



Date: May 26, 2020

To: House Committee on Human Services

From: Aly Richards, CEO, Let's Grow Kids

Re: Supporting Families and Child Care Programs Through Reopening Period

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Thank you for another opportunity to share with the committee Let's Grow Kids' perspective on supporting child care programs and families during this incredibly difficult time. As you know, Let's Grow Kids (LGK) is committed to ensuring that all children, birth to five, have access to high-quality, affordable early care and education programs. In the midst of this unprecedented global public health crisis, LGK has been working closely with the Scott Administration, early care and education programs, families, our federal delegation, and state and national advocacy organizations to ensure we can present the General Assembly with detailed information about the supports and assistance that early care and education programs and families need.

Vermont has been a model for the nation of how to support child care programs through this unprecedented time. Since the crisis first hit, our work at LGK has been focused on (1) supporting emergency child care for essential workers, and (2) making sure Vermont's early care and education system is able to survive this crisis. We are all now turning to the challenges of reopening child care programs and building a more resilient early care and education system.

I acknowledge that, for some, the conversation about reopening feels premature and the risk of a resurgence in COVID-19 cases is still too great to consider opening child care programs or any other parts of our economy. For others, though, the need to return to work is dire. In the face of skyrocketing unemployment and increasing food insecurity, and with additional federal unemployment benefits set to expire this summer, many families are struggling to survive financially while also prioritizing the health and developmental needs of their children at the same time. As Dr. Mark Levine articulated in a recent press conference, we must consider the "emotional and developmental impact of isolation for our children, particularly our most vulnerable children." With proper precautions, a high-quality child care setting can offer critical services, resources, and supports that many children and families need. Indeed, hundreds of child care programs have been doing just that for many weeks for the children of essential workers.

That said, it is important to remember that in these uncharted pandemic waters, nothing is without risk. In the absence of clear answers and guarantees, the best we can do is follow the data and work together to plot a course toward recovery that balances risks and returns and

prioritizes the welfare of all Vermonters. While some families may choose not to take advantage of child care just yet even if it is available, it is imperative that we provide healthy, nurturing environments for those families who choose it and those who just don't have a choice.

## Considerations for Reopening Child Care

Now that the Governor has said that any child care program may reopen next week, we all must consider how to safely and responsibly reopen the early care and education industry for Vermonters returning to work. As this crisis has made abundantly clear, child care is essential economic infrastructure in our state, but our industry faces critical challenges related to access, affordability, and wages for early educators, among others. As we begin to plan for our new future, we must work towards a system that is **stronger, more equitable, and more sustainable**. To do so, we must support children and families, assist programs in adhering to new health and safety guidelines, support early childhood educators, and develop necessary infrastructure.

As we have previously discussed with your committee, Let's Grow Kids has the following recommendations around reopening the early care and education sector, including opportunities for leveraging federal funding from the CARES Act to invest in supports that will strengthen the early care and education system immediately and over the long term. We have also prepared a [chart](#) that details these expenses and explanations of where they fit under CARES CRF guidance.

## Support children and families.

Although initial public health data indicated that children are less likely to contract COVID-19, much is still unknown about this virus and its impacts. We do know that the economic and psychological effects of the pandemic directly impact children—and exponentially impact children whose families were already struggling. Even before the pandemic, child care was unaffordable for many families, often costing more than tuition at a state college. Through expanded child care financial assistance and other permanent solutions, we ensure families have access to safe, developmentally-focused options. Financial assistance to families must adapt to the crisis for the foreseeable future:

- **Increase CCFAP reimbursement** rates to reflect the increased cost of providing care during a pandemic.
  - **We estimate at least \$450,000 per month in additional CARES Act funds may be needed for this purpose during the crisis.** CDD could provide a more precise estimate.
- **Continue to make CCFAP payments to child care programs based on enrollment instead of attendance.** Currently, CCFAP payments to child care programs are being made based on enrollment instead of attendance; it has been announced that this will end on May 31 and switch to a different system requiring families to go through an

eligibility specialist if their children are not immediately returning to care full-time due to health risks or more general concerns about returning to care.

- **Expand CCFAP work search qualifications** beyond 12 weeks to provide families adequate time to find work as the economy slowly reopens, while preserving their access to critical child care financial assistance.

## Provide adequate compensation and support to child care programs to adhere to new COVID-19 health and safety guidelines.

Child care programs must provide a safe environment for children and staff to minimize the spread of COVID-19. This means providing ongoing financial and logistical support to programs to enable adequate sourcing of necessary supplies, staffing, and planning for reopening.

- **Structure “Restart Stipends” to offer child care programs and the families they serve flexible support.** We are concerned that \$6 million will be insufficient to support reopening costs for both child care programs *and* summer day camp programs, because the challenges facing Vermont’s child care programs and the children and families they serve are so great at this time.
  - To help alleviate financial pressures on child care programs and families, the state should set aside at **least \$6 million for child care programs**—with additional funds for summer day camps—in a grant program that would provide reopening grants for child care programs to help cover increased operating expenses, so that they do not have to raise tuition rates through the end of 2020.
  - While these funds should be prioritized for programs opening before July 6, another round of funding will be necessary for programs opening later this summer or in the fall.
- **Allow child care programs to source PPE through Vermont’s procurement process.** We continue to hear many times a day from programs preparing to reopen who are desperate to source the supplies needed to comply with health and safety guidance. Vermont’s child care programs should be able to source PPE for their staff through the state’s procurement process. The increased cost of PPE is a significant hurdle but finding available PPE may be an even greater challenge.

## Support early childhood educators.

Child care professionals are the backbone of our essential early care and education infrastructure – we must do a better job of acknowledging and enriching their child development skills and paying them what they are worth, especially since they will continue to be at high risk for exposure to COVID-19 as the economy reopens.

- **Increase wage supports for early childhood educators.** Early childhood educators working at programs that have remained open, as well as those that will reopen, are on the front lines of exposure to COVID-19. Additional CARES Act funds should be allocated to extending hazard pay for early childhood educators through the remainder of 2020.

- **Fund professional preparation and training – including scholarships – to recruit and retain early educators.** Even before COVID-19, recruitment and retention of early childhood educators was a challenge. Given that many early educators may not be able to return to their jobs due to their own health concerns, it is essential that early childhood educators are supported to remain in their roles and equipped to navigate these uncharted waters.
  - **We estimate that \$14 million in CARES Act funds could support hazard pay and continued professional preparation and training of Vermont’s early childhood education workforce through the response and recovery period.**

## **Develop necessary infrastructure.**

The IT system that currently supports Vermont’s early care and education system and CCFAP is significantly outdated, and in recent weeks, the IT system has made it much more difficult for the state to perform necessary functions to respond to the crisis, such as identifying child care programs willing to serve essential personnel children and getting stabilization payments out to programs. An updated IT system will continue to be necessary to get Restart Stipend payments out to programs, manage new capacity challenges due to smaller group sizes and unexpected closures, and to manage future sudden closure and reopening needs based on potential virus resurgence.

- **With a \$6.7 million, one-time investment through CARES Act funds, the state can purchase and implement a new IT system to effectively administer Vermont’s ECE system through the COVID-19 recovery period and beyond.**

We are hopeful that after witnessing the impacts of life without child care, we can come together to strengthen our child care system so that it supports and values children, early educators, and working families for what they are -- the heart of our society and the backbone of our economy.

We greatly appreciate your committee’s attention to our youngest Vermonters, their families, and their early educators. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do to support Vermonters during this incredibly difficult time. We look forward to continuing our work together.