

House Committee on Human Services

Witness Testimony from Holly Morehouse, Vermont Afterschool

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Afterschool and Summer in a COVID-19 Landscape

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the amazing work being done by the directors and staff working in Vermont's afterschool programs and other youth-serving organizations. While these have been very difficult months all around, I cannot say enough about how innovative, caring, and adaptable this field has been.

Although schools had to close their physical doors, from one community to the next, afterschool providers and staff have stepped in to play key roles to meet specific needs in their community. From helping to run the school meals and food distribution system to providing childcare for the children of essential workers to creating engaging opportunities for connection and learning online to serving as one-to-one coaches reaching out to youth and families, this field continues to inspire us all.

If you think about the field of afterschool in general, it is a space for collaboration, flexibility, positive growth, asset focus, and innovation. You can't run an effective afterschool program without being someone who can think on your feet and who thrives in an environment where learning is more flexible, student-driven, hands-on, less-scripted, and all about teamwork and exploration. At Vermont Afterschool our entire team has been focused on doing everything we can to help all of us in the field stay in a problem-solving mindset-- learning from one another, addressing each challenge as it arises, and always keeping children and youth as our main focus.

At Vermont Afterschool we have been fortunate to be able to use our infrastructure and statewide reach to host daily calls and Zoom sessions with providers in the field. We have been engaged in numerous conversations about how to provide support that will keep the sector strong, and children, youth, families, and staff safe.

State Response

Afterschool is a diverse field that doesn't fit cleanly into any one agency or department (e.g., Child Development Division overseeing childcare; Agency of Education with schools and education; Agency of Commerce and Community Development working with towns around summer camps; Department of Health leading on health guidelines). From the beginning we have been striving to work across agencies so that we can have a clearer systems approach that doesn't divide the field or result in conflicting information. We are extremely pleased that the health and safety guidance released earlier this week covers childcare, summer, and afterschool programs all under one heading. That alignment is important for the field and also for Vermont families who may have a 4-year old in childcare, a 7-year old in a summer program, and a 12-year old at a science camp.

While the governor's March directive specified childcare for essential workers for infants through children in 8th grade, the afterschool field and programs serving children over the age of 5 were left out of the stabilization funding program. That oversight falsely bifurcated our state childcare system which runs up through at least age 12 and put afterschool programs and any childcare options for children

over age 6 on a weaker footing. Not only did many more afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations have to lay off staff, but it also means that ramping up and being ready to open for summer may be more of a challenge. That said, we greatly appreciate the \$6 million in funding to support programs operating this summer and recognize additional costs of operations under COVID19, particularly in staffing, cleaning, and supplies. We estimate that afterschool and summer programs and camps will need approximately \$3 million in additional funding to be up and running this summer.

The Importance of Summer

Summer is important for children and youth. I well understand the connections between childcare and support for working families. I speak to that often myself. However, what I want to focus on here is not the economic rationale for opening programs this summer, but the child and youth development rationale.

While schools are focused on continuity of learning, we have a whole field of youth workers specializing in positive youth development who are well-positioned to focus on social emotional needs, connectedness, peer relationships, and more. Access to summer programs this summer in particular is important for a myriad of reasons:

- Social emotional well-being.
- Learning loss.
- Access to healthy food.
- Supports for children and youth in difficult home situations.

I also would like to consider the benefits to schools from operating some level of summer programming this year. We have heard from school administrators who consider summer programs as essential for students and also as a way to gain experience, insight, and practice into how to operate in this new landscape. We know that schools and programs that ran essential childcare programs are better positioned to be up and running this summer than those that did not. It makes sense to look forward and see that those that run programming this summer will have more experience and knowledge in order to be ready to open schools in the fall.

Recommendations

I want to go back to that strong problem-solving mindset that is so present across this entire field and encourage the Legislature to support three things:

- The importance of continuing to ensure that we have coordinated, centralized, and cross-agency guidance for the field
- Providing for financial parity in support for the afterschool and youth-serving field in line with early childhood programs as we restart/re-open and also on-going
- Doing all that we can to ensure Vermont's children and youth have access to afterschool and summer programs both this year and next. One concrete step would be for the Legislature to pass S.335 and establish the Task Force for Universal Access to Afterschool so that that group can start working on these important issues today.