

# Otter Creek Child Center

“Celebrating 35 years of helping children discover their love for learning”

Date: April 20, 2020

To: Senate Education Committee

From: Linda January, Executive Director, Otter Creek Child Center

## **Testimony on Vermont’s Child Care Stabilization Grant Program**

**LINDA JANUARY:** Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about the Stabilization Grant Program the Child Development Division development in order to support the early childhood field and the impact it has had on Otter Creek Child Center.

I first want to thank and acknowledge the amazingly hard work CDD has been doing to support and to keep the field of early childhood stable. I do not envy their position. With that I also have to acknowledge that although I am internally grateful for the financial support, it has been an incredibly frustrating experience to navigate. Communication has been all of the place and piecemealed together. We have received important information after 8 p.m. at night with guidance following days and sometimes a week later. It has been hard to navigate and feel confident in your decision making. In Addison County, early childhood directors have banded together, meeting once a week, to support each other and interrupt guidance from the AOE and CDD together. Our strong support group has been essential in getting through the last 7 weeks.

On March 17, when Otter Creek closed our doors, we had 47 children enrolled (40 families). Of those 47 children, 22 of them receive tuition assistance through the state’s Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP), 47% of our population.

On March 18, 2020, we had a board meeting to discuss, at that time, the 3 week closure period. The board made a plan that would support both families and continue to pay teachers through April 3, 2020, without having to dip into our reserves. On March 19, 2020 we received information from CDD about the stabilization program; we quickly had to shift plans in order to take advantage of the stabilization program. For the first three weeks, we had 22 children receiving CCFAP, 18 children receiving UPK dollars, 4 families paying partial tuition, 4 families unable to pay anything, and the rest graciously paying full tuition.

When we got word of the Phase 2 of the Stabilization Grant Program, the board reconvened and decided to once again take advantage of the program in order to keep teachers employed. I reached out to all families to have individual conversations with them about what was best for their family. During those conversations I heard a lot of concern and fear about losing their spot if they needed to unenroll and a lot of frustration that they were dealing with a financial hardship and instead of being offered support they were being punished. In the end we had 5 children unenroll. Through the Stabilization Grant Program I am requesting 100% of tuition for those 5 children and 50% of tuition for 26 children.

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Through the combination of revenue sources we have been able to continue to pay 13 full time teacher, 2 part time teachers, and 2 administrations at 100% of pay. These revenue sources include; CCFAP, UPK, and the Stabilization Grant Program.

The decision to utilize the Stabilization Grant was not an easy one. Although it felt like the right thing to do for teachers, it did not feel like the right, ethical thing to do for families. It was really hard to ask families to continue to pay 50% for a service they cannot access. It felt even worse to tell families if you can't afford that 50% we have to unenroll your child and actively try to fill your spot. This act goes against everything Otter Creek stands for in supporting families in times economic hardship. For the 5 children we had to unenroll, we have told families that they have been placed at the top of our waitlist and when we are ready to enroll for re-opening they will be the first contacted. As of this time, I have not tried to fill those 5 spots. I'm currently working half time, with my 2 year old at home full time, my 13 year-old niece at home, and my husband laid off; we have been navigating our new normal with very little extra time beyond meeting the basics for Otter Creek. And honestly, I have not figured out what to say to potential new families; “I have a spot; I'm not sure when you can access but I need you to pay 50% until you can access it.” It feels like a hard sell and not natural!

For the month of May, we have accessed the Payroll Protection Program for funds that will allow us to support families with their 50% co-pay. We will continue to access the Stabilization Grant Program, pay teachers at 100% of salary, have UPK dollars, and CCFAP dollars to continue to balance our budget.

The month of June is feeling like the black lagoon with so many unanswered questions regarding re-opening. We are thankful that CDD has reached out to providers to gather our thoughts, fears, concerns, and questions about reopening. It is important that the planning for reopening is done as a united front and that flexibility is built-in to meet the varied needs of children, families, early childhood educators, and programs.

Again I want to thank you for this opportunity and to thank you for the hard work each of you are doing to support Vermont through this pandemic.