



Date: Wednesday, February 13, 2019

To: Vermont Senate Committee on Health & Welfare

From: Janet McLaughlin, Interim CEO and Chief Programs Officer, Let's Grow Kids

Testimony on the Vermont Early Care and Learning Survey

Thank you for inviting us to speak with you today about the results of the Early Care and Learning Survey. Let's Grow Kids' mission is to achieve affordable access to high-quality child care for all Vermont families by 2025. This mission may sound familiar to you if you're familiar with the Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children or Vermont Birth to Five. In the past year, we have fully integrated our work, and now we have one name, but we've always been one organization. Together, we have over 30,000 Vermonters who support our mission for Vermont's children, including parents, early educators, business and health care leaders, partner organizations, and community members.

As an organization that works closely with families, early care and learning providers, and community members, the findings of the survey affirm much of what LGK has heard from Vermonters over the years: child care is hard to find, costs drive how families use child care, and child care challenges impact our state's economy.

Child Care is Hard to Find

The Vermont Early Care and Learning Survey findings provide us with greater clarity on the demand for child care: the fact that 4 out of 5 families surveyed use regular, non-parental care, and that Vermont families who access child care use more paid child care than unpaid care, points to the need for continued support to grow the capacity of our early care and learning system. For families who use regular, non-parental care, the average hours used for paid care is nearly 30 hours per week and the average hours used for unpaid care is 15 hours per week. Our work with early care and learning providers and families points to many issues underlying our state's capacity challenges, including the ability to attract and retain early educators and a desperate need for increased financial supports for families to access and afford care.

Cost is Important

The survey findings also highlight the fact that cost is an important decision-driver for families. Families are having to juggle arrangements to make things work. More Vermont families are receiving financial support from a variety of sources to help pay for child care than other families nationally, but the survey findings also demonstrate that this financial support may not be enough to make care affordable for families. One of these financial supports is Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). As a state, we have made a policy choice not to establish waitlists for the program, but this comes with a tradeoff. Families are receiving lower levels of support because the state has underfunded the program for a number of years. According to the survey results, low-income households pay a significantly higher portion of their income when they pay for care.

On average, families in the lowest income category pay \$159 per week for center-based and \$103 per week for home-based care. And this is after factoring in any financial assistance they may receive to help pay for care. We appreciate this committee's attention to the issue of child care financial assistance in the past, and we hope that you will continue to consider how we can better support Vermont families in affording quality child care.

The Impact of Child Care Challenges on Vermont's Economy

The final point that we wanted to highlight from the survey findings is how these child care challenges are linked to Vermont's economy. Vermont's child care crisis has a direct impact on the ability of Vermonters to work, which adversely impacts our economy. In families with all parents working, a majority of households cited work as the reason for searching for child care, and more than 80 percent stated that the availability of child care affected how much they worked. These findings affirm what we hear from families throughout the state: our lack of affordable, quality child care limits the ability of Vermont parents to make the best choices for their families and careers. This is why business leaders in our state, including the Vermont Business Roundtable, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, and the Main Street Alliance have prioritized this issue.

Conclusions

We cannot wait to act on this important work. Let's Grow Kids is already taking steps to address many of the challenges highlighted by the survey, through initiatives such as our Make Way For Kids program, which is providing grant funding and technical assistance to early care and learning programs to help them increase their program capacity. In its first year, Make Way for Kids resulted in the creation of 262 new child care and early learning slots and helped programs increase the quality of 239 additional slots over the course of approximately 8 months. We need to join together to take bold action to address the challenges Vermont's families and early care and learning providers face. Each year that passes by is a missed opportunity to improve the developmental wellbeing of our kids, support strong, healthy families, and improve our struggling economy. We know that members of the Legislature are working on solutions, and we look forward to working with you this session and in the coming years to continue to address these challenges.

Thank you very much for your attention to this important issue.