



Date: April 30, 2020

To: Senate Committee on Education

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

Re: Supporting Families and Child Care Programs During and After Vermont's COVID-19 Response

Thank you for the 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 is working closely with Vermont's Administration, early care and education programs, families, our federal delegation, and state and national advocacy organizations to ensure that early care and education programs and the children and families they serve have the support they need to get through these challenging times.

Let's Grow Kids Current COVID-19 Response Work

Currently, Let's Grow Kids is:

- Collaborating with the state and our partners to be a resource for child care programs and early childhood educators, and collecting feedback from the early childhood field and relaying their concerns to state agencies and policymakers.
- Pulling together resources that we're updating regularly at <https://www.letsgrowkids.org/coronavirus> with guidance and information for early childhood educators, families, and employers.
- Supporting emergency child care for essential workers:
 - Partnering with the state to determine child care needs by creating a webform for essential workers.
 - As of the morning of Tuesday, April 28:
 - 1,149 essential workers have completed the form:
 - 339 workers requested help for 534 school-aged children;
 - 412 workers requested help for 575 children under 6; and
 - 155 workers requested help for 356 children in both age groups.
 - Working with the Department of Health to share guidance on health practices through resources and webinars;
 - Procuring and shipping supplies for emergency child care programs, such as PPE, thermometers, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, etc. for continued operation.
- Supporting programs that have closed:

- Our team of experts is working around the clock to help programs navigate this crisis, answering questions, and connecting programs to free HR and business guidance through a weekly webinar and FAQs.
- We also have been hearing from Vermonters who want to know how they can help. In response, we set up an Emergency Fund, in collaboration with the Vermont Community Foundation, to support child care programs, early educators and their families. This can also be found on our website resources page.
- At the state and federal level, we're advocating to ensure any emergency relief bill recognizes child care programs as an essential service and provides financial relief so programs can weather this crisis and so we don't end up with programs closing permanently.
- Supporting families:
 - Families are really struggling right now. Our early childhood experts are pulling together resources for families that we're sharing on our website.
 - We also are seeing many early childhood educators who've had to close their programs but are finding creative ways to stay connected to the children and families they serve – from sharing videos of story time to posting activities caregivers can do with children at home. We're pulling together model resources based on these great examples. This provides additional resources for families, and also helps child care programs to continue providing valuable services to families who are still paying tuition.
 - We know that for many families, paying even 50% of their tuition during the closure period feels like too much, and we expect it to get even more difficult for families to continue paying as the weeks go by. We are looking at examples from other states about even more tools to support families' ability to support their early care and education programs while also managing the financial stressors of this pandemic.
- Supporting employers:
 - Child care is a fundamental support for employers and we know businesses are worried about how this crisis will impact their business and the economy overall.
 - We've been hearing from employers around the state and have compiled some guidance around how they can support non-essential and essential workers at this time. We're partnering with business organizations to provide webinars for employers.
 - Examples of supports include work-from-home policies, flexible schedules, paid sick time policies, and opening lines of communication around employees' child care needs.

Strengthening Supports for Families and Early Childhood Educators

As we work to support the many stakeholders in the early care and education system, we've been working very closely with the Child Development Division. We know firsthand how diligently they have been working to ensure Vermont families and child care programs are supported. We appreciate this committee's attention to ensuring that young children, their

families, and early educators are supported during this time. The good news is that Vermont is leading the nation in this work through a variety of supports, including the Child Care Stabilization Program.

The Stabilization Program is designed to help both families and child care programs navigate the COVID-19 closure period. I would encourage you to reach out the Child Development Division for specific program details and guidance. The main goals of the program are to support child care programs in continuing to pay their employees and their ongoing expenses such as their rent, lease, or mortgage, utility bills, etc.; to provide families with immediate economic relief; and to ensure families have child care slots to come back to when Vermont begins to reopen. Currently:

- The Stabilization Program is optional – child care programs have the option to choose whether to participate.
- If a program participates, The State will pay 50% of tuition costs or CCFAP co-pay for a family; providers may choose to charge up to the remaining 50% to families to maintain their slot.
- If a family is unable to pay 50%, they are able to talk with their child care program about an alternative payment amount. Some child care programs have reserve funds, corporate scholarships, or other resources they can use to cover some or all of the family's portion of the payment.
- If a family is unable to pay 50% of their regular tuition or CCFAP co-payment and their program is unable to provide additional financial relief, they can explore their eligibility for CCFAP if they are not already enrolled with their community child care support agency.
- Families may also choose to unenroll their children from child care. If a family chooses to unenroll, a child care program can place the family on their waitlist and request to be reimbursed 100% by the state (up to \$360/week) through the Stabilization Program.

To quote just one of the many comments we've received from early education programs, "I feel incredibly valued. And so appreciate living in the only state that is helping providers by covering their lost income due to mandated closure from COVID-19. We WILL have a stable childcare system when we return from this mess, which will help folks get back to work that much faster."

Additional Opportunities

The Stabilization Program is just one of several tools that child care programs and families can use during the COVID-19 closure period, including continued payment of CCFAP reimbursements and Act 166 tuition payments based on enrollment vs attendance, child care-specific low or no interest business support loans through VSECU, and other business and family supports. That being said, we understand that the program is not without its challenges. Let's Grow Kids has heard from numerous families about their current challenges, and we see

several opportunities to strengthen supports for families through CARES Act dollars. We understand that the committee has heard suggestions for tax credits for families who are continuing to pay tuition to their early care and education programs; here are some other possible sources of immediate relief:

- **COVID-19 Financial Relief Scholarship Fund for Families:** As your committee is aware, some families are unable to continue to pay 50% of their regular tuition or CCFAP co-pay and their child care program is unable to offer them additional financial support. We propose creating a scholarship fund through CARES Act dollars to support these families. This would be an immediate way to provide financial support to those struggling to preserve their child care slots.
- **Increase CCFAP Reimbursement Rates:** During the COVID-19 response, the state has been paying programs an additional \$125 per week for children of essential employees receiving emergency child care. While this is a much-needed increase for programs offering emergency child care, many programs report that the additional funding is barely enough to cover increased costs associated with increased staff needed to meet reduced child to staff ratios, needing to purchase PPE and additional disinfecting and sanitation supplies, and needing to implement new health and safety procedures. Low-income families in Vermont rely on CCFAP to help them afford child care. CCFAP reimbursement rates are already years behind current tuition rates for child care. Vermont should use the CARES Act funds to immediately increase CCFAP reimbursement rates to align with new cost projections for the new cost of providing child care. Reimbursement rates can be revisited on a quarterly basis and adjusted appropriately to reflect updated COVID-19 protective measures and guidance.
- **Increase the Work Search Eligibility Determination for CCFAP:** While most families qualify for CCFAP based on employment or education or training needs, CCFAP will provide up to 12 weeks of child care financial assistance if a parent or guardian is searching for work. Given the uncertain timeline for economic recovery in our state, the work search eligibility should be expanded beyond the federal mandatory minimum of 12 weeks to at least 24 weeks using CARES Act funds.

This pandemic has brought into stark relief the critical nature of child care—as well as the fault lines. We're seeing that early childhood educators, and so many other underpaid and undervalued workers, are the backbone of our economic and public health infrastructure and that families, now, more than ever, need a variety of supports to help them afford and access child care. We greatly appreciate your committee's attention to our youngest Vermonters, their families, and their early educators.