



Date: Monday, August 31, 2020

To: Rep. Ann Pugh, Chair, House Committee on Human Services Committee
Rep. Michael Marcotte, Chair, House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development

From: Aly Richards, CEO

Re: The COVID Hiring Crisis in Early Childhood Education

Even before COVID-19, Vermont needed more than 2,000 additional lead early childhood educators in order to meet the child care needs of children birth to five likely to need care in our state. As many early childhood educators now face their own child care challenges, health care needs, and tough choices in light of the pandemic, Vermont's early care and education programs are facing a severe hiring crisis. These challenges are highlighted through data. On one job listing site, there are 72 current openings posted, and we know even more programs are struggling to find the staff they need to operate at reduced capacity, let alone the full capacity they anticipate in the coming weeks. Data collected by the Child Development Division through a recent survey also highlights these challenges. That survey found that 49% of the regulated child care programs surveyed said they changed their hours/days of operation because of COVID-19, and of those programs, 33% said they changed hours/days of care because they didn't have enough staff to operate at full hours. Additionally, we have heard in the past two months from programs serving 500 children in Chittenden County alone that have closed or are about to close due in large part to staffing challenges.

In order to retain current early educators – many of whom are considering other employment as they struggle to manage unexpected costs such as health care and child care for their own school-aged children – and to recruit others to return to work or begin working in early childhood during the pandemic, Let's Grow Kids proposes the creation of a COVID-19 Child Care Recruitment and Retention Incentive Program. This program should serve all early childhood educators who have returned to work, or are hired to work full-time, part-time, or per diem by September 30, 2020 and who commit to remaining in the workforce through the end of the calendar year at center-based child care or preschool programs and family child care homes regulated by the Child Development Division. We also recommend the grant program include staff working for afterschool child care programs regulated by the Child Development Division that have not or will not receive school-age child care hub grants that offer hiring bonuses.

We recommend that incentive grants be no less than \$500 per early childhood educator in order to provide meaningful, one-time financial support. We believe that this program would be an allowable use of Coronavirus Relief Funds, because:

- It is directly related to the impact of COVID-19 on the early childhood workforce;
- It would be a one-time expense that would be expended by December 30, 2020; and
- Because retention and recruitment of these employees is crucial for supporting families during the pandemic and for reopening Vermont's economy. There is a severe staffing crisis in child care programs that has been created by the pandemic, and this is a short-term program intended to alleviate the situation.

Below, please find proposed language for the creation of the program for your review. Vermont's families, our businesses, and our economy are relying on child care to support our state's economic recovery. We must ensure that our early childhood educators – those individuals who make child care possible – are available to provide the professional care and education that our children and families need more than ever during this challenging time.

COVID-19 Child Care Recruitment and Retention Incentive Program

In fiscal year 2021, \$3.5 million [estimated] is appropriated from Coronavirus Relief Funds to the Department for Children and Families' Child Development Division for the purpose of establishing an incentive program for early childhood educators who are providing child care under difficult circumstances in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling the state to recover from COVID-19. Qualifying staff shall work full-time, part-time, or per diem in a privately-operated center-based child care or preschool program, family child care home, or afterschool program not receiving funds through the school-age child care hub program that is regulated by the Division.

Eligible individuals shall:

- Work in a privately-operated center-based child care or preschool program or family child care that is regulated by the Division; or
- Work in a privately-operated afterschool child care program that did not receive funds through the school-age child care hub grant program and is regulated by the Division; and
- Have returned to work or been hired to work by September 30, 2020 with the intention to continue actively working through at least December 30, 2020.

To participate in the program set forth in this section, an eligible individual shall submit to the Division documentation appropriate for their position. A qualified individual shall receive a payment of at least \$500.

The Division shall administer the incentive program set forth in this section or contract for its administration and adopt policies, procedures, and guidelines necessary to implement the provisions of this section. Incentive payments shall be available pursuant to this section on a first-come, first-served basis until appropriated funds are depleted. Funds shall not be made available after December 30, 2020.