

Wednesday, April 10, 2019

Testimony from Nina LeMieux on H. 531

My Story

In January of 2017, I was a single mother of 3, making it work. I was a full-time, permanent state employee making nearly \$22/hour, full benefits, and retirement. I had worked my way up from a temp position starting at around \$15/hour in February of 2013. I also worked a 2nd job to supplement my income until July of 2014 while taking college courses online to pursue my AA degree. With a lot of hard work and dedication, I was getting where I wanted to be, where I wanted my family to be.

On January 6th of 2017, I got notice from our childcare provider that she would be closing her doors...in 20 days. She did not have the financial support to be able to stay open, despite being established for 5+ years. Within an hour of getting word that she was closing, I began looking for a new childcare provider. Within a couple of days, we had found care for my school-aged children (now 9 and almost 7), but I had a 5-month-old and I was having no luck finding a new provider for her. I was being told things like, "I'll have an opening for an infant in August," and, "I can put you on the waiting list. You'll be 8th." I couldn't wait until August to find childcare for my daughter; I had a full-time job and I **needed** to work. I began working with the Family Center of Washington County almost immediately and was told that there was a childcare crisis in Vermont and that the odds of me finding an infant spot, at least in a timely manner, was slim to none.

By mid-February, I still had not found childcare for my infant, and was having to call out or only work a couple of hours a day because I couldn't always find someone to watch her all day, from 7am,- 5pm. I had a wonderful support system of friends and family around me, but they all also worked full-time.

I didn't want to risk disciplinary action/termination, so after speaking to my director, HR, and the union, I was told it would be best to resign so that I would have a better chance of being re-hired with the state once I found full-time, permanent childcare.

I was suddenly unemployed, collecting 3 squares and Reach-up. I got plenty of help from 3squares, but my Reach-up benefit, despite being a single mother of 3 with no income, was only \$770/month. My rent alone was \$1150/month. Over the course of a few months I had drained what little savings I had been able to accumulate so far in life. I also had to cash out my retirement from the state. From January-July of that year, the only local childcare I found was an infant spot at the Waldorf school; a spot that cost \$220/week. Being unemployed, I was eligible for 100% CCFAP, but it still only covered \$180 of that \$220, and I had to worry about losing that benefit once I was back to work full-time, and I simply couldn't afford to pay \$220/week for only 1 of my 3 children.

In July, one of the childcare providers I had called numerous times since January had a sudden opening. My daughter began attending this childcare on July 10, 2017. I had applied for a few positions over the course of my unemployment, but not too many, as I feared I would find something and have to pass because I didn't have childcare yet. Once she started childcare, I began looking for work harder than I ever have. Unfortunately, state positions can take several months to run their course, and the division I had worked in previously had essentially down-sized and there were no open positions, permanent, limited, or temporary. A friend of mine managed a kitchen at a school, and having food-

service experience and just needing to get back to work, I began working at the school in mid-August. I went from having a career, making great money and having great benefits, to doing a job I had done when I was 15 for minimum wage. It was better than nothing, though.

During the course of my unemployment and my employment in the school cafeteria, I battled severe depression. Despite suffering from depression since my teen years, I had also been diagnosed with post-partum depression after my youngest was born. I had had a handle on it until I lost my job. I was overcome with feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and failure. I felt I had failed myself, but most importantly, I felt I had failed my children.

Despite being back to work, I was only working 30-35 hours/per week making minimum wage. I was unable to find a second job, because I didn't have anyone to watch my children on nights and weekends. In October 2017, I had to give up our apartment – our home – and go live with close family friends so I could get back on my feet. If the feelings of failure and being worthless didn't get to be before, they certainly were now. Here I was in my late 20's with 3 children and sharing a bedroom in a family friend's home just so I could get back on my feet.

More than 2 years later, we are still recovering from this crisis. We moved back into our own place last March. Although it's so nice to have our own space again, it's a step down from the beautiful apartment we were in before all of this. I am back with the state, working for DCF as a temp employee working about 30 hours per week. I have my foot back in the door, but I am still making more than \$5 less per hour than I was when I was with DOL. I also don't get any benefits or paid time off. I am still trying to rebuild our lives, and honestly, right now, there is no end in sight. I still struggle to pay bills. I still struggle to pay the co-pays for the childcare we do have despite being eligible for CCFAP. Right now, I pay roughly \$400 a month in copays; if the federal poverty line was raised and I could even save ½ of that, I could use that money for so many other things; I could rebuild my savings, I could buy gifts for holidays and birthdays without worrying about how I'll pay my rent for the next month. If I didn't qualify for any childcare assistance making the money I make now, I simply wouldn't be able to afford childcare; but I also wouldn't be able to afford to be unemployed again as the assistance I would receive simply isn't enough to survive.

I know several of my friends & coworkers who would benefit from the FPL being raised. Right now, some of those friends and coworkers "make too much" and don't get any assistance paying for childcare, and at least half, if not more, of their monthly income goes to paying for childcare.

At this point, if something happens: my car breaks down, myself or one of my children get severely ill, etc., I don't have any savings to draw from. I am still repaying debts to friends and family who helped us out over the last couple of years. I cannot continue to pursue my degree(s) because I can't afford to reduce my hours to go to school as I have nothing put away to supplement working less. Career-wise, I am back where I started 6+ years ago. I have literally had to start completely over, from scratch; and my children have had to come along for that ride, which is something I'll never forgive myself for. Despite this whole thing being a string of circumstances beyond my control, I am still their parent and I feel like I've let them down.

I strongly encourage you to pass H.531 as an important step forward in strengthening Vermont's Child Care financial Assistance Program for families like mine and to help support new and existing early educators to begin to address our state's child care crisis.