



Pam McCarthy, Vermont Family Network
Senate Health and Welfare Committee Testimony on H.531
Children's Integrated Services (CIS) FY20 Funding
4/10/2019

Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today with regard to H.531 and Children's Integrated Services (CIS). My name is Pam McCarthy, and I am the President and CEO of Vermont Family Network, a statewide organization that empowers and supports families of children with disabilities and special health care needs. As part of our services and supports, my organization provides the Children's Integrated Services Early Intervention program in Chittenden County, which has the largest group of infants and toddlers in the state who are eligible under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Our organization is also a member of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights and the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance.

As one who has personally been involved in prevention and early intervention for over 30 years, and the CEO of the agency contracted by the state to provide Children's Integrated Services Early Intervention (CIS-EI) in Chittenden County, I am very concerned about the continuing lack of resources allocated to CIS to provide services to some of our state's most vulnerable children. At a time when the needs of our youngest learners are increasing, often due to the impacts of poverty, substance abuse, trauma, and other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), I believe it is essential to bolster early childhood services and supports. These services and supports come through CIS, and make a huge difference, particularly when we are seeking to stabilize young children in their early childhood learning environments and reduce the costs of special education in our schools throughout Vermont.

H. 531 Restores the Governor's Proposed CIS Funding Cut for FY20

The Department for Children and Families' Child Development Division's CIS Director testified before this committee in February. She shared the attached data, strongly reinforcing advocates' concerns that CIS is gravely under-resourced, and as a result services that are proven to support young children's development are not getting to those who need (and are legally entitled to) them.

As you know, CIS has been level-funded for over 10 years, and the strain on the system is evident. Caseloads are increasing, as is family complexity. Recruiting and retaining excellent early care, health, and education professionals is challenging. These factors are combining in ways that jeopardize good outcomes for some of Vermont's most vulnerable children and families.

It is critical to support young children's development early and well, and the Administration and advocates agree that we need to shore up the early care, health, and education system to ensure bright futures for our youngest Vermonters. Providing the funding to make these services possible, however, is anything but assured.

Unfortunately, the Governor's Recommended FY20 budget included a cut to CIS funding, citing under-utilization of services as the reason. However, as CDD staff themselves indicated to you in February, CIS service delivery is being interrupted because of a lack of funding – delayed services, staffing shortages, inadequate capacity, and a crisis-driven system are the specific indicators cited in their written testimony. What appears to be underutilization of this funding is actually a lack of capacity.

The House Human Services Committee heard our concerns, and we applaud the decision of the House to reject this proposed cut. We fully support the language in H.531 that restores the funding, specifically for the purpose of increasing reimbursement rates to CIS providers. We hope that you will agree with this position, and that you will further refine the purposing of the funds, directing them to be spent on the CIS “bundle” where they can be applied for the greatest impact in each AHS District, given the particular needs and resources that can be leveraged in in different regions of Vermont.

CIS Program Details – Who we help, and why the system in failing them

CIS providers and child development champions believe that the Governor's budget recommendation to cut \$309,714 from CIS due to underutilization is shortsighted and uninformed. The specialized staff that provide CIS services – Speech-Language Pathologists (SLP's), Developmental Educators (DE's), Occupational Therapists (OT's), Physical Therapists (PT's), and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) providers – are in limited supply, especially in the more remote regions of Vermont. Their compensation is often less than adequate to recruit and retain their much-needed skills. It's worth repeating: What appears to be underutilization of this funding is actually a lack of capacity.

CIS underfunding is also a legal issue. Children who have, or are at risk of developmental delays, under federal law are legally entitled to high quality, consistent services under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Very young children, for whom time is of the essence, are waiting for services to which they are entitled to by law in a timely way under IDEA and by Medicaid Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) mandates.

Organizations like mine are frequently challenged by the lack of DE's, SLP's, OT's, PT's, and ABA providers. Sometimes this provider shortage is due to less than desirable reimbursement rates and lack of reimbursement for mileage, sometimes because specialty providers just don't exist in a region, or because they cannot meet the caseload demands, as is the case in Chittenden County. Here are a few examples from my organization's recent experiences with CIS:

- CIS is uniquely positioned to provide home visits that prevent child abuse and neglect, but level funding means that we can't provide a "therapeutic dose" to all our clients. Between FY16 and FY17, Chittenden County provided CIS Family Support to 15% more clients but with the same staff level. This meant we had to reduce the frequency of visits by Family Support workers.
- Level funding for CIS has forced Chittenden County to cut two full-time Family Support positions and 30% of our capacity to deliver Evidence Based Home Visiting, a primary strategy for addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and helping families prepare their children for success in kindergarten.
- Chittenden County CIS providers may be asked to provide a greater contribution to the CIS contractor's admin fees in FY 20, which will mean further reductions in staff and further reduced capacity in direct services to children and families.
- For young children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), clinically and developmentally appropriate services are lacking statewide. In Chittenden County, we currently have eleven young children diagnosed with ASD, and seventeen who are suspected of having ASD. Some children have been waiting as long as 7 months for intensive services. Earlier intervention and support of the right kind, at the right time, in the right amount, for the right duration for children with this diagnosis has been shown to make an appreciable difference.
- Washington County notes that their one Occupational Therapist who makes home visits cannot see any new CIS clients until 2020.

These are just a few illustrations of the need for increased support for CIS, and why I support increased funding for CIS.

VFN appreciates that H. 531 as passed by the House would prevent the Governor's proposed cut to CIS for FY20. I would be remiss if I didn't encourage you to also consider increasing funding for the Children's Integrated Services bundle in the 12 CIS regions, given years of level funding and increasing family needs and complexities, not to mention the challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled CIS staff with decreased ability to adequately compensate them. It is important to address the community-identified needs of our most vulnerable children and their families, and to meet our IDEA and EPSDT obligations as a state.

If there is any ability to increase Vermont's investment in prevention and early intervention under CIS, it should be exercised, given our stated commitments to realizing the promise of *every* Vermont child.

Thank you for your time, and feel free to contact me if you need further information.

All my best,



Pam McCarthy
President/CEO, Vermont Family Network