



Date: April 9, 2020
To: Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
From: Aly Richards, CEO, Let's Grow Kids
Re: Child care needs during COVID-19 public health crisis

Thank you for the opportunity to share with the committee Let's Grow Kids' perspective on child care needs 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, our federal delegation, and state and national advocacy organizations in a variety of ways:

- Collaborating with the state and our partners to be a resource for child care programs and early childhood educators.
- 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.
- Emergency child care for essential critical infrastructure workers:
 - Partnering with the state to determine needs by creating a webform for essential workers—as of April 8th, 1037 workers from every county, with 1661 children, had completed the form. Care was requested for 486 school-age children, 517 children under 6, and 317 children in families with kids in both age groups;
 - Support for emergency care programs in managing health concerns, including creation of guidance and webinars with the Department of Health;
 - Supporting access to supplies for emergency child care programs, gathering and shipping materials (such as PPE, thermometers, toilet paper, cleaning supplies) for continued operation. As of today we've heard from 58 programs in need of supplies; we have been working to source and deliver these supplies right now but in the coming weeks emergency child care programs need access to state procurement processes through the State Emergency Operations Center in order to remain in 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.

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 understand the scope of the impacts from closure of early care and education (ECE) programs and to ensure Vermont has enough emergency care available to support essential workers. We greatly appreciate this hard work, and we support the guidance that has been issued to continue Child Care Financial Assistance Program payments to programs that have closed, to support families through the stabilization payment program, to provide additional pay for emergency care programs, and other supports that CDD is putting into place.

The Child Development Division has and continues to follow national best practice—as it emerges on a daily basis—in crafting Vermont’s response, taking a flexible approach to the use of state Child Care Financial Assistance and federal Child Care Development Funds to provide emergency child care to essential workers, to continue payments flowing to child care programs that have been forced to close, and to provide some relief for families paying tuition. This is an appropriate use of these funds and a sound strategy to prop up an emergency system. It also allows Vermont to look forward and plan for the continued existence of an ECE system when the acute crisis has passed. **The emergency measures put in place by CDD are among the best in the nation and demonstrate an understanding of the magnitude of the problem facing ECE programs and families alike. We strongly encourage appropriators and policymakers to support these policies with whatever funds are necessary in the coming weeks and months.**

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.”

The temporary expansion of the Child Care Financial Assistance Program to support all families struggling to pay full tuition is not only good practice during an epidemic; it’s the direction identified by the Blue Ribbon Commission, and by this committee in your work on the 5-year plan for CCFAP. Another aspect of the child care system that this committee has very recently discussed is the need for an updated IT system. The current crisis response has been impeded by our state’s outdated IT infrastructure. In other states that have invested in upgraded IT for child care systems, we’ve seen agencies and collaboratives able to very quickly launch comprehensive systems for tracking the need for emergency child care and linking families to programs.

This pandemic is bringing 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. The Health and Welfare Committee has been discussing this fact for years; now the rest of Vermont is seeing it clearly as well.

Vermont is the first state in the nation to commit to ensuring child care programs and early childhood educators are ready to reopen when the time is right. We need more public investment in child care at the state and federal level so that Vermont and the U.S. can have a system that works for today’s families and economy –through this crisis and into the future.