



Voices for Vermont's Children testimony
House Committee on Human Services and Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
May 8, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion.

Like the other topics that you have been addressing during this pandemic, child care is incredibly nuanced and this pandemic has magnified the many challenges that families and early care providers have been struggling with for decades.

The economic and social pressures to reopen are so strong that it may be difficult to make a clear, objective assessment about whether or not it is safe to open. Providers feel the weight of this decision very acutely. An article this week in the New York Times cited multiple studies from Italy, Germany, and China that point to the potential for cases to soar if we reopen schools now. It is critical to weigh all the evidence carefully. If we're going to re-open congregate settings for children, it should be with eyes wide open about the potential impact on providers, families, and our community at large. We may not have much leeway in this moment, and we recognize that.

We should take this opportunity to reflect on these pressures. This pandemic has highlighted, once again and in the extreme, that childcare is essential to families and to the whole fabric of our society. We appreciate the measures Vermont has taken to protect the childcare sector, and assist both providers and families economically. As a place of critical, primary relationships in children's lives, as well as a sector dominated by women, we also value the social/emotional and gender-equity benefits of these interventions. And, childcare is an essential service in an economy where most parents are in the workforce. Now, when there is tremendous pressure to get these parents back to work, we are faced with figuring out how to balance all of these variables.

The opposing pressure o between the essential service of child care in our market economy and the movement toward a "universal", yet limited pre-k has left many providers with pieced together slots, budgets, and reporting obligations. Just like our other systems, the childcare continuum is a multi-dimensional service. Providers are asked to coordinate early intervention supports, to provide meals, to work with children who express trauma, and to support families. Each family brings its own strengths, abilities, resources, schedules, and needs to a provider. The complexity of the child care world cannot be understated.

Budgeting aside, this pandemic has created a dynamic tension between the obligation of providers to look out for the safety and well being of their children and staff - and the reality that Vermont is counting on child care providers (or a percentage of them) to remain available for essential workers who have no other option for their kids. We know that many of the precautionary measures that are indicated for COVID-19 are not possible for young children. Children under the age of two cannot wear masks, social distancing with an infant is

impossible, and toddlers touch and drool on everything. In addition, the medical community reports that children who have COVID-19 are more likely to be asymptomatic. Tests are still not available for routine, regular testing of asymptomatic individuals. It is important to ask the following questions “why are we considering reopening childcare right now?”, “is this in the best interest of children?”, and “if we do gradually reopen, “how can we ensure that the children and youth who need child care the most get priority access?”

The Child Care Services Association, shared the results of The Bipartisan Policy Center survey throughout the country related to child care use and concerns. As a parent, I was not surprised to hear that parents with children under age five are worried. They worry that their child care program won't be open due to post-COVID-19 emergency closures, but they also worry that their child and family will be more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 if they return to childcare, and that they won't be able to afford child care going forward.

We know that the inequities that were present before the pandemic will be a factor in child care during the pandemic. Some families will opt to keep their children out of group settings until a vaccine is available. For many others, that will not be an option. With many families out of work and without a financial cushion, we do not have a clear indication of how families will respond to the opening of child care in the immediate future. What we do know is that for too long, the need for quality childcare has far outpaced its availability, leaving many families without options. We must continue to take steps to address this need.

We were asked to comment specifically on why some providers were not getting paid. While others can comment more directly, we have been informed that some providers have not received their child care subsidy payments as they understood that the state would cover half of all families tuition, but in reality - afterschool capacity was not included in that offer. Centers who offer childcare for both groups created agreements with families and staff with the understanding that their income would be captured in the subsidy payment. If they submitted their reimbursement forms with the afterschool tuition included, the entire payment was not made until the form was adjusted. These providers are in a difficult spot. The goal of the funding was to ensure that providers remained viable, we recommend that the state ensure that these programs are not at risk due to this situation and that the afterschool network be consulted about how to ensure that this critical component of the care continuum is also preserved.

We can learn from the providers who have remained open as we think about what is possible moving forward. Voices encourages the legislature to ensure that expectations are clear and reasonable, and to provide ample opportunity for providers and families to offer feedback and guidance throughout this process.

We can also learn from other human service programs as we try to create a funding structure that works for child care providers. Residential programs have participated in several iterations of rate setting exercises to ensure that they have the flexibility to meet their residents needs while ensuring the viability of their programs. They have come to the conclusion that their services are more consistent when they operate by contracts, rather than a per child fee scale. Their service delivery model is increasingly dependent on flexible funding where quality programming is valued and funded. Voices recommends exploring ways to fund child care providers that will provide stability and innovation within the field. As always, any funding that is offered in support of this sector should not detract from the social safety net that supports families' basic needs.

This crisis has made an undeniable case for the certainty that we are all connected. As we look toward our future, both during and after this pandemic, we must be driven by a desire to keep those connections in balance. Our society can only be healthy when we take steps to provide for the health and welfare of all our members. This includes childcare workers, who deserve a living wage and deep respect for their commitment to ensuring the health and welfare of our children. This also includes families, who deserve to be able to choose whether to return to work or stay home without the pressure to make decisions based on harsh financial realities or the availability of childcare. We should always center children, who deserve above all else to be provided with the resources, the love, and the care they need to thrive.