



TO: SENATE HEALTH & WELFARE COMMITTEE
FROM: PARENT CHILD CENTER NETWORK
RE: Guidance on Child Care Re-Opening

Thank you for your careful attention to the issue of the process of re-opening childcare programs as Governor Scott “turns the spigot” to re-open Vermont’s economy. During this important transition time, Vermont is collectively recognizing how important childcare is to Vermont’s economy. However, equally important is that childcare is for the care, education, and nurturing of very young *children*, and children have special needs and characteristics that must be taken into consideration as we make childcare available once again for families.

We absolutely understand the value of child care and what it offers to children from an educational, social/emotional, and nurturing standpoint and the need for children, especially the most vulnerable children, to re-engage in this system. We stand ready to problem-solve with you and with the Child Development Division (CDD) to find workable solutions that keep everyone safe and healthy, so that we can feel ready to open and provide the childcare that families need.

We list below several specific concerns that we do not believe have been addressed, and that must be addressed before young children can be safely cared for in congregate settings and to ensure the sustainability of the childcare field. It is important that providers are directly part of the conversation that helps us to navigate these issues; the Parent Child Centers are ready to step up and help figure out how to move forward.

We would like to request time to talk with your committee about these issues and request that you take action to address them as soon as possible.

Below we list our top level concerns, as well as potential solutions to address those concerns:

1. A shortage of staff who are able and willing to work in childcare settings.
 - a. The childcare field was already facing a staff shortage pre-COVID. Now, we face an increasing staffing challenge because some of our regular staff are vulnerable themselves, as defined in the CDD re-opening guidance, and some staff have children at home that may not have slots available for summer care. For those staff who are in a vulnerable category the CDD and VDH recommend not returning to childcare settings.
 - b. In order to follow guidance for group size, ensure groups do not commingle and to do the enormous amount of cleaning that will be required, we will need additional staff.
 - c. The CDD guidance indicates that any staff with any symptoms must not attend the center until they are either cleared by a test or symptom free for a period of time. It is likely that even if they are not positive for COVID-19, under this guidance staff will have to stay home, possibly for weeks. This situation will require additional substitute staff. We will need additional staff to meet the guidelines around cleaning and sanitation of the childcare and registered home space.
 - d. *Staff should be offered Hazard Pay at no less than \$20/hour. We cannot even contemplate this level of pay with our current finances. Funding should be provided to allow for current staff, new staff and substitute staff to be paid at this level until the COVID guidelines are relaxed.*
 - e. *We had previously asked CDD to reconsider our current licensing and STARS requirements for teachers to assist us with this issue.*
 - f. *We would welcome the opportunity to work with DCF and ACCD to help to funnel potential qualified staff people and substitute teachers to our centers so that we can ensure we have the needed staff to provide consistently.*
2. Our financial situation is precarious.
 - a. Even with the stabilization program, before the pandemic the childcare industry has barely stayed afloat. Heading into re-opening, we have increased costs with less available funding, as we will be serving fewer children without additional stabilization funds.
 - b. The restart grants will help, but the current level of funding is not enough to get the childcare and summer program fields through the transition. Both childcare and summer programs must have access to this important funding, and more funding needs to be allocated to this grant program.

- c. If we have a positive case of COVID in our childcare, the current guidance requires us to shut down, which will immediately end any income we have under the current restart plan. This is not sustainable.
 - d. *While we are “opening the spigot” and re-starting the economy, the state should offer a base level of funding for child care providers so that we can ensure that we can keep slots available for families who need them as they return to work.*
3. We cannot get the supplies that are required per the guidelines to keep our children, staff and families safe.
- a. We need thermometers, PPE, cleaning supplies, and possibly other items to comply with the guidelines.
 - b. These supplies are not only an added expense, but in many cases, they are not even available to us.
 - c. We do not feel comfortable opening with less than a week of supplies on hand. At this time, we cannot acquire these supplies.
 - d. *During the time that the guidance is in effect, the state should supply child care providers the supplies required by the guidance at no cost, and at least a month’s supply ahead of what is needed.*
 - e. *The ordering of these supplies should be clear and easy, e.g., a simple online form.*
4. To state this very clearly: **We have great concerns about the health and safety of the children we care for, the staff that care for the children, and the families of both the children and the staff.**
- a. For very young children, the guidelines are challenging at best and not possible at worst.
 - b. Even though with the guidelines in practice, people could be safe, it is nearly impossible to imagine how we would be able to implement these guidelines with discipline when serving infants and toddlers.
 - c. We are concerned about the social/emotional impact that the guidelines will have on children in our care. We do not want to compromise the nurturing and empathic ways in which we interact with children and support them to interact with one another.
 - d. Childcare is often a safety net and stable space for many children who struggle with trauma and have significant social and emotional needs. We expect the presence of this to only have increased for more children and with more significant behaviors when they return, which requires more physical intervention to keep children safe. Given the guidance, the increased requirements for teachers to not commingle, lack of other mental health supports available in the center currently we believe that those children who need us most may not be able to maintain in our centers.
 - e. *We would welcome an opportunity to have a thorough discussion with VDH and CDD to offer revisions to enhance the guidelines that make logistical, real-world sense for the care of very young children AND do the best possible job to keep children, staff and families safe.*
 - f. *We need supports readily available to our teachers and directors to help us address the mental health and trauma-related issues that may be presenting in the children that we care for.*

Summary of our concerns is captured in this article, as well:

<https://vtdigger.org/2020/05/14/child-care-providers-worry-new-state-guidelines-will-be-difficult-to-follow/>

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration. We look forward to the opportunity to speak with you further.

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