

To: Chairperson Virginia Lyons and Members of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee

From: Linda E Johnson, Executive Director, Prevent Child Abuse Vermont, (PCAVT)

Re: Current needs of “at risk” children and families in Vermont and current service adaptations by PCAVT and need for PCAVT’s programs to be placed into Statute by Legislature.

Thank you, Chairperson Lyons and Members of the Committee for this opportunity to share how “at risk” families are experiencing as a result of the corona virus pandemic, and their needs.

PCAVT has historically delivered 60 Nurturing Parenting Programs and Circle of Parents Support Groups annually for approximately 800 parents and 1200 children at risk of child abuse and neglect. Our referrals come from DCF, Family Court, Corrections, Drug and Alcohol and Mental Health treatment providers. About 15 to 20 % of participants care self referred. Close to 80% of all attending are in some stage of recovery from substance abuse.

When the pandemic began to be felt by Vermonters and schools and child care centers closed, parents attending our programs were upended. Many were coming to fulfill plans with DCF to support them having their children return from foster care or stay out of foster care. Some, who were expecting their children home in 3 months or less, received their children back without much notice.

Parents, who were allowed visitation with their children, had it stopped. Others with Court dates had those hearings cancelled for the time being. Some parents can speak by phone to their children and some have been restricted. For many of these parents there is great distress and anxiety about how well their children are being protected from the virus.

Many parents who have custody of their children had jobs and now must choose between work and income or keeping their children safe at home. Many of the families we work with had not been “stay at home” parents and for them, and for many parents now caring for their children required to remain at home except for trips to the grocery store and pharmacy is a perfect storm for tempers to boil over and abuse to occur.

Many families home with children, do not have access to phones and to computers of any form. Others may have phones but they are the kind one buys minutes for... Some families may have only one screen to share amongst older kids and parents.

Despite these challenges, our program coordinators have reached every single parent attending groups that were in place and those who were about to begin attending a group. They are setting up virtual on line meetings with those who have the technology. Unfortunately only about 6 or 7 out of every ten participants have internet service, or a reliable phone.

**Free internet, free telephones and phone service plans would help reduce isolation and increase safety and support for all family members.**

There is a need for in home technology delivered family support. Parents who allow children access to lots of screen time, need support and information about how accessible our children and youth are right now to on-line predators. They need information about and access to lots of positive fun things to do and to watch on line

that community and national resources are creating for this emergency.

Our work also includes training early childhood educators and caregivers about preventing child sexual abuse. Our work is both victim and victimization prevention. We are almost fully booked for April and starting to book for May. We also do Shaken Baby Syndrome Abuse Head Trauma Training for high school students, early childhood educators and caregivers, home visitors, social workers, etc. and we are fully booked for April and filling up in May.

We use Event Bright to advertize and register participants for both initiatives. Though in person training is the gold standard, because we use platforms that allow us to see everyone participating it is a reasonable substitute for now and very well received.

We also carry out the Healthy Relationships Project, as school based child sexual abuse prevention initiative meeting school's ACT 1, 2009 requirements. We are unable to work with students but are working hard to connect with faculty and staff, and set up on line interactive trainings.

It is important to note that all forms of child abuse occur in secrecy and isolation. We are working hard to ensure that Vermont does not suffer an epidemic of all forms of child abuse during this time.

Before the pandemic took hold, PCAVT was seeking to have its child sexual abuse training for early childhood professionals and caregivers grant from the Child Development Division, (CDD), of DFC put into Statute, as well as our grant for Nurturing Parenting Programs and Circle of Parents Support Groups now in CDD but as of July, in Family Services Division of DCF. We respectfully ask for your help in-order to protect both of these services from unwarranted cuts.

In fact our results are consistently praised by DCF. Our evaluations are based in science and we use scientific instruments in all programs and trainings every time. The NPPs and Circles have proven their efficacy in national evaluations and in incident reduction here in Vermont. They are well respected child abuse prevention and intervention programs.

CDD directed us to come to you to put us into Statute so we would not be reduced. They were correct in that this

is the only way we can continue even at this level, not having any increase in more than 20 plus years.

I realize you as a Committee and as Legislators and individuals with families yourselves are busier than ever. That said, on behalf of the hundreds of children found to be abused in Vermont every year, please help us, continue to reduce that number... despite the spike in sexting and neglect resulting from the opioid crisis. We know we are continuing to keep numbers down with the resources we have.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

For All Our Children and Families,

LJ

This testimony given: April 2, 2020