



Date: April 9, 2020

To: Chair Lyons and the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

From: Morgan Crossman, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures

Re: Childcare Services during the COVID-19 emergency

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to your committee this week with regard to Building Bright Futures (BBF) role in the early childhood system with regard to childcare. My name is Dr. Morgan Crossman, the Executive Director of Building Bright Futures. I'm also the mom of a 2-and-a-half-year-old daughter who is enrolled in both child care and was just enrolled in preK for the fall. This memo includes an overview of Building Bright Futures responsibilities under Act 104 and our response to the COVID-19 pandemic for the field of early childhood and more specifically, supporting our public and private partners in response to childcare needs.

Building Bright Futures

Building Bright Futures (BBF) is Vermont's foundational early childhood public-private partnership, charged under Act 104 to serve as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood, the mechanism used to advise the Governor and legislature on the status of children birth-age eight and their families. BBF's mission is to improve the well-being of children and families in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and bringing voices together across sectors and within regions to discuss critical challenges and problem-solve.

BBF serves as the backbone organization to the early childhood system using collective impact to achieve a unified early childhood system where state, private, and community partners are working together with a shared vision, shared action, and shared accountability; where data (through Vermont Insights) is utilized to drive decision making; where sensible state policy is informed by the wisdom of communities; where regional tables are set for communities to problem solve, coordinate, and take action; and where the jewels of best practices to support the social, emotional and cognitive development of children are disseminated broadly and implemented. This work includes BBF's key charges under Act 104 utilizing a statewide infrastructure outlined below. BBF is the only organization with the infrastructure necessary to serve as the foundational public-private partnership, supporting the early childhood service system by using collective impact to address the complex health, education, behavioral health, and safety conditions surrounding children and families in Vermont.

BBF's 3 key charges under Act 104



- Convening Vermont's early childhood community to foster coordination and collaboration on behalf of children and families.
- Monitoring the system of services and child and family well-being
- Advising the Governor, administration and legislature on the current status of Vermont's children and families

BBF's Statewide Network Infrastructure includes the following components

1. A [Regional Council network](#) serving Vermont's 12 AHS regions working locally to identify gaps, share best practices, take action to improve systems and services for young children and families, and support integration and alignment by bringing together community members across sectors, and elevating regional successes and barriers to state partners
2. Upholding the [Early Childhood Framework and Vision for Vermont](#) which includes maintaining and supporting the implementation of [Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan \(ECAP\)](#)
3. The Early Childhood [State Advisory Council \(SAC\)](#): brings together 23 governor appointed and at-large early childhood leaders and decision-makers from across sectors for systems-level discussions on how to best coordinate and enhance services for young children

[BBF's Response to COVID-19](#)

Since March 14th, BBF has transitioned all of our regional, State Advisory Council (SAC) and Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP) Committee meetings to virtual status. Because of our team's expertise in facilitating and convening virtual meetings, this shift does not drastically alter our workflow given the statewide nature of our work.

Our team is pivoting alongside our partners to virtually convene Regional, ECAP and State Advisory Council (SAC) meetings to specifically address early childhood emergency response and strategy instead of holding to existing agendas. We have heard a range of questions, concerns and updates from regional partners and have developed processes to share this information and strategize with our state partners as time and capacity allows. We will continue to move forward with our charge under Act 104 to convene, monitor and advise on all matters of early childhood and are poised to adjust our work to meet the needs of our statewide partners and communities. We have been in contact with a range of agency and community partners and are monitoring efforts across BBF's core infrastructure of regional councils, early childhood action plan committees, and the State Advisory Council).



BBF held its first ever, [all-virtual State Advisory Council meeting](#) this month, attended by more than 65 early childhood leaders. The agenda focused on early childhood agency partner updates and priorities (Child Development Division, Agency of Education, Department of Health and Department of Mental Health), assessing the changing needs of families and communities, and reviewing how BBF can best support the early childhood system during this time.

Since the start of the COVID-10 emergency, BBF has been closely monitoring and documenting the gaps, needs, questions, concerns and strategies emerging from families, communities, regions and statewide partners. The following **early childhood themes and priorities** have emerged statewide within the first few weeks (this is not exhaustive list, but top themes emerging in no particular order):

1. Child care: emergency child care for essential workers, guidance for child care programs and families
2. Food security and basic needs: diapers, wipes, formula, growing reliance on food shelves, use of WIC
3. Parent/caregiver/child safety and mental health: risks for domestic violence and abuse as well as substance abuse
4. Health care & health insurance: health care and health insurance for early educators serving children of essential employees, health insurance for all children and families
5. Technology: lack of connectivity for families (those residing in rural areas, no access to a phone or computer), additional remote learning needs, WIFI and training for providers, families and children
6. Distance learning: support for educators, children and families in distance educating and remote learning, appropriate expectations

BBF's Child Care Response

Within our role as a neutral convener, BBF has supported the response to child care in the following ways:

- Supported the development of the webform to stand-up emergency child care for essential persons in partnership with Let's Grow Kids and the Child Development Division
- Continued dissemination of information to early childhood stakeholders through BBF infrastructure (e.g. agency guidance and FAQs)
- Continued monitoring and documenting questions, comments, concerns, gaps, and strategies emerging in the field
- Weekly dissemination of information gathered to agency partners to inform guidance documents and FAQs



- Not surprisingly, there have been a multitude of questions about child care from parents, providers, educators and others given the evolving guidance.
- [Building Bright Futures](#) and the [Vermont DCF Child Development Division](#) (CDD) will be hosting a series of forums to answer questions about childcare via Zoom. Representatives from CDD will clarify guidance for parents, childcare and after school providers, and early childhood partners. Questions can be submitted in advance via this [online form](#). To access the forums, join using meeting id 415559023 or request a link from Julia Andrews at jandrews@buildingbrightfutures.org. The forums are scheduled for:
 - Friday, April 10, 1:00-2:00 pm ([Recording](#))
 - Friday, April 17, 1:00-2:00 pm
 - Friday, April 24, 1:00-2:00 pm
- BBF participates in bi-weekly meetings between CDD, LGK, BBF & Vermont Afterschool specific to child care. We also have weekly or bi-weekly meetings with the Agency of Education and the Vermont Department of Health to support a collaborative and integrated approach.

Perspectives from the field: Successes and persistent challenges in child care

Vermont's child care successes

1. Vermont has mobilized quickly to respond to the needs of children and families, especially the emergency child care needs of essential persons, in addition to designing a plan to ensure child care programs are able to reopen their doors once this has ended. That's not to say there haven't been challenges with implementation but we should be proud of the work that's been accomplished and that Vermont is leading the way nationally.
2. Vermont has utilized existing partners and the existing child care referral system to develop a new child care system and process in a short period of time. We now need to close the gaps and focus on implementation.
3. There have been incredible cross-agency, cross-sector, public-private partnerships and communication emerging. Partnerships have been strengthened between the Vermont Department of Health, the Department of Children and Families and the Child Development Division, and the K12 food system. These partnerships have supported key discussions of the needs of children and families, provided access to child care, and continually reviewed the needs of children and families across partners to ensure the best and safest delivery of care during this crisis.



4. The field has received regular information from the Child Development Division, although some of the guidance needs clarity.
5. The state has truly recognized the importance of child care as an essential.

Vermont's remaining challenges with child care

1. Financial Concerns
 - a. Concerns from child care programs about their ability to make payroll, continue paying rent and utilities, etc.
 - b. Continued confusion on how to bill/submit invoices
 - c. Lack of clarity around how different funding streams may be applied to families (CCFAP, preK)
2. Interagency partnership
 - a. Perception of a lack of coordination between state agencies (AHS & AOE) makes it challenging for regional systems to work together and difficult for families to know where to look for information. However, over the last week or so it has been very clear that for all child care related questions and concerns, the point of contact and guidance will be coming from the Child Development Division.
3. Family Concerns
 - a. Concern about enrollment (children losing their space) if families don't have the ability to meet the requirement to pay 50% of their tuition during closure. However, we've also heard that providers have been mindful of families needs and have adapted as best they can to meet the needs of families.
 - b. Families have also called for alternative models of care, through family, friends and neighborhood networks.
4. Health Concerns
 - a. Programs have raised health and safety concerns for teachers and staff in centers and homes. The Child Development Division and the Vermont Department of Health have been responsive to this concern in creating joint guidance and webinars.
5. Clear and consistent communication
 - a. Programs and providers have been hesitant to make decisions and disseminate information to families due to the weekly guidelines updates.
 - b. The field has strongly requested clarity on the guidance and FAQs, and for those documents to be written in an accessible way. In effort to respond to these needs, BBF and the Child Development Division have partnered to host a weekly Early



Childhood Forum on Child Care to provide the field with direct access to agency partners to ask questions and receive up-to-date information.

Concluding Remarks

Building Bright Futures will continue working virtually to support the needs of the early childhood service system during this emergency. We are working closely with agency partners on a weekly basis to ensure that the needs, questions and concerns of families, communities, providers and other early childhood partners are elevated to decision-makers. Our statewide infrastructure supports our ability to consistently communicate with decision-makers and the field for streamlined feedback loops. Our team is honored to serve as a resource to the legislature, families and early childhood partners. We are committed to providing the most up-to-date, high-quality information and data to inform decision-making at all times.

Thank you very much for your consideration of these topics.

Sincerely,

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