

## **May 22, 2020 Senate Health and Wellness Committee Testimony**

Vicky Senni, Co-Director at Turtle Island Children's Center in Montpelier, VT

My name is Vicky Senni. I am the Co-Director of Turtle Island Children's Center in Montpelier. We have a capacity for 90 children between the ages of six weeks old through preschool (or five yrs old). We are an Act 166 public preK partner school. Prior to the pandemic, we had 86 children enrolled. We operate with 20 early educators and three administrators, and as many substitute teachers as we can get.

I want to start by saying thank you. Thank you for trying to understand the issues that we are facing during pandemic times. The administration has absolutely done the right thing for Vermont by issuing stabilization payments for childcare, which includes an additional small stipend per child, per week for those who have been providing **emergency childcare** for essential workers.

**The providers who have been caring for children during this closure** have managed to follow strict health & safety guidelines and keep children and teachers safe **because** of the support that has been offered : these stabilization dollars have allowed childcare centers that are currently operating to maintain **smaller group sizes**. They've been offered PPE and cleaning supplies with **timeliness**.

**This must continue.** All of us as childcare providers across the state have **a commonality in our concerns :**

- Providers don't exactly know how many parents need or want care immediately between June 1st and July 6th, or at any point throughout the summer. This information is difficult to gather; **it takes time**. In part because parents themselves are trying to figure this out. I sent a survey to all of our families two weeks ago and am still working with each of our 80+ families to figure this out. **It takes time**.
- Providers don't exactly know how many **teachers** we will have come June 1st, or even July 1st. So many have underlying health conditions or are over the age of 65 and in the process of consulting with their physicians about returning to work. **This takes time**.
- Just yesterday I learned that my Co-Director will be moving out of state in order to be closer to her family during this global pandemic, whose future impact is yet to be known. And without health insurance, even in our position as Directors, she needs to take care of herself and not put herself at risk without the proper assurance that she'll receive medical care without incurring insurmountable debt if she gets sick. Our teachers are in the same position. In non-pandemic times, providers (and yes, even Directors) cannot afford good health insurance. I am heart-broken and yes, really scrambling.. But I understand her choice. We are still in pandemic times, and we need to brace ourselves now and remember that we are people first, before workers. But now I'm in a position where the plans that I did have in place, or the plans that were starting to come together, are already crumbling. What does this mean logically? We have 7 classrooms and are

planning to offer a school-aged summer camp-- that's 8 total groups of children. I cannot supervise each of those groups, as that would risk cross-contamination if I were to be a vector of disease. (I plan to supervise and offer hands-on support to 3 infant classrooms, while my co-director was planned to supervise two toddler classrooms, and our mentor teacher would supervise the preschool. We are still searching for a lead teacher for our school-aged camp. Logistically, because of safe group sizes of no more than 25, I cannot go between these different age groups as a vector. How is that supposed to work?)

- Finally, we all have to reconfigure our buildings and spaces, set up new procedures, protocols, handbooks and train our staff, find new & qualified teachers, order supplies and materials. **This takes time.**

**The stabilization payments must continue during pandemic times. The stipends for offering care (per child, per week) must continue during pandemic times. We are not all going to full enrollment (for us that's 90 children), yet without full enrollment we cannot pay our bills: our main expense being wages. Even if we are allowed to open our doors to 90 children and fill all of those slots-- we know it's not safe.**

**Restart grants---** we have no idea how much money will be coming to us. Grants are due TODAY, and the funds are distributed May 27th, and we are scheduled to reopen June 1. That's just a few days between knowing whether this is financially viable, and actually doing the work. Will we have everything in place by then? We don't know.

**We are teachers, we are educators, and we are caring for the youngest humans in our state. We want to work; we love our jobs and miss the children terribly. We have always needed the support, we've always been surviving and not thriving and today is no different. Thank you.**