

Senate Health & Welfare Committee

Testimony of Claire Kendall, Family Center of Washington County

On behalf of the Parent Child Center Network

RE: Governor's Proposed Restatement Budget – Childcare Eligibility, Resource & Referral

September 9, 2020

The Parent Child Center Network is opposed to the proposed changes to the CCFAP program in the Governor's recommended budget. We ask your committee to also oppose these changes. Below are some of the impacts we have identified with this change, which is not only a budgetary change, but also a policy change that will impact families and childcare providers. Parent Child Centers and other providers have spent significant time building relationships with DCF/FSD to ensure families get access to programming based on their eligibility - this is now a good system that works well and would have to be completely overhauled in the middle of a pandemic where things are already so much more challenging for families

The proposal to shift childcare eligibility, resource and referral services to ESD would take away this locally known and locally accessed service that is embedded and integrated in communities, and it could be disastrous. Community Based Child Care Referral Specialists were vital during the COVID School and Childcare shutdown, when hundreds of Essential Workers were able to access essential child care slots because Community Child Care Referral Specialists worked round the clock, 7 days a week reaching out to childcare providers to secure slots for essential workers. These community-based staff were able to match families with providers so that Vermont essential workers could work, knowing that their children would be taken care of.

Families with young children who need to work or enroll in training or educational programs often have multiple needs that are met via the one-stop-shop of Parent Child Centers or other community-based host agencies. A family may walk in the door needing help finding or paying for childcare, and then they are connected with multiple other family resources, supports and referral services. That one-stop-shop approach will deteriorate if these services are moved into ESD.

IMPACTS ON FAMILIES

If accepted by the Legislature, this would introduce a profound change of Vermont's social policy as it applies to young families. As it is now, the policy is to determine eligibility for childcare subsidy through a local provider that serves families holistically and helps them access other services and supports. In effect, by moving the program from where it currently sits – at CDD – to ESD and eliminating the positions at CDD that oversee the program, DCF is shifting away from a system that considers not just eligibility for child care subsidy, but takes a multi-generational, family-centered approach to each family whether they are eligible or not.

Applying for childcare subsidy is often the first time a young family touches the Human Services system of care. When families are applying, they often share much more information than what is needed to determine eligibility, which allows the local specialist to get them connected to many supports and services that might not otherwise be identified. Families often feel less comfortable sharing personal and family issues with state staff because of the fear associated with the power of the state and sometimes the stigma associated with state services. Parent Child Centers and other local providers can offer a warm, welcoming and judgment free place where families can share their concerns, struggles and barriers and get connected to the help they need. They will also find a home at the Parent Child Center that they can come back to for other supports and services as they need them.

Due to the pandemic many families have been accessing these services for the first time, with layers of stressors such as: loss of employment, reduced school hours, loss of child engagement activities from community partners, reduction of people's salaries. They are often embarrassed and stressed when they seek help. We are well equipped to draw out their issues and address their needs with our strengthening families framework.

CCFAP, Referral and Specialized CCFAP are integrated with CIS at the regional level and that works for children and families. It is critical that these services are connected to the CIS service in order to keep quality services that are accessible and family friendly and to ensure better outcomes and seamless integration. If these functions are moved into ESD, that CIS connection is likely to be lost, which will mean that families are not getting the integrated services that their children need.

Accessibility is an issue for families. Currently, families just “pop” in to get paperwork, drop off paperwork, ask questions etc. If they must go to the state building, parking is a bigger issue, having to go through metal detectors, or not feeling comfortable in the same building as FSD because they have an open case, etc. So many families with this program come in for childcare and end up getting many more services like diapers, CIS referrals, playgroup info, etc. They will not receive this information in the same way or be connected to their local PCC in the same way, and this could significantly impact families' access to other programming.

We work with the families to make sure they actually access the services they need, for instance, going back and forth with them and other services providers to make sure they have all their paperwork in, to help them access family support, childcare or other CIS services. We are concerned that families will fall through the cracks without this wrap around approach that community providers are committed to.

Our Specialists and CIS CCC work closely together to ensure families are not "dropped" from one service need to another. The "warm handoff" that the State demands to ensure continuity for families is based on clear communication and timely transitions. The CIS CCC Specialist in each county needs access to FAP files as their work overseeing Child With Special Health Needs, Family Support and Protective Service Child Care are all processed under FAP guidelines and policies.

In 2011 the CDD thought of moving these divisions to ESD and it was deemed on many levels a poor idea with many flaws and potential negative impacts to families. We would ask now:

- What has changed, especially during a pandemic?
- What process have been developed to ensure a smooth continuity for families and providers?
- What accommodations are in place for ESD workers to learn of and develop relationships with all of the support workers who assist families throughout our community?
- How will this workload be distributed among the current State work force and what work has DCF has done to anticipate and mitigate the impact on Vermont families?
 - Currently, there are 21 Child Care Financial Assistance Eligibility Specialists around the State. Each one handles an average between 350-400 cases per year. They process over 10,000 applications/year.

IMPACTS ON CHILDCARE PROVIDERS

Childcare providers operate on a thin margin and CCFAP eligibility determination for families and regular payments must be in place for providers to operate. In order for these smooth operations to happen, childcare providers need prompt confirmation as to where families are at in their eligibility determination, before assigning a secured childcare slot. It is critical to know payment is in place before admitting a child, and parents often urgently need the child to begin attending a program to secure employment.

The BFIS state data base system is difficult to use and childcare providers often rely on local support from local CCFAP specialists with questions around invoicing and family eligibility and determination.

Childcare providers are strapped for time working all day with children and little breaks and need access to local specialists to get the supports they need. Our community-based specialists know them and are frequently communicating through email and phone to ensure they have what they need so they can bill appropriately and get paid.

We are concerned that this will be one too many changes for childcare providers at this critical time, and we'll see more people close their doors. Everything is in a state of flux right now in this sector, and these providers were on the edge before the pandemic struck.

FINANCIAL IMPACTS FOR PARENT CHILD CENTERS - \$616,898 total

- Family Center of Washington County would lose \$151,162/year
 - \$117,234 CCFAP & \$33,928 referral; approx 2.5 FTE's
- Springfield Area Parent Child Center would lose \$79,986/year
 - \$16,734 for referral and \$63,252 for CCFAP). Approx 1.2 FTEs
- Sunrise would lose \$102,000/year.
 - Approx 1.5 FTEs and also this contract pays overhead and if it isn't in place it causes other services to cost more because overhead has to be redistributed
- Parent Child Center of NCSS will lose \$130,862/year
 - \$104,514 for CCFAP and \$26,312 for referral. Approx 2 FTEs
- Lamoille Family Center will lose \$85,844 annually.
 - It has been level funded for many years. \$7,804 is spent on administrative costs. \$3,000 is spent on occupancy costs, which would have to be absorbed by all other programs, increasing their cost. That leaves about \$75,000, which covers salaries.
- NEKCA North Parent Child Center would lose \$51,013 per year
 - \$45,626 for CCFAP, \$5,387 referrals. One FTE - this position has been level funded for quite a while and we have had the same staff member in this role since at least 2017. She is the hub for Orleans and Northern Essex - the most rural Counties in Vermont.
- The Family Place would lose \$101,875 per year
 - 1.5 FTE; and similar to Sunrise's comments about overhead.