

Budget Testimony - Amy Johnson (Parent Child Center of Northwestern Counseling & Support Services – St. Albans Vermont)
Senate Health and Welfare Committee

Good morning Senate Health and Welfare committee members. Thank you for having me - it is truly an honor to speak with you and represent the work of the Parent Child Center Network.

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for your ongoing support of the Parent Child Center Network – specifically as it relates to the Prevention Bill. Prevention is crucial in turning the curve for our families. Providing preventative services to families that help to build resiliency and other protective factors that reduce the risk of abuse and neglect are vital in building and sustaining healthy communities.

The impact isn't always immediate but what is gained, in the long run, by providing upstream services is cost effective and only makes our state stronger and healthier. Prevention has a long term ripple effect on the life of a child and their family that is profound. Parent Child Centers have been invested in prevention based work since their inception. PCCs work builds communities where children and families thrive; communities that support children in having a healthy childhood.

We have been delivering critical and essential prevention and early intervention based services, to families with young children since 1988. The Master Contract does not adequately fund these state services that it requires PCCs to deliver. Due to this, Parent Child Centers are often forced to make difficult decisions about programming, staffing, and center infrastructure.

Just as critical as the services we offer are the staff who deliver them. We provide state programming at 30% less wage. Often staff experience low wages without benefits. We have quality individuals who build strong relationships with families and wrap them tightly in supports. These relationships are critical in building trust and keeping families engaged in the services they need to succeed. As it stands now, nearly 100 staff have left in the past three years for jobs with higher pay and benefits. This brain drain not only affects our centers but our families as well. PCC wages and benefits must sustain the highly skilled people who do the work. A 1.5 million dollar increase would allow for all PCCs to bring their staff to \$15/hour.

The landscape of our state is continuously changing, and though we are decades old we are designed to be innovative and responsive to community needs. Despite decades of chronic underfunding, we continue to meet community and family needs and respond to gaps in the system. We do this while our infrastructure suffers as we move money around to support staff to work with families instead of making the needed improvements to our buildings, grounds, data systems, classrooms, kitchens, professional development systems, and beyond. A one-time funding request of 1.5 million dollars would help relieve some of the ongoing stress of continued underfunding.

With decades of experience, and a true understanding of our community landscape, PCCs support the most vulnerable young families often times entering our system through our Reach Up program. When a family becomes part of the PCC they are naturally and automatically brought into the full scope of services and programming we offer. This seamless service delivery system allows us to support families holistically with programming that has a positive impact on everyone. This rings especially true for our Reach Up families. Co-location of Reach Up case management and early childhood services ensures that families are supported to access resources, information, guidance, and community support that are critical to their children's well-being during the early years in their development.

Often times Reach Up is our access point to vulnerable families who we might not otherwise come on our radar. Just recently a teen mother entered our PCC Reach Up program. When she gave birth to her child she struggled and her baby was deemed failure to thrive a few short weeks after delivery. She was scared and reluctant to meet with other service providers. Her trust in her PCC Reach Up case manager allowed for co-visits with our perinatal support and CIS team enabling both mother and baby to get the additional supports needed.

Reach Up families are often our most vulnerable families who come to us with very complex needs. Most are experiencing extreme poverty, often generational poverty, all while caring for young children. According to a 2018 statistic, 45% of children in PCC Reach Up were 0-5 years of age. PCCs integrated multigenerational approach supports these families by allowing them to be seamlessly connected to the full array of services offered by the parent child center with warm hand-offs to the adult system of care. We are able to intervene early to help families thrive and child development thrive. Weaving reach up services into the full scope of what we do allows us to make sure services are readily available and mitigates and often times prevent the stress of navigating multiple systems; which often sets families up for failure.

While we provide a tight wrap around families we know that families also need the financial support to address extreme poverty. Currently the reach up grant for families is far from enough to meet the basic needs of the children in the home. Basic needs grants to Vermont's lowest-income families meet only 34% of a subsistence budget. It is clear that the tightly wrapped services of the PCC are needed for our most vulnerable families as well as increasing family grants to meet basic needs. It is not one or the other, it's both to meet the complex needs of these families and help them thrive.

We know it's possible for Reach Up families to thrive - in fact, it's not the exception it's commonplace. For example - when Paige came to our PCC via Reach Up she was unemployed, experiencing domestic violence, had a toddler with behavioral challenges due to toxic stress, was pregnant, had lost a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, had DCF involvement, lacked transportation, and lacked childcare for her son. She received PCC Reach Up case management services and upon entering the doors of the PCC she was connected to support groups for her loss and postpartum depression, was connected to concrete supports to help with transportation and housing barriers, was connected to an early childhood and family mental health support team, was connected to childcare referral and financial assistance, among other things. Today she is graduated, has a home, a job, a car, no longer has DCF involvement, her children have childcare and are thriving in her care. The full scope of the work being done by the PCC Reach Up program to support needs and address social determinants of health is massive and it works!

Another contract that is slated to be cut from the budget in Vermont Children and Family Community Response (VCFRCR). This project was created to address the high rates of young children in DCF custody. The pilot, existing in three regions (Franklin/Grand Isle, Washington county, and Rutland county - areas hit particularly hard with high rates of young children in custody), works with families identified by DCF family services, who are at risk of future involvement in the child welfare system. Skilled home visitors assist families over a four month period to assess for needs and interventions. They link families to resources and supports designed to enhance social connections, improve their financial situation, and increase protective factors in families. We understand that caseloads are high for DCF Family Services. If we push upstream, as the VCFRCR project does, we lower the number of children coming into custody and lower the caseloads of DCF workers. Prevention is key.

We hope there is an understanding that PCCs do prevention work and we do it well. Please support the house budget increase to the Master Grant and the one-time funding for PCC's, and

please reinstate the Reach Up Case Management contracts to the PCCs. If possible add \$500,000 to the one-time funding for a total of 1.5 millions dollars.

If we want families to get the services they need then we need to invest in services and organizations that provide these to families; specifically programs we know and trust to provide services that work for families. For Vermont families, Parent Child Centers are the answer.

Thank You.