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**House Committee on Human Services
Testimony of Marsha Faryniarz, Interim CEO
Greater Burlington YMCA
February 18, 2021**

Hello, my name is Marsha Faryniarz and I am the Interim CEO of the Greater Burlington YMCA. I have been with the Y for 39 years and though my titles and positions have changed, the vast majority of my experience is in school age and early child care. I have served the State in various capacities around child care, to include being a part of various Building Bright Futures committees, serving on the Governor's Child Care Advisory Board, the predecessor of Building Bright Future, and helping to create the first set of licensing regulations for school age programs in the state.

The Y serves just over 200 children in its early child care programs. Approximately ½ of those children are infants and toddlers. We have four locations, two in downtown Burlington, one in St. Albans, and we have a partnership with the UVM Medical Center to provide care at a Winooski-based center for Medical Center employees.

I have received your questions in advance and in my testimony hope to address each one. I, of course, welcome your questions. Before diving in, I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify and express my appreciation for time, attention, and energy that is being dedicated to the incredibly important issue of early child care and education.

- I will start by stating that one of our biggest challenges at the Y and across the state is finding and retaining qualified staff to work in early childhood education programs.

This is not a Y problem, this a problem for the over 100 infants on the waitlist for just our facility in Burlington and for families all across Vermont.

We are trying to open two more infant classrooms in one of our two Burlington locations, but cannot because we simply can't get qualified applicants to fill our head teacher positions. Professionals are leaving the field, as they can't afford to work in early child care. We need to incentivize staff to not only come into the field, but to remain. For that to happen, they need to be paid commensurate with other educators in the public sector, and they need opportunities for advanced degrees. Our experience is that those who come to us with advanced degrees, become our center head teachers or Directors/Asst. Directors. They are committed to the field, and have the education and experience commensurate with what's needed in early child care to run high quality programs. Two of my center directors currently hold master's degrees.

- The reality is that in order for us to pay our staff commensurate with their K-12 peers, we have to have financial support from the state. Families cannot afford to pay out of pocket the true cost of care and, unfortunately, subsidy currently falls well short of that cost.

At the Y, we are fortunate to have a development team who is tasked with raising funds in the community to help support families to access many Y programs, the biggest chunk of which goes to early childhood programs.

- 31 percent of the families we serve are families receiving state subsidy. We do not cap the number of families we serve who receive State subsidy because to turn families away seems antithetical to the Y mission. That said, it is a conversation we have had many times when we are talking about our ability to remain financially viable.
- Currently, every week the Y subsidizes our families on subsidy to the tune of approximately \$3,800. This includes families who utilize our Burlington and St. Albans centers. As an example, allow me to share that our tuition cost for infant care is currently \$389/week. A family qualifying for 100% subsidy receives state support in the amount of \$238.94 per week, a difference of \$117.60 from the rate we charge. The families simply cannot afford to cover the weekly gap. After arranging for a manageable payment for the family, the Y is left to cover – through scholarship – the remaining balance.
- The amount the Y covers to help ensure families who receive State subsidy can access high-quality care can be even greater due to other factors. This gets to the question of payment for enrollment versus attendance.
 - There are days we don't receive payment because a family has used up their allotted days of vacation.
 - Our staff have appropriate, but considerable, hours of mandatory training. This goes beyond the hours allowed and when we are not serving subsidy families during that training, we are not paid.
 - There is also a huge cost, administratively, to get families receiving State subsidy enrolled and very often when a need arises to request an exception due to an unanticipated absence. These are families who are on the edge, they may be experiencing food and housing insecurity in addition to child care challenges. Why add to their burden by putting limits on their care. A family that uses Y early child care that does not utilize State subsidy, but rather pays the full amount, can take as much time off as they want and secure their spot because they can pay for it. The system, as it currently exists, puts undue stress and worry on subsidy families should events out of their control dictate the need for them to be absent. That they will lose their child care should not be a worry they have to think about, and they should not have to call the centers and the State to beg for a variance.
- The Y is, in the scheme of things, fortunate. We are an organization with a business office and center Directors who don't have to be in the classrooms every day. I don't know how smaller centers or any home-based child care program can find the resources necessary to serve families receiving state

subsidy. The financial burden of providing care to these families should not fall on the provider and families. If you expand the CCFAP to lower- and middle-income families, there must be increased funding to the providers so that they can afford to provide the care. The Y is uniquely positioned to be able to provide scholarship dollars, and we still struggle. Most centers and home-based care cannot afford to face the financial hits of below-market subsidy rates and high administrative costs.

- An additional consideration that must not be overlooked is the fact that an investment in the early care and education of children through high-quality programs leads to savings down the road. We, unlike K-12, see our families every day. We are in constant communication about the development and well-being of their children. We know if a child isn't coming with enough food, we know if a family is in need of housing. We can identify if a child is experiencing any trauma at home, as we have eyes on them every day.

We know brain development is critical in the early years. Our infants are not just getting basic care every day. Our staff ensure they receive dedicated time for songs and books each day to work on literacy. They work on spatial awareness, problem solving (how do I get that toy, what does it do?), gross motor and fine motor opportunities to build their skills and muscles so they can roll, then sit, crawl and walk. For infants, everything is new. They are little scientists all day long. They are learning how something new relates to what they already know. They are constantly exploring and expanding their minds. A high-quality program maximizes that opportunity.

Lastly, you asked three questions:

What can the state do to improve your interaction and support your business and children? Improve the existing BFIS system. It is unreliable and unnecessarily complicated to navigate.

What is one thing the State should stop doing? Limit or bring to an end the undue burden on families and providers created by ever increasing and changing regulations, processes, and procedures.

What is the one thing the State should keep doing? Keep making investments in early child care.

I am so encouraged by this bill as it comprehensively addresses the many challenges facing the early care and education of children. I thank you so much for the work you have done to date, your support of this bill and the heavy lifting I know will come. There is nothing more important than ensuring families and children have the supports they need to be successful. Simply put, high-quality child care is essential. It is what every young child needs to support their growth and what parents need in order to work and contribute to a vital Vermont economy.

Thank you for your time.

Marsha Faryniarz
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