

Good Morning, My name is Mike Bensel. As Executive Director of Pride Center of Vermont. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share an exciting initiative related to recruitment of LGBTQ+ foster parents for youth in the foster care system, especially LGBTQ youth.

We are currently experiencing a critical shortage of foster parents in Vermont. The pandemic has worsened the situation by making it harder to secure enough foster families for the Vermont children in need. Add to that, Pride Center has encountered many LGBTQ+ adults who are hesitant to engage in the foster process due to a long history of systemic barriers and discrimination that have prevented qualified foster parents the opportunity to provide a loving home. Just last summer the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of an adoption agency that refused to work with LGBTQ couples.

Over the past several months, we've been working with DCF, Outright Vermont, and RaiseAChild, a nonprofit organization that works with agencies and organizations to increase the number of foster parent resources, to discuss partnering on an LGBTQ+ Foster Parent Initiative. This pilot, which will run from February through June 2022, would include a statewide multi-media awareness campaign and key educational events to promote foster parenting.

We are asking the Legislature to assist us with a \$75,000 Budget Adjustment appropriation to the Department for Children and Families. I have submitted a letter of support from DCF to Pride Center for your review.. We believe that this would be an appropriate use of ARPA funds, given the critical situation Vermont is in regarding lack of foster homes, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic). A VT Digger article that highlighted the critical need for a program like this - and the connection to the pandemic. I have provided the link to the article in my written testimony -

https://vtdigger.org/2021/12/07/vermont-faces-a-shortage-of-suitable-foster-homes/?utm_source=VTDigger+Subscribers+and+Donors&utm_campaign=1b8a73058e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_12_08_11_58&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_dc3c5486db-1b8a73058e-405538477

The appropriation would be used as seed money for the initial phase of this partnership. DCF would contract with the Pride Center, which would be the lead organization to accomplish this work. The partners would work together over the balance of FY 22 to identify foundation funds that would assist us in moving forward.

With your support, we can work together to help place more kids, including LGBTQ+ kids, in loving foster homes here in Vermont.

**Department for Children and Families
Family Services Division**

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Agency of Human Services

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Dear Mike:

On behalf of the Vermont Department for Children and Families, I am writing to you to indicate our support for your efforts to help address the critical shortage of foster parents in Vermont. The Pride Center's prospective campaign to attract members of the Vermont's LGBTQ+ community to serve as foster parents, and to help identify placements for LGBTQ+ youth, is very exciting - and very timely, in that the pandemic has worsened the situation.

We support your plans to partner with other organizations to develop a statewide multi-media awareness campaign and key educational events to help promote foster parenting within the LGBTQ community, as LGBTQ individuals and families have historically experienced challenges in fostering and adopting.

We look forward to working with the Pride Center as a partner and cultural broker to engage LGBTQ adults in the process of fostering and adopting, with the ultimate goal of placing more kids, including LGBTQ+ kids, in loving foster homes here in Vermont.

Thank you,



Aryka Radke
Deputy Commissioner



Brenda Gooley
Director of Operations



