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To: Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations

From: Margaret Atkinson, Director of Development and Community Relations for the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development 

Public Hearings on the Governor’s Recommended FY 2022 State Budget

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My name is Margaret Atkinson, I am the Director of Development and Community Relations for the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. The Prouty Center is the fiscal agent and primary provider for Children’s Integrated Services (CIS) in the Brattleboro AHS region.

The Child Development Division of AHS (CDD) has for many years has offered “Special Accommodation Grants” (SAG) to early care and learning providers to assist with the expense of caring for children with special needs. This is a small amount of funding in the context of the state budget, but it has an enormous impact on the well-being of children with special needs and the adults who care for them. An increase to these funds is needed.

Most often SAG funds pay for a one-on-one aid to support children with special health needs, for example a feeding tube, or children on the autism spectrum or with behavioral issues who need extra support to stay safe. With this extra help, children are able to participate and benefit from high- quality early care and learning settings. In addition, their parents are able to work and maintain the family’s economic security knowing their children are receiving the responsive and supportive care they deserve.

Early education providers are often working with limited resources. Early educators, especially those operating home-based businesses, usually do not have the ability to purchase specialized classroom materials or to hire and train additional staff to meet a child’s special needs. SAGs are specifically designed to assist providers with the expense of caring for children with special needs as an integral part of Children’s Integrated Services.

The SAG funds have always been in high demand across the state and the roughly \$350,000 in funding is usually depleted by February or March of each school year. This means that children who may have been able to be attend and benefit from their early learning programs have been asked to leave mid-year because providers cannot meet their needs. Parents have been left desperately seeking new placements or have left their jobs to stay home with their children, endangering their financial well-being.

The Prouty Center and our early childhood partners ask that the Legislature fund SAGs in the amount of \$500,000 in the FY 22 budget, and that the administration of the grants be part of CIS Specialized Child Care. This investment will assure that families and early care providers are receiving and providing truly integrated services in alignment with the state’s commitment to its young children.