

I'm speaking today as an educator, and as a member of the Early Childhood Educators' Coalition, a worker-led, statewide advocacy group that formed out of frustration around the reopening plan of last Spring, and I think I'd actually like to start there.

On May 22nd of last year, Ted Brady, deputy secretary of Commerce and Community Development, told the Senate Health and Wellness Committee that childcare was one of the biggest obstacles to reopening the economy, on par only with a lack of available testing and PPE. He told the committee that employers were telling him that childcare was in fact, the single biggest obstacle to getting employees back to work. Another way to say this is that childcare providers are one of our most essential professions, vital to the proper functioning of Vermont's economy. And yet, these essential, indispensable workers who we have all leaned on not just since June of last year, but for years and years before that, their wages and working conditions do not nearly reflect the magnitude and value of their role.

According to the Building Bright Futures Early Childhood Systems Needs Assessment, the median wage for a preschool teacher in this state is \$14.57/hour. For other childcare workers, it is only \$12.71. Compare that to the kindergarten teachers we send our 4- and 5-year-olds to at the end of every summer, who make \$31.69/hour, a wage that does in fact reflect their skills and the value of their role in our communities. And while we still ask to raise all minimum wages to at least \$15 an hour, it's important to know that according to a report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Vermont's housing wage – the hourly wage our neighbors must earn to afford a two-bedroom home at fair market rent – is \$22.78. In Burlington, it's almost \$30. The majority of early educators are condemned to living paycheck-to-paycheck, struggling to afford housing, food, and healthcare.

It's also worth mentioning that this is a field primarily staffed by women, whose skills, dedication, and labor go largely unnoticed and under-appreciated as they earn subpar wages and largely subsidize childcare costs themselves. This is true of home providers who will go without paying themselves for a week or two when they know some of their families are unable to come up with the cost of tuition, and this is true of mothers who have had to pull themselves out of the workforce to watch their children.

In my preschool classroom pre-pandemic, I had 18 3-5 year-olds in my care every day, which meant constant care, attention, clarity, precision, planning, and reaction. That's a whole lot of noses to be wiped, wet pants to be changed, and more often than you'd expect, fights to stop, disagreements to mediate, and crying children to comfort, and that's all without mentioning activities to set up, curricula to design, and direct classroom instruction to put into practice. In the meantime, I had to meet the Act 166 requirements of documentation and assessment, which meant recording at least three pieces of evidence for 73 different benchmarks for all 25 of my kiddos. That's almost 5,500 pieces of evidence to record, write up, and grade for each grading period. I had no time to meet with my co-teacher for planning, I had very little time to meet with parents, and after working 8:30-5:30 with that kind of energy output and focus, the thought of attending night-classes just to eventually reach what's considered a livable, fair-housing wage was demoralizing, depressing, and devaluing. Honestly, it still feels easier to come tell all of you that the people doing this work just need more money.

And that was all before the pandemic. Once the pandemic hit, this essential, vital, dedicated, stretched-thin workforce was asked to return to in-person instruction without hazard pay or state-provided PPE in order to save and prop up Vermont's economy. It's important to note here that our organization, the ECEC, partnered with VTAEYC last summer to run a healthcare survey of childcare providers in Vermont, and unfortunately the results matched what we had known and said to each other for a long time. Results from this survey showed that over 11% of child care workers in Vermont are uninsured and over 50% are underinsured. For those who do have some type of insurance, the majority are insured through a spouse or family member, which is never a sustainable or adequate solution. We know people can feel trapped in a job by the healthcare it provides, but people can also feel trapped in households or relationships for the same reason. When our coalition asked Dr. Levine if he would advise someone do our job without health insurance, he immediately said no.

Compared to statewide and national statistics, child care workers in Vermont are both uninsured and underinsured at a much higher rate than the general population. Only 3% of Vermonters as a whole are uninsured and 36% (under the age of 65) are underinsured. I personally took extra unpaid time-off from my classroom teaching in order to keep my income under the threshold to qualify for Medicaid because I did not have the extra income to pay for my own insurance. It should be noted though, that many childcare workers are working side-gigs for money under the table in order to supplement their already insufficient income, and aren't reporting it for the same reasons. As to whether I personally did this during my unpaid time off, I will have to plead the fifth.

I was paying 50% of my income on housing in what could generously be described as an efficient one-bedroom apartment, and that's not counting utilities, car payments, groceries, student loans, and God forbid any unexpected expenses. I also would take freelance transcription jobs at night to supplement my income. And with my education and experience in the field, I was actually making more money than many of my colleagues.

So when we were forced back to work without adequate protections, I had to have a conversation with my family. My father will be 70 this year, pretty solidly in the at-risk category, and incidentally in his retirement he and my mother have been providing childcare for my niece so that my sister does not have to quit her job to raise her daughter. Knowing that in my work I would be in very close contact with small children—and their noses, and wet pants, and tears and all the secretions that come with the trade—my family told me that they would not be comfortable seeing me during the pandemic.

So I left the profession, and I now work for Vermont Humanities as their literacy programs manager. It is a good job with a wonderful organization that does a lot of good in our state. It is not, however, essential to Vermont's economy. I don't think anyone at the Agency of Commerce and Community Development would force my current colleagues and I back to in-person working conditions to preserve the stability of our economy. And yet, as a non-essential worker, I now make nearly twice as much money as I did as a preschool teacher, I have very good health insurance, and I can work from the safety of my own home. I can see my parents, my siblings, and my niece. My former colleagues in childcare, however, are still working under

the same looming viral threat, the same uninsured numbers, and the same wages as before and like our colleagues in elementary and secondary education, are not in line to be vaccinated as a group. Do these people not deserve a living wage? Deserve adequate housing? Deserve healthcare? Should these essential, dedicated, and skilled professionals be tasked with propping up our state's economy for all of us with nothing more than a well-intentioned "thank you?"

Today I'm here to ask the committee to look directly at the issue on page eight of this bill, where it is stated that early childhood educator compensation will be commensurate with peers in other fields. Their peers are educators, the kindergarten teachers who make \$31/hour. Childcare providers are vitally important educators, providing stimulating and nurturing environments for their students at perhaps their most critical developmental stage, and deserve to be compensated for their valuable labor and skills. We, the Early Childhood Educators' Coalition, encourage the committee to be specific in their calls for adequate compensation, that entry-level wage for childcare providers be raised to \$25/hour, and that all childcare providers receive comprehensive healthcare. Student loan repayment and scholarship opportunities alone, while a valuable element of any compensation package, are not nearly sufficient to meet the need.

Childcare is a collective good. For state officials, for businesses, for employers, for parents, for grandparents, for teachers, for children, for all of us. We need a childcare system that represents our values, and we need creative, courageous leadership to get us there.. And we can get there. Multnomah County in Oregon, with a population of around 800,00, only a bit bigger than our state, just successfully passed an ordinance that all 4- and 5-year-olds in the county would receive full-day, 5 days a week childcare using the existing mix of public, private, and home-based care. They did this while also dramatically raising wages for all childcare providers to be equivalent to kindergarten teachers, all by taxing the top 12% of earners in the county and no one below that threshold. We can do this, and we owe it to our essential workers now more than ever. Thank you.

NY Times article on the UPNow campaign in Multnomah County, OR:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/06/upshot/oregon-universal-preschool-election.html>

