

Good Afternoon. My name is Samara Mays. I am the owner, director and pre-school teacher at Montpelier Children's House. We are a 5 STAR program that is also an Act 166 Participating Provider. My dad started Children's House in 1984 – first as a home program before moving to Barre Street in Montpelier. This past winter, we had an opportunity to move our program to Mountainview Street – the Loveworks program was closing this location and National Life found themselves seeking a new tenant. With a Make Way for Kids grant we were able to grow our program from pre-school only to include children from birth to three.

Our new space has capacity for up to 44 children but we are currently at capacity at 30 children – both due to Health and Safety concerns during COVID and due to staffing challenges. Right now, we are working to open a desperately needed infant/toddler room – I have a long waiting list and get calls every week. The barrier to making this happen is finding qualified staff. I took a quick look at the Early Childhood jobs board and was disheartened to see I was among many, many programs trying to hire staff right now.

Of my 30 families, 18 have their tuition reduced by Act 166 funds and four receive CCFAP. There are eight teachers total at Children's House – Two hold an Associates Degree, five a B.A. and three of us hold a current Educator's License.

Questions for witnesses

1. My practical experience is that holding a degree is often but not always important in providing high-quality childcare. I have had teachers with stellar credentials and little practical experience who were not effective teachers and others with a handful of Community College credits who had spent many years in the field who were magical in the classroom. I'd love to see those amazing teachers without degrees be supported to more easily be able to convert their experience into credentials so that they could advance in the field, especially as we move toward a future state when early educators are paid well and their expertise is recognized.

In my experience, based on what I'm able to pay, it can be very difficult for people with degrees to be able to work for me. At one point I was hiring for a licensed teacher for our preschool and interviewed a highly qualified, enthusiastic recent graduate. Early on in the interview it was revealed that she would need to earn at least \$25/ hour to make her student loan payments – something that was far beyond the reach of my program. It is my experience that for many educators holding a degree or a license, a job in the public school system makes far more financial sense for them – they enjoy a higher rate of pay and benefits that I simply cannot offer.

As an Act 166 Provider, we are required to have a licensed teacher on staff for our preschool classroom. In the end, I decided to get my own Teaching License through Peer Review because I knew that finding and paying a licensed teacher would be a constant struggle.

Additionally, I struggle to find and retain qualified teachers with *any* level of educational attainment. The wages are low, particularly in relation to the ongoing training

requirements. The work is incredibly rewarding but it is hard – working with groups of children – particularly the very young – there are few moments of downtime. There are far easier ways to earn a similar wage and teacher burnout in early education is very real.

2. Children’s House has always accepted families who utilize CCFAP – we do not have a cap on or limit the number of children from those families. That said, we could reach a point where this would become financially challenging – payments are received weeks after care is provided. This is the same with Act 166 tuition. After a point we would need a line of credit to bridge the gap between care provided and payment received.

Changes in H.171 that expand CCFAP to lower and middle income families would absolutely improve access to my program. Full-time enrollment for an infant is nearly \$1,200/ month. For many families this is prohibitively expensive.

3. Being paid based on enrollment vs attendance would have a tremendous impact on our program and for our families. This past summer, when the state shifted back to paying based on attendance when programs were encouraged to reopen, I had a child who received CCFAP funds whose family had a school aged child for whom they could not find care – as was the case with many school aged children this past summer. This family also struggled with adequate transportation. Because CCFAP provides only so many allowable days of absence, this family was faced with paying the full cost of a day of childcare or finding a way for their daughter to get to school when they had no other reason to leave home– when at that time this was not the best option for this family.

By paying based on enrollment, families receiving CCFAP are able to make the same choices about their child’s attendance as those no receiving funds. It is simply a matter of equity.

4. When you submit your program’s information to the State for the market rate survey, what do you submit and how to you come up with the figure?

At this time, I submit the tuition that we charge our families

5. If your program takes children 0-3, what does a typical day look like?

It’s arrival time – Paige greets baby T outside the front door with an open smile and he smiles back, revealing a new tooth poking out. After a brief exchange with his dad, he goes into her open arms as Paige hefts both the baby and all of his daily supplies back into the classroom. As they enter the classroom, they are greeted by the joyful squeals of toddlers as they walk up the stairs and run down the ramp of the low loft. T’s eyes follow them as they move purposely through the classroom, navigating the space. “You see Peter running up the ramp! He is fast!”

Alanna sits close by on the floor and moves in quickly as Peter greets another child with a two-handed shove. His playmate sits on the ground, upset and stunned. “Ouch!” she says softly “I bet that didn’t feel good.” He crawls into her lap for comfort. She turns to his playmate, who stands close by “Do you want to play?” she signs “play” with her hands. Peter signs “play” back with a big smile and runs off to get a ball, which he hands to his playmate, who smiles back. They both move away to play with the ball together.

Amidst the sounds of the room, Paige sings a made-up song as she changes T’s diaper, letting him know what she’s about to do. And so the day goes – in constant motion with love, care and intention through caregiving routines, supporting growing play skills, learning how little bodies can crawl, climb and navigate – making sense of the world as it emerges around them.

To a person off the street, it would look like a fun day of play and nurturing. In fact, every interaction is intentionally structured to support brain development and aligns with a planned curriculum intended to support the whole child.

6. What do you think about the concept of the State setting the lowest amount you would be allowed to pay an employee in your program?

I would be absolutely open to this, but there would need to be money coming from somewhere other than tuition coming out of parent’s pockets. Parents are stretched by the costs of child care, and my program is barely getting by. The economics simply do not work right now.

3. As a provider, someone who is doing the work:

a) Please identify one thing that the state could do to improve your interaction with them and support your business and the children

I am a small program, and I am the full-time administrator in addition to my other roles. Program administration – particularly around Act 166 and CCFAP take a lot of my time. Making programs less administratively cumbersome would be tremendously helpful. I was unable to apply for the last round of much-needed COVID grant funding because I simply did not have enough waking hours in my day to get the application done.

b) What is the one thing the state should stop doing

The State should stop putting the financial burden of accessing childcare and being a childcare provider on families and caregivers. Act 166 has made a huge difference for my families whose children are eligible – it’s a great start but for many, high-quality care remains out of reach.

Child care providers do this work because it is heart work – we do it because we love what we do and we know it is some of the most important work to be done. The trade off is that many of us sacrifice our own financial stability to work in a profession with very low wages, even for teachers who hold a degree. Many programs, including my own, cannot afford to provide benefits and many teachers are un-insured or under-insured – which is particularly unsettling as we are in very close contact with children during a pandemic.

From a personal perspective, owning and operating a childcare program is not the best financial choice for my own family. Both my husband and I are self-employed – he carves granite in Barre – neither of us can access employer-sponsored health insurance – what this means is that we pay a total of \$32,000 each year to buy insurance on the exchange - my youngest is a Type 1 diabetic and we meet our hefty out-of-pocket expenses by early summer of each year. The state could stop forcing the hundreds of self-employed early childhood educators around the state from having to purchase health insurance on our own at prohibitively expensive rates that are often out of reach.