



**April 20, 2021**

**To:** Senate Health and Welfare Committee

**From:** Tina Zuk, Government Relations Director, American Heart Association

**Re:** Testimony supporting H.171, early childcare and education legislation

The American Heart Association supports H.171, and the goals of this legislation to address immediate needs in Vermont's early childcare system as well as put in place what we need to have success in years to come.

This legislation has so many benefits: supporting existing staff, incentivizing and ensuring a pipeline of well-educated childcare staff, helping families, and providing better chances for children to develop lifelong habits that will allow them to thrive.

Every week in the U.S., nearly 12.5 million children younger than age 5 are in some type of childcare arrangement, making both early care and education programs and in-home childcare settings important for helping kids build healthy habits.

According to the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, a child's brain develops rapidly during the first few years of life, making that time absolutely critical for a healthy future. A report from the Nemours Children's Health System echoes that, noting that children develop skills, knowledge and habits from birth to age 5 that are carried into adulthood.

Not only are ECE settings an optimal opportunity for interventions that prevent obesity, a 2016 study shows physical activity and healthy diets in early childhood are also associated with better cognitive outcomes. Young children who are active and eat healthy learn better.

However, as you've heard in testimony, if parents can't afford childcare, centers are understaffed, underfunded and don't have adequate resources and pay – families and children pay the ultimate price.

This legislation can change that and help ensure a better future for many Vermont kids, especially those from low-income families.

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, children who participate in early childcare programs are more likely to, as adults, be healthy and have higher earnings, and be less likely to commit crime and receive public assistance.

The childcare financial assistance program, modernization plan, scholarships for early childhood providers, loan repayment assistance program and related funding included in this legislation are critical to ensuring this success – providing critical funding to allow the best chances of success.

This is also a logical next step in Vermont following several taken to improve early childcare including an one by the American Heart Association working with the Eat Well Play More Coalition, the Vermont State Alliance on Childhood Obesity and numerous partners in 2015 to set standards for early childcare for nutrition, physical activity and screen time in state licensing regulations. One of the things we heard from childcare centers was they needed more resources to help implement these standards. The funding in this bill does this and so much more, validating the critical role early childcare plays in the future success of Vermont's children.

This investment reaps so many rewards. Research by the Heckman Equation Project reported that high-quality birth-to-five programs can deliver a 13% return on investment annually and lead to better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors and employment.

Please give it your support.