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Thank you for having me here today as you hear from a wide array of people about the importance of Vermont's nonprofit sector to both communities and our economy. For the record, my name is Shabnam Nolan. I am the executive director of King Street Center located in downtown Burlington. King Street Center is a youth development organization whose mission is to empower youth to explore their talents and find their voice through learning, play, and opportunity. Today, we serve more than 150 youth - touching the lives of over 400 community members – through our Toddler, Preschool, K-5, Middle School, High School, and Mentoring programs. Many of the families we serve have experienced great hardship – from growing up in generational poverty here in Vermont, to being forced to leave their home country and arrive to our community as refugees – and all are deeply committed to ensuring their children have more opportunities and success than they were able to have growing up.

We've all heard the data: Vermont's population is aging, and we need to bring in more young people, more workers, if our economy is to continue to thrive. This fact took center stage in the governor's budget address this year, and it's true – we have to invest in the generation of people who are going to be our workforce for the next 40 years. The legislature has also heard this call and implemented creative strategies in the past few years to attract more people from out of state. Private companies are pouring money into recruitment and the promise of a workforce outside of Vermont. These strategies are commendable, but they are incomplete.

Nearly 1 in 5 Vermonters are children under the age of 18. Of those youth, more than 1 in 3 are at or near working age. The majority of these youth are in our public schools. They are our family, our neighbors, and our future workforce. And we need to start investing in them right now.

For many years, the nonprofit sector has taken on a large part of that responsibility outside of school hours – and done so with very little state grant dollars. Programs like King Street Center have privately raised millions of dollars over the years to invest in Vermont's youth to be both a safety net, and a place where they can connect to opportunities to explore what a future might have in store for them.

We know well how even one exposure to a potential career can change the trajectory of a child's life. Take 9th grader and King Street Center teen program

participant Alex. In 2022, Alex and his King Street mentor had the opportunity to visit Vermont Flight Academy to learn about flying. As they made their 10,000 foot ascent into the air, Alex was able to experience what it felt like to be in the pilot's seat. That moment sparked in him a deep desire and passion to become a pilot. Immediately, he began clocking flight hours. Today, Alex is a decorated Cadet in the Vermont Civil Air Patrol and interning at Beta Technologies. At only 15 years old, Alex is preparing for the United States Air Force Academy and Vermont's National Guard for an exciting life among the clouds.

Investing in Alex and kids like him must be part of our workforce strategy. Any state resources we are investing in attracting a workforce from outside of Vermont should be matched with equal determination and commitment to the youth who are here right now. Research shows that with every \$1 invested in youth, \$3 is saved by improving their academic performance, increasing their earning potential, and reducing their involvement in crime.

The problem is, however, just as the workforce is aging, so too is the private funder pool, and given our sector's reliance on this type of revenue, more and more nonprofits will be at risk of disappearing. Yet, there could not be a worse time for this to be our collective reality.

All across our state, the opioid epidemic continues to plague communities with an immense amount of demand for drugs in too many of our cities and towns. Basic principles of economics tell us that when there is an increase in demand, there is also an increase in supply. For many youth from low-income families, every member is responsible for the overall wellbeing of the household, financially and otherwise. Easy money is attractive and without alternatives, they'll take the bait. We know for a fact that drug suppliers look to poor kids to supply their drugs. It's already happening. We are seeing it right now.

We know this because King Street is in the center of that reality in Burlington, as we are located near city hall park and in significant drug activity areas. We've needed to invest money that we did not plan on to secure the safety of our youth and staff. We have been in lockdowns more than once this past year as police surround the building while running after someone with a gun in our backyard. We do daily sweeps of the playground, often finding needles and bags where children play.

With 150 kids coming through our doors every day, we are doing everything we can to keep them safe and forward focused. But we need help. Us and other nonprofit organizations need the state to think of us not as an afterthought, but as part of their proactive strategy to solving the many challenges our state is facing, from workforce to safety and beyond.

There is not enough out of school programming to serve every child in need, and there is not enough state grant dollars for the nonprofits currently doing this work. 1 in 4 children in Vermont are alone during after school hours when risky behavior is at its peak. 1 in 5 Vermont children live in low-income households with at least one working parent.

If these kids don't have access to safe, positive spaces to go to during the hours they're out of school, I fear what the impact will be on them – and on all of us. Without more investments in nonprofit programs, we will not only lose the promise of our youth contributing to our future workforce, but we will lose them entirely. We cannot let that happen.

As you have your conversations in committee rooms and among your colleagues, I urge you to keep this question at the forefront: What role does our nonprofit community play in building our future workforce and how can they be part of the solution? If you can keep this at the forefront as you decide where to make state investments, then I guarantee that you won't just be looking at responding to these statewide challenges, you'll actually be preventing them and their impact on our youth.

Thank you.

\*Data sources: [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) & Vermont Afterschool Alliance