

Hello,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all. I have been a part of expanded afterschool access for several years. Back in 2021, I had the great pleasure of being part of the Taskforce for Universal Afterschool Access as a representative from the field of Afterschool. Through this Taskforce I supported the authorship of a document that was used to help guide the creation of the State Afterschool Grant that was released last month. I had been anticipating the release of this grant for so long that I literally jumped for joy. Not only have I been hoping for this grant to support community efforts for the youth in my community, I was proud to be part of the change that allowed other communities to feel the hope of providing youth positive opportunities for socialization and to engage in meaningful activities outside of school. But then my spirit felt crushed when I learned that the money was tied to the state education fund and therefore not available to organizations outside of LEAs. The idea behind this grant was to expand access allowing communities to decide for themselves how best to support their young people. Sometimes that expanded access lies outside of the public school system and we should not block organizations that are trying to be part of positive change from accessing these funds.

Schools do so many wonderful things for young people and for the community. My experience in 21st CCLC programs has given me the most heartwarming memories of connections between youth, families, schools, and the community, and personally these funds could go a long way in supporting the eight programs that I oversee as we will be losing some funds once we run out of ARP ESSER funds. However, keeping these funds tied to money meant for the public education system runs counter to the expansion of programming and equity of access. There are many reasons public schools cannot and should not be the only organization allowed to host afterschool activities. For many rural communities, schools have been the sole organization responsible for out-of-school time activities for young people. This inherently creates limitations on flexible opportunities for young people due to continued ties to the school as an institution. No matter how amazing a school is, for some youth, their personalities or life experiences make them crave out-of-school opportunities that have no

connection with sitting in a classroom, or their grades, or whether or not what they do in their leisure time will affect their school-day time. They should be able to have a choice to leave the school and venture into their community and be made to feel that they belong there.

Not only are some youth going to refuse access to school-based afterschool programs, thus limiting the intention of expanded access, having schools be the sole provider for youth learning, engagement, and development has a negative impact on the social welfare of a community. It's important for the health of the students, families, and the community as a whole, for community organizations to hold responsibility for supporting the well-being of young people. When this responsibility is not shared, it creates silos between members of the community without children and those with, which often leads to misunderstandings and even prejudices. It also creates a culture of "us vs them", with young people not feeling connected or valued within their community. Older people often blame young people for misdoings or make assumptions that they don't care. These things are true, it's just that young people are essentially outcast from their society when they aren't on the school's campus. Some major effects of this include lack of community involvement when young people become old enough to vote and join local boards or committees. There is substantial research that also shows a strong correlation between lack of community involvement with a sense of belonging and substance misuse.

All of this was understood by the Taskforce when we met to discuss the need to provide a grant opportunity to expand access to young people. I understand that there is concern around access and equity of programs that are community based and not structured and legally bound in the same way as public schools, but the grant process is meant to make sure these organizations do adhere to these crucial practices of equity.

I would also like to share a personal story of why this is so important to me. I have been an afterschool professional for 14 years. I am a member of the Franklin and Grand Isle Regional Prevention Network, the FGI Prevention Collaborative, the Vermont Community Foundation, and I am the community Lead for the Vermont Youth Project in Enosburg and Richford. I have successfully written over a million dollars in grants to

help fund out-of-school programs. However, in five years of seeking grants, I keep falling short on funding a youth center in either Enosburg or Richford. These two communities have vibrant 21st CCLC programs. On any given day you will see thirty to eighty middle and high school youth engaging in high quality programming in the school buildings. And on those same days you will find just as many middle and high school youth searching their communities for a place where they find a sense of belonging. And the sad truth is that substance misuse and mental health challenges are both on the rise. The solution isn't more programming at our schools, but a place out in the world where they can be seen and heard as individuals in the towns that they call home.

As a Trustee for the Village of Enosburg Falls I have been able to work with my fellow board members and Village staff to find a way that the Village can oversee a youth center. We have a Youth Council made up of five Enosburg Middle and High School youth who can help advise the center and we are working with students from the Human Services program at the local Tech Center to assist in building a Center that meets the specific needs of the area youth. We are working with organizations such as Outright Vermont, Franklin County Caring Communities, and Vermont Student Anti-Racism Network to make sure this space is inclusive and welcoming to all. The center currently has a small grant from the Vermont Children's Trust Foundation and from the United Way. The center plans to offer mentoring programs, community outreach, cooking classes, gaming and other low-structured socialization so youth will have the opportunity to hang out with peers and supportive adults in a variety of ways.

It took five years to get here, but the money is not enough to sustain a center. The issue with finding funds isn't a matter of grant writing skills, quality of proposal, partnerships, or the ability to manage funds. It's the fact that this center is being organized and overseen by a municipality, not a school district or a 501(c)3 organization. Therefore this project doesn't qualify for most grants, especially the larger grants that allow for enough funds for staff and volunteers to spend time making a great Center and less time being concerned about paying rent in three months. The knowledge that this grant was going to be released this year brought hope to the Village Board that we might be successful in our application. For our community, the LEAPS

21st CCLC program cannot expand access to all youth all year. It's beyond the program's capacity. But a youth center would not only provide a service that meets the needs of youth who don't participate in LEAPS, it would also provide programming when LEAPS is not in session. This sort of partnership would do exactly what the Taskforce had in mind and what the grant application is meant for, it would expand access and build equity in services for a community in need. I urge you to support changes in the funding system to create a special fund that would allow non-LEAs to apply for this grant. It would give the youth of Northern Vermont and other communities a chance to go to programs that meet their needs. I agree that funding this grant process should not put a burden on the education system. This expanded access opportunity should be funded in a way that schools and community organizations can work together to apply in ways that work best for their communities. Our young people are depending on it.

Thank you,

Heather Moore  
Resident of Enosburg Falls, VT