

**Nellie Marvel - House Committee on Human Services  
Testimony - S.56**

My childcare story began before pregnancy - because even before COVID, that was the level of forethought necessary to access childcare in Vermont. About a month before I got pregnant, I reserved a spot at a local well-regarded childcare facility that would allow, I thought, time to actually get pregnant, have a child, recover from birth, and just maybe take some unpaid maternity leave (maternity leave access being a conversation for another time).

At the time, I was working as a committee assistant here in the legislature. When the legislature adjourned for town meeting break, I was 39 weeks pregnant. I knew my son would be born shortly, and suspected I wouldn't be returning to the State House after break. I knew my life would be upended - babies have a habit of doing that. But I had no idea just how right I was.

The Monday after town meeting break, March 9, 2020, my son was born. On March 13th, the legislature adjourned in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic. On March 17th, normal operation of childcare facilities ceased. On March 24th, Governor Scott issued the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" executive order. My son was two weeks old.

Needless to say, our plans had to change. Even after I was ready to return to work, I realized I had become one of the countless women across the state forced to choose between career and family. I was luckier than many - my husband's job remained steady. At the time, my work for Senate Health and Welfare was both part-time and remote - allowing me to work with a newborn strapped to my chest. Lori may remember seeing the back of Bowen's head on Zoom calls.

The arrangement worked, but was not sustainable. I was burning out - juggling caring for a baby while working (along with the brutal newborn-stage sleep deprivation). We relied heavily on savings to make ends meet, and even *if* anyone was hiring for full-time work at the time, we had no options for childcare. Facilities were still closed.

Fast forward to now. Things have gotten better. My son turned three last month, and is a happy, chatty, and imaginative bowling ball of energy who loves to sing sea shanties at 6am, and will regale anyone who listens with fascinating tales of things that definitely didn't happen. I have a steady full-time job, and we managed to hold onto that original childcare spot. Bowen loves his friends and teachers at Turtle Island Children's Center in Montpelier. He is developing in leaps and bounds thanks to the dedicated, caring, and well-trained staff there.

Things have gotten better, but the problem isn't solved. Turtle Island, like many other childcare facilities around the state, is struggling. Staff retention is an issue, and they are faced with an impossible task as COVID becomes the new normal; keeping children too young to know it's rude to cough directly in someone's face - healthy. They are doing more than ever with less than ever and it is not sustainable for them either.

So they're doing what they have to in order to keep their doors open - increasing costs and cutting back their hours. Objectively, this choice makes complete sense. Resources cost money, and the reduced staff need time away from the children in order to plan their classrooms.

Subjectively, the choice fills me with the same sort of anxiety that I felt in those beginning days of the pandemic. I have never experienced a time when childcare covered a full day's work. Childcare closes promptly at 3:30pm, so that's when my work day ends. I make up time when I can on evenings and weekends, and use personal time when I cannot. I am among the fortunate; both that I have personal time, and that my job and supervisor are flexible enough that I'm allowed to make up time outside of normal work hours.

Our extended family is also deeply involved in Bowen's care. His grandparents are willing and able to fill in gaps as needed, but are also getting older and less able to help than in years past.

By way of example - whether I'd be here today was even called into question. My mother-in-law, who normally watches Bo on his days off from school, was recently diagnosed with cancer. She has an oncology appointment today, accompanied by my husband. I'm supposed to be at home watching my son right now. I scrambled to get coverage. Knowing my son's bombastic personality, I knew that bringing him along for testimony would be a non-starter. My boss overheard my struggle and offered to watch him while I testify. So Bowen is at my office right now. I can only hope that the Cannabis Control Board is still standing when I get back.

My mother-in-law's diagnosis also underscores the vulnerability of my husband and I relying on elderly family members to supplement care. It's unclear how long we'll be able to rely on any of them to help as they continue to age.

These experiences have already colored our plans for the future. We had always planned on two kids that were two or three years apart. We still hope to have a second

child, but my son is three, and there is no second child in sight. The steady upward trajectory of childcare costs has already affected our choices.

To put this in perspective - on paper, my husband and I are not a couple that should struggle to afford a second child. We have three graduate degrees between us, and our combined income as State of Vermont employees puts us into the six-figures. We should be comfortable, and we are, but we're already paying the equivalent of a second mortgage for three days of childcare. It remains an open question whether we can afford what will amount to a third mortgage for an additional child with part-time care. And it's an answered question whether we could afford two tuitions for full-time care in the event grandparents are no longer able to help out - we cannot.

Our childcare system is in drastic need of an overhaul if our state wants to attract young families and continue to thrive. This bill makes laudable strides in its expansion of financial assistance for families and support for providers. It also puts my husband and I in a funny position. As a family of three, we're just over the income cutoff for financial assistance proposed in S.56 because we make just over 600% of the Federal Poverty Level. We would qualify as a family of four. I've spoken already about how childcare costs have changed our family planning. There are still cracks that families in need will fall into - mine may be one of them.

We frequently hear about Vermont's aging population, and the desire to attract more young people. This will not happen unless the state invests in making it affordable to raise a family here. I personally know multiple families in my age and professional demographic who have left the State, or are considering leaving, for states with more robust social support infrastructure - in large part due to the unaffordability and unaccessability of childcare.

My father was a childcare provider in Brookline, Massachusetts during the seventies and eighties. He's 74 years old, and still talks about his time there as one of his favorite jobs. He left due to the demanding nature of the job and low pay. The issues that caused him to leave childcare in 1985 have continued, and have only been exacerbated as the field continues to require more of its professionals without the necessary investment that would provide wages and benefits that could allow them to stay.

Childcare providers are teachers - many have graduate degrees - but their advanced degrees are not reflected in their pay, and the exorbitant costs that families must pay do not equate to living wages for staff. We're faced with an opportunity - COVID ripped the band-aid from a wound left festering for decades. Vermont's childcare systems have no winners, and it is time for a fundamental overhaul.