

To: House Committee on Human Services
From: Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool
Date: April 13, 2023
Re: Universal Afterschool and S.56

Good morning. For the record, I am Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool. We are a statewide nonprofit dedicated to strengthening programs, empowering youth, and expanding access to afterschool and summer programs so that all Vermont youth are active, engaged, connected, and heard. I also serve as a member of the Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force along with representatives from the Agency of Education; Department for Children and Families; the Department of Health; the Department of Mental Health; the Agency of Natural Resources; the Agency of Commerce and Community Development; Hireability and the Department of Labor; the Governor's Office; and Senator Sanders' Office. I'm here today to provide an update about universal afterschool, including the interactions with S.56, H.300, and the budget bill.

Looking at the big picture, Vermont has an unprecedented opportunity. We envision a universal afterschool landscape in which youth and families who want to participate in high-quality afterschool and summer programming are able to do so because programs will be universally available, accessible, and affordable. A universal afterschool and summer model is a solution for all kids, all families, and all communities across our state, and we support a mixed delivery model in which schools, licensed child care programs, registered family child care homes, nonprofit organizations, municipalities, teen centers, and others providers are and can continue to be part of the landscape to meet the needs of those within the community.

Every young person will know they have a place to go after school and over the summer, and every Vermont parent or caregiver will know their kids are safe and cared for when they can't be at home. Youth will be able to pursue their career aspirations, build protective factors, develop workforce and life skills, and receive academic support.

Six keys to success:

- Commitment – Vermont has long been looked to by the national afterschool and summer field as an example, and that has only increased in the past few years. With large-scale support from both the Administration and the Legislature, including those in the room, the Vermont is seen as a state that understands the importance of afterschool and summer programs for Vermont's children and youth. In 2020, the Governor set a goal for universal afterschool and summer in his State of the State speech and reiterated that commitment in October 2021 with the forming of the Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force.
- Collaboration – Through the Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force, cross-agency collaboration and partnership has been a successful model and has been highlighted nationally. Having a wide variety of state agencies at the table allows for broad scale efforts intertwined into multiple initiatives and stakeholder groups.
- Coordination – The model includes the cross-agency team to work closely with afterschool and summer programs to continuously improve quality and integrate input from all stakeholders, including providers

and youth. This includes a commitment to a mixed delivery system where maximum flexibility can be applied to enhance each community's unique mix of resources, partners, strengths, and opportunities.

- Improving Program Quality and Data – We're working together to build on and promote common quality guidelines for all programs and be able to track impact and outcome data for the entire system. This will include offering technical assistance, professional development, and youth engagement opportunities.
- Reaching Youth and Families – We are committed to equity and have been engaging young people to help develop a deeper understanding of the potential barriers and challenges to accessing afterschool and summer programs, particularly for youth in rural areas, those who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ+, and youth with special needs.
- Sustainable Funding – We are developing a funding structure that includes revenue sources and grant programs so that every year, Vermont will have more access, availability, and equity in our universal afterschool and summer system. This includes utilizing federal revenue streams such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Child Care Development Block Grant, others that can support strategies related to workforce, STEM and career exploration, and meeting the needs of families, as well as state funding passed in 2020 in Act 164, cannabis sales tax revenue.

As you know, there is proposed language related to the cannabis revenue in both H.300 and in the Governor's budget recommendations. Currently, they mirror one another, assigning the cannabis revenue to the Agency of Education through a special fund, creating an advisory committee comprised of the members of the Interagency Afterschool Task Force, and outlining the grant program. We support this language being more permanent, but how that happens is up to the legislature. However, we'd recommend that language is updated across the board, so there's no delay in future progress, especially with some of the ESSER investments beginning to end.

School age child care programs are part of the afterschool and summer program landscape, and families access the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) to help cover the cost of programs for their children up to the age of 13. Vermont Afterschool has been working with the Child Development Division to encourage more programs to enroll in CCFAP and increase the number of school-age child care slots across Vermont.

The afterschool and summer field, made up of professionals working across a wide variety of program types and funding sources, stepped up to meet the needs of youth, families, and caregivers during the height of the pandemic. However, as with our early childhood partners, the field has faced a significant number of afterschool and summer professionals changing jobs and leaving the workforce due to low wages, lack of benefits, and fatigue from COVID challenges. Strategies related to retention for child care providers should be applied to both early childhood professionals and those serving school age youth.

H.300 and the budget bill outline an Advisory Committee to provide recommendations to the Secretary of Education regarding the universal afterschool grant program, comprised of the members of the current Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force. As shared above, having a cross-agency team has been highlighted as a national example, allowing a wide view of the afterschool and summer landscape; better understanding of the needs of youth, families, and communities. The collaboration between the Agency of Education and the

Department for Children and Families is foundational, given that they administer two of the major revenue streams supporting afterschool and summer programs. Additionally, the other members are essential. For example, a program may need support or resources related to mental health or health care; business owners in a community may be seeing workforce challenges related to their employee's children or youth; a provider may need assistance to meet the needs of all youth ; and programs may be interested in how to better partner with businesses related to career exploration and employment opportunities for older youth.

This cross-agency collaboration mirrors the importance of the mixed-delivery system which already exists in Vermont communities. First and foremost, this approach provides choices for youth and families, essential to meeting their specific needs, interests, and promoting youth agency. Additionally, communities will be able to build off existing infrastructure, make decisions about what gaps exist, and choose how to move forward. The Interagency Afterschool Youth Task Force has analyzed initial data to understand what capacity exists in each community and where the largest gaps between the number of youth and number of slots in afterschool and summer programs exist. This work will continue as we move forward to universal afterschool and summer.

As an added benefit, the work to expand the number of schools eligible to provide universal school meals using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), along with the policy in H.165 (the Universal School Meals bill passed by the House), will have a profound and positive impact on the number of schools and towns in Vermont that will be eligible to provide universal free afterschool and summer meals and snacks to all children, fully funded by USDA. This means less of the state revenue in building the afterschool and summer system will need to go towards ensuring youth have snacks and meals, furthering the impact of the investment.

Collectively, we can ensure that every youth has access to high-quality afterschool and summer programs regardless of where they live, what languages are spoken at home, how much money their families have, any special needs or disabilities that may require special accommodations, their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other factor. Thank you for investing in Vermont's youth, and in turn, their families, our communities, and the state.

I am grateful for the time to speak with you today.