



House Human Services Committee Testimony

TO: Chair Theresa Wood, House Committee on Human Services

FR: Linda E Johnson, Executive Director, Prevent Child Abuse Vermont (PCAVT)

CC: Rep. Brumsted and Rep. Donahue

DT: January 25th, 2024

PCAVT is a 47-year-old private non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting healthy relationships within families, schools, and communities with the ultimate goal of eliminating child abuse. Annually, PCAVT serves approximately 8,000 individuals. Our commitment to impact assessment is unwavering, with rigorous evaluations integrated into all our programs- we measure every time, with every participant. We do not waste the courage of individuals, nor the resources of our State and community partners. Our programs deliver the desired outcomes without fail.

As we have only ten minutes, I will start by saying plainly that we have been dreadfully underfunded, with stagnant amounts for literally more than 20 years. The reality of cost of living increases along with disastrous cuts have resulted in lost opportunities to actually protect children and prevent abuse from occurring.

Also, it is important to note we have had to wait for grant payments for months at a time and recently had no choice but to reach out to the Commissioner for help. Commissioner Winters did in fact help us immediately and our payment was in the bank just a few days later. I regularly have to remind the grants management office that we are in need of our grant payment. These are truly good people without question. I am hoping that whatever the difficulty is, this Committee will be able to help resolve it.

Our Work: PCAVT is comprised of three distinct departments: Family Support Programs, Safe Environments for Infants and Toddlers, and Child Sexual Abuse Prevention.

Family Support Programs: The participants in PCAVT's group-based Family Support Programs, which include Nurturing Parenting® (12-18 weeks), Strengthening Families (14 weeks), and Circle of Parents® Support Groups (weekly indefinite meetings), are predominantly referred by DCF, Family Court, and the VT Department of Corrections. These programs receive partial support from the DCF/FS Nurturing Parenting Programs Grant. Until July 2020, DCF provided an annual grant of \$307,371 to PCAVT. However, beginning July 2020 a reduction of \$40,000 occurred. These funds came from a federal grant called Community Based Child Abuse Prevention and had been consistently awarded to support NPPS for more than 20 years. We were told that these funds which are administered by the Child Development Division (CDD) of DCF, were needed to assist in transporting DCF-involved children in childcare to doctor's appointments. Subsequently, PCAVT has been diligently working to bridge this financial gap, but the ongoing struggle continues to pose a serious challenge. PCAVT was offering approximately 60 programs annually with support from DCF Family Services including the \$40,000 from CDD, however, this funding was badly needed then and the need has only increased since...

Thanks to you, we received a “one time only”, grant from DCF that allowed us to hire two more Family Support Programs Coordinators. They are hard at work, in communities, working with substance misuse intervention organizations, prisons, schools and family serving organizations throughout Vermont. My only concern is what will occur after the end of June...Funds in the amount of \$567,371.

Safe Environments for Infants and Toddlers: also known as The Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention grant, has provided us with just enough funding to support one single Manager/Trainer dedicated to preventing the deadliest form of child abuse affecting the youngest and most vulnerable Vermonters. Over the past 15 years, we've seen 2 increases in funding; they were \$1 or 2 thousand dollars each time. These were woefully inadequate. Our Trainer's efforts involve educating nurses, providing materials for Welcome Baby Bags, and offering information to parents of newborns on safely comforting a crying baby, the dangers of shaking an infant, and best practices for putting down to babies to sleep safely. Since its implementation in Vermont, there has been only one infant death resulting from shaking in the past 15 years. This marks a momentous improvement from previous years, where we tragically experienced this kind of incident 3 to 6 times annually.

Fortunately, you recommended and the Legislature granted approval for the allocation of "one-time-only" funds, enabling us to hire a full-time Safe Sleep Promotion Coordinator/Trainer. We are now delivering education based on skills and knowledge to safeguard infants and toddlers from accidental asphyxiation as well as abusive head trauma. We have experienced the loss of approximately 6 to 9 infants, annually due to adults rolling over on infants, soft materials in the sleep space, and other hazards. We are working hard with numerous partners and are dedicated to eliminating this tragic occurrence. The additional funding is critical in sustaining this vital prevention program. There is a significant amount of work ahead, and we irrefutably need more than one single person to cover the entire state and educate individuals in recovery centers, Turning Point Centers, prisons, AA and NA meetings, and other relevant forums. A total of \$271,376 is needed to deliver the Safe and nurturing Environments for Infants and Toddlers at the effective dosage.

The Healthy Relationships Project's has a grant from DCF of only \$45,000 and plays a crucial role in supporting *all* our child sexual abuse prevention work. That is the total amount PCAVT receives now from DCF/FS to address preventing child sexual abuse for all Vermont's children and youth in all our schools. This grant began in the amount of \$35,000, during Governor Howard Dean's administration.

PCAVT offers child sexual abuse prevention programs for children from ages 3 through high school, including CARE for KIDS (ages 3 through 2nd grades), Care for Kids Elementary (3rd through 6th grades), SAFE-T (7th and 8th grades), and Project SELFIE (Safe Expression On-Line for Internet Empowerment, 7th through 12th grades). And thanks to you, with support from the "one-time-only" funds received this year, we have initiated CARES, a child and youth trafficking prevention program. (According to DCF, there were 41 children trafficked last year in Vermont.) Schools have embraced this program, but without the continuation of these funds, PCAVT will be unable to offer CARES.

When we began in 1982, 47% of all who perpetrated were youth with younger children, and 49% of those youth were 11 to 14 years of age. Through our work we brought this percentage down by 77% and

the rate of victims by 67%. Without more help at this time, I truly fear we will begin to roll back the progress accomplished with harm to children increasing.

About 30 years ago, CDD asked PCAVT to train childcare providers in child sexual abuse prevention. We accepted. CDD awarded PCAVT a grant of \$117,000 from federal dollars used for training. The only time it increased was the two years following the tragic murder and sexual assault of 12 year old Brooke Bennett, by her step uncle. These increases were for \$10,000 per year. Then it was reduced again to \$117,000.

In July of 2020, this grant was zeroed out. The DCF Business Manager was inexperienced and did not understand the connection between prevention education for childcare providers and keeping children safe. These vital funds were replaced by the Commissioner that fall and then were no longer included in subsequent budgets. We respectfully request the Legislature restore these funds along with cost of living increases. This amount we are requesting for all our child sexual abuse prevention work is \$400,000.

Based on the Governor's recommended budget for 2025, PCAVT is to receive \$403,746, which is level funding. This amount does not include the continuation of a "one time only" grant of \$300,000, which you recommended in the 2024 fiscal year. Our actual need and request is for a total of \$1,283,746. This will allow us to meet Vermonter's needs for our programs, preventing child abuse by supporting families, schools and communities.

Thank you so much for you attention and all your hard work.

For Children,

Linda

Linda E Johnson, Executive Director