

Good day. My name is Jaileen Kunhardt, I work with Northwestern Counseling & Support Services in Chittenden County where I am also a resident. I am here to speak on behalf of the Parent Child Center Network across the state of Vermont in support of a Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% for the Designated & Specialized Service Agencies providing essential state services to Vermonters.

I would like to thank the legislature for their ongoing support of the DA/SSA system. Many legislators are aware of Parent Child Centers, and we thank you for your growing support of our network. Since the 1980's, Vermont has opened 15 Parent Child Centers across the state providing valuable and critical services to all families with young children. Our centers experienced decade after decade of underfunding, and we still have a long way to go before we can pay our staff the wages they deserve and provide them with the benefits they need for themselves and their families. The staff we have chose their careers because they genuinely love children and providing our families with support.

At my agency, I am constantly reminded of the reasons why we need your support. My team is consistently understaffed with multiple vacancies we are unable to fill; this means we are unable to accept referrals in a timely manner. The agency struggles to offer compensation that considers the educational requirements and demands of our work. The families on our waitlist have voiced their frustration and some children are close to aging out of our program by the time we get to them. There are childcare emergencies, and we don't always have the capacity to respond. Children are struggling which causes ripple effects on the whole family and other children in the classroom. The families we serve have been impacted by staff turnover. Relationships are the foundation of our work, and it affects progress when an employee leaves.

To support families, Vermont should continue its investment in the DA/SSA system. A Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% will support our ability to hire qualified staff and retain them to best support Vermont's families.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Jaileen Kunhardt