

FY26 Budget Hearing: Testimony – Margaret Walsh, Director (Parent Child Center of Northwestern Counseling & Support Services - St. Albans, Vermont)

My name is Margaret Walsh, and I serve as the Director of the Parent-Child Center at Northwestern Counseling & Support Services. I am here today to advocate for increased funding for the Parent-Child Center Network and to emphasize the critical role PCCs play in supporting Vermont's children and families.

First, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the legislature for its ongoing commitment to Parent-Child Centers. Positive early childhood experiences are central to the overall health of our state, and it is evident that this legislature values and invests in the people doing this essential work.

To ensure we can sustain and strengthen prevention-based supports and services, we are requesting to secure \$500k from the Tobacco Settlement Fund for the base funding of the Integrated Grant, to allow PCCs to consistently and comprehensively provide tobacco cessation referrals, education and support for pregnant people and families with young children, to ensure infants and young children are not exposed to second-hand smoke.

Investing in smoking cessation funding for young children and families has far-reaching benefits, leading to drastically improved public health outcomes. Exposure to tobacco smoke—both direct and secondhand—has been linked to numerous health risks, including respiratory infections, asthma, and low birth weight. By providing smoking cessation resources, education, and support, we can help expectant parents and caregivers quit smoking, creating healthier home environments and reducing the likelihood of chronic health conditions in children. Reducing tobacco use among parents will improve overall family well-being by decreasing hospital visits, lowering health care costs, and promoting longer, healthier lives.

Supporting Parent-Child Centers is an investment in Vermont's future. PCCs serve as vital primary prevention and early intervention resources, strengthening families, improving health outcomes, and ultimately reducing long-term costs across healthcare and social services.

I urge you to continue prioritizing this critical work by securing \$500,000 from the Tobacco Settlement Fund to sustain and expand Parent-Child Centers' essential services.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.