

Good morning. My name is Chris Nelson, and I live in, and own, a family child care home program in North Troy, in Orleans County. I've been an advocate for child care in general, and rural family child care specifically, for years. I've been providing care and education to families in my community for over 30 years, long enough that I now care for the children of the children of former families.

I facilitate a statewide peer network of 47 family child care leaders, caring for roughly 480 Vermont children. Our network members are deeply connected to our rural communities, providing continuity and support for families in areas where there are not many options. We are your family child care experts. I'm here representing many of my family child care colleagues in our support of S.206, the Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill. Some have supported professional licensure from the beginning, some became supporters after their advocacy added the Family Child Care Provider license option last year. When people learn about all the provisions in the bill to support family child care, I've found skeptics usually become supporters. While we may have differences of opinion about some things, we are aligned on this: we want professional recognition and we want to ensure our voices are heard. We're often spoken for, but we can speak for ourselves. We know this system inside and out, we know how policy changes under Act 76 have improved our work. Those of us who helped shape this legislation and have been following this bill know how it will impact us, and we are working to share that information with our peers. So thank you for inviting me today to listen to family child care testimony from real rural Vermont.

We are your experts in family child care throughout the state of Vermont. We care for hundreds of Vermont's youngest children, and we keep families in our rural communities working. In places like ours, when child care is available, parents can work. When it's not, local businesses feel it immediately. Family child care has always filled the gaps: extending hours and providing afterschool care, being a steady support for our communities. For decades, we have been the consistent, flexible option that makes it possible for families and local economies to function.

The unique and wonderful thing about Vermont's mixed-delivery early childhood education system is that we have autonomy within regulations. That means families seeking regulated child care can choose the setting that works best for their family. Every family is different, and they know the needs of their child. Sometimes family child care is the best fit, and the best quality.

Family child care owners are not asking for less regulation. We work with vulnerable populations; we should be regulated, and we're familiar with regulation. What we want is to have a voice in our own regulation, and equal access to the opportunities that come with being part of a recognized profession. That is what S.206 does.

Individual professional licensure creates a system where opportunities for family child care educators are the same as opportunities for center-based educators. At its core, this bill is about equal opportunity. We've spent a long time trying to unite our child care system and share opportunities, and this bill does that. To put an even sharper point on it: this legislation will

ensure that families living in rural communities have access to the same quality as those in more urban parts of our state.

It does not mean we create a system where opportunities for family child care are different from opportunities for center-based care. Instead, it creates the conditions for choice, allowing educators and families to select the path that works best for them.

People sometimes point to family child care programs closing. Nationally, they are. In Vermont, they were, up until a couple of years ago. Contrary to popular belief, this was not due to overregulation. It was because resources were funneled to larger population areas. Historically, the challenge in rural Vermont hasn't been regulation; it's been access to resources. Act 76 shifted the balance and sent a lot more resources to family child care, and recent data shows family child care growing, which reflects what we see in our communities. When resources and supports are available, family child care grows.

If S.206 takes effect, opening career opportunities to all early childhood educators statewide, that helps rural family child care. We're proud of our independent businesses and our value to our communities. The quality of our home programs is on par with any other kind of child care program. Like any professional, we want a clear way to demonstrate that quality. We would love to be able to show families a professional license to practice. And yes, renewing a license every couple of years is a cost, and a task. But if it makes our practice better, and if it means access to opportunities that we do not currently have, we'll gladly do it. If it strengthens our practice and expands our opportunities, it's worth it.

There are many young people eager to enter this profession. Their biggest obstacle is parents who worry about investing in training for a career that won't be sustainable. If we professionalize early childhood education—including family child care—we change that calculation. We open doors for those who want to do this work but need a viable career path. We're so close.

Quality isn't determined by the door a child walks through. This bill ensures that every educator, and child, is valued the same.