

Joint Fiscal Committee Testimony

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On behalf of the Parent Child Center Network

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your interest in what is happening both in our communities and in our organizations – as the impacts of federal decisions play out for us. I am Corissa Burnell, the Co-Executive Director of the Rutland Parent Child Center, speaking on behalf of the VT Parent Child Center Network.

The mission of the Vermont Parent Child Center Network is to provide children, youth and families with strength based, holistic and collaborative services across Vermont– with a focus on early childhood education and prevention services. The Network provides leadership, support and advocacy on behalf of its membership and in collaboration with key partners to achieve the best outcomes for families.

The 15 Centers located across the state are service hubs for families with young children – an actual place in the local community where families are always welcome and can get the support they need, regardless of income or family circumstances. We work hard to build trust with the families we serve, so they feel safe coming to us no matter what is happening in their household. We know that this strong bond of trust will become even more important as the federal impacts shred the safety net and make it more difficult to get all children off to a great start in life. The work that Parent Child Centers do is not just informational. We get to know the families we serve, so we can understand their needs. The services and concrete supports PCCs provide are a gateway to family stability.

We are seeing economic strain on some families, as well as emotional impacts as they worry about what all the changes will mean for their households. Like many Vermont families — including my own — we're just one or two financial setbacks away from a crisis. That is why we need PCCs to support basic family stability -- housing, heat, food, and transportation shouldn't be luxuries to Vermont families. In Rutland we have seen an increased need for concrete supports because, as we know, not all families make a livable wage. All summer, directors from the 15 PCCs have been meeting with a clear purpose: to prepare for what we see as the coming struggles facing Vermont families. We've been sharing what we're witnessing in our communities and asking hard questions about how we can act now—and how, with support from the State, PCCs can be a key part of the solution.

We believe the best way we can help is to focus on two key areas:

1. Making sure that every family we serve that is eligible for benefit programs and those already connected stay on programs they are eligible for - especially SNAP (3SquaresVT) and Medicaid. Gaps in coverage of these programs result in losses to PCCs and other providers of Federal Medicaid dollars. This also leaves PCCs vulnerable to an increased need in our food pantries which we can not sustain.
2. Making sure we can help families with “concrete supports” keeping them above water and preventing an unexpected monetary issue from causing a family irreversible harm.

Also, PCCs will lean even harder into our 8 Core Services –ensuring families with young children know they can come to us for the services and support they need. The services PCCs provide are grounded in research that builds resilience, self-sufficiency, mutual support and responsive parenting that enables families to deal with adversity, and thereby improve long term outcomes for their children.

If families don't know help is available they can't access it. Services and supports need to be visible, accessible, culturally appropriate and designed to de-stigmatize. Parent Child Centers make sure supports are brought into the community and are timely and accessible.

In order to do these things, we will need additional base funding (\$1.8m) from the State for our PCC Integrated Grant. But what we will be asking for is not meant to replace what we may be losing from federal funding or to solve every problem that the federal actions create - it is simply to support PCC's doing the work that our statute outlines for families with young children. We need to continue to strengthen families so they can weather the times ahead.

PCCs are already serving as a hub for families staying connected to local resources and in Rutland we have seen a recent rise in families needing support navigating already existing systems such as 3SquaresVT and Medicaid. **When families are vulnerable they need trust in order to access resources - and that's where PCCs excel as family resource centers, rooted in communities across the state.**

We at the VPCCN really appreciate the Joint Fiscal Committee's attention to what is happening for people and organizations as the federal impacts are realized in Vermont. However, we would like to request that additional policy committee hearings be held before the legislative session begins so we can work alongside you to build solutions that make sense for the best outcomes for Vermont families.

Our families feel like they are being left behind by the federal government. Or even worse, they are afraid because of the actions of the federal government. They need the State of Vermont to step up at this time and make sure the services and supports they need are there - PCC's are a key provider of those services and supports.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and for your concern about what our Vermont families are facing.