

## Appropriations Committee

Public Hearing, March 9, 2021

Testimony submitted by

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and Members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mary Cecchinato and I am the Executive Director of the Torrington Child Care Center, Inc. and also, a co-chair of the State Funded Child Development Centers Director's Forum. The Forum represents over 103 child care centers serving over 4000 children birth to school age throughout Connecticut. Established by the Legislature over 50 years ago the Centers ensure low- and moderate-income working families have access to high quality, affordable child care.

The current pandemic has brought the issue of access to affordable child care for families to the forefront of the public consciousness. During the past year countless articles were written revealing the lack of child care and the negative impact it has on families and the overall economy. There can be no doubt that the child care industry is critical to Connecticut's economy and the well being of children and families.

The Forum members appreciate the long-term commitment the Legislature has made to funding child care and recognizes the many competing interests for funding that this Committee grapples with to meet obligations and balance a state budget. We believe it is imperative to invest more dollars in child care to sustain an industry that has long been underfunded. Connecticut families need to go back to work, engage in job training and seek higher education.

To do this, child care subsidies in the Care4Kids program must be increased. Connecticut only pays at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of the market for infants and toddlers and only the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile for preschool while the federal government recommends payment at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile market rate. From 2002 to 2019 there were no increases in payment rates for programs! We cannot go backwards now!

We appreciate the increase in the Early Care and Education line item however, this increase does not account for the increase in the minimum wage and the impact of having to raise everyone's salary. In July 2019 I needed to hire an assistant teacher and her starting hourly wage was \$10.00. In September of 2019 minimum wage increased to \$ 11.00 an hour so she received an increase where senior staff stayed at the same hourly wage. Fast forward to September 2020 when there was another increase to \$12.00 and I have staff who have been employed for over 8 years making \$ 12.25 to \$ 12.50 an hour. They have not had increases due to our budget restraints so their hourly wage remained the same. In November of 2020 I had to hire a new staff member and had to start her at \$ 12.00 an hour with no increase for other staff. Our Board of Directors after much thought decided that they will give the staff who have been with us for over 5 years a weekly pay adjustment of \$35.00 a week. This will remain as an

ongoing adjustment as long as we have the funds to continue. In September 2021 the minimum wage will increase to \$ 13.00 an hour. We receive funding from the Office of Early Childhood for School Readiness and Child Development Center slots and we collect fees using their fee scale. Due to the fee scale, we cannot raise our fees to help cover the increase in minimum wage let alone compensating our other employees. I am all for the increase in minimum wage but we need an increase in our funding so we can pay competitive wages to all of our staff.

Child Care head teachers are mandated to acquire B.A 's and continuous training however, these educators are among the lowest paid professionals in the teaching field. Centers struggle to recruit and retain teachers who are compensated higher in the public school system. Investment in child care must be a priority to help families go back to work, especially low-income minority families hit hardest by the pandemic.

We also urge you to fully fund the OEC programs and restore the proposed cuts. Research demonstrates that early prevention and intervention programs have the greatest return on investment.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Forum and the children and families we serve.

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