

Testimony of Michelle Tarryk, Northeast Kingdom Learning Services, Inc. (NEKLS), Executive Director to the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee, February 19, 2019.

Representative Marcotte and Members of the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee; I would like to thank you for asking me to testify. I understand that the your Committee is working hard on workforce development this session and I am pleased to share the work we are doing in partnership with others in the NEK to better understand the issues employers and employees are facing and how we in the service sector working together can help to shape and improve how employers can attract, train and retain employees and how we can support employees in preparing for and engaging in sustainable employment.

My name is Michelle Tarryk and I began working for Northeast Kingdom Learning Services or NEKLS for short in 2000. NEKLS is a 501c3 that began operating in the mid 1960's as an Office of Economic Opportunity adult literacy program and in 1990 was incorporated as a Vermont non-profit corporation. We serve the tri-county region known as the Northeast Kingdom and we have offices in Newport, Canaan, Island Pond, St Johnsbury and Hardwick. While adult education remains one of our core programs, NEKLS has broadened its services to include a K-12 tutorial program, Children's Integrated Services early intervention and family support services, prevention programs that address tobacco and drug and alcohol prevention for youth and adults, and now partnering with Head Start and Kingdom Children's Museum will be opening an early care and education center in Newport in July of 2019. NEKLS is still a relatively small non-profit employing 54 staff but we remain a people centered organization that believes our success should be defined only in terms of the success of the people and communities we serve. I began my employment with NEKLS having only a high school diploma

as a Migrant Education recruiter. After several years of hard work and dedication I was promoted to work in the Business Office and was afforded the opportunity to participate in professional development that included college courses walking into a college classroom for the first time at the age of 38. Neither of my parents had a college degree and I will forever be grateful for NEKLS assisting me in earning an Associate's Degree in financial accounting. In 2008, I was promoted to Chief Financial Officer and I began working on my Bachelor's degree in human services. In 2010, I was named interim Executive Director and in 2011, I was named permanent Executive Director. In 2014, I completed my Bachelor's degree in human services and in 2016; I completed my Master's Degree in Human Services with a concentration in Organizational Management and Leadership from Springfield College. I am a poster child for the benefits of adult education. The reason I share this with you is because I think it is important to understand what drives me in the work that I do and why I know that providing opportunities for people to see their own potential and a pathway for sustainable employment is critical for Vermont's successful future.

Today I would like to tell you about the following initiatives that are taking place in the NEK:

- An early care and education center that is scheduled to open in July in Newport.
- The Northeast Kingdom Early Childhood Cooperative (NEK ECC), a shared services hub for childcare providers in the Northeast Kingdom.
- Our partnership with North Country Career Center and CCV on a Workforce Education and Training grant that is targeting developing the Child Care Providers workforce, Step Up to Childcare.

I would also like to share some of the challenges that we are experiencing with these initiatives:

- Challenges with the permitting process. We are being told that the drinking water permit will likely take at least 6 months to complete. This is unacceptable and hinders the ability of a business or organization to have a successful start.
- Challenges with strictly defined populations that can be served under some grants. Our current Workforce Education and Training grant targets people who are in high school or college or have graduated within the last 24 months. Setting restrictions such as this limit the ability to serve those who are motivated to enter the field but do not meet the target population. This causes the local entities to find other resources to serve this population.

I would also like to ask you to support H.194. This bill proposes to expand the population served by the Child Care financial Assistance Program, enhance subsidy size, and increase the rate upon which reimbursements to early learning professionals are based. It also proposes to implement a student loan repayment program for early learning professionals and expand an existing scholarship to individuals seeking a degree in early childhood education or early childhood special education. This bill establishes a refundable tax credit for early learning professionals and for employers investing in childcare. It also establishes the Early Care and Learning Fund. This bill gets it right by lifting the employees with children in childcare, the early learning professionals caring for these children, and the employers employing the parents of these children simultaneously. This bill makes the down payment on an investment that will have a long term positive impact on the future of economic development in Vermont. It is important to recognize that investing in early care and education is critical to the economic

development and success for today and tomorrow. We must recognize that this is a long game to be played and will take multiple years of investment to reap the benefits in the future: well cared for and educated children grow up to be members of a strong, educated workforce, a strong, educated workforce supports businesses and industries to succeed and grow and, strong businesses are able to provide supportive salaries and benefits to their employees, families who are able to make a supportive salary and who are able to move out of poverty have improved health and education outcomes for their children. Getting this right now, starting today gets us closer to the optimum vision for Vermont's economy.

I have included electronically power points on the Early Care and Education Center, the NEK Early Childhood Cooperative, and the Step up to Childcare Workforce Training for more detail which I will highlight in my testimony here. **(Refer to attachments)**

The greatest single factor in helping to move this work forward is the relationships of the leaders in the NEK. There is a level of partnering and collaboration that we have not seen in years. We are creating change, together – creating shared agenda's – recognizing that our individual success is reliant on your success and vice versa. When you are able to do your best work, we are able to do our best work and our students and clients benefit from this increased cooperation – it is truly more than just collaborating – it is cooperating together, identifying the common goal(s) and the role each of us play in achieving the common goal(s).

Things that you can do:

- Support pre workforce development funding that would support other Step Up to workforce trainings. Limit the restrictions of who is eligible to participate.

- Find ways to incentivize employers to provide childcare benefits and student loan repayment benefits – perhaps a State match or tax credit for businesses.
- Look closely at the permitting process for businesses to start or expand – what is necessary for quality and safety purposes and what is simply red tape that gets in the way and discourages business growth?
- We must find ways to incentivize people participating in workforce training opportunities and education programs including but not limited to college degree programs.
- We should explore 4 year technical education high schools where students enter into 9th grade directly into a career path such as plumbing and heating, electrical, automotive, construction, agricultural and environmental studies, early care and education, and hospitality. Waiting until 11th grade is too late.

In closing, I would like to thank you for allowing me to testify before you today and will happily answer any questions that you may have.

