

S.263 Testimony - Amy Johnson (Parent Child Center of Northwestern Counseling & Support Services – St. Albans Vermont)
Senate Health and Welfare Committee

Good morning Senate Health and Welfare committee members. My name is Amy Johnson and I'm the Director of the Parent Child Center of Northwestern Counseling & Support Services. I'm also the Chair of the Vermont Parent Child Network. Thank you for having me - it is an honor to speak with you and discuss the integral work of PCCs.

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for your ongoing support of the Parent Child Center Network – specifically as it relates to championing the Parent Child Center bill, S.263

The Parent Child Center Network, a network of 15 family resource centers across the state of Vermont, was built into designation to provide upstream prevention and early intervention services to all children and families and especially to those at risk. Parent Child Centers, deeply rooted in the Strengthening Families Framework, provide essential services that are family driven, strength based, and multigenerational all while building protective factors in children and families. PCCs' work helps build communities where children and families thrive; communities that support children in having a healthy childhood.

The PCC network is linked together by their eight core services; services that help families to get the support they need in a way that is comprehensive and holistic. These services include: home visits, early childhood services, parent education, parent support groups, concrete supports, playgroup, information and referral, and community development. The eight core services, not coincidentally, are nearly identically in line with the Center for Disease Controls program area recommendations that communities should invest in to mitigate the risk and effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). PCCs are dually focused on ACEs and toxic stress mitigation as well as social determinants of health and meeting the basic and complex needs of families and do this work seamlessly through the eight core services.

We see the great strength and value of the eight core services play out in our work every day. For example – we had a young family come to us through our Welcome Baby program. They had just given birth to twins; one of whom was hospitalized due to serious medical complications. Homeless and caring for two new babies, the family was connected with a parent child center staff who immediately went into action supporting the family's identified needs and goals. The staff was able to get the family emergency housing at the shelter, connected the family to WIC and Home Health nursing, made warm handoffs to Community Action and the Champlain Housing Trust, supported the family in meeting with the Children with Special Health Needs team, connected the family to mental health counseling and social supports, introduced the family to local food shelves, helped the family fill out essential paperwork, modeled and taught parenting strategies, helped the family with safe sleep environments for their babies, provided rides and gas cards to aid in attending necessary care appointments, provided concrete supports in the form of baby monitors, diapers, wipes, and cribs, helped with household hygiene, provided emotional support, and knowledge of child development. While still enrolled in programming, this family continues to thrive because of their hard work and because of supports and care coordination provided by the parent child center and their community partners.

This example isn't the exception it's the everyday nature of the work of a Parent Child Center; for families we ensure there is no wrong door for accessing services. PCCs, acting as the hub of services for pregnant families and families with young children, have an integrated multi-generational approach that supports families by allowing them to be seamlessly connected to the full array of services offered. PCCs are able to intervene early to help families thrive and child development blossom. As the hub, we wrap families tightly in supports and ensure families don't fall through the cracks. When a family becomes part of the PCC they are naturally and automatically brought into the full scope of services and programming we offer. This seamless service delivery system allows us to support families holistically with programming that has a positive impact on everyone involved. Families are supported to access resources, information, guidance, and community support that are critical to their children's well-being during the early years in their development.

With decades of experience, and a true understanding of our community landscape, PCCs support all families including the most vulnerable. We have been delivering critical and essential prevention and early intervention based services, to families since 1988; when we were written into statute. As the landscape of the state is continuously changing, we are designed to be innovative and responsive to the changing community needs. Despite decades of chronic underfunding, we continue to meet community and family needs and respond to gaps; we have a finger on the pulse of what is going on in each region of the state and develop programming accordingly. As our communities have evolved, as has the network. As we grow and change we continue to focus on the overall health of the network, sustainability and viability, and quality and consistency of the services offered across the network

The Parent Child Center Network, dedicated to high quality programming, has taken the next step in ensuring our supports and services are consistent across the network and meet high quality standards. This is happening by way of adopting the National Family Support Network's Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support. The Standards, approved nationally in 2012, were vetted by nearly 1,000 family serving organizations and integrate and operationalize two key frameworks: the Principles of Family Support Practice and the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework. The Standards of Quality focus on five areas: family centeredness, family strengthening, embracing diversity, community building, and evaluation. These standards act as a blueprint for implementing best practice, require continuous self-assessment of programming, and help the network demonstrate quality. To thrive as a network we understand the need for continuous quality improvement and are committed to such.

The Parent Child Center bill will help create a quality structure for PCCs across the state to deliver high quality prevention supports and services. Furthermore the bill will support the overall global health of the network by allowing for adequate funding of the prevention hub. The bill will ensure that our state maintains a rich and robust network of family resource centers that provide essential state services to expectant and parenting families of young children; high quality services that are a vital community resource.

By supporting S.263 we recognize the importance and true value of a network of family serving organizations that support positive childhood experiences. Childhood experiences have a tremendous impact on the future of Vermont including lifelong health and opportunity for children and families in our state. As such, early experiences are an important public health issue. Parent Child Centers, legislated into existence to strengthen protective factors in families and address the challenges they face, are the front line in the effort to address this public health

issue. The impact isn't always immediate but what is gained, in the long run, by providing upstream services is cost effective and only makes our state stronger and healthier. If we want families to get the services they need then we need to invest in services and organizations that provide these to families; specifically programs we know and trust to provide services that work for families. For Vermont families, Parent Child Centers are the answer.

Thank you greatly for your continued support of PCCs.