

Testimony Group Child Care

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Statement By

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PA licensed group childcare home

Before The

Children & Youth Committee Members

Members of the Committee, my name is Tonya Fisher. I have owned and operated a Group Childcare Home for 17 years in Blanchard, Centre County. We are a Star IV facility, certified a Nature Explore outdoor learning space, and 1 of only 2 group homes remaining in our county.

I am grateful to have been presented the opportunity to share with you the destruction our childcare system faces with the proposed regulation changes.

We providers were recently presented 2 drafts pertaining to the upcoming regulation rewrites. Without fear, I can say that these proposed changes are far-reaching and have been clearly written with bias to the affect it will have on children, families, economy and us, the providers.

I am confident that my colleagues have shared specific codes and highlights that will have a devastating impact on family childcare. I am here today to express the value of childcare as a whole.

Childcare is work that makes all other work possible. In addition to supporting working parents, quality childcare promotes early childhood development and literacy skills to help prepare children for school and life. To improve quality in Pennsylvania, the Keystone Stars system was created, and providers had been given financial incentives to “climb the ladder”. This is a CHOICE that providers make. With these new regulations, what was once available as a choice is now going to be required by providers, now, little to no financial support. From presenting our budgets to community partnership, these proposed regulations are overstepping the Health and Safety role that DHS has.

Our Nation’s childcare system was built on the foundation of parent choice. Recognizing that parents, not the government agencies, should decide what is best for their children. If a parent’s choice is to have their child attend at a center, group home, family home, or relative neighbor, that is their choice to make. However, with the proposed regulations, that choice is being stripped from the parent. How? As hard as this is to type, because under the proposed, we, in-home providers are being forced to close our doors. The regulations presented are unattainable and quite frankly an insult to seasoned professionals as myself.

Pre pandemic, Pennsylvania was facing a slow building childcare crisis. If parents could afford childcare, finding a spot for their child was next in the line of their challenges. With income guidelines for subsidy being unreasonable, parents were often making the choice to go, as us providers call it, underground. Unlicensed, untrained, and unmonitored facilities. In January 2020 my waitlist for childcare was 16 children deep. We now have 47 children on our waitlist.

Some startling statistic for Centre County

Pre Pandemic

64 family daycare providers

9 group childcare providers

Post Pandemic

13 family childcare providers

2 group childcare providers

A Fragile System and a Global Pandemic = The not so Perfect Storm

That is a minimum of 390 children without care in one county. With centers struggling to find/keep staff, where do you think those children found care? Is that really what we want for the children of our state?

Childcare is the foundation to our entire economy. It should come as no surprise that the slow collapse had far-reaching consequences for families. When childcares across our state were closed during the pandemic, we, family childcare were battling to keep our families working. In my childcare, we have parents who are State Police Officers, registered nurses, 2 engineers, 3 teachers, 1 college professor, 3 farmers, and the list goes on. Picture if these parents were not able to go to work. Now picture what will happen when these devastating regulations become our laws.

Group Childcare

What is a group childcare home?

Group childcare homes are a facility in which seven to twelve children unrelated to the operator receive childcare services.

As a member of the original ADHOC committee that voiced our concerns on the first draft of regulations, I can say that they have taken few of our submissions into consideration while making some devastating modifications at the same time. Group homes, such as mine, are the middle child for childcare. We operate in our homes but at a slightly higher number than family homes. We have always had our own set of regulations and our trainings are all based around

family childcare. Some group providers may have staff, if ratio requires, some may not. I personally have had the same staff for the last 16 years.

Children of multiple age groups are cared for together and are building lifelong relationships. Siblings are cared for in the same space. Care is received from the same provider day in and day out.

We provide care in my home to the children of our community. On the weekends you may find me at the children's ball games, birthday parties, graduations or even their weddings. They are a part of my family. Most of them are in my care from infancy through 5th grade. Continuity of care, the state has pressed this during the recent years and they never needed to look further than family childcare. As you can imagine, with the latest release of the rewrites, I was shocked to find that they have now categorized groups with centers. I understand that this is far easier than rewriting another set of codes, but clearly this is not the correct way to emit one. Group childcare is and always will be family childcare. Providing care to families, in our home, in a loving and nurturing environment.

As mentioned above, I know that others have covered many of my concerns, but I would be failing my children and staff if I did not speak out on a few.

My task of singling out individual codes is not as easy as it appears. I am challenged with looking at Center regs but hoping the state does right by the children and moves us back to FCCH. I will be addressing these without a code, as at this point I could be considered family or center.

#1 Group Childcare

After years of operating a group childcare, I find it ridiculous that we would be moved with centers for regulation purposes. For ratio purposes this would imply that when I have more than 1 child in my care, I would need myself plus a facility person (in short, a staff person) with me. TWO CHILDREN and I would need 2 staff persons in my home. Meanwhile, down the street, a hypothetical family childcare could care for 6 children and her own BY HERSELF. Please make this make sense to me. With the challenge of finding staff as it stands, this is completely unattainable. My staff person would hit overtime by midweek and be mentally exhausted. Hire a second employee? Hiring additional staff would require me to raise the rates of tuition by 50%, not to mention that there is no staff to be found at this time. With the proposed requirements of education and training, persons would be suited better to work for the public school system and earn a higher salary.

#2 The bleed over from Keystone Stars

Quality is a choice. Let the stars standards where they are and allow providers and parents to make the choice on the quality care they give/receive. Let us all remember that DHS is Health and Safety.

#3 Providers own children

To think that you are going to include the providers own children in overall numbers is preposterous. Most family providers go into this field wanting to be with our own children. With the rewrites, we will be forced to dismiss children from our care, lose income and deprive other children of the quality care they would receive. I support reevaluating the staff/child ratio. I cannot support the financial burden this will cause family providers. The result of this alone will displace hundreds of children into an already failing system where there is no childcare to be found.

#4 Pets

Pets contribute to a child's self-esteem and self-confidence. Positive relationships with pets can aid in the development of trusting relationship with others. Having a pet teaches responsibility, communication, compassion, and empathy. For us, we have 5 childcare pets that are on the list to disallow. The turtle and the tree frog are in contactless enclosures (let me add, you are more likely to get salmonella from cookie dough than you are from a reptile) and our ferret receives a rabies vaccine yearly. Our birds are out of reach with guards around their cage to prevent food from traveling to the floor. If the concern should be that the provider may not do proper cleaning, perhaps you should evaluate the providers more before issuing a license to them.

#5 Trainings and requirements for teachers, staff, and aids

The amount of paperwork needed to bring in new staff is ridiculous, now you want to add that Level status, degrees, etc

I can, without hesitation, tell you that I have a degree in nothing but could rewrite these regulations, manage my childcare and 2 others (if needed), develop my own curriculum, and still have time to sleep. I do NOT need a degree to tell me that I am qualified for my job. Again, I feel that if licensing doesn't feel someone is qualified, then **DO NOT ISSUE THEM A LICENSE**.

A little back story if you will. This past summer we had an intern (a former child in my care) from Lock Haven University with us for 2 months. She was entering the field of childcare. Once she saw the other side of this field and the pressures put on us, she changed her degree. Another of example of how we are being overregulated.

#6 Waivers

Did you see that in the regulation? Me either. Because it does not exist and should. Providers should be permitted to apply for waivers for things such as pets, ratios, television time (we are currently participating in the adopt a cow program that has interactive videos daily) etc. With the proposed regulations, this would not be possible.

There is an enormous difference between the childcares in rural central PA and those found in areas such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The children at a facility located in the city take field trips to areas such as ours to learn farming and forestry. Meanwhile our children are living this

life daily. A waiver system would allow for us to be granted permissions for things such as mulch, sawdust, and shelled corn. Items that typically would be violations, yet we are encouraged to enhance small motor skills.

#7 CACFP

I must question if the rewrite committee has considered the downfall that transferring groups to centers will have with our food program. Currently, group homes are monitored and sponsored by state operated organizations. With the rewrites, we will be forced to follow the federal guidelines that centers participate in. Is the federal government ready to take on thousands of more children and hundreds of providers. A better question is, are current group providers ready to take on the painstaking paperwork that the Department of Agriculture requires? Add this paperwork to our ever-increasing load and the answer will be no. The outcome, providers requiring parents to send lunches. Another financial burden on parents and what I can guarantee to be less than nutritious meals being sent for the children.

#8 Rewrite System

Earlier I had mentioned that I was on the original AD-HOC committee, which was a select group of providers that gave input on the first draft of the rewrites. Again, as I am today, I was honored to have been given that opportunity. However, with this opportunity came a lot of frustration and tears. I was literally watching everything that I had worked so hard for slowly be stripped away from me by persons, who more than likely, had never worked in a childcare setting. Persons who knew better than I how to operate my business. Persons who are able to tell me what the parents would like or what is best for those children. I can't help but think how different this testimony would be had providers been able to sit in on the rewrites, voice their opinions, and express what would and would not be attainable. Instead, we have providers preparing to close their doors, dismiss children and lay off staff.

Providers were given the opportunity to share their concerns starting with draft #2. This came after those sitting behind desks found themselves making monumental decisions that would impact an entire industry. Again, how different would that draft (if a 2nd draft was even necessary) have been had providers been included in the process?

I know I speak for others when I say, the above listed are enough to cripple if not destroy family childcare.

In closing I would like to take the opportunity to express my deepest concerns for the children and families of our great state. The waitlist at my facility is what it is because parents in our area choose family childcare. They want the continuity of care and they want their children together. I implore you, please do not take this choice away from them. Do what is right for the children and families and allow Group Childcares to remain with Family Childcare. Listen to all our concerns. We are in this field daily and I am confident when I say that we know what is best for our business and the children.

Through the pandemic, we worked that front line. We made it possible for the police, nurses, firemen, doctors etc to go to their essential jobs. We put ourselves in harms way to help the families of our community. We kept our doors open, while other businesses closed to ensure that children were properly cared for, and families didn't struggle. I believe we have earned the right to decide what is best for our businesses and for children.

Again, thank you for taking the time to hear the providers position on the rewrites. It has been an honor to voice my opinions and concerns. I am happy to answer any and all questions or support in anyway I can.

Sincerely,

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