



Center for Rural Pennsylvania
Public Hearing – Child Care Access in Rural Pennsylvania

February 13, 2024 – 10:00 a.m.
Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 – Room 2402
17 Maple Ave., Pottsville, PA 17901

Hon. Gene Yaw
Chairman of the Board
Center for Rural Pennsylvania
362 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dr. Kyle Kopko
Executive Director
Center for Rural Pennsylvania
625 Forester St., Room 902
Harrisburg, PA 17120

My name is Robert S. Carl, Jr., President and CEO of the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce

On behalf of the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce, our Board of Directors, staff and 800 members strong, representing businesses and nonprofits across the greater Schuylkill County region and many contingent Pennsylvania counties, we welcome the Center for Rural PA Board of Directors and Chairman PA Senator Gene Yaw and Vice Chairman Representative Eddie Day Pashinski.

We are appreciative and excited that the Center for Rural PA has chosen to come to Schuylkill County. We are even more grateful for the opportunity before us to present the importance of the child care industry, both in Schuylkill County and across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the importance of this public hearing to further the discussion of necessary child care reform, regulatory, legislative, and targeted child care funding enhancements. Schuylkill County has worked with your Executive Director, Dr. Kyle Kopko, to present to you today very qualified testifiers---leaders in the child care industry and more importantly dedicated and passionate professionals knowledgeable about their field and the critical need for reform and funding enhancements for its very survival and necessary industry elements of improvement to keep high quality professionals in the child care industry.

Our child care advocacy journey has been underway for months. Our core group has been working diligently to educate our State Legislators and present a suggested pathway of reform. Thanks to Mary Beth Dougherty, a chamber board members and staffer for PA Senator Dave Argall, we have had meetings with Cindy Urban, Executive Director, Senate Education Committee, which Senator Dave Argall Chairs, and Joan Bradbury, Executive Director of the Senate Health & Human Services Committee to discuss the child care industry concerns and potential pathways for reform. We have worked with the PA Chamber of Business & Industry and PA Early Learning Investment Commission Issues Employer Needs Survey- “Employing and Engaging Parents with Young Children” to encourage our members employees to engage. We have conducted a meeting with the Schuylkill County Child Care providers on December 6, 2023 capturing the 5-6 key issues facing the child care industry and reengaged them again in a meeting with the entire Schuylkill County State Legislative Delegation (Senator Argall; Representatives Twardzik; Barton; Watro and Stehr) on February 1, 2024 to discuss the issues and potential solutions of relief. We conducted a Schuylkill County “Impact Survey to Child Care Parents” through the child care providers in January 2024, receiving an outstanding 152 survey responses.

The “Ready Nation Council for Strong America” reports that \$ 6.65 billion is the annual cost of Pennsylvania’s child care problems in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. These substantial and long-lasting consequences are felt by parents, businesses, and taxpayers. Most parents of young children are in the workforce and need child care. Those who are not in the workforce are likely not to be because of child care—either because of child care placement or affordability. The current child care system does not meet the needs of Pennsylvania families or employers, with a huge percentage living in areas where demand is three times the licensed child care slots. Western Schuylkill County would be an example of that void. Pennsylvania studies indicate that infant child care cost represents 40 percent of the median annual income of a single parent in PA averaging \$12,152 per year. This makes child care an affordability issue for low-income families who do not have access to subsidized child care and for middle class families who do not qualify for subsidized child care. I am sure I do not need to tell you that Schuylkill County is below the State median family income average. The ongoing quality and sustainability of child care providers is constantly threatened by high rates of provider turnover caused by low compensation, resulting in a lack of stability and consistent caregiving. Sadly, I have heard too many times that the average wage for a child care worker is \$12.00/hour.

Through these professionals presenting to you today, I have become extremely well educated both to the importance of child care in the continuum of education and why immediate attention is required. Let me begin by saying that quality child care is not day care or “babysitting” outside the home. It is real education! It in fact is the foundation, the “footer” if you will, to the educational system, and the foundational step of a child’s future potential growth and learning, before our young people are of age to enter K through 12 educations. These are truly the “formative” years of child development, and what is afforded to our children in these child care providers facilities sets the table for better or for worse for the remainder of their lives. When we focus on our well-known societal problems, including mental health, lack of nutrition at levels necessary for learning; inadequate levels of reading and English capabilities; problems of association and human interaction--all these significantly develop in the first five years of a young person’s life. Yet in our education system, we seem to want to just “take for granted” this developmental time and the necessary resources required for excellence. Thus, in these formative years, we place child care providers and the children they serve at unnecessary risk. We spend an inordinate amount of time discussing education and government resources for same in the K-12 years while completely dismissing the infant to pre-K pathway of our children. We want to use buzzwords like “workforce development” and believe there is some magic “potion” to place people into jobs. My training tells me to look at the root cause of the problem. There can be no workforce improvement without greater support for their dependents. There can be no stable and quality child care settings without support for competitive wages and benefits. We need to focus our attention better on the critical importance of the child care industry and the critical timeline these professionals serve for our children.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce has taken the child care advocacy agenda as one of its highest priorities. We know our child care providers need assistance and require viable change for the industry to survive. We know our parents of child care age children need support. It makes little sense to focus on overarching workforce development issues without understanding the root causes of workforce departures. Men and women with children of child care age cannot go comfortably to work without knowing their children will be taken care of and educated in a safe and cost-effective environment. Child care providers cannot adequately support their services without viable child care workers, adequately compensated, who feel appreciated by their child care provider owners without fearing bankruptcy of their facilities. Unfortunately, the current dynamics of Pennsylvania’s child care system is not conducive to allow this to happen. Furthermore, while the child care industry was given some assistance in the closing weeks of the 2023 PA State Legislative sessions, where the State Budget was finally concluded with compromises between the PA House and PA Senate, let’s immediately dispel the thought that the Child Care Tax Credit included in the finalization of the State Fiscal Code was the panacea for the child care industry. While the Child Care Tax Credit is a boost for the parents and was supported by many local chambers of commerce including ours, it does not assist the child care providers with

the endemic problems that keep their industry in peril. We need to focus our attention on the child care providers and listen carefully to what they need to survive and what the State Legislature must work to fix.

The chamber, our businesses, non-profits and their employees are all appreciative of child care enhancements to make child care for our workforce more affordable. Promising answers to make child care more affordable including tax credits and Child Care Works ELRC, PA Pre K Counts, military stipends and now larger companies working with chambers of commerce to support families in finding affordable childcare and including childcare benefits in their packages are all important enhancements. This is important because we are well aware of the majority of workers who averaged 35-40% of their gross wages for child care services.

We need to support child care centers that can offer high quality care for the children and parents of their communities. We need centers that can survive financially. Too many go from month to month being as innovative as possible in an attempt to survive. You will hear their stories today. We need quality teachers who will stay in the child care profession they love. Not feel it necessary to leave the profession because their providers cannot compete with other educational providers, K-12 who can provide wages and benefits making their lives and families more sustainable, because of the disparity of government funding and attention in those settings. We need to understand that in an effort to recruit some child care providers pay upfront substantial costs just to qualify their workers to begin work---background checks, safety and CPR trainings, health screenings, etc. We need to understand that these same professionals who are mandated to become more highly credentialed by their providers as part of the regulatory environment or important star ratings, only become a self-defeating scenario as those same credentials cause them to be a target of other local educational environments. The combination of low wages and the inability of providers to provide significant health care benefits, make these employees constantly vulnerable to recruitment and ultimately to departure to the level of education they love.

We need teachers who are resilient in times of challenging classroom circumstances and who can remain optimistic and passionate. Many child care providers need to support services well beyond basic child care education because they are supporting parents who are suffering with in-home/child developmental issues, children with special needs, and early childhood intervention services such as speech, physical therapy, social-emotional development; and fine and gross motor skill development. The picture I am painting for you is so you can appreciate the love, caring and compassion that child care provider owners and their teachers and support staff must possess to remain committed through their love and passion to this industry and avoid burn out that might cause them to leave the profession or to abandon the child care profession they love.

Today, you will hear from three great child care professionals and advocates on this Schuylkill County panel. First you will hear from Mary Ann Devlin, Executive Director of Child Development, Inc. providing services to our community for almost four decades. I had the pleasure of working with Mary Ann in my time as a Schuylkill County Commissioner and I am now proud to join her again as a chamber executive for the much overdue enhancements for child care. Then, Michelle Dallago, Director and Head of School, Perception Early Learning Center, a Montessori curriculum-based provider here in Pottsville, PA. Michelle just celebrated her 23rd year of operation. Her program exudes the love and caring, and high level of child education, that is appreciated by parents. She does her work daily unselfishly and with great passion. Finally, you will hear from Kim Bastian, Regional Advocacy Program Ambassador, Pennsylvania Child Care Association (PAAC), a state-wide advocate spending time working the legislators in the Harrisburg Capitol, educating them for the needed child care reform we are focusing on today.

Also by my side today is my chamber colleague and Executive Vice President, Samantha Chivinski. Samantha did the great work of constructing the survey issued to the child care parents achieving 152 detailed responses. She is a tremendous professional and a proud mother of a beautiful daughter, Sloan, now a kindergartener and a graduate of the Perception Early Learning Center, who through that pre-K program progressed quite

successfully. I am going to turn to her both to discuss the “Schuylkill County Child Care Impact Report” statistics and her perspectives as a working mother who has accessed child care services.

Samantha Chivinski, Executive Vice President, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce shares her testimony.

Please take the time to look at the data and read the individual responses Samantha just referred to in the “Schuylkill County Child Care Impact Report”. Their detailed comments will move you. In addition to the data she spoke of, 62.5 % indicated having been on a waiting list for child care services ranging from a minimum of 6-12 months and too many in the range of 1-2 years. The excellent news is that 98.7% of Schuylkill County parents indicated their child care setting to be of quality, safe, and a healthy nurturing educational setting. However, 65.8% of parents indicate acute awareness of the risk to the child care industry because of low child care wages, inadequate benefits, and the direct correlation to child care sustainability. Parents spend 25-35% of their wages (as a median); and in fact, amazingly too many reported 40%; 50%; 60%; 75% and even 80% spent on child care. One responder stated spending \$ 2,000/month on child care—followed by “more than our mortgage”. I can assure you that \$ 2,000/month in Schuylkill County is a very sizeable amount of money.

As I conclude, I respectfully ask you to make this moment what I have told these child care leaders it in fact is--that NOW is the time; the time to realize this foundational service has not been addressed the way it should be for the future of our children; for the integrity and support of our passionate child care professionals; and for the security, financial well-being, and workforce development of their parents. Without reform and dedicated resources, we are doing a disservice to the future of Pennsylvania. If Pennsylvania wants to prioritize workforce development and economic vitality, as Governor Shapiro has indicated, and change the projected trajectory of the population trends that your body just published, I urge you through the Center of Rural PA Board of Directors to join us in leading the charge to every PA State Senator and State Representative until true regulatory, legislative, and financial reform can be achieved. Other states have committed and reformed. The Commonwealth of PA through your leadership can do so too!

Thank you for your time and attention!