

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Public Hearing on Early Learning and Early Care in the District of Columbia
November 14, 2015**

Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Soumya Bhat, and I am the Education Finance and Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through thoughtful policy solutions.

First, thank you to the Committee for holding this hearing on early learning and early care in the District. Having access to high-quality health and education programs for young children is critical to their success in school and to their ability to achieve their full potential as adults. It is also important for parents – particularly those with low-incomes – to have adequate access to affordable quality care while they work or attend school.

Partnering with DC Appleseed, DCFPI is working on a research study to examine the cost of providing quality child care for infants and toddlers in the District.¹ Over the past several months, our project team has conducted on-site interviews with a sample of accredited child care providers that serve families participating in DC’s child care subsidy program. While our findings and recommendations will not be released until early 2016, we would like to share a few qualitative trends from our research with the Council today.

Compensation and Benefits for Child Care Professionals

Our interviews revealed that many DC providers want to offer benefits and better salaries to their early childhood education teachers, but simply cannot afford to given the other pressures they face to maintain quality programs. The need to maintain licensing and accreditation standards and to provide healthy food, sufficient diapers, and a working HVAC system make it difficult for providers to offer adequate staff salaries, often leaving center operators to depend on the quality of their relationships with staff and their commitment to children to maintain their workforce. Many reported extremely low wages and often do not offer any benefits – such as health care, retirement plans, or paid sick leave.

These trends are echoed nationally, where one-third (36.7 percent) of child care workers live in families with income below twice the poverty line, compared with 21.1 percent of workers in other

¹ This testimony is meant to be read in conjunction with the testimony of Judy Berman, Deputy Director for DC Appleseed.

occupations.² In DC, many providers also face staff turnover or lose quality professionals to the DC Public School system, which can offer Pre-Kindergarten teachers a higher salary and benefits (an average of \$93,040 in the 2015-16 school year) plus a nine-month schedule. This turnover can significantly impact the emotional well-being of infants and toddlers. Continuity of care - keeping young children with the same provider/teacher for an extended period of time - is important for them to build trusting relationships, secure attachments, and strong bonds over time.³

When asked what types of investments they would make in their program if they received a 10 percent to 20 percent increase in program income, the majority of providers we interviewed said they would offer better compensation and benefits for their staff. This isn't just out of kindness. They know that better compensation will mean better retention, better care, and happier customers.

Capacity to Serve Children with Disabilities

Many families with young children served in our city's child care centers and homes require additional services to properly identify and address a developmental delay or disability and ensure the family is aware of the supports and programs that are available to them. While providers are often the front-line in terms of identification through the universal implementation of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, they are not provided any additional resources and often lack support to provide these children and families the additional attention they need. There is also confusion about whether or not children at age three and older can receive early intervention services in the community-based setting or if they need to move to DCPS or a charter school. In some cases, providers have to accompany children to a public school setting to receive their weekly services, which is both time consuming and disruptive for staff and children.

Several providers spoke favorably about the Healthy Futures program, which provides mental health consultation to child care centers to build the capacity of staff to promote children's positive social emotional development and reduce behavioral problems. These types of consultants can connect families with early intervention services or help them navigate the special education system. Research also shows that early childhood mental health consultation can lead to lower rates of expulsion in early childhood programs and improvements in children's behavior.⁴ We hope to see more of these types of programs accessible to community-based providers, as well as a recognition of the time and resources they expend serving children with special needs, so they can develop the right skills and strategies to better serve these children.

Alignment of the District's Early Childhood Programs

The needs of young children are complex – including health care, nutrition, cognitive and social development – and DC families with young children often interact with several different public

² Elise Gould, "Child Care Workers Aren't Paid Enough to Make Ends Meet." Economic Policy Institute. Issue Brief #405. November 5, 2015. Available at: <http://www.epi.org/publication/child-care-workers-arent-paid-enough-to-make-ends-meet/>

³ Mary Benson McMullen and Peggy Apple. "Babies (and Their Families) On Board! Directors Juggle the Key Elements of Infant/Toddler Care and Education." NAEYC, September 2012. Available at: http://www.naeyc.org/yc/files/yc/file/201209/McMullen_YC0912.pdf

⁴ Deborah F. Perry, Courtney Holland, Nikki Darling-Kuria, and Sarah Nativ. Zero to Three, 2011. "Challenging Behavior and Expulsion from Child Care: The Role of Mental health Consultation." Available at: http://main.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/32-2_Perry.pdf

services to get their needs met. In a 2012 scan of early childhood programs and services in the District, DCFPI identified about 30 programs across six agencies that serve young children (age 0-5) and their families.⁵ The city should continue to work on ways to deliver these services in a coordinated way to help ease the burden on families and streamline access to multiple programs at once.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

⁵ DC Fiscal Policy Institute. “Early Childhood Education and Development in the District of Columbia: A Resource Map.” 2012. Available at: <http://www.dcfpi.org/dc-early-childhood-funding-and-services-a-visual-resource-map>