

June 20, 2017

Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Education,

As a network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children's health and policy experts, we know that access to childcare is an essential cornerstone in supporting the health and development of young children. We write today in support of Senate Bill 257, "An Act Providing Immediate Child Care Assistance to Homeless Families," which will give families living in homeless shelters immediate access to childcare vouchers.

An extensive body of scientific evidence, including research from Children's HealthWatch, shows that children's cognitive and physical development during the first years of life are a critical period of rapid brain and body growth. This is the time when infants and toddlers form the fundamental neurological architecture of the brain and central nervous system that they will have for the rest of their life. Quality childcare is necessary to ensure children's future success in life. However, children who experience homelessness and enter shelter experience immense levels of stress, which can lead to impairments in learning, memory, and the ability to regulate certain stress responses that last well into adulthood.

Currently, families have to wait 30 days after entering a shelter just to apply for a childcare voucher, and even then they must have a job, or be enrolled in an educational program, to be eligible for it. However, oftentimes homelessness is caused by a family's primary breadwinner losing a job or a lack of continuing education. Without childcare, a parent cannot attend a job interview or enroll in school.

Children's HealthWatch research has shown that 28 percent of working mothers interviewed between 2002 and 2013 in urban hospitals across the country experienced job loss within the past year. Another 10 percent had their work hours reduced in that period. Market conditions (34 percent), workplace factors (19 percent), childcare problems (15 percent), and family health concerns (14 percent) were the most frequently reported causes of job instability.

Lack of dependable childcare is a barrier to stable employment for many families; with this bill, families that enter into shelters will receive access to childcare immediately, thus ensuring that parents can feel confident about the health, safety and development of their children while they look for a job, enroll in school, and heal from traumas associated with their loss of stability. The mothers and fathers we interview in emergency departments talk about how frustrating this experience is – they want to work or obtain training to build their skills, but cannot afford to leave their children in safe care. There is no lack of desire to participate in the workforce and become financially independent; instead there is a lack of assistance and support at the critical moments when they are making forward strides.

Leveraging the perspective of pediatricians and health scientists, our research is designed to improve children's opportunities for healthy, successful lives by informing public policy and practice. Based on our knowledge and expertise as pediatricians and public health researchers, we urge you to report this bill favorably out of committee, as it will aid homeless families across the Commonwealth in getting back on their feet after a crisis. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Children's HealthWatch