

TESTIMONY OF BETH STARKS, FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
CHAUTAUQUA LAKE CHILD CARE CENTER

BEFORE THE NYS ASSEMBLY
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
STANDING COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON BANKS
OFFICE OF STATE-FEDERAL RELATIONS
TASK FORCE ON FOOD, FARM & NUTRITION POLICY

Good morning! Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Beth Starks, the founder and Executive Director of Chautauqua Lake Child Care Center.

I am a third-generation Early Childhood Educator and have experience in everything from infant rooms all the way up through higher education. I am proud to serve on both the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council and the Child Care Availability Task Force. I come to you today to speak about child care as a small business. Below, in my written testimony, you will find links to a lot of statistics and additional information on the topics that I will be discussing today.

I know that time is of the essence and I am making an appeal to all of you. I come to you as the founder of a non-profit child care center and a supporter of public education. I come to you as a leader, a public servant and a voice for children and families. Other small businesses, and families need your help now by supporting childcare providers. Our small businesses are especially strained right now when it comes to their workforce. **Workers need child care to do their jobs.** I implore you to ensure more decisive steps are taken in NYS to assist families in paying for child care and to safeguard the safety and health of child care providers and the families they serve. We need you to ensure that New York's child care providers are ready and able to play their vital role in restarting the economy as we emerge from this pandemic. In the past months, I have listened to our Governor and to many other leaders talk about the reality of this situation. We know this is a situation like no other, and there was nothing we could have planned for. We are building the plane as we fly it and we have true budgetary constraints. I do understand that NYS has had the most cases and the most deaths. The health and medical crisis and the medical decisions needed to come first. I understand that the decisions involving child care needed to come a little bit later. Yet child care providers are essential and have been on the front-line providing care for children of essential workers so that they can do their jobs--as nurses, doctors, law

enforcement, and so on. Child care providers have allowed essential workers to work every day knowing that their children are healthy, safe and happy.

I come to you today frustrated, heartbroken, sad, exhausted, scared, discouraged and so close to giving up. I am frustrated at the lack of support, the lack of supplies and the lack of financial resources. I am heartbroken. Heartbroken for the child care facilities that have already closed, most never to reopen. I am heartbroken for the mom of the 9-week-old who just started in my care on Good Friday as she had to return to work as an essential worker. I'm sad for the staff that I have lost, for the parents crying in my office because they can't afford child care. I am scared for my business of 14 years that I am trying to keep afloat and I am scared for every child care provider and for our industry. I am discouraged at the lack of acknowledgement and awareness of the importance of Early Childhood and the lack of investment in children.

First of all, I want all of you to understand that child care is a business that supports all other small businesses. We are an essential business that has remained open throughout the COVID-19 emergency. By doing so, we have allowed all other small businesses (as well as all other industries) to remain open and now to re-open. So, all of your medical providers, restaurant workers, hospital staff and even farm workers have child care (& workers) thanks to our centers. As mentioned by our previous speaker, a farm needs workers in order to operate, there are child care centers that specifically serve migrant workers. Child care is an industry that is different from other small businesses because we enable other small businesses to operate.

I chose to begin my verbal testimony by telling a few stories. The things that I told included: why I started my child care facility, the problems that child care had pre-COVID and what we've gone through during this COVID-19 Pandemic. I founded my center as a non-profit 14 years ago while I was working at SUNY Fredonia in the Education Department. While I was there, I had my first son (who just turned 16) and could not find child care for him. I brought him with me to Fredonia every day & I found an incredible in-home child care provider for him. Soon, I decided to stop working at the college and became a licensed in-home child care provider myself. In NYS, an in-home licensed day care facility is also a small business and there are a lot of them in WNY and across the state. After having my in-home facility for two years, realizing the need for child care in Mayville was so great, I then became incorporated and opened my center. Chautauqua Lake Child Care Center (CLCCC) provides care and education for over 100 children ages 6 weeks to 12 years. CLCCC is a non-profit child care center leasing space inside Chautauqua Lake Central School. The partnership with the public school allows families to drop off & pick up their children all in one place. We provide full time care, part time care, UPK, before school and after school programming as well as

a full day summer camp for school aged children. We also employ 11 full time staff and 10-15 part time staff, depending on the time of year.

I've also been a part of a lot of initiatives in our County and across NYS. I serve on our Education Coalition here in Chautauqua County where we focus on bringing together educators & industries to meet the needs of the County. I lead the K-readiness subgroup where we focus on young children specifically. Our Education Coalition has had a lot of efforts county-wide to try to support child care. We started an initiative in the City of Dunkirk, as there are no licensed child care centers in the City of Dunkirk. Initially, Mayor Willie Rosas called together a Business Roundtable, focused on child care. It was his most well attended roundtable discussion, which demonstrates the need for child care in the area. Our County Executive at the time, George Borrello, now a NYS Senator, made child care a county-wide priority. He recognized how important child care is as an industry and how interconnected it is to businesses and economic development. Last year, then-County Executive Borrello (in collaboration with the City of Dunkirk, private sector business, the County Chamber, and the County Planning office and also with the help and support of Assemblyman Andrew Goodell) was able to apply for some funding through the Governor's Workforce Development Initiative/Economic Development Council to work on obtaining additional funding for child care. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in obtaining funding, even though it was greatly needed. My point is that child care was in a crisis situation here, preventing people from going to work, pre-COVID. We are in what's called a child care desert because there isn't enough child care here in Chautauqua County (or in much of NYS). According to the Center for American Progress, **64 percent of New Yorkers lived in a child care desert (before the Pandemic)**, which means that there are more than 50 children under the age of 5 in a census tract that contains either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.

The past 3 months, the situation has gotten much worse. **Over 50% of my colleagues in Chautauqua County have closed their doors.** Nationally, it is estimated that about ½ of them will never open again. We cannot re-open our county or NY without child care because there is nowhere for children to go and that includes children from infants all the way up through the teenage years.

We're an industry that needs financial support. My colleagues will tell you that they stayed open during COVID because it was what was right for children and families. I will tell you that we all made poor business decisions because we operated our businesses by leading with our hearts, instead of making financially-based decisions. We are all

fulfilling our mission in serving children and families. We remained open serving on the front lines, but every single day we are open we continue to lose money and there is very little support. I was fortunate enough to be able to get the PPP (Paycheck Protection Plan) and I will tell you my story in being able to do so. I had to find the only lender in Chautauqua County that was able to allow me to apply for a PPP loan; there was only one. I searched all weekend to find the lender and it was KeyBank. The manager let me call her on a Sunday and come to meet with her first thing on a Monday morning to open an account with her. None of the other lenders would let me apply and/or open an account with them. Once I was able to open an account, we were able to apply for the PPP and were thankfully approved. If you look at child care centers statewide, I was told that only 10% received the PPP, and that's just for the centers. None of the in-home providers were eligible because they are sole proprietors. So, the PPP money has only helped a few of us. The EIDL (Economic Injury Disaster Loan) money I was able to apply for, but I was denied. I don't know the rationale behind it, but we just received the email that told us we were not eligible for that funding. As far as federal funding, there was CARES Act money that was set aside for child care federally and we were really excited because we were told we would receive \$164.6 million in NYS specifically for child care, but we have yet to receive that funding. **Of that \$164.6 million in CARES funding, only \$30 million was allocated**, \$20 million was designated for scholarships for families (the scholarship only assists families making up to 300% of the poverty level and luckily in Chautauqua County we were already serving that population. So, very few families here were able to take advantage of this money.) and \$8 million for supplies. We are so thankful for the supplies, which just came this past Saturday. Beyond that there has been no help directly to child care facilities. The biggest need is purely financial. We need working capital. Most of the remaining providers in Chautauqua County literally have weeks left until they too close their doors.

We cannot look at supporting childcare as a "subsidy". It is truly an investment in economic development and infrastructure. We cannot rebuild our economy without an investment in something as critical as childcare.

In closing, I will tell you that there are also bright spots. In the beginning, I spoke about feeling frustrated, heartbroken, exhausted, scared, discouraged and so close to giving up. Well, I also come to you energized, inspired, hopeful and encouraged and determined to never to give up. I am energized by my insightful colleagues, in my community, across the state and across the nation. I am energized by my staff who are incredible and dedicated and selfless. I am energized by my students who are the future educators. I am inspired by my community coming together in a way that it never has and bridging divides. I am hopeful for our future and a chance to fix all of this. I am

encouraged by the hard-working families, the families struggling to go to work every day to provide the best opportunities for their children. I am encouraged by the child I sat with yesterday talking about the people he loves and I am encouraged with the knowledge that he is healthy, happy and safe in our care.

This issue to me is not political. It is very much bipartisan and I believe that we have to all come together to support children and families. In doing so, we support our economic infrastructure and the future of our state. If we aren't making decisions based on what is best for our youngest citizens, then we are doing a disservice to our entire population.

So, I offer to you my assistance as part of the solution. I trust your leadership. I trust your judgement. Families and providers need to be heard. They need your support and they need it now. **I recognize the need for funding and the CARES Act allows emergency federal funds to be used to provide child care to the essential worker keeping us safe and to every other worker trying to go back to work. We need to follow the lead of many other states around the country and use that funding immediately to assist families and providers. We need additional funding for child care in the next round of CARES relief from the federal government. There are also so many other sources of funding that could be used for child care in our state. We need to do innovative things like use FEMA dollars, community development block grant funds, and economic development money to invest in child care. We have to try to find other funding sources and make NYS the leader in early childhood education during this time and in the future.**

I will always believe every challenge is an opportunity and we have the opportunity now to do the right thing for our current workforce and for our state's youngest citizens, our future.

Thank you for your time.

Additional information:

Chautauqua Lake Child Care Center website-
www.clccc.org

Center for American Progress - Information on Child Care Deserts-

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2020/06/22/486433/coronavirus-will-make-child-care-deserts-worse-exacerbate-inequality/>

Open Letter to the Governor from NYS Child Care Providers-

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IUzSS4u2zNH4SGoqnOhWj_MITwtq_f8y/view

Letter to Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Stewart Cousins, Assembly Speaker Heastie, NYS Chancellor of Education Rosa (including the May 18, 2020 recommendations of the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force)-

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/16aBPz67psqoipsYDVYD4PXyXyOKEY5pivCIn6RQyQzk/edit?usp=sharing>