

Good morning distinguished Representatives of the House and thank you for inviting me to this hearing. My name is Jessica Shertzner and I have a unique experience and perspective of childcare in PA. Growing up my mother was a family childcare home provider and later became a group home provider. I have worked with DHS as a certification representative and owned and operated 4 childcare centers for over the past 20 years. All of my facilities have been Keystone Stars 3 or 4 as well as participated in PreK Counts and PDE licensed Kindergarten. I hold an AA in Elementary Education, a dual BA in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education and a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education. I am a PA licensed teacher, hold a PA Director's Credential and well as a certified PQAS instructor, which allows me to teach other early childhood educators. I am a member of several national and statewide organizations representing childcare. To say that childcare is my profession is an understatement, childcare is my life's purpose. It is my experiences and education, in that order, that allow me to provide a fair and equitable solution to the issues that we are facing currently in early childcare. It does not matter to me if its democrat or republican, the care of our children is a nonpartisan issue and I will accept nothing other than children first. The priority is and should always be the children but in order to take the best of the children of Pennsylvania we MUST also take care of those that care our children.

To treat the current state of childcare in PA, as a simple issue is an understatement, it has so many layers to it but I hope to show you just how broken childcare in PA is for all parties, including DHS, providers, families and children.

In 2022, I came before the committee to discuss the regulation rewrite. While here I mentioned repeatedly that PA ranked 39th among the 50 states in ECE Quality, don't worry I will tell you by the end where we now stand. Thanks to the many providers who raised their voices in unison and members of this committee, we were able to have the rewrite go back to the drawing board. While this sounds like a win, and it was, it was not a win in all aspects. DHS began the rewrite process again but this time they excluded all the committees and selected a group of their own. Very few providers had any input and the details have been kept so secret we will absolutely be blindsided when they are released. Right now, they are under "formal review." When released they will have a 30 day comment period. 30 days is not long enough to go through 4 sets of regulations, ask questions or challenge, which is what DHS is counting on. In my 2022, testimony I gave several instances where providers have no trust in DHS and visa versa. This type of behavior exemplifies this as it still continues.

Another issue that providers regularly take issue with is the inconsistencies among inspectors in DHS, however recently we have had examples of where these inconsistencies are not just between inspectors or even supervisors but also among the same regional manager. A provider can have it in writing with one clarification from the regional manager but when requested to enforce based on this clarification, they won't stand behind their clarification that they placed in writing stating DHS's interpretation has changed. To make the situation even more cumbersome, when the exact same clarification is asked on a different day, 2 months later, in a different setting the same regional manager states that there has not been any new clarification and the original interpretation was correct. This is a prime example of how DHS chooses when and where to enforce a regulation or even how to interpret it based on the day, time and provider. No provider is a mind reader and can anticipate or even try to adhere to the regulations if they are ever changing and inconsistent even within the same person. The number of citations being issued now compared to 10 years are increasing at a drastic rate. This isn't because providers have gotten worse but the increasing over citation that DHS incurs. Reps have stated to several providers that they cannot leave the facility until they find something to issue citation. That sets the standard that no matter how much effort and time a provider takes to running a quality program it will never be good enough. For providers and staff that just sends them the message of why even try that hard, even my staff understand that if an inspector comes in the door, we will be receiving citations even if we have done nothing wrong.

Let's move to another issue facing the workforce in all of our childcare facilities who cares for all of the Pennsylvania children. In PA, we care for approx. 825,000 children, birth to 5. AS of 2022, PA employed roughly 69,000. Early childhood educators. While we all know these numbers have decreased so has the number of facilities.

	2015	2025	Difference	Percentage
Center	4,703	4,916	+213	5% increase
Group	759	591	-168	23% loss
Family	2,549	963	-1,586	62% loss
Total	8,011	6,470	-1,541	19% loss

As of a report in 2022, the average wage for an early childcare provider is \$13.07 an hour. The living wage at that time was \$15.43, child care providers are 15% below a living wage. To put that in perspective of all occupations, the average wage is \$23.38 an hour putting

childcare providers 97% below all other occupations. 38% of EC educators use one or more public assistance programs, this costs PA taxpayers over \$200 million. 12.2% of EC educators fall below the federal poverty line. Those that care for our most valuable asset are doing the worst but we expect the most from them.

Prior to the pandemic childcare providers were eligible for the education retention award based on the education level. Educators were well aware of these amounts in advance and how to earn them. The amounts varied based off the level of education and the Star level at the facility they worked at held. These amounts ranged from \$800 up to \$4000. Many staff over many years put in the effort and gave up time with their families to better themselves and the field and earned degrees only for those awards to be taken from them during the pandemic. OCDEL kicked providers when they were already down and struggling. Now in 2026 OCDEL has released most recently the Retention and Recruitment grant for \$425 per person. Not only are these grants a slap in the face to all of the educators who worked so hard and diligently to better themselves and better their programs, they are inconsistent and non reliable. This most recent grant for example was as per their contract, which every provider signed, it clearly stated was a legally binding agreement and was to be paid no later than March 15th. To date no provider has received those funds! Now OCDEL will argue that they wanted to give the providers more and it is now increased to \$645 to which I'm sure OCDEL will say we should be grateful however the new agreements to which providers must sign have not even been distributed or were distributed on Friday 3/27/2026 and must be returned by Tuesday 3/31/2026, which I'm sure many providers will miss and will need extended. So, if providers signed a legally binding document, advised their staff of when those funds were coming but OCDEL can just not pay on time, again why would we trust anything the department puts out. Many will say we should be thankful or it's better than nothing but we are begging for our crumbs from a cookie in which the state stole from us providers in the 1st place during the pandemic when providers were already struggling. I refuse to be thankful for something that was our already earned.

To insult to injury, these grants do nothing for retention and recruitment. If anything they do the opposite. Many center provider can tell you that they cringe when these grants get announced because they know that the minute they are issued, within a week of paying them staff will either quit or put in the notice. Staff will stay just long enough to get the bonus and leave for another position when they may be able to collect a second time or leave the field entirely. These grants are not helping.

Now I am a big supporter of furthering your education and I'm always there to support my fellow educators to further themselves even knowing that majority of them have families and time restraints and will place a burden on them. I wholeheartedly believe that an education is not what makes a good early childhood educator quality, what makes them the best that they can be is the motivation and experience they receive by working with children. This can come from personal experience with their own family, their own siblings, working at a church nursery, running a kids club, etc. Many different environments can provide someone with skills to be a great early childhood provider, education is just the cherry on top but without a foundation of love and compassion for children, no education will ever make you a better child care provider. What we need in this field, is people who have patience, who enjoys the presence of children, who wholeheartedly cares about their well-being, who wants to have fun in a princess hat, who wants to crawl on the floor and be the Brontosaurus while the child is the T-Rex for the 100th time, who wants to have dance party at 3:00 in the afternoon on a Friday because that's what the kids need I need! I need a grandmother or a mother in my infant and toddler room to hold the babies to rock them, to understand that they didn't have a good night's sleep and just need extra cuddles, to recognize a mother who may be dealing with postpartum depression or is just a family member who struggling or second guessing their abilities. We need someone to be there to support families and there is no college class in any college that will teach them how to be a good person and being a good person to children, moms, dads and siblings that is something that they either have or they don't. It's something that gets exemplified by more experience with children. I will take someone with 20 years experience over a bachelor's degree with no experience every day all day. Getting your education is something that can be added and worked on while you're experiencing working with children, not only is that good for children but it's also good for the person who's getting their degree. Educators are one of the highest fields where people get their degree and then leave and they don't return to education because they had no real life experience and no idea what it really took to manage a group of children. So if education is one of the highest fields where people abandon their degree, why are we forcing degrees first? Education is secondary to experience.

We welcome and encourage you to visit our centers but please don't come and read our children a story take a picture and move on. Come sit down with the Directors and operators and listen. Observe our awesome classrooms and take note of what you see. Quality is occurring in PA but its not because this childcare system, its in spite of it. I urge

you to look at every child as if they were your child or grandchild and decide what their care should look like. We only have children for 2,000 days before they go to school. These days need to be filled with providers who love them and all the amazing experiences that childhood has to offer not a checklist of all the things they can't do.

I am challenging this Committee to step back and realize that childcare in PA is in crisis and is seriously flawed. I'm calling for a complete reorganization and restructuring of childcare in PA, dare I say a revolution. In this field, there are over 100 certification reps, over 30 supervisors, multiple regional managers, multiple DHS administrative staff resulting in roughly 200-250 state employees not including all the PA Keys staff. There are also over 70,000 childcare providers in PA. That is not a committee that's an army! An army of people who have dedicated their lives to the betterment and care for the children PA. We have the resources to make PA the best state for childcare. In 2022, PACCA shared our state ranking of 39th out of 50 states in childcare. In 2026, we are ranked 38th. This is unacceptable for the children of Pennsylvania. In childcare we don't teach children, you can't, you shouldn't, you won't and I will not accept it from you because we as providers know WE CAN, WE SHOULD & WE WILL!

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