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Testimony to the House Committee on Energy and Digital Infrastructure in support of H 753  
From Ellen Amstutz, [ellen@VPCCN.org](mailto:ellen@VPCCN.org), Director, Vermont Parent Child Center Network on  
behalf of the 15 Parent Child Centers.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the experiences of low-income families with  
children under six who experience hardship in paying for utilities.

The **Parent Child Center Network** represents Vermont's 15 Parent Child Centers (PCCs)  
which are located throughout the state and provide a range of in-home and community-  
based services to families with children under six. The 15 PCCs are funded by the state to  
deliver **8 Core Services** that build family resilience and responsive parenting, support child  
development, protect against economic hardship, and prevent child maltreatment. PCCs  
are trusted places in the community where families turn in times of need. This past fiscal  
year PCCs served 22,593 parents of young children.

One of the core services that PCCs provide help with is **Concrete Supports**. Concrete  
supports are material and financial help to address immediate needs and mitigate  
hardship. This is provided in many forms including food, diapers, clothing, transportation,  
and help with rent or utilities. Each PCC has a small fund to help with these needs.

This year PCCs experienced a 28% increase in families requesting concrete support. Utility  
bills represent a sizable proportion of these requests and of funds spent. All 15 PCC help  
families facing a utility cut offs. Here are some examples from PCCs around the State:

The center that serves **Windham County, Early Education Services in Brattleboro** made  
payments on utility bills for 39 families last year, paying out a total of over \$8,000. Most of  
these families were facing disconnect notices, all had a child aged 5 or under in the home.  
Through a partnership with the local Community Action Program, they also helped families  
apply for the energy discount and provided food and gas cards, so that income could be  
freed up to pay utility bills.

The PCC in **central Burlington, the JS Munt Family Room**, there are too many families  
asking for help to provide support to all who request it. Some families present bills of over  
\$500. The PCC staff at this center works with a representative at Burlington Electric to  
coach families in how to reduce their bills and make their homes more efficient, as well as



applying for the Energy Assistance programs. The PCC uses funds to help reduce the bills and negotiate a payment plan.

In **St. Albans, at PCC of Northwestern Counseling and Supportive Services** the PCC helped a single mother with three children who missed a payment and faced a disconnect notice. In another case a single parent of two who lives in an old apartment with high electric-heat bills needed help to keep the electricity on. Single parents raising children on one income are most at risk of falling behind on utility costs.

Two PCCs that serve the **Northeast Kingdom and are part of the Community Action Agency** serve very low-income communities. Financial coaching and fuel assistance programs are combined with utility payments and other concrete supports to keep these families afloat while working on longer term solutions.

**Lamoille Family Center** helped 15 households last year, paying out \$3,300 to the utility company to prevent disconnections. One example was of a two-parent family who welcomed their third child. The mother worked at a local ski area and had to take unpaid maternity leave. There were no infant slots available in the childcare. During this time, the family fell behind with water and electric bills. They live in an unweatherized trailer with electric heat. Lamoille Family Center also shared examples of families who don't earn enough from jobs to cover their housing costs. Parents are making decisions about whether to pay the rent or the utilities. One family is so far behind with fees and penalties added that it is prohibitive to turn it back on and make monthly payments. A family is living in rental housing that has not been properly maintained and weatherized resulting in electric bills of more than \$1100 during the cold months. The family earns farming wages and cannot make the full monthly payments.

Living without utilities and in substandard housing are conditions that can be detrimental to the health and well-being of young children. The stress and adversity the parent is experiencing has a negative impact on the cognitive development of babies and toddlers at the most critical time in brain development. Parents cannot provide nurturing and stable care that is critical to healthy brain development.

It is of critical importance that utilities are affordable to families. Poor families are disproportionately impacted by having utilities take up such a large portion of their family budget. It is also critical that families with children be protected from utility



disconnections. The PCCS can help but we are unable to keep up with the needs. We are requesting an increase in our funding to enable us to assist more families.

By providing short term financial supports when parents need them most, we can mitigate hardship and help families navigate short term challenges. Parents can be better at parenting when protected from the most adverse consequences of being poor, including going without basic services.

We hope you will consider how families with young children are impacted by high utility costs and support H753 and the PCCs request for additional funding for concrete supports. They are Vermont's next generation, and we need to ensure they are raised in safe, nurturing, and healthy environments and parents have the support and stability they need.