

The Food Trust

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ENSURING THAT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, NUTRITIOUS
FOOD AND INFORMATION TO MAKE HEALTHY DECISIONS

Jamese Kwele's Public Testimony for PA Child Care Development Block Grant – Draft State Plan Date: May 8, 2018

Good morning, my name is Jamese Kwele. I serve as Senior Associate at The Food Trust, a nonprofit working to increase access to healthy, affordable foods. I am a resident of Lansdowne, PA, a member of the Board of Directors for the William Penn School District, and a mother of two, including an 4 year old, who is in preschool.

My work at The Food Trust focuses on early childhood nutrition, including advancing support for breastfeeding, healthy first foods, and Farm to School activities in Early Care and Education (ECE) settings. The historic increase in Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding and the revision of Pennsylvania's child care plan provide unique opportunities to ensure that ECE providers have expanded access to resources, training and technical assistance to support healthy eating -- a key aspect of high quality child care. With that in mind, I am here today to voice support for the following recommendations:

- Expanding funding for the child care subsidy program to increase access to high-quality child care to lower-income families;
- Increased reimbursement rates for child care subsidies to better reflect the true cost of quality ECE; and
- Applying CCDBG funding towards Farm to ECE resources, including professional development, training and technical assistance to support healthy eating in early childhood settings.

A growing body of research connects experiences in early childhood to health and well-being throughout life. We know that the greatest returns come from investing in early childhood. While all children benefit from high-quality child care, children living poverty as well as those facing racial bias can benefit the most. Given the wait-list of eligible children, it is imperative that PA increase the number child care subsidies available for lower-income families. Moreover, in order for programs to prepare children for kindergarten and set them up for long-term health and well-being, ECE providers must have the capacity and financial stability to serve children and provide a high-quality experience. As is well documented, reimbursement rates for programs serving low-income children in PA are below-market rate and in an effort to support quality and advance equity, these rates must be raised. Increased reimbursement for subsidies must translate into higher compensation for ECE staff, whose important work shapes the lives of the commonwealth's children.

Early childhood is a key period when taste preferences and eating habits form. Research demonstrates the crucial role that good nutrition plays in brain development and for young children entering kindergarten healthy

and ready to learn. Through farm to ECE, which is a set of activities that includes increased access to fresh, healthy food, gardening, and nutrition education, children gain familiarity with fruits and vegetables, learn where food comes from, how it grows, and develop a healthy, fun and fulfilling connection to nutritious eating.

In 2016, The Food Trust, in partnership with the PA Head Start Association, convened the Ready, Set Grow, a task force comprised of early childhood and food systems stakeholders in order to identify common goals and priorities for advancing farm to ECE practices. The following recommendations are informed by the input of over 50 task force members:

- We support the use of CCDF funds to develop and provide training so child care providers and foodservice workers have the resources and skills needed to implement farm to ECE activities and procure affordable, fresh foods. While some TA is currently being offered in the area of healthy eating, there is a need to develop a more systemic approach for training and technical assistance, particularly around the use of Farm to ECE strategies to inform high-quality early care and education settings.
- Most early care and education providers are small businesses that rely on parent fees to fund program operations. The reliance on parent fees impacts the quality of food and education that can be provided in programs. We believe a shared services model could benefit PA's ECE providers in their effort to provide healthy foods to the children and the families they serve. For example, an established food distributor organization, such as Common Market, could develop a system specifically tailored to ECE settings that identifies local vendors and manages the logistics of their food procurement and distribution. This strategy would provide an economic boost to Pennsylvania farmers by encouraging healthy local food consumption in ECE settings.
- We support the launch a pilot program to offer an additional 10 cents per meal in state reimbursement to ECE providers that use locally grown foods in their CACFP compliant meals and snacks. As a model, Michigan's 10 Cents A Meal For School Kids and Farms pilot program is providing schools with match incentive funding up to 10 cents per meal to purchase and serve Michigan-grown produce to an estimated 95,000 students. A similar reimbursement offered in PA would benefit children, ECE providers, and make a significant investment in the local agricultural economy.
- The 2017 Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race for Results report showed that PA ranks nearly last in the nation for well-being of Latino/a and Black children. PA must do more to ensure that race is eliminated as a predictor of outcomes for young children. The state must collect, report, and make publicly available data related to racial disparities. While the state's child care plan describes what is necessary to support the healthy development of children and outlines a universal implementation approach, it does not fully address the impact that structural racism has on child outcomes. The revised plan must use a racial equity framework to identify specific strategies including working collaboratively with

communities of color to intentionally remove the systemic barriers keeping children of color from opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.