

OPEN LETTER: CHILD CARE PROVIDERS HAVE BEEN ABANDONED by NYS OCFS

Janice Molnar, Deputy Commissioner
NYS Office of Children and Family Services, 52 Washington Street, Rensselaer, NY 12144
Governor Cuomo and Sheila J. Poole, Commissioner

Dear Janice Molnar,

April 2, 2020

I am a life-long child care provider and leader in my community. In the past three weeks I have had hundreds of calls and emails from Hudson Valley early childhood educators and child care providers who are scared and confused and looking for direction. **The message I hear repeated over and over again from child care providers in my community is that we have been abandoned by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services during the COVID-19 health crisis.**

We are told that the OCFS is **closed** and our licensors will only work remotely at this time. While we are encouraged to remain open, our governing agency has decided that the child care field is not a safe place to be. While thousands of educators have created on-line strategies for education and communication, the Office of Children & Families Services has shuttered itself and continued to send out the same old "Dear provider emails" which are confusing and often contain contradicting information. Although we are engaged in intimate human work, we have not received any human support - even via an on-line forum, phone call or video chat. While we see various representatives and state commissioners sit alongside our governor during regularly scheduled press conferences, we have not seen nor heard from child care leadership. In a time of crisis, we have been underrepresented, invisible and neglected.

I do not expect my president, my governor, nor my county executive to understand the specific and nuanced work of caring for young children, but I did expect and hope that the NYS Commissioner of Childcare would have a clear understanding of my job. Like my many colleagues in the field, I have been disappointed and shocked by your lack of leadership and care.

One example that demonstrates your lack of respect, protection and understanding for the profession of child care is the most recent letter from you regarding guidelines for *Returning to work following COVID-19 exposure*. You passed along directives from the Department of Health which listed guidance for emergency personnel, police officers, transportation infrastructure. The guidance stated that these essential personnel can return to work after having contracted COVID-19 as long as they are 72 hours fever free. The guidance also outlined that these essential personnel can continue to work in the field even though they have been exposed to COVID-19 as long as they are asymptomatic.

- **THIS GUIDANCE DOES NOT SPEAK SPECIFICALLY TO CHILD CARE PROVIDERS. Child care providers believe that these recommendations are reckless.** We are NOT emergency personnel, police officers nor transportation infrastructure. We imagine that those personnel might have protocol for returning to work while remaining some semblance of social distancing. We do not have this option. Children do not understand social distancing nor is it appropriate to care for young children without being physically close to them. What's more, child care providers often do not have the health care, sick days, hazardous pay, or protective gear that has been prioritized for emergency personnel.
- **THIS GUIDANCE DOES NOT RESPECT CHILDREN and FAMILIES and THOSE THAT CARE FOR THEM.** The outlined steps in the letter from DOH raises many questions specific to caring for children and to the developmental needs of children. Our questions and needs are NOT addressed in your attached one page memo which offers no additional guidance but basically states that we should follow DOH generic guidelines because we are essential personnel. We are also wondering, do parents of young children know that our Commissioner has offered these loose standards in regard to the care of their children? Do parents across our state know that child care workers can continue to work with children even though they and the children they care for have been exposed to COVID-19? Do parents understand that their child care providers may return to work after only 72 hours of

being fever free from this serious illness? Are parents and child care teachers given the latest information about this highly infectious disease, including that children are often carriers. **Do parents understand that the children and caregivers who remain in childcare centers are not being given more stringent guidelines for operating in this critical period, but rather they are being given looser more lenient structures and protocol?**

- **THIS GUIDANCE IS CONFLICTING and CONTRADICTING.** In one recent “Dear Provider” email, we received the message that local health entities have the authority to direct programs to close or quarantine for specific reasons, such as if an employee or student tests positive for COVID-19. Now, in this most recent guidance we are instructed to keep working, even if we have been exposed to the coronavirus. Another example of the general conflicting guidance is that health officials report that the coronavirus symptoms vary from individual to individual, but a common characteristic is a fever - and the fever may come and go over the course of the illness. This causes us to believe that 72 hours of being fever free is not enough time to ensure that a person who cares for young children should be cleared to hold and feed young children.

I have looked to Washington State, Vermont and Massachusetts for strong language and clear protocol that speaks directly to the unique profession of child care because I have NOT found it in NYS. I have watched as other states have looked to our national organizations and advocacy groups such as *NAEYC* and *Child Care Aware*, as they strive to follow best practices, such as closing child care - even for one day or one week - to send a clear message about the value of our work and to give child care centers time to reorganize and reopen under emergency conditions. Other states are having conversations about hazardous duty pay and helping child care connect to resources for collecting essential supplies (milk, cleaning supplies, masks). Other states do not make promises that they are miracle workers - but they use language that shows value to the unique profession of caring for our youngest citizens. **Other states do NOT regurgitate directives from DOH to essential employees, - rather they use their knowledge of the child care industry to interpret guidance and write directives to fit the unique circumstances that providers, children and families face in this crisis.**

What we know for sure is that caring for young children in the best of times requires special skill, knowledge and expertise. Crisis is not the time to lift regulatory measures, lessen supervision and support from governing agencies, and operate in chaos. Crisis is the time to be our best for children and families who are also operating under extreme stress. Crisis is the time to be strong for one another, to find new ways of caring better, and to speak boldly about our priorities and what we value most.

Now as we march into the apex of this crisis, I ask, who will be the last child care provider standing? As we see more deaths and illness in our communities, only parents in desperate straits will continue to use group settings for their loved ones - their small children. The small business owners and home family providers who have no margin to close, will stand as long as they can, and even while they are sick, with arms open, receiving children from parents who are working in essential infrastructures. We proceed into the heart of this storm as if our children and child care providers are dispensable. The current emergency crisis has highlighted the underlying care crisis that we have accepted as a society, which places children and care at the bottom of a hierarchy. The working poor caring for the working poor will continue to function as they have for years, without appropriate resources, compensation, respect or value. Care remains the invisible infrastructure and it is crumbling.

Many things will be revealed in the days to come. One thing I know for sure is that in the crisis, when we had an opportunity to be seen and valued in a new bold way, our child care commissioner missed the opportunity to speak for us, to protect us, and to reveal our worth.

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