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Philadelphia City Council Committee on Licenses and Inspections
Regarding Bill No. 140944

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on this bill today. I want to thank Councilwoman Reynolds Brown for introducing it and Councilmembers Goode and Quiñones Sánchez for their sponsorship. Today I am speaking on behalf of the Southeastern PA Early Childhood Coalition (SEPECC) as well as Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY).

As you know, the current bill arose after child care providers and advocates came out last November to oppose [Bill 140802] an amendment to the zoning code that imposed a greater burden on applicants for group child care homes, which care for up to 12 children. The vast majority of residences in the city already were, or are now as a result of that law, zoned such that applicants must obtain a variance, rather than a special exception. Child care advocates opposed that zoning change as an unnecessarily restrictive and burdensome requirement that increased the cost to expand, because in most cases the zoning board requires that they be represented by an attorney. The current bill [140944] does not remove the significant expense of legal representation, but it does help by waiving the fee for the appeal.

In fact, the current bill goes further than just covering applicants for group child care; it waives the zoning fees for all new family child care homes. This is important because family child care homes are much more common than group, and these very small businesses have significant startup costs -- ranging from the food safety test, to child abuse clearances that cost \$65 for each household, to additional health assessments and tests.

These small businesses are vital to the men/women who run them as well as to the many families that depend on them for a more personalized/family-oriented childcare setting. Currently nearly a thousand home-based providers care for about 6,500 young children in the city. Families take advantage of the lower cost of family child care homes. Often parents prefer a provider located very close to their home or work, especially if they rely on public transportation. And importantly, our city's economy depends on a growing low-wage service, health and retail sector in which workers cope as best they can with irregular and non-traditional work schedules. Few large child care centers offer flexible hours or care on weekends or evenings when these parents need it.

Although we support this bill, we feel that it is a small step and we as a city must go the whole mile. Philadelphia has a childcare crisis: it's a crisis of quality and affordability. Childcare costs, on average, more than college tuition, so families are unable to find

good quality childcare at a price they can afford. And quality providers cannot afford to stay in business if they are small in scale. You may recall that last November we were joined by one of very few family daycare providers in the lower Northeast with a Star 4, the highest rating. She has a master's degree in early education, yet she made only \$17,000 last year. She explained that she was at her wit's end because of a catch-22: maintaining a high quality childcare home was financially unsustainable, but she couldn't afford the cost of expansion, either.

The honest truth is that our city has way too many family and center-based providers that just meet basic licensing requirements, which are based solely on health and safety. Fewer than one in ten family daycare providers is rated high quality on PA's voluntary quality improvement and rating system, Keystone STARS. Low quality programs may be run by people who love children, but they are basically babysitting. They do little to develop children's social-emotional or cognitive skills, to help build the character that will allow them to interact well with others, be ready to learn when they start kindergarten, and gain the 21st century skills we need in our workforce. High quality programs can do this and more.

Last year more than 220 million child care subsidy dollars flowed into our city from state and federal funds. This critical work-support helped low-income working parents have reliable and safe care, but 4 in 5 children with the subsidy were not enrolled in a high-quality program. Those families lost a huge opportunity to get their kids ready for school. And taxpayers lost the opportunity to save millions of dollars -- in future special education, social service and criminal justice costs that we could be saving if at-risk children had a high-quality early childhood experience.

In sum, the demand from parents for home-based care will continue. We must devise policies that support these small businesses, help preserve the residential character of neighborhoods, and at the same time seek to guarantee that taxpayer funds are used smartly to promote the best outcomes for children.

I say this knowing that there are other proposals that attempt to address these problems in one way or another. I am excited that so many Council members have joined this dialog about how we can address the child care crisis. Right now we believe that the best way to do this would be to mandate enrollment *and* continuing progress in the state's Keystone STARS program. The city can and should do more to push all providers to attain Star 3 or 4 ratings as soon as possible, but also to make sure they have the resources they need to build and maintain this high quality. In two weeks you will consider allowing a ballot measure that could create a platform to rally public support for doing this, and lays out a process for doing it smartly. Please pass the current bill, but also keep our eyes on the prize. Our kids and our future depend on it.