July 15, 2020

The Honorable Mike DeWine
77 S High St., 30th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & ELECTRONIC MAIL

Re: Ohio Child Care

Dear Governor DeWine:

Thank you for your continued leadership on behalf of our children during these unprecedented times. We are grateful to you and to your staff as we work together during the COVID-19 global pandemic. On behalf of Groundwork Ohio and our 60 partners below who are equally committed to our youngest children, we write with an urgent request regarding Ohio’s vulnerable child care sector.

Ohio’s children and economy are threatened because COVID-19 has put our state and national child care infrastructure at risk. While important steps have been taken to address the needs of kids and families by your Administration and in Congress’s first three federal relief packages, more must be done to fully stabilize our child care industry and prevent widespread permanent closures of child care programs across the state. As we enter the next phase of this crisis, we must ensure that child care is supported as critical infrastructure necessary to our economic recovery.

Recent analysis from a national survey of providers along with data on child care deserts have estimated 45% of Ohio’s child care supply could be lost without significant increases in funding to weather the pandemic and consequent economic crisis. Before March, Ohio was already experiencing a shortage in our child care supply. The crisis has further complicated this shortage due to the significant loss of revenue that many of our programs are experiencing while facing increased expenses to ensure their program is following all health and safety guidelines. If we do not have an adequate supply of child care as families continue to return to work, we will not only lose providers, but the critical infrastructure upon which our economy is built—our child care system—will be decimated.

We are well aware of the significant state budget concerns looming in Ohio. With this in mind, we have been working closely with Ohio’s congressional delegation to garner support for a substantial federal investment in child care. As Congress begins to lay out its next steps to support the nation’s economic recovery, we are urging members to provide child care with at least $50 billion in dedicated, flexible funding to address emergency needs and protect the child care industry as a key part of our nation’s infrastructure. When discussing relief for child care, we are also urging Congress to:
• **Continue to make the health and safety of children and staff in child care programs the top priority.** As child care programs reopen, we must place safety for children, staff, and families as the first priority.

• **Ensure child care providers who temporarily close because of the pandemic continue to receive funding that will allow them to pay staff and cover fixed costs.** Child care providers vary widely in their current structures and funding streams making it impossible for some to reopen without losing significant funding or operating on thin, unsustainable margins. No one financial tool will work for all providers or our communities, thus it is essential that any funding must allow for flexibility.

• **Make certain that providers who stay open during the crisis have the support necessary, like primary protective equipment (PPE) and health and safety products, to do so.** Child care providers are already highly regulated when it comes to maintaining the health and safety of their program to protect the children they serve and their staff. During the pandemic, these procedures have become even more regulated as providers attempt to practice social distancing between children while also disinfecting high-touch areas and objects. While regulations have increased, access to PPE and sanitary products decreased. In order to continue to maintain the health and safety of the programs during the crisis, providers need to have assistance accessing PPE and other necessary supplies.

• **Recognize that child care professionals are essential workers.** Child care professionals are going above and beyond to provide children of essential workers with quality care and will continue to do so as more families begin to return to work. However, these professionals are risking their own health and safety as they provide care while being paid low wages. If we want to protect the child care workforce, which already faced a shortage of professionals before the pandemic due to low wages, we must provide child care professionals with pay commensurate with their experience and the essential nature of their work as they continue to put themselves and their families at risk.

• **Allow child care providers to build the supply of and pay for substitute teachers when needed.** The threat of COVID-19 is not going away any time soon and, like any other employer, we can expect employees to fall ill or be required to quarantine due to COVID-19. Funding for substitute teachers will allow a program to continue to operate and maintain classroom ratios in absence of an educator.

• **Remove co-payments to allow families the ability to access affordable and quality care during this time of need while also ensuring that child care providers continue to be paid for co-payments.** In Ohio, the loss of co-payments going directly to providers would add to the loss of revenue many providers are experiencing.

• **Include family child care homes in all child care funding decisions.** Many Ohioans rely upon family child care homes to provide care for their children, especially those in living in our rural communities. When making decisions regarding child care, it is important to consider the impact it will have on family child care home providers.

• **Sustain the market today and into the future by recognizing that most child care providers are small businesses and they should have access small business relief like any other small businesses.** Due to the way small business relief (such as the Paycheck Protection Program) was designed, many child care providers were ineligible to participate and left in the dark, even though they are classified as small businesses. For example, many family child care home providers were unable to apply for funding due to not having an existing business relationship with a bank. Designing any future small business relief programs while recognizing the unique structures of child care programs will allow these programs to apply for relief funding and continue to keep their doors open.
• Expanding access to publicly funded child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, while providing these programs with support and flexibility to meet the needs of new and returning families. More low-income families will need support in accessing child care as they return to work and many more may become eligible for and looking towards Head Start and Early Head Start as a result of the economic stress families are experiencing. Increasing funding will allow for more families to access these programs, while also allowing the programs to adjust and expand their services as needed.

Child care is a foundational element of our state’s economy and, in the face of the crisis created by this pandemic, is rapidly shrinking. All roads to recovery in Ohio and throughout the country will need a strong, viable child care system. Without increased investments, child care availability and affordability will be out of reach for Ohio kids and families and will make returning to work – and economic recovery – impossible.

As a national leader in your COVID-19 response efforts and, in particular, your focus on the needs of Ohio’s youngest and most vulnerable children, we ask that you encourage Ohio’s members of Congress to support this critical request for child care relief.

We are grateful for your ongoing efforts to support Ohio’s children and families before, during, and after the pandemic and we look forward to continuing to support you in this work.

Warm personal regards,

Shannon Jones
Executive Director
Groundwork Ohio

CC: LeeAnne Cornyn, Office of Children’s Initiatives