



To: Chair Sarah Gelser
CC: Members of the Senate Human Services Committee

From: Patrice Altenhofen, Executive Director, Family Building Blocks Relief Nursery and Board Chair, Oregon Association of Relief Nurseries

Date: 6/2/2020

RE: The Impact of Social Isolation on Oregon's Families

Background

Thank you, Chair and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to speak with you on behalf of the Oregon Association of Relief Nurseries and the harmful impact of the recent health and economic crisis on the safety and well-being of children of Oregon and their families.

Let me begin by explaining that Relief Nurseries exist to prevent child abuse and neglect. We do this by partnering with parents to provide therapeutic classroom experiences for children, home visits for children and their families, education and training for parents, and respite care. We also provide concrete supports such as food pantries, clothing closets, and diaper banks. We have nimbly adapted our services to the current social and physical distancing restrictions by providing families access to virtual classrooms, home visits, and mental health therapy, as well as delivering resources and basic needs items to family homes through porch drop-off. Some Nurseries are also able to provide in-person respite care to one family at a time.

Relief Nurseries serve families with small children, newborn to age five. In ordinary times, the families who voluntarily choose to partner with us are facing overwhelming life circumstances and detrimental toxic stress. Families are facing stressors such as food insecurity, poverty, substance use, lack of transportation, and isolation. Many parents are victims of domestic violence or were victims of child abuse in the past. On average, the families Relief Nurseries partner with are facing 16 of these risk factors, where the average American family faces three.

The need for child abuse prevention is great even under normal circumstances: there were over 80,000 reports of child abuse and neglect in 2018, that resulted in 12,585 confirmed victims of abuse, 46.3% were younger than 6. Today, as a result of increased economic pressures, school and child care closures, and the shelter in place order, Relief Nurseries are witnessing firsthand families at a breaking point – living in or near a space of dangerous volatility. We will see these same families, and these same children at risk tomorrow.

Inequities

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the ingrained inequities present in our system—inequities that are exacerbated during times of crisis. We know that those who live in poverty, those who are members of minority groups, and those who struggle with mental health challenges, are the ones who are impacted the hardest, and almost immediately. Many Relief Nursery families are



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essential workers, on the front lines keeping us healthy, safe, and fed while we shelter in place. All the while, they can't shelter in place. Most live in multi-family housing, take public transportation to get to work and live paycheck to paycheck. The loss of just one paycheck places them at risk of experiencing homelessness. Many Relief Nursery families experience the stigma of poverty, of being less educated, of being an immigrant, of being a minority. These families also experience a technology divide that during this crisis has left them even further behind when accessing education, health services, mental health treatment and other supports critical to their family's stability. Relief Nurseries serve thousands of families statewide, 25% of whom do not have a phone or a computer, or reliable wi-fi.

Relief Nursery Families are Experiencing Desperation

One Relief Nursery shared the story of a mom who is experiencing domestic violence but has been unable to access resources. She utilized respite care at a Relief Nursery to find the time to apply for cash assistance and a domestic violence grant to help her move her family away from the abuser and to help with new housing. She was also able to attend a counseling session and says she is feeling more hopeful that she can get away and start her life over. She is so grateful for the support.

We know a toddler who was taken into DHS custody last month after his mom and her boyfriend physically abused him and gave him access to drugs. Mom had been active in Relief Nursery services then became more and more isolated as sheltering in place went on, and stopped responding to phone calls and participating in virtual home visits. Fortunately, this child's father has custody of him now and he is back in Relief Nursery services.

A home visitor from another Relief Nursery tells the story of receiving a call from a Relief Nursery mom who felt she could no longer bear the intolerable emotions she was feeling. This mom walked out her front door and down the street, leaving her young children inside alone. She felt she could not go back home, that she could no longer care for her children.

Another home visitor was delivering a food box to a family. As soon as the home visitor pulled up to the house, she heard the enraged voice of a father's continuous yelling and cursing at his toddler and preschool aged children.

It is also important that I mention just how extra challenging this crisis is for parents with children who have special needs. So many of the children served by Relief Nurseries have special education requirements and needs. Many have dual diagnoses – special education and mental health. We have one mom who does not have the means or wherewithal to handle the stress or needs of her child. She cries all the time and feels near desperation every day.

How Relief Nurseries are Responding

Relief Nursery teachers, home visitors, and respite care workers are able to help parents regulate their painful emotions and overwhelming stress so they can safely care for their children. These parents, and others like them, continue to need crisis intervention and intensive

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on-going support, including basic supports like food boxes, diapers, hygiene and cleaning products, and even masks.

Yet, even with the level of services we are currently providing statewide, countless families remain isolated, and largely cut off from typical community support and resources. Parents are struggling to provide food for their children and are unable to pay their rent and other bills. As time goes on, this is wearing parents down, and when you are worn down, you break down.

Family Building Blocks is the Relief Nursery serving Marion and Polk counties and our mission is simple: Keep Children Safe and Families Together. As Executive Director, I have given countless speeches talking about the transformation of life, and how Relief Nurseries partner with parents to transform their lives and the lives of their children.

Today, I want to be very clear. During this pandemic, we are not just talking about transforming lives, we are talking about saving lives.

What you can do to prevent child abuse and neglect and support families right now?

- 1. Hold child abuse prevention programs such as Relief Nurseries harmless** as the legislature considers cuts to the General Fund *and* the Student Success Act in 2020, and the 2021 long session. Now is the time to double-down and invest in the safety of kids. Relief Nurseries are funded through a public-private partnership. For every dollar the state provides, Relief Nurseries raise another \$1.65 in private contributions. The \$2.8 million we were allocated as part of the SSA helped Nurseries raise the money to open 6 new sites, with 2 more in the pipeline for next Spring, expecting operating revenue to come this summer. Any reduction to either allocation will result in a direct reduction to services.
- 2. Direct the Early Learning Division to expand the criterium for “enhanced pay” available during the crisis to include Relief Nursery staff providing respite care for families at the highest risk of abuse and neglect.** Our teachers and home visitors want to be helping families, but also must balance the health and safety of their families when deciding whether to provide direct services. An increased wage is warranted to just *partly* offset that risk so that we can provide services to as many families as possible during this time.
- 3. All children are born full of potential, yet young children who experience barriers to opportunity due to poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, language or geographic location often lack access to quality early childhood programs. Breaking the link between these factors and adverse life outcomes can only happen if we change the distribution of opportunities in those years. Prioritize a robust early childhood system that includes early education, child welfare and family support programs like Relief Nursery, Healthy Families, Head Start, Early Head Start, Oregon Pre-Kindergarten, Preschool Promise, Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education, and culturally specific early learning programs.**