



Main Office
2082 Lexington Avenue, Suite 204
New York, NY 10035

t: 212.206.7818
f: 212.206.7836

info@dccnyinc.org
www.dccnyinc.org

Queens Office
James C. Hall, Jr.
Family Child Care Network
York College
94-20 Guy Brewer Boulevard, Room 2F01E
Jamaica, NY 11451

t: 718.262.2247

TESTIMONY

City Council FY21 Executive Budget Hearing

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Good afternoon. My name is Lisa Caswell, and I am the Day Care Council of New York's Senior Policy Analyst. For more than 70 years, we have successfully served the needs of non-profit organizations sponsoring early childhood education programs across the city. Our 93 members currently operate more than 216 programs, all of which are under contract with the Department of Education (DOE).

We also continue to work closely with DC 37 and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators to manage workforce issues as they arise. We have conducted Zoom meetings with DCCNY's members to ascertain how they are coping with remote learning, the status of their families, and to collect any recommendations and issues that they feel will help their communities during this unprecedented time.

When the COVID-19 shut-down began, child care workers were deemed essential workers for several reasons. We know their work supports the education and social wellbeing of young children. We also recognize that some parents were also deemed as essential workers and would need child care while they went to work. Child care workers are a critical component now and will be more so as we move to reopen the City.

The majority of child care workers are women of color. We also know a number of the families in the child care system are single-parent households. As we identify the critical needs and financial resources for public services, child care should continue to be viewed as an essential service that affects millions of people.

COVID-19 Response

DCCNY members reported that their major challenge after the shut-down was training staff on remote learning and determining how many of their staff and families had technological equipment, and internet access at home. It was a significant adjustment for staff and many families who were lacking computers. Fortunately, the Department of Education's (DOE) iPad loan program has been extremely helpful in addressing this need. We recommend that this resource be continued. Internet providers should be enlisted to provide low cost or free Wi-Fi

service for families. We anticipate that remote learning will continue in some form; however, it cannot be done sufficiently if we do not have vital tools.

Parents are overwhelmed having their children indoors all day. DCCNY members have integrated additional recreational and stress management activities into their weekly programming. Those programs that operate within settlement houses have also assigned social work staff to families in need of emotional support.

Major Concerns

Child care providers and the families they serve want to know when we will reopen, and under what conditions. The city's publicly-funded child care system is aligned with the public school system, as far as, major openings and closings. It is assumed, that the reopening plans (in September) will include child care programs. We and our members hope this is the case. They should continue to be viewed as essential workers and their role in the reopening a critical necessity.

On an operational level, child care programs will need access to nurses and social workers to cope with an entirely new system. While teachers shift from large groups to small clusters of children, the main issues will be social distancing and classroom ratios, but we must also keep in mind, mental health needs and regular testing for COVID-19. Child care programs can be hubs in their communities to have nurses present on a regular basis to monitor the children and parents. Social workers are needed to address ongoing anxiety and stress problems. These concerns will not disappear but may be compounded once people return to work and are in greater contact with others.

Current guidance from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that no more than ten people can be in a classroom at one time, including both staff and children.

The question is, will we sustain our commitment to early learning at a time when the children need it most, or will we revert to determining access only by space availability? We hope the children win. Many unemployed parents will need child care while they look for work. We know several of our members have large available spaces that could accommodate young children with social distancing. We recommend that DOE and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene work closely together in establishing new spaces or maintaining existing spaces so that the children, families and child care workers benefit. These three groups must work in tandem with clear regulations and directions.

In the immediate aftermath of the shut-down, the priority for DCCNY members was to help meet with the widespread lack of access to food. Several DCCNY members became critical sources of food and meal distribution in their community by opening their kitchens to prepare meals and distribute food. This is a new volunteer service for some child care programs that must be continued by

providing the resources to buy food. Others referred their families to local resources and distributed their remaining food supplies.

We recommend that remote learning and center-based learning be done concurrently. Child care programs could offer multiple sessions in a center per day and the remaining days could be spent at home. Child care staff could work split shifts and on Saturdays, as necessary. This objective is to have as much child care available for families and maintain employment for workers.

We also recommend that those family child care providers that are not part of the DOE networks be enlisted to offer continuity of care for young children. Again, the majority of child care workers are women of color. This is more so among our family child care programs. These small Minority/Women businesses are available and ready to help families as they return to work. They must not be overlooked.

Final Remarks

We would like to thank the City Council for their tremendous leadership at this time. Community based child care programs are awaiting your help knowing that a plan will be developed that addresses our concerns. The Day Care Council stands ready to help in any way we can.

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