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Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room XXX
Boston, MA 02133

Good Morning Chairs Peisch and Lewis, and Members of the Joint Committee on Education. My name is Samantha Aigner-Treworgy, Commissioner of the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Department and the children and families the Department serves.

The last time I gave testimony, it was a very different moment in time, with a very different context. EEC, like everyone else, has had to pivot sharply and quickly over the past three months. Our pivot has had to balance the health and safety of children, families, and communities with the need to provide an essential service to the Commonwealth. There is now a focus on child care nationally, as the pandemic has highlighted the fragility of this industry that has been called on as a critical enabler of the economy. Massachusetts has long recognized the need for these critical supports to families—being the first state in the country to create a Department like EEC with oversight for the comprehensive set of community resources families with young children rely on. And as the economy reopens, the critical need for EEC's resources—particularly child care for working families—is more apparent now than ever.

I want to start by giving a snapshot of the landscape of child care in the Commonwealth before COVID-19, then highlight the quick work EEC did to build support for families and providers throughout the closure, and end with an update on our progress as we reopen child care— including the work that still lies ahead.

First, I would like to give you a sense of the child care field across the Commonwealth pre-COVID-19. In FY20, EEC had a total system capacity for approximately 250,000 children across all of our ~8,200 licensed programs to serve children ages birth through fourteen. To give you a sense of scale, there are about a million children in this age group in Massachusetts and over 750,000 children who live in households where all the adults are working full-time. However, EEC currently only subsidizes about 55,000 children— just over 20% of the 250,000 child total capacity— supporting the tuition payments for low-income and vulnerable families who need access to child care while their parents are working or in school. These subsidized slots are concentrated across approximately 50% of our 8,000+ providers, and only about 15% of our providers have 2/3 or more of their enrolled parents funded through state subsidies. The rest of those who accept our subsidies—about 35% of all programs—operate on a significant mix of private, out-of-pocket tuition along with our state-subsidized families. This means that, although the majority of EEC's budget is used to subsidize low-income families' access to child care, the infrastructure to serve these families is vulnerable to the loss of private tuition payments suffered by the industry as a whole.

One of the greatest assets of the Massachusetts early care and education system is the mixed-delivery model of providing options to help meet family needs. This includes roughly ~5,400 Family Child Care Providers typically serving between 6 to 12 children of mixed ages in a home setting, and ~2,800 child care centers with an average of about 5 classrooms each. All told, prior to COVID-19, child care represented an estimated \$4 billion industry in the Commonwealth. During the COVID-19 shut down, it is estimated that child care has lost approximately \$250 million per month in private, out-of-pocket tuition alone. While EEC has been able to continue to pay our

subsidies and tried to be flexible with the funding appropriated to us by the legislature in FY20, no one could have predicted this crisis or the profound impact it would have to our field that our current structures are not prepared to address.

For the past three and a half months, EEC has worked hard to support programs through this unprecedented time. When child care was ordered to close on March 20, 2020 via the Governor's Executive Order, EEC worked hard to ensure that this essential service would still be available to those who would be needed to serve the Commonwealth through the pandemic. In a matter of days, EEC created and launched the Exempt Emergency Child Care Programs (EECCP) to provide emergency back-up care for essential workers and vulnerable families with no viable alternatives to group care settings.

Almost immediately, EEC received hundreds of applications from dedicated providers across the Commonwealth committed to serving their communities, and by March 23, EEC was able to open roughly 400 sites across the state to perform this critical service. With no way to know how long this program would be necessary, we set the parameter to offer the flexibility we knew we needed in a rapidly evolving crisis situation. The program stabilized at about 550 providers offering care for the duration of the closure, totaling approximately 10,000 seats on a daily basis statewide—less than 7% of our normal capacity. The program functioned on a minimum health and safety 'checklist', and we were reliant on the expertise of the high quality licensed providers to use their best judgement amidst a difficult situation. We monitored each program daily with one-on-one phone calls designed to ensure we addressed every new situation that arose immediately in collaboration with the Command Center. The systems we put in place for the emergency were designed to operate a small number of providers with a hands-on approach to keep children, families, and staff safe with rapid response to their questions. We gained invaluable insight through this experience and are using these learnings to inform our next steps as we reopen at scale. As we plan for the future, I wanted to highlight the other efforts we were able to sustain throughout the child care closure:

- EEC will have provided an estimated \$22M in stipends to emergency child care providers (through July 10), covering some of the cost of operations for those who were willing to step up and serve their communities, in addition to multiple PPE deliveries and cleaning supplies.
- EEC continued to pay for subsidized children enrolled at the time of closure, including compensating programs for fees that parents are required to contribute to their care. In total, this provided \$160M in funding to the 50% of providers who had subsidized children enrolled in March.
- EEC automatically extended authorization for any family whose subsidy expired through July 31 for 6 months from the date of expiration.
- EEC funded and coordinated technical assistance for all providers—regardless if they accepted state subsidies—to access Paycheck Protection Program funds, as well as legal and accounting advice through Children's Investment Fund.
- EEC provided guidance and support for educators to access Unemployment Insurance, particularly to our Family Child Care providers who became eligible under the PUA program authorized by the CARES Act.
- EEC developed a partnership with WGBH to ensure that the parents of our youngest children—birth to age eight—had access to the types of family activities they could use to ensure that children were still engaged and learning during this time.
- EEC engaged with child care providers, both those serving as emergency care and those who remained closed. We conducted field surveys; hosted town halls; collected weekly input from advocates, experts, funders, and local leaders; solicited input and ideas for partnerships from

local business leaders; and engaged with the general public through thousands of emails, phone calls, and other inputs. I personally hosted open forums every two weeks to make sure providers, anxious to return to normal operations, had a chance to get their questions answered.

We have learned a lot as a Department through this time and are working to ensure those learnings get integrated into our phased recovery plan. On average, we used only 30-35% of our emergency child care capacity on a daily basis, although we did see these utilization numbers go up as the economy of the Commonwealth began to reopen. This speaks to the need of working families to access these critical services as they return to their “new normal”, and it highlighted the urgency for EEC to return to a system that could safely function across every community. On June 8, when the Governor announced the start of Phase II, we were ready to support the field to take the necessary steps to reopen child care. As we look to states across the country attempting to restart their own child care systems, there are some key lessons that inform our path forward.

- Parents are hesitant to return to group care settings immediately and seem to prefer smaller groups when they do return. In our emergency child care system, we saw parents use family child care programs at twice the rate of center-based care.
- Operating any group care program in the midst of this public health crisis means increased operational burden on both educators and administrators.
- Having time to plan for the operational and programmatic changes necessary to keep children, families, and the workforce safe from COVID-19 is vital.
- No setting is immune from this virus, and we need to prepare our educators caring for children to protect themselves and their families from this insidious disease through implementing demonstrated public health standards. The consequence of a potential exposure could mean quarantine not just for the exposed individual, but also on the entire center or family child care home if proper precautions are not taken.

Now, as we look to reopen child care, we are focused on ensuring we are providing the resources our providers, educators, and families need to stay healthy and safe this summer. In planning for reopening, we engaged the community and our stakeholders around four distinct principles: health and safety, community recovery, workforce, and financing.

- **Health and Safety:** The Minimum Requirements for Health and Safety are designed to provide the guidance to protect families and staff in child care, including sanitation protocols and space configuration, program design modifications, grouping and physical distancing, screening and exposure guidelines, and communication with families and staff about the return to child care. EEC developed these in partnership with the Department for Public Health (DPH), Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), Department for Children and Families (DCF), and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The Minimum Requirement for Health and Safety are aligned across the child and youth serving programs to ensure that families and communities do not have to grapple with different standards across the programs they will rely on this summer.
- **Community Recovery:** Ensuring that EEC’s supports beyond child care are designed to help meet the needs of families, children, and staff who need support during this time. Redesigning the services funded by our support service providers to work remotely with our providers and address the unique needs of those returning to child care after this extended closure.
- **Workforce:** As has long been a topic across national partners, the early education and care workforce was vulnerable prior to the COVID-19 crisis. In Massachusetts, the EEC workforce is

91% women and 41% people of color, and it notably has been a focus of the Legislature to address the recruitment, training, and pay scale of this workforce. Nationwide, one in five early educators falls below the national poverty line. In Massachusetts specifically, the average child care professional earns less than \$31,000 annually – that is 34% less than public preschool teachers. While EEC is working hard to ensure that the health and safety protocols are in place to protect the workforce as they return, we have repeatedly heard about the anxiety many of our educators have about returning. In order to ease the process, EEC has worked to expedite hiring processes and onboarding support, as well as providing training and mental health support for educators in the field.

- **Financing:** We know that the business model, which requires per child funding to sustain operations, will be a challenge for many child care providers through recovery. We recognize that there is a cost to implement these increased health and safety protocols and are doing everything we can to support child care providers through this challenge. While the investment to the Child Care and Development Block Grant through the CARES Act will help mitigate the impact on providers, we know that Massachusetts' critical child care infrastructure will require creative solutions to endure the year ahead. EEC will continue to support significant flexibility for providers serving subsidized families, including removing attendance requirements and continuing to cover parent fee payments through August.

Last week, child care began to open through our simple three step process designed to ensure that programs are prepared to meet the demands of operating group care in the COVID-19 recovery. This process is intentionally designed to reorient providers to the ways to keep people safe and healthy as they return to full scale operations. While EEC will not be able to provide the daily check-ins as we did with emergency child care, it is critical that we provide the time and support up front for programs to prepare themselves for the road ahead. This three step process was intentionally designed to do just that:

- 1) **Intent to Re-Open:** this short survey allowed EEC to prepare operations and begin understanding the overall impact of the COVID-19 closure on the provider landscape. Almost 95% of providers indicated that they did intend to reopen, which allowed EEC to begin preparing to ensure vulnerable families will have access for the summer.
- 2) **Designing Operational Plans:** EEC provided templates for specific areas we know providers will need to be prepared for in COVID-19 recovery. Staffing protocols, cleaning, and what to do if someone becomes symptomatic—our emergency child care providers taught us were all critical areas for consideration.
- 3) **Approval and Support:** While programs receive a quick turn around for provisional approval (within five days), our licensing staff will be working with providers over the next two months in order to ensure they have the supports they need to be successful.

As of yesterday, we have over 2,000 providers who have resumed operations, and an additional almost 1,000 providers who are approved by EEC to open when they are ready. In addition, we have almost 5,000 providers who have started the reopening process, and we are working with them across our five regional offices to ensure they are prepared for the road ahead. We have worked hard to continue to provide operational adjustments in our Requirements based on provider feedback, while consulting with our public health experts to ensure that we are doing all what we can to protect our child care environments from the invisible disease. We expect that our Minimum Requirements for Health and Safety will be in place at least through the summer, and we will continue to take feedback to make adjustments where we can. As school districts and municipalities plan for fall under the newly released DESE guidance, we will continue to work to provide the flexibility our child care providers need to

partner with their communities to provide service for children and families during this transition. In addition, we will be distributing the \$45.7M of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) provided to the Commonwealth in the CARES Act to help maintain this critical child care infrastructure for our subsidized providers. Once appropriated by the Legislature, EEC intends to provide monthly operational grants to the ~4,100 providers who serve EEC subsidized families to defray the increased operational burden for the months of July and August. Our regional offices will also be distributing personal protective equipment to all providers to ensure they launch safely. And while we are working to integrate all we have learned as we begin the reopening process, there is still a lot we do not know. Assessing the unique needs of each type of provider across our mixed delivery system will require constant feedback loops to gather information and respond in systematic ways in supporting the industry as a whole. Understanding parents' initial comfort with and need for child care will be critical to ensure we are investing in the infrastructure that meets their specific needs. And we know that those needs are changing in the wake of COVID-19. Businesses are changing, work is changing, and child care needs to change with it. Over the next two months, we will continue to learn about the demands on child care as a critical enabler of the re-opening economy and continue to partner with stakeholders and employers to build our path forward. Child care will continue to be the backbone of working families, and we will need to make sure that backbone remains stable and intact for when families are ready to return.

We know families need safe, reliable, high quality providers to care for their children as they go back to work. Research continues to show that high quality child care is important for employers to have attentive, consistent employees; it is important for families to feel confident leaving their children to go to work; and it is important for children to have the start they need to be successful in school and in life. EEC was created because Massachusetts recognized the incredible value of this care and the vital supports we offer families—not only for the children, but for all citizens and for the economy of the Commonwealth. As we look ahead, we know that maintaining the progress we have made as a state will take creativity, innovation, and the dedication of each and everyone of us. Massachusetts is not alone in this struggle; the country is grappling with the reality of a field not designed to withstand this kind of seismic shift in the landscape around it. But Massachusetts has the opportunity to continue leading the country as we work to modernize the child care business model in a manner that will sustain this critical industry. And the passion, dedication, and the commitment of every member of this community I have met since returning to the Commonwealth last year assures me that we can and will lead the way.

I have said a lot over the past three months that this was not the adventure I intended on having when I accepted this esteemed position last August, and yet, here we are. Though we are not out of it yet, I can look back on the work we have done as a department and can continue to say that I am in awe of what the EEC has accomplished. I have seen a level of determination, persistence, and creativity in this field that makes me absolutely sure that this field emerge from this crisis stronger than we went in—and I can honestly say that I am honored to be trusted in this leadership position in this pivotal moment in history. Thank you for your time, I look forward to answering any further questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Samantha L. Aigner-Treworgy
Commissioner