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Vermont Can't Work Without Her

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– Chris Nelson

I've spent 30 years in the home-based child care business. It's been a labor of love that grew from difficult circumstances. I was a mother to four children, all under the age of 5 in a blended family. I live about 3 miles from the Canadian border in a rural area, so it took me over an hour and a half to get them all to daycare, and then I drove an hour to work at one of our mountain resorts, and then after working an eight-hour shift, I drove another two and a half hours to pick them up and go home. It didn't make any sense, so I quit my day job and started taking care of my children and other people's children.

Within a week of opening my business, my program was full, and ever since then I've had a waiting list. We only have a few centers in my county, so home-based programs, with low staff/child ratios and extended hours, are essential. Without us, I don't know what parents would do. I work 12 hours a day to cover the parents' commute. Centers are open fewer hours, which doesn't work for a lot of parents doing shift work or seasonal work.

Parents really like that my program is nature-based, which means we try to be outside at least 75 percent of the day. I currently have children enrolled from 2 to 13 years old. On a typical day, we might visit the pond and our goal is to collect tadpoles and bring them back so the children learn life cycles. The 2-year-olds might want to feel the little jelly eggs, and the older ones will see that the eggs grow legs and tails and grow into frogs. We learn the children's interests, how they think, how they learn, and we just build on that for each child. Many of these children stay with me from when they are babies 'til they go to school, and then they return in the summer in the school age slots.

Schools mandate 275 days a year for learning, but I believe every single minute is a teachable moment. My philosophy about myself is the same. I've taken just about every training available as a child care provider. I've earned an associate degree and a bachelor's degree in early education. I was the first [home-based provider] in Vermont to apply for the CQRS (Childcare Quality Rating System) and I maintain a 5 STAR rating. If I'm done learning and think I know everything, then I'm done with this career. So now I'm dabbling in master's credits. Adults have to grow and develop themselves, just like children.

To pay for my education and the expenses of running a home and business, I apply for every grant or subsidy offered. I still work multiple jobs. My living expenses, personal property taxes, any equipment or property upgrades all come from my other jobs. I've been an EMT, working at that every hour I wasn't taking care of children. Now I work for [Let's Grow Kids](#), for [Home Grown](#) doing child care advocacy, and I teach professional development classes, which help providers learn how to care for the most vulnerable children and their families.

It's important to me to pass on what I know to other providers just starting out. My own children are grown. I have eight grandchildren who have been through my program. One of my daughters-in-law is my assistant and

has been for many years. My mom was also a home-based child care provider, so we've got generations of expertise here. National policymakers need to hear from a lot more home-based providers. They need to understand that a rigid checklist doesn't fit every program. Relationships and learning, those are the measure of quality that parents are looking for and that children need.

They also need to understand that in Vermont, the difference between being registered and being licensed is a small difference in capacity but a huge difference in financial investment that isn't attainable for most home-based providers. To become licensed, I'd have to put in a sprinkler system and upgrade to a \$35,000 septic mound system to accommodate the two additional children I could accept. There's no way the income I make from two more families would ever pay off the upgrades. Infusing the system with more support and opening it up to all providers regardless of licensure so that public dollars truly pay for the cost of care is how we create a child care system that serves all children, all families, and the American economy.

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