Testimony of Sharon Jones
Executive Director, Blair Regional YMCA & Garver Memorial YMCA
Interim, Out of School Time Director

Chairman Rowe and Esteemed Members of the Committee

I would like to welcome you all to the Blair Regional YMCA and want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the critical issue of childcare regulations.

My name is Sharon Jones, and I am the Executive Director of the Blair Regional YMCA and the Garver Memorial YMCA. In addition, I am currently serving as the Interim Director of the Out of School Time Program at the Blair Regional YMCA. My YMCA career spans over 39 years serving four YMCAs in Blair, Cambria and Montgomery Counties. In addition, I serve on the Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania State Alliance of YMCAs Board of Directors.

INTRODUCTION
The success of our Y has been its ability to adapt and change to the ever-changing needs of our communities. In Blair County, the need for childcare is great and we understand the importance of being leaders in the childcare community. So much so that our YMCA has raised $10M to build a new Early Learning Center and renovate/expand our YMCA programs and services. We will be breaking ground soon and the community room you are sitting in now will soon be home to a licensed childcare room.

For over three decades our YMCA has been providing childcare to families in our community, and we look forward to offering and expanding childcare well into the future. However, with that vision and commitment comes some challenges that stand in the way of progress. Today, I would like to focus on three of those challenges

Challenges in the Childcare Sector

The three biggest challenges I see today include:

- The modernization of the regulations,
- Staffing requirements
- Funding.

While we recognize and appreciate all that Office of Child Development and Early Learning, (OCDEL), does to support childcare centers we also recognize that changes are necessary in order to move good to great.

Challenge # 1 Need to Modernize the Out of School Regulations

- School age children are not preschoolers. Licensing should support safe and engaging out of school experiences that reflect school age youth development and the operating realities of before & after school programs and summer camp programs.
- Many childcare regulations were created for ages birth – 5 and unintentionally create barriers for programs serving school age children. When you apply these to school age programs they do not match the risk or setting.
- Currently the same regulations are in place for a two-year old and an eleven-year old who need to use the restroom.
    - If you walk outside this room you will see one of our school age childcare classrooms which is located three and half feet from the bathrooms. In following the regulations for use of bathrooms a staff person must stay in ratio and that may require bringing eleven children to the hallway to sit while one child uses the bathroom. Yet if that same child needed to use the restroom during their normal school day they could walk to and from the bathroom unaccompanied by a staff person. A two-year old does require supervision but the same supervision is not necessary for an eleven-year old.
- When requirements are misaligned with the age group in care, resources are shifted away from providing enrichment and positive youth development, without improving outcomes.
- Communities need OST programs and when regulation compliance deters programs from being offered, families lose childcare options, employers lose workforce stability and economic growth is slowed down.
    - In addition to the need for school age childcare programs during the school year, the demand for summer camp in Blair County is greater than the number of children who can be served.
        - A few years ago, we had many parents arrive at the Y around 4:30 AM with their camp chairs, coffee, and snacks, just like I used to do when getting in line for a concert ticket, hoping they would be there in time to get their child enrolled in one of the 108 available spots. We filled those spots in a short time period and had 38 children on a waiting list that year.
        - Fast forward to 2026, summer camp enrollment is full again this year and we already have a waiting list. We could expand our program and provide service to some of those children on the wait list with a simple change in the number of children permitted to be in the classroom.
            - The current regulation states that the allowable number of children permitted in a space is determined by the total square footage of the space, divided by

40. So, an 800 sq. ft. room at the YMCA can only accommodate 20 kids but the same classroom at a school could allow for a much larger number of children. This regulation reduces the number of children who can access our childcare programs. If you take it a step further it impacts workforce recruitment and retention and it reduces the potential revenue stream needed to pay for the excessive cost of providing quality and affordable childcare.

CHALLENGE #2 STAFFING QUALIFICATIONS

- Direct Care Staff
    - To help address the staffing shortages we believe that greater flexibility around staffing requirements is needed, without compromising safety and health standards.
    - The current educational qualifications required for childcare staff can severely limit our applicant pool.
        - The cost of obtaining a degree or a certification in early childhood education is a financial burden, especially given the childcare industry pay rates. Other businesses are paying higher wages and do not require additional education requirements. Without developing and accepting a broader pool of qualified applicants, the expansion of childcare looks grim for the future.
- Directors and Leadership Pathways
    - We also need more flexibility in recognizing and securing directors. As our before and after school programs move into multiple school-based sites, DHS requirements increase the need for qualified on-site directors. The minimum qualification for a director is an associate's degree and 4 years of experience. We have a dedicated staff member with 18 years of experience in licensed childcare who already performs director-level responsibilities, yet she cannot be designated as a director due to being a few credits short of a bachelor's degree. In our eyes, the depth of experience far outweighs the additional credits needed, and this limitation creates a barrier to expanding services for families in our community.

CHALLENGE #3 FUNDING

- Funding is needed at every level. Families need help in paying for the cost of childcare and providers need help with the rising costs of operating quality childcare programs.

- Wages and healthcare benefits are our highest cost in the operation of our childcare programs. Given the educational and experience requirements currently in place and the importance this career has to the economic growth of our state, wages should reflect the value of childcare employees. Providers are caught in a hard spot where they cannot afford to pay the higher wages to retain or recruit stay yet they cannot afford not to pay them because if they do not they will not have staff.
- Pre K Counts Program, (PKC)
  - I cannot say enough about how wonderful this program is and the value it brings to our community and those children enrolled in this program.
    - The curriculum used in the PKC program is the same curriculum used in our early learning childcare program which includes a pre-K classroom located down the hallway.
    - Funding provided by the state for this program requires us to pay our lead teacher, who works 9 months annually, a salary comparable to that of a starting teacher in our local school district. The teacher down the hall at the Early Learning Center who meets the same credentials as required of the PKC teacher and uses the same curriculum, makes less money, and works for 12 months a year.
    - Creating opportunities to level the playing field in childcare with programs like Pre K Counts would be a tremendous step in providing stability in traditional childcare programs

- Solving the funding challenges that provide affordable childcare to families while also trying to find funding sources that support a strong sustainable childcare system is complex, but we must remain committed to that outcome.

CONCLUSION

I respectfully ask the committee to continue the excellent work you are doing to strengthen childcare for all ages and to implement practical changes to the current regulations so providers can serve more families safely and effectively.

Economic Development is critical to all our communities in Pennsylvania. Investing in childcare is an investment in our workforce and economy. It helps parents stay employed, businesses stay competitive, and communities stay strong.

Together we can make a positive impact and create the change needed for a sustainable childcare system.
Thank you for your time and commitment to this important initiative.