

**Testimony submitted by Shawn Towey
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**Philadelphia City Council
Rules Committee
Thursday, November 6, 2014**

We are here today to respond to Bill 140802, which would amend the city's relatively new zoning code to make it harder to open a Group Child Care program, serving up to 12 children. I am here only because a few days ago, a colleague ran across a petition created by Monica Wright, a childcare provider, on change.org. I point this out because I staff the 1000-member multi-stakeholder Southeastern PA Early Childhood Coalition, and we were not notified about this bill. We think Council's process is hasty and has not allowed time for opposing voices to come forward. We urge you to vote against this bill.

As members of the Rules Committee, each of you is committed to making good policy for the residents of our city. Bill 140802 would take us in the wrong direction, may drive providers underground, and does nothing to solve the real childcare crisis in the city.

I say we have a crisis in childcare because most families in Philadelphia need childcare while they work, and most are simply unable to afford the cost of good quality child care. Only 30 percent of our 3 and 4-year olds have access to publicly funded, high quality pre-k, although 77 percent would be eligible under the state's income guidelines – there simply aren't enough seats. For infants and toddlers the numbers are more dismal. There are more than 100,000 children under the age of five in Philadelphia and two-thirds of them live in low-income families, yet only 26,000 are receiving a subsidy to help parents afford childcare while they work. While parents with subsidy may pay about 10% of their incomes for childcare, low-income and poor parents on the waiting list are faced with a median cost of about \$1000 a month for toddler care. It is no wonder they must prioritize affordability over quality.

Thousands of families take advantage of the lower cost of family and group child care homes. Many parents prefer the family-oriented, more personalized feel that a family or group home provides. Often they seek out a provider that is located very close to their home or work, especially if they rely on public transportation. Finally, few centers offer care on weekends or evenings when many service, healthcare and retail employees need it.

The sad truth is that many of our city's childcare centers, family childcare homes or group childcare homes are not good quality. They are regulated and licensed by the state, so they DO meet basic state standards for health and safety and specific adult-to-child ratios that vary depending on the ages of the children in their care. But they are not necessarily good quality learning environments, staffed by people with a background in early childhood development. Only one third of our 163 Group Childcare homes are even enrolled in Keystone STARS, the state's voluntary quality improvement program, and fewer than one in ten family or group providers is rated high-quality. Commercial child care centers perform only a little better.

Indeed, we do not oppose regulation. We think the city should regulate childcare, with the intent to raise the quality of care offered to the majority of Philadelphia children. Quality childcare operators who follow best practices for children will also be more accountable to the parents they serve and the neighborhoods in which they operate.

Currently, Group childcare providers may operate in their own home or in a commercial facility. We understand the reservations of some neighbors who fear living in close proximity to commercial businesses whose owners do not live on the premises. However, we believe that the zoning process currently has safeguards to protect them. The Zoning Board grants a "special exception" to those Family or Group child care owners whom they judge will operate in the interests of the children in their care, with accountability to neighbors. Neighbors have an opportunity to weigh in on the decision and be heard. Not every application is approved. Some others here today will provide examples of why we think the system is working. The bill in question would prohibit residential zoning for Group Childcare homes, thus requiring the prospective provider to obtain a variance, with a heavier burden of proof for the applicant to meet. If enacted this would erect a barrier for all applicants, rather than helping to weed out those likely to cause problems for neighbors. In some cases, family providers who know it would be hopeless to attempt to expand to Group might decide to operate outside the law. This could create an even worse

situation in their relationships with neighbors. In sum, Bill 140802 is a hammer when what's needed is a finer tool.

For economic and other reasons, the demand from parents for Family and Group Childcare will continue and we respect their choices. Rather than trying to ban it, we think the city should devise policies that support these small businesses, aid them when they want to grow incrementally, help preserve the residential character of neighborhoods, and at the same time seek to guarantee that taxpayer funds are used smartly to promote the best outcomes for children. The best way to do this would be to mandate enrollment in Keystone STARS or another equivalent accreditation program.

I encourage City Council to defeat this bill, start over and work with all stakeholders in the early childhood community to solve our early education crisis. The city's Office of Empowerment and Opportunity is currently engaged in devising a citywide plan to do just that. Let's work together as they have in New York, San Antonio, Chicago to raise our standards and provide kids with the rich early start that will enable them to begin kindergarten with the skills they need to be successful in school and life.

