



Kennedy Krieger Institute

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*A comprehensive resource
for children with disabilities*

January 31, 2024

The Honorable Vanessa Atterbeary
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
Room 131 House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Letter of Support on House Bill 377 - Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program - Funding - Alterations

Dear Chair Atterbeary,

Kennedy Krieger Institute is deeply grateful to Delegate Mireku-North for introducing Senate Bill 419, the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program Funding and Alterations. This legislation is critical in ensuring that funding remains available for early education providers of our most fragile children.

Families and caregivers for children with complex medical needs have very few resources for integrated medically supported early childhood education. We believe it is part of our mission to serve children and their families through a stimulating MSDE (Maryland State Department of Education) accredited (five-star Maryland EXCELS rating) integrated childhood education center. As you are aware, Kennedy Krieger is home to four early childhood education programs, three that receive annual grants from these funds including:

- Parents and Children Together (PACT); Helping Children with Disabilities Therapeutic Nursery (Southeast Early Head Start)
- Parents and Children Together (PACT); World of Care
- Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD); Inclusive Pre-K (Center for Autism Services, Science and Innovation (CASSI) at Kennedy Krieger Institute)

These programs are built on an inclusion model – bringing together typically developing children with those who are neurodiverse or have medical needs to learn together in a safe and supportive environment.

By extending the funding for fiscal years after 2025, this legislation creates a level of sustainability that has not previously been present for early childhood providers of medically fragile children, although supplemental funding sources, i.e., government, foundation, and corporate grants, as well as donations from private philanthropy, continue to be needed to cover program costs. The prescribed amount, i.e., \$3,700,000 per year, does not consider inflation, annual cost-of-living adjustments, and the increasingly complex array of services our children and their families require each year.

Kennedy Krieger encourages the committee, when evaluating potential amendments for SB419, to consider incorporating cost of living adjustments, inflation, and other pressures of the economy. In addition, we encourage a tiered model, rather than a model with standardized cost per child, to be explored. The cost may be higher should a child need a dedicated aide, nurse, or other services not readily provided by the program. We strongly support considering the uniqueness of each child and their specific needs.

Currently, statewide, there are five programs receiving funds from the Maryland State Department of Education under this fund. However, as outlined in the annual report from MSDE to the budget committees submitted December 30, 2023, three new eligible early learning centers are coming online in fiscal year 2024 and will be receiving awards from this program. A prescribed amount at \$3,700,000 per year does not account for new programs nor the expansion of available programs. **As a result, each program would receive less funding.**

The ability of our early childhood programs to provide exemplary service for our enrolled children with significant needs is in large part because of our highly skilled and educated workforce of teachers and support staff who dedicate themselves to the children and families we serve. Unfortunately, because of being a historically underpaid field, Kennedy Krieger, like fellow childcare programs, has struggled to retain and hire highly qualified staff. **Currently, we have an early childhood provider vacancy of 18%. If our programs were fully staffed, we would be able to support an additional 50 children.**

We are confident that increased funding will support the early childhood workforce, enhance service delivery models for our children, and result in a significant return on investment. As research has shown, effective early care and education makes a difference and yields a significant return on investment; with the Bipartisan Policy Center citing as much as \$13 for every dollar invested.¹

Renewing and expanding the Therapeutic Child Care fund to allow the full implementation of staffing and practices proven to benefit children is not simply good for children, but society at large. The availability of research-based therapeutic early learning enables parents to work; helping to address Maryland's higher-than-the-national-average reduction in prime-aged women in the workforce. But more than that, it gives these families peace of mind as their children thrive. Early learning and preschool have a considerable impact on the health and well-being of families. High-quality programs generate long-term impacts to prevent or reverse the damaging effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), improve access to nutrition, and enhance a child's cognitive and physical development.

Lack of access to inclusive early learning is one of the most cited reasons for family stress, and disruptions in provision of care reduce the efficacy of critical early intervention afforded during these formative years. At the same time, research has shown long-lasting benefits for children with and without developmental differences to learn, grow, and play side-by-side. That is why Kennedy Krieger has made a firm commitment to including more typically developing peers within our early childhood programs. This is yet another reason it is critical for the Therapeutic Child Care funds to not simply adjust for inflation and increased implementation sites, but to allow innovative practices like what we are doing as Maryland's first inclusive, integrated services early care and education demonstration hub.

We deeply appreciate the efforts of the Committee to engage in identifying and implementing needed solutions.

Respectfully,



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¹Smith, L.K. et al., (February, 2023). Building bipartisan support for child care toolkit: 2023 update. Bipartisan Policy Center: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BPC-ECI-Bipartisan-Toolkit-2023-Update-Full-Report.pdf>