



Testimony in Support of SB359, Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
January 29, 2025, 10:30 am
Respectfully submitted by
Dennis C. Alexander, Director of Government Relations

Mister Chair and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Easterseals, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support SB359 to extend funding for the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program in FY27 and beyond.

Easterseals DC MD VA is a nonprofit organization serving Maryland (except for the Eastern Shore), Northern Virginia, and the District of Columbia, leading the way to full equity, inclusion, and access through direct and life-changing disability and community services to thousands of children and adults in our neighborhoods, regardless of their disability, military status, income, race, or age.

We currently operate a combined total of eight child development centers and Head Start programs throughout the area. Five of these programs are located in the State of Maryland.

At Easterseals we recognize that the emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive and linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community.

The Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program is critical to organizations like Easterseals that specialize in providing child development services to children under the age of 6 years who have developmental delays, disabilities, and physical and mental health concerns. Currently, about 30% of children enrolled in Easterseals center-based programs have a special need.

Providing high-quality child care for children with disabilities and delays requires a comprehensive approach that addresses their unique needs, promotes their development, and ensures they feel included and supported. Some key elements of Easterseals programs include:

- ongoing teacher training, including embedded training on communication development and support for children with trauma-based behavioral concerns;
- adaptations of learning environments such as calming corners in classrooms and use of equipment such as mobility aids or adaptive feeding equipment/seating;
- utilizing additional classroom staff and;
- hiring additional support staff, including a behavioral health clinician to support children and their families.

Since inclusive classrooms are a blend of children with and without special needs, we are limited in the number of spaces

we can offer to families of children who need support, especially in our classrooms for 3-4 year olds, in which we experience the highest demand. Due to the high number of families in need, our centers are often overwhelmed with more requests than we can fill. Due to this need, the continued support from programs like the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program is absolutely essential.

As one parent told us, "It was important for us that [our son] be able to take part in a larger community of kids...It gets back to those questions we had after the diagnosis: Would he ever go to school? Would he have friends? He is 2 ½ and he's done both...[Easterseals] has given us this gift of giving our child a fulfilling, happy life."

In summary, Easterseals continues to support many communities in Maryland by providing high quality, inclusive early child care and education that supports children with developmental, behavioral and medical needs. With 90% of brain development occurring in the first five years of life, a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes in school and beyond. The Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program serves a critical role in helping us serve some of our most fragile children and I encourage you to support continued funding for this program.