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COMMITTEE: Ways and Means and Appropriations

TITLE: Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program – Funding -
Alterations

Kennedy Krieger Written Testimony on the Critical Importance of the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program

Kennedy Krieger writes on behalf of the four Therapeutic Child Care (TCC) grant-funded programs at Kennedy Krieger Institute that provide critical child care and early intervention services to our state's most vulnerable children and their families. While all our programs collectively address some of the most challenging medical, developmental, learning, social-emotional health, and behavioral needs of Marylanders from birth to kindergarten entry, we already know we are underserving the need **across our state**. With a continued rise in autism spectrum diagnoses and a rapid explosion of early childhood mental health conditions alone, demand for the intensive and specialized services offered by Kennedy Krieger's therapeutic child care programs at the Early Childhood Development and Education Center (EDEC – formerly known as PACT) and CASSI, and that of our peers' programs, warrants the need to sustain programming. **Any funding reduction stands to have a devastating impact on our ability to meet the existing needs of children and their families.**

Kennedy Krieger's Therapeutic Child Care Services:

- **World of Care (at EDEC)** – a therapeutic child care, and the only option for Maryland families for children birth to age three with complex medical and developmental needs.
- **Southeast Early Head Start (at EDEC)** – serving income-eligible children in Baltimore City, from 6 weeks to age three, with a trauma-responsive care model that addresses adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) specifically.
- **Early Learning Classrooms (at EDEC)** – a preschool model with infused social-emotional learning and integrated medical, clinical, and education services.
- **Center for Autism Services, Science and Innovation (CASSI)**—specializes in early intervention programming for young children on the autism spectrum.

Since fiscal year 2023, our enrollment has steadily increased, with the transition back to work for families and back to school for children post-COVID-19; additionally, we have experienced an increase in children requiring specialized services, especially in the behavioral health arena. Since fiscal year 2023, Kennedy Krieger has served 251 children and families through the TCC funding. In the 2024-25 school year, we are currently serving 115 children requiring therapeutic services across all four of our programs, with enrollment continuing to increase weekly. We provide year-round services that include before-school and after-school care and summer programming. Currently, 67% of our children require intensive additional support. These supports range from specialized nursing for feeding, medicine management, devices, responsive care for underlying conditions (i.e., seizures, pacemakers, etc.), and to targeted interventions like occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language services, as well as behavioral psychology, family education, and early childhood mental health therapy to address the trauma levels increasingly seen for both the children and their caregivers.

These increased demands for intensive and specialized services afforded through TCC are not expected to abate. At the specific diagnoses level, we have seen the ratio of children presenting with autism spectrum disorders increase from 1:150 in year 2000 to 1:36 in year 2020. We have also seen a significant increase in children qualifying for early childhood mental health therapy and behavioral psychology over the last five years. State and national trends forecast these numbers to continue to increase.

Funding Reduction Impacts:

The ability of our early childhood programs to provide exemplary service for children with significant needs (medical, developmental, and those at risk) is in large part because of our highly skilled and educated workforce of teachers, support staff, and related service providers who dedicate themselves to the children and families we serve. Currently and historically, the TCC grant did not fully cover the cost of programming. TCC reimburses approximately 60% of the current per-child cost. The rest is paid through federal grants, other state and local funding, private philanthropy, and Medicaid billing when available. As you are aware, these funding sources are all equally imperiled now. If we are to respond to the needs of the communities we serve, the TCC funding must be in place.

Decreased TCC funding will necessitate reductions in staffing and services, negatively impacting the number of children we are able to serve and the level of specialized practices we can implement. We would not be able to offer year-round programming, and the intensity of early intervention services and the number of children served would be reduced. This is significant given that we are the only program serving children birth to three with these intensive needs. As we use TCC funds to enable our full-time nursing staff who can serve children with an array of diverse acuities, we would also need to restrict the profiles of children served. In short, with reduced TCC funding, the **ability to support the diverse needs of our youngest, most vulnerable population during the critical years of development, including children with autism, developmental delays, social-emotional health and behavioral challenges, and families in poverty, is jeopardized.** Additionally, this not only impacts children, but we know loss of care impacts the ability of families to obtain and maintain employment, adding stress and other negative consequences for the household. This loss of employment adds to our state's revenue challenges, hurting society at large.

Summary:

We applaud the allocation of funding under the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program and recognize its impact on children and families. As partners with the State of Maryland, we also acknowledge the state's critical financial situation. We seek to partner and figure out strategies to leverage resources as we support sustaining the quality early education of our children. Our ask is to retain the existing full funding for the Therapeutic Child Care Program **to meet the plethora of complex and growing needs of Maryland's youngest learners and their families.**

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