

January 27, 2025

To: The House Ways and Means Committee

From: Erin Fernandez

Re: HB185 Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program - Funding - Alterations

POSITION: SUPPORT

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and Committee Members, and thank you for the opportunity to write to you in strong support of this important Therapeutic Childcare legislation. Special thanks to Delegates Mireku-North, Chair Atterbeary, Foley, Kaufman, Miller, Solomon, Terras, and Vogel as well as Senator King for their leadership and championing some of our most vulnerable and youngest children.

Our journey began in September 2023, when we placed a call asking for our 5-year-old son to be evaluated for county services due to a sudden and drastic change in behavior at his PreK program. We waited 5-6 weeks to be seen only to be told that he did not qualify and just needed strategies to be successful in the classroom. We will never forget the day that the PreK Director called to tell us that it would be best for everyone if he did not return to their program, effective immediately. That phone call led to a traumatic six weeks at home and only accelerated the endless search for answers to find out what was going on with our little boy.

While we waited to be rescreened by the county, we consulted every specialist imaginable; the County's Mental Health Support Services, clinical psychologists, behavior therapists, pediatricians, nurse practitioners, friends of friends, teachers, and school administrators to name a few. Developmental pediatricians covered by insurance have waitlists of 1+ years so we did our best to find private care that we could afford.

We enrolled him at the Lourie Center's Therapeutic Nursery Program which was an absolute godsend. When I say that our family literally could not have survived without TNP, that is not an exaggeration. The six weeks without school or childcare were nearly impossible for my husband and I to manage – we have another small child and no family support in the area. We worked it out through a mixture of FMLA and the grace of understanding bosses.

Our son needed 100% support and there were no other schools in the area that could support him. None. Without TNP our son would have had zero education leading up to his kindergarten year. There were many mornings when the lead teacher held me while I cried. They attended IEP meetings, arranged observations, wrote reports, strategized solutions and supported us without judgement. They treated our son as a little person and more than the sum of his actions.

This funding is absolutely critical to families like ours all throughout the DMV region. There are so few places that are truly designed for children with social-emotional issues and that also provide wrap around services. Today, I urge you for a favorable report on HB185– so that other families can have the benefit of the same support we received. Early intervention with these vulnerable children is absolutely critical for their future success.