



October 14th

To the Public Utilities Commission

From Ellen Amstutz, ellen@VPCCN.org, Director, Vermont Parent Child Center Network
on behalf of the 15 Parent Child Centers.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the experiences of families with children under six who experience hardship in paying for utilities. We appreciate the opportunity to bring the experiences of low-income families to inform decisions on utility costs.

The **Parent Child Center Network** represents Vermont's 15 Parent Child Centers (PCCs) which are located throughout the state and provide a range of in-home and community-based services to families with children under six. The 15 PCCs are funded by the state to deliver **8 Core Services** that build family resilience and responsive parenting, support child development, protect against economic hardship, and prevent child maltreatment.

One of critical services that PCCs provide is help with **Concrete Supports**. Concrete supports are material and financial help to address immediate needs and mitigate hardship. This can be provided in many forms including food, diapers, clothing, transportation, and help with rent or utilities. Each PCC has a small fund to help with these needs.

All 15 PCC help families facing a utility cut offs. For example, the center that serves Windham County in Brattleboro made payments on utility bills for 39 families last year, paying out a total of over \$8,000. Most of these families were facing disconnect notices, all had a child aged 5 or under in the home. Through a partnership with the local Community Action Program, they also helped families apply for the energy discount and provided food and gas cards, so that income can be freed up to pay utility bills.

In the PCC in central Burlington, there are too many families asking for help to provide support to all who request it. Some families present bills of over \$500. The PCC staff works with a representative at Burlington Electric to coach families in how to reduce their bills and make their homes more efficient, as well as applying for the Energy Assistance programs. The PCC uses funds to help reduce the bills and negotiate a payment plan.

Two PCCs that serve the Northeast Kingdom and are part of the Community Action Agency serve a very low-income community. These parents can participate in financial coaching



programs and fuel assistance programs. PCC concrete supports for utilities make the difference.

Some of our PCCs report that some families are living without utilities and in substandard housing, conditions that can be detrimental to the health and well-being of very young children. The stress and adversity the parent is experiencing has a negative impact on the cognitive development of babies and toddlers at the most critical time in brain development. Parents cannot provide nurturing and stable care that is critical to healthy brain development.

It is of critical importance that utilities are affordable to families. Poor families are disproportionately impacted by having utilities take up such a large portion of their family budget. The PCCS can help but we are unable to keep up with the needs.

By providing short term financial supports when parents need them most, we can mitigate hardship and help families navigate short term challenges. Parents can be better at parenting when protected from the most adverse consequences of being poor, including going without basic services.

We hope you will consider how families with young children are impacted by high utility costs. They are Vermont's next generation, and we need to ensure they are raised in safe, nurturing, and healthy environments and parents have support and stability they need.