

Childcare providers poised to bargain with Vermont over subsidies ^[1]

Author: Galloway, Anne

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EXCERPTS:

Home childcare providers who take state subsidies can now form a union, under a law signed into law by Gov. Peter Shumlin on Thursday.

About 1,400 childcare providers now have the option to join a collective bargaining unit, most likely through the American Federation of Teachers, which has lobbied for the legislation in the Vermont Statehouse for the past four years.

Subsidies for parents who qualify for state support are currently at 2008 levels. It would cost the state about \$9 million a year to bring the subsidies to 2012 levels.

Shumlin told a small group of supporters who were assembled at Nan Reed's daycare in Burlington that the bill gives "a voice to the hardworking people, mostly women, who are out there every day, doing the work, giving kids the strong start they deserve."

"What this bill does is recognize one of our greatest opportunities in Vermont is to get early childhood education right and to ensure that we both compensate our hard working providers and give them a voice to achieve that fairness," Shumlin said. "Combined with ensuring we have the quality of training that will bring our kids a bright future, all the evidence shows if we can get there early, if we can invest a dollar in Vermont's children when they are youngest, we will get a \$7 return later on - that's the best news for taxpayers."

Kay Curtis, a childcare provider in Brattleboro, described the four year battle for the right to negotiate with the state. It was a journey, she said, that helped to change Vermonters' perceptions of early childhood educators.

"When we started, people did not understand the importance of the work we do," Curtis said. "We care for and educate Vermont's children from age of birth to 5 - the formative years of a person's life. The passage and signing of this bill is an important step forward in recognizing and respecting the work of early educators across Vermont."

The legislation was highly controversial, especially in the state Senate, where John Campbell, the president pro tem, initially blocked debate on the bill after it passed the House in 2011.

Sen. Dick McCormack, D-Windsor, the lead sponsor of the bill, thanked Campbell for "graciously" allowing the legislation to come to the floor for debate this session, "despite his own reservations about it."

"This is about collective bargaining," McCormack said. "It ought to be a fundamental human right, it ought to be available to anybody who works for a living, but in particular to the people, mostly women, who provide this service to our children."

The state allowed the unionization last year of state subsidized homecare workers who provide support for elderly and disabled Vermonters in their homes. Recently, the American Federation of County and Municipal Employees negotiated a \$4 million pay increase for 9,000 workers in Vermont, many of whom earned minimum wage.

Shumlin described the negotiation as successful. He said paying homecare workers more saves the state money because it keeps people in their homes and out of institutional care.

When asked if the state could afford to pay childcare workers more in subsidies, Shumlin told reporters that the state has an "illogical," two-tiered system that rewards teachers in the public school system but treats childcare workers as if they are less important. He did not suggest, however, that money from the Education Fund, which pays for schools, should be used to help pay for childcare costs.

If childcare providers refuse to become part of the union, they may be subject to "agency fees," or mandatory fees for non-members, under state law.

The U.S. Supreme Court is reviewing a case in Illinois involving agency fees for homecare workers. There is wide speculation that the Court may overturn the fees.

Thirteen states now allow private childcare providers to unionize.

-reprinted from the Brattleboro Reformer

Region: United States ^[2]

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