

September 20, 2021

Dear Commissioners Will Bunek, Melinda Lautner, Deb Rushton, Rick Robbins:

Commissioner Robbins—thank you for your service in the criminal justice system. The early childhood millage was designed to PROTECT AND increase the well-being of young children and their families. One of the wonderful and EFFECTIVE outcomes of high quality early childhood programs is the significant finding that participants in high quality early childhood programs are less likely to engage in the criminal justice system.

- Commissioner Bunek—thank you for pointing to the Quebec study. While this study looked at child care, which our millage is prohibited from addressing, it does raise the issue of the detrimental effects of low quality programming. Studies such as these help the designers of millage services to use best practices and a robust supervisory model to ensure that the services meet the high quality standard.
  - o However, one way the millage funded programs can help with the child care quality concern is to support parents in evaluating the quality of the care options available to them and in assisting families who want to advocate for higher quality child care options.

- Commissioner Bunek- thank you for your concern about quality. The reason the early childhood millage programs have been slow to start is the realities of the Pandemic. The Health Dept was overwhelmed, service providers were unable to visit families at homes or to gather for activities. We must not blame the early childhood millage service for Pandemic restrictions!.

- Commissioner Bunek- thank you for your concern about legal considerations. Millage service designers were very careful to ensure that

services meet the letter of the law. None of the early childhood millage services meet the legal definition of ‘education’.

- Commissioner Rushton-- thank you for your concern about equity and equality. Why did the millage use a Universal (not means tested) approach? For the same reason our public schools, roads, emergency services, etc are not means tested. It's in the best interest of our community to promote the health and well-being of all families in our community.

- o We've heard concern that only 32% of County citizens voted. Perhaps as we increase the well-being of our community, we'll see greater citizen participation in issues in our community.

- o Inviting parents and children from diverse backgrounds to join together at events like playgroups and parent support offerings allows children and families experiences they may not in their natural settings. For ex: children who struggle with special needs often make greater speech gains when they are in groups with typically developing peers.

#### Description of Services

The issue of service redundancy has been expressed a number of times. A portion of the millage services were indeed available via NMCAA (very limited Leelanau families were home visited via NMCAA) and the Health Dept.

These services were available only for those who met eligibility criteria (income, risk factors and child's age), are for a limited duration. Health Dept services are narrow in range, focusing primarily on the physical health of mother and baby.

The millage expands access to services to all families with children from 0-6, as well as expanding the scope to address a broader range of issues known to promote overall well being in families.

The millage based services use two best practice models: The Parents As Teachers model - a research based family support and child development curriculum, and The Strengthening Families Approach - a research based family support based on the five protective factors:

- Knowledge of child development and parenting
- Concrete supports in times of need

- Social connections
- Social emotional competence of children
- Parental Resilience

The Parenting Communities Program and the Health Department Interface

While the Health Dept did not plan to become the provider of the millage services, they offered a unique 'home' for the services. They:

- Have years of proven experience in the bulk of the millage service offerings;
- Have an intimate knowledge of the service area and the local partners;
- Are able to access funding sources, such as Medicaid, that cover costs for those who qualify for such funding sources, thus preventing any 'double dipping' and/or duplication of services;
- Are able to seamlessly extend services to families who have historically 'aged out' of services despite the child and/or parents seeking to continue to participate in supportive services.

Thus, the Health Dept offered not only expertise, but also an efficient funding mechanism by which our millage dollars became the 'payor of last resort' and are able to prevent duplication of services.

Why support robust ECD especially now: Nearly half of parents (48%) said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic.

The program launched on June 20th. Since then 38 families have received 174 home visits, 34 playgroups were held in five different locations across the county and 64 families participated serving 123 children. These numbers are unduplicated and they are impressive numbers for summer, and for the beginning of in person services.

Over 80 people attended the first community based family event. The upcoming Mom Power program, an evidence based therapeutic intervention, is full with nine moms and 14 children participating, and currently has a wait list.

Leelanau families are often working long hours in the summer and do not typically access programs. This suggests that families are eager for programming and support and that the millage funding should remain stable to meet the readily predictable expansion of interest.

How do we know this approach works to promote health and well-being? The results of the Parenting Communities Survey (2006-2012) from program participants stated:

- o They engaged with their children in more positive ways as a result of participation
- o They have grown in their abilities to communicate and respond more effectively with their children

- o Increased knowledge of resources and services: one third to one half report accessing these resources.

- o Increased knowledge of parenting and child development

- o Feeling more confident navigating difficult situations

Parent Testimony from Parenting Community Participants

"I love the playgroups and family events. It gives us something interactive to do with the kids."

"The resources available to me. They help me navigate the many obstacles in my life."

"Connecting with other parents!"

"Playgroups have been the best place to bring my toddler for fun interactions after having my second baby. It is a place I feel confident bringing both the kids and myself, and that's huge!"

"It's been a lot of help for my child socializing."

Community leaders- from school superintendents to probate court leaders, from health department leaders to foster care leaders reported year after year that as the community saw more and more families who participated in Parenting Communities, parents were more involved, and parents and children were generally healthier and demonstrated greater well-being.

Why ECD?

- 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years of life.
- High quality environments and relationships promote well-being, while environments and relationships rated as low quality dampen development.
- High quality home visiting can significantly improve first-graders' school readiness and reduce the rate at which they repeat first grade.
- When adequate community infrastructure is in place, low-cost universal-access approaches to home visiting can provide short-term positive returns on investment by triaging families into the appropriate level of services.
- Research indicates that home visiting can improve children's lives by increasing their chances for early school success and eventual high school graduation, which in turn enhances their employment and earnings potential. For example, in

2009, a high school graduate's average annual income was 40 percent higher than that of a typical dropout.

- Longitudinal home visiting studies have shown improvements in adolescent mental health, middle school achievement, and decreased substance use and/or criminality.

#### Economic Considerations

The highest rate of return-on-investment (ROI) in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible. A small investment now pays huge dividends later. Our economic future depends on building a highly educated and skilled workforce. Early Childhood Development Services are the most efficient means to accomplish these goals.

Research shows parents and children who are supported in early childhood have:

- Lower substance abuse rates
- Half as many criminal arrests
- Better problem solving skills
- Lower divorce rates
- Less depression
- Lower teen pregnancy rates
- Lower retention/special education needs • Higher graduation rates
- More likelihood to attend college • Higher lifelong earnings

We hope the above, well informed and researched information will resonate with each of you in its importance to the families and children of Leelanau County. We implore you to continue the Early Childhood Millage the voters approved in 2019.

I (Barbara Varley) worked for 32 years with the MDHHS as a social worker with families and children in the foster care and adoption programs. In Northern Michigan I covered multiple counties: Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Benzie, Manistee and Wexford. What always impressed me and made me proud to be a resident of this county, was how there was such collaboration and teamwork among the different systems meeting the needs of our community members, families and children. I was most impressed with the Leelanau Family Coordinating Council which was able to bring resources together, without duplication of services, to meet the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. In relation to families in crisis this approach resulted in more support for struggling families, keeping families together with fewer children removed from their homes and parents and placed in foster care. Always the best for our community! As a county we have been in the forefront in so many ways for our children. To zero out this voter approved Millage now would be a serious step backwards for the future of our county as a place where the its most vulnerable citizens are valued and supported.

Thank you. Barbara and James P.Varley Leland Township