

Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW
Suite 200S
Washington, DC 20001

February 6, 2018

Re: Supports for Zoning Commission Case No. 17-20

The process of opening a childcare center in a location which has never previously been assigned a certificate of occupancy takes nearly a year. This is the third program I've opened and each time the timeframe from lease to grand opening spanned 7 months to 12 months. During that time, the financial hardship is taxing. For the third location, I needed a business partner because it was financially a great investment. My business partner and I chose Rhode Island Ave NE because it qualified for the Great Streets Grant. Unfortunately childcare programs aren't 'licensed' as a business until construction is completed. We learned at the time grants were awarded we no longer qualified because we were not a licensed business. We were devastated that \$50,000 we'd anticipated receiving to open the program was taken away due to a technicality.

To open the center the size of Petit Scholars, we in total invested more than \$150,000.00 of our personal funds. We'd anticipated spending \$50,000.00 each but we also had to make up for the loss of the grant. The lease/rent for commercial spaces in my community have escalated because of development. It is difficult to a year of rent with no income from the business. However during the process of awaiting permits, inspections, and the opening a program, we are required to pay rent on an empty space. This is also while covering the costs of construction.

Petit Scholars@RIA was set to open August 1, 2017. Once we completed our initial licensing inspection, we were waiting on our final inspection. Within days of receiving our certificate of occupancy for a total capacity of 50, it was revoked due to the zoning regulation MU-4 which limited us to no more than 25 occupants. We'd received initial deposits from more than twenty families who just exhausted their leave and were ready to return to work. We had staff resign from their places of employment who were ready to begin working. We again had the wind knocked out of our sails. We'd made promises that were severely impacting the livelihoods of families, staff and our own financial security.

Again, our new staff quit their jobs to join Petit Scholars@RIA as teachers and assistants. As a result, I had to pay an additional four staff members that I did not need. This further depleted my savings but I couldn't impact the livelihood of women who left their jobs to work for me. I had to ensure they were paid. A few were able to work in the homes of families as private nannies until the program opened. However, we lost three staff members we worked for months to recruit as a result of the delays.

We left with families without childcare who were returning to work. With little to no notice, more than thirty families were without care. This wasn't a great way to start off relationships with our new families. Thus, we lost more than 50% of the enrollment and business we worked from

January 2017 until July 2017 to build. We had no revenue but needed to continue to pay rent, utilities, insurance, etc. This was yet another blow that could have ended our program.

Petit Scholars@RIA opened 60 days later than we'd promised our community. Needless to say, this was one of the most stressful and difficult experiences in my life both financially and personally. If we were made aware of this process during the permitting and inspection phase, we would have prepared. We would have applied for the hearing while construction was in process. However, we received a certificate of occupancy and based on an error have it revoked days before opening. The Office of Zoning did work to expedite our BZA hearing (case 19620) and that helped us get open. In the interim we had to seek community support, visit multiple ANC meetings, get parents to write letters/testimony and await the date for a hearing. The process didn't have to go in our favor. If we'd had an ANC who didn't support us, we may have not been able to open due to lack of community support.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education already has processes in place to ensure programs meet the requirements for space (i.e. square ft per child). They also ensure children have safe places to play in the community and when they are unavailable, programs receive professional development that allows us to use space and equipment available to ensure our little ones breath fresh air, receive sunshine and vitamin D, and programs ensure gross motor play is part of the daily experience.

I barely survived the repeated blows financially and the delays because I had personal savings that I could use to fill in the gap. In that regards, I was beyond lucky. Most programs could not have continued. Washington, DC has the highest cost of childcare, the highest lease/rents, and most of our programs and staff are underfunded. I am aware the mayor is working to help change policies and provide funding. We are moving in the right direction and to streamline the process, these regulations should be removed. The process of opening a childcare center is harrowing and this is why only 1/3 of the need for childcare is currently being met. Please consider the financial hardship this process places on small businesses and help childcare programs open so that we can continue to support the families residents of Washington, DC who need to work.

Sincerely,

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