

Hello,

My name is LaShonda Flowers. I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of SF2135. I have worked in childcare for over a decade. I was an in-home provider for 11 years and began the process of buying a building and opening my own center last summer.

It was not an easy process, or a fast process. And this was the third time I've done it - twice before with locations in churches that then fell through. I finally received my license in December, and opened in February.

The process to get licenses was incredibly challenging—physically, mentally, and emotionally. I struggled to get my licensor to return my calls or emails. I could not get in contact with him until I called the main number and the licensor on call sent him a direct message.

I was full of hope when he finally came, and those hopes were dashed pretty quickly. When I mapped out how I would use my center space, and therefore how much revenue I would be able to generate. There is not a lot of squish room in childcare, often none. To be able to pay my mortgage and run a center, I need to have a certain number of children enrolled.

I had planned to use the basement of my building for school age children. The previous tenant in the building was a childcare owner who did exactly that. But I was told by the fire marshal that I could not, even though the previous childcare owner had it specifically stated on her license. Suddenly, I couldn't have the 13 school agers I'd been planning on.

In the upstairs space, I had measured and calculated that I could have 36 kids, but my licensor measured and calculated that I could only have 28. So my first shock was the dramatic increase in the number of children I would be allowed to have.

My next shock came with the unexpected things that the licensor said I must have or do. For example, I had three play kitchens. He said that on two of them, because the hook to hang the hot pads was broken, I couldn't use them unless I replaced the hooks. On the third one, he said I couldn't use it because the play refrigerator didn't have a door, so it was just a set of shelves. He said I couldn't use that because it wasn't "complete." I sadly ended up tossing out the three kitchens.

After doing the things he had asked, I was confident when he returned that I would be licensed on that visit as I had made sure via phone that I had all of my paperwork and what I needed for the rooms. But when he came again, he said I didn't have enough manipulatives (hands on materials like blocks). I needed two sets of something so that there would be enough sets for X number of kids. All I could think of was how much money it would cost for me to purchase more materials.

I strongly support SF2135 because I want to see licensing be focused on health and safety, not the number of manipulatives I have. A checklist that only included health and safety issues would make much more sense and be much easier for providers to follow and get licensed.

I love the concept of having the question of quality be one of continuous improvement and support for providers. I can testify to the fact that the current process is not at all supportive. Childcare providers spend their days supporting and nurturing our youngest Minnesotans. The least we should be able to do is to support them.

I am excited to work with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to move forward with a new way of regulating childcare that puts kids and those who care for them at the center. I urge you to pass this bill to help us make those first steps.

Thank you.