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Protest of YoungStar Intent to Award (RFP # 437001-M23-0001890)

Dear Rachelle Armstrong:

Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) is writing in protest of the April 19, 2022 decision by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) of an Intent to Award the YoungStar RFP contract (RFP # 437001-M23-0001890) to Shine Early Learning (Shine).

Wisconsin Administrative Code provisions require large contracts go through a competitive negotiation process involving an RFP, review, and award process. SFTA recognizes the competitive proposal process as a driver for innovation, growth, and continuous improvement. Proposers and stakeholders have confidence in this process and its outcomes when the procurement process itself follow all guidelines outlined by state statutes and administrative codes. When this occurs, we are able to accept the decisions made, even when they lead to significant change.

In this case, DCF's evaluation process was not in compliance with Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4). The submitted proposals were not reviewed based on the evaluation criteria included in the RFP, and accurate records were not kept or made transparent throughout the evaluation process. A change in award should be approved per Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(7), because the proposer with Intent to Award was not responsive to all mandatory requirements, the evaluation committee failed to follow the evaluation criteria as set forth in the RFP, and violations of Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08 have occurred.

Our grievances are outlined below with reference to the Wisconsin Administrative Codes we believe were violated during the process of the YoungStar RFP.

The Intent to Award should be changed because the evaluation committee failed to follow the evaluation criteria as set forth in the RFP.

Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(7)(b) states awards should not be recommended to proposers who should have been disqualified as not responsive to all mandatory requirements of the RFP. The examples below demonstrate that the proposer who received an Intent to Award did not directly address multiple prompts in the RFP. Further, that proposer received high scores from the evaluation committee in those sections, indicating the evaluation committee's failure to score based on the evaluation criteria as set forth in the RFP as required by Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(a).

1. Section 9.1.1 of the RFP required the following: *Describe how you would ensure that all eligible programs who request it receive at least the minimum amount of customized, program-specific consultation around evidence-based high-quality practices that are included within YoungStar rating criteria.*

Shine's response failed to directly address this prompt; there was a statement that requirements would be met, but little description of how this would be implemented. The Section 9.1 RFP prompt explicitly required descriptions of meeting the services requested for all programs: *Provide a comprehensive plan that outlines how you will ensure that each of the following core service areas will be completed in a high-quality way. The plan must include enough capacity to serve all regulated, QRIS-participating ECE and school-age care programs across the state.*

The response issued by Shine did not describe the capacity to be successful with meeting required deliverables in the proposal for all programs, such as the required minimum number of consultation hours. Currently, all programs that participate in YoungStar are offered a minimum number of consultation hours each year, with the ability to ask for more consultation time as needed. As current YoungStar service delivery agencies, CCR&Rs employ over 60 coaches to provide these intensive, one-to-one coaching opportunities statewide, with high caseloads for even this number of Coaches. With a reduction in the number of coaches across the state as referenced in Shine's proposal (from over 60 coaches to Shine's plan of 22), the capacity to meet this standard is not only unaddressed but demonstrated as not present in their proposed model.

For example, in Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Washington, and Waukesha, the average YoungStar caseload for each Coach is around 70 providers. This area alone employs around 18 YoungStar Coaches to meet this demanding caseload, which is 4 less than Shine's proposal of 22 Coaches total for the entire state. Shine's proposal states, "We determined the number of coaches by using DCF's data to reverse engineer the time each coach will spend with providers, along with travel time, documentation, meeting, training, and professional development" (pg 27). This statement does not specify the data that was used to determine this or how they came to such a small number of consultants based on past needs already identified by the current demands for delivery of YoungStar services. Therefore, the staffing plan for Coaches put forth in

Shine's proposal is shown by current YoungStar service delivery to be too low without suggestion of how the proposer could deliver those services with so few staff. As such, Shine's response does not address the required point of how their model would be able to deliver the specific number of hours required by DCF to all programs statewide, and Shine did not demonstrate enough capacity to serve all regulated, YoungStar-participating early childhood and school-age care programs.

2. In addition, in response to the section 9.1.1 prompt quoted above, Shine states that YoungStar technical assistance will occur only for providers at what they term the "Tier 3" level, but they do not demonstrate a plan for how this will be implemented for all providers who request it, as required in the prompt. Per Shine's proposal, "Tier 3 Services represent individualized coaching designed to support providers who require or desire the most specialized and intensive interventions" (pg 28). They state they will meet the requisite number of hours, but do not describe the method in which this will occur, nor a plan for going over and beyond those as a minimum for providers who request additional technical assistance hours. It is also unclear how providers will be deemed in need of or guided to this Tier 3 coaching, leading to concerns that not all providers who desire services will have access to them. This demonstrates a failure to fully respond to the prompt requiring clear demonstration of how all programs will be served with technical assistance.
3. Section 9.1.1 of Shine's proposal failed to address DCF's requirement for Specialty Coaches working with providers. The RFP requires detail on how the contractor will *ensure that staff employed as specialty coaches are available to provide consistent, specialized quality coaching and evaluation on other program quality elements that are not assessed within the rating criteria* (pg 23). This section outlines a clear requirement for programs to receive specialized coaching; however, Shine's proposal merely states that "Content Specialists" will be "coaches of coaches" (Shine Proposal pg 28). Regarding coaching of programs in specialized content areas, the Shine proposal does not lay out any plan for providing the coaching required in the prompt, only training and professional development on those topics. The proposal therefore fails to answer or address this significant requirement of the prompt, and is therefore an incomplete answer.
4. Section 9.1.2 of the RFP required the following: *Indicate how you will ensure that programs receive timely, accurate, valid, and reliable ratings using the YoungStar rating criteria and any applicable ERS tool(s).*

The awarded contractor's response did not provide a full response to this prompt. The awarded contractor did not describe how they will rate 2 and 3 Star programs, which together comprise 71% of all YoungStar participating, non-automated programs. The Shine proposal only addresses ratings conducted using the ERS scales for 4 and 5 Star providers, how delivery of these ratings will take place, and how raters will qualify for their positions. There is no clear description of who will complete the 71% of ratings for 2 and 3 Star programs or how these will be completed

in a timely fashion with accurate, valid, and reliable results (Shine Proposal, pages 32-33).

Additionally, Shine did not address how they would provide Formal Ratings, also known as ERS Observations, to programs rated 3 Stars. On page 33 of Shine's proposal it states, "Programs that have met all requirements for 4 or 5 Star may request an ERS observation," specifically leaving out this type of YoungStar rating which is currently available to 3 Star programs. As such, the awarded contractor did not respond to all mandatory requirements of this prompt or the RFP.

Further, this lack of consideration for how the majority of ratings would be conducted calls into question the validity of Shine's proposed staffing plan and whether it includes capacity to provide these services to all providers statewide who request them.

Even if these failures to address the required deliverables are not disqualifying omissions, the evaluation committee awarded the proposer a higher score for section 9.1.1 than SFTA's Proposal, which provided full responses to the RFP. The disparity in scores between the answer that fully responded to the criteria and the answer that did not demonstrates that the evaluation committee did not use the RFP's evaluation criteria as required by Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(a).

Similarly, considering the awarded proposer's answer in Section 9.1.2 did not address how they would rate 71% of active YoungStar participants, the evaluation committee awarded the proposer a disproportionate number of points for their response (63 of 75 possible points). This further demonstrates that the evaluation committee assessments does not apply required criteria to responses. Shine's answer to Sections 9.1.1 and 9.1.2 of the RFP, which failed to respond to required prompts, constitutes a failure to respond to all mandatory requirements of the RFP. The scoring disparity also demonstrates that the evaluation committee failed to follow the evaluation criteria as set forth in the RFP. A change in award should be approved Per Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(7)(b), (d), and (e).

As required, SFTA's protest fully identifies contested issues and does not include any subjective interpretations by evaluators. Instead, there is a clear intent to award an entity that does not have the on-the-ground capacity of staff and knowledge of program needs to provide YoungStar Program services in Wisconsin's unique child care environment and includes unquestionable acceptance of responses that do not fully answer the RFP questions posed.

The Intent to Award should be changed because the evaluation committee failed to give all proposers equal opportunity to make a presentation, keep accurate records, and issue an accurate and transparent final report and recommendation.

5. In early March, DCF issued questions for clarification and a request for a presentation/interview to respond to the questions. Although DCF was not required to request a presentation, Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(e) states that if a presentation is requested, all proposers must

receive equal opportunity. That did not occur, as the evaluation committee members supposedly present in the presentation/interview demonstrated evidence of in fact not being fully present.

On March 22, 2022, at DCF's request, SFTA delivered a virtual presentation via Teams in response to the YoungStar RFP. Five evaluation committee members were present in the virtual meeting. During the presentation, at least one SFTA staff member received an email about a non-YoungStar-related topic from one of the evaluation committee members who was present (with camera off) in the Teams meeting. This clearly indicates that being logged in to Teams was the extent of at least that committee member's presence in the presentation as they were completing unrelated work during that time. This lack of meaningful engagement is further supported by the fact that no evaluation committee members turned on their video at any point during the presentation or asked any follow-up questions in what was to be an interview following the presentation. Given these facts, SFTA must question whether other members of the committee may have been equally disengaged from our presentation. Therefore Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(e) was violated, as it is unknown how many evaluation committee members were actually present in this or any other proposer's interview, and what level of attention, beyond logging in to Teams, the evaluation committee members gave SFTA vs other proposers' presentations. SFTA was not provided an equal opportunity to present to the committee, given that at least part of the committee was otherwise engaged during the presentation without SFTA's knowledge, and therefore should not be counted among the five committee members supposedly present.

Further, this violates Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(c), which states the evaluation committee must keep accurate records of all presentations. The evaluation committee, and specifically the committee member who was engaged in other work during the presentation, would not reasonably be able to accurately understand or note SFTA's responses provided during the presentation. Given these violations, SFTA questions how the committee could be able to accurately reach the decision of award without full knowledge of the content of our presentation to answer the questions the committee posed for clarification in order to reach their decision. We understand that in a virtual world it has become a norm to have a choice of cameras on or off. However, this is such a critical matter of which entity partners to serve thousands of child care providers to improve quality, and gives parents quality child care, that we were well-prepared, fully engaged, and expected full engagement and an equal opportunity to present.

6. The records and recommendation for award issued by DCF were neither accurate nor transparent. The RFP score sheets released by DCF include four scores; five evaluation committee members were present in the YoungStar RFP presentation SFTA delivered on March 22, 2022; and the numbering of the Evaluators on the score sheets (2, 3, 4, and 6) indicate that there were at least six members of the evaluation committee, two of whose scores were not shared and apparently not included in the totals. There is no indication whether the four scores

counted in the final recommendation came from committee members who were present in the presentation SFTA delivered at DCF's request for more information, or if one may have come from the committee member who was engaged in other tasks during the presentation. Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(4)(c) states the evaluation committee must keep accurate records of all evaluations and decisions. However, the final score report and recommendation issued by DCF did not contain accurate records of all the evaluation committee members' evaluations or recommendations, even to the level of concealing the number of Evaluators who had input on the final decision.

Even if these actions are not found in violation of Wisconsin State Statute or Administrative Codes, the lack of transparency from the evaluation committee around the scoring and review of this RFP call into question the legitimacy of DCF's process and decision, especially in light of how close the final scores were, the fact there were seemingly only four reviewers for a contract of this size, and the enormous impact this decision holds for Wisconsin's early childhood systems, as discussed below. At the least, SFTA requests the full scores and evaluations of the committee be released to address integrity of DCF's decision.

Additional concerns of public policy relating to this RFP process

It is in the interest of good public policy that DCF use a heightened scrutiny and transparency when evaluating any RFP that will impact the entirety of the state's early childhood system. An inequitable process has potential to diminish public and partner trust. In addition to the violations outlined above, SFTA therefore brings forward the following concerns of public policy. It is also of note that these easily identified issues outlined below also demonstrate the passive approach of the evaluation committee in reviewing submitted proposals and evaluating potential contractors.

1. Shine Early Learning engaged in misrepresentation in their proposal which received an Intent to Award. Without their express knowledge or consent, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies were written into Shine's budget proposal as subcontractors that will conduct YoungStar community outreach should Shine be awarded the YoungStar contract (See Attachment B). The Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies have no such partnership with Shine at this time. As such, Shine misrepresented their relationship and is currently unable to fulfill the outreach and engagement activities as described in their proposal.

Shine describes this supposed partnership as an important part of their ability to conduct statewide communication: "Working closely with existing coalitions and support organizations, we will collectively identify the needs of the local communities, align efforts, reduce possible duplication, enhance existing efforts and ensure that information about YoungStar is disseminated statewide to community members and families. To start, we will collaborate with each of the nine Child Care Resource & Referral agencies in the state, with whom we have met multiple times during the formulation of this proposal" (Shine Proposal, pg 35).

This description, and others, of meeting with the CCR&Rs to build collaboration is further misrepresentation of any partnership between Shine and the CCR&Rs. Two meetings took place, during which the CCR&Rs expressly declined to take part in Shine's proposal because they were asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Shine once more misrepresents these meetings on page 13 of their proposal: "In designing our proposal, we have sought out state experts and thought leaders to collaborate with Shine in the design and delivery of our model, including multiple meetings with the executive directors of each of the state's nine Child Care Resource & Referral agencies, which currently administer the YoungStar training and technical assistance system." During the meetings between Shine and CCR&Rs, no elements of program design were discussed, and in fact CCR&R directors declined to directly collaborate at that time. This statement is purely an embellishment and misrepresentation of the conversations Shine had with CCR&Rs in order to lend legitimacy to Shine's proposal, as CCR&Rs are longstanding and well-known local partners in early childhood and are through SFTA's Managed Network of CCR&R Members. We have recently reached out to Shine as should they receive the contract, then CCR&Rs are best poised to partner.

2. SFTA is extremely concerned about conflicts of interest inherent within Shine's proposed YoungStar model:
 - A. Shine's parent company, Acelero, is a for-profit company that owns 13 child care programs in Wisconsin and would financially benefit from those programs receiving or maintaining high YoungStar ratings. Due to Child Care Counts payments based on Star ratings, these child care programs, and therefore Shine, benefit financially the higher these programs are rated. It is a conflict for Shine to be the rating agency of its own child care programs at all, but especially in light of this financial incentive. It is doubly concerning that, per Shine's submitted budget, a significant amount of the YoungStar contract funds will go toward salaries of out-of-state executives who could potentially also benefit from the Child Care Counts payments tied to YoungStar ratings. In fact, per §16.75(1)(a) 2, if a vendor is not a Wisconsin business but is competing with a Wisconsin business in a procurement event, the agency will apply a penalty to the non-Wisconsin business if they are domiciled in a state, nation or subdivision thereof that applies a preference for their businesses.
 - B. The Wisconsin Registry's position as a subcontracting partner on Shine's proposal creates inherent conflict with their role in Wisconsin's child care system as the sole entity capable of determining whether staff are qualified to be YoungStar Coaches or Trainers. DCF's requirements in the RFP state that YoungStar Coaches and Trainers must have a Registry Level 14 to be qualified. However, The Registry determines what is required in order to reach Level 14. If awarded the YoungStar contract, Shine's Coaches and Trainers would be required to be approved before they could begin services, especially any staff coming from out-of-state, and that approval would need to be

conducted by The Wisconsin Registry. This places The Wisconsin Registry in a point of conflict that they should be the entity approving the credentials of YoungStar staff while receiving funding as a subcontractor of the YoungStar administrator. If placed in this position, it would be against The Wisconsin Registry's own best interest to deny YoungStar staff credentials for any reason, especially in light of Shine's assertions in their proposal that they strive to find staff in less than three months (Shine Proposal, pg 23). As described below in 3A, this would be extremely difficult given the qualification requirements. The Wisconsin Registry has always been an independent, neutral organization acting as a check/balance to ensure the integrity and qualification of YoungStar staff.

In addition, YoungStar requires that child care staff reach certain Registry Levels in order to increase the Star rating of their program. This also places The Wisconsin Registry in a point of conflict. Staff education is known as one of the largest hurdles for programs to reach higher Star ratings. As a subcontractor receiving YoungStar funding, The Wisconsin Registry would no longer be an independent organization ensuring the integrity of Star level as determined by staff qualification.

3. Transitioning YoungStar services to Shine's proposed model constitutes an overhaul not only of YoungStar services, but Wisconsin's entire child care system. SFTA does not believe the level of rigor and integrity in the RFP process reflected the impact of this decision. The effect will likely be a decline in providers participating in YoungStar and a reduction in equity of access to not only YoungStar, but all early childhood systems and supports, in conflict with DCF's own stated goals. Specific examples include:
 - A. The national partnerships included in Shine's proposal will introduce new organizations to Wisconsin's early childhood system, impacting every organization currently delivering services in the state, not only those engaged in YoungStar. Not including the Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies that did not give consent to be partners on Shine's proposal, as described above, there were 8+ agencies listed as delivering YoungStar services on Shine's proposal in an effort to piece together the required services. Some of those agencies are not currently part of Wisconsin's existing child care system and would at best bring duplication and confusion of existing services and at worst, starting over with services, relationships, and programming that took many years to build in the current system. SFTA does not intend to disparage having new organizations enter Wisconsin's early care system and provide services, and in fact recognizes that often this strengthens a system and brings growth and innovation. In this case, however, Shine's proposed model proposes introducing new organizations to deliver services that are already existing, trusted, and widely used. Should Shine be awarded the YoungStar contract with their proposed model, it would therefore constitute an enormous shift to not only YoungStar, but delivery of all early childhood services from every early childhood organization in the state. SFTA does not believe the enormity of this impact

was considered in DCF's intent to award decision, which would be to the detriment of all child care providers.

- B.** YoungStar data systems are currently linked to the systems of other programs and agencies, allowing YoungStar data to be used not only for YoungStar purposes but to give a full understanding of Wisconsin's early childhood services and needs. Shine's proposed data system risks an upheaval of this data system, crippling its usefulness for a variety of programming. DCF has made significant financial investment into the YoungStar Case Management System (CMS) and linking it with other systems, including SFTA's data systems. The data currently housed in these systems is not only YoungStar data, but information on use of a plethora of early childhood services and resources. In other words, these integrated data systems allow YoungStar data to contribute to monitoring and engaging with Wisconsin's early childhood system as a whole. This data is pulled for a variety of purposes; it is not utilized only for YoungStar purposes. As such, SFTA is concerned about the potential removal of YoungStar data from this system, and the significant reduction of data that organizations around the state would have access to, and for years have been utilizing to shape programming and growth. It is also important to note that Shine's model does not factor in the extensive data collection DCF is already doing through CMS and raises the question of further duplication of services and waste of resources. While other platforms, such as Shine's, could be incorporated into this data sharing, each addition requires intentional time and valuable state resources needed to realign systems that may already exist. Shine describes their data system as "a tested and sophisticated centralized system and processes for coordinating all quality service monitoring, data collection and analysis" (pg 41), which already exists in the current YoungStar CMS.
- C.** The transition from onsite to largely virtual coaching that is central to Shine's proposed model, staffing plan, and budget does not take into account the many resultant activities and equities tied to onsite coaching. Shine does not offer plans to replace these pieces of the current YoungStar model, or provide supports to the system when they are removed. Pieces of Wisconsin's early childhood system that will be lost with the significant reduction of onsite coaching include:

 - i.** When YoungStar was first created in 2010, it was in part with the intention of layering fraud prevention measures into services for child care programs. Often, YoungStar staff going onsite to deliver coaching has been a measure to assist in verification that fraud is not occurring in child care programs. One example is ensuring that Wisconsin Registry program profiles are updated and reflective of the actual number of staff within programs (a program claiming to have more staff than it does, or staff more qualified than they are, would be providing care not in accordance with required staff-to-child ratios). As staffing often drives the YoungStar star level, it is imperative to maintain this oversight through onsite

coaching, and through The Wisconsin Registry's neutral relationship to the YoungStar administrator.

- ii. While coaching onsite, YoungStar staff contribute to the detection and prevention of child maltreatment. On multiple occasions, CCR&R Coaches have observed severe enough concerns to make a report to the Bureau of Early Care Regulation. In other scenarios, Coaches have been able to provide guidance around supervision issues they observe. This ability to provide this level of protection and support for children is lost in a largely virtual model.
- iii. Implementing a largely virtual model intentionally forgets Wisconsin's vast rural communities, many of which lack simple access to the internet. This has been a large driver of ongoing onsite service delivery even during the pandemic, which DCF has acknowledged the need for many times. In fact, in 2021 DCF created the Technology Access Program to provide Wisconsin's child care programs with no-cost technology items, including laptops, printers, and routers, in recognition of the fact that many programs do not have access to basic technology items. Shine's proposal does not address providing high quality services to these child care programs without internet access, and SFTA has serious concerns about the evaluation committee's failure to take this population into account throughout the RFP scoring process.

In addition, virtual services have unintended negative impacts on equity for other underserved communities. As an example, a current CCR&R YoungStar Coach and Trainer who works extensively with the local Hmong community in her area points out that for every virtual training she hosts, nearly 30 minutes is used assisting providers with connecting to the training. She lists providers' lack of experience with technology as a major barrier to conducting virtual work in the underserved Hmong community. Shine's significant reduction in Wisconsin-based YoungStar staff indicates they will not have capacity to deliver the required amount of onsite services. Expecting a majority of providers to conform to a largely virtual model is not building equity into YoungStar, but removing it.

- iv. YoungStar Coaches currently spend a significant portion of their time working with providers helping them not only with YoungStar services, but the many other systems Wisconsin providers must take part in (Wisconsin Registry, fingerprinting, Provider Portal, Child Care Counts, etc.). These extra services are not addressed in Shine's proposal, and their loss will severely impact all facets of Wisconsin's early childhood system. Implementing a largely centralized model dependent on a Help Desk cuts across equity by excluding providers who simply need this hands-on support to navigate not only YoungStar, but all early

childhood programs, systems, and supports around the state. Not only DCF, but many facets of Wisconsin's early care system currently rely upon these services being delivered by YoungStar staff, including assisting providers in setting up and maintaining the information on their provider portals, updating their WI Registry program profiles, applying for Child Care Counts, and countless other needs to be successful as a provider in Wisconsin. In fact, DCF has turned to the CCR&Rs numerous times in acknowledgement that CCR&R staff, especially YoungStar staff, have access to providers that they cannot reach; a few recent examples include gathering Cost of Care Survey responses by phone when the online survey was unclear to providers or there was no internet access (at least 30 providers in the Milwaukee area alone), and assisting providers in ordering materials for the Technology Access Program when there were connectivity issues or language barriers to self-navigation.

It does not appear that these vital issues of public policy were appropriately considered during RFP review. For a contract of this size and a program so deeply intertwined in every facet of Wisconsin's early childhood systems, a high standard of scrutiny, consideration of impact, and transparency throughout the RFP process is necessary. That was not the case in the review of the YoungStar RFP. These oversights outlined above call into question the integrity of the RFP process as a whole and the thoroughness of the evaluation committee in reviewing proposals for this crucial program.

Additional concerns of the legitimacy of this RFP process

Shine's proposal states they will engage in a number of activities and methods of service that are unfeasible or disallowed by DCF's own YoungStar requirements. These items are easily identified by individuals familiar with YoungStar requirements, which once more calls into question the legitimacy of the RFP process in terms of the thoroughness of the evaluation committee and whether RFPs were reviewed with the evaluation criteria as the basis.

Concerns around this RFP process and Shine's proposed model are already being widely and publicly discussed. Many child care providers, through the course of participating in YoungStar, are familiar enough with YoungStar requirements to be concerned that these activities described below earned an Intent to Award. At the WFCCA Family Child Care Conference that took place on April 30, 2022, child care providers in attendance initiated a lengthy discussion around concerns with the proposer who received the Intent to Award. (Staff in attendance from the organizations involved in YoungStar proposals, including SFTA, declined to comment or contribute to these conversations.) Wisconsin child care providers have expressed serious concern, among other issues, at YoungStar funding being awarded to an out-of-state, for-profit company while Wisconsin's child care providers are in desperate need of funding and support from entities that understand their unique needs.

SFTA believes it necessary for the stability of Wisconsin's early childhood system and ongoing YoungStar participation that DCF publicly answer these concerns, regardless of the awarded proposer.

1. SFTA is concerned about the feasibility of Shine’s proposed plan for delivering YoungStar services, particularly around hiring qualified staff. It is SFTA’s understanding of Shine’s proposal that they would need to fill about 50 positions, including 11 Content Specialists, 5 Raters, and 22 Coaches, to deliver the services described in their proposal. This raises concern for several reasons:

- A. The qualifications required to deliver YoungStar services, as listed by DCF in the RFP, are not commonly held by many individuals around the state, particularly for Specialist and Coach positions. The staff of the current YoungStar administrator and subcontractors are the largest group of qualified individuals in the state, and in some regions the current YoungStar staff may be the only qualified individuals. SFTA therefore believes it is Shine’s assumption that they will be able to hire current YoungStar staff to fill their vacant positions. While it’s likely some staff would be willing to work with Shine, we strongly believe this is in general a false assumption. A number of factors are likely to influence staffs’ decisions, including years of service with their current organization, the reputations of partner agencies on Shine’s proposal, and their current employers’ abilities to leverage other funding to continue their positions. If a significant portion of current YoungStar staff choose not to join Shine, Shine may not be able to fill 50 positions with qualified individuals. The staff hired would then need to be working toward qualification while delivering YoungStar services, which would result in a much less qualified YoungStar team with a significantly longer onboarding process than Shine described in their proposal, and which earned them points toward the intent to award.
- B. This staffing plan to quickly hire 50 employees with YoungStar qualifications reveals a severe lack of knowledge from Shine of Wisconsin’s early care and education field, the number of individuals statewide who meet the YoungStar hiring criteria, the current hiring climate, and YoungStar staff requirements. If Shine is unable to hire mostly pre-qualified staff, as is likely, there are a number of time-intensive qualification requirements new staff will need to go through that mean Shine would not be able to onboard and begin delivery in a timely manner as described on page 23 of their proposal.

Of significant concern is the requirement for Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS) trainings for YoungStar Coaches. A large portion of the Evaluation Criteria and the consultation efforts of CCR&R coaches revolves around WMELS, which is a time- and effort-intensive training for which Shine’s proposal does not readily address their plan to bring new staff up to qualification. “The basis for the development of the WMELS is a set of guiding principles that specify beliefs and values about young children in Wisconsin” (Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards, Fifth Edition, page 8). YoungStar Quality Coaches and Trainers in Wisconsin undergo a stringent training program to become trainers and coaches around the Early Learning Standards, including becoming Tier 3 Trainers and Consultants (taking the Training and Technical Assistance

Professional, TTAP, courses and then logging 40 hours of consultation time and 40 hours of training time), attending a WMELS class, applying to become a trainer, and then going through a mentoring program and co-training experiences with an approved mentor. The performance standards and guiding principles are unique to Wisconsin and are the cornerstone of the Early Childhood systems in Wisconsin. Even if an out-of-state organization were familiar with WMELS and their link to the Evaluation Criteria, as a new YoungStar administrator, they would need to have all coaching and training staff complete the rigorous training plan to meet the requirements of training and consulting around WMELS, once again making Shine's transition of services timeline lengthier than shown on their workplan (Section 10, page 38).

The evaluation committee did not take into account the probability of success in filling these vacant positions. It is SFTA's belief that Shine made promises in their proposed model that they cannot possibly uphold in terms of staff qualifications, and the quality of YoungStar programming, and therefore Wisconsin's child care providers will feel the effects.

- C. SFTA questions how Shine reasonably expects to deliver high quality services to all providers statewide with merely a fraction (22 Coaches) of the current staff needed to deliver those services in a meaningful way (70+ Coaches), and whether DCF took the feasibility of this staffing model into account. The current Coaches already have high provider caseloads, up to 80 per Coach. The impact of significantly reducing Coaches would be backlogs and delays for providers, as well as minimal ability to meet DCF's current rigorous YoungStar expectations for Coach service delivery and documentation.
2. Shine demonstrates in their proposal that they severely underestimate the number of technical assistance requests made by Wisconsin's child care providers, which they are proposing to serve. As an example of their ability to deliver services, Shine's proposal states, "In Indiana last year, the SPARK Help Desk Support Team responded to nearly 2,500 questions from 1,495 unique early childhood professionals" (pg 31). This is a mere fraction of Wisconsin's child care programs and the support provided to them by SFTA/CCR&Rs' extensive network of Coaches and support staff across the state. Wisconsin currently has nearly 4,500 regulated programs. Last contract year alone, SFTA and CCR&Rs logged over 23,000 provider interactions and over 34,000 instances of technical assistance related to early childhood programming. This points again to the question of whether Shine truly has a realistic view of or capacity to provide support for all of Wisconsin's providers, and on what basis DCF made the determination of Shine's fitness.
3. Shine's proposal outlines use of their proprietary self-assessment, but YoungStar Evaluation Criteria only permits use of a limited list of identified self-assessment tools, which does not include Shine's (Group Eval Criteria, pg 8). This demonstrates a lack of knowledge from Shine about requirements of YoungStar delivery and whether they will in actuality be capable of

meeting them.

Further, as the current contract administrator, SFTA and the CCR&Rs have requested many times that DCF expand the list of approved self-assessments. DCF has refused these requests. SFTA questions why during the RFP process DCF determined to change this longstanding precedent for the proposer that received the Intent to Award, without even having reviewed the proposer's self-assessment form to determine whether it is suitable for YoungStar.

4. One of the more troubling aspects of Shine's proposal is the link they seek to build between YoungStar services and Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network (WEESSN). While WEESSN membership is free, at certain tiers some benefits require ongoing subscription or member costs. This link between YoungStar and WEESSN causes SFTA to fear that in Shine's model, child care providers will be steered toward a model of paying out-of-pocket for some aspects of quality improvement services. This is not consistent with YoungStar's purpose of helping all regulated child care providers improve quality practices. Most child care programs have razor thin budgets and would be excluded from these services. Only those programs that can afford such services would realize the benefit, leading to further inequity in early childhood. When asked, WEESSN has been unable to provide to SFTA any cost benefit analysis that points to actual financial benefits in numbers for members. Even more troubling is Shine's misrepresentation in their proposal of how many providers have chosen to pursue WEESSN's services. After years and multiple large rounds of funding from DCF, WEESSN reports just over 900 members at any tier (less than a quarter of Wisconsin child care programs or YoungStar-participating providers). Yet to justify the tie to WEESSN, Shine represents this as WEESSN "having significant success to date" (pg 11). If WEESSN becomes part of the YoungStar Collaborative proposed by Shine, then YoungStar is being used to promote WEESSN membership and services, effectively taking a program that is required of many providers (YoungStar) and tying a cost to some of the benefits they could receive by working with a Coach. We do not believe tying YoungStar services to additional costs could improve quality or access for Wisconsin providers.
5. Shine directly misrepresented provider satisfaction with current YoungStar services. In their proposal, Shine states: "Providers shared during our focus groups that the ability of current YoungStar consultants to provide the applicable expertise to support providers was hit or miss" (pg 28). In multiple instances, Shine points to provider stated dissatisfaction with the coaching they receive. Yet the Technical Assistance survey data provided to proposers by DCF indicates otherwise; on average, CCR&R consultants scored 4.79 out of 5 in 2021 on provider satisfaction across points such as meaningfulness of consultation and whether the consultation received would improve the quality of their program. Speaking with a small group of providers who support the argument they want to present while ignoring what the data actually shows is not data-driven practice, nor is it a demonstration of the level of integrity Wisconsin expects in administration of statewide programming. SFTA questions whether the evaluation committee

reviewed Shine’s claims against the data they themselves provided proposers, and if so, why an organization that repeatedly misrepresents that data received the highest proposer score.

Based on (1) the irregularities outlined above, (2) the significant impact on Wisconsin’s child care system that this decision holds, and (3) the strong potential that an injudicious decision would impede DCF’s own stated goals of improving child care quality, access, affordability, and workforce statewide, SFTA strongly urges DCF and the Department of Administration to review the integrity of this RFP process and reconsider the intent to award to Shine Early Learning, per Wis. Admin. Code § Adm 10.08(7). DCF has a responsibility to process integrity as well as to Wisconsin families, child care providers, and communities, to make this impactful decision with full transparency and free from the cloud of significant question of processes and motivation.

The grievances included in this document depict an RFP process that gave undue preference to one proposer, and in doing so violated Wisconsin State Administrative Codes and ignored conflicts and other concerns related to the proposal that received the Intent to Award. The minimal difference in scores between the two submitted proposals, combined with lack of assurance that the procurement process adhered to state requirements, does not justify the disruption to the entire child care system and high costs that would be associated with moving forward with transition of YoungStar administration without further review. As such, SFTA urges a reconsideration of the Intent to Award.

Sincerely,



Matricia Patterson
Executive Director, Supporting Families Together Association

Attachments

Attachment A: Shine Early Learning’s YoungStar Proposal Text

Attachment B: Shine Early Learning’s YoungStar Budget