

# Being a childcare worker has always meant living on the frontlines <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In almost a decade running a daycare out of her home, Zoila Toma has only closed her doors once. Now, she's having to consider what she would do if she came down with coronavirus symptoms. "I would probably have to close," she said. That closure could last as long as two weeks, the recommended quarantine time for the virus, which would devastatingly mean thousands of dollars in lost income. "With this job, it's breaking even," she said. "You get the money and you use it as you get it." Her hope is that, given the global pandemic, parents would be understanding, but, she adds, "In other situations if I closed for two weeks, I would more than likely lose my clients."

The sudden shuttering of schools in response to COVID-19 has raised concerns about the availability of childcare in this country. But less publicized is the precarious experience of childcare providers themselves, who work in germ-heavy environments while receiving low pay, little to no paid sick leave, and questionable access to healthcare. Although the effectiveness of kids' ability to transmit coronavirus is unknown, amid the current outbreak, all of these factors translate into a pressing public health concern. But this is a pre-existing labor rights crisis. "Talk about a shaky foundation," said Marcy Whitebook, director emerita of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. "We don't have a system that has a lot of give in it, because it's so under-resourced. It heavily relies on the unpaid or insufficiently paid labor of women."

Even absent COVID-19, childcare comes with notable health risks. "[Childcare workers] are continually in contact with a population who have limited ability to be responsible for their own hygiene," said Whitebook, somewhat generously, of toddlers. "You can't social distance in a childcare center." All you can do is be vigilant about cleaning toys and surfaces and monitoring hand washing. Toma puts it like so, "If one person comes with the flu, automatically, it's going to be transmitted." To the kids, at least—she's managed to only get the flu once in all her years of childcare. In that instance, she locked herself in a room in her house while two assistants took care of the kids. The one time she did close her daycare, it wasn't even because she was sick: She just needed time to disinfect her house after several of the kids got sick. "When kids vomit, it just goes everywhere," she said. "They're sitting on the sofa and—bleh. The carpets! It's a deep cleaning."

Toma's contract with parents allows for three paid sick days, which is paltry, but many are not even that lucky. There is no national data on paid sick leave for childcare workers, but Whitebook paints a bleak picture of the current state of things. "Sometimes they'll have three days. Sometimes they don't have any," she said. "More often than not, they don't get paid sick leave or they get limited paid sick leave. We hear people saying they can't even depend on their sick leave because often there aren't subs available." Several states have passed paid sick leave laws, but many have exemptions that can exclude childcare workers, among many others. Of course, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which would grant paid sick leave amid the current outbreak, is headed to the Senate. The question still remains: What about after COVID-19?

Childcare work is, for the most part, low paid, which makes taking unpaid sick leave frequently untenable. "You're on the financial edge," said Whitebook. Amid the outbreak, the financial precarity will likely increase: "In a lot of childcare centers, if the enrollment drops, people can be sent home without pay," explained Whitebook. "In some places, childcare businesses will just go under because they will have families quarantined, so they're not going to send their kids to childcare." She added, "This is a very vulnerable part of our economy, even though there might be high demand for it."

Toma is worried that amid coronavirus' economic impact that she will lose clients as parents lose work. Already, she's heard from a fellow childcare provider who had parents pull out of daycare because of a COVID-19 related job loss. Toma is lucky enough to work in a two-earner household. "I can't imagine just how much it's going to hurt other providers that have just one income in the house," she said. Similarly, she only has health insurance because her husband's work provides it. Whitebook says that childcare workers "may or may not have health insurance," and even if they do, people often "postpone medical treatment because of cost" or forgo it altogether "because deductibles are high or the copayments are high."

Poverty, paid sick leave, access to healthcare—all of these are problems that exacerbate an outbreak like COVID-19, but they have been there all along for childcare workers. Toma is currently a member of SEIU Local 99, a union currently working on developing a contract to negotiate with the state of California that could guarantee childcare workers certain rights and protections. Whitebook argues that

coronavirus double-underscores necessary systemic change in this field of work. “We have to finance the system differently,” she said. “Only in the United States do we do so much on the private market and put so few government resources into it. We need to finance early childhood publicly.” It shouldn’t take a global pandemic to clarify this, but here we are.

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