

Child care is broken. Biden has a plan to fix it. ^[1]

But it might come too late to help some providers in the pandemic.

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Source: Vox

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

As Covid-19 runs rampant across California, sickening hundreds of thousands of people, Rosa Carreño's day care in San Jose has remained open through it all.

"All of us were scared," Carreño told Vox. It was "a situation that could put my own family at risk."

But, she said, "we become family with the families that we take care of," some of which have included essential workers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic.

"For me, closing was not an option," Carreño said. "I felt my responsibility was to be there for them."

But staying open has come with many challenges. Carreño has had to purchase extra cleaning supplies and remove carpets from the day care in order to make the facility safer and comply with new regulations. Even some of the stuffed animals had to go. She had to "figure out a way to continue still having the child care and having fun with the children, but minimizing the risk," she said.

New supplies and safety procedures cost money, and although Carreño hasn't seen enrollment drop, other providers around the country have — and many are struggling to afford those extra costs on decreased revenue. A recent survey of California providers by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) found that 77 percent of open child care programs have lost income due to the pandemic, and 80 percent have faced higher costs associated with cleaning requirements. Many providers fear catching Covid-19 at work but can't afford to close down even for a short period — a survey earlier this year found that 30 percent of centers would have to shut down permanently if forced to close for two weeks or more.

To help child care providers like Carreño stay afloat, many experts have called for a bailout of the child care industry, estimating that providers around the country need about \$50 billion to keep paying their expenses amid lower revenues and potential temporary closures. Now presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has made such a bailout part of a larger proposal — which also includes provisions to boost workers' pay and strengthen their power to unionize — to help America's caregivers.

"If we truly want to reward work in this country, we have to ease the financial burden of care that families are carrying," Biden said Tuesday during a speech announcing the plan. "And we have to elevate the compensation, benefits, and dignity of caregiving workers and early childhood educators."

Reforms like the ones Biden proposed are essential, workers and their advocates say. And with the pandemic focusing more attention on the importance of child care than ever before, the time is ripe.

However, actually passing such broad-based reform will require voters and policymakers to understand and accept the enormity of the task at hand. "Public awareness has spiked," CSCCE director Lea Austin told Vox. "The challenge will be translating that awareness into an understanding of what is needed and the level of resources that are really necessary."

America's child care system was broken long before Covid-19

Child care in America "is a system that has not worked very well for anybody," even before Covid-19, Austin said. "It hasn't worked particularly well for children, for families, or for the people who are providing services and working in these programs."

For many families, child care is unaffordable, costing more than \$1,000 a month in many states. It's also extremely expensive to provide: Quality care requires low caregiver-to-child ratios and strict safety protocols, even in normal times — not to mention overhead costs like rent and food for children. Even with fees that are punishingly high for many parents, many programs struggle, Austin said.

They have little cash on hand for emergencies, and they often pay staff poverty-level wages and offer no benefits. Child care workers nationwide make an average hourly wage of just \$10.82, and some earn far less. More than half rely on some form of public assistance to get by, and they're more likely than other workers to lack health insurance and paid sick leave.

Low pay for workers also affects the quality of care that kids receive. Children do best with a consistent caregiver, but low pay leads to

high turnover, Rhian Allvin, CEO of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), told Vox. Kids also benefit from having caregivers who are trained in child development and early education, but “if you make \$10.40 an hour without a BA and then you make \$11.40 with a BA, there’s no incentive to be grounded in the science of early learning,” Allvin said.

All of these problems existed before the coronavirus hit — and now, child care programs and their workers are squeezed even further. Many parents have pulled their children out, leading to a drop in revenue. In some cases, new physical distancing requirements have also limited the number of kids that programs can take. “We had 150+ students,” one provider said in response to the California survey. “Now the most we can have is 48.”

Meanwhile, everything is more expensive, from cleaning supplies to new requirements such as making sure children play and nap at an appropriate distance from each other. Forty-nine percent of providers who operate family child care centers have been unable to pay themselves at least part of the time, and 34 percent have taken on credit card debt to stay afloat, the CSCCE survey found. And even getting the right cleaning products and protective equipment like masks has been a challenge, with 38 percent of providers saying they were unable to obtain the supplies they needed in the previous month.

Providers in California, where Covid-19 cases continue to rise, are scared of getting the virus at work, with 38 percent saying they are concerned for themselves and 38 percent reporting concern for their family members. But many providers can’t afford to close, even if they’re scared — among programs that remain open, 80 percent said they were still operating because they lack the financial resources to survive a closure.

The combination of high costs and low enrollment, however, could force many programs to close permanently in the coming months. In a nationwide survey conducted by the NAEYC in June, an overall two out of five respondents — and half of all minority-owned child care providers — said they are certain they’ll have to close if they don’t get some kind of government help. Only 18 percent of programs said they expected to last longer than a year without public support.

Biden has a plan to help child care workers — now and in the future

For this reason, many child care advocates have called for a bailout of the industry. Members of Congress, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren, have proposed including such a bailout in larger Covid-19 relief packages — but so far, nothing has passed.

Now Biden is making relief for child care centers part of his larger caregiving plan, which he unveiled on Tuesday in New Castle, Delaware. “As a first step, Biden will immediately provide states, tribal, and local governments with the fiscal relief they need to keep workers employed and keep vital public services running, including direct care and child care services,” states the campaign document outlining the plan. (The campaign did not provide specifics on the amount of relief the candidate would make available if elected.)

But the former vice president also promises to go beyond the immediate crisis and invest in child care for the future. His plan would provide free preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the country. And for kids under the age of 3, the plan would create a system of tax credits and subsidies so that families earning less than 1.5 times the median income in their state would pay no more than 7 percent of their income for child care, with “the most-hard pressed working families” paying nothing.

The plan also includes tax credits to encourage employers to construct onsite child care facilities, something companies did during World War II that’s become harder to imagine today, as families (most often mothers) are expected to handle child care on their own.

The proposal would also boost worker pay to the level of elementary school teachers, as well as provide workers with health insurance, paid sick leave, and affordable care for their own children. It also outlines steps to protect workers’ rights to unionize for better pay and working conditions, something they’ve won in some states (including California) but not all.

The proposal “is about easing the squeeze on working families who are raising their kids and caring for aging loved ones at the same time,” Biden said Tuesday. “And it’s about creating jobs with better pay and career pathways for caregivers, and showing them the dignity and respect that they deserve.”

Child care workers and advocates have praised the tenets of Biden’s plan. The proposal “would be a great step forward in a universal system of early care and education in this country,” CSCCE’s Austin said. “What’s really important about what Biden has proposed is addressing the conditions of [the] workforce and calling attention to how low the wages are, and how that is really linked to both educator well-being and the well-being of children.”

The reforms Biden has proposed “would be excellent news for everyone” in the child care workforce, Carreño said. “It’s been long overdue to see our profession as a first priority.”

Supporting child care workers over the long term will require the political will to listen to their needs

Still, some say a potential Biden administration won’t come soon enough for the aid the industry needs. “It’ll be too late for a bailout in January,” NAEYC’s Allvin said. “We need that money now.”

Even if Biden wins the election, real, widespread change will require a sustained commitment from policymakers and the public to the reforms that workers — and kids — need. During the pandemic, “People have realized how critical child care is,” Austin said. But as parents across the country struggle with months of caring for kids while also trying to do their jobs — and as many stare down confirmed or anticipated school closures in the fall — there’s been a focus on child care as a solution without regard to the safety or interests of child care workers.

“Somehow the burden has fallen on child care to be the answer for everybody else to be able to go to work, rather than really examining

what we should be doing right now to make sure that workers across occupations can sustain themselves,” Austin said. “It’s this invisibility of the people who are actually doing child care that has allowed the workers and their own well-being to be missing from this conversation.”

Biden’s plan is a step in the right direction for workers, many say. And around the country, workers themselves are making their own voices heard, joining together to form unions and advocate for their rights.

More than 40,000 child care providers in California were granted collective bargaining rights last year, and this week, workers around the state are voting on whether to officially join the Child Care Providers United union. If the vote succeeds (as is expected), “We will be able to have a voice,” Carreño said. “We will be able to sit down at the bargaining table” and draft a contract with the state that includes better pay and benefits.

“Our country finally has come to realize that we are essential,” Carreño said, “and our country really needs to invest in the caregiving workforce and give us the legal protections that we need.”

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