

Child care is in crisis—We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fix it ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine what child care looks like in the US.

Now is our opportunity to solve the child care crisis and provide much needed support for parents and care workers.

The child care industry in the US has long been underfunded and overlooked, but when COVID-19 hit in the spring of 2020, the lack of investment in our nation's child care sector became a glaring problem. The pandemic pushed millions of parents into remote work and many into unemployment; child care centers closed; and schools moved to virtual learning. With everyone at home, families became acutely aware of what a lack of child care could do to the wellbeing of communities.

The pandemic pushed the child care sector to the brink. Centers all over the country closed and many have not been able to reopen. Now the industry faces a staffing problem as care workers are leaving the child care sector for lower-risk jobs with higher pay and benefits. This means that centers are taking fewer children, leaving many families without reliable child care.

When the care industry suffers, we all suffer. Parents can't work, and mothers in particular take on a disproportionate amount of the care responsibilities at home. Women have been forced to step away from the workforce—suffering economic and emotional repercussions—in large part because our government has not prioritized funding a system that provides adequate affordable child care for hard-working families. This impacts all of us. Women's declining participation in the workforce is costing the US economy \$650 billion a year.

We have an opportunity to change all this. Right now, the Senate is negotiating a reconciliation package that could invest hundreds of billions of dollars into the care industry and make lasting change that could positively impact our communities for generations to come. It's time for Congress to start treating child care as the essential infrastructure that it is.

Care Work Is Essential Work

Rochelle Wilcox is the founder and director of Wilcox Academy of Early Learning in New Orleans . Back in February, Rochelle spoke to us about the need to find long-term solutions to this problem. Months later, with the Delta variant on the rise just as back-to-school time hits, this is truer than ever.

"For a minute, we thought things were getting back to normal," Rochelle says. "But the constant problem has been workforce. We have been posting jobs everywhere because we need staff. Since February, our waitlist has grown to 138 children that we cannot place at this time because we do not have the workforce. We have the space, but not the staff."

The problem of staffing has become a dominant issue for child care centers around the country. The vast majority of care workers are women and many are also parents themselves. As the Delta variant poses an increasing risk to children, for these workers, the negatives often outweigh the positives when it comes to returning to work. Child care is one of the most underpaid professions—the poverty rate among child care workers is more than double that of other women workers, and child care workers are disproportionately Black, Latina, Indigenous, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and immigrant women. Child care workers receive a median wage of \$12 an hour and rarely receive benefits. Those meager wages, compounded with the risks of COVID-19, mean that right now, workers are understandably turning to lower-risk jobs with higher wages and better benefits, leaving child care centers with hundreds of children in need of care but few staff to do the job.

"We need to treat [care work] as a professional career," Rochelle points out. "Men and women working in this field deserve to be able to take their children on vacation, buy a reliable car, buy a home, live the American dream in the job that they love. They should not have to leave this field and be less impactful in another job because someone else offers a dollar more and they offer benefits."

Providing livable wages and benefits for care workers would mean that child care centers could not only take in more children, but also

increase the quality of care that they offer. When child care centers are fully staffed and properly funded, they can lower the student-teacher ratios, invest in professional development for teachers, and spend more time on things like developing age-appropriate curriculum. Investing in care doesn't just make a difference for the workers, it makes a lasting impact on the children and their families. When speaking to child care providers themselves, it is this impact on children that drives them to advocate for more government funding for child care.

"Investing in early childhood means funding proven programs and innovative strategies for children from birth to age 5," says Carrie Henry, owner and director of Creative Kidz & Creative Kidz East in Louisiana. "[This investment] would strengthen families in their role as their child's first teacher, improve the quality of early learning environments like preschool and child care, expand access to those programs, and promote prevention and early identification of health problems that can impact learning later on."

Brice Gresham, one of the lead teachers at Wilcox Academy, knows that investing in care could change our world for generations to come. "The tools and the love that we pour into early child care is the foundation for everything. It's world changing, and can address things like hunger, crime, anxiety, and depression. If we [invest] in early child care we will see the world change around us, because it starts from birth and gives tools for our children to maneuver through this world."

Care workers are doing the crucial work of caring for and educating our nation's youngest learners. When care workers thrive, we all thrive.

Exhausted Parents

No one understands how essential child care is quite like parents. In the last year and a half, they've had to pivot to remote work, remote schooling, and no child care. It's moms in particular who are taking on the majority of these responsibilities, often at the cost of their own career and wellbeing. On average, women do three times as much unpaid care work as men. This has cost women enormously. Globally, women have lost at least \$800 billion in the last year, largely due to the unpaid care responsibilities they've taken on during the pandemic. Not only that but child care expenses remain extremely high in most places. Moms are struggling, and as we head into another uncertain school year, it is crucial to ensure that families have the support they need.

Crystal Downs is a mom in Marietta, Georgia, trying to juggle her career as a fulltime photographer with caring for her 3-year-old daughter. "I feel stuck," she says. "The cost of child care is keeping our family trapped financially, but it's the only way we can get work done."

Alicia, a mom in New Jersey, feels similarly. "Due to child care costs, sometimes one parent, usually the mother has to give up their career or spend years out of the workforce. It should not be that way. A person should not have to choose between their family or career."

Moms around the country are feeling the anxiety that comes with juggling child care and a career at a time when things are more uncertain than ever. Without support for families and increased access to quality, affordable child care, many moms will not be able to return to work. This will have lasting repercussions for women and for the US economy as a whole unless our government steps in and does something.

Solving Child Care

There are real, tangible solutions to the child care crisis. Robust investment and funding for the child care industry could transform the way our country does care and positively impact our families and communities for generations. Congress has the opportunity with the \$3.5 trillion budget reconciliation bill to make sure that families spend no more than seven percent of their hard-earned income on child care, that the people caring for our children are paid decent living wages, and that all children have access to safe, reliable care. A bold substantial investment in care is the only way we'll achieve a fair and equitable recovery for all.

"We need to make early learning a community resource," says Rochelle. "If we go back to child care as it was pre-COVID, then we have failed. We need to think about the whole picture and how we can do policy around this. We need to start thinking of this as a community effort. We need systemic change."

Right now, we have a once in a generation opportunity to reimagine what child care looks like in the US and provide much needed support for care workers and families. It is abundantly clear—care work makes all work possible. Child care is essential. Child care is infrastructure. We need our government to start investing in this crucial work so that all of us can thrive.

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