

As American workers return to the office, democrats push to address the lack of affordable childcar ^[1]

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As a growing number of companies require employees to return full-time to the office, young parents are facing a new crisis: what to do about their not yet school-age kids when they're away at work.

With inflation reaching a 40-year high and the price of staples, such as gasoline, increasing by 50% year over year, many American families don't have the luxury of keeping one parent at home. And the old-fashioned solution—asking the grandparents to step in as caregivers—is only tenable for about 20% of working mothers, according to a 2013 study. Which leaves professional childcare providers holding the bag.

But that's the problem: the COVID-19 pandemic all but gutted the childcare industry, which has shed nearly 1 in 9 jobs since March 2020. Daycare operators' attempts to rebuild in recent months have been complicated by both rising wages and the ongoing national labor shortage, which make it difficult to recruit and retain staff. Child care workers earn an average wage of just \$13.31 per hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some 460,000 families now say they have unreliable access to childcare, per a recent report by Wells Fargo economists.

The challenge is particularly acute for parents in need of infant care, which requires higher staffer-to-child ratios, and therefore a more expensive offering for child care centers. "For my infant and my toddler rooms, well over 100% of what's coming in is going towards my costs," Corrine Kuntz, a daycare operator in Montana told TIME in November. "My two-year old program and my three- to five-year-old program basically have to cover the cost of my infant and my one-year old programs."

As American families' child care struggles increase—and political strategists prepare for the November mid-terms—both voters and lawmakers are paying attention. Polling conducted by a bipartisan team at Hart Research and New Bridge Strategy in September 2021 found that 81% of voters see child care and preschool as worthwhile investments of taxpayer money. That includes 80% of self-identified independents and 66% of Republicans. Further, 58% of voters say federal funding of childcare programs should be increased.

On Wednesday night, more than 100 Democratic members of Congress, sent a letter to President Joe Biden, urging him to throw his weight behind stalled legislation that would fund universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year olds and create a sliding scale child-care system for younger children based on household incomes. The letter was sent to the White House with the signatures of 122 House Members and 32 Senators, including Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith and New Jersey Rep. Mikie Sherrill.

"We stand ready to work with you," the letter says, "to enact legislation through reconciliation that ensures middle-class and working families do not spend more than 7 percent of their income on child care, expands access to pre-K, and invests in the early childhood workforce and infrastructure."

The universal pre-K and sliding-scale child care subsidy proposals were both originally in Congressional Democrats' \$1.7 trillion social spending and climate change legislation, Build Back Better. The Administration's signature legislation was shelved in December after centrist Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin pulled his support. But polls show that the programs are broadly popular among both Republican and Democratic voters; two-thirds of voters told the Hart Research and New Bridge Strategy pollsters that they'd be more likely to support a budget reconciliation package that includes provisions to make childcare and preschool more accessible.

Democrats see supporting the programs as good policy and good politics. With slim majorities in both Congressional chambers at risk in the midterms—and Biden's approval rating hovering at its lowest point since his January 2021 inauguration—Democrats are happy to push for popular childcare policies. The proposals also make good economic sense, says Katherine Clark, assistant speaker of the House, who headed the letter to Biden. "We lose a staggering \$57 billion per year in earnings, productivity, and revenue because parents can't find affordable quality care," Clark told TIME. "Our recovery and our ability to build a better, more inclusive America hinges on us creating a child care system that finally works for working families."

Cheryl Oldham, vice president of education policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce says the "kitchen table" childcare crisis is not limited to the parents of young children, either. "This isn't just an individual issue, it's kind of a collective issue. And it is an economic issue," she says. "[The pandemic] really kind of put on steroids, the idea that childcare is a critical workforce issue....the economy is not going to get back to where it needs to be unless this piece [is reformed]."

No Republican lawmakers support reforming America's childcare landscape through a reconciliation bill, but some argue for addressing the child care problem by expanding existing programs. Senators Richard Burr, of North Carolina, and Tim Scott of South Carolina, introduced a bill in March that would bolster the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program, which provides states funding to subsidize low-income families' access to child care and helps childcare centers recruit well-trained staff. The program currently has sufficient funding to help just 11% qualifying children.

Burr and Scott suggested expanding CCDBG to ensure any eligible family earning less than 75% State Median Income pays no childcare copay, and that no CCDBG-eligible family pays more than 7% of their household income towards childcare. However, the GOP bill does not request any more funding to make those changes possible, nor have the Senators suggested an estimated amount that would be needed to cover any expansion of the benefit.

Reached for comment on whether Burr would vote to increase funding for a larger CCDBG program in the appropriations process, a spokesperson says: "Senator Burr believes that appropriators can and should prioritize increases to CCDBG funding to improve access and quality for families across America," adding that he would "support their efforts to target funding to this program over other, lesser priorities."

Clark's office does plan to request an increased level of funding for the CCDBG program for Fiscal Year 2023 later this month. The office did not disclose how much funding she will request, but said it will be in excess of the White House's request for \$1.4 billion more funding for CCDBG versus the current Fiscal Year's allocation.

A boost to CCDBG is not the sweeping universal pre-k and entitlement childcare Democrats are requesting in their White House letter. (Even the GOP-invited witness to a Senate Committee hearing on early education policy testified in March that a funding boost through the regular legislative process would likely be insufficient to solve the crises. "We believe funding must be included in the reconciliation process because we do not believe Congress will allocate enough funding to make a material difference in access to childcare through the traditional budget process," Ellen Reynolds, CEO of the Georgia Child Care Association, said.)

But whatever the ultimate legislative solution, Oldham says it needs to come fast. "Childcare," she says, "has been broken for a long time."

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