

Day care dilemma: Getting child care to work ^[1]

Struggles in the child care industry

Author:

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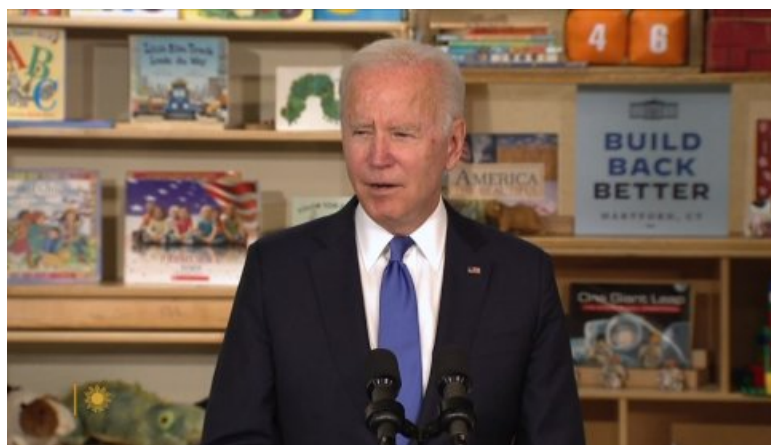
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EXCERPTS



The parents dropping off their young children at Kiddie Campus Childcare Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas consider themselves lucky.

Britni Nuñez makes \$17.50 an hour in a chicken plant. She and her husband, a factory worker, spend \$250 a week to send baby Zania here. "We both work," she told correspondent Rita Braver, "so if we didn't have child care, one of us would have to stay home. ... If it was just me paying, it'd be half my check every week."

And it is also hard for Robin Slaton, who is trying to keep Kiddie Campus afloat: "Yeah, it's just been a struggle," she said.

As the owner of this facility, she faced financial problem before COVID. Then when the virus hit and enrollment dropped, she had to begin letting teachers go. "I started with laying some off," Slaton said. "Then my leadership team. I just couldn't afford the higher-paid employees."

Braver asked, "As COVID started to ease up, did parents want to send their kids back?"

"The issue was not the number of kids that we could enroll; we have a waiting list, over 50 children," Slaton said. "Five of our classrooms are closed, because we cannot find teachers to hire."

"Why can't you find more teachers?"

"It is the low wages that we pay. Then we have Hobby Lobby paying \$18 an hour with some benefits, and we just can't match that."

In contrast to the craft and hobby chain, Slaton says she can only afford to pay her employees an average of \$13 an hour without raising prices beyond what families she serves can afford. So, she is trapped in a vicious cycle.

And she is not alone.

"There is a crisis for American children, their families and the child care workers," said Lea Austin, who runs the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkley. She said many other countries offer all parents some subsidized childcare for young children. But things in the U.S. have gone from bad to worse.

Braver asked, "What did the pandemic do to the availability of child care?"

"We have lost about 16,000 child care programs across the country, about 131,00 jobs," Austin replied.

Federal Emergency COVID Relief Funds did provide \$39 billion to support child care, helping struggling centers and some parents, like Rikael Franklin. She works as a caregiver at Kiddie Campus, and as an "essential worker" now gets vouchers to pay for her two children,

who are enrolled here. But when that money runs out, she said, "If I didn't have vouchers, I don't think I would be able to work, because my whole check would go straight back to them."

President Biden's Build Back Better plan would offer permanent help with child care costs. But that legislation is stalled, and Mari Slinker, an essential worker in a food production factory, whose four-year-old daughter comes to Kiddie Campus, says that if the vouchers go, it will mean struggle: "More overtime, less time with my daughter."

But there may be even more bad news on the horizon. Kiddie Campus owner Robin Slaton said she can no longer keep fighting to make ends meet. "I've actually decided, after 24 years, that it is my best interest of my health to put this childcare center up for sale," she said.

She plans to start an organization to help day cares across the country lobby for more support. But in the meantime, if she cannot sell Kidde Campus, she said she will be forced to shut down. "And I feel bad saying that, because I know the community needs it."

And Mari Slinker fears the worst for families like hers: "Stress, more stress, more worries – that constant wondering, is my kid okay today?"

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