

Not a moment too soon: A new network offers promise for our broken child care picture ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

U.S. child care is broken. Centers and other businesses are closing. Educators are finding work in other fields with better pay and less stress. Families are too often left in the lurch, without the stable, safe and consistent care that parents and children need to thrive. Of course, the pandemic has only made things worse, but maybe the deepening of this crisis can make the urgency to resolve it more widely felt and give rise to new opportunities. And that's exactly what The Child Care for Every Family Network (CC4EFN) aims to do, building support for sweeping change that is both equitable and sustainable.

Last month in *Inside Philanthropy*, Ashley Beckner of Imaginable Futures—a grant-making venture of the Omidyar Group—cited the rise of the Network as part of “a coordinated and robust movement that builds consensus on a national vision and is grounded in the voices of families and providers. We must give organizers who have been doing this work for decades the resources they need to drive this change.” I spoke to Co-Executive Directors Erica Gallegos and Andrea Paluso about their understanding of the crisis and what they see as the best strategies for movement building.

Two Heads Are Better Than One

CC4EFN's dual leadership structure makes perfect sense—and could be a harbinger of a greater nonprofit trend. Not only is the job enormous, but Gallegos and Paluso have families and responsibilities of their own, making demands on their time with or without a pandemic.

“We're so glad to be two people,” Paluso says, “because this is a lot of work.” She comes to CC4EFN from Family Forward Oregon and Family Forward Action, which organizes moms and caregivers to advance policies to support caregiving and to build systems that support caregivers. Becoming a mother for the first time 17 years ago, she experienced “how few structural supports we have and what that means for mothers' lives, and the impact that was having on my own life and my ability to both provide for and care for my family.”

A first-generation college student, Gallegos says she was politicized by other Latina women. After graduation, she worked as a child care provider for three years, until she realized she couldn't pay her bills that way, and she went into organizing, eventually taking a leadership role with OLÉ. She has a 10-year-old and a 3-year-old. “I realized that education was the catalyst of my success,” she says, “and access to child care increases that exponentially for children in BIPOC communities. That is why I love this work and fight so hard for access for all children, as well as increased wages for providers.”

A Crisis on Top of a Crisis

The co-directors emphasize that child care was unsustainable and deeply inequitable long before the pandemic. The patchwork system that came into being over the course of centuries depends on exploitation through low wages of providers who are disproportionately women of color. At the same time, too many families can't afford the kind of care that they need, and so they're making a lot of impossible trade-offs around how they work, when they work, whether they can work, how they're able to participate in other parts of civic life, and how they arrange for care. The lack of stability has dire and long-lasting consequences for children and families.

Lest anybody assume the worst is over, remember that we're coming to the end of what remains of temporary COVID relief from the federal government, which has curtailed some of the devastating impacts, supporting families and keeping providers in business. Gallegos asserts, “So many families and parents and providers are going to be facing a whole other crisis once that (federal) money expires, and it's really going to cause a huge cliff in access to care and support for providers.” With prospects dimming for the Build Back Better Act's child care provisions, eligibility and access will decrease, excluding the children who would benefit most and pushing women (especially BIPOC women) out of the workforce.

According to Paluso, “We haven't decided yet collectively as a country that child care is a public good we should invest public dollars in. The Covid-19 health and economic crisis has shown the impacts of this kind of long-term neglect.”

But there is good news. “We’re winning in some states,” notes Gallegos, pointing to victories in California, Connecticut, New Mexico (which she helped advance as policy director at OLÉ) and Oregon (ditto for Paluso and Family Forward Oregon) and others, “but we’re not yet winning at the federal level.”

A New Way to Organize

The traditional way of mobilizing advocates in federal advocacy can be limiting and transactional. “It can feel very top down,” Paluso says, “whereas when we build power organically, and from local communities up, we can organize more parents and providers in a longer term and more sustainable way.”

Initiated by state based, grassroots organizations along with the National Women’s Law Center and the Center for Law and Social Policy, CC4EFN began as a design committee composed of parents, providers, and state and national organizers and advocates, responding to such open-ended questions as:

- What do we need?
- What should we demand?
- How will a win look different if we work differently?
- What are our equity-centered values and principles?
- How should we organize ourselves to build power and win more transformational investments?

The design committee agreed that they needed a structure that included state-based organizing groups working directly with parents and providers on the ground, along with national advocacy groups often leading federal advocacy efforts, and actual parents and providers who are most impacted by child care. Reflecting the sector’s makeup, the majority should be women of color.

“There was firm consensus,” says Gallegos, “that we can’t settle for incremental change divorced from our big-picture vision of a national campaign for child care.”

Paluso is optimistic. “We’re stronger than we’ve ever been. We are really building something powerful and different. We’re seeing the scale of the demands shift and power growing, thanks to organizers, parents, families and providers on the ground.”

A New Kind of System

K-12 education varies dramatically from state to state and district to district, but it’s still a system, unlike child care and early education. As New America put it in a guidebook in 2020:

Early childhood education is funded in a piecemeal approach, primarily through family payments and public provisions that fuel inequity. Families with low incomes spend a greater portion of their discretionary income on child care, and public subsidies allow only a fraction of eligible families to access the services they need.

Paluso envisions “a set of coordinated strategies across local, state and national efforts that really talk to each other and are linked to each other in a cohesive system funded with public dollars.” Accomplishing this goal requires a joint strategic direction, new partnerships and, eventually, a universal system that’s truly a system. It means honoring all different kinds of care in a variety of child care settings (including paid family leave) and making sure parents have real choices about what’s best for their families.

Gallegos argues, “We have to radically reimagine the system, and that includes how it’s funded. And so it’s going to take taxing the rich, it’s going to take ballot measures, and it’s going to take major federal investments. And none of it will work unless parents, families and providers are at the table making decisions about what they need for themselves.”

Many of the details remain to be worked out, but the contours of the new system are taking shape:

- Decoupling child care funding and access from employment status. This linkage undermines stable care for children and stable incomes for providers.
- A larger workforce, which means sustainable, living wages and benefits
- Workers need the freedom to organize, which includes but is not limited to having a collective voice about working conditions and pay.
- Families having real choices in the kind of care that’s best for their child, and with a variety of cultural and linguistic options. Quality care can be found in many settings.
- Recognition that child care is a public good and should be well-funded with public resources
- An equitable system that considers the needs of all children and families, and provides support for caregivers to serve all children well.

While it would have been a major step, Paluso and Gallegos don’t believe passage of Build Back Better would have solved all of our child care’s systemic woes. Gallegos recollects a participant in one of CC4EFN’s leadership sessions who noted, “Build Back Better was never really, truly for us (women of color). There was no better before to build back to. That framing really centered white, affluent mothers and not Black, Indigenous and other people of color.”

“We will be demanding more from the federal government,” Paluso promises.

Region: United States ^[3]

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