

For Child Care Gains: Look To States, Not The Feds ^[1]

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As a single, working mom, I know firsthand how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated instability across the childcare industry. I also know that the last two years have required families — particularly those who are resource constrained — to make unimaginable sacrifices. I experienced these challenges from a place of privilege and resource, and even I had days that felt insurmountable.

I also saw how some policymakers were responding quickly and swiftly, not only to the childcare crisis, but also to more systemic challenges. In my home state of Colorado, Governor Jared Polis has been a champion for parents, children, and childcare providers through investment and the creation of the Department of Early Childhood. In fact, Colorado is now one of a few states nationwide to dedicate a state agency to early childhood services and massively expand state-funded universal preschool. The new department maintains an ambitious agenda of increasing access, affordability, and provider pay; building the one-stop-shop for all childcare and early childhood services; and defining what high-quality means across all early childhood programs. But at the same time, the state is looking to both Gen Z young professionals and retirees to fulfill child care shortages.

And it is not just Colorado working to expand access to child care. This month, New Mexico launched a Child Care Finder in partnership with the online childcare management platform Wonderschool. The tool allows parents and caregivers to search among 1000+ childcare programs statewide and filter results by fields such as proximity, age of child, quality rating, tuition, language, and program type. This partnership marks a new era of ensuring parents can choose the best child care option without compromising quality. In response to the launch of the Child Care Finder, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham shared, “Making sure that every New Mexico family and child has access to affordable quality child care is a cornerstone of the work of this administration, and we are committed to continuing to close remaining barriers to access.”

I have grown more curious about the state-level solutions to address our childcare crisis. I spoke with Josephine “Josie” Kalipeni, the executive director of Family Values @ Work and a passionate advocate for universal child care and family leave. Josie was born in Malawi and has seen inequities in both one of the poorest countries in the world and one of the wealthiest countries in the world. She is committed to fighting the devaluation of care and caregiving. It was the connection between supporting working families, caregiving, and advocacy that inspired me to hear her story and learn about her work.

Alison Griffin: How has Family Values @ Work (FV@W) supported working parents over the last two years?

Josephine “Josie” Kalipeni: Actually, for nearly two decades, FV@W has been building momentum for federal paid family and medical leave and paid sick and safe days. More recently, we have also been fighting for affordable child care. We have supported organizing and education in 27 states to win local and state policies that could pave the way for eventual federal programs that all working families can access.

During the pandemic, our network advocated for emergency paid leave and paid sick days programs — which we won in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). We offered “know your rights” resources to workers, both through our website and events and through our state partners, to help families do the calculations necessary to determine which program could help them most.

Over the last two years, we have been speaking out about the truths amplified by this pandemic: The care economy in America is in tatters, and we need universal, equitable policies to support working families.

Alison: What have the last two years revealed about working families that we did not fully realize leading up to the pandemic?

Josie: The pandemic shined a spotlight on two key challenges.

First, the infrastructure to support working caregivers does not exist.

The pandemic showed us there are supports that working families need, especially those who also have other caregiving responsibilities. But the supports available are incredibly inequitable. While communities of color and the advocacy community have long known that a work-life balance is a farce without policies such as paid family and medical leave, the pandemic showed us that this is a pressure point for millions of families.

Second, the federal government can — and should — do something about the struggles that working families are experiencing.

In the midst of the pandemic, a bipartisan Congress came together to enact legislation that funded affordable healthcare access, increased protections for essential workers, invested in childcare infrastructure, and established paid leave. Though temporary, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan, somewhat united in the idea that these policies are necessary to support workers and stabilize the economy. We have heard for so long that Congress can't afford to pass these family-supporting policies. And yet, over the last two years, it proved us all wrong.

Alison: Are there policies in place that, if better leveraged by states, communities and employers, would make the difference in the lives of working families? If not, what sort of policies are needed to ensure working families — and single parents — have both career opportunities and consistent, quality care for their children?

Josie: Twelve states in the FV@W Network have passed legislation establishing paid family and medical leave. Their expertise and learnings have been critical in developing the federal legislation and informing what we know works and what doesn't to create equitable access for working caregiving families.

We also know that local and state agencies, as well as private employers, can do a better job of informing workers of their existing paid leave rights and helping them access these benefits. For example, many communities struggle to gain real access to paid leave programs if the application is offered only online or only in English, or if help with the process is only available Monday through Friday between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Immigrant and gig economy workers, people with disabilities, and communities facing the digital divide need agencies and employers to do more to connect them to paid leave.

In addition to paid leave, we know families need access to affordable, quality child care. With the loss of more than 3.5 million mothers from the workforce, we learned that investment in child care to support working families is essential. When families do not have the quality care options they need, we see the impacts on the next generation of workers and our economy. States have the obligation to lower childcare and early education costs, target assistance to ensure those who have been most marginalized receive the most support, raise wages for early educators and childcare staff and increase the child care options so that families can find the best fit.

Alison: What have you learned from the FV@W state partners and how they support working families?

Josie: Working communities of color are dealing with covert and overt racism in the midst of managing work and family caregiving. This is happening after the pandemic deteriorated the little care infrastructure that once existed. We have learned that, with robust support, our state partners can build power among our constituents by deeply investing in the relationships in their communities. These local-level relationships build trust, which enables support to flow to those most in need when they need the help the most.

When the pandemic hit, we knew that working with caregivers would be hit hard. Partners like 9to5 organized supports for vulnerable members. 9to5 is a multiple-issue organization working at the intersection of workplace justice, childcare justice, housing justice, gender, and racial justice. Members in the 9to5 community are predominantly low-wage BIPOC workers who are also family providers: mostly mothers, sisters, aunts. Even though 9to5 is not a direct service organization, they knew that work hours would be cut, causing these critical family providers to lose their jobs because they had to care for a family member or had no access to child care in order to get to work. They were able to raise over \$1 million for families who were struggling to pay for bills, groceries, and rent.

Alison: Which states are having the greatest success — or have paired early childhood efforts with support for working families? Are these states subsidizing child care, expanding paid family leave, or offering paid sick leave?

Josie: Through the efforts of state organizers, working families, and advocates, many states have started to reset the bar and reimagine their childcare infrastructure to better serve working families. For example, California created a children's cabinet, which serves as an advisory body responsible for improving the collaboration among agencies that serve youth in the state. This cabinet will work to engage stakeholders from some of the most impacted communities, coordinate services across agencies and provide input on the state's rollout of universal preschool.

Early childhood organizers in New Mexico had major wins when they amended their state constitution to secure stable funding for children ages zero to five. A ballot initiative was just passed that made New Mexico the first state in the nation to create a permanent fund for child care. It specifies all children under age five must have access to education, funded through an expansion of New Mexico's Land Grant Permanent School Fund. Combined with pandemic relief funds, the state was also able to expand its income eligibility from 200% to 350% of the Free and Reduced Price Lunch rate, making New Mexico the state with the highest income eligibility for childcare assistance. The Child Care Finder is the latest in the state's efforts to lead the nation in childcare access.

Finally, we have seen many states increase wages for early educators, which will have a major impact. Right now, one in seven childcare workers are living below the poverty line and lack access to health care. Washington, D.C.'s budget for fiscal year 2022 included recurring, local funding for part of the landmark Birth-to-Three law that increases early educator compensation to parity with public school teachers. The funding for this law will come from a raised personal income tax rate for individuals making over \$250,000.

The District also implemented a groundbreaking "Baby Bonds" program for families of children born after October 1, 2022. The bonds are seeded with \$500, and \$1,000 is added per year until the child turns 18. The concept has long been discussed in liberal think tank circles, and DC is being watched carefully to see how viable it would be in other locations.

Last year, Oregon passed a bill to create a Department of Early Learning and Care by consolidating childcare and early learning programs and streamlining governance. The office's budget allowed for an expanded childcare subsidy to include undocumented families, to lower family co-pays, and to advance equitable pay for providers.

Alison: As you look to 2023, where have you set your sights and doubled down on your advocacy efforts?

Josie: The movement for paid leave has been strong for more than three decades, and next year, FV@W will celebrate helping to lead that movement for 20 years. Our roots in this movement are deep and lie with the advocates who organized and won unpaid leave through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993 - now 30 years ago. That unrelenting work has brought us to this critical moment where paid family and medical leave are so close to being implemented at the national level. We know access to paid leave and affordable child care for all will help to guarantee prosperity for so many working families and lead to more equity for all workers. They deserve our continued advocacy and support, and our children's futures depend on it.

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