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The struggle for early child care is real [1]

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Excerpts

When Cara Sager and her husband Brian visited San Antonio in December 2021 ahead of a job-related move, she discovered the wait list for the local day care center she'd hoped to use was an untenable eight months.

This meant Sager, a 34-year-old physical therapist, wouldn't have child care for her infant daughter when she was scheduled to start a new job here.

"I thought, 'This is just insanity,'" she recalled. "What do you do?"

Abilene, where the couple had been living, suffered from the same paucity of quality child care spaces, she said.

Fortunately, their scheduled move was postponed for months, and her child was able to start at the Pineapple School — a Spanish immersion early learning center that Sager "loves" — when her job started last August.

The Pineapple School costs Sager $1,400 a month — not a huge burden, since her spouse is a surgeon and her own job pays well. But it's a sum that would put such care beyond the financial reach of many families.

"For us, it wasn't a question of not having the money to pay for child care, it was the question of, 'Are there any openings?'" Sager said.

Her panic at the potential lack of appropriate child care is a fear shared by many parents in San Antonio, Texas and beyond. The nation's early childhood care system was already limping along. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, cutting the legs out from under a fragile situation.

As the virus wreaked havoc, more than 111,000 employees left their jobs in child care — a whopping one-tenth of the workforce. The reverberations were felt in homes across the nation as some 6.5 million families were unable to obtain stable child care, according to census data from the spring of 2021.

Local child care centers that stayed open — in the beginning, serving only children of essential workers — saw operating costs rise and revenues sink, as many parents (read: women) kept their children home as they worked remotely or became unemployed.

Bexar County saw about 20 percent of its child care centers close due to pandemic stresses, and many that remain open are still struggling to recover.

Billions in federal funding poured in to mitigate the disaster, but child care experts say it wasn't enough and didn't address the long-term problems that continue to compromise the country's early childhood care system.

It is our national shame. The U.S invests a pittance in its child care industry when compared to every other developed nation. And this from a country whose leaders are forever banging on about how children are our future.

Back in the 1970s, a bipartisan effort to create a universal child-care system was scuttled when President Richard Nixon vetoed it, claiming it would "weaken families."

Since then, it's been every man (or mother) for herself, a gantlet that entails negotiating a fragmented, crazy-quilt landscape of day care options that may or may not have an open spot, may or not be high quality and may come with a price tag that eats up a huge share of household income.

If the prospect of parents struggling to find safe, quality care for their kids doesn't tug at your heartstrings, perhaps the pocketbook aspect will move you: One estimate found that a lack of reliable child care costs Texas an estimated $9 billion a year in lost income and tax revenue.

The exorbitant cost of child care — on average more than $10,000 a year, nearly twice what experts consider affordable — is a burden for too many families. But child care center owners are in a bind: To be able to retain employees, they'd have to pay them more — and raise prices for parents who are already tapped out.

Child care workers (most of whom are women, often women of color) are low-paid, an average of some $27,000 a year – worse pay than many jobs found in retail, fast-food and other low-wage industries. Paltry wages and high turnover bedevil the industry.

Aside from large, for-profit chains, community-based child care centers often run on razor-thin profit margins, giving many owners no financial wiggle room.

Some nonprofits and charities in San Antonio offer assistance in various forms to low-income parents, for whom the search for quality and affordable child care can be especially arduous. But it's not enough to address the enormity of the problem.

In Texas, federal subsidies offer inadequate help to low-income parents when it comes to child care.

In worst case scenarios, a desperate working mom may leave her kids in unsafe situations, such as with an elderly or frail relative or with an unemployed boyfriend — the latter arrangement posing a possible "lethal recipe," as one former Bexar County criminal prosecutor put it.

The huge social policy bill pushed last year by President Joe Biden included major reforms to the nation's child care industry. They would have capped expenses for parents, provided large subsidies to centers to help them raise wages and retain workers, and added money for universal prekindergarten. But those reforms were stripped from the final package due to opposition by Republicans and Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

The argument again was that such help would meddle in family affairs — proving that Richard Nixon is still very much alive and with us.

As the new year starts, Texas is blessed with a $33 billion budget surplus, and you'd think that at least some of the largesse could go toward improving the state's abysmal early childhood care situation.

But in his inauguration speech, Gov. Greg Abbot enumerated his plans for the windfall — cutting property taxes, more work on the power grid and other infrastructure issues, help for businesses and of course more money to enforce the border.

As far as the fate of the state's children go (aside from making schools safer, which doesn't address reducing the flow of guns), Abbott remains obsessed with two issues: allowing the use of vouchers for private schools and a parental bill of rights, which is really more a stealth move against transgender kids' rights and other so-called "woke" agendas.

The governor is always crowing about how Texas is such a great state for business. But when it comes to how it fares as a place to raise kids — especially when child care costs are factored in — Texas doesn't even break into the top 10.

For Sager, who is originally from California, the issue is not just a lack of quality child care. It's the fact that her adopted home state makes mothers (and fathers) return to work too soon after having a child, robbing them of early bonding time.

In California, parents are able to take eight weeks of paid maternity or family leave — it's one of only 13 states to offer it. Texas offers no paid maternity leave, although eligible employees taking such leave will see their jobs protected for 12 weeks under nationwide federal family leave rules (for employers with more than 50 workers, that is.)

But how many households can go three months without a paycheck?

Again, it's our shame: The U. S. is the only industrialized country in the world to not offer paid leave for new mothers.

Employees in Texas seeking paid time off after a baby are at the mercy of their employers, who may — or may not — offer such a perk. Some may be able to cobble together paid time off for vacation or sick pay, perhaps short-term disability. But the vast majority of working people in the nation lack paid family leave through their jobs, which equates to about 9,709,000 workers in Texas.

Some in Washington are taking note: Today, a bipartisan group in Congress meets for the first time to try and hash out a national paid family leave policy.

In Abilene, Sager requested and received five months of unpaid leave for her baby, and was able to receive six weeks of short-term disability pay. Pregnant again, she plans to ask off for the same arrangement for her second child at her present job.

"I'm not asking to be paid for five months, I'm asking for job protection," she said. "Why should a woman be punished for having children and wanting to spend longer than six to 12 weeks at home?"

Again, it's not just a heartstrings issue: If women in Texas participated in the labor force at the same rate as women in countries with paid leave, there would be more than 592,000 additional workers in the state and $23.8 billion more in wages earned statewide, studies show.

"It's such a different world from here," Sager said. "It feels like Texas doesn't really care. There's just no support in Texas for a new mother."

Here's the deal.

Your children are my children. And my children are your children. We are not islands, but are instead all bound up together, interconnected at the roots. Research has repeatedly shown how crucial those first few years in a child's life are — a time when young brains rapidly develop, personalities take shape and loving attachments (or the lack thereof) are forged.

How well our children fare as adults — as the future workers of America, if you will — is a process that begins in the crib, on the story-time carpet, on the day care center playground.

You may argue we shouldn't spend taxpayer money on higher paychecks for day care workers, or for more high-quality child care centers, or for time for mothers and babies to bond. It's not your concern, you may say.

But here's the reality: It is.
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