

More hospitals are offering child care. But they shouldn't have to

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Excerpts

Since the pandemic began, thousands of child care locations have closed, exacerbating an already acute shortage.

But health care worker Jada Carter was lucky. Her two children went to Hospitots, one of the few places to stay open during the early days of the pandemic, when, by one estimate, two-thirds of child care centers closed.

Hospitots is one of the three child care centers connected to the Ballard Health System in Johnson City, Tenn., where health care workers can send their kids at a discount. Having reliable child care while much of the country was struggling made her job possible for Carter. "At a time when the world was falling apart, child care was never something I had to worry about," Carter said. Ballard Health is in the process of expanding to include 11 more child care sites throughout Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. "The number one reason for doing this is recruitment and retention of staff," said Paula Masters, vice president of health programs and population health at Ballard.

The lack of federal child care infrastructure means that the health care industry is stepping in to create its own child care systems. Hospitals and health care systems are facing a staff recruitment and retention crisis that is particularly acute for nurses, who are overwhelmingly women and who resigned from hospital work in huge numbers during the first two years of the pandemic.

Polls consistently show that Americans want quality affordable child care options — and the health systems that do provide this understand what a powerful recruiting incentive the on-site systems provide.

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Frankly, hospitals shouldn't have to do this. A patchwork child care system leaves many Americans, not just those who work in health care, vulnerable to job disruptions, turnover, and absenteeism. Across all industries, child care remains one of the top reasons employees cite for leaving their jobs — and it's even more critical for people who work in frontline "deskless" positions, which aren't able to reap the flexibility (and different child care arrangements) that come with remote work.

Yet it's because our national system for child care is so absent and broken that it requires private employers to solve what is considered in many high-income countries to be a "public good."

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