

A step forward on child care ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Ensuring access to safe, good and affordable child care is crucial for helping to lift low-income parents out of poverty and build futures for their children. The child care bill signed on Wednesday by President Obama is a bipartisan step in the right direction, and it holds promise for further progress.

The new law, the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, makes safety and other improvements to the \$5.2 billion child care program, which provides grants to states to help low-income parents who work, or are enrolled in job training or school, obtain child care, mostly through federal vouchers. The new law requires comprehensive background checks for staff, as well as training in first aid and CPR; annual inspections of all facilities; and quality improvements, like increased parent education.

Parents will be able to find more information about child care providers online to make their choices, and subsidies will be recalculated no more than once in a 12-month period to avoid the instability of an immediate loss of child care because of a sudden change in income.

Existing statutory provisions untouched by the new revisions allow parents to use the vouchers at religious facilities, as long as the child care provided does not involve religious instruction or worship. The wording does leave room for discrimination on the basis of religion in hiring for some positions, although not in admissions. Using public money for hiring that is based on religion raises constitutional concerns. But in 2002, the Supreme Court dismissed constitutional objections to a similar voucher plan in a case involving Cleveland public and parochial schools.

The nearly unanimous support of the new law in both chambers of Congress, from both sides of the aisle, was a bright spot. (The final Senate vote last Monday was 88 to 1.) That refreshing display of bipartisanship owes much to the collaborative efforts of Senators Barbara Mikulski and Tom Harkin, both Democrats, and Senators Richard Burr and Lamar Alexander, Republicans; and in the House, Representatives George Miller, a Democrat, and John Kline, a Republican.

Their success in rallying support for improved child care standards has raised hopes for getting more done - most urgent is to increase the amount of funding for the program, which now serves only a small percentage of eligible children and severely underpays child care workers. Ways should be explored to help working parents at the lower end of the middle class, who are not eligible for vouchers but struggle to meet rising child care costs. What the country needs is high-quality child care that provides an enriching learning environment. And that takes more money.

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