

American child care has a slumlord problem ^[1]

Author: Smith, S.E.

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EXCERPTS

President Obama's nearly \$4 trillion budget proposal for the next fiscal year includes a direct shot at addressing rising child care costs in America with tax credits and other incentives. Setting aside nearly \$200 billion over the next decade, he's advocating for increased affordability, availability, and quality of childcare, as well as universal pre-kindergarten education, a move that could jumpstart the U.S. economy. It's an important step - but money alone won't solve America's child care problem.

Access to child care in the U.S. is complicated by more than simple costs and regional availability; it's also an issue of safety, as a sobering report from Reveal illustrates. While the child-care industry explodes, the system designed to regulate it is failing. As the United States pushes for child-care reform - Congress just passed a bill last year to improve safety standards - it needs to consider reform to enforcement at the same time.

Businesses offering child care have been racking up violations for decades, including unsafe electrical wiring, illegal provider/child ratios, insect infestations, neglect reports, and poorly maintained facilities. Reveal reports that 10 child-care centers in California remain open despite accumulating over two dozen serious violations in five years. In one center, a child was allegedly given a black eye by a teacher. In another, a preschooler was left alone in a van for an hour and a half. Another had a play area infested with black widow spiders, North America's most venomous type.

Making matters worse, accessing violation records can be difficult for parents, even in states where data must be kept online, as the data are often incomplete, out of date, or nebulous. "So, essentially, I enrolled my daughter in a death trap," one tearful parent told Reveal.

Why is the system that's supposed to protect those in need falling apart, and what can we do about it?

Lack of regulatory consistency, paired with weak laws, is a profound issue. From state to state, protections are highly variable - this is one reason the new budget includes incentives for states to improve their standards for child-care providers. But it may also be time for more aggressive federal reform.

The Department of Health and Human Services could take a more active role, especially when it comes to policies regarding facilities that accept federal funding. Since many daycare facilities utilize at least some federal or state funding, they could become subject to stronger and consistent federal policies; thus, a child in Kansas would receive the same protections as a child in Texas or Washington.

Another issue is the work of a familiar villain: In many states, regulations have been defanged by industry lobbyists. Until lobbyists are left out of the process of lawmaking, policies will fall far short of what's needed.

Reporting processes also need to be streamlined, with clear procedures for escalating each and every reported incident. When reports fall through the cracks and aren't aggressively pursued, those at risk lose out. And better online records must be established. Much as consumers can turn to the state bar and medical board to look up attorneys and doctors, they should be able to do the same with child-care facilities, an option only available in some states.

Funding issues are another component of any fight against the collapse of the regulatory system. In many states, deep slashes to government programs like Social Security and other social services are leaving the most vulnerable members of society in a state of increased fragility. When funds are cut, the number of full-time social workers and other staffers drops, with employees being cut to part-time status or laid off entirely to make up budget shortfalls. That leaves fewer inspectors to evaluate facilities, fewer social workers to discuss and process complaints, and more opportunities for a backlog to develop, which is precisely how these problems develop in the first place.

Obama's budget is putting forth the funding proposals that will help states protect their children - if legislators and government agencies can find ways to use that funding effectively. As it turns out, that's a big "if."

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: budget ^[4]

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