

Who cares for the caregivers? What unionization could mean for the future of publically funded childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last month the California state assembly voted to allow home-based childcare providers to form a union and bargain collectively with the state government. Although California would represent the largest state to permit childcare unionization, it is not the first. Over the last decade, more than a dozen states have allowed home-based childcare workers to unionize and more are considering legislation that would do so.

Efforts to organize childcare workers have produced a mixture of glee, derision, and confusion. Supporters argue that unions will serve as powerful for the interests of childcare providers and young children, while opponents suggest the unionization of child care workers is simply a ruse to line the pockets of greedy union bosses.

At first blush, home-based childcare workers and labor unions may seem like an odd pairing. Childcare is a fundamentally different setting than the factories of the 40s and 50s and the state and local bureaucracies of the 60s and 70s. However, as a result of caring for children whose parents use publicly-funded childcare subsidies, home-based childcare workers can be classified as quasi-public employees. This public employee status may be conferred on home-based childcare workers either through legislation or by executive order from a governor. Where this has occurred, home-based childcare workers have come to represent a potentially new type of union member.

It is easy to see why some home-based childcare workers might seek union support. Despite decades of advocacy and state efforts to professionalize the childcare workforce by increasing child care subsidies or otherwise increase salaries and benefits, home-based childcare workers continue to earn appallingly low wages and have little to no access to benefits and minimal job security. Estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that people who care for children are paid approximately the same hourly rate as veterinary assistants (people who care for our pets) and parking lot attendants (people who care for our cars). Many home-based childcare workers also lament their lack of a voice in the state policy discussions that govern their work.

The unionization of home-childcare workers may have important implications for children and families. Poor working conditions for home-based childcare providers often results in poor learning, as well as health and safety conditions for young children. With flexible hours and generally lower costs than comparable center-based child care programs, home-based childcare is a popular source of non-parental care among low-income infants and toddlers in the U.S., including the rapidly growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse families. The problem is that home-based care ranks well below formal center-based childcare on nearly every indicator of program quality. Children in home-based care get less cognitive stimulation, spend less time in goal-directed academic or social activities, and watch more television than similar children who enroll in center-based settings.

As California Governor Jerry Brown considers the legislation allowing state home childcare workers to organize, it is worth noting that there now evidence that unionization may lead to higher quality home-based care for low-income children. In a study recently published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, my colleagues and I found that unionization in Illinois led to a significant increase in rates of licensure among home-based childcare workers. Licensure tends to be good for children: it ensures that childcare providers at least meet basic guidelines to safeguard the health and safety of children in their care, licensed programs generally provide more stimulating environments, and licensure represents an important first step in the professionalization of the home-based childcare workforce. Yet the impacts of unionization in Illinois were not entirely positive. We also found that unionization resulted in a reduction in the overall number of children who received subsidies to purchase childcare. Thus, we found that unionization led to better regulated but less available subsidized care.

Although this study indicates that unionization may have positive effects on the quality of care available to low-income children, advocates for the expansion of these union-friendly policies face an uphill climb. Unionization is a political non-starter for many policymakers and providers. The automatic collection of union dues from all licensed providers who care for subsidy-receiving children has angered some workers who oppose labor unions and has led to lawsuits in multiple states. In other states, home-based workers' collective bargaining

rights have been eliminated as governors' offices changed from one political party to another.

There is no sign that the political and ideological battles surrounding childcare unionization will cease anytime soon. The recent re-authorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant includes important provisions to improve the working conditions of providers and the learning conditions of the young children in their care. Yet whether you are fundamentally pro-union or anti-union, we should all be able to agree that, to date, home-based childcare workers have not received the compensation or the consistent support they need to effectively promote the health, development and safety of young children. Unions are willing (and may just be able) to push for these changes.

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