

Clinton's day care plan: A good start, but not enough^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Earlier this year, Hillary Clinton introduced her plan to confront these rising costs. Arguably the most progressive part of her platform, it would use tax credits to cap child care costs at 10 percent of a family's income. This would have a significant impact on low-income parents, the demographic most in need of day care services and whose work-family conflicts are matters of survival, rather than inconvenience.

I work in a casino, and I know many parents who are forced to forgo a necessary wage to stay home and care for their children, because the money they'd make wouldn't cover the cost of child care. In the case of single parents who have no choice but to work, they often have to leave their kids at lower-quality and unlicensed facilities - or in extreme cases, home alone.

Quality day care centers are not necessarily bountiful either. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Development says that less than 10 percent of American child care facilities are rated "very high quality." Mrs. Clinton's plan acknowledges this reality, and would pump federal money into raising the wages and retention rates of day care workers, many of whom cannot even afford the services they provide.

In states like mine, Nevada, where low-wage work makes up a quarter of the economy, less than 25 percent of families can afford child care. Mrs. Clinton's proposed tax credit would not only be good for individual families, but also for the larger economy - the Economic Policy Institute estimates that it could generate \$1.92 billion in new economic activity for the state.

True, her plan could always go further - Nordic-style free day care, for example - but it's close to comprehensive when measured against her rival's. Donald J. Trump doesn't have a day-care policy to speak of beyond, as he said at one point, that he thinks it's a wife's job.

But he also said, in an Iowa town hall, that "it's not that expensive for a company to do it." That's not a policy, but it's a good point, and it's one that Mrs. Clinton should take to heart. Her plan focuses on pumping up federal funding, but it doesn't place any onus on, or provide incentives to, large companies, which often have the resources to make child care available to their employees. A mere 7 percent of American businesses offer on-site child care, even though it has been proved to reduce turnover and increase worker productivity, as children are the No. 1 reason for absenteeism and tardiness.

A city like Las Vegas is the perfect example of a labor market that would benefit from some combination of Mrs. Clinton's federal assistance and Mr. Trump's offhand business-centered approach. The leisure and hospitality industry employs over 375,000 workers in Nevada and operates round the clock, 365 days a year. Yet very few day-care facilities in Las Vegas offer weekend or overnight care, and those that do demand high rates or require large upfront deposits.

Forget quality and affordability. Finding any child care center that accommodates the erratic hours of swing, graveyard or on-call shifts - the sort of schedules demanded of a majority of casino workers, and increasingly of wage workers across the country - can become another job in itself. MGM Resorts, the largest employer in Las Vegas, provides discounted child care to its employees, but relies on only one facility to serve its many thousands of workers.

A co-worker of mine recently experienced this dilemma. Newly separated, she was unable to find affordable child care to cover her weekend shifts as a casino cocktail server. Turns out, she wasn't alone: Other co-workers offered her their empathy and advice, sharing similar experiences; even our bartender joined in, expressing his own challenges in finding a quality place to take his daughter. In the end, she did what many parents do in the choice between work and family: She took the pay cut and stayed home, a result beneficial to neither her family nor her employer.

What Mrs. Clinton's plan does is get assistance to the families like my co-worker's who really need it, but the challenge with any tax-credit plan is educating workers on how to properly claim it. And then, of course, they have to find a place to use the money those credits free up. In the meantime, as our economy becomes increasingly reliant on service positions, dual-income households and schedules that operate outside the traditional workweek, work-family conflicts aren't going anywhere soon, until the work sector takes some initiative in helping to relieve it.

That's why, on top of Mrs. Clinton's plan, we need to find ways to encourage, or require, employers to provide coverage themselves. Reforming work culture to be more compatible with family life is not only an ethical proposition, but a worthwhile economic investment.

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