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High Quality Child Care for Children Under Age 4: Meeting the Needs of Children and Parents

By Linda K. Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development

Yesterday, I was proud to participate in a roundtable discussion on Capitol Hill to discuss some of the challenges parents face in finding and affording high quality child care for children under four. Joining with me were:

- Senator Bob Casey (D-PA)
- Representative Joe Crowley (D-NY)
- Representative Lois Frankel (D-FL)
- Roberto Rodriguez (White House, Domestic Policy Council)
- Dawn O'Neal (a center-based child care worker)
- Zunnobia Hakir (a parent of a 2 year old son in an early childhood program in Washington D.C)



The room in the Russell Senate building was packed as reporters, advocates, parents, and others from organizations throughout the D.C. metropolitan area wanted to hear more about the current challenges facing parents and the proposed solutions that Senator Casey, Representative Crowley and Representative Frankel will offer next week in legislation to be introduced in both the Senate and the House.

The Members of Congress spoke about the difficulties parents have in finding child care, about how hard it is to afford child care and also about the importance of quality child care. All three policymakers said that the earliest years of a child's life are a critical time in development, child care needs to be safe, but that it also needs to promote child development.

White House staffer Roberto Rodriguez reminded everyone about the President's remarks in last year's [State of the Union Address](#): *In today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, **we need affordable, high-quality child care more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have -- it's a must-have.** So it's time we stop treating child care as a side issue, or as a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us.*

As Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, I provided an overall frame of the issues confronting us. I shared five points that are central to understanding why it's time to address the quality of child care for children under age 4.

- 1) The neuroscience is clear, over 80% of the human brain is developed in the first four years of life. Both genes and experience play a role in brain development.
- 2) There are over 7.5 million children under the age of four living below 200% of the federal poverty level. Nearly two-thirds of them are in some form of non-parental child care every week. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the vast majority of that care is poor to mediocre in quality.

Why is that the case?

- 3) There are over 2 million adults working in child care programs. Their average hourly wage is about \$9.30 per hour or \$19,344 annually, which is lower than the federal poverty threshold for a family of 3. These workers are not well trained but on these wages, they cannot afford the cost of higher education.
- 4) Over 60% of mothers with children under age 3 are working today. Child care is not optional, it's a necessity and supports both parents AND business.
- 5) The average cost of child care for infants and toddlers is more than \$10,000 per year and as high as \$17,000 in some areas. You do the math. For families living below 200% of the poverty line, it is simply unaffordable.

So, **IN SUMMARY**, what choices do our low income working families really have? We are forcing our children during their most critical developmental years into low quality settings, with poorly trained and paid staff and expecting them to arrive at our schools ready to learn.

Without intending to do so, we have created a *“cycle of early learning poverty”*. Whether we like it or not - and good or bad - child care is where most of our children get their early learning experiences, which is why it is critical to expand access to high quality care. A grandparent and a parent reaffirmed that during their remarks on the panel.

Dawn O'Neal is a grandparent. She has also worked in a child care center for 15 years. She told the audience that she earns \$8.50 per hour. She told them how she loves caring for children but that with her wages so low, she often has to make difficult decisions at the end of the month as she seeks to pay bills, buy groceries, or purchase her asthma medicine. She talked about the high quality of her center. But, she told the room, *“one of our staff has to use a different center for her child. She can't afford the program she works in. That's just not right.”*

Zunnobia Hakim, a mother of a 2 year old, went to Head Start as a child in Anacostia. She is now on the police force in the District of Columbia, and she told the audience, *“Even as a police officer, I do not earn high enough wages in DC to afford quality child care.”* Her son attends an Educare program, for which she is grateful that he is learning and happy. *“I have been a police officer for 15 years. Every day on DC's streets, I see the results of when children don't have access to high quality child care.”*

The legislation to be introduced next week, the Child C.A.R.E. Act, builds on the foundation laid in the recently reauthorized Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act but is specifically focused on high quality care for infants and toddlers. The measure will allocate funding to states to help close the gap between what parents can afford to pay and the cost of high quality child care for children under age 4. The bill will also focus on strengthening the workforce and increasing wages for those who work with our youngest children.

We can break the cycle of early learning poverty. Watch my blog in the next few weeks as we examine each of the challenges (i.e., affordability, quality, supply, workforce, wages, etc.) in more detail.