

**Prepared Testimony of
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I express my gratitude to Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and Members of the Subcommittee on Worker & Family Support at the Committee on Ways & Means. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I come to you as a lifelong educator, and policy leader with deep subject matter expertise in education spanning birth through college and career and their connections to life outcomes. However, I am first and foremost a parent, the same as many of you, who has personally navigated the obstacle course of childcare with two young sons - one son with special healthcare needs.

As you know, this pandemic has highlighted the persistent inequities that were hidden in plain sight and exacerbated the challenges from access to affordability and the ongoing debate on quality early childhood care. A critical factor prohibiting parents, particularly single parents and women of color, from obtaining and retaining employment is childcare, especially programs that offer high-quality, early learning opportunities for their children. Over the past ten years, more rigorous kindergarten state standards have widened the disconnect between preschool learning and expectations at school entry. As such, “daycare” is simply not enough to prepare our earliest learners for the critical transition to early elementary years. We also know that the foundations of lifelong health are built during the earliest years, so public investments in high quality childcare will pay off doubly in supporting learning and

reducing many of the most common chronic diseases across the lifespan. This, now more than ever, must be part of our focus.

Neuroscience has made clear that brain development within the first five years after birth is the gateway to lifelong learning, health and success. This brings to bear the importance of expanding our focus beyond just ensuring the safety of our youngest citizens to building a strong foundation for their education, health and workforce trajectories. Two-thirds of families today have all available parents in the workforce. As I am sure many of you can relate, we know that having a “safe place” allows working parents to focus on their jobs and provides peace of mind that their child is being prepared to prosper and thrive in their future. What parent wouldn’t want that for their child?

Access has been an ongoing obstacle as we elevate the need to ensure equitable outcomes for all children, but it has been especially difficult for parents and children of color. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 51% of the country lived in a childcare desert, widening the disparities in early childhood care for communities of color and families facing economic insecurity. We also know that 37% of Black babies and 30% of Hispanic/Latinx babies are living in poverty compared to 13% of white babies. Of the 40 million unemployment claims during the pandemic, 21.7% of those were workers of color in essential jobs. And for families who are already struggling to make ends meet or facing economic insecurities due to rising costs of food, transportation, and housing are spending approximately 29% of their income on weekly childcare costs, compared to 6% for families at or above the federal poverty level.

This means that our children who need early childhood care supports the most are not only unable to access the care they need but are at an increased disadvantage throughout their lifespan. Some childcare centers, which already operated on thin margins, were compelled to close due to lack of attendance because of parents concerns about their child's health. Currently, half a million childcare slots will be permanently lost. A national survey found that nearly half of low-income families are not going to be able to return to prior childcare arrangements post-pandemic which is crippling to the workforce. Of the childcare facilities that are or will open, they continue to struggle to ensure the health and safety of the caregivers and children they serve due to the cost of cleaning products, proper PPE materials, staggering drop-off/pick-up times, in addition to the necessary infrastructure adjustments and the continuously changing guidelines as we learn more about COVID19. Children of employed mothers under the age of 3 who are living in poverty spend an average of 21 hours per week in nonparental care. This includes any type of care, not taking into account quality.

The Child Care Development Block Grant has the potential to directly support working families during tough times like these. Through vouchers to eligible families or grants and contracts to providers, parents can leave their child in a safe place while they work. But safety alone is not enough. Children's developing brains need responsive interactions, language rich environments, and supportive, trained teachers. But, especially now, as high-quality programs suffer financially, parents in a bind may not have access to programs that provide these supportive experiences in their absence.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, I am a mother of a child with special healthcare needs - my son was a patient of over half a dozen specialists across three states by the age of three. Yet, the combination of his amazing early childhood care providers and healthcare professionals provided him an opportunity to thrive in his learning environment and me the opportunity to have the career that allows me to help support my family and advocate for so many families like mine. In my current and previous roles, I've worked closely with governors' offices and their policy advisors on education, health and human service issues which included childcare topics and I've seen first-hand that early childhood education is not a partisan issue.

Over the past few years, Governors on both sides of the aisle have prioritized the need for high quality early learning environments and ensuring the health and safety of their youngest citizens by increasing state investments and improving childcare licensing requirements. Governors see early childhood as the gateway to success for their current and future workforce. In Alabama, (R) Governor Ivey prioritizes the transition to kindergarten in her Strong Start, Strong Finish plan to prepare their youngest citizens from the prenatal period through preschool to be ready for a successful kindergarten year and beyond. During my time as Director of Education at the National Governors Association, we worked to facilitate a bipartisan site visit between (D) Governor Bullock of Montana and key legislators in Alabama to share best practices on early learning and learn more about Alabama's Strong Start, Strong Finish program – a first of its kind. For both states, starting with early childhood was the key to a strong current and future workforce and ensuring strong life outcomes for their citizens. It is clear to me, from both my professional and personal experiences, that our

children' and citizens' health and prosperity cannot be a partisan issue if we are to achieve equity in opportunity, excellence in outcomes, and ultimately ensure the success of the workforce and long-term viability of our economy. Equitable access to high-quality early learning environments and healthcare are essential components of a prosperous and thriving workforce.

Closing

Ladies and gentlemen of this esteemed committee, I implore you to continue to increase your investment in the childcare industry and its infrastructure. This will help to support the health and safety of our workforce who are highly dependent on access to childcare and early learning opportunities for their children. As previously outlined in the [Child Care is Essential Act](#), a \$50 billion commitment to the Child Care Development Block Grant provides families direct access to childcare and necessary professional development and economic support to providers on the front lines. Additionally, we know that an increase in guaranteed federal funds through the Child Care Entitlement to States will help states budget, plan for, and invest in, widely available high-quality childcare which will steady the needs of the current workforce. Our states are requesting and desperately needing this support to revitalize their economies and send parents back to work and children back to environments that will keep them healthy and safe. I thank you for the opportunity to testify and welcome your questions.