



**TESTIMONY OF HELEN BLANK, DIRECTOR OF LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC
POLICY
NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER**

**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF THE SENATE
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, & PENSIONS COMMITTEE**

**HEARING ON "THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN CHILD: SECURING OUR
CHILDREN'S FUTURE"**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Helen Blank, Director of Leadership and Public Policy at the National Women's Law Center. What an honor to be here today 20 years after the enactment of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). I want to give a special thanks to Senators Dodd and Hatch who helped champion the passage of this landmark support for children and families.

Since 1990, there has been increasing recognition and conversation about the importance of the early years. Despite many developments to provide better quality experiences for young children, we still haven't found the will to ensure that *all* our children, especially our most vulnerable children, have the early childhood opportunities they need. We owe our young children better. The gap between the rhetoric and the reality is stunning given the research, the support of our top economists, and the growing public understanding of the importance of our children's early years not only for school success, but our nation's economic success. And with the current focus on deficit reduction, we face possible backsliding in our investments in young children and families that they cannot afford.

During the past 20 years, conversations have continued about what early childhood investments should accomplish. There has been debate about whether the focus should be on child care and early education's role as a support to help families work or as a support for child development, and whether the focus should be on increasing access to child care assistance and early education or increasing quality. In truth, these are all equally important and interrelated goals. When parents do better, children do better. We also know that there is a tremendous payoff when low-income children participate in high-quality early learning programs.

The federal commitment is paramount. Unlike K-12 education, the bulk of public funds for child care and other early childhood programs are federal, not state or local. In addition to CCDBG, our largest investment, there are several key federal programs that low-income parents rely on: Head Start and Early Head Start, Preschool Grants under Part B Section 619 of IDEA, Grants for Infants and Families under Part C of IDEA, and now home visiting. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) helps ensure that children in these settings have access to nutritious meals and snacks during the day and offers technical assistance and training to isolated family child care providers. The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit helps some middle-income families as well by covering a portion of their child care costs.

All of these programs matter, but CCDBG is at the heart of the system. For families, CCDBG is a lifeline to their ability to work as well as their children's ability to learn. It provides help to parents with children from birth up to age 13 for a full day and full year of child care for those

who need it. We have made a difference since 1990 when the CCDBG was enacted.

Approximately 1.6 million children now receive help in paying for child care each year through CCDBG and funds transferred from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant to CCDBG.¹ Additional families receive child care assistance through funding used directly within the TANF block grant.

You may remember Sheila Merkison, a Maine mother, who testified before the Committee in 2002. She was on her state's waiting list for child care assistance. Sheila left her abusive husband and struggled with her child care costs. She told the Committee, "The problem I'm facing is, although I believe my day care deserves every penny of it, my child care expenses are 48 percent of my weekly net income. I see no other way to fully provide for my son if this program can't help us. I make \$18,000 a year.....I'm asking for the ability to work to provide for my son."

After testifying, Sheila did receive a child care subsidy. She wrote to me this week. "I have been working as an Insurance Agent for 8 years now. My son is doing excellent. He was recently invited to test for the Johns Hopkins University Talent Search due to his high scores on the standardized tests at school. I was able to buy a home through the Rural Development agency a year ago. I honestly would not have been able to accomplish any of this without the child care assistance when I needed it."

CCDBG quality dollars also undergird early childhood systems in the states, supporting families at all income levels. The quality dollars help fund T.E.A.C.H.® and other programs that help child care providers with the cost of going to school and attaining credentials as well as reward them for their efforts. The quality dollars are also used to support monitoring of programs, regardless of the income of the children served, to ensure their health and safety. In addition, the quality set-aside supports resource and referral services to help families searching for care and community child care programs, helps purchase basic materials, books, and equipment for family child care homes and centers, and assists in the costs associated with starting and operating Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, which provide a pathway for providers toward higher-quality child care. These initiatives have made a difference. But, there continues to be, as a result of inadequate investment in child care, a constant tension between serving more eligible children and improving quality.

Head Start and Early Head Start are the other national building blocks in our early childhood system. Head Start has provided comprehensive services to more than 27 million of our nation's poorest children and their families since 1965.² Early Head Start represents our best efforts at reaching our poorest infants and toddlers and their families. Head Start continues to strengthen its program standards, teacher credential requirements, and monitoring efforts. In addition, State Early Childhood Advisory Councils, which are authorized by the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 and are receiving initial funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, are facilitating even closer collaboration across all parts of the early childhood system.

At the state level, prekindergarten is an important and another positive development. It often comes with higher standards than child care. However, these programs are targeted primarily at four-year-olds and fund only a part-year, part-day, and sometimes part-week, program in most communities. This leaves working parents scrambling to cover the remainder of the time. Innovative early childhood leaders have put state prekindergarten funding together with Early Head Start, Head Start, and child care dollars, as well as other federal and state resources, to meet the needs of working families and to provide higher-quality care throughout the day and year.

Despite the growth of CCDBG, as well as the growth of Head Start, Early Head Start, and prekindergarten, there are still significant gaps to fill. And while coordination and collaboration and “systems building” can encourage these resources to be used as effectively and efficiently as possible in helping children and families, coordination and collaboration are not cost-free and alone will not fill those gaps.

Access

We are reaching only a fraction of those who need access to early care and education opportunities, much less ensuring that those opportunities offer high-quality early care and education. Only one out of six children eligible for federal child care help under CCDBG receives it.³ Many states have restrictive eligibility criteria, limiting child care assistance to only the lowest-income families. In 13 states, a family earning over 150 percent of poverty (\$27,465

a year for a family of three) cannot qualify for help in paying for child care.⁴ And in many states, even those families who are eligible are placed on long waiting lists for child care assistance. California's usually has about 200,000 children on its waiting list.⁵ As of last February, Florida's waiting list had almost 67,000 children.⁶ Several states are now limiting child care assistance to families who are receiving, or were recently receiving, TANF.

With limited funding, states are forced to make Solomon-like choices between serving fewer families, asking parents receiving child care assistance to contribute more toward the cost of care, or paying child care providers who serve subsidized families lower rates. Only six states pay reimbursement rates to child care providers that reflect the current cost of care in their communities.⁷ With such low rates, child care providers that serve families receiving child care assistance must make sacrifices as they stretch their already tight budgets. Families receiving child care assistance may have difficulty finding a high-quality child care provider willing to accept the low reimbursement rates. Families can also confront numerous hurdles in the process of applying for and renewing their eligibility for child care assistance. This makes it more challenging for parents to retain the child care assistance they need to get and keep a job, which creates more chaos in the lives of children who desperately need stable early childhood experiences.

For too many of our most vulnerable children, Head Start and Early Head Start remain out of reach. Less than half of eligible three- and four-year-olds have the opportunity to participate in Head Start.⁸ And just 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers are enrolled in Early Head Start.⁹

Most states that have prekindergarten programs serve only a portion of their four-year-olds, and even fewer of their three-year-olds.

Quality Assurances and Health and Safety

Another major gap is in ensuring the basic health and safety of children in child care. There has been scant support in Congress for federal child care standards. This has left children with a patchwork of standards that do not always guarantee their health and safety. State licensing standards remain weak in far too many areas, from safety standards for facilities to staff-child ratio requirements. Eight states don't require an annual monitoring visit for child care centers, including California, where five years can pass between licensing visits, according to a study by the National Association for Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.¹⁰ Yet, states—facing budget crises of their own—do not currently have the resources to expand their licensing systems, and are typically reluctant to strengthen their standards out of concern that doing so would increase costs for child care providers operating on tight margins, which would force them to increase their fees, which would only put the cost of care further out of reach for more parents.

Early Care and Education Workforce

We will also continue to struggle to improve child care unless we address the training, education, and compensation of the early childhood workforce. In 2009, the average annual wage for a child care worker was just \$20,940.¹¹ With such low wages, it will continue to be difficult if not impossible to attract and retain good teachers for our early learning programs.

Child Nutrition

Many children get a good part of their daily nutrition in child care and early learning settings. Without access to CACFP, they are dependent on food brought from home that in these tough economic times is simply inadequate. Yet, reimbursement levels for meals is insufficient to ensure that providers have the resources to provide meals and snacks that meet the newly recommended standards from the Institute of Medicine. While young children eat small portions but frequently, federal funds do not provide enough for a second snack during a long child care day. Family child care providers have less and less access to CACFP and the sponsors that work with them do not have the necessary resources to support providers. Pending Child Nutrition reauthorization does not adequately address the Child and Adult Care Food Program and it is possible that it will actually result in fewer providers and children having access to its benefits.

Looking Ahead

Our country needs to move forward to close these lingering gaps in our early childhood system. We should expand access to child care assistance, Head Start, Early Head Start, CACFP, and state prekindergarten programs. We need to provide opportunities and incentives for early childhood providers and teachers to increase their education and compensation. We need to make sure there are resources for high-quality, full-day programs that address both parents' need to have care for their children during their working hours and children's need for early learning opportunities. We need to ensure there is coordination between early care and education programs and school systems so that what children learn and the progress they make before they enter school is reinforced after they enter school.

In the long term, we need a national agenda. National and state organizations focused on children and families have developed such an agenda—the Agenda for Affordable, High-Quality Child Care—that can guide the Congress in enacting a comprehensive reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (and which we request be including in the hearing record).

However, there is a step that Congress must take now. Despite the consensus about the importance of the early years for all children, we are at immediate risk of taking a giant step backwards. The fate of 300,000 children receiving help from CCDBG and Head Start and Early Head Start hangs in the balance. Without an FY 2011 appropriations bill that sustains the \$1 billion increase for child care and the \$1 billion increase for Head Start and Early Head Start that were provided in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, these children and families and their child care providers will lose the help they are currently receiving. This will be particularly devastating as they continue to struggle in this difficult economy and as many state budgets remain in free fall. Along with this core funding, Congress should also establish an Early Learning Challenge Fund that will encourage states to strengthen their early childhood systems and make effective use of their early childhood resources.

Parents will always be their children's primary teachers, and they will always have the biggest role to play in their children's early learning experiences. But they need your support. Federal and state governments still need to step up to close these gaps. Because if children miss out on

these early learning opportunities that help them succeed in school, we all lose out. Let's take this opportunity to build a stronger early childhood system for our children, and for our future.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Child Care and Development Fund Statistics, FY 2008 CCDF Data Tables (Preliminary Estimates), Table 1: Child Care and Development Fund Preliminary Estimates Average Monthly Adjusted Number of Families and Children Served (FFY 2008), *available at* http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/data/ccdf_data/08acf800_preliminary/table1.htm.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, Head Start Program Fact Sheet FY 2010, *available at* <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/fy2010.html>.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Human Services Policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Estimates of Child Care Eligibility and Receipt for Fiscal Year 2006 (April 2010), *available at* <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/10/cc-eligibility/ib.shtml>.

⁴ Karen Schulman and Helen Blank, State Child Care Assistance Policies 2010: New Federal Funds Help States Weather the Storm (Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center, 2010), *available at* <http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/statechildcareassistancepoliciesreport2010.pdf>.

⁵ Schulman and Blank.

⁶ Schulman and Blank.

⁷ Schulman and Blank.

⁸ Calculations based on data on Head Start enrollment from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start and data on children in poverty by single year of age from the U.S. Census Bureau.

⁹ Calculations based on data on Early Head Start enrollment from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start and data on children in poverty by single year of age from the U.S. Census Bureau.

¹⁰ National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, We CAN Do Better: 2009 Update. NACCRRRA's Ranking of State Child Care Center Regulation and Oversight (Washington, DC: NACCRRRA, 2009), *available at* http://www.naccrra.org/publications/naccrra-publications/publications/We%20Can%20Better%202009_MECH-screen.pdf.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2009 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, *available at* http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm.