



POLICY AGENDA

BUILD A CARING ECONOMY

Providing care—for children, seniors, and people with disabilities—is part of daily reality for millions of people across the country. And at some point, we all need care ourselves. But at the federal level, the United States does little to ensure that people have access to paid family and medical leave, to child care or long-term health care, or even to a single paid day off when they are sick. As a result, too many employers force workers to make impossible choices between their jobs and their caregiving responsibilities—and too many schools similarly fail to [accommodate pregnant and parenting students](#). High-quality child care is hard to find and even harder to afford. Aging and disabled people and their families also struggle to access high-quality, home- and community-based care. And LGBTQI+ people can [face particular challenges in caring for their chosen family members](#).

Receiving dignified care from empathetic caregivers is essential for people’s ability to thrive, and giving and receiving care is a fundamental pillar of our society. But without the supports they need, caregivers—who are [predominantly women, and disproportionately Black women, Latinas, and other women of color](#)—are too often pushed out of school or out of the workforce, undermining their economic security. Meanwhile, the care workforce—early educators, home health care workers, certified nursing assistants, and other

professional care workers—often are paid poverty wages for doing the work that makes all other work possible.

POLICIES THAT SUPPORT CAREGIVING SUPPORT ALL OF US—AND OUR ECONOMY.

Investing in care advances the economic security of our families and communities and serves as critical infrastructure for our economy. And it is popular: In a 2024 poll, [roughly three in four voters supported](#) universal paid family and medical leave legislation, a child care guarantee, and investing in aging and disability care—and supported funding these investments by raising taxes on the wealthiest individuals and corporations.

STATE POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP CAREGIVERS AND THE PEOPLE THEY CARE FOR THRIVE BY:

Increasing Families’ Access to Affordable, High-Quality Child Care and Early Education.

Child care is a backbone of our economy. Historic federal relief dollars in the American Rescue Plan Act helped prevent the child care sector from collapse during the pandemic—but most of that funding has expired and decades of underinvestment have left the sector incredibly vulnerable. Parents cannot afford to pay more: child care prices have risen faster than the

rate of inflation, squeezing families, crowding out other expenses, and making it hard for parents—especially mothers—to work. Meanwhile, early educators—nearly all women, and disproportionately women of color—are paid poverty wages because providers cannot afford to pay more; many are seeking higher-paying jobs in other fields, which only compounds the shortage of high-quality, affordable child care for families.

A sustained and robust national investment in universal access to child care and prekindergarten is necessary to raise family incomes, dramatically reduce costs for families, fairly compensate early educators, support children’s early learning and healthy development, and strengthen our economy overall. The last of the federal child care relief dollars expired at the end of September 2024, and ongoing funding for the major federal child care assistance program, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), is far from adequate. **States can help bridge funding gaps and improve child care systems** by investing their own resources in child care and by **sustaining and building on policy improvements made during the pandemic**, including **policy changes that expanded access to child care assistance**, raised provider payment rates, boosted compensation for child care teachers, and allowed more flexibility to meet the varied needs of diverse families and providers.

Providing Refundable Tax Credits for Families.

Today, many families cannot afford the high-quality, reliable child care they need to work and support their families and build their long-term financial security. The **national annual average** cost of child care in 2023 was \$11,582, and the burden of child care costs is even higher for low-income families who pay for care, costing more than a third of their income. As a complement to significant direct investments in the child care system, **states can enact refundable state tax credits** that are based on the federal Child Tax Credit, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit to boost families’ incomes. The temporary expansion of the federal CTC under the American Rescue Plan Act showed that some families used the tax credits to help pay for child care. Other **child care–related tax provisions**, such as state Employer-Provided Child Care Credits, do not meaningfully help families with low incomes and should not be prioritized by states. And state CTCs should not extend eligibility for the credit to fetuses, because such provisions could be used to lay the groundwork for further restrictions on abortion. States should instead invest in programs that already benefit pregnant people and children, such as WIC, SNAP, TANF, housing assistance, child care, and more.

Expanding Access to Home- and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and Improving Jobs for Home Care Workers. Home- and community-based care enables aging and disabled people to access long-term support and services and remain in their homes and communities instead of moving to a nursing home or other facility. Receiving support in the homes they’ve lived in for years, with the community members they know and love, is typically what people want and supports their health and autonomy. However, while Medicaid covers HCBS, **most other health insurance plans do not**—and even people who are eligible for services through Medicaid often encounter **long waiting lists** before they can get the care they need. Moreover, home care workers—who are disproportionately women of color suffer—from **poor job quality**, typically including very low wages and minimal benefits, making it difficult to attract (and even more difficult to retain) workers to provide these essential services.

While **enhanced federal Medicaid funds** provided during the pandemic helped states stabilize their home care systems, a more robust national investment in HCBS is necessary to ensure everyone who needs this care can access it and care workers can access good jobs. In addition, **states can support** families and care providers by investing their own resources in HCBS and by **sustaining and building on pandemic-era improvements**, including policy changes that expanded eligibility for Medicaid HCBS (e.g., to **serve children with behavioral health needs**); **reduced waiting lists**; provided **housing-related services and supports**; **supported family caregivers**; and **improved compensation and career paths for home care workers**. States can also **support home care workers** by, for example, enacting policies to combat misclassification, promote unionization, incentivize and improve training, **support immigrant workers**, and collect and publish data on job quality metrics for the home care workforce—and by consulting directly with care recipients, family caregivers, and home care workers to advise on proposed policy changes.

Guaranteeing Paid Family and Medical Leave and Paid Sick Days. **Everyone needs time to care for themselves and their loved ones**—but people working in low-paid jobs, who are least likely to be able to afford to take unpaid time off from work, are also least likely to have access to any paid sick days or paid family or medical leave. This reality leaves many women of color—who are **disproportionately likely** to hold low-paid jobs, and to be both breadwinners and caregivers for their families—and other working people with the impossible choice between caring for themselves or their families and maintaining their financial security. **States can establish** programs to **guarantee at least 12 weeks of universal, comprehensive paid family and**



Maty Miranda of OLE Education Fund in New Mexico (second from left), and Jamilla Harper of Metanoia in South Carolina (far right) speak on a panel about effective strategies for centering the voices, experiences and leadership of parents and child care providers in state child care policy and advocacy efforts alongside Merline Gallegos, Christine Matthews, Chantelle Mitchell, and Raynique Syas (middle)—storytellers from South Carolina and New Mexico who are part of NWLC’s [Sparking Change](#) storytelling initiative that centers the voices and experiences of women and nonbinary people of color closest to the intersecting issues of income insecurity and child caregiving.

[medical leave for all](#), ensuring that working people are able to take the time they need to bond with a new addition to the family, or to care for themselves or their loved ones when a serious illness or injury strikes—including the broad range of individuals who may comprise someone’s chosen family, particularly for LGBTQI+ people. And they can enable everyone to protect their health, attend doctor’s appointments, and deal with unanticipated illnesses, without threatening their economic security, by ensuring that all employees can earn [at least seven paid sick days each year](#).

Promoting Fair Work Schedules. Working families shouldn’t have to constantly sacrifice their families’ needs to meet ever-shifting, last-minute shift changes. But too many employers give their employees little or no input into their work schedules and change those schedules at the last minute, making it [incredibly difficult for working people—especially working parents—to care for their families](#) and plan for child care, doctor’s appointments, and other obligations. Part-time workers, [who are mostly women](#), are particularly likely to face unpredictable work schedules and are often denied the additional hours they want and need to support their families. Black women and Latinas especially bear the brunt of these scheduling practices, [as they are more likely to experience them than their white counterparts](#) and more likely to be both the [primary breadwinner and caregiver for their families](#). **States can help** ensure that working people can fulfill their responsibilities on the job and in the rest of their lives by [implementing baseline protections](#) to give employees a voice in their schedules and more predictable, stable, and adequate work hours.

Protecting Caregivers From Discrimination.

Caregivers, particularly women, still face discrimination in the workplace, stemming in part from outdated

stereotypes regarding gender norms and expectations around “women’s work.” Workers who are caregivers do have protections against workplace discrimination through a patchwork of federal laws, but due to gaps in these laws and the difficulty some employees have in proving discrimination because of their caregiving responsibilities, some workers still lack protection.

States can enact laws to [explicitly protect caregivers from discrimination](#) in the workplace—by, for example, adding caregiver status to existing antidiscrimination laws as a protected category, like race, sex, religion, or national origin. While some state and local laws specifically cover discrimination against parents (commonly referred to as “parental status” or “familial status”), broad and inclusive language that recognizes an individual’s chosen family best protects caregivers and reflects their lived experiences.

Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students.

[Students who are pregnant and parenting](#) can thrive in schools that support them and their caregiving responsibilities—but too often, school policies ignore, or are even hostile to, the needs of pregnant and parenting students. **States can implement** basic protections that enshrine and improve upon federal requirements by, for example, requiring schools to explicitly outline lactation accommodations, inform students of their right to have excused absences for pregnancy-related reasons, and excuse absences when parenting students need to care for sick children, or when child care plans fall through. Further, states should invest in resources like transportation support, housing assistance, and child care benefits to remove some of the barriers that prevent student parents from staying in school—ensuring that pregnant and parenting students are able to take care of themselves and their children while continuing to succeed in school.