

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Child Care and the American Workforce: Removing Barriers to Economic Growth"

Tuesday, June 24, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for bringing your expertise and experience.

For years, I've heard from parents with young children that having reliable child care makes all other work possible. A majority of families with children under the age of six need some form of child care, and in most households, all the adults are working. In fact, all available parents are in the workforce for 69 percent of children under age six. And of course, when kids get older, they need before and after school care and extended learning opportunities, or they will have the gaps that really challenge families as well.

Despite this overwhelming need, child care remains both expensive and scarce; it's something every witness here today included in their testimony. And in today's economy, parents must often juggle multiple responsibilities to make ends meet. Too many families today struggle with higher prices at the grocery store and skyrocketing costs for healthcare and housing. Child care is a necessity for the majority of American families, and in many places across the country, it's more expensive than housing or in-state college tuition.

So, this forces families to make impossible choices; do they pay for rent, utilities, food, and healthcare, or do they pay for child care? In too many cases, families settle for lower-quality care or may decide to leave the workforce entirely, jeopardizing their financial stability and future opportunities for their children.

This issue is especially acute in my home state of Oregon, where the hurdles are both supply and affordability. I speak with many Oregonians – often women – who are limited by the lack of access to child care. But it isn't just women, it's families and the business communities as well. Earlier this year, I held a town hall meeting in Clatskanie, which is a rural city of about 1,700 people, very rural, where the Head Start center is the only child care available for the entire city. And on Oregon's coast, the limited options for child care prevent the coastal towns from expanding and thriving when families have to turn down jobs because there is no child care available.

The Oregon legislature created the Child Care Infrastructure Fund in 2023 to help expand child care options, but the funding is just a drop in the bucket compared to what is truly needed to meet the demand.

The lack of affordable care limits opportunities, creates stress for families, and also holds back the economy.

Child care challenges for parents and caregivers in the workforce cost the economy an estimated \$122 billion each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. Oregon alone loses \$1.4 billion each year.

These numbers reflect the missed economic potential as parents, particularly mothers, are forced to leave their jobs or reduce their working hours. When parents cannot work because they do not have reliable child care, businesses lose skilled workers and the economy suffers.

Despite the high cost of child care, care providers are also struggling. The early care and education workforce is overwhelmingly composed of women, particularly women of color. Child care workers are among the lowest paid sectors and many child care providers have little to no access to other workplace benefits, like healthcare. It is unacceptable that the people caring for our nation's youngest are barely able to make a living wage and have stability in their own lives. And I've spoken to child care workers who can't afford child care for their own children.

The child care workforce is essential to our society, yet their compensation does not reflect the importance of their work.

As Dr. Friedman included in her testimony, "The root of the child care crisis is that we are relying on the private market to solve a problem it cannot." And I know the chairman mentioned public-private partnerships, and that's going to be a part of the testimony today. That may work in many communities, but there are many communities in Oregon and across the country where they do not have the ability to do that. Without bold and sustained federal investments, child care costs will continue to rise, and the workforce that provides this care will continue to struggle. We know that investing in child care helps address the needs of children, families, and providers. And we also know that this is a good investment. Thank you, Ms. Codella Low. You wrote in your testimony that, "for every \$1 invested in early childhood programs, the return is up to \$17 in reduced need for public assistance, increased earnings, and better educational outcomes." We know these programs work, yet we still struggle to fund them.

I'm grateful that solving the child care crisis is a bipartisan issue. Democrats and Republicans alike understand the importance of caring for our nation's children. We have bipartisan support for a \$12.4 billion investment in the Child Care and Development Block Grant. I've been working for years on a bipartisan basis. I don't think Ms. Stefanik is here yet, but we have been working on the Child Care Food program to streamline and update it.

But I do need to point out that many of the policies that my colleagues in the majority are supporting will make life harder for everyone, including policies in the "Big Ugly Bill" that will cut crucial programs like SNAP and Medicaid, these are programs that support children, families, child care centers, and the child care workforce. Thousands, millions of children get their health benefits from Medicaid and rely on SNAP.

So, let's acknowledge that hurdles to fully fund child care limit economic growth, threaten employers and small businesses, hurt working families and the early educator workforce, and, because the early years are so critical to development, hinder the ability of children to meet their full potential. Again, it is a good investment to invest in early childhood education. It is undeniable that child care is necessary for parents and the economy and workforce, but child care is also important for children.

Quality child care means not just having some place to park your kid during the day so you can go to work. Child care is early learning and social and emotional development. It sets kids up for success for the rest of their lives. Frankly, child care is the best investment we can make in our future.

We should invest in child care. We have the *Child Care for Working Families Act*, which would cap the cost of child care at 7 percent of income, making it affordable for all parents, and also provide historic investments in the child care workforce, including higher pay, better benefits, and improved training opportunities. This workforce is critical to doing the important work.

Again, investing in child care is an investment in our nation's future. We can and must enact policies that make child care accessible, affordable, and high-quality for every family. The cost of inaction is great, and families, workers, and the economy cannot wait any longer.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to the discussion, and I yield back.