

Testimony of Agnes Braga, Speech Language Pathologist Assistant and Working Mother of Two, Ways and Means Committee, U.S. House of Representatives
“In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care, and an Economy that Failed Women.”
April 21, 2021

Good (Morning or afternoon) Chair Neal, Ranking Member Brady, and Members of the Committee. My name is Agnes Braga. I am a Speech Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA) with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and I am a proud member of SEIU Local 99.

I am fortunate to be given this opportunity to discuss the challenges working mothers like me face in balancing work and family life as our country moves forward from COVID-19.

It is an understatement to say that this past year has been difficult. Like thousands of other working parents, I have had to figure out how to keep my 16-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter safe, figure out Distance Learning, while balancing my workload.

As a SLPA, I provide direct support to students with communication disorders. I enjoy providing my students with the care and attention they deserve as they find their voice in the world. I am very passionate about my work and each student are like my babies. I was devastated when COVID hit and could no longer provide them with in person support.

Today, I am preparing for my return to the school sites. While I am excited to see students in-person, I am anxious and fearful about how reopening our schools will impact my professional and personal life.

Just like our country, my family is also in a time of transition. My children’s father and I are separating and will soon live separately; so, I am going to be a single mother.

While I try to move forward in finding my new normal, I worry about what my return to in-person classroom instruction will mean for my own children.

Like many teens, my son suffered from deep depression during quarantine because he was not able to spend time with his friends which is very important to someone his age. His father and I have been able to give him attention and support while I have been working from home. Now, I worry about what will happen when I leave both my children by themselves to work at the different school sites I am assigned.

I am also worried about how our upcoming move will impact care for my daughter. Her father can walk and protect her to and from school now, but he will not be able to do this when we no longer live in the same neighborhood. My job requires a 1-to-2-hour commute each way through L.A. everyday, so my daughter would be by herself for several hours.

I am anxious about the time between my daughter’s departure from school and my arrival home. Girls her age on their own in my city can get hurt or even abducted. Will she be safe walking alone? Will I be able to find an affordable care program for her?

Sadly, my story and concerns about childcare are not unique. My brother and sister-in-law are both nurses who do not receive any financial assistance for childcare. They relied on my mother to care for their baby. My mom is

currently recovering from a surgery. So, I am helping care for her during her recovery, as well as my brother's 1-year-old, and sometimes their 4-year-old too. My family's story is just one example of how challenging it is to balance work and family responsibilities. This pandemic has made things even harder for most of us.

I am very proud of the work my SEIU Local 99 family has done to secure a \$500 a month stipend for LAUSD teachers and classified employees with young children as we return to school. School employees, including custodians and bus drivers, will get a subsidy for each eligible child aged five and under through the end of the semester and if they work over the summer.

It was important for us to negotiate this benefit to provide extra support for parents with young children who have been under so much stress over this past year. Our union has also worked to expand access to childcare for nurses and other essential workers who have been on the frontlines serving our community during this pandemic. All working parents of young and school aged children like me need reassurance that our children are safe while we are earning money and being responsible parents.

Childcare should be more affordable and available for all working parents. It is critical that we make childcare jobs important and substantive -- that means strong unions, higher pay with healthcare, sick leave, and other benefits. Childcare providers do some of the most important work - nurturing and educating the next generation of Americans so that their parents can go to work. This workforce should be respected, protected, and paid good wages.

As our nation continues to move past this pandemic, changing the status quo and improving the lives of working mothers and our children is essential. We need to ensure that childcare is affordable and accessible for parents and financially viable for childcare providers. This is a critical step in the reopening and recovery process. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.