

Testimony of Joy Spencer
House Committee on Ways & Means Hearing:
“In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care, and an Economy that Failed Women”
April 21, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Neal, Ranking Member Brady, and members of the committee. My name is Joy Spencer. I'm a single mom of an amazing two-year-old, a proud member of MomsRising, and Executive Director of Equity Before Birth, a charity organization that supports pregnant people most impacted by the inability to access benefits like paid leave.

The work I do everyday is personal because I know what it is like to struggle without paid leave and affordable child care. Our nation's failure to invest in taking care of our families has increased the hardship I've experienced in my life. The absence of paid leave and affordable childcare has caused me to struggle to pay bills, meet basic needs and reach my career goals. As you can imagine, the pandemic has worsened these challenges immensely. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

I had a difficult pregnancy, and was without any paid leave. Throughout my pregnancy, I struggled to keep food and water down, and I battled headaches and dizziness. I had to suspend my event management work because I was simply too sick to be on my feet much of the time. I needed a desk job.

It was stressful looking for work while pregnant, but I landed a position through a temp agency. I was grateful, but also keenly aware that I lost wages every time I had to ask for time off for a prenatal appointment, which was frequently because of my high-risk pregnancy.

I knew that as soon as I gave birth, I'd lose my source of income. To build my savings, I got a second job at a call center, which also offered no paid leave. Despite being constantly nauseous and dizzy, I worked as many hours as I could because I needed the savings. After all, the bills would not stop coming when my baby arrived.

Once I gave birth, I spent my limited savings quickly. It was terrifying having a newborn and no income; we struggled with basics like rent and food. I wanted to work, but there was no affordable child care in my community. Parents sit on waitlists for years! Like many parents, I was caught in a Catch-22: I wasn't eligible for many child care assistance programs because I didn't have a job, but I couldn't get a job because I didn't have child care.

After a lot of hard work, I finally found a job with Americorps and a program that would subsidize my child care. It was a struggle to pay the \$100/month parent fee, but at least I had income and a safe, enriching place for my daughter. When I found a higher-paying job at the county courthouse, my parent fee more than tripled, making it hard to get ahead and save.

Then the pandemic hit. My daughter's child care program closed but the courthouse didn't, so I still needed to go into work. That caused a crisis because, once again, I couldn't access the paid leave I needed.

My employer gave me some files to organize at home, but I ran out of remote tasks quickly. My daughter's program reopened two days a week, but that wasn't enough. I couldn't keep calling out of work or leaving early. But if I left my job, how would I pay the bills? It felt like after all my hard work, everything was falling apart. I was losing sleep and crying a lot. I told my mom we might need to move in with her.

Then, in what felt like a miracle, I was offered a position as Executive Director at Equity Before Birth, where I still work. My salary is higher than ever, but I still struggle with child care. Right now my daughter's program is only open three days a week, so I try to squeeze most of my work into those three days. I recently discovered I owed \$975 to my daughter's child care program. My new salary meant I no longer qualified for the subsidy, but no one had told me! Again, I feel lucky. My provider waived the first \$975 fee and put me on a payment plan. Most programs can't offer that, especially at a time of increased costs for providers and strict margins.

And I still struggle to pay my bills because so much of my paycheck goes to child care. $\frac{1}{3}$ of my monthly income goes into childcare, which costs about the same as my rent. I recently had to lean on local churches to get help with paying my electric bill. I live paycheck to paycheck, and an emergency expense like a car repair would put us in crisis.

I know many families can relate to my struggles. One of the parents we serve through EBB caught COVID-19 on the job and then was laid off because she didn't have the paid leave she would have needed to be able to quarantine. This is not an isolated story. Many others have been laid off and then lost their child care because they could no longer pay. Child care assistance is one of the most common requests we get at Equity Before Birth, but we don't have the funds for that. The pandemic has pushed so many moms out of the workforce and into deep poverty - it's going to take years for many of us to dig out of debt.

These are structural problems and we need federal solutions. Now more than ever, we need a comprehensive paid family and medical leave program and universal child care. Everyone deserves the time to get healthy and care for loved ones, and all children deserve quality early learning experiences.

I hope you will invest in the care infrastructure working families need. It would be a huge win for children, families, our economy, the public health, racial and gender equity, and more. Thank you.