

Testimony to House Ways and Means Committee
Rebecca Gonzalez, Founder and CEO, Time to Learn Daycare, Bronx NY
April 21, 2021

Good afternoon. My name is Rebecca Gonzalez, and I am the CEO & Founder of Time to Learn Daycare. In addition, I am the mother of 3 boys between the ages of 13 and 20, who are all at home with me now. And I became a grandmother last July, when my oldest daughter gave birth to her first child.

Before I opened my business 11 years ago, in 2004 I had been in a shelter and was receiving government assistance. When I got out of the shelter in 2005, I worked in a party store then decided to attend college. Two years later I became pregnant, and the doctor put me on bedrest in my 2nd trimester. While I was at home, I started to think about what I could do. My cousin suggested that I start my own business in the early childhood field. I didn't know where to start as she shared information about a woman who provided health and safety training, which I needed to become licensed. It took a while to get everything settled, as I had 3 small children and another one was on his way. The training was \$250, which was more than I received every 2 weeks. But I saved and saved, and finally I was able to cover the fee. I opened my first site 2 years after I had my youngest son.

Six months before the pandemic, my second site was approved to provide 24-hour care, an extra service I provide for parents who work nontraditional hours. When the pandemic reached New York, I had 22 children enrolled and employed 2 assistants. The children were all ages --- infants and toddlers, preschool and school-age. My daycare parents worked in healthcare and the restaurant field. Several were attending college at the time.

By April, my enrollment dropped to 2 children. Some parents made arrangements to work from home, and those who were attending college stayed home with their children.

I was used to seeing my children on a daily basis and caring for them 5 days a week. I voluntarily created zoom calls three times a week so I can connect with my children and they can also see their peers and mingle with them online. I greeted them and asked them how they were feeling, and we went over basic educational activities. I charged no fee for this. My children always asked when they were coming back to daycare. I had no answers for them.

One of my biggest concerns was about the children being at home all day when I know parenting can be stressful. But I understand that as a parent, keeping them at home is safer. I told all my parents that they could count on me if they needed support.

I tried to keep myself, my staff and parents updated with the CDC guidelines and training. I encouraged everyone to stay positive during this difficult time. Meanwhile, I was helping my own children with remote learning and also supporting my daughter as she prepared to become a first-time mom. The whole thing was very difficult and scary.

By April I didn't know if I could continue doing this myself, trying to cover everyone's needs and I had forgotten about my own. One minute I was working with the children and the next minute I was helping my 13- and 16-year-old with their schoolwork under a completely remote learning model. Being part of two groups that support family childcare providers -- ECE on the Move and All Our Kin -- helped a lot.

When my daughter needed to go to the hospital in July, I called the parents of the children I was taking care of and told them to come pick their children up. (I had prepared them ahead of time and fortunately one of them works in health care, so she understood!) I drove my daughter and her husband at the hospital, but I wasn't allowed to go in. I was thinking of my daughter and that she wanted me to be there to support her. As part of the Covid protocol only one person was allowed to be there with her, and I

couldn't take that away from daddy. I decided to stay in the parking lot just in case and spoke to her via whatsapp. I was able to connect my mother, my sister, my daughter and myself and we were my daughter's support team while she was being induced! Fortunately, my daughter gave birth to a healthy boy and she and her family are doing well.

I couldn't take time off to help her as I had to care for the 2 children that were attending the program. I gave her support after my shift was over. At the time I felt drained, but as a mother I had to support her if she needed it.

All this time, I did not know if children would come back to childcare, or if the number enrolled or staff ratios would be limited (which it is now, to 15). This would make it difficult to continue paying all the bills plus the extra expenses of PPE supplies. We were asking for more childcare funding because family childcare providers – and all childcare, really -- were already way underpaid, with no benefits. Still, we were expected to be on the frontlines, open to care for essential workers' children and exposing our own families to risk.

Still caring for only two children, I closed one program temporarily in January 2021. In my second site, from September 2020 to April 7th no children attended. Since April 7, 2021 I have had only 2 children attending as their parent has to work. I have a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old who is doing 2 hours a day of remote learning from my program. I texted parents but some are still home with family members and most children are back at school, so parents pick them up after.

Family childcare is a hard business to sustain. I know many experienced family childcare providers who have closed permanently since last year and they continue to do so. I am always sad to hear when providers close their doors. What does it mean for them and the community? Where will they work now, after investing so many years in this field and

leaving with nothing? Where will parents find accessible care near them?

You have to love children to do this work, because at the end of the day, family childcare providers earn an average of \$4 dollars an hour per child in subsidies. We have to pay minimum wage to our staff, pay for insurance, rent, light, internet to assist with remote learning etc. Can you calculate what we earn after we pay our employees and other expenses? Despite the fact that we provide a vital service, we don't have health and retirement benefits or paid family leave.

The relief funds we received from the state were small compared to what childcare programs need to build back to where we were before. And the system we had before was not even close to adequate.

No one should have to constantly juggle the needs of our businesses and families like we do. Many people think the pandemic was a special exception – a once in a lifetime event. But it magnified problems that working mothers and childcare providers have experienced for decades.

We can't go back to the old system, because it was unsustainable for parents and providers.

Childcare is a public good -- as much a part of the infrastructure as roads, bridges and public transportation. Without us, parents can't go back to work. Children don't reach their full potential unless they have stable, nurturing environments that support their growth and development.

We need to invest in the childcare workforce to rebuild the childcare supply. This means helping new educators come into the field. It means supporting additional education, training and compensation for childcare providers so that younger people want to work

in child care in a residential setting and we can keep experienced professionals like me.