

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY CAMPAIGN

*Investing in Women to Build a Better Future for All*

## Child Care Matters: Building Economic Security for Low-Income Women

September 2010

*Report by*

*Women's Economic Security Campaign*

Chicago Foundation for  
**women**  
Celebrating 25 Years Strong



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## About the Women's Economic Security Campaign

The Women's Economic Security Campaign (WESC) uses the power and resources of women's funds across the country to increase opportunity for low-income women and their families. We strive to elevate the voices of women's foundations and to ensure that the problems faced by women living in poverty and their families are at the center of efforts to fix our nation's economy and create opportunity for all U.S. residents. Our tools include public policy, advocacy, public education and grant making to organizations that work to eliminate poverty by supporting women struggling to overcome economic insecurity.

WESC was launched through the combined efforts and leadership of four regionally diverse women's funds—Chicago Foundation for Women, Washington Area Women's Foundation, the Women's Foundation of California and the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis. Working in collaboration with the Women's Funding Network, we seek to harness the voice and power of women's foundations nationwide to improve the lives of low-income women. Women's funds have invested nearly \$500 million over the last 20 years and have more than \$456 million in collective working assets.

Women's funds collectively invest in women-led solutions to systemic causes of poverty. We have worked to improve women's economic security through both local outreach and longer-term policy change on issues such as paid sick leave, pay equity and quality child care. Through our extensive connections as community leaders and funders, we are able to bring together experts and advocates from across the political spectrum. Together, we intend to reframe the debate on improving our nation's economy to include greater support for programs and policies that create opportunity for low-income women and their children.

## WESC Policy Report Series

*Child Care Matters: Building Economic Security for Low-Income Women* is the third in a series of WESC reports that advocate for an increased focus on policy initiatives that would provide low-income women with the assistance they need to secure good, family-supporting jobs. In addition to the reports, we provide tool kits made up of resources for taking action and elevating the voices of women's foundations, as well as other organizations, working to ensure greater opportunity for low-income women and their families.

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*Building Economic Security for Low-Income Women*

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## Introduction

### **For the 10 million women in the labor force with children under age six<sup>1</sup> child care is almost always a major concern.**

As any working parent knows, maintaining steady employment or gaining additional training and education is unlikely to occur without good, reliable child care. But the availability and quality of early care and education programs is even more critical for low-income, single mothers who lack the financial resources to access the best care for their children. During this time of economic upheaval, when so many low-income women are struggling to find and keep work, the lack of affordable, quality child care presents an enormous obstacle to a more financially secure future for millions of families.

In this report, the Women's Economic Security Campaign (WESC) provides an overview of why quality early care and education is vital to improving economic security for low-income women. *Child Care Matters: Building Economic Security for Low-Income Women* includes data on child care costs, the quality of available care and the state of the child care workforce for the geographic areas served by the four lead WESC funds in California, Illinois, Tennessee and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The report also highlights promising practices used by our grantees and community partners to improve access to affordable, quality child care, and to increase wages and training for the primarily female child care workforce. Finally, we offer recommendations for changes in federal and state policy that would improve economic opportunity for low-income women by improving the early care and education available to their children.

This report is not a comprehensive discussion of all aspects of the early care and education debate. It does not spotlight every promising program or highlight all needed policy changes. Rather, *Child Care Matters* focuses on several core areas of debate, illustrating how charitable foundations and public and private entities can work to improve outcomes for children and opportunities for low-income women.

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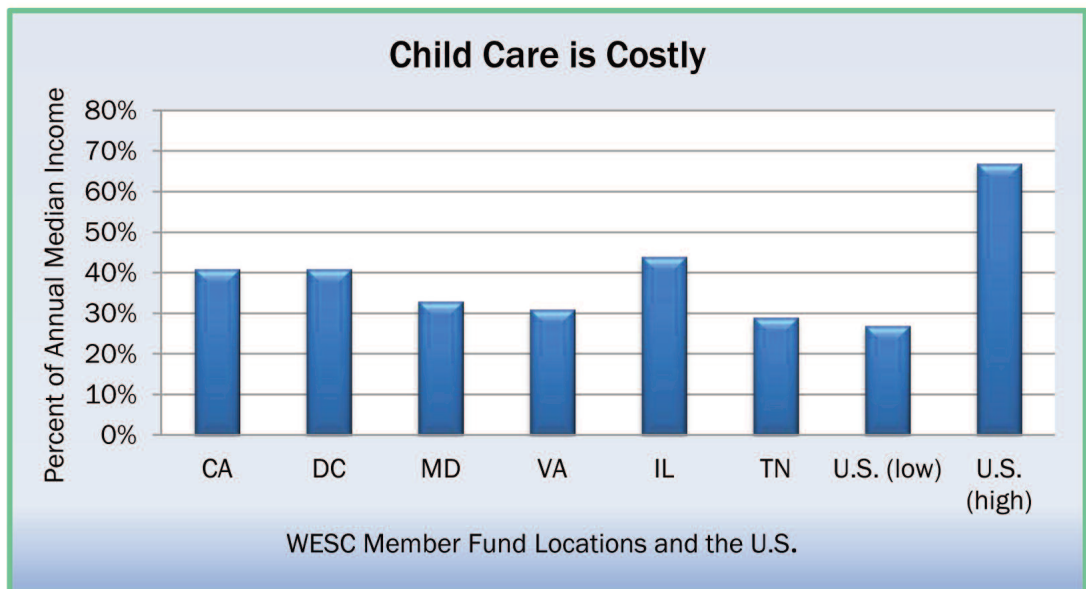
## Quality Child Care and Economic Security

In 2008, 72 percent of single, low-income mothers (earning 200 percent of the poverty level or lower) with children under age six were employed.<sup>2</sup> For low-income, single mothers child care is a critical component of economic security.

**Obstacles to Affordable, Safe and Reliable Early Care and Education.** Issues of affordability, transportation, flexibility of schedule and other concerns lead families to choose a variety of early care and education options including traditional child care centers, home-based providers or piecemeal arrangements with neighbors and relatives. But the settings a family can access vary by income level. For example, in 2005, low-income families were less likely to have a young child cared for in a child care center (18.2 percent) than were families with incomes above the poverty level (24.8 percent).<sup>3</sup>

While having stable, high quality care in a single setting is better for all children, it is often not realistic for low-income women who frequently have shifting work schedules and evening hours and may not be able to afford the most costly

Figure One



Source: National Association of Resource and Referral Agencies

center-based care options. National research indicates that when a mother works a variable schedule she is more likely to use a variety of care settings than when she works a fixed schedule. She is also generally more likely to rely on informal care, which is typically provided by family, and is less likely to have a regular schedule of care.<sup>4</sup>

Securing stable, quality care is costly, presenting an enormous barrier to single mothers, many of whom have very low incomes. For example, as shown in Figure One, the average cost of full-day care for an infant represents about 41 percent of the median income for single mothers. Variation in child care across the nation—from a low of about 27 percent of median income to a high of about 67 percent—reflects differences in cost of living, in child care supply, cost of child care operations and wages.

The “average” child care is simply unaffordable for most low-income mothers. For example, according to the data in Figure 1, a single mother in Illinois living with two children and with an annual income of \$36,620 (or 200 percent of the poverty level), would need to spend about \$19,163 annually on child care, leaving just \$17,457 for such basic needs as housing, food, medical care and transportation. Without assistance, her only option would be to find other forms of care (often substandard and unstable) while she worked or furthered her education—or to drop out of the labor force altogether, seriously limiting her future prospects.

Unstable and unaffordable child care has direct consequences on a worker’s ability to get and keep a job. Consider these facts:

- ✘ Disruptions in child care for working parents cost U.S. businesses approximately \$3 billion each year.<sup>5</sup>
- ✘ Forty-five percent of parents miss at least one day of work every six months due to a child care breakdown, according to a survey of employees across multiple industries. The survey also found that 65 percent are late to work or leave work early due to child care issues.<sup>6</sup>
- ✘ Mothers with reliable child care for their young children are significantly more likely to stay on the job—saving company time and money—than are those without regular care.<sup>7</sup>

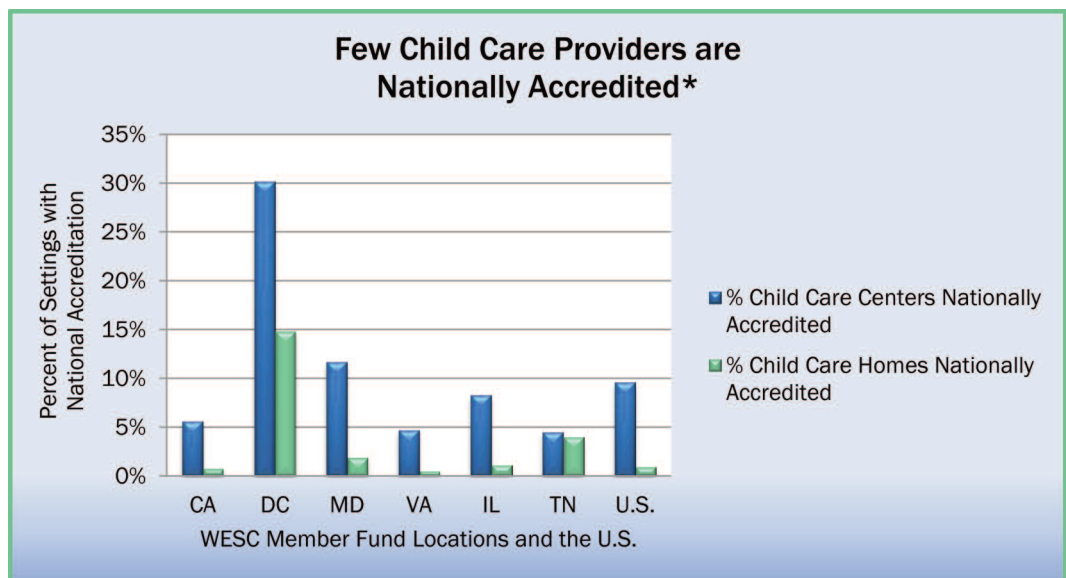
Securing stable, quality care is costly, presenting an enormous barrier to single mothers, many of whom have very low incomes.

**Quality Early Care and Education Helps Prepare the Next Generation of Learners and Workers.** Research indicates that quality care can lead to good education and social outcomes for children—helping to break the cycle of poverty. We know from recent research that children are born ready to learn. They cultivate 85 percent of their intellect, personality and skills by age five.<sup>8</sup> Virtually everything experienced by a child—both positive and negative—influences the development of the child’s brain and his or her subsequent development and life chances.<sup>9</sup> The type of child care settings or home environments where young children spend their days—and who they spend them with—has a profound impact on how their brain develops.

For example, a multi-year study of more than 100 child care centers in North Carolina reported that children in higher-quality settings demonstrated significantly better cognitive and language skills and abilities than did children in lower-quality settings.<sup>10</sup> The converse is also true. Research published in 2010 indicates that behavior and academic problems among children who received low-quality care in their first four and a half years of life persisted through their 15th birthday.<sup>11</sup>

High-quality education and care settings are hard to afford and hard to find in most low-income neighborhoods. As illustrated in Figure Two, nationally, only 9.6 percent of child care centers and about 1 percent of child care homes have achieved national accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children—a marker of high quality. And only about half of states currently have a Quality Rating Incentive System.

**Figure Two**



Source: National Association of Resource and Referral Agencies  
 \* Nationally accredited by NAEYC

While high quality early care and education settings are critical for all children, they are particularly important for children in low-income families and neighborhoods. These families often lack the resources to purchase books, music and other “brain”-stimulating materials.

Low-income families may also have low literacy levels and thus limited access to information on good early childhood practices, such as limiting television and encouraging imaginative play. By the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in third grade, they know about 12,000 words on average. By comparison, third graders from low-income families have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers.<sup>12</sup>

**Quality of the Workforce Matters.** Not surprisingly, research shows that children receive better-quality care and early educational experiences when child care providers have more training. These studies link additional education, especially if it is in the early care field, to improvements in a teacher’s ability to assess a child’s developmental status and needs, while also identifying appropriate activities to challenge a child and encourage healthy development. These studies have found that:

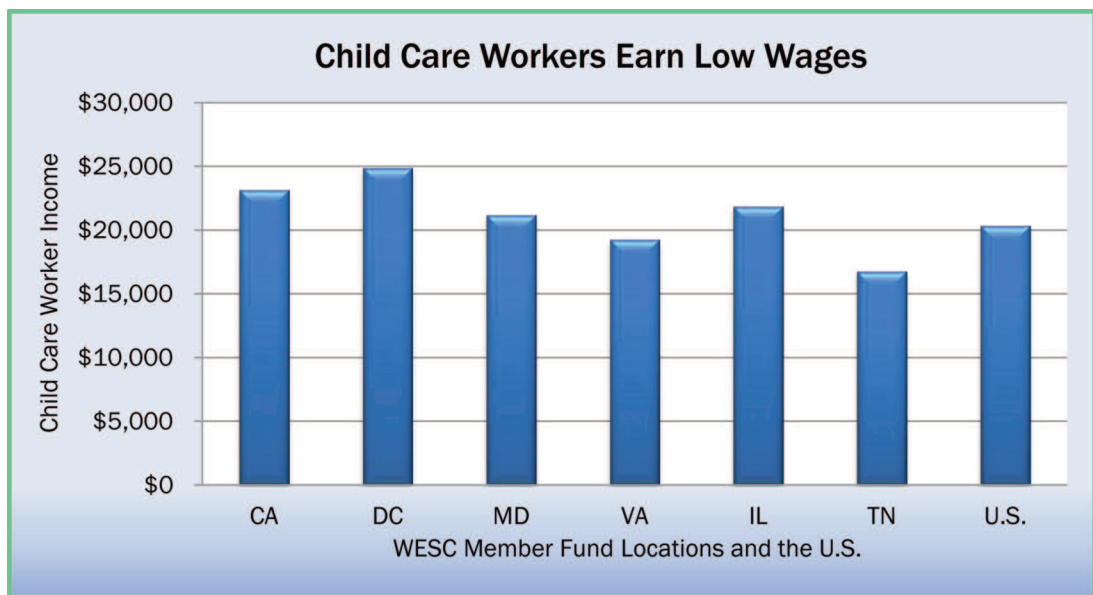
- ✘ Children whose teachers had at least a bachelor’s degree in early care and education engaged in more concrete, developmentally appropriate activities than did children with teachers who lacked a degree.<sup>13</sup>
- ✘ Babies and toddlers in child care thrived with providers and caregivers who had the sensitivity and skills to respond to their cues and needs.<sup>14</sup>
- ✘ Education qualifications of the child care provider workforce have fallen over time, with some evidence that infant and toddler providers are likely to have less formal training and education than those working with preschool children.<sup>15</sup>
- ✘ Children whose teachers had at least a bachelor’s degree in early care and education or training as a Child Development Associate (the early childhood basic credentialing standard) had better language skills than did children whose teachers had no more than a high school degree.<sup>16</sup>
- ✘ Children in classrooms with teachers who had at least an associate’s degree in early childhood education had higher scores on developmentally appropriate picture-vocabulary tests than did children in classrooms with teachers who only had a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup>

The quality of the child care workforce has a direct impact on the quality of child care settings. Without well-educated and trained early care and education workers, low-income children are unlikely to receive the developmentally-appropriate early education experiences they need to succeed in school and life.

**Women Are the Early Care and Education Workforce.** There are about 1.3 million people working formally in child care, 94.6 percent of whom are women.<sup>18</sup>

Early care and education jobs historically offer low pay with few benefits. Indeed, many child care providers earn wages that barely put them above the poverty line. As illustrated in Figure Three, nationally, the average income of a full-time child care worker is about \$20,350—approximately 120 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of three. While child care salaries vary across the nation, all are well below regional median incomes.

**Figure Three**



Source: National Association of Resource and Referral Agencies

Only 20 of the 821 occupations reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics have lower average wages than do child care workers.<sup>19</sup> Like many low-wage employees, child care workers also typically do not receive employee benefits such as pension plans, sick leave or health insurance.<sup>20</sup>

Child care is considered a growth industry with an expected 11 percent increase in jobs between 2008 and 2018.<sup>21</sup> But these jobs generally are trapping female workers in a cycle of economic insecurity.

Low child care provider salaries also mean employers cannot attract well-educated and trained workers. Without the potential to earn better wages in their current occupation, there is little incentive for early care and education workers to seek more training and improve their skills. The relative cost of care compared to income means that many families can't afford the best-quality care and are forced to choose lower-cost, lower-quality options.

## Key Federal Policies

**Several federal policies and programs shape the state and local early care and education policy landscape.** The federal programs listed below are the largest and have the greatest influence on the availability and quality of early care and education programs for low-income families. While they help millions of low-income families, as noted below, most do not reach all eligible families. There are a variety of reasons for this, including inadequate funding, complicated enrollment procedures and inadequate outreach to those who could benefit from these programs. This section provides an overview of the policies. Later in this report, we address how federal policies could be improved to better meet the needs of low-income mothers.

- ❏ **Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).** This program supports families by increasing the availability, affordability and quality of child care in the United States. CCDBG is administered through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which allocates funds to states through a formula, with some funds available only if the state provides matching funds. States can set income eligibility guidelines. In 2008, CCDBG accounted for more than \$9.2 billion in federal and state expenditures for child care, which includes some funding from TANF. States are required to use at least 4 percent of CCDBG funds for quality improvement initiatives. One in six eligible children currently receives assistance as part of CCDBG.<sup>22</sup> For more information visit: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb>

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- ✧ **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).** States can use a portion of their federal TANF block grant to directly fund child care as well as transfer funds into their CCDBG budget. In FY2009, states spent approximately \$1.8 billion in TANF funding directly on child care assistance for very-low-income parents seeking employment, education and training. For more information visit: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/tanf/index.html>
  
- ✧ **Head Start/Early Head Start.** Started in 1965, Head Start is a federal program aimed at children from birth to age five who come from families with incomes below or at the poverty level. The goal of Head Start is to prepare these children for kindergarten, while also providing needed services such as health care and food support. Head Start and Early Head Start programs received approximately \$7.2 billion in regular appropriations during FY2009, and \$2.1 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding. About one-half of eligible children are receiving Head Start services (for children ages 3 to 5), and only 4 percent of eligible children participate in Early Head Start (for children under age 3).<sup>23</sup> For more information visit: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/index.html>
  
- ✧ **Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.** This federal tax credit helps to ease the burden of paying for child care by allowing a credit on income taxes. The credit is partially refundable, so parents who work but have incomes too low to owe federal income tax—a disproportionate number of whom are single mothers—can receive part of the credit as a tax refund. Families can deduct up to 35 percent of qualifying child care expenses, depending on their income level. In 2009, families could deduct up to \$3,000 in child care expenses for one child and up to \$6,000 in child care expenses for two or more children. For more information visit: <http://www.irs.gov/newsroom/article/0,,id=106189,00.html>

***Poverty Impact Statement:*** *In each WESC policy report we identify how key policy and program changes can affect poverty among low-income, single women.*

Ensuring that low-income, single mothers can access quality early care and education for their children is critical to improving economic security. In 2008, more than 3.5 million single mothers were living in poverty. Low-quality, hard-to-access child care threatens the ability of these mothers to stay employed or pursue education and training that would lead to better jobs. More than 3 million children under age six live in low-income, single-female-headed families. Participating in stable, quality early care and education programs gives these children the start in life they

need to grow and thrive, and gives their mothers the support they need to work toward a more promising future that helps break the cycle of poverty. Finally, making more quality options available to more low-income families should include improving the training and wages of early care and education providers, who earn just above the federal poverty level on average. Any serious effort to reduce poverty must include increasing access to quality early care and education for low-income women.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Census, American Community Survey 2008, NACRRA.

## Promising Practices

**We know that when low-income women have access to quality, affordable child care, a world of opportunity opens up to them and their children.<sup>24</sup>**

While achieving this goal remains a struggle in many communities, this section offers a snapshot of programs WESC funds have supported and worked with over the years that are changing the pattern of low-quality and unreliable child care options for low-income women. At the same time, several of these programs are increasing education and career opportunities for the predominantly female early care and education workforce.

Each of these programs, and others like them, could be replicated across the country. But making that happen will require a sustained effort by our political leaders and the private sector to elevate the child care needs of low-income women to the top of the public policy agenda. Any serious effort to create greater opportunity for these women, and to correct the systemic deficiencies that have held too many women back for too long, must include a greater focus on child care programs and practices that work.

### *Improving Access to Affordable Early Care and Education*

**At Issue:** *Inadequate availability of child care assistance makes quality early care and education programs unaffordable for many low-income women. Even when affordable, high quality early care and education programs are available too often these programs are located outside low-income communities, are inaccessible by public transportation or have hours that do not match many workers' schedules. Additionally, many child care programs may not accept child care subsidies that help low-income families enroll their children in early care and education.*

Despite help from last year's federal economic stimulus legislation, many states have been unable to keep up with the demand for child care assistance. Nineteen states currently have waiting lists for children who are eligible for subsidized child care.<sup>25</sup> In addition, struggling families are often unable to qualify for assistance. In 2008, a family of three earning just over \$35,200 a year (less than 200 percent of the poverty level) could not qualify for child care assistance in 75 percent of states.<sup>26</sup>

This has negative consequences for children and parents. Research indicates that when families are not able to access child care assistance, they may go into debt, return to welfare, choose lower-quality, less stable options for their children or face untenable choices in their household budget—including purchasing less food, not paying utility bills and forgoing medical care.<sup>27</sup>

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High-quality, affordable child care is also in short supply in many communities, particularly for parents who:

- ✘ **Have very young children.** There are fewer slots for infants and toddlers in licensed and regulated care settings than there are for older children. When slots are available, they are naturally more expensive because of the higher cost of caring for very young children.<sup>28</sup>
- ✘ **Have children with special needs.** Chronic shortages of care and education settings exist for children with special needs as these require specialized facilities and appropriately trained teachers.<sup>29</sup>
- ✘ **Work evenings, nights or weekends.** Many low-income mothers work non-standard and shifting hours, which makes finding care and education programs difficult.<sup>30</sup>
- ✘ **Live in low-income neighborhoods.** These neighborhoods tend to have less overall child care supply than do higher-income neighborhoods.<sup>31</sup> According to analysis of census data, poor areas and non-metropolitan areas are less likely to have an adequate supply of licensed child care center slots than other areas.<sup>32</sup>

Patty Siegel, executive director of the California Child Care Research and Referral Network, which helps low-income parents find affordable, quality child care, emphasizes that the quality of care is irrelevant to low-income parents if it is unaffordable and inaccessible. “There has to be enough quality to give parents a real choice,” says Siegel. “There is a lot of de facto segregation in the child care world.”

### **Strategies to Increase Funding for Child Care Subsidies**

While the economic stimulus legislation funded temporary increases for publically funded child care subsidies, those funds are drying up and many low-income families who need help affording early care and education are no longer receiving assistance. Federal and state child care subsidies are critical to insuring that low-income mothers can afford care for their young children while they pursue education, training or work. When public subsidies are not available, many low-income mothers are forced to leave work or school and sign up for cash assistance.

Bringing these issues to the top of the policy agenda has historically been a struggle for early care and education advocates faced with legislators who often undervalue the important role child care plays in enabling families, and women in particular, to move out of poverty. Advocates have long understood that the most effective voices for change are the low-income women who are affected most directly by child care subsidy cuts and other issues that make it difficult for them to access quality care. The challenge: Organizing disparate groups of typically single mothers with limited resources and little time in their busy schedules.

**Listening to Parents' Voices.** In 2006, a growing number of low-income California mothers were confronted with an unusual problem. If they accepted even small raises from their employers, many discovered they would no longer be eligible for child care assistance. Losing this subsidy could be disastrous for women who were finally making strides toward economic independence but who could see their efforts crumble without affordable child care.



Child Care Keeps Parents Earning  
and  
Children Learning!

So they decided to challenge the system. A group of women, under the auspices of Parent Voices, a parent-led grassroots organization working to make quality child care affordable and accessible to all families, took their concerns to state legislators in Sacramento. Their goal was to update income eligibility requirements for child care subsidies, which had been frozen for five years by the state legislature, even as the cost of living continued to increase. Since families are eligible for child care subsidies if they make up to 75 percent of the state median income (SMI), Parent Voices called its campaign, “Defrost the SMI.” Members traveled to the state capital, shared their personal stories with state legislators and even presented their family budgets as the best evidence of their continuing need for child care subsidies.

Their efforts paid off. On June 30, 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a budget bill that defrosted the SMI and included \$67 million in new funds to cover the cost of updating child care subsidy eligibility criteria. Patty Siegel, whose organization created Parent Voices 16 years ago, says legislative victories of this kind would be far less likely without the work of mothers willing to speak up for change. “A major barrier is getting legislators to listen, and having parents there makes them listen,” she says.

Parent Voices is housed in local resource and referral programs across the state and draws its members from the parents—primarily mothers—who use the services provided by the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, a grant partner of the Women’s Foundation of California. “We have outreach capacity to about 10,000 parents who receive our fliers and mailings, and about 500 parents who are actively participating in Parent Voices events,” says Mary Ignatius, statewide organizer for Parent Voices. To develop this committed parent base, the organization makes a point of catering to the needs of single mothers by providing meals and child care during meetings. “Our goal is to create a real community for these mothers who are normally completely isolated from larger groups and other mothers,” says Ignatius.

For women like Beckie Moralez, joining Parent Voices has been a life-changing experience. Moralez, who had a history of drug abuse, first became involved with Parent Voices three years ago when she was living with her young children, now ages six and five, in a transitional shelter in Butte County, north of Sacramento. “Child care was making a huge difference for me. I knew my kids were in a safe place while I was working on overcoming my addiction and going back to school. If I didn’t have it, I would have moved backwards instead of forwards—back into the poverty I grew up in,” says Moralez.

Today, Moralez is working as a drug and alcohol counselor, no longer receives public assistance and is moving into her own home. She is also a passionate speaker and recruiter for Parent Voices. “It is very important for women like me to let legislators know that if we can get child care, we can go back to school and have the kinds of careers we see other people getting but feel are out of reach for us. The message from legislators is always about jobs, but they need to know that without child care we can’t work,” says Moralez. Among Parent Voices’ most recent victories was convincing the state legislature to allocate \$15 million in federal stimulus money to serve families on the child care assistance waiting list.



*Beckie Moralez speaks out about the importance of high-quality, affordable child care*

### Strategies that Help Parents Access Available Programs

Lack of child care assistance isn’t the only barrier to accessing quality programs. Many low-income single mothers have minimal experience with formal early education and may resist signing up their young children or may feel that sign-up procedures are too complicated. Others feel that programs that meet only a few hours a day are not practical, especially if they’re difficult to get to and would disrupt their child’s normal care routine. Outreach efforts that address these obstacles can help increase enrollment among low-income communities.

**Bringing Preschool-for-All to All Children.** When Illinois passed legislation in 2006 guaranteeing preschool for every three- and four-year-old in the state, government leaders assumed families would quickly enroll their young children in the large network of Head Start and other early education programs. They were wrong. Among the first to recognize this were members of a group of low-income African American and Latina women, called POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew—Policy Action Council), part of the Chicago advocacy organization, COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues).



“Parents started talking to us about how they were noticing that a lot of pre-school-age kids in their communities weren’t in school. They were very concerned that low-income parents weren’t connecting to early learning programs and enrolling their kids,” said Kellie Magnuson, lead organizer for COFI, a Chicago Foundation for Women grantee partner.

The group decided to prove its point by embarking on a major door-to-door campaign to find out why parents weren’t enrolling their kids and to encourage them to sign up. More than 5,000 interviews with parents and caregivers in low-income Chicago neighborhoods revealed that almost half of eligible children were not in preschool. The group produced a report, *Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?*, that highlights a number of barriers keeping low-income children out of early education programs, including complicated and confusing enrollment procedures, lack of transportation to available programs, inflexible schedules and lack of awareness about the importance of preschool for children. “In my neighborhood a lot of parents just thought preschool was play time and they could do that at home,” said POWER-PAC member Gloria Harris.

Armed with the report findings, parents like Harris, along with COFI staff, organized meetings with government officials to convince them that an effective preschool-for-all program needed to include funds for implementation and outreach. Their work has started to pay off. They won a commitment from Chicago Public Schools to pilot-test “Walking Preschool Buses,” a network of community residents who are hired to walk children to preschool programs when parents or caregivers are unable to do so. Through its work with the Governor’s Council on Early Learning, including the appointment of a POWER-PAC grandmother to the council, the group was able to secure \$500,000 from a \$3.5 million early education federal grant for a pilot program to test different outreach approaches in six neighborhoods.

POWER-PAC parents have also continued their one-on-one outreach. Harris says she has personally convinced at least 10 families to enroll their children in preschool. “I tell them my story, about how important Head Start was for my child, and they listen. No one has ever really sat down with these parents to explain why early education is so important,” she says.

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– Kellie Magnuson,  
lead organizer for  
COFI

## ***Policy Priorities that Will Help Families Access Affordable Early Care and Education***

- ✘ **Enhance the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.** To support more low-income families, this credit should be made fully refundable and maintained at least at current levels (no less than \$3,000 for one child and no less than \$6,000 for two or more children). It should also be indexed for inflation to help retain the value of the credit in future years.
  
- ✘ **Increase Funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant Program (CCDBG) and Head Start to Help States and Localities Reduce Waiting Lists for Subsidized Child Care.** The Children First Act of 2010, along with increased appropriations overall for CCDBG, would expand funding for child care assistance for low-income families through CCDBG. In addition, funds provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to increase subsidies and Head Start and Early Head Start should be continued.
  
- ✘ **Reduce Barriers that Prevent Low-Income Families from Using Subsidies in High Quality Settings.**

*This should include:*

- Requiring states to establish reimbursement rates that will help ensure that more early care providers are willing to care for low-income children in rural and low-income communities. States should reimburse child care providers at no less than the 75th percentile of the current market rate. Market rates should be based on a survey conducted at least annually and reflect cost variations by geography, age of children and provider type.
  
- Requiring states to set a one-year eligibility determination period for child care so families don't have to send in their paperwork more than once a year; establishing a web-based application system to streamline the process; and supporting additional outreach efforts to eligible families.

## *Improving Access to Quality Early Care and Education*

**At Issue:** *Early care and education settings should provide children with an environment where they can learn and thrive. But there are a limited number of such programs, and even when they are available, low-income parents have difficulty accessing them. Consider these facts:*

- ✘ Only one in seven child care centers or family child care homes is rated as high quality.<sup>33</sup>
- ✘ According to an analysis of child care licensing requirements, only 30 states have adequate requirements for child care centers, and just eight have adequate requirements for family child care homes in core health and safety measures.<sup>34</sup>
- ✘ Only 25 states require inspections of family child care homes each year. Six states require inspections of child care centers just once every two years, and California requires the inspection of child care centers once every five years.<sup>35</sup>

Research suggests that in some states, low-income communities tend to have fewer regulated caregivers than do higher-income communities.<sup>36</sup> Finding quality care is a particular struggle in rural farming areas. “A lack of even decent home-based care in these communities means people have no choice but to take their kids to the sweltering hot fields,” says Siegel.

### **Strategies that Bring Quality Programs to Low-Income Families**

In an industry where anyone in the neighborhood can put up a flier and say she is a child care provider, ensuring that children attend quality programs can be a challenge. Promoting efforts to improve learning environments is critical but may be particularly difficult to achieve in home-based care settings or centers where resources are limited. Assisting centers in going through the national accreditation process can help them make drastic improvements in their learning environments, while in-home providers may benefit most from outreach efforts that provide them with resources and training to improve quality.

**Linking Home Care to Preschool Providers.** Home-based child care is a common arrangement for many young children in the United States, especially for very young children, and those from low-income families, families of color and non-English speaking households.<sup>37</sup> In-home providers may offer more flexible scheduling than centers, enabling them to accommodate shifting work schedules common among low-income workers. They typically are also more affordable than centers and may provide environments that are familiar and comfortable for parents, particularly if they are non-English-speaking. However, these settings may lack the resources needed to ensure good-quality, consistent care.<sup>38</sup>



Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), a grantee partner of Chicago Foundation for Women, found that the prevalence of home-based care in low-income Chicago suburbs, while vital for parents working non-traditional hours, was keeping children from participating in early education programs offered through the state's Preschool-for-All initiative. In a state where 67 percent of single, low-income women with children under six work non-traditional hours, the question was how to continue to give parents both the flexibility of home-based arrangements and the education opportunities available in preschool settings. IAFC's answer: Developing a program, called Community Connections, which combines the best of both approaches.

Under the program, which is funded through the Illinois Preschool-for-All initiative at a rate of \$3,000 per child a year, children already enrolled in formal or informal family child care homes are taken to a state pre-school classroom for part-day pre-kindergarten instruction four days a week. On the fifth day, the pre-kindergarten teachers visit the family child care homes to coordinate curriculum, bring new resources and discuss children's progress. For example, the Child Life Academy in Burnham, Ill., a low-income suburb just south of Chicago, has one classroom devoted exclusively to the Community Connections program, where it serves 20 children in the morning and 20 in the afternoon. The children are transported from their home-based programs to Child Life Academy by the school's regular bus driver.

Jasmine Ross, who had been the Community Connections teacher for Child Life Academy for two-and-a-half years, said children who participated in the program made huge developmental strides. She pointed to the case of four children who were cared for by one home provider and were all found to be behind on verbal and cognitive measures when the school tested them initially. "When I went to visit the home, there was a 64-inch television in the middle of the day care area, and the kids were watching cartoons all day," recalls Ross. But the more Ross worked with the provider, and the more the children participated in the preschool program, the more progress she started to see.

“The kids were playing with the games and materials we left behind, and they quickly started catching up and getting to where they should be developmentally,” said Ross.

The biggest initial obstacle to setting up the program was convincing all parties involved that it was a worthwhile endeavor. “We had to convince the child care centers to devote a classroom to these kids. We had to convince the providers to participate, and they had to convince the parents to give their consent,” said Carlos Fortenberry, assistant director of Community Connections. Initially, Fortenberry went door to door to explain Community Connections to the providers and centers, and gradually the concept caught on. One major selling point for home providers was that they would continue to receive a full day of child care assistance payments from the state, which agreed to categorize the preschool time as enhancement, not time away from home-based care.

Today, there are 18 Community Connections sites scattered throughout the low-income suburbs of Chicago and “at least seven or eight are begging to sign up,” says Fortenberry. State funding shortfalls, however, will prevent the program from adding any more sites in the coming year.

**Promoting Accreditation to Improve Quality.** Obtaining national accreditation is one avenue to higher quality for early care and education programs. National accreditation requires higher teacher-staff ratios, better teacher preparation, educationally appropriate curriculum, improved operations, improved communications with parents, and improved facilities—all elements of quality programs.<sup>39</sup>

However, improving these key dimensions, and obtaining accreditation can be a costly, complex and time-consuming endeavor for most early care and education settings. That’s where programs like Ready, Set, Grow! (RSG) in Memphis and Shelby County, Tenn. come in. RSG, a community partner of the Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis, mentors centers through a process that involves meeting hundreds of different criteria required to obtain accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which is considered the industry standard.

“This can be a difficult process for center directors to handle themselves and still complete the daily tasks involved in managing a child care center. We are there to guide them through the process,” says Sandy Guntharp, project coordinator for RSG, which operates out of the University of Memphis’ College of Education with funding from the Plough Foundation. The program started six years ago when a group of local business leaders came together to consider strategies for creating a better-educated workforce in the area.

“They recognized that meant starting all the way back in preschool and making sure early learning settings were delivering quality care. An excellent way to do that was to help more centers become accredited,” said Guntharp.

One of the primary objectives of the program was to make sure that high-quality care was available in low-income communities. When the program began, there was just one accredited child care center serving a low-income area in Shelby County. Today, 32 centers in Memphis and Shelby County are accredited, and 14 of those are in low-income neighborhoods. In the entire state of Tennessee, just 129 child care centers have received accreditation.

To help centers get through the arduous accreditation process, a panel of directors of accredited centers in Shelby County provides mentoring and support. “Until RSG came along, I was using my huge box of accreditation materials as a footstool under my desk,” says Patrice Jones, director of Ernestine Rivers Child Care Center. Working closely with RSG staff and volunteers gave Jones the extra push she needed to accelerate the process. “They kept us on deadline and kept reminding us what we needed to get done. With their support and guidance, I was able to step back and look at what changes I needed to make in the program,” says Rivers, who received accreditation five years ago.

The focus of RSG’s work is helping to bring policies and procedures up to speed, such as upgrading and formalizing parent handbooks and employee manuals. In the first years of the program, RSG also helped centers to modernize their facilities, providing funding for everything from purchasing new playground equipment to installing child-size toilets. However, limits on funding forced RSG to pull back this aspect of the program, and it now collaborates with other groups on this essential part of the accreditation process. It also works closely with the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA; see below) to obtain scholarships for center staff to further their educations, another key element of accreditation.

### ***Policy Priorities that Will Improve the Availability of Quality Early Care and Education***

- ✎ **Pass the Early Learning Challenge Fund.** The fund would provide vital resources to some states to increase the availability of high-quality early childhood settings for low-income children. It would challenge states to work toward comprehensive, high-quality early education systems for children from birth to age five that include coordinated access to screening and developmental assessments, coordinated professional development systems, and the use of comprehensive data for assessing and improving children’s access to high-quality early education programs.

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When the program began, there was just one accredited child care center serving a low-income area in Shelby County. Today, 32 centers in Memphis and Shelby County are accredited, and 14 of those are in low-income neighborhoods.

- ✘ **Establish Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.** States should be required to create and operate Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) for all licensed child care centers and family child care homes. The QRIS should rate the quality of the setting, provide financial and technical assistance to providers working to improve quality, link increases in employees with credentials with improved compensation, and offer increased levels of reimbursement for care provided by higher-quality programs. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia currently have a statewide child care QRIS.<sup>40</sup>
- ✘ **Improve Early Care and Education Facilities.** Under federal law, child care providers cannot use CCDBG funds for new buildings or substantial renovations, but making these funds available for this use could dramatically improve the quality of early care and education spaces in low-income neighborhoods. Congress should pass the Child Care Facilities Financial Act of 2009 to address the unmet capital needs of providers in low-income communities.
- ✘ **Increase System Integration.** Because of the number of federal, state and local funding streams, and the many unique programs with different hours of operation and eligibility requirements, the early care and education field looks less like a coherent system and more like a patchwork of fragmented programs. States and localities should explore and adopt financing and program strategies that align, coordinate and integrate early care and education programs. This kind of coordination would enable such programs to better meet the needs of families, reduce administrative burdens and promote the more efficient use of limited resources.

### *Improving Early Care and Education Workforce Conditions*

**At Issue:** *With average wages of just about \$21,000 for a full-time worker, it's no surprise that high turnover and low-quality predominate in the early care and education field. Approximately two-fifths of center-based teaching staff and half of home-based providers leave their jobs each year, largely in response to low compensation and few opportunities for advancement.*<sup>41</sup>

Child care programs are more likely to attract and retain well-qualified staff and have a high level of quality overall if they offer good compensation. But even when child care workers advance their education and training, compensation too often remains low. In Tennessee, for example, a child care worker who receives a Child Development Associate credential would likely see her compensation increase from minimum wage to no more than \$9 an hour. Even those with a bachelor's degree are unlikely to make much more than \$12 an hour.

Despite their low wages, child care workers play a vital role in propelling our nation's economy. One study found that by providing workers with a service critical to maintaining employment, the licensed child care sector allows the country's labor force to earn more than \$100 billion annually.<sup>42</sup>

Among the most notable efforts to address the problems faced by the child care workforce is the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Project. The program was created in 1990 by the North Carolina Child Care Services Association to confront under-education, poor compensation and high turnover among child care providers. T.E.A.C.H. offers scholarships to child care workers to help them obtain training in early childhood education. Funding for the scholarships comes from a variety of sources, including private foundations, the United Way, corporations, Child Care and Development Block Grant quality funds and state governments. Twenty-three states now operate TEACH-like programs.

### **Strategies that Increase Opportunities and Wages for Child Care Providers**

To create a better-trained, better-paid child care labor force, those working in the field first need to have a realistic and affordable means of increasing their training and education. Funding also needs to be available to ensure that those climbing a professional child care ladder are compensated appropriately along the way.

**Raising Salaries Starts with Creating More Training Opportunities.** When Glenn Hopkins set out to turn the Hopkins House preschools in Alexandria and Fairfax County, Va., into a “world class” program, one of his first goals was to recruit a well-trained staff and pay them significantly above the market rate—about \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year. That well-intentioned effort quickly came up against a major obstacle. “We couldn't find any qualified teachers,” said Hopkins, who was looking for staff with either an associate's or a bachelor's degree in early education.



In response, Hopkins initiated a plan to create the well-trained workforce he needed, and in the process expand the pool of qualified child care workers in Northern Virginia. He launched the Early Childhood Learning Institute (ECLI) with funding from the Washington Area Women's Foundation (WAWF) and the Early Care and Education Funders Collaborative, a collective of corporate funders and local and national foundations, including WAWF. Under ECLI, low-income women receive financial support to earn a Child Development Associate credential and 31 college credits towards the 67 needed for an associate's degree in early childhood education. The courses are offered on-site at Hopkins House on evenings and

Saturdays through the Northern Virginia Community College. Since many of those entering the program have been out of school for some time and need remedial training, ECLI also partners with the Alexandria public schools to provide tutoring. There are currently 90 students in the program, 30 of whom are on track to soon get their associate's degrees.

Hopkins's efforts have attracted the notice of members of Congress, which recently awarded the program a \$250,000 demonstration grant through the U.S. Department of Labor to explore replicating the ECLI approach throughout Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. "This is considered a jobs program that helps low-income women advance their careers and leads to higher-quality early care," says Hopkins. The program also received a \$30,000 grant from the city of Alexandria to pay for a member of the ECLI staff to work with other area centers to encourage them to partner with ECLI and hire program graduates at salaries of no less than \$30,000 a year. "They typically say they can't afford to pay more than \$20,000 to their staff, but they are beginning to listen and buy into what we are saying," says Hopkins.

**Ensuring that Child Care Workers Can Take Advantage of Training Opportunities.** In nearby Maryland, child care workers can receive financial bonuses if they complete different levels of training under the Maryland Child Care Credential Program. The problem is that many workers don't know the program exists or what they need to do to earn their credentials. The Prince George's Child Resource Center (PGCRC), a grantee partner of the Washington Area Women's Foundation and the Early Care and Education Funding Collaborative, has stepped in to help child care providers take advantage of this unique state program, which gives financial rewards to child care providers of \$200 to \$1,500 as they complete different levels of training. "It is a wonderful program, but it isn't marketed well and isn't reaching those in the neediest communities," says Jodi Regner, director of community programs for PGCRC.

In the initial phase of what it calls its Professional Development Project, PGCRC conducted an outreach campaign to educate providers about the credential program, which was established in 2001 by the Maryland State Department of Education to raise the bar for early childhood educators and ensure that all children in the state have access to quality care. "We heard over and over again from providers that they had never heard of the program," said Regner, noting that when the state's new four-star rating system for child care providers goes into effect in 2011, those without credentials will find it extremely difficult to get ratings above one or two stars.



PRINCE GEORGE'S CHILD  
RESOURCE CENTER, INC



*Children at Redeem Christian Academy in Temple Hills, Md. learn through developmentally appropriate activities*

PGCRC is currently working with 40 child care providers in low-income communities to help them complete forms, write required essays and account for all of the education and training they need to fulfill each level in the credentialing process. To move up to a higher level and receive an additional bonus, providers are required to complete at least 12 to 24 hours of additional training each year. At the Redeem Christian Academy in Temple Hills, Md., the entire staff is being guided through the credentialing process with the help of PGCRC.

Stephanie Robinson, director of Redeem, says the program has motivated the staff to make changes in their teaching style and improvements in the quality of the center's education program. "They are learning to work with the kids in more developmentally appropriate ways, like encouraging them to pretend and play, and not just sit at their desk with worksheets all day," says Robinson. They have also learned that part of their job is to educate the parents, primarily low-income single mothers. "They are trying to get the message out to parents that there are activities they can engage in with their kids at home that will build on what they are learning at school." Robinson said that the staff is continuing to receive training and further their credentials, and that all now have associate's degrees.

#### **Creating a Professional Career Ladder for All Child Care Workers.**

Without a clear professional track, positions in early education can seem like dead-end jobs. The state of Tennessee set out to change that perception several years ago when it instituted a coordinated statewide career development system for the child care workforce.

Using CCDBG funds available to make quality improvements in state child care systems, the state launched the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) in 1992, establishing a system of early childhood education programs that would be available through colleges across the state.



Under the program, which is a community partner of the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis, child care professionals can advance from earning a Child Development Associate credential all the way up to graduate degrees, while having most of the cost of their education covered through scholarships. A separate credentialing program, called TECPAC (Tennessee Early Childhood Program Administrator Credential), is also available for all family providers, group providers and center directors in the state, who can take classes in such areas as leadership and administration/management.

"Surveys had found that 87 percent of child care workers in Tennessee had no early childhood training. TECTA was a response to that," said Elizabeth Wilson, director of the TECTA program at Southwest Tennessee Community

College, one of nine TECTA sites throughout the state. To participate in the program and receive financial support, covering from 75 percent to 100 percent of tuition, most providers must first attend a free 30-hour orientation offered by TECTA in one of the following areas: family child care, center-based care, school-age or infant/toddler care and child care administration.

Statewide, more than 7,000 students have received financial support through TECTA to advance their education. This year in Memphis and Shelby County alone, 600 students completed the orientation, launching them on a career track that is available to every child care worker in the state. “One of the overriding goals of TECTA was to improve the professional perception of child care workers, to allow them to see themselves as professionals who can move up a career ladder,” says Wilson.

Although TECTA has largely succeeded in reaching that goal, concerns remain about the low salaries paid, even to those with advanced degrees. As a result, more child care professionals are taking matters into their own hands. “They have learned to move from one center to the next to increase their salaries,” says Wilson. Others accept jobs with Head Start or in public schools, where the pay is significantly higher.

### ***Policy Priorities that Will Increase Opportunity for Early Care and Education Workers***

#### **✦ Reduce Barriers to Early Care and Education Providers Seeking Post-Secondary Education and Training.**

*This could be accomplished by:*

- **Addressing System Barriers.** States should create and maintain statewide boards to ensure that post-secondary education and training courses at the community level taken by early care providers meet high standards, can be transferred among educational institutions and can help workers move along a career path.
- **Addressing Financial Barriers.** Through public and private funding, states should create mechanisms to increase the education levels of early care and education workers and provide salary increases to those who meet key education criteria. For example, North Carolina has obtained approximately \$260 million from private funders for their early care and education programs. Other states have pursued public-private partnerships as well.

***“One of the overriding goals of TECTA was to improve the professional perception of child care workers, to allow them to see themselves as professionals who can move up a career ladder.”***

***– Elizabeth Wilson,  
TECTA program  
director, South-  
west Tennessee  
Community  
College***

- ❏ **Establish Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (see above).** States should be required to create and operate Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) for all child care centers and family child care homes. The QRIS should rate the quality of the setting, provide financial and technical assistance to providers working to improve quality and offer increased levels of reimbursements for care provided by higher-quality programs. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia currently have a statewide child care QRIS.<sup>43</sup>

## A Vital Role for Women’s Funds

### **For decades, women’s funds have understood that access to affordable, quality child care is critical to economic security.**

As noted in the stories above, women’s funds have invested in innovative strategies to improve the quality of child care settings and create a better educated, better compensated child care workforce. They have invested in systems reform efforts and in programs that engage parents and community members in advocating for better access to quality early care settings.

Because women’s funds look holistically at the issue—from the perspective of working mothers, child care workers and children—and have deep ties to their communities, they are well situated to identify key problems, support innovative solutions and work collaboratively to bring promising practices to scale.

Working collaboratively with other funders, women’s funds can continue to play an important role in developing new programs and bringing the struggles faced by low-income women to the top of the public policy agenda. In addition to investing in programs to improve access to quality early care and education and develop a better trained and compensated workforce, they can:

- ❏ **Work with business leaders to raise awareness of child care as a critical workforce development and business development issue.** For example: Washington Area Women’s Foundation came together with area business leaders to form the Early Care and Education Funders Collaborative, which identifies and funds programs that help improve the amount of high quality child care available to low-wage workers.
- ❏ **Advocate for state and federal policy changes that will allow more low-income women to obtain affordable, quality early care and education for their children.** For example: the Women’s Foundation of California has supported advocacy efforts among parents and child care providers aimed at helping state and local officials understand the barriers to accessing quality child care.

- ✎ **Work with grassroots organizations and local early care and education providers to identify the gaps that are preventing programs from meeting the needs of low-income families.** For example: the Chicago Foundation for Women supported the efforts of grassroots organizers to go door-to-door in low-income communities to learn about difficulties families faced accessing quality preschool programs. They then supported efforts to create advocacy strategies that help low-income families participate in these programs.
- ✎ **Through public education and communications outreach efforts, raise up the importance of improving the quality of early care and education settings for all young children.** For example: the Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis, in collaboration with the Early Success Coalition, has supported efforts to increase awareness of the importance of early care and education and the characteristics of quality early care settings among parents and child care providers by supporting programs that help child care centers achieve national accreditation.

## Conclusion

As a nation we need to recognize that job creation and training programs will not be effective without the establishment of policies and systems that promote quality, affordable and accessible child care for working parents, especially low-income mothers. Without good and reliable child care, women who try to hold down jobs will face little prospect of economic security, and their children will suffer the consequences of inconsistent, sub-standard care.

The child care challenges faced by low-income families and our nation are large. No one sector—public, private or philanthropic—can resolve them alone. We must work together in communities, states and at the national level to increase resources, institute new strategies, and establish better early care and education settings for all children.

Central to these efforts is improving the training and compensation available to child care workers themselves. If they continue to earn poverty-level wages it is unrealistic to expect early care and education programs, particularly those that serve low-income communities, to provide the learning experience that children mired in poverty need to grow and thrive.

As a nation we need to recognize that job creation and training programs will not be effective without the establishment of policies and systems that promote quality, affordable and accessible child care for working parents, especially low-income mothers.

At the local, state and national level there is much policy makers, as well as the philanthropic community and private entities, can do to ensure that programs with a proven record of success are able to expand their reach to more families and communities. During a time of desperately lean state budgets and deficit concerns in Congress, we must all work together to ensure that the needs of low-income mothers and their children are not pushed aside for another day. If we fail to give them the support necessary to secure good jobs and find quality care for their children, our country's long-term economic health will suffer—and we will all pay the price.

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**To learn more about the profiled programs:**

- ✘ **Parent Voices**  
<http://www.parentvoices.org>
  
- ✘ **California Child Care Resource & Referral Network**  
<http://www.rrnetwork.org>
  
- ✘ **Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)**  
<http://www.cofionline.org>
  
- ✘ **Illinois Action for Children**  
<http://www.actforchildren.org>
  
- ✘ **Ready, Set, Grow!**  
<http://www.memphis.edu/icl/rsg>
  
- ✘ **Hopkins House**  
<http://www.hopkinshouse.org>
  
- ✘ **Prince George's Child Resource Center, Inc.**  
<http://www.childresource.org>
  
- ✘ **Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA)**  
<http://www.tecta.info>

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