

**Testimony of Child Care Advocates
Before the
COVID-19 Pandemic Response Hearing
Wednesday - 05/13/20 at 10:00 a.m.**

Good morning members of the Senate Commerce, Finance, Agriculture, Banks, and Insurance Committees; and the Assembly Small Business, Ways and Means, Agriculture, Banks, and Insurance Committees; as well as the Assembly Office of State-Federal Relations and the Task Force on Food, Farm & Nutrition Policy. Thank you for hearing our testimony today. We represent several nonprofits and two statewide coalitions (Winning Beginning NY and the Empire State Campaign for Child Care); many of us also serve on the legislatively mandated New York State Child Care Availability Task Force as either advocates or providers.

Thank you for meeting to discuss the federal response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses in New York State. Child care (inclusive of afterschool) is one such business—many of the State’s 18,512 licensed or registered programs, whether they are center- or home-based, or serve infants, toddlers, or school-age children, qualify as not only small businesses, but a majority are minority- and/or women-owned. They are the backbone of our workforce; the often unseen support behind working parents.

We are here today because New York State cannot safely and effectively re-open without child care, which can be challenging to access and afford in normal times. Without access to high-quality, safe care, parents cannot work—it’s as simple as that.

Yet the current crisis has introduced a lot of uncertainty about child care for many parents of young children in New York State. One in three parents of young children say they do not plan to return to the child care arrangements they had prior to the coronavirus crisis or are unsure what they will do when the crisis is over. This uncertainty around child care cuts across all types of pre-pandemic arrangements, including low-income families (49%) who may be unable to afford their existing care if their financial situation worsens.

The federal response to child care was relatively swift—Congress adopted the CARES Act a month ago and sent more than \$160 million to New York State. To date, only \$30 million has been apportioned—in the form of child care scholarships to income eligible essential workers and cleaning and safety supplies for child care programs. Due to the urgency of keeping child care programs open, the management of these initiatives and funds has been borne by a non-profit, the Early Care & Learning Council. We urge the State to release the remainder of the federal CARES Act funding (\$130M+) immediately to support the recommendations we are making, and to revamp the scholarship program to serve more families. If we do not allocate

this funding promptly, we will be hobbled in our efforts to make the case for additional federal funds—and we know that more will be needed over the long-term to re-open our State safely and effectively.

In addition, to meet the tremendous needs New York families will have as the economy re-opens, and to re-open child care in the safest manner possible, New York State must draw upon all existing funds, including federal Child Care Development Block Grant, the Preschool Development Block Grant, and economic development dollars. We are also working hard to secure additional federal funding for New York State as a whole, and for child care in particular.

Many child care providers have remained open throughout the pandemic, providing critical care to healthcare, retail, transit, and many other essential workers.

Since the start of the pandemic, child care providers across the State have served on the frontlines, providing care for essential workers – often without the supplies that would assure their health and safety. These providers are 85% women, a majority black/brown sisters and 65% are paid so low that they qualify for public assistance. They have stepped up and met the challenge head-on. Now, they need support to continue their work during the re-opening and beyond.

Many of the providers that have closed in the face of the virus are uncertain they will have the means to re-open. One study contends that New York State could lose up to 50% of our child care slots. We must ensure that programs re-open, and that they can do so safely and expeditiously. If certain steps are not taken, there may not be a viable industry on the other side of this crisis.

For essential workers during the pandemic – who are being asked to work long hours while their school-age children are out of school, at a time when they cannot rely on older relatives and neighbors to assist with care - the challenge is finding and affording safe care for their young and school-aged children. Going forward, our economy cannot re-start without sufficient child care capacity. When additional parents are allowed to return to work, they will need care – particularly if businesses begin to re-open before schools and camps are allowed to.

Therefore, we must have a three-pronged strategy:

1. Ensure the safety of children, their families, the child care workforce, and our communities by supplying child care providers with the resources they need to implement the most current safety protocols.
2. Increase support for child care programs and state- and federally-funded afterschool programs that have remained open.
3. Create a fiscally supported capacity plan for child care and afterschool programs that want to re-open and families that need to return to work.

We urge New York State to:

- **Ensure the safety of New York’s children, families, child care providers, and communities.** With the growing evidence that children stricken by COVID-19 can fall seriously ill, and that many other children are symptomless carriers of the virus, safety is the most vital concern.
 - Collect data on the number of providers and children attending child care who become ill, how many programs are forced to close due to the virus, and constantly revise safety practices as the data dictates.
 - Provide child care programs the most up-to-date information about the impact of COVID-19 on children, especially in light of the ever-changing information, and have direct access to public health officials to help them trouble-shoot issues as they emerge in real-time.

- **Expand and strengthen Emergency Child Care Tuition Scholarships.** Many New York families, having endured layoffs and reduced work hours, will emerge from this pandemic even less able to afford the high costs of child care than before. To enable them to re-enter the workforce and regain their economic footing, New York State should expand the CARES Act Tuition Scholarships to:
 - Increase income eligibility to at least 400% FPL
 - Extend duration of program to continue through complete re-opening
 - Expand eligibility beyond essential workers as re-opening rolls out

- **Provide ongoing support for all low-income working parents.**
 - Maintain county waivers at 85% of state median income and elimination of co-pays; make these waivers statewide and costs covered by the State (using CARES Act and other available funding).
 - Identify opportunities to streamline the child care subsidy process, learning from the CARES scholarship process. The Child Care Task Force has conducted work to review all regulations and identify areas to streamline and better coordinate all early childhood programs. Continue to build on this work and minimize the red tape and bureaucracy associated with the child care industry.
 - Prioritize families involved in child welfare/ foster families/ children with special needs – equitably across counties using state and federal funding.
 - Ensure families who are seeking employment and/or are participating in job training are able to access child care subsidies or scholarships in all counties, using state and federal funding.
 - Eliminate county variations in subsidy eligibility during this period of recovery, and beyond.
 - Make a timely decision on summer camps. Thousands of children and youth attend camps, and parents rely on camps to provide care and enrichment while they work. Can families rely on camps this year? If not, will currently contracted providers be allowed the flexibility to provide virtual supports and/or take home activities for the youth and families they serve?

- Make use of existing afterschool programs for school-age children over the summer and during the school year to ensure age-appropriate activities and supports, and to maintain previously developed relationships between participants, staff, and families.
 - i. Issue guidance allowing currently funded afterschool programs under the Advantage After School and Empire State After-School programs (\$88M total in existing programs) to continue operating flexibly to meet the current needs.
- **Stabilize New York’s child care provider base – before it’s too late.**
 - Provide child care programs start-up grants that taper off only when a center reaches 95% of pre-pandemic attendance. Social distancing guidelines and staggered parental return-to-work will make enrollment at a level of fiscal viability a phased reality.
 - Supplies will be important, but providers will also need quality supports and on-going training on how to provide care safely, especially as health concerns ebb and flow. Some providers may need capitol.
 - Create start-up grants to programs that will need quality support, education, and technical assistance.
 - Provide premium pay for providers who are providing care at great risk.
- **Include child care as part of the official re-opening strategy, particularly at the tables tasked with redefining education and economic development.** Child care, schools, businesses, and families are interconnected; none can function without the others. As we look ahead to re-opening scenarios that might include staggered school schedules and varied business hours, it is essential that child care experts are at the decision-making tables.

Thank you for your interest in this issue. We look forward to working with you to help New York State re-open.

Empire State Campaign for Child Care

Winning Beginning NY

Chautauqua Lake Child Care Center
 Child Care Council of Suffolk
 Early Care and Learning Council
 New York Association for the Education of Young Children
 New York State Network for Youth Success
 Prevent Child Abuse New York
 Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
 The Children’s Agenda
 WNY Women’s Association
 YWCA