

CT VIEWPOINTS

## As COVID relief funds wane, Connecticut must invest in fixing child care



by Allyx Schiavone

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The author leads a rally in support of childcare workers.

Beginning this fall, child care providers, early childhood educators, and families across the state will no longer be able to count on the federal COVID-19 relief funds that helped to carry our flailing child care system through the pandemic and subsequent period of ongoing economic recovery.

The American Rescue Plan Child Care Stabilization Program supported over 2,500 child care programs and nearly 105,000 children across the state.

I am the executive director of the [Friends Center for Children](#) in New Haven. We provide early childhood care and education for children ages three months to five years. Our year-round, full-time program provides a community of care that includes skilled and dedicated educators, family participation, and a comprehensive emotional well-being program. We used these COVID-19 relief funds to keep our programs open, classrooms staffed, and provide resources for our students during a time of deep insecurity and financial instability in our nation.

The sunseting of these relief funds amidst an ongoing child care crisis in our state will place added financial pressures on Connecticut families and child care providers. This year, I marched alongside the hundreds of parents, child care providers, early childhood educators, and business leaders who have repeatedly turned out to rally for greater state investment in child care, at events like the March [“Morning Without Childcare”](#) and the [New Haven Family Stroll](#) in May.

Still, even with [recent, much-needed funding increases](#), when it comes to affordable child care the reality does not align with our state’s potential to meet the needs of every Connecticut child. Many of the state’s “solutions” remain short-term and piecemeal. For example, eligibility requirements for [Care4Kids](#), the state’s child care subsidy program, exclude most families that struggle to pay for child care and lead many mothers upon the birth of a second child to drop out of the labor force when faced with the cost of care for two young children.

The impacts of this ongoing strain are also felt far more broadly, by employers, businesses, and workers. Early childhood education programs put our children on a path to developmental success and allow parents to work. The future of Connecticut’s economy rests on families having access to quality, affordable child care.

Connecticut consistently ranks among the most expensive states for child care in the nation. According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), Connecticut ranks fifth out of 50 states and the District of Columbia for the most expensive infant care. The average cost of full-time infant care in Connecticut is a staggering \$15,501 per year. Child care for a 4-year-old costs \$12,731, or \$1,061 each month. A minimum wage worker in Connecticut would need to work full time for 38 weeks, or from January to September, just to pay for child care for one infant. For working-class families, this financial burden is simply unsustainable.

What's worse, the current reported costs of Connecticut childcare are based on what parents can afford to pay. The **true per child cost of child care in the state** is approximately \$22,000-31,000 for infant and toddler care. Preschool care and early childhood education costs approximately \$12,000 to \$16,000. While some subsidies exist to bridge the gap between true costs and market-driven expenditures, all too often the burden falls to the education and child care centers to offset these costs. That means they struggle to offer a dollar or two over minimum wage. In effect, the system is currently subsidized by teachers and workers absorbing these costs by being paid poverty-level wages. This leads to enormous staff turnover and lower quality care.

These costs also place an enormous strain on families across the state. At the start of Fiscal Year 2023, **there were 114,724 child care spaces available for the approximately 180,000 children ages 0-5 in Connecticut**, leaving over 65,000 children without the option to be accommodated at all. Moreover, of those, spaces for children under five that are subsidized in one way or another **is only 50,913**, with roughly 5,000 of those slots out of commission due to staff shortages.

Many parents – especially single parent families and those with low incomes – are forced to make difficult choices. Some may decide to stop working altogether, sacrificing their careers and financial stability, in order to care for their children. In a late-summer **2022 Census Bureau survey**, more than 365,000 adults reported losing a job because they needed to take time to care for children under age five, while more than 1.3 million adults left the workforce for the same reason.

The consequences of these challenges touch every area of our lives. Balancing work and family responsibilities can cause increased stress and mental health issues for parents. These can trickle down to our children.

Recent data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual **KIDS COUNT Data Book** shows that **in Connecticut, one-in-four children have one or more emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions**. Quality early childhood education has a profound impact on a child's development, setting the foundation for future success in school and beyond.

We need quality care that nurtures children's social-emotional and mental health needs. Many children already face food insecurity, teacher turnover, and other social challenges. As they grow up, they must receive intentional and focused care that provides the emotional and social skills needed to become functional adults. By

ensuring that all children have access to affordable child care, we can level the playing field, regardless of socio-economic status.

When it comes to combating this crisis, what we need is a long-term, transformational investment from our leaders. It is also an economic necessity. Comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-five early education has been found **to net a 13% per year return on investment for our economy**. Affordable child care allows parents to remain in the workforce, contributing to the state's economy.

When parents can pursue their careers with access to high quality, affordable child care, we foster a thriving workforce and a stronger economy for everyone. This should be a top priority for every Connecticut leader, policymaker, and voter.

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