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Miriam Johnson Sutton: Connecticut can't afford to let our child care system fail



Chris Ehrmann/AP

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Brinkmanship in Washington, D.C. and in state capitols around the country, including here in Hartford, has brought our state's early childhood care and education sector to the brink of calamity. If Congress doesn't act by Sept. 30, \$24 billion in federal funds that barely kept the child care sector afloat during the pandemic will expire, blowing a massive hole in the budgets of state departments of education, child care providers and inevitably, parents facing tuition hikes or losing their children's spots. If the funding isn't renewed or supplemented, Connecticut is projected to see nearly 1,000 care providers close their doors and more than

37,000 young children lose care. As both a provider and a parent myself, I have seen both halves of this equation suffer through years of chronic underfunding. Unlike the rest of the pre-Covid economy however, there's something that set the child care sector apart from others — we were already in crisis before the pandemic.

Unlike other sectors, child care doesn't have the luxury of adapting to the market without inflicting dire economic pain on either parents or teachers. The sector's low wages choke supply of services, but raising them means raising tuition, pricing out our most vulnerable families who can't afford care. Even with the stabilization funds we are about to lose, 37% of Connecticut's 180,000 children between 0 and 5 are currently either priced out of child care or without available spots.

This is no longer a problem for child care providers, parents and their children alone. It is a whole-of-society problem requiring holistic and urgent solutions. If the funding cliff isn't averted, we are about to see the number of children without care jump from 66,000 kids to over 100,000. That means parents dropping out of the workforce because child care isn't a luxury — it is a physical necessity. The Century Foundation estimates our parents are about to lose more than \$130 million in earnings as a result of the expiration of these funds, and our employers more than \$150 million in lost productivity and our child care sector is set to shed nearly 5,000 provider jobs. Nearly 2,600 providers across every county in the state are set to lose this federal lifeline. The time to act was months or even years ago, but with these dire consequences now just days away, the time to act must be now.

In the short term, two things must happen. First, I am raising the alarm to Connecticut's congressional delegation that we have an opportunity – vote to pass the Child Care Stabilization Act, which would restore \$16 billion of the \$24 billion set to expire at the end of the month. Second, Connecticut must immediately lift the self-imposed funding cap so that some of our state's current budget surplus can fill the remaining child care funding gap.

Beyond these immediate stopgap measures, now is also the time to truly fix our broken system, not just put one band-aid on top of another as we let things go from crisis to crisis. The sector needs a stable revenue source outside of the whims of the legislative process, like Vermont's new payroll deduction tax through which employers and employees contribute toward a public good that the state's residents rely on. As well, the state must look at creative ways of investing in physical infrastructure like the construction of new centers, subsidized or free housing for at-home providers as well as center-based teachers and other incentives to supplement provider salaries without raising costs on parents. And finally, child care must be accessible to all parents who want it, the cost should be prorated based on household income, and should never drive families into poverty or force them to choose between care and other basic needs.

Our lawmakers in Washington and in Hartford face pivotal choices in the coming days, and after years of undervaluing child care to the detriment of children, parents and providers, have an obligation to avert a disaster that would ripple out across our state's economy. Just as importantly, they have a historic opportunity to move this vital sector out of a state of permanent crisis and toward what our families truly need — sustainable, equitable and affordable care that every Connecticut child and parent can rely on.

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