

## Opinion: I can only afford to be a teacher because my employer covers my rent. More should.

*It's obvious that our economy relies on early care and education, but there's a massive gap between what parents can afford and what teachers like me need to earn to survive.*

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When I moved from Ohio to New Haven, Connecticut, I knew I wanted to continue my career in early care and education. I also knew I needed a job that would make it possible to support my children.

Unfortunately, in my field, those sorts of jobs are few and far between.

It's obvious that our economy relies on early care and education, but there's a massive gap between what parents can afford and what teachers like me need to earn to survive.



From left, Allyx Schiavone, executive director for Friends Center for Children, and educator Paris Pierce. Friends Center for Children

The child care system is subsidized by the low wages paid to early childhood educators. This reality often leaves teachers struggling to find safe and affordable housing, so initiatives like the Friends Center for Children's free Teacher Housing Initiative are vital.

## **Help teachers build a foundation for financial stability**

I've been a part of the initiative for nearly four years, and I can't overstate how much it has improved my life.

This program isn't just about living in safe housing without needing to pay rent, though that has made an incredible difference – this initiative is about helping teachers build a foundation for long-term financial stability.

Through this initiative, I have been provided a financial coach who helps me set and reach savings goals with the money that would have gone toward rent. We discuss budgeting, credit, banking and any other financial concerns I might have.

This support has given me relief, reduced my stress and significantly improved my family's quality of life.

More than that, it provides stability and the breathing room I need to focus on both my personal and professional growth.

## **Teachers want to continue doing the work we love**

We need significant, sustained investment to stabilize the early care and education sector, and to demonstrate to teachers and would-be teachers that our value is seen.

By offering rent-free housing as a part of our salary package – through a combination of housing that was bought and donated to the Friends Center, as well as houses that were designed and built through a partnership with the Yale School of Architecture's Jim Vlock First Year Building Project – teachers at the Friends Center can live more securely while continuing to do the work we love.

But rent-free housing isn't the only way to support early care and education.

Public-sector programs could invest in purchasing or constructing child care centers and home-based facilities, which could be offered to providers rent-free or with significant tax savings for homeowners.

Local, state and federal government entities could also incentivize employers to build child care facilities, which would help offset capital costs.

Suppose public programs and private initiatives come together to address the supply deficit of early care and education. In that case, we can lift the financial burden of rent and mortgage payments from providers.



This would allow providers and the larger American public to reinvest in what matters most: paying teachers a living wage.

Ultimately, it's not just about making early care and education affordable for families – it's also about making it sustainable for educators.

*Paris Pierce is an assistant teacher in the preschool program at Friends Center for Children in New Haven, Connecticut.*