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Labor as the Bridge: Bringing Together Low-Wage Workers and Family Child Care Providers to Meet Care Needs

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Introduction

Every few years, news reports emerge discussing the child care crisis – or the growing need and rising costs for child care in the U.S. But for many workers, this crisis is one felt on a daily basis. A recent survey conducted by the UCLA Labor Center, the Garment Worker Center and Research Action Design, and with the generous support of the Ms. Foundation, documents the challenges faced by low-wage garment workers in Los Angeles in securing child care. Among the most startling revelations was that garment workers, among the lowest paid workers in the region, spend as much as one-third of their weekly income on child care.¹ These rates parallel experiences across the U.S.: a national survey indicates that child care for toddlers amounts to 44 percent of a single working mother’s Income.² The challenges for garment workers are exacerbated by regional conditions and workplace inequalities, including rampant wage theft, high costs of living, a lack of affordable housing and barriers related to immigration policy.

The survey and other recent data raise key questions about the ever growing need for child care – and the present *and* future of California’s workforce. Public policy is only recently beginning to catch up to the growing demand for quality care and the lack of supply thereof. Today’s child care system is a patchwork of various public and private local, state and federal funded programs. Yet quality child care both supports maternal labor and benefits child development. Aside from lost economic productivity, the inaccessibility of regular child care plays a critical role in perpetuating the multi-generational effects of poverty.³

¹Garcia, Natalia, Shaddock-Hernández, Janna, and Valles, Dario. *Hanging by a Thread! Los Angeles Garment Workers’ Struggle to Access Quality Care for their Children*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, the Garment Worker Center and Research Action Design, 2015.

²National Association of Child Care resource & Referral Agencies (NAACRRA). *Parents and the high cost of child care*. NAACRRA, 2014.

³Winer, Abby C. and Thompsom, Ross. *How Poverty and Depression Impact a Child’s Social and Emotional Competence*. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, n.d.

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Family child care providers offer home-based care in formal and informal arrangements and serve low-income workers through government subsidies. They have attempted to fill the gap in child care and early education for working families.⁴ For the purpose of this report we coincide with the Urban Institute that family child care refers to any care setting (licensed or unlicensed) in which providers offer child care in their homes, serve multiple children from different families, and provide these services as an intended ongoing business.⁵

Like garment workers, family child providers face their own challenges in the workplace. Family child care providers' experiences and advocacy provides an important window into what *can* work to close the child care gap – and where new strategic action is needed. In this brief, we bridge the realities of child care access in California for low-wage workers with the experiences of family child care providers, and offer recommendations from practitioners' perspective to resolve the growing crisis of care. Affordable child care is essential to improving the lives of working families in California, and child care providers are a key component to closing the educational and inequality gap in the state.

What do workers say about child care access?

Two of the major findings of the jointly-produced garment worker child care access survey were 1) child care was unaffordable and inaccessible for garment workers and 2) garment workers are not accessing public subsidy programs. Garment workers devote one-third of their weekly income to child care needs – paralleling national trends⁶. Infants and toddler are the most difficult to place in child care largely due to the potty training and other requirements for centers. Weekends, holidays and nights are particularly challenging to find care. Garment sector employment does not take into account local school breaks or holidays; and during these times, it is not unusual to encounter children in the factories where their mothers work.

The *Hanging By a Thread!* study also found that a mere 4 percent of garment workers are accessing publicly funded child care programs – including those with federal funding like Head Start and public preschool programs. Garment workers were unaware of or did not think they were eligible for programs such as Los Angeles' Universal Preschool (LAUP) program, which is funded by the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge. Approximately 18 percent of garment workers surveyed noted their immigration status as a barrier to accessing government child care programs, with many assuming to be ineligible, even if their children are citizens.

Aside from the lack of information on government-supported care, the burden placed on the applicant for aid is enough to deter many overworked parents. Garment workers noted the time consumed and significant paperwork required for such aid. As one worker explained, “Even if I know where to go to apply for assistance, I need help to complete all the paperwork.” In order to receive aid, workers must continually respond to “means-testing verifications,” i.e. income assessments by agencies, and must update agencies of their constantly changing work schedules. Garment workers share the burden of

⁴ This policy brief is informed by over two years of ethnographic field research by Dario Valles, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University and co-author of this report. Valles has also conducted over 15 in-depth, “life history” interviews with family child care providers on their experiences.

⁵ Chaudry, A. (et al). 2011. *Childcare Choices of Low-wage Working Families*. Urban Institute 2011.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) Data on Child Care (2013)

obtaining signatures and requesting schedules in advance from supervisors who often force them to work under the table and off the clock.

Given these roadblocks, providers rely on family, friends, and neighbors to care for children; more broadly they turn to family child care providers. The burdens of child care are clearly shared by the underpaid child care providers who care for low-wage workers' children, which we discuss further below. But how did family child care providers become such an essential part of care for low-wage and working families?

How did we get here?

The various puzzle pieces that make up the jigsaw of the contemporary child care system in California emerged throughout the second half of the 20th Century.⁷ When young women were mobilized to work in war-related industries, the emergency situation prompted the Lanham Act of 1940, which authorized federal public child care, serving approximately 600,000 children at 3,100 centers across the country at its height.⁸ While the Lanham Act was not reauthorized after the war, parents and early education activists were able to continue funding for publicly-funded day care (or “custodial care”) centers open in California into the 1960s. However activists had to accept higher income requirements and increased parent fees. The post-war child care programs introduced “means testing,” intended on preventing middle class women from accessing these services, while also stigmatizing these program and associating them with poor or single women.

The Lyndon Johnson Great Society and War on Poverty provided a major boost to child care with the federal “Head Start” program. As researcher Abby Cohen notes, Head Start was “premised on the notion that early childhood education could have a substantial impact on poor children's later success” and provided a “comprehensive child development program” that linked learning, health, social service and parent involvement.⁹ The Head Start program emphasis on child development has led to the success of the program, but it is limited in scope, only serving families below the federal poverty level.

In 1971, advocates of early education and those advocating for working families proposed universal federal funding through the Comprehensive Child Care Act. The Act was meant to unify these diverse programs but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon, whose allies compared universal child care to communal child rearing and warned against government incursion into the family.¹⁰ A decade later, President Ronald Reagan accelerated the dismantling of social programs, privatizing the public sector and deploying race-based rhetoric, such the image of the Welfare Queen, to stigmatize welfare and social service users.

It is not until the federal Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 that the U.S. saw new federal child care programs. And it couldn't have come sooner: By 1988 more than half of all mothers with children under

⁷ . Early 20th Century Progressive and New Deal legislation ignored the experiences of the vast majority of women of color, especially those working in domestic and agricultural labor, and failed to provide any support for working mothers.

⁸ Stoltzfus, Emilie. *Citizen, mother, worker: Debating public responsibility for child care after the second world war*. Durham: UNC Press Books, 2003.

⁹ Cohen, Abby J. A brief history of federal financing for child care in the United States. *The Future of Children* (1996): 26-40.

¹⁰ Fousekis, Natalie M. *Demanding Child Care: Womens Activism and the Politics of Welfare, 1940-1971*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

six were in the workforce.¹¹ The FSA amended direct welfare payments through Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) by introducing the first iteration of welfare-to-work. It was the first open-ended entitlement for child care, and child care was guaranteed for the hours mothers participated in this jobs training program. However, if child care was not available participation was not required.¹² The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), which fully replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), expanded this program through the Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. This authorized TANF recipients and those in state “workfare” programs, such as Cal-Works in California, to receive subsidized child care.

But PRWORA also placed stringent new time limits on accessing aid and subsidized care. It was also followed by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, which increased restrictions on government agencies dispensing aid to immigrants. Throughout the 2000s, increasing anti-immigrant legislation complicated the ability of all immigrants, regardless of status, to access basic services. As garment worker’s experiences indicate, these punitive approaches have created fear among immigrant communities – even among those eligible for services – of utilizing any government-funded services.

By 2000, women’s work force participation had reached its historical peak in the U.S. at more than 60 percent. The 2008 recession put more men out of work, especially in construction jobs, while industries like the health and service where women prevail have only grown. Currently in California there are about 300,000 families on a waiting list to receive child care subsidies, and more than a billion dollars have been cut since 2008 in early educational programs. This has left an ever-growing gap in care – for which government services have only responded in a piecemeal fashion.

Recently, new federal programs have sought an answer to early education access, given the plethora of research showing its importance to later academic and economic achievement. President Barack Obama passed the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a federally-funded pilot program intended to close the achievement gap and reach low-income and English learners with quality preschool for children ages 3 to 5. This plan is focused on quality and child development as well as kindergarten readiness and closing racial achievement gaps. But while the RTT-ELC should be applauded, as we discuss above, it remains out of reach for many immigrant and low-wage workers – including the garment workers surveyed. How then can this patchwork of care be unified – and how can we answer to the ever-growing need for child care? The answer requires looking at the experiences of workers who have become essential to the child care infrastructure in California: family child care providers.

Why is family child care so important to workers?

Family child care is defined as “care given by an adult related to the child or unrelated, in the adults own home and outside the child home”.¹³ Unlike center-based and preschool and Head Start, family child care homes provide year-round and flexible care. A national study found that family child care for children can be up to 13 hours day and for all but two weeks out of the year, with more than half the

¹¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Women in the Labor force: Databook*. BLS Reports December 2014 Labor force Statistics from the Current Population Survey

¹² Cohen, 1996.

¹³ Layzer, Jean & Goodson, Barbara. *Care in the home: A description of family child care and the experiences of the families and children that use it: The national study of child care for low-income families: Wave 1 report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006.

providers willing to care for children when they are sick.¹⁴ Researchers have clearly documented that low-wage working mothers are more likely to work non-standard shifts, including weekends, holidays and evenings, making the coordination of traditional childcare often impossible for this labor force.¹⁵ As a consequence, more and more low-wage families are seeking child care arrangements that fit their employment schedules as well as their social, linguistic and cultural needs.

Ethnographic research among family child care activists in Los Angeles reveals a racially and ethnically diverse workforce representative of Los Angeles and offering variety of multi-lingual settings. Similar to the national survey, family child care providers in Los Angeles have a range of anywhere from seven to twenty years of experience. Low-wage workers often select family child care because these providers offer subsidized care (and often will make pay arrangements to support families), provide meals, accommodate early and late pick-up and even provide transportation.

What is the current state of family child care in California?

Family child care is critical to subsidized care for low-wage workers and to keeping many active in the workforce. Yet child care providers make on average 4.98 dollars an hour with no health insurance creating an industry that is characterized by high turnover.¹⁶ The low pay in the industry is largely due to the Regional Market Rates (RMR) funding formula developed during in the late 1980s to determine caps on the rate child care providers can be paid through public subsidies. The RMR, family child care advocates argue, are largely based on outdated regional surveys of pay – maintaining wages artificially low for those willing to take subsidized children. In California the most recent RMR is currently set at 85th percentile of the RMR survey conducted in 2009, *minus* 10.11%; in other words, it is substantially lower than current costs of care.

Even with the low pay, most family child care providers are willing to work with the variety of federal state and local agencies in order to offer care for low-income children. But many are simply squeezed out from participating in these subsidy programs. Family child care providers interviewed were largely excluded from the new Race to the Top funding because most care for infants and toddlers. For those family child care providers with the education credentials to even qualify for funding, they could not meet the substantial paperwork and time commitments. In general, family child care workers already contend with numerous regulations required to maintain licensing including site inspections and zoning laws.

These substandard wages and institutional challenges have made family child care ripe for union organizing. Family child care providers have unionized in more than a dozen states including Oregon and Washington state. In California, family child care providers have worked with unions and labor organizations, as well as broader early childhood education advocates, to support improving child care delivery.

¹⁴ Layzer and Goodson, 2006.

¹⁵ Sheely, Amanda. 2010. "Work Characteristics and Family Routines in Low-wage Families". *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Vol. 23 No. 3.

¹⁶ Jean Layzer and Barbara Goodson, "Care in the Home: A Description of Family Child Care and the Experiences of the Families and Children Who Use It," ABT Associates for the US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007

In 2007, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed AB 1164, the Family Child Care Collective Bargaining Rights bill. The bill continues to be reintroduced annually by successive legislative sessions – and vetoed by successive governors. In 2015, it is currently pending as SB 548, the Child Care Quality and Accessibility Act. At the same time, the family child care union groups and advocates have been active in early education advocacy. Recent victories include:

- Helping restore Cal Works Stage 3 funding – for parents no longer on cash assistance but still requiring child care subsidies – from budget cuts;
- Meeting quarterly with the state’s Department of Education to discuss improving child care subsidy procedures and access;
- Helping close a resources and referral agency in the South Bay found to have been mismanaging public funds;
- Organizing a multi-city, statewide bus tour in February 2015 culminating in Sacramento to raise awareness of the role of early childhood education in closing the racial and economic academic achievement gap. The trip garnered significant media attention, particularly from Spanish-speaking media, and brought together family child care providers, families who receive care, policymakers and other early education advocates.

Despite all of these accomplishments, family child care providers continue to lack the resources and capacity to help meet the tremendous need for child care. Yet, they continue to devote their energies to serving low-wage workers while providing important, intimate early education that is necessary to raise up the next generation of California’s workforce.

What can we do about child care?

California is at a crossroads in terms of closing the deep economic and social chasm that has defined the last several decades. California has now had budget surpluses and the states GDP will surpass both Brazil and Italy – and there is no wiser investment for the future than early education. Child care is a critical component to women and young workers’ economic mobility, as well as to ensuring a capable 21st Century workforce. And there are key opportunities on the horizon to impact both California’s current and future prosperity:

- **Increase resources and protections for family child care.** Support child care unionization through the passage of SB 548, the Child Care Quality and Accessibility Act. With this, increase the standard reimbursement rate and provide key protections for family child care providers.
- **Increase training opportunities for child care providers.** Child care unions are currently partnering with child development programs in creating an apprenticeship program, modeled after other trade unions, for those entering the early education field.
- **Streamline the child care application process.** Reduce the complexity of applying for subsidized care for parents and standardize immunization, employment and residential verification procedures.
- **Streamline different funding sources.** Bring together federal, state, and local funding streams under a unified umbrella, and increase federal and state funding for care.

- **Increase access to public subsidies.** In particular, open access to immigrant and low-wage working parents beyond the “welfare-to-work” system. Improve education and outreach to help inform these communities on available services.
- **Improve networks of parents, providers and agencies.** Target different businesses & industries with high need (i.e. garment industry), as well as labor and community-based organizations in these industries, to promote existing child care options.