

Bolstering child care as vital as rebuilding roads



Your Turn

Kirsten Gillibrand and Sarah Clark
Guest columnists

For years, we have known that our child care ecosystem was hanging on by a thread.

Providers can barely cover costs and employees' low wages don't reflect the importance of their work. Even before the pandemic, child care was out of reach for too many families. It was not available – Rochester had 1,000 slots for 9,000 children under the age of two; and, across Monroe County, there were only three slots for every 10 kids.

And it was not affordable – a year of child care in New York is often more expensive than a year of in-state college tuition. While assistance exists for low-income families, the subsidy system can be difficult to navigate and doesn't cover enough families.

Then COVID-19 hit, throwing the entire system into a tailspin. As businesses closed and people lost their jobs or began working from home, child care providers saw enrollment plummet and had to lay off staff and close their doors. Roughly 1,500 providers shut down statewide since the beginning of the pandemic, and child care employment statewide is down 15% from pre-pandemic levels. This left working parents with few options. Almost three million women have left the workforce across the country during the course of the pandemic, many because of caregiving-related concerns.

The importance of the child care system has never been more evident. But the child care system in New York is on the verge of collapse. The question now is not only how do we recover, but how can we take this moment and transform for the better?

The fight to convince the public and our fellow elected officials that invest-

The fight to convince the public and our fellow elected officials that investments in child care are investments in the nation's infrastructure has been a long one, but families now have reason to be optimistic about child care policy efforts at the state and federal level.

ments in child care are investments in the nation's infrastructure has been a long one, but families now have reason to be optimistic about child care policy efforts at the state and federal level. Over the last year and half, the rapidly changing realities of American families have emphasized the need for significant investment into child care and supporting families. It's now clear that for working parents, the child care provider they rely on is just as critical to getting to work as the roads they drive to the office.

The 2021 American Rescue Plan recognized this reality, and infused much-needed investment into New York to help shore up our fragile child care system. It included \$1.1 billion for the Child Care Stabilization Fund and another \$705 million for the Child Care and Development Block Grant. That federal funding for New York was supplemented by another \$600 million passed into the FY2022 state budget. Those resources and the changing tide of public opinion gave us a real opportunity to transform child care in our state.

Along with the increase in funding, New York also advanced a series of critical improvements to child care over the past year. The state legislature ensured that the state's budget agreement included measures to guarantee that child care providers are reimbursed to help cover their costs when children stay home sick, increased the eligibility for childcare subsidies to up to 200% of the federal poverty level statewide, and limited out-of-pocket costs for families receiving child care

See CHILD CARE, Page 15B

Child care

Continued from Page 13B

subsidies. The state legislature also passed two critical provisions awaiting a governor's signature.

First, legislation that would give providers the option of receiving subsidy payments through direct deposit, ending the days of waiting for a paper check in the mail. And, second, legislation to ensure that New York's Child Care Availability Task Force composed of families, providers, state leaders and other stakeholders will continue to oversee this multibillion-dollar investment and ensure these resources are distributed quickly and to those who need it the most.

But our work is not done. Our country and our state must continue to invest in child care infrastructure. The American Families Plan includes critical measures to bolster our care economy, ensuring that low- and middle-income families pay no more than 7% of their income on child care. It also expands the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, providing relief to families struggling to afford the high cost of child care. These proposals must be a part of our infrastructure plans moving forward.

To truly transform the child care system, we must raise wages for our caregivers, which will help attract and retain a quality workforce, and support



Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand speaks during a rally organized by the “Paid Leave for All” cross-country bus tour, as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer cheers on Aug. 4 in Washington, D.C. The bus tour made a stop near the U.S. Capitol to hold the rally along with the advocacy group “Care Can’t Wait,” and call on lawmakers to pass a national paid leave policy. GETTY IMAGES

providers with subsidies that actually cover the true cost of providing high quality care. We also need to recognize the needs of modern families by decoupling work hours from eligibility so that the system no longer punishes low-wage workers with unpredictable schedules, and increase reimbursement rates for non-traditional hour care so that parents who work nights

and weekends or are enrolled in higher education have more options.

The time to guarantee universal access to affordable, quality child care is now. It will not only move us toward a full recovery but ensure that New York will thrive for generations to come.

Kirsten Gillibrand is a U.S. senator from New York. Sarah Clark is a state Assembly member.