



What New Moms Need: More Flexible Childcare Options

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I'm expecting my first child very soon. Like all new moms, I'm preparing for the big day and the many challenges associated with parenthood. As a dual-earner family, one of those challenges is finding affordable and quality childcare.

My husband and I are already shopping for childcare options that are right for us. It has been an eye-opening experience. The market is saturated. Today there are fewer providers because COVID-19 shutdowns forced many out of business. With fewer choices and more parents seeking childcare as people move from remote to in-person work, the competition is fierce, with six-month or longer waitlists, limited space for babies, and rising costs.

The pandemic has proven that working parents need more flexibility and increased options, like the innovative approaches developed when the pandemic forced parents to find community alternatives to traditional childcare. These include neighborhood co-ops or pods, where parents take turns providing care or hiring a teacher, nanny sharing, support from family members, or rearranging work schedules. Some have been forced to leave the workforce.

Unfortunately, President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats have another approach — one that comes with a hefty price tag and a wide array of new regulations imposed upon daycare providers. While they claim their plan will provide relief to struggling parents, it will decrease childcare options for parents and misdirect taxpayer dollars away from the neediest families.

While negotiations over the reconciliation bill continue, a framework released by the White House says it will “ensure that middle-class families pay no more than 7 percent of their income on childcare.” Federal subsidies would be provided on a sliding scale, with families earning less than 75 percent of state median income paying nothing for childcare and families earning up to 250 percent of state median income paying no more than 7 percent of their income for childcare.

This sliding scale of subsidy payments “would be heavily skewed toward high-income families,” according to Rachel Greszler, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation. “For example, a couple making \$343,600 in Washington, D.C., would receive \$30,300 in childcare

subsidies for two children, while a couple making \$53,000 in Mississippi would receive \$17,600 in childcare subsidies for two children,” writes Greszler.

As with all “free money” that comes from Washington, the childcare subsidies come with strings attached that will ultimately impact care and parents keeping their preferred provider. Providers that receive federal funds would be forced to abide by a host of new mandates and regulations, which include wages for workers that are equal to what local public elementary school teachers are paid. According to the CATO Institute, “The average childcare worker nationally is currently paid \$25,460, against \$60,660 for the average elementary school teacher (in other words, the latter earns 138 percent more).” The result of this new pay mandate for childcare workers, says Greszler, is “childcare costs equaling twice the current per-pupil cost of public K-12 education.”

With federal funds also come one-size-fits-all curriculum mandates and new building requirements, further pushing out smaller providers and parental choices. And greater government control increases the power of politicians and bureaucrats to force provider closures.

It is also deeply unfair for the parents who will receive no subsidies because they forgo two incomes (or freelance) so one can stay home, who send their children to a religious provider that is unable to abide by government-imposed mandates, or who are unable to find a “government-approved” provider.

Congress would fund this new government overreach with a bait-and-switch approach that we’ve seen before. Their goal is to encourage states and families to participate in the program, increase dependency on government funds, and then, as costs increase and choices decline, force states and future Congresses to pick up the financial pieces. It’s a recipe for disaster, especially for families.

The pandemic has proven working mothers and fathers need more flexibility, not less — including faith-based options. Let’s learn from these lessons and increase choice and flexibility instead of creating a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, states should audit childcare regulations and eliminate those that are costly, burdensome, and do nothing to improve safety or care outcomes, including those that limit the supply of home-based childcare providers. States should prioritize the role of the family and communities and empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

The proposal before Congress does not put families first. It would create a new two-tier system that reduces affordable options, especially for lower-income families, and leads to diminishing quality of care. It should be rejected.