

Testimony of Angélica González

House Committee on Education and Labor Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee

Solving America's Child Care Crisis: Supporting Parents, Children, and the Economy

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Good morning Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen and members of the Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee. My name is Angélica María González and I thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I am a single mom of three children, a recent law school graduate, a Seattle, Washington resident and a proud member of MomsRising. My children are fourteen, seven and four. I currently work as a law clerk for Lane Powell.

As a single mother, who is the sole provider with no family, finding high-quality, affordable, reliable child care falls to me. But throughout my 14 years of parenting, doing so has never been easy and often it has been impossible. Despite trying my best, I have struggled to find and maintain the child care my family needs at every turn and this struggle has had a profoundly harmful impact on my family.

I am what you would call a true grit, hard worker, pull yourself up from your “bootstraps” type of person. But the truth is, is that the childcare system is so broken, that I was really only able to persevere and overcome on pure miracles and luck. And I believe my miracles happened so that I would have the opportunity to tell my story and fight for a just cause because the truth of the matter is that not everyone is lucky, and not everyone gets a miracle.

As a child I grew up with a single mother who struggled greatly with many issues such as housing and childcare which led to growing up on the streets of Phoenix, Arizona. At the age of eleven I left the streets on my own to find a better life and eventually made my way to Washington State where I found my father. I overcame many obstacles and faced many barriers.

At the age of sixteen I was on my own. At the age of seventeen, seeing no future, I dropped out high school and shortly thereafter had my first child, Jasmine. Looking into Jasmine's eyes as a baby, I knew I had to give her a better future than what I knew. I was determined at that moment to work as hard as I could to make a better life for her. One of the first issues I ran into was acquiring child care for my daughter so that I could go back to high school and graduate.

There was no location that would accept an infant and I had no money to pay anyone. This was the beginning of an issue that has not resolved itself to this day. At this time, I was a homeless teen that was just focused on trying to graduate so that I could give my daughter a life I never had. Luckily for me, a small alternative high school allowed me to bring Jasmine with me to class and attend school and graduate. This is not the case for most young moms.

In desperation of wanting to provide a better life as a mother, getting a college degree and well-paying career was a high priority for me. I enrolled in Green River Community College, but I

couldn't take my toddler to a college class, and there was no way I could afford the wildly expensive child care centers in my community.

The community college I attended had a child care program on campus for students who needed it - but the waitlist was unbelievably long for parents who could pay. And for parents who could not, it simply was not an option. I was told it could be more than a year before a spot was available. The center had one or two scholarships available for people like me who could not afford to pay for child care and many other women were on a waitlist to receive the scholarship as they were in the same position as me.

Ultimately, I had to rely on intermittent, unlicensed care from people in my community while I got my degree. It was a huge source of stress. A year and a half after I put my name on the waitlist, a spot finally opened up for my school's child care program. Luckily for me, many of the women who were waiting before me dropped off because they couldn't wait that long. That helped a lot, and I was able to finish my associate's degree and transfer to the University of Washington, where I graduated with my bachelor's in 2010.

Life went on, struggles happened, but I continued to fight the battle of intermittent, unlicensed care. I never had a stable situation for my child, no early development, or quality in care. But see, this is what most people around me went through.

I was determined to be successful. I landed a great job as a family liaison for a school district. And I qualified for a child care subsidy from the state of Washington. That meant I could go to work each day knowing my children were in a safe, positive environment, and their care didn't eat up my paycheck.

Finally, I thought, my hard work had paid off. I had a career I loved, the care I needed, and the financial stability I had always dreamed of. But then, I received an unexpected \$200 child support payment from my children's father. Because my income appeared higher that month, all of a sudden I lost the child care subsidy I relied on. Overnight, I went from paying \$15/month for child care to about \$800.

I was scared, confused and livid. That payment was an anomaly -- a one-time thing -- and that \$200 wouldn't cover the cost of child care anyway. I called the agency and tried to explain the situation. They told me it could be three months before all the paperwork could be processed and I would need to reapply after showing that I had no child support payments for three months! For us, this was an emergency. I needed to keep my job so I could put food on the table and keep a roof over our heads.

I tried to make it work. I got a second job at a nonprofit, which allowed me to bring my kids to work, so I could pay for child care and keep my first job. It was good that I could bring my kids, because no child care was available outside standard work hours and the care that was available was prohibitively expensive.

The setup was unsustainable. I was exhausted working all the time while caring for small children. And more and more, my kids were becoming a distraction at my second job. Financially, we were barely scraping by. It didn't work for me, for my kids, or my employer. Trying to "make it work" just wasn't working. Like many desperate families, I was forced to rely on unregulated care from someone in my neighborhood.

It was terrifying. I worried about my kids every day. The woman who watched them was watching many more children than one person can handle. She was the only option for so many parents. A neighbor told me she saw my three-year-old daughter nearly get hit by a car because no one was watching her and she ran into the street. There are no words to describe what it feels like to hear that. I pulled my kids from her care, and I vowed to never put my children in unlicensed care again.

Ultimately, I had to leave both jobs in search of higher-paying work that would allow me to cover the cost of child care. Finding a job like that was nearly impossible without more education, as was job searching with two children, with one being a toddler in my home. It was a Catch-22: in order to attend interviews, I needed someone to help care for my children, but without a job, I couldn't afford the child care I needed in the first place.

It is unacceptable that families can be forced to compromise safety and quality when it comes to child care. We all want our children to be in safe environments where they are learning and growing, and where they get personalized attention from well-paid and well-trained staff. But for families like mine, often that's out of reach. That endangers not just the health and safety, but also the healthy development of children. We need bold solutions to change that.

Leaving that unlicensed child care left me with really limited options. During that very vulnerable time, I found myself in an abusive relationship. I tried so hard to make it on my own and could not do it no matter how hard I tried. It was difficult to escape this situation, in part because I could not support myself and my kids and I knew I could not pay for child care on my own.

During the relationship, one thing that was held over me was the inability to make it work on my own. I was mocked because I was a woman that had a Bachelor's degree, well-educated but made less than a man with no education who worked manual labor jobs that I could not obtain. The power dynamics were unfair and my struggles as a woman were used as a symbol of my weakness. I did feel weak, with no options, no value in life, and I was miserable.

An additional child later, when the relationship ended, I couldn't afford housing or child care. But I was determined to try and fight again. I was offered a job that would have totally changed our situation: a well-paying management position. But in order to take it, I would need child care for my son, who was an infant at the time. For once, with my new salary, I thought I would be able to cover the cost of child care, even though it would eat up a huge portion of my paycheck.

I called a child care resource hotline and with their help, I contacted every licensed child care center in three counties. Not a single provider had a spot available and none expected to have one open any time soon. I was heartbroken. Once again, child care was the barrier that prevented my family from getting the financial security we needed. The long waitlist continues and some wait for two and a half years or more before being accepted, while some never are.

I was forced to turn down the job, and we lost our housing. Over the course of my kids' lives, we've spent time in shelters and we've spent time living with friends. Moving my older kids around to different housing meant uprooting them from the schools and Head Start programs they loved.

Living in a shelter, I was at the end of my rope. It was around this time that I decided to go to law school. I wanted a higher-paying career so my children and I didn't have so much instability. I did not want to keep being so vulnerable as a woman. And law and policy had always been a

passion of mine: I saw firsthand how women like me suffer when policies don't account for our experiences, and I wanted to use my degree to make a difference. My kids and I were living in a shelter when I was accepted into law school.

Again, child care was an issue. Even though I was in school, in order to qualify for a child care subsidy, I had to be working full time. So I worked in order to have child care during the day. I often got about three hours of sleep while in law school. No one should have to do that. This prevented me from getting the grades I knew I could get. I couldn't participate as my peers did and it put me at a huge disadvantage.

My last year of law school I struggled to make child care work. The community child care program at El Centro de la Raza allowed me to pay a discounted rate and somehow by a miracle they made it work because they wanted to see me graduate from law school to help the community. Again lucky! Eventually I graduated and now I'm making higher wages than ever before. Yes, school was worth it!

Still, I struggle with my student loans. I pay for a preschool program for my now four-year-old, and I am lucky because I receive a discounted before- and after-school child care rate for my children. I often have to work weekends and evenings, especially if I am planning to be successful in my career. This is extremely difficult. It means that I have to leave work around 3 pm to pick up kids and take them to another babysitter and then drive back to work to continue to work in the evenings. This means I waste about an hour or more battling through traffic to transfer them to a daycare. I have to find many daycare providers and pay all kinds of prices depending on who it is and what I can find. This is a dance that so many parents have to do.

It's baffling that most people in my profession in Seattle are paying above 5,000 dollars a month on childcare. Many of them, like me, have to pay multiple providers to cover the hours we need for work. Some have to pay centers and multiple nannies because not one meets the hour requirements or time availability needed.

I am lucky to find support from friends and community members who help me fill in the gaps for the child care I still need. The teachers and staff pitch in for free to help me with my children in cases of urgent needs because they see I am by myself and I have no one. They know that if they don't help me, I could easily fall on my face. Again, I am lucky!

Families shouldn't have to rely on luck to succeed in their careers and become financially secure. This isn't an individual problem that needs individual solutions. Our child care system is terribly broken, and it's holding families back and harming children. It's not even working for the child care educators, the majority of whom are women and are struggling themselves because child care is one of the lowest paying industries. My friends who work in the industry are often at the food banks and struggling to pay their rent.

I have dealt with this for 14 years now and my mother struggled because of child care back when I was a child.

We can't wait any longer for solutions.

I've seen over and over that the system is just not designed to support families. It all seems built around the idea that each parent or guardian has a partner who can stay home. But that's not the reality, even in two parent households.

The child care crisis harms everyone, but it especially harms women. I believe it's a huge contributor to the pay gap and the glass ceiling. In order to climb the ladder at many jobs, you need to be willing to work late into the evening or come in on weekends but often, child care centers aren't open during those hours. I struggled with that personally when I worked in sales and needed to work in the evenings and still struggle with it today.

I've also known women who have refused raises because it would mean losing their child care subsidy, especially because the raise wouldn't have paid them enough to replace the subsidy.

There are so many reasons to invest in child care: it helps families, it helps kids, and it would be great for our economy.

I work hard. I want to have a career and be independent. If I'd had access to quality, affordable child care from the start, my whole career and my kids' lives would have looked very different. The same is true for many other families.

When you are discussing policy solutions to the child care crisis, I hope you will remember my story and support bold solutions. We need to tackle all aspects of this issue, from availability to affordability to staff training. Every family should have access to the high-quality child care they need to thrive. We have an obligation to protect the most vulnerable. Further, protecting our vulnerable and making sure that children and families can thrive will only help our economy and the stability of the workforce. Thank you.

Accessible and affordable childcare is a WIN WIN for everyone!