

United States House of Representatives

Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education

Testimony of Sarah Rittling, Executive Director, First Five Years Fund

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Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the need for all children, especially those from low-income families, to have access to affordable, high-quality early learning and care.

My name is Sarah Rittling and, as the Executive Director of the First Five Years Fund, I am here today to urge the Committee to provide an additional \$4.38 billion for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), an additional \$5.47 billion for Head Start, and an additional \$185 million for the Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program in the Department of Health and Human Services budget. I am also requesting an additional \$392 million for early intervention services provided under IDEA Part C and \$82.6 million for preschool special education services under Part B, Section 619 in the budget for the Department of Education. These requests have also been relayed this week to Congress in a letter cosigned by 44 national organizations.

I spent the early part of my career on Capitol Hill as counsel to Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., on education policy before the Senate Health, Education Labor and Pensions

Committee. Before that, I served as counsel to Rep. Michael N. Castle, R-Del., on education and labor matters before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. Today I am the Executive Director of the First Five Years Fund, also known as FFYF, which works to build on the long-standing bipartisan support at the federal level to expand access to high-quality early learning and child care programs. This is what brings me here today.

I first want to thank the Subcommittee for your bipartisan efforts to strengthen the child care system in our nation. I appreciate the support you have shown these programs in the past. I know no one on this Committee needs a primer on the essential role that child care plays for families, businesses, and the economy. And you know that, for millions of working families with young children, child care has become either unavailable or unaffordable. Child care is hard to find and, even when parents can find it, wait lists are long and costs are high. This has only gotten worse in recent years, as the child care sector is still down approximately 60,000 jobs from pre-pandemic levels, leaving families with an even smaller supply of care even as nearly all other sectors have completely recovered. And this has an impact on families all across the nation.

- Families like the single mom who had to give up her job at the restaurant and stay home because the cost of child care would eat 75% of her take-home pay.
- Or the parents who have to leave their active toddler with an elderly neighbor because, like nearly two-thirds of all rural families, they live in a child care desert, with little or no access to available child care or early learning options.

- Today, we're here to talk about the child who will struggle to catch up with her peers once kindergarten starts because her parents didn't have access to affordable, quality early care where she could learn, develop and thrive.
- And finally, we're here to talk about the small business owner who had to turn away work or close the restaurant this week because staff had a hole in the patchwork child care they rely on and couldn't come in. According to the Bureau for Labor Statistics, hundreds of thousands of employees each year miss work because of child care challenges. In fact, child care challenges cause our nation to lose as much as \$122 billion every year in revenue, earnings, and productivity.

Congress plays a key role in addressing these realities. Federal programs benefit families in all fifty states and every Congressional district. Even with the growing support from committed governors, local elected officials, businesses, and philanthropy, the federal government provides the vast majority of public funding for the extremely complicated child care system we have in this country. But, today, these programs still only reach a fraction of the families in your district who are eligible and need child care.

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG): CCDBG helps parents work while their children receive quality care. States partner with the federal government on how to use these funds to best meet the needs of children, parents, and child care providers in their communities. This block grant focuses assistance on helping low-income, working families with young children pay for care and, over the past few years, some states have also used CCDBG funds to raise payment rates for providers, improve health and safety standards, meet the child care needs of families working nontraditional hours, and reduce waitlists. The program is designed to support families

who are working or in school, with an income below 85% of the state median income (though states can set income eligibility below that ceiling). However, at current funding levels, the program only reaches around 14% of eligible children and families.

Head Start and Early Head Start: Head Start and Early Head Start deliver comprehensive early learning, health, nutrition, and family support services to families and children from birth to age five who are most in need. These programs customize services and program models based on the needs of families in their specific communities, an approach that allows many programs to combine Head Start funding with other federal and state funds for pre-K, child care, or other early care and education services to maximize their impact. The program is designed to reach children in families making below the federal poverty line - which is less than \$30,000 for a family of 4 - or who are categorically eligible because they're homeless, in the foster care system, or also receiving other assistance like SNAP or TANF. With the current funding level, however, Head Start today only reaches about a third of eligible children aged 3-5 while Early Head Start only reaches 11% of those aged 3 and under.

Preschool Development Grants Birth-Five: In a nutshell, with Preschool Development Grants the federal government supports states' ability to build an essential early learning infrastructure. It's about strategy; states use this funding to create more effective, efficient programs by collaborating across multiple systems and agencies. For example, states have used these funds to coordinate funding across programs, build better data analysis, foster parental choice in care, or bolster the early learning workforce. This all strengthens programs and lays the foundation to make high quality early education available to even more working families. These grants have been

incredibly impactful, with nearly every governor across the country applying for funds and 42 states currently benefiting from the program. Additional federal funding would help ensure all states can build a strong infrastructure of early learning and care for children and families.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: IDEA ensures states and public agencies can provide early intervention, special education, and other related services to more than 7 million eligible children and youth with disabilities across the country, including infants and toddlers. Programs for young children with disabilities play a significant role in early childhood education and development. Ensuring that young children have access to early interventions during this fundamental period for learning, behavior, and health means that children will get the appropriate services and supports they need to be equipped for success in school and even mitigate the need for more extensive services later in childhood. This funding is essential in making sure that young children with disabilities are ready to learn when they enter school.

CONCLUSION: Access to a high-quality child care and early education helps children enter kindergarten ready to learn, and offers working families greater opportunities and a pathway out of poverty. This Subcommittee has historically been incredibly supportive and I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of additional investments in our federal early learning and child care programs. We stand ready to assist in any way.

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