

Before the
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES SENATE
March 15, 2002

Testimony of
Travis H. Hardmon,
Executive Director,
National Child Day Care Association
1501 Benning Road
Washington, DC 20002

Good morning Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee, fellow witnesses, and honored guests. My name is Travis Hardmon. I am the Executive Director of the National Child Day Care Association, serving in this position since 1994. I am the President of the District of Columbia Child Care Providers Coalition, and I serve on the Board of Directors of the United States Association for Child Care.

The National Child Day Care Association (NCDCA) is the largest non-profit child care provider in Washington, DC. NCDCA provides comprehensive child development and family services for 1600 children, ages 6 weeks to 12 years of age, at 25 child development centers - providing full-day, year round services, and a new family child care system of 20 home providers. Approximately 75% of the children enrolled at NCDCA participate in the child care subsidy program. During my time at NCDCA, we have expanded services by opening 8-child development centers, yet unfortunately, we are still unable to meet the child care needs of the community.

It is indeed an honor and a pleasure for me to come before you today to testify on the importance of, and need for, significant additional funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, the major federal support for child care assistance. Even in times of economic uncertainty and pressing international and domestic concerns, our nation must look first at the care and education of our children.

I have been asked to focus on what is needed to meet the needs of working parents while promoting the school readiness among our children. I am happy to do this from my perspective as an early childhood care and education provider in the District of Columbia, an interesting area and unique in many ways in providing comprehensive early childhood and family services.

I commend you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for demonstrating your commitment on this important topic by holding this hearing.

Needs

There are three areas that I believe need to be addressed in order to better serve the children, families, and community:

1. Stability of the child care delivery system: including a trained, educated and adequately compensated child care workforce - and the need to increase payment rates to providers who serve low-income families.
2. Providing services to meet the needs of families with infants and toddlers,
3. Improving school readiness in the context of the child and family.

While there are more issues I can include, Congress and the Administration have the capacity to address and improve these three now within the context of CCDBG reauthorization.

1. Stability of the child care delivery system

- NCDCA employs over 300 staff in 25 centers in Northeast, Northwest, and Southeast D.C. Of that staff, approximately 150 are teaching staff. Child care centers, and the child care industry as a whole, are losing well-educated teaching staff and administrators at an alarming rate. Annually, on average, NCDCA loses 10 percent or more of our teaching staff to better salary offers, or retirement. Recruiting approximately 15 new teachers a year places an enormous burden on the organization and jeopardizes the quality and stability of our child care services. High staff turnover is also a burden to the children who must deal with losing a beloved teacher and must risk developing a new relationship on a too frequent basis. We constantly struggle to recruit well-qualified staff and often find that we are hiring replacement teachers who have less training and education. Despite recognition that higher wages contribute to greater staff stability, and program quality, compensation for the majority of teaching staff positions does not keep pace with the cost of living.
- Additionally, the payment rates that we receive are too low to provide families with access to the full range of quality services and directly impacts the stability of the child care infrastructure. The monthly reimbursement rates that the District

pays are inadequate and are based on outdated market rate information. Paying subsidy rates that meet the full and current market rate would allow our organization to hire and retain staff, better equip our classrooms with books and supplies, and upgrade our curriculum materials; thereby improving the quality of care available to the children we serve. Operating without adequate reimbursement rates is a recipe for failure.

Recruitment and retention is a top challenge faced by our agency. We have had new classrooms ready but were unable to open due to difficulty hiring qualified staff. With the move to improve program quality, provide professional advancement and growth opportunities, and meet the changing needs of our clients, NCDCA has undertaken significant professional development activities – activities that require new investments. Salaries and training costs for continual professional development represent 80% of NCDCA's operating budget. These costs are necessary and critical if NCDCA staff are to be qualified and trained in the latest research-based methods of teaching and delivering comprehensive services. Despite this trend, funding to help us address our retention and training needs are falling short of what is truly needed. Unfortunately, the President's budget proposes to continue mandatory CCDBG funding at the FY 2002 level for the next five years – a plan that would seriously undermine the stability of the child care delivery system.

Let me put this in perspective. Without an increase next year for workforce development and reimbursement rates, we would not be able to keep pace with inflation, and rising expenses leaving these critical needs unaddressed:

The need for increased staff training to improve quality,

Salary increases to avoid losing more qualified teachers and staff,

The need for additional slots to meet unmet and growing need for services,

The need for additional equipment, supplies, and program curriculum materials.

2. Providing Services for Infants and Toddlers

- In the District of Columbia, we have other early childhood initiatives to supplement education for three-, four-, and five-year-olds: charter schools and the D.C. Public Schools' pre-kindergarten program. However, during the previous year nearly six thousand families with infants and toddlers were on the District's waiting list for child care assistance, and in desperate need of services. Each week NCDCA receives calls from families seeking services and we must turn them away because we do not have the capacity to serve them. Unfortunately this leaves low-income families in the District with choices that do not promote the optimal development of their children and may indeed place them in care settings that do not even provide for their basic and health and safety. Additional funding is needed to develop and equip facilities to meet this age group and to ensure that our youngest children are in safe, developmental and enriching care while their parents are at work. The infant care workforce must be appropriately prepared, trained and compensated.

3. School Readiness

Given the recent compelling research about what young children need to know in order to succeed in public school, I am pleased with the increased emphasis on early literacy. High quality child care programs have traditionally emphasized pre-reading and language development, however, we need to improve the training for early childhood teachers, and need

better materials and curriculum so that children in child care will have the language rich environment and skills they need to succeed.

However, I must share my concern, that much of the discussion seems to focus on the purely academic aspects of school readiness. Particularly when we're talking about our children under five years of age, we should remember that we are not talking about SCHOOL but about READINESS FOR SCHOOL. Quality early care and education providers have long recognized the importance of a holistic approach, which includes comprehensive services for children and families at risk. Book learning will not be achieved in isolation, especially when you're dealing with children from low-income families where basic physical needs must be addressed if we are to create a rich learning environment. Nutrition, health screening, family support and parental involvement are just a few of the elements, which pave the road to success in school and, in turn, to success in life. And I can't stress enough the critical role, which a child's parents must play, in our work.

Our program at NCDCA would not be the success it is today without our focus on the family. Certainly as we help each child, we help the family. But, we are not about some sort of "trickle up" theory. In practice, our comprehensive approach to child development is a comprehensive approach to family development. Within its four walls, NCDCA provides GED training, a male involvement initiative, a Parent Apprenticeship Program, a home ownership program, and a parent and family self-empowerment program. NCDCA must constantly fundraise to supplement the child care reimbursement rates that we receive. Providing services to the child within a family context is the most effective strategy for helping children to be successful and ready for school. We believe it is important to provide the kinds of services that children from disadvantaged backgrounds need. We see our children

as the hub of a family wheel. As we benefit the child, we benefit the family. And as we benefit the family we benefit the child, and in doing both, we benefit our community. Because of this comprehensive approach to human development, children leave our program stronger, more resilient, more hopeful, and more “educated” – and ready for school. Yes, it may sound complicated. But children, families, and the poverty from which they come are not simple concepts, easily defined.

Conclusion

I thank you for this opportunity to share my excitement about the work we do and seek your help to address the challenges faced by families and the child care providers who serve them. We know what works. When it comes down to the nuts and bolts, one message remains clear – if we are to address our infrastructure needs, expand services and improve quality for children from birth through school age, substantial increased funding is absolutely necessary.

I was to be part of the panel to testify at the hearing that was scheduled here on September 11, 2001. Since that day, we have done much healing and have come together as a nation. I want to thank you for your leadership and also to say that all our efforts as a country and as a world leader must start with looking at the well being of our children. They are our most precious assets and ensuring their care and well-being is our best defense.

Again, I thank the Committee for the privilege and opportunity to testify today on behalf of early childhood programs and I make myself available to the Committee now and at any time in the future to answer questions on this or any other matter.