

Mary Braxton
Testimony before the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees
Of the Virginia General Assembly
January 3, 2024

Good morning. My name is Mary Braxton. I am a child care specialist at the Child Care Network in Fredericksburg. I work with child care providers daily to promote high-quality and best practices.

For more than 25 years, I was a family child care provider – caring for infants and toddlers to school-age children who needed “before” and “after” school care. Now, my job is to help child care providers to become licensed and to offer technical assistance to child care providers to strengthen the quality of care.

The past few years have been such a trying time for so many – for families with children and also child care providers. Unemployment is much lower now than it was a year ago. It’s back to nearly the same rate as it was in January of 2020. But, that’s only part of the story. More than 121,000 parents in Virginia are not working because they are caring for children not in child care or school.

For economic recovery and growth, parents need access to child care, particularly mothers. They can’t get a job or keep it, if they don’t have access to quality, affordable child care.

I have a few recommendations for consideration as the General Assembly gets underway for the new session. First, child care workers are the workforce that supports all other workforces. While child care is a work support, it’s the job of child care workers to promote the healthy development of children. Yet, for this important work, child care workers earned about \$13.48 per hour last year. Child care is one of the lowest paid occupations. And, yet the earliest years are when a child’s brain is developing the fastest – in fact, building the foundation for all future learning and school readiness. That’s what makes the work of child care providers so important.

What is needed is a wage supplement strategy to increase the pay for those working in child care. Parents simply can’t afford to pay more. What I see on the ground is a tight labor market where child care programs cannot compete against other local businesses to recruit and retain workers. We urge the General Assembly to develop a wage supplement strategy with the Department of Education to boost child care pay either through refundable tax credits like Louisiana or monthly grant supplements like Maine.

Second, there is a child care staffing shortage. When workers call out, either sick, or to attend a training, or to take personal time, unlike the public school system where K-12 teachers are temporarily replaced with substitutes, there is no substitute pool for child care. We need to fix the background check system so that there is flexibility within communities to have a background check screened and trained substitute pool to fill in when needed. Currently, there are programs that have waiting lists for children due to staff shortages. A substitute pool could help bridge this gap. Please support legislation to provide flexibility related to the background check process.

Thank you for listening today.