

Mary Braxton
Testimony before the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees
Of the Virginia General Assembly
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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, preschool age children, and also 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. And my job has become a 24/7 need as these childcare providers try to navigate through current challenges of caring for children amidst a pandemic.

It’s unbelievable that we are entering the 3rd year of the COVID pandemic. This has been such a trying time for so many – for families with children and also child care providers. Many people have been fortunate to be able to work remotely. But, like other essential workers, child care is an onsite job. No part of taking care of children, and doing childcare, is a virtual job or option.

I have a few recommendations for consideration as the General Assembly gets underway for the new session. First, in December, Governor Northam announced an extension of HB 2206, which was enacted by the 2021 General Assembly to expand child care subsidy for families with children under age five. Given the state of the Virginia economy at the time, the bill was designed to help parents of young children go back to work by increasing eligibility for assistance to 85% of state median income. Governor Northam extended this law through May 2022.

Virginia’s unemployment rate has declined since the spring of 2020, but there are still many parents who are not working. To help parents return to the workforce, we urge that HB 2206 from the 2021 session be extended through calendar year 2022. This bill also only offered child care assistance for school-age children if they had younger siblings under age five. Many parents of school-age children are still struggling to afford child care. We urge that the law be expanded to support families with both young children and school-age children.

Also with regard to child care subsidy receipt, we urge that Governor Northam’s proposal to eliminate the 72-month family cap on child care subsidy eligibility be eliminated. Child care is expensive. Low wage families need help to afford it. An arbitrary time limit on child care assistance undermines the ability of parents to work and the opportunity for children to be in a safe place that promotes their healthy development.

Next, child care workers are the workforce that supports all other workforces. Their work is onsite, it can’t be done remotely. 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 onsite important work, child care workers earn about \$11.30 per hour. Efforts have been made during the pandemic to provide bonuses, but what is really needed is a wage supplement strategy to increase the pay for child care workers for the important work that they do. 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 use some of the supplemental federal dollars that Virginia has received to develop a wage supplement strategy with the Department of Education to boost the pay of child care workers.

Access to child care is the road to full economic recovery in Virginia. Just as the 95 and Route 1 corridor in the Northern Virginia area is a key part of our transportation infrastructure, supporting a strong child care infrastructure is key in supporting our economic stability in Virginia.

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