

Expanding child care assistance funds helps working families

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BILOXI — There is growing awareness of the importance of early care and education for our state's pre-school children. However, in the absence of adequate public state and federal funding, parents must pay to obtain these services for their children. The fees for these services are expensive: average child care fees exceed the cost of college tuition. Mississippi's working families - especially low-wage working families - need help paying the cost of these important services for their children.

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It is in our collective interest to help working parents obtain these services for their children. We know that early care and education services support children's successful early development, help them enter school ready to succeed, and improve their long-term outcomes. These benefits are experienced most significantly by poor and low-income children.

We also know that full-time, full-year child care allows parents to enter the work force and remain employed. Already, three-fourths of Mississippi's children live with parents who work. Some 47 percent of our state's children live in families headed by single parents, most of

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whom are single mothers. These parents need affordable child care in order to remain employed or enter the work force.

We also know that child care is a key component of our state's economy. As stated in Broadening the Base, the recently released report from the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, "Child care is a key driver in the Mississippi economy through the direct supply of jobs and wages and through work force supports provided to employees working in Mississippi's businesses. Additionally the wages supported directly and indirectly by the industry also generate tax dollars to support the delivery of state services."

Mississippi employers report a need for affordable, reliable child care for their employees to reduce costs associated with absenteeism, turnover and re-training.

We also know that child care reduces reliance upon government assistance programs by making a real difference in families' ability to work and succeed. This makes the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program a perfect source for child care assistance. The TANF program was designed to move families from welfare to work. Data gathered since TANF's implementation show that former welfare recipients with young children are 82 percent more likely to be employed after two years if they receive child care assistance.

Because child care has proven to be the work support that makes the transition from welfare to work most successful, many states commit significant amounts of TANF funds for child care. Mississippi does use some TANF money for child care. However, more is needed. Currently, Mississippi's federal child care funds - the Child Care and Development Fund and current levels of TANF funds used for child care - serve only about 30 percent of our state's eligible children.

We have an opportunity to increase the amount of TANF funds our state uses for child care services and thereby serve more children and help more parents remain employed. Our state has unspent TANF money that could be used for child care. In addition, child care could be given higher priority in our use of TANF funds in light of its effectiveness in meeting the goals of the TANF program.

Please join the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative in urging Gov. Haley Barbour to direct TANF funds to expand the supply of child care assistance for child care services for our state's working families.

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