

Bernadette Akum Ngoh
Owner/Director, Trusted Care Family Day Care Home
215 York Street
West Haven, CT 06516
trustedcare01@gmail.com

Testimony Submitted by Bernadette Akum Ngoh
Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs - Subcommittee on Economic Policy
Hearing on The Role of Child Care in an Equitable Post-Pandemic Economy
June 23, 2021

Good afternoon Senators Warren, Kennedy and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Policy. My name is Bernadette Ngoh. I am the Owner/Director of Trusted Care Family Day Care Home, fondly called Mamu Daycare in West Haven, Connecticut. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today.

Trusted Care provides quality and affordable childcare services. Our mission is to provide childcare in a nurturing environment where kids play, explore, and learn at their pace with fervent guidance. This gives parents opportunities to work, attend school or participate in other functions with peace of mind, knowing that their children are Home at Mamu Daycare. We are state-licensed and working toward national accreditation.

I was raised in Southern Cameroon by a single mother, Dorothy Akoba, who believed strongly in the value of education even though she had no form of formal education. As a peasant farmer and small business owner, she worked hard to educate us. I am the first girl in my family to go to college. I received a LLB in English Private Law from the University of Yaounde II SOA, Cameroon, and a Diploma in Women's Law from the University of Zimbabwe. I attended the University of Bridgeport, where I earned a Master of Science in Counseling, Professional Diploma for Advanced Study with specialization in Counseling and Master of Business Administration.

Up till 2010 I was an Adjunct Professor at the University of Bridgeport in the great state of Connecticut. In 2011 I had twins. I looked around for quality and affordable daycare, but the reality of the times motivated me to start one in 2012. Our program gave me the opportunity to care for my own children. With my kids as partners, we tested most of the activities that characterize our program as it is today: outdoor learning, the untapped learning space for kids. Our activities offer kids opportunity to play, explore, exercise, and have fun as they learn and enforces “magic” words and expressions such as: “Thank You”, “No thanks”, “I’m Sorry.” Our kids build life skills, such as problem solving. Each child irrespective of their zip code or the financial standing of their parents and/or guardian has the potential of doing what they know to do best.

I have the fun, hard job of supporting our kids’ curiosity, hoping that it will follow them in their later ages, their needs will guide their adventures, their innocence will last a little while and love, truth and hard work will pave the way for the next generation of Senators, CEOs, engineers, doctors and teachers.

Oh, how I love my job! Oh, how hard my job is! Oh, how even harder it is for the kids, especially kids 6 weeks through five years. Each day the kids leave for work, sometimes very early in the morning to give Mom, Dad or their guardian time to be the essential heroes they are: decision makers, CEOs, doctors and other healthcare workers, scientists, IT engineers, farmers and grocery store workers.

The kids, as well as their parents, are heroes. They get up early, go to work on time and oftentimes are obligated to work extended hours to support the job that you are doing. At the daycare, they play hard. Playing is a “factory” for learning. Daycare educators provide families with an environment that helps children be the best they can be, that helps them learn to fly. I support children’s language development, social/emotional development, and behavior. Character is a scarce commodity that has its roots in early child education.

Before the pandemic, the youngest child in my care was about 3; most of the children ranged from ages 3 to 8. I lost business, enrollment fell and attendance dropped. Today my youngest is about 18 months, 1 is 2 years old and the majority are between the ages of 3 and 10.

The pandemic was tough – it hit us so hard. We quarantined twice. My husband got extremely sick, and it was scary. We were not sure he was going to make it. I became sick too. But eventually we both recovered and were able to go back to work.

A parent lost his job and pulled his child out of daycare. Other parents shared their difficulties of paying for additional expenditures (mask and sanitizers) with their budgets. I suspended collection of out-of-pocket family fees from most of the subsidized parents. I had several unfilled slots at the daycare. It's tough financially – you're just wondering, "if I don't take this child [for free], I may lose them when they get subsidy." Then I look at parents. They have even less than me and I can see some of them are struggling. I run a 24/7 childcare program, which helped with my income but meant very long hours during the pandemic.

We might be getting out of the pandemic but the day-to-day struggles of struggling families date back to before COVID-19 pandemic, and they require a lot, especially from family child care providers. We are not only educators, but also business people, nurses, counselors and social workers for parents as well as children, I have parents with kids who are paid about \$475 a week and could not afford diapers, wipes and taxi fares to daycare or work on stormy days. One works a late shift, picks her child up late and has a long walk to and from the bus. She is barely surviving. As hollow as I see my unmet financial needs, the struggles of a parent like this one add to my duties. It is the "unseen labor" of many childcare providers. I buy diapers to supplement what she can afford. I arrange for her to be dropped off at the bus stop and home when she is running late, the weather is not favorable or when it too late in the night to be pushing the stroller with the baby. To do my job, I must be able to shift quickly from one

role to the next, drawing on all the knowledge and skills I have gained from continuous training and experience to support that parent and her child.

True, it takes a community to raise a child, but learning begins at home. Due to the changing nature of our work, family daycare homes have become homes where most of the foundation for learning begins. Sometimes childcare providers spend more time with children than their parents. Providers spend “day-time” time with our children. We are among the first people who will impact the lives of children in ways that will determine tomorrow’s society.

How do we place a value on this work? Is it as important as the work of doctors or policemen? Let’s look at remuneration. If I became sick and closed my doors tomorrow, five parents would not be able to work. And I would not receive sick pay, disability benefits or a pension if I were older.

When the pandemic hit, schools and child care centers closed their doors, but family child care stayed open. We were recognized as essential workers, but we are not supported the way other essential workers are. Senators, without us most of you could not be working. Childcare providers taught you. We are teaching your children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews their first words. Jeff Bezos wouldn’t be working either. And even our businesses, hospitals and police officers would not be at work if we close our daycare programs. This is the multiplier effect of childcare on the economy.

Building a strong childcare infrastructure is long overdue. Our country has been pennywise, and pound foolish. If we do not build a strong foundation, there will be cracks that will be much more expensive to fix later. Investments in childcare now also enable us to save more later, when children become adults and their challenges are much more costly to address. A stitch in time save nine.

As a daycare provider, parent, and a business owner I am submitting that:

- Our country has a childcare infrastructure problem.

- Investment in childcare infrastructure will provide immediate and long-term economic benefit.
- Childcare providers cannot afford to do this work, parents can't afford to pay for it, and children are missing out on the nurturing and support they need to thrive.
- We need professional development and compensation to retain experienced childcare educators in the field.
- You have an awesome responsibility: voters are asking you to rebuild America's infrastructure in the wake of the pandemic. Every dollar you invest in child care – including family child care programs like mine – generates significant economic benefit. The danger is not in investing too much, but in investing too little.

We need high-quality care for all children from birth to five, and equitable access to funding so that all families can enroll their children in the childcare program of their choice. For the sake of our future, I urge you to invest as much new funding as possible in rebuilding the childcare infrastructure over the next decade.