

Dasja Reed

April 27, 2021

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Supporting Children, Workers, and Families by Strengthening America's Child Care Sector

Testimony

Thank you, Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee for inviting me to share my child care story with you. My name is Dasja Reed. My two-year-old son Jarret and I live in New Orleans. I work full-time for the City of New Orleans. I am a full-time student pursuing a degree in early childhood education. And I am a first-time mom.

I gave birth to Jarret in the fall of 2018. As a city employee, I had 8 weeks off for maternity leave. I learned quickly that healing from complications related to child birth, looking for child care, adjusting to new life with a baby, and doing it all alone was a lot to tackle in just 8 weeks. Due to physical complications, I was forced to take off an additional 8 weeks from my job which was unpaid. This created lots of stress and hardship. I am grateful for the support systems I had, but it was not enough. Being a new parent is hard and there is so much to learn in what seems to be such little time.

Just a few months after delivering my baby, I started looking for a child care that would meet all our needs. In my area, I found that most child care ranged from \$500 to \$1,000 a month. In addition to unexpected expenses that go along with being a new parent, child care would consume more than 50% of my monthly earned income. The adjustment was difficult, and I ended up having to settle for a child care program that I could still barely afford rather than my first choice. The child care program that was my first choice was a great quality program. Most of the teachers had a college education. The building was cleaner. They had a great curriculum and good communication with families. There was a teaching assistant in the classroom. It was also much safer. Safety was very much on my mind when I was looking for a child care. My first-choice program had a 4 to 1 ratio which made me feel more comfortable, but the program I had to go with was 7 to 1. After applying for child care assistance when Jarret was 6 months old, I was told that there was not enough funding available, and it took more than 10 months for me to be approved. Over those 10 months, I paid full price for child care and struggled to keep my household afloat and pay other bills with child care expenses taking up such a large portion of my income. During that time, I also had to switch child cares a few times to find one that worked.

And then the pandemic hit. I had to leave my job with the city because my son's child care closed, and work had not closed yet. At first, I had to use my annual leave so that I could stay home with him. But then my leave ran out and my job shut down. We were furloughed until my department opened back up again. So, I was out of work and not getting paid, because I was not able to find a child care for my son. I applied for remote jobs and was even offered a new position with the city last summer but had to turn it down because I had nowhere to take my son. To make ends meet, I stopped using my car to save on insurance. I held off on making payments on my federal student loans. I did my best to remain positive. I even started my own

business, Precious Seeds, selling personalized educational materials for children to earn some income.

Last September, I found a new child care for Jarret. I was scheduled to return to work during phase 3 of New Orleans' reopening so it was great timing. Jarret went for about 3 weeks before I found out that I was not eligible for the child care assistance I had just started receiving before the pandemic because I was not back at work yet. I was still trying to get my new business off the ground and while I had a full course load, it was not enough credit hours to qualify for assistance. I could not afford the \$740 monthly child care fee without the child care assistance, so Jarret lost his spot.

Eventually they let folks come back to work, but by that time Jarret's child care was permanently closed. This meant I could not go back to work until I could find a new child care provider. Finding child care was even more challenging this time around. I spent dozens of hours last year looking for child care. So many child care providers were shut down permanently. And for the ones that were open, it was hard to go there for tours or they did not have as many seats available anymore. All the slots were filled. I just wanted to get back to work and find a place that was a good fit for us.

Just 2 months ago, I finally found a new child care and Jarret loves it. I have seen such a difference in him and his development, and we are in a much better place. We have a great child care provider and child care assistance. Before the pandemic, I was at work and stressed out; not feeling like my son was in a safe place. Now, I am not stressed, I can focus on work and school, and have peace of mind.

Being able to find and afford quality care for Jarret has been such a challenge. This is a developmentally important time for him. What happens in the first few years sets the tone for the rest of a child's life. I realize that even more after having my son. Having quality care and child care assistance consistently over the last 2 years would have made such a difference for us. And I know it would mean a lot to other families, too. There are so many families like mine across the country. We are scrambling to make ends meet. We are juggling jobs, school, and care for our children. We are keeping ourselves and our families healthy. We are raising the next generation. And we are doing our best. Now we need Congress to do the same, because the choices we make now will shape our country's future. I urge you to invest in the child care system that Jarret and I, and countless families across the country, need.

One page summary

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Being able to find and afford quality care for Jarret has been such a challenge. This is a developmentally important time for him. Having quality care and child care assistance consistently over the last 2 years would have made such a difference in our lives. I urge you to invest in the child care system that Jarret and I, and countless families across the country, need.

Biography

Dasja Reed is a parent, small business owner, student, and city employee from New Orleans, Louisiana. She is passionate about early education and supporting young children. Dasja is currently pursuing her associate degree in early childhood education and is the owner of Precious Seeds which makes personalized educational materials for children. When she and her two-year old son Jarret are not playing at soccer practice, they enjoy learning time and swimming.