

Ms. Le` Vaughn Westbrook - Testimony

Good morning. I want to thank Chairman Alexander, Senator Mikulski, and Senator Burr for inviting me to testify today. I also want to thank the other members of the Committee for listening to my story.

My name is Le` Vaughn Westbrook and I am a wife and a mother of three beautiful children, Dre who's 1 ½, Matai who's 6, and my firstborn, Quale' Jelani, who would have been 8 years old on July 2nd.

I am a Licensed Clinical Master Social Worker and work as an emergency psychiatric clinician for a hospital in Fairfax, Virginia.

I'm here today to share Quale Jelani's story and how I lost him. It's the heartbreak of my life, and a cautionary tale about the consequences of an inadequate child care system.

In September of 2008, I was a single mother returning to work after maternity leave, living in Georgia. As a first-time parent with limited resources, I did everything I knew at the time to find a quality child care setting for my 2 ½ month baby boy, Quale'. Although I qualified for child care assistance, I didn't have the required recent pay stubs as I had been on maternity leave, and therefore was unable to receive benefits and it limited what I could afford. I visited the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's website to find affordable, licensed child care. I assumed a child care license meant I was putting my son in a safe, high quality setting. I ultimately chose a family child care program that was licensed, close to home, and that fit my work schedule.

On September 25th, 2008, during my son's second day of child care, I received a call from a neighbor of the child care that almost made my heart stop. My son was unresponsive -- not breathing. When I arrived at Quale's child care, they told me that the Emergency team had unsuccessfully performed CPR on my son for 25 minutes. --Quale died. Because the child care program was considered a crime scene, I was not able to see my child or hold him. Three days later, at the funeral home, I was finally able to see him again.

I questioned how this could have happened. After spending many late nights on my computer doing research about Georgia's child care regulations, my concerns about inadequate child care licensing requirements were confirmed. I contacted Georgia Early Care and Learning State Department and an investigation was launched. I discovered that not only had the state not conducted a comprehensive background check on the provider, the provider was potentially on the child abuse neglect registry. Furthermore, the state had cited this *licensed* provider for various violations, including a lack of first aid training, no CPR certificate, and "inadequate supervision" of the children in her care. If I'd known this information when I was conducting my child care search, I never would have placed Quale' in this provider's care and I wouldn't be here today.

Since my son's death I have worked tirelessly advocating (at the state and federal level) for legislation that requires comprehensive background checks before issuing a license to any child care provider.

Thanks to the reauthorization of CCDBG in 2014, championed by the hard work of this committee, there are new and stronger health and safety measures for child care. I am so pleased that the new law mandates comprehensive background checks for providers and requires training to include safety, first aid and CPR for all child care providers. These measures are critical and will prevent the heartbreak that I and so many other parents have faced.

However, millions of families, like mine, still struggle to find and afford quality child care. I now live in Northern Virginia, one of the most expensive places in this country to raise a family. I earn a good salary so I don't qualify for child care assistance yet quality child care is still not affordable; the cost of putting my 2-year-old son in a quality setting is **\$2,000 a month!** My husband and I did the math, and we decided he would stay at home and care for our son. It's wonderful that we can do this, but it comes at a significant price. My husband is putting his career on hold and our living with one income is a major strain on the family budget. I would prefer having the *choice* of quality child care for my son in the fall, quality child care with exceptionally trained, responsive and caring providers that can partner with me in preparing my child for school.

In summary, though tragedy has forced me to become an expert on child care licensing and I know what questions to ask of providers, many parents don't have that knowledge. They are like me with my first child - they don't know where to go to find information about what a license does – and doesn't – mean.

More has to be done to support parents like me. It's important to have affordable, quality options so parents can have peace of mind while they work or go to school. The equation is simple—quality child care ultimately equals a strong, stable workforce. Also, more has to be done to support child care providers both through increased compensation and training—they are the ones working tirelessly to shape young minds and build loving hearts.

I wanted to share Quale's story with Congress, not to dwell on all the laws that could have been in place to protect him, but to inspire future action that will enable each and every family in your districts and across America to have access to safe, healthy, and affordable child care.