

March 2, 2023

To: The Joint Ways & Means Sub-Committee on Education
From: Sky Lockhart, Portland
Re: 5013, child care investments

Dear Co-Chairs Frederick and McLain and members of the committee,

My name is Sky Lockhart and I live in Portland, OR.

Before my son was born, I had been managing a restaurant for almost two years. I was essentially running someone else's small business, working 50-60 hours a week on a slim salary, with no employee benefits. After having some serious conversations in the first term of my pregnancy with my midwives about adequate rest and time for physical health needs like walks and actually having time to eat enough food, I quit my job when my employer chose not to reduce my workload.

I returned to the hospitality workforce three months post birth, chipper about working as a part-time waitress. I was jarred into the shocking reality that finding someone to watch my child during the peak hours for restaurant workers meant paying most of my wage, including tips, on a personal nanny. Finding someone who could support the needs of an infant who was available during non-traditional childcare hours meant paying big dollars. I forfeited my "good shifts" that I had earned with years of experience and seniority to work during midweek lunches, which meant that I didn't have to pay for a nanny, but also meant I made very little in tips. The trade still was beneficial, if only slightly. This was the beginning of a years-long period of poverty for my family.

After two years of trying to juggle being a mother in the restaurant industry, the solution to my child care issues seemed like a clear choice, I needed to work in some other field so I could actually have access to childcare center hours. I needed a business hour job. I happened to have gone on public benefits due to separation with my son's father and a need for enforceable child support. In some self-sustainability courses, I felt determined to find a new career, one where I could actually find someone to watch my child so I could work.

I was startled when I in turn found out that if I went into a 9-5 job, my childcare costs would be more than I could afford, even with Employment Related Day Care. I anguished over this dilemma; "How could this be? How could it be that if I take a dependable job during childcare hours, I still can't afford it?" It seemed to me that the numbers surely were off, that the ERDC copay had been mis-calculated to be so substantial. And yet, I did what American families do, I swallowed the barrier as my own shortcoming. I accepted my fate as an impoverished mother and struggled through some of the most important developmental years of my son's life to get our basic needs met.

I then decided to try another method to earn my family financial stability. Returning to college after ten years, I enrolled full time for myself, as a solo single mom, and enrolled my son part-time in child care. Reading through the curriculums for my courses, the time requests for each course load, I knew the hours did not match up. There were hardly enough hours my

ERDC would cover my son in preschool for me to be in my own courses, let alone any time for homework. Yet I had grown accustomed to this standard of living; sufficient child care was a luxury item, I was not within the class of folks who had access to this privilege. So I chugged along in states of depletion and major stress, perceiving my struggles to be proof of my own inadequacies, at least, during my first year of studies. Once in higher levels of my degree, I scoured through research on family policy: maternity leave, paid sick leave, child care, were all available in other developed countries, but not in the US. My understanding of my most substantial personal issue was being revealed as a significant systemic issue most families face.

Three years later, with a degree in Social Work and a new perspective on the world, I was FINALLY free of the massive weight of child care that had been anchoring me down for all of my son's early years. He was of age for public school. We had made the journey through the most vulnerable times for most families' lives!

I was fortunate in that he had developed smoothly, was healthy, and had little trauma from living in homes that were not designed for human living, as in the two tiny homes we resided in that did not have indoor bathrooms or insulation because I could not afford to rent an apartment nor could I afford to have a job due to the child care costs associated with working. I had managed to shield him from those traumas, I had made our lives warm and special regardless of the smashing impacts of poverty on myself. My body, my nervous system, my immune system, were much less fortunate. I was now adapted to constant states of stress and overwork, from physical demands such as bicycling across the city towing a child because I couldn't afford a car, or walking miles with a stroller loaded with child and groceries on a regular basis. I developed multiple auto-immune diseases during those first five years. I developed constant states of moderate-to-severe chronic pain. I had earned my degree with the highest honors, I had a brilliant mind and a passion to support families who were enduring what I had endured, and yet, my body could barely manage to get out of bed some days. I was in horror when I read about one of my auto-immune diseases with "high morbidity and high mortality rates". I had a potentially fatal condition. One that is often triggered by stress.

My efforts and my potential were seriously not adding up to my current capacity. I had a history in professional sports and was used to being able to get my body to perform. How could it be that my body was increasingly less able to function? And while I mulled over these factors that seemed so misaligned, there were factors that when brought into the equation did add up: Social Determinants of Health and toxic stress. Toxic stress is a state of frequent and long-term activation of the sympathetic nervous system and a form of trauma that is being shown in research to have equal effects of other forms of trauma on the nervous system, the brain, and long-term health. Toxic stress can be found in increased numbers in populations of people experiencing high levels of poverty. I was debilitated from poverty. I "should" be a positively contributing member of society, and I couldn't get my body to produce. Because of poverty. Poverty connected directly to lack of access to childcare. Lack of childcare and other family policies such as paid leave was the Social Determinant of Health that was directly correlated with my chronic diseases.

Then, our pandemic struck our country, demanding I CONTINUE to be the sole provider for my child, even though my child was finally old enough to be in our public school systems. It felt so surreal. My child care barriers seemed never ending.

And while I waited just like so many mothers and other caregivers for the pandemic to relent so I could access childcare and therefore income, one thing I am not waiting on is a time when Oregon and the broader US will have basic family policy. The barriers to child care that I have experienced for over seven years will likely have impacted my health for my entire life, potentially reducing my life expectancy and absolutely reducing my life quality. This is not an uncommon story, though. I hear similar ones from parents on my block and at my son's school. We are ALL struggling. We ALL need access to childcare. And our health systems and future generations need it too.

I strongly urge you to protect and expand investments in our early learning and child care programs so we can take our first steps toward a child care system that works for everyone, so that future Oregonian parents won't have a story to tell like mine.

Sincerely,
Sky Lockhart