



Midlands Voices: Quality child care is 'absolutely essential.' This U.S. Senate measure may help.

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If you spend enough time talking to working parents with young children in Nebraska, there's one topic of conversation that inevitably crops up — child care. Across the board, families will tell you it's hard to find and, if you can find it, even harder to afford.

And yet reliable, quality child care is absolutely essential to our state. Working families need the peace of mind that their little ones are safe and cared for while the adults are at work or school. Our employers say it's essential to building a stable, reliable workforce. And young children benefit from the early learning opportunities to build cognitive and social skills during this critical period as their brains and bodies grow.

But Nebraska's child care system is currently failing both providers and families. Child care providers struggle with the rising costs of delivering quality services while barely earning enough to keep their doors open.

And when quality care becomes scarce or too expensive, the impact is felt across Nebraska. Too often, working parents are going into debt, cutting hours or even dropping out of the workforce entirely. Employers are left scrambling to fill shifts or jobs. And our economy takes the hit — according to one study, each year, lack of affordable, quality child care costs Nebraskans over \$745 million dollars in lost income and productivity.

It's a complex problem, but the good news is that there is something we can do

about this. And new legislation introduced by U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer earlier this month is a big step in the right direction.

The federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), a program with a long history of bipartisan support, assists hundreds of thousands of working families with young children across the country, including thousands right here in Nebraska. The program helps working families access and afford the quality child care that meets their individual needs.

Unfortunately, however, the current CCDBG program only reaches a fraction of the families who qualify. It also hasn't been reauthorized in Congress since 2014, meaning it is well overdue for updates to meet the child care challenges of today.

The new Child Care and Development Block Grant Reauthorization Act of 2024, which Fischer introduced on August 1, 2024, would help fix this.

The bill would make critical improvements to CCDBG, modernizing the program to better support both working parents and providers. Currently, only families making less than 85% of our state's median income qualify for CCDBG help. If passed, this legislation will allow states to expand eligibility, serving families who make slightly too much to qualify, but not enough to afford child care without assistance.

The bill also promotes parental choice. Families have different child care needs based on their budgets, their work schedules and the kind of care that works best for their little ones. The CCDBG Reauthorization Act would give states the maximum flexibility in using the block grant across a variety of settings, also known as "mixed delivery." This approach creates efficiencies by blending funds to support a child care system that is more responsive to the needs of Nebraska families.

Finally, the CCDBG Reauthorization Act will increase the supply of child care by expanding capacity, improving facilities and better supporting child care providers, particularly rural and in-home care providers who are key to ensuring Nebraska families have options. Reimbursement rates for child care providers haven't kept pace with the cost of care. The legislation would help improve provider reimbursement rates by transitioning states to a "cost estimation model" which better reflects the true cost of providing child care.

Modernizing and supporting CCDBG is widely popular, too. A 2024 poll from First Five Years Fund found that an overwhelming majority of voters support increasing federal funding to the states which allows them to expand their child care programs (CCDBG), including 74% of Republicans, 86% of Independents and 96% of Democrats.

The bottom line? The CCDBG Reauthorization Act is a win-win. It gives Nebraska's hard working parents a wider choice of affordable child care options to fit their families' specific needs. It strengthens workforce participation for employers in all sectors of business and industry. It increases the supply of quality early care and learning programs every community needs to thrive — from Omaha to Alliance.

It takes real leadership to advance legislation that actually gets things done. We're grateful to Fischer for her long standing advocacy on behalf of Nebraska families and we are proud to support her latest efforts to make a difference in our state. It's good to know Nebraskans have leaders in Congress who understand the importance of child care and early learning and are prepared to act decisively on it.

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