

## Education Committee

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)  
H.B. 5465: *An Act Increasing Early Childhood Educator Salaries and Expanding Child Care Opportunities for families*

S.B. 1: *An Act Concerning Childhood Mental and Physical Health Services*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policy solutions to enhance women's economic security, combat discrimination, and increase gender equity in Connecticut.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support H.B. 5465: *An Act Increasing Early Childhood Educator Salaries and Expanding Child Care Opportunities for Families* and S.B. 1: *An Act Concerning Childhood Mental and Physical Health Services*.

The COVID-19 crisis has threatened the collapse of an already fragile system of child care in our state. Throughout the pandemic, child care providers have struggled to remain open with changing public health guidelines and declining enrollment. During the pandemic, 3 in 4 private childcare providers closed their doors. In an industry where 92% of businesses are owned by women, the impact of the pandemic on the child care sector not only negatively affects parents of young children in need of care, but also child care workers and business owners in need of work and reliable income to support their own families.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, child care is a feminized and undervalued profession which has led to lower pay for women, specifically women of color, that perpetuates the gender wage gap and threatens women's economic security. As we continue to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis, additional support and value of the contributions of women is critical to strengthen the child care sector, as well as the state's economy overall.

CWEALF supports H.B. 5465 and S.B. 1, which include several provisions critical to improve Connecticut's early childhood education and services in Connecticut, including:

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<sup>1</sup> Essential Equity: Women, COVID-19 and Rebuilding CT. 2021. Retrieved from:  
<https://womenandgirls.ctdata.org/docs/Essential%20Equity%20Women%20Covid-19%20and%20Rebuilding%20CT.pdf>

### **Increasing Early Childhood Educator Salaries:**

In a 2017 report early childhood educators national median wage ranged from \$10.72 per hour to 13.94 per hour, putting early childhood educators at or just above the poverty level.<sup>2</sup> The low wages had a disproportionate impact on people of color, who on average earn less, and make up 40% of the national early childhood educators.<sup>3</sup>

The low compensations for early childhood educators is not only a problem for individuals who work in early childhood education, but also affects the quality of early childhood education children are receiving,<sup>4</sup> such as lack of job retention and diminished number of workers in the field.

CWEALF supports legislation to provide a much needed salary increase for early childhood educators, which will improve their economic security.

### **Increase availability, affordability, and quality of childcare services:**

Access to affordable, quality child care is essential to support Connecticut's workforce; however, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2018 report indicated that 44% of Connecticut's population lived in a "child care desert," defined as an area with "little or no access to quality child care."<sup>5</sup>

The Office of Early Child (OEC) also estimated prior to COVID-19 that Connecticut was short 51,000 licensed child care spaces for infants and toddlers. Child care deserts are more likely to exist in geographic areas with higher percentages of rural, low-income, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino families.<sup>6</sup> Research shows the pandemic could result in the loss of almost half (48%) of Connecticut's child care supply, or 46,349 slots.<sup>7</sup>

Lack of access to child care is compounded by issues with affordability. Research in Connecticut depicts that only 1 in 20 families of color can afford high quality child care compared to 1 in 5 families in the overall population.<sup>8</sup> When families do not have access to the affordable and reliable childcare that they need, women are more likely to bear the burden of caregiving responsibilities: during the pandemic, 76% female parents reported needing to stay home and not work due to their child care situation compared to 24% of male parents.<sup>9</sup>

CWEALF specifically supports provisions in H.B. 5465 that will expand Care4Kids subsidies so providers are paid at the 75th percentile of market and families are eligible up to 75% of

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<sup>2</sup> Mclean, C. (2021, February 5). *Increased compensation for early educators: It's not just "nice to have" - it's a must-have*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/increased-compensation-for-early-educators-its-not-just-nice-to-have-its-a-must-have/>

<sup>3</sup> Essential Equity(2021)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> CTDATA . (2022). *Essential equity: Women, covid-19, and rebuilding CT*. The Connecticut Women and Girls Data Platform. from <https://womenandgirls.ctdata.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

the state median income and permanently expand eligibility for Care4Kids to parents enrolled in an education or training program.

**Student Loan Forgiveness Grant Program for Early Childhood Educators:**

CWEALF also supports language in H.B. 5465 that establishes a student loan forgiveness grant program for early childhood educators with student debt for degrees earned at Connecticut public institutions after four years of teaching in the field. This component of the bill is especially important to women, who make up the majority of early childhood educators and shoulder the majority of student loan debt nationwide.

Research from AAUW indicates women graduate owing almost \$22,000 in student debt, compared to \$18,000 owed by men. Black women carry the highest student loan debt of any racial or ethnic group and graduate with an average of \$37,558 of student debt compared to their counterparts.<sup>10</sup> H.B. 5465 is critical to provide early childhood educators, the majority of whom are women, relief from their student loans.

Child care is essential to our economy. Lawmakers must take bold and intentional action this year to strengthen our current child care system and ensure an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. CWEALF urges the Committee to advance H.B. 5465 and S.B. 1 as necessary steps forward in uplifting the economic security of child care educators as well as women and families in our state who depend on access to affordable child care to advance in the workforce and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

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<sup>10</sup> AAUW, Deeper in Debt. 2020 Update. Retrieved from: [https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Deeper\\_In\\_Debt\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Deeper_In_Debt_FINAL.pdf)