

Public Health and Children's Committees Joint Public Hearing

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)
S.B. 2: An Act Expanding Preschool and Mental and Behavioral Services for Children
Submitted by Brandi A. Kennedy, MSW Policy Practice Intern
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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 policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

We urge the committee to support *S.B. 2: An Act Expanding Preschool and Mental and Behavioral Services for Children*.

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, declining enrollment, resources and staff. Simultaneously, parents continue to struggle with getting back to work with limited child care options available to them. The challenge for families to find safe and affordable child care is prevalent now more than ever.

The Office of Early Child (OEC) 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.¹ Research shows the pandemic could result in the loss of almost half (48%) of Connecticut's child care supply, or 46,349 slots.² Lack of access to child care is compounded by issues with affordability: research shows that in Connecticut, 8 in 10 families cannot afford the full cost of high quality infant and toddler care, including 94% of families of color.³

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 are critical to strengthen the child care sector, as well as the state's economy overall.

We urge lawmakers to make significant and intentional investments in our state's early education and child care programs and include in S.B. 2 mechanisms that reshape our system to not only improve access to quality and affordable care, but also provide livable wages to educators and providers. Connecticut childcare workers have faced low wages and

limited benefits for decades. This has exacerbated high turnover rates among a historically feminized and undervalued profession, which has led to women, especially women of color, engulfed in the perpetuation of gender wage gaps.

Additionally, S.B. 2 must address a critical need for all Connecticut communities as the pandemic has introduced extraordinary life stressors and drastic changes that have directly impacted our youth. As we have progressed through this pandemic, many young children cannot remember a time prior to social distancing, mask wearing and remote/ hybrid learning models. However, for young adults and adolescents, this new reality has left many vulnerable to mental health consequences. Consistent with research prior to the outbreak, girls appear to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing increased mental health problems during the pandemic.⁴ The state of our children's mental and behavioral health is a growing public health crisis as 1 in 4 children suffer from depression and 1 in 5 children suffer from anxiety symptoms.⁵

Connecticut thrives when our youth and families are healthy and secure. The effects of the pandemic on children's mental health are long-term problems that require multi-leveled solutions. CWEALF urges the Committee to advance S.B. 2, a necessary step forward in addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of our most vulnerable population and 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.

1 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>

2 see note 1

3 see note 1

4 Hawes, M., Szenczy, A., Klein, D., Hajcak, G., & Nelson, B. (2021). Increases in depression and anxiety symptoms in adolescents and young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Medicine*, 1-9. doi:10.1017/S0033291720005358

5 Nicole Racine, P. D. (2021). Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19. *JAMA Pediatrics*.