

Thank you, Chairman Romanchuk and Members of the House Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, for allowing me to offer testimony today.

My name is Mary Beth Bush, and I have been a family childcare provider for 24 years in Champion, Ohio, near Warren. As a licensed Type B Childcare Provider, I am permitted to care for up to 6 children in my home. I'm proud that I am one of only 2 homecare providers in Trumbull County to be nationally accredited, and I have earned a 5-Star distinction under Ohio's *Step Up to Quality* initiative.

Currently, I'm working for the Early Childhood Resource Center in Youngstown, an information and referral organization that is helping other small business owners like myself improve the quality of their childcare programs.

I also serve on Groundwork Ohio's Steering Committee.

I began offering childcare in my home in 1995 after I had my second child and couldn't find acceptable daycare. At the time, I was a restaurant manager. Because I wanted to be the best I could be for my kiddos, I earned a Child Development Associate credential, also known as a CDA; then I went on to receive an associate's degree and, in 2018 at age 56, I completed my bachelor's degree in early education.

Today, I continue to care for children on some evenings for local working parents, and on the weekends for Air Force reservists who are required to attend monthly trainings. There are hardly any childcare centers that are open on nights or weekends, though, of course, many parents work evening and weekend hours. Right now, for example, one of my moms is a nurse who works nights.

Very few of the children I've cared for received Publicly Funded Childcare assistance. Their parents made too much money. But, believe me, they still struggled to pay me.

My full-time rate was \$170/week, which translated to just over \$3.75 hour. Infants were a bit more.

At one point, I was caring for an infant whose family was receiving Publicly Funded Childcare. This was during the time the State cut its reimbursement rates from about \$200 a week for infants to around \$140. That pay cut meant I was being paid just \$2.80 an hour for this baby's care. Most of the time, she was in care for fifty hours a week.

My children's arrival times were staggered throughout the day. Most days I worked from 5:30 a.m. until 6 p.m., but on some evenings, I had children until 8 p.m. Some families needed part-time care, others were full-time. Though I cared for only 6 children at a time, I often had more than 12 children on my roster.

After my allowable business deductions for running a business in in my home, I never earned more than \$22,000 a year.

I love caring for children.

I love getting to know the children's families and sharing ideas about what their young children need or like.

I love that siblings could stay together during the day when they were with me, rather than being in separate classrooms at a center.

But, in time, I couldn't keep up. I needed a job with more financial security and benefits. Bear in mind, families come and go as their needs change. I couldn't count on what my income would be from month to month.

To be part of the *Step up to Quality* process and earn a Star Rating, caregivers must be licensed and have a contract with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. You also have to be willing to take children receiving Publicly Funded Childcare, even though the reimbursement definitely does not cover your real costs.

Yes, you can become a 1-Star program with not much investment. But to be a truly high quality program — to move up the *Step Up to Quality* Star ladder, which is what we want to encourage — you must do things like pay a qualified person to be your substitute when, for instance, you go to required trainings.

In practice, a lot home care providers have had their husbands stand in for them while they are away for this sort of thing; they and I don't have assistants. But that's not allowed any more under *Step Up* unless the substitute has the required education, has been finger-printed and so on.

Finding qualified substitutes absolutely is the best thing for children, but it's expensive.

One thing I really want to emphasize is that finding affordable and quality childcare is not just an issue for families who are poor and those with low-paying, entry-level jobs. They have an exceedingly difficult time finding quality care, but so do middle-class families, including professionals.

There are, for example, myriad nurses, firefighters, police officers, retail managers, hair stylists and others who are making a good wage. But childcare costs are taking a huge portion of their paychecks. And because these particular people don't work 9-5, there search is even more difficult.

What is wrong with the childcare system now? I'll make 3 quick observations:

First, we don't have anything resembling a system.

The real-world situation is that families from all walks of life are patching things together, week to week, to get to work and have their children cared for.

When I was providing in-home childcare full-time, if I got sick, 9 -12 adults weren't going to work that day. As many as a dozen employers were impacted if I had the flu. Those parents had to take vacation, forfeit pay or even risk losing their jobs.

Second, wages in the childcare industry are a crime.

Who is going to tell their daughter or son to go to college or to get a credential to become a childcare educator? Even private-pay centers that can leverage economies of scale still pay poorly if you're hoping to support your own family. There are people with bachelor's degrees earning under \$15 an hour in this industry.

Many workers at childcare centers earn so little that they're eligible for Publicly Funded Childcare themselves. How ironic is that?

Third, the availability of infant care is incredibly difficult to find. The required staff-to-child ratios for infants is greater — as it should be — and, whether you're a center or a home-based provider, it's easier to make the numbers work if you don't accept babies. Yet, many moms must go back to work after 6 or 8 weeks.

If you think I'm painting a bleak picture, I am. And it is the truth.

If we really want babies to get a healthy start, if we want to promote early brain development so children will succeed in school and in life, we need our youngest children to be in the hands of individuals who have the training and knowledge to care for little people. Infants need everything toddlers and older children need — and more. The job of caring for them is much bigger; it is more than changing their diapers and giving them a bottle.

Thank you again for allowing me to share my experience and thoughts. I am sincerely grateful for your interest and hope you consider, given our quality system's many needs, increasing the state's investment in quality child care. I ask you to continue to be courageous and bold on behalf of babies and young children.