

Kristina Valdez, MSW
Written Testimony

**Democratic Policy Committee Hearing/ innovations for Economic Recovery:
Childcare and College Students**

4.28.22

Thank you, Chairwoman Muth, Senators Collett, Cappelletti, Comitta, and Schwank, for hosting today's hearing and inviting me to offer testimony. My name is Kristina Valdez and I am the Executive Director of the organization Along The Way.

Organization Description

Along The Way is a 501c3 non-profit organization whose mission is to provide community, acceptance, and hope to women.

We do this by providing our flagship anti-poverty program that eliminates the biggest obstacle to single mothers investing in themselves through working and/or going to school –no child care. The women and families Along The Way serves are the most under-resourced families in our community – all single mother-headed households, 90% of our clients have been women of color. Our clients are often trauma survivors; we've served immigrant women; all find their way to us desirous of a better life and a true pathway out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Along The Way provides high quality, in-home child care during non-traditional hours; for income-qualifying single mothers with three or less children, our service is free; non-qualifying parents will soon be able to utilize our child care service on a fee-for-service sliding scale based on income. Our child care service is designed to complement center-based child care by *filling in child care gaps where needed*.

We believe in providing all families, regardless of income, preventive & holistic family support to allow them to maximally invest in themselves because we've seen how doing so ***breaks the cycle of poverty***. We've watched part-time retail workers become registered nurses. We've seen CNA's & waitresses become business owners. We've seen first-hand that even among the most under-resourced populations, when these strong women are supported in the ways they need, they self-invest in their families and later come back to serve the women and families still stuck in the cycle of poverty.

Strategic Goals

- Increase economic self-sufficiency among low-income single mothers living in Eastern PA.

- Contribute to the building of a strong & resilient local economy.
- Strengthen the Eastern PA workforce.
- Develop & Execute interventions that are rooted in historical & cultural understanding, and that target the effects of interacting systems and institutions.

Supporting Statistics As Context (for our intervention)

- ⇒ Only 8% of center care and 1/3 home-based care provides child care during non-traditional hours, after 7pm and on the weekends (1).
- ⇒ 1 in 3 parents in PA need child care during evenings, nights, and on the weekends (2).
- ⇒ 25% of single mother families live in poverty (3).
- ⇒ *Pre-pandemic*, the PA economy lost \$3.47 billion yearly due to child care issues (4).
- ⇒ **Single mothers who receive support with child care are almost 40% more likely to maintain employment over two years compared to those who do not receive support** (5).

The Struggle of Our Clients

They hold low-wage jobs that usually require nontraditional work hours when schools & daycares are closed, making the lack of adequate child care one of the biggest obstacles to obtaining & maintaining employment, and it's also their biggest obstacle to furthering their education. The systems that are in place within government & society were created when 2-parent families were the norm; now 41% of children born in PA are born to a single mother, divorce is common, and 1 in 6 children in the US is being raised without a father.

The families we serve:

- Don't work 9-5 office jobs; they do shift work— 2nd, 3rd, and weekend shifts— in industries such as healthcare, hospitality, service, & manufacturing.
- They are trapped in poverty with no way out until they find us. They can't get subsidized child care without a record of employment, they can't get employment without reliable childcare and if they do, they end up losing their job due to child care issues. They are being asked by society to be mom, dad & breadwinner & primary child caretaker, often with literally NO safe & reliable child care options available to them.
- When we meet mothers, they often say finding us was “a miracle.” They are often unemployed or underemployed and eager to work to support their children.
- Along The Way gives these parents the concrete, practical support needed to invest in themselves to be able to support their families'— whether it be through employment, education or in many cases, both, simultaneously. 50% of our child care recipients have been able to go to work and school at the same time, and 93% of our single mother clients have been able to maintain stable employment with reliable child care.
- As shift workers, it's common for our clients to be earning their associates or bachelors degree at a community college, taking daytime classes. For these clients, they often work

all night (often as CNAs or hospital employees), go to class in the morning after work (often as full-time students), then go home to sleep until 3pm when their kids come home from school. They spend a few hours with their children, then we arrive at their home in the evening so they can do their 7pm-7am shift. They are among the hardest working people I've ever met. We have 75 mothers on our waiting list for child care; unlike many providers, our biggest obstacle is not finding child care workers—in fact, we receive applications to employment weekly from social workers, substitute teachers, and people who have formerly worked in preschools. Our biggest obstacle to those families getting off the waiting list is that we fundraise 100% of the monies needed to absorb the child care cost burden to families so they can get ahead.

- Our staff members – all of whom have background checks, clearances, CPR certification, trauma-training and more make dinner for the children, do the bedtime routine with the children—all in their own home so that they can sleep in their own beds night after night and have the stability they need to thrive. We operate similarly to a home healthcare company, but instead of healthcare, we provide in-home child care to eliminate obstacles to self-investment through employment & education.
- For the families we serve, all of whom are within 200% federal poverty threshold, they are working and often also going to school – all during times that it is difficult to impossible to find safe & reliable child care. And even when there is center-based child care on weekends or overnight, the feedback we've received from families is consistent with parent surveys that have been conducted by research entities such as the [New Urban Institute](#). Parents do not want their children in an institutional setting during nights & weekends, especially when the child is already in school/center-based care during the day. Parents' first choice is almost always for their children to receive care at home. By innovating the systems of care in our communities, we have the potential to set the most under-resourced families up for success instead of failure.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you all and present Along The Way's service model. I am happy to address any questions or comments of the Committee.

References

1. <https://www.childcareaware.org/our-issues/research/the-us-and-the-high-price-of-child-care-2019/>
2. Research for Action. (2019). Making it work: Examining the status of non-traditional child care in Pennsylvania.
3. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.html>
4. https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/EarlyEd_UntappedPotential_Pennsylvania.pdf
5. <https://www.ffyf.org/our-child-care-system-is-not-meeting-the-needs-of-families-providers-or-the-economy/>