



**SHRIVER
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Child Care Advocacy With SEIU In The Ranks

Keynote Address to Founding Convention of Early Learning Division

Service Employees International Union Local 925

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I am truly honored to be here to speak to all of you, some of the most unsung heroes in our society. In 1990, I began working on a welfare-to-work project at the legal services agency in Chicago where I learned immediately the central importance of child care to families on welfare striving to go to work. I have been advocating for state child care assistance programs that make affordable, quality child care accessible to all families ever since. I was asked to be here to share my perspective as a longtime child care advocate on the impact that unionizing 50,000 home child care providers in Illinois has had

We have a presidential campaign starting and in the coming months, you will be hearing about the social ills that everyone wants to address. You'll hear about the achievement gap, the high school dropout rate, and the 7 million people incarcerated in American prisons.

What you probably won't hear, though, is that the linchpin to solving these problems, the most cost effective strategy for solving them, is affordable quality child care.

We have known for a long time that for every \$1 the government spends on quality child care, the government saves \$7 on welfare, incarceration, etc. And now the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis tells us that there is a 17% annual rate of return on investment in quality early learning programs, and that this is the best investment of public dollars that we can make.

With all the research showing the critical importance of affordable quality child care to combating our most persistent and distressing social ills, you would expect that the child care field would have all the resources it needs. But instead, our field is plagued by low pay, no benefits, and high turnover.

In our state child care assistance programs for low-income families, parents are cut off eligibility long before they can afford the full cost of quality care. Parents who qualify for the program often have high co-payments that make participation unaffordable. Provider reimbursement rates are too low, which results in providers being unable to serve subsidy kids, reducing the number they can serve, closing classrooms or shutting down their programs altogether. Other programs must cut corners, keeping pay low, with no benefits, and high staff turnover



Policy wonks like me go to the policy makers with fancy arguments and charts, and prove to everyone's satisfaction that we should be spending vastly more on child care than we are. But does it happen? No. And why not? Because it's not enough to be right.

The lesson we learned long ago in Illinois is that everyone in the child care field must present a united public front or we get nothing. We can fight behind closed doors, and I've seen some fights between child care advocates that make barroom brawls tame in comparison. But in the end, if one organization is advocating for one thing and another is for something else, we get nothing. And that big troll that sits on top of the state treasury is pleased, knowing that he won't have to give up any of his treasure to child care.

Child care advocates working together over the years have achieved some important victories in Illinois. We got an annual cost of living adjustment to the program's income guidelines. We defeated several proposed increases to parent co-payments. We created a wonderful blueprint for sweeping reforms to our rate structure.

But when we step and look at what we've accomplished, we find that we've really just kept pace. We didn't change the fundamental dynamics that make child care so undervalued.

And why not? Because we didn't have the force.

My fellow Chicagoan, Al Capone, said, "I've found you can accomplish more with kindness and a gun than just kindness." SEIU is our gun. SEIU brings a critical element that is otherwise lacking. It has the ability to participate in the political process in a way that the rest of us cannot, with lots of money and campaign volunteers. And my guess is that the politicians here in the state of Washington are not a whole lot different from the politicians in Illinois -- a little less corrupt perhaps -- but still money and volunteers gets you access. And with what SEIU can bring to bear, it means access to the Governor and the legislative leaders -- the people who make decisions and set funding priorities for your state.

And what has been achieved since SEIU joined the field of child care advocacy? We have achieved fundamental reforms to the rate structure for all providers. A tiered reimbursement system that is the first in the nation that includes license-exempt home providers, reflecting a hard fought consensus in the child care community that quality is important no matter what the setting. Health insurance for home providers. Three years of huge rate increases for homes that have already led to a parity increase for centers in year one, with the other years still to be negotiated. The license-exempt home rate will increase by 35 percent from \$9.48/day to \$12.75 over the term of SEIU's contract, with the possibility of getting up to 20% more through tiered reimbursement.

Do we have challenges ahead? Of course we do. But the reason we've accomplished as much as we have, and the only way to accomplish things, is through unity and partnership. In a partnership, everyone must work to understand each other's issues and trust that if they give their support now, it will be reciprocated later. In partnerships, sometimes there have to be difficult conversations, because partnerships between those with different interests and issues don't run



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smoothly all the time. But we have learned that the real enemy is not each other but rather those who want to cut taxes and starve us of the public funds we need. We have recognized that what we have in common far outweighs our differences.

In closing, I'd like to quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "We must learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or [we will] perish together as fools."

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