

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 29, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Budget
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Finance
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
U.S. Senate HELP Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leader Schumer, Chairman Sanders, Chairman Wyden and Chair Murray:

We are writing to urge a significant and meaningful investment in the care economy as part of the Build Back Better reconciliation infrastructure package. The coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on the caregiving crisis facing our Nation and the harm this has caused to our constituents, but the need for major investments in our care economy preceded and will last well beyond the pandemic. To build an economy that includes all working people, we must invest in care. We must center on those hit the hardest, while recognizing that all working people and their families have a need to provide or receive care, and that care gaps means losses in trillions of GDP right now. Women, and especially women of color, have found their economic security in jeopardy, as they have been pushed out of the workforce in record numbers. Women's labor force participation is at a 33-year record low, and women globally lost over \$800 billion in income due to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ If Congress passes a physical infrastructure bill alone, it will be devoting investments to an industry where 90 percent of jobs are occupied by men. Women, caregivers and families need a care infrastructure plan to truly recover from the pandemic.

A strong care infrastructure must include three prongs—home and community-based services, universal paid family and medical leave and child care and early learning. All three are critical for our economy to not just recover, but to provide the supports that women, caregivers and families needed even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now is not the time for piecemeal approaches; it is the time for bold and robust investment in our Nation's families.

First, investing in the care economy means investing in home and community-based services (HCBS), with a commitment to expand services and cut the years-long waiting time that hundreds of thousands of Americans face. The investment in HCBS also needs to ensure that care workers are paid a living wage and have the benefits they deserve. And the investment should provide for high-quality services over a long enough period of time to ensure States choose to carry out these vital programs. It is critical for the investment to be robust enough to

¹ Oxfam International (2021, April 29), COVID-19 cost women globally over \$800 billion in lost income in one year. Retrieved 1 June 2021, from <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/covid-19-cost-women-globally-over-800-billion-lost-income-one-year#:~:text=The%20COVID%2D19%20crisis%20cost,3.9%20percent%20loss%20for%20men>.

accomplish the twin goals of expanding services and improving the quality of home and community care jobs for workers. This will avoid pitting family caregivers, people with disabilities, seniors and workers against each other.

America's population is aging: by 2040, the number of Americans aged 65 and older will more than double to 80 million, while the number of adults aged 85 and older will almost quadruple.² Currently, over 800,000 people, including older adults who want to age in place and people with disabilities who need support to work, live independently and be part of their communities are left waiting for years, often placing the responsibility of care and support on unpaid family caregivers. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic showed us just how important allowing Americans to have a choice in where they live and receive services is to ensuring their safety and health. In addition, the HCBS workforce, predominantly consisting of women of color, has long been plagued by low wages, poor benefits, isolation and barriers to joining together in a union.

A long-term investment in HCBS, such as what is outlined in the Better Care Better Jobs Act, would fortify this frontline workforce, which must expand to meet a rapidly increasing level of need, and also address the long-standing inequities the pandemic exposed and exacerbated. It is time that we invest in women-dominated jobs and industries in a manner that reflects the essential work they do to support us and our communities. This too will help address gender pay gaps that have long persisted in our economy.

We must also pass, and expeditiously and effectively implement, a universal paid family and medical leave program that offers paid leave benefits to all working people in the United States. It must offer comprehensive, affordable, equitable and meaningful benefits permanently, or for as long a time horizon as possible. The United States is one of the only countries in the world without some form of paid family and medical leave, and our families are suffering. More than 110 million workers—a full 80 percent of the workforce—lack paid time off to welcome a new child or care for a family member, and 60 percent of the workforce lacks paid time off to care for their own serious medical needs. With millions of families just one unexpected bill away from financial emergency, a lack of paid leave forces people into impossible choices between losing their jobs and income and being able to care for themselves and their families.

Finally, we must invest in child care and early learning in dollar amounts equal to, or in excess of, those outlined in the President's American Families Plan for early childhood and Pre-K. The pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated the deep inequities of a child care system that relies on families paying unaffordable sums and early educators being paid poverty-level wages. It is time to build a comprehensive child care and early education system that works for our Nation's children, families, educators and economy. This means ensuring families have access to high-quality, affordable child care that is available when and where they need it and treating caregivers and early childhood educators with respect and dignity for their valuable and complex work, while paying them competitive, living wages and benefits, and supporting safe, developmentally appropriate child care facilities, especially in child care deserts and underserved locations.

² The Urban Institute (2021, May), The US Population is Aging. Retrieved 30 June, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/program-retirement-policy/projects/data-warehouse/what-future-holds/us-population-aging>.

As we work to rebuild our economy, we must address structural inequities that were major drivers of crisis and economic stability in the pandemic. Investments in the care economy and policies that support workers are critical to an equitable recovery for all. The American Rescue Plan laid important groundwork for lasting, equitable change and delivered results for America's women and families. We must continue that work by passing robust investments in our care economy that meet the needs of working families and caregivers.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



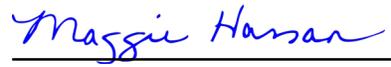
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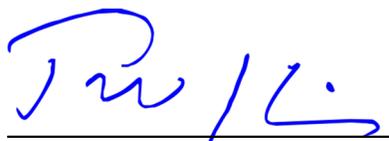
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