

The Pueblo Chieftain

BURNIE ZERCHER: Lawmakers must help working families afford child care

BURNIE ZERCHER APR 29, 2018



As a local business owner, I am concerned that wage and income growth in Pueblo and other communities across the state are not keeping pace with the cost of living for working families. This is especially true for families with young children who rely on child care to stay at work, yet cannot afford the rising costs of quality care.

Each year, families across the state pay an average of \$15,138 -- more than \$1,200 monthly -- per child for center-based infant care in Colorado. That makes Colorado the seventh most expensive state for infant care in the country. Child care for a 4-year-old in Colorado costs \$11,229 annually -- or \$936 each month, according to Child Care Aware.

Tax credits tied to child care expenditures can help our families with these high costs, but current policies do not meet the needs of many working families in Pueblo and throughout Colorado. Fortunately, a bipartisan bill recently introduced in the state House of Representatives would expand the child care expenses income tax credit, assisting more low-income and middle-income families across the state.

All kids deserve a strong start and as more families have all available caregivers in the workforce, child care has become one of the most critical components of children's early education. The first five years of life are a time of rapid brain development, so it's critical for our youngest learners to receive a solid educational foundation in those early years.

Quality early childhood programs also help save taxpayers' money in the long run. In fact, a December 2016 report from Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman shows the rate of return on investments in early childhood development for disadvantaged children can be 13 percent per child, per year, due to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability and economic productivity. Children who have access to a high-quality program often go on to earn higher incomes, are 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school and are 50 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Quality early childhood education makes kids more successful and we will all benefit from that success for decades to come. Today's kids are tomorrow's engineers, teachers and business leaders.

Because of both high costs and a lack of capacity, most children in Pueblo do not have access to quality child care, making it more difficult for families to remain in the workforce.

A 2016 report from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment found that nearly one in nine Coloradans with young children report they or a family member had to quit a job, not take a job or change jobs because of the difficulties surrounding child care.

The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program and the child care expenses income tax credit are meant to help families with this burden, but they do not reach all families who struggle with this issue.

Thousands of people are moving to our state each year. We need to ensure that we have the tools to help them stay in the workforce by improving access to child care, while at the same time giving children every opportunity to succeed later in life.

I'm grateful to the House for passing the child care expenses income tax credit expansion with strong bipartisan support. Now it's time for the Senate to bolster our economy by supporting working families across the state and pass House Bill 18-1208.

Burnie Zercher is the chairman of Industrial Constructors/Managers, Inc. and is an executive member of Executives Partnering to Invest in Children and a member of Council For a Strong America/ReadyNation.