

FORUM

EDITORIAL

Lawmakers, get with stepped-up efforts on child care reforms

Last year, The Plain Dealer and cleveland.com launched the "Rethinking Child Care" series to highlight a silent crisis in accessing child care with enormous economic workforce repercussions for Ohio — keeping too many parents from the workforce simply because they aren't able to find the quality child care they need at a price they can afford.

Cleveland.com's Jeremy Pelzer recently reported that, "As of last year, 800,000 Ohioans cut back work hours or stopped working altogether because of problems with child care, according to figures extrapolated from polling data by Groundwork Ohio, an early childhood research and advocacy organization."

Our child care series has found, among other discouraging facts, that Ohio is at the nation's lowest tier — 25% of market rate — in its base reimbursement rates for subsidized child care for low-income households. That means that many qualifying families can't get affordable child care.

On top of that, many rural Ohioans live in "child care deserts," while the state's "ratio of child care to rent is at 103%, making Ohio one of the worst in the nation in terms of this metric," cleveland.com's Julie Washington recently reported, citing a 2022 Ohio Chamber of Commerce report.

The state's business community has long been concerned that Ohio's broken system of child care, inadequate subsidies and a lack of the kind of innovation seen in other states is turning into an economic weak point — impeding a post-pandemic return to the robust workforce that Ohio desperately needs to grow and prosper.

Finally, others are beginning to sit up and take notice of this problem.

Gov. Mike DeWine highlighted the need for more aggressive and comprehensive child care reforms in his recent State of the State address, announcing Ohio will use \$85 million in COVID-19 relief funds to help day-care providers with grants aimed at upgrading and expanding existing facilities.

He also proposed a new \$140 million Child Care Choice Voucher Program that would widen family income eligibility for working families, which his administration calculates will likely impact another 8,000 children.

In addition, the DeWine administration is working on streamlining and making fairer the state's five-tier Step Up to Quality child-care rating system. Another 16,000 kids already are being served because of expanded eligibility guidelines, DeWine said.

Kara Wentz, who heads the new Ohio Department of Children and Youth, argued at a recent summit on child care issues in Columbus that, as currently written, the proposed rating changes would, as Pelzer summarized, result in many child care providers getting a 10%-20% boost in state funding and reduce the 'administrative burden' on them.

Pelzer noted, however, that critics argue the changes will also likely result in cuts for some highly rated child care providers. One reason is that, so far, no additional state money has been allotted to the subsidies.

That, in turn, highlights the critical party that hasn't come to the table with a sense of urgency to enact reforms: Ohio's legislative leaders, who are capable of lightning-fast action — sometimes.

In his State of the State, DeWine mentioned the need to do more to corral smartphone use by kids in Ohio. On Wednesday, the Ohio Senate passed a bill to do that, shoehorning limitations on cellphone use in public school classrooms into an unrelated bill about literary seals on high school diplomas.

Where's the similar drive to introduce and pass child-



Supporters of Issue 1, the Right to Reproductive Freedom amendment, attend a rally held by Ohioans United for Reproductive Rights at the Ohio Statehouse in October 2023. Joe Maiorana, Associated Press

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Legislators lacking health care knowledge shouldn't be imposing restrictions on us

Eileen Kilbane Gordon and Teri Mills

As nurses, we're outraged that, despite our expertise, it's individuals with no health care experience (mostly older white males) who legislate on women's health. Legislators' ignorance of reproductive health, including in vitro fertilization, pregnancy, miscarriage, contraception and abortion, is deeply concerning.

The Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, boasts of his role in terminating abortion rights. Trump nominated three conservative judges to the U.S. Supreme Court, which led to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Trump is now backpedaling on a national abortion ban, saying repeatedly he would leave decisions regarding reproductive health care to the states. In contrast, President Joe Biden has pledged full support to reinstate abortion as the law of the land if he's reelected. He cannot do this alone. To codify Roe once again, Biden will need the help of a Democratic Congress.

The result of Trump's actions has led to widespread chaos in women's health care and renewed efforts by states to create unreasonable restrictions. The Alabama Supreme Court's IVF ruling has forced couples to ship frozen embryos out of state. The Arizona Supreme Court resurrected a long-dormant 1864 law that bans nearly all abortions except if a mother's life is in jeopardy although, fortunately, the state Legislature is now moving to repeal it.

In January an Idaho male Republican state senator introduced a bill to eliminate rape and incest exceptions from existing laws. Recently, Texas Republican leaders convened with an anti-abortion group advocating for penalties, including death, for women undergoing abortions.

The turmoil surrounding abortion laws has left nurses and physicians uncertain about the legality of their actions and fearing loss of their licenses. In September 2023, Britany Watts of Warren suffered a miscarriage at 22 weeks. Despite being sent to a hospital emergency department (ED) by her ob-gyn physician, she received no treatment due to confusion over Ohio's six-week heartbeat law. After being sent home untreated twice, she miscarried alone and returned to the ED with continued bleeding. An ethics group raised concerns, and an ED nurse, acting on

advice from hospital administration, called the police, who arrested her for abuse of a corpse. Fortunately, a reasonable grand jury chose not to indict Watts.

Two months later, Ohio voters overwhelmingly passed a constitutional amendment safeguarding reproductive rights and abortion. However, its implementation faces hurdles in the courts, leaving providers of reproductive health care apprehensive about treating women like Watts. Attempting to remove one hurdle, two Ohio reproductive-health physicians introduced House Bill 343, to remove the six-week ban on abortion.

The assault on women's reproductive health care persists as the Supreme Court considers banning mifepristone, an FDA-approved pill used in 63% of pregnancy terminations following consultations with health care providers. The challenge, brought by a group of nonspecialized dentists and physicians, disregards overwhelming evidence of mifepristone's safety supported by over 100 studies. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, and others have objected to this challenge.

The mifepristone case isn't the end for abortion opponents. Far-right justices might exploit the 1873 Comstock Act to ban the mailing of contraceptives and reverse self-managed abortion using mifepristone. Even if mifepristone remains available, anti-abortion states could use this legislation to restrict access not just to this drug but to contraceptives overall.

Americans treasure freedom to make personal health care decisions without government interference. When polled this February by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 81% of Democrats, independents, and Republicans said abortion is an issue of individual rights and freedoms.

In this November's election, the contrast between Biden and Trump, Democrats and Republicans is profound. Abortion rights are on the ballot. As nurses with decades of experience, alongside countless other health care providers, we urge you to vote to keep abortion safe and legal, keeping judges and legislators out of the exam room. By casting your ballot, you wield the power to assure accessibility of reproductive healthcare for all.

Kilbane Gordon and Mills are registered nurses in Ohio.

COMMENTARY

We ask a lot in judging mothers' qualities