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New Yorkers need universal child care

The price tag of universal child care is significant but achievable — for New York City and the state.

By Elizabeth Palley

Guest essay

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This guest essay reflects the views of Elizabeth Palley of Brooklyn, a professor and director of the PhD program at Adelphi University's School of Social Work.

It is time for universal child care in New York. It benefits children, families, gender equality and the economy. New York City mayoral candidates and Gov. Kathy Hochul have made child care central to their agendas. New Yorkers, including Long Islanders, need it now more than ever.

When I considered having a second child, I faced an impossible choice: leave New York City or stop at one child. My husband and I — both tenured full professors — could not afford care for two children without help from my family. We earned too much for subsidies, yet not enough to manage the soaring costs. This is the reality for countless New Yorkers.

Child care is expensive. In 2024, the market rate for center-based infant care was \$25,168 in Nassau and Suffolk counties and \$26,000 in New York City. Only families earning up to \$108,000 for a family of four are eligible for subsidies. In New York City, using federal benchmarks, you'd need to earn about \$334,000 to ensure that the cost of child care was not unduly burdensome. The numbers aren't much different for Long Island.

Families with children under 6 are twice as likely to leave New York City as other households because of the cost of child care. Yet decades of research prove that high-quality care is one of the smartest investments a government can make. For every dollar spent, the return is about \$8, through better health and cognitive outcomes, higher graduation and college attendance rates, increased lifetime earnings, and reduced reliance on public benefits and the criminal justice system.

It's also a gender equity issue. Much of the wage gap between men and women can be traced to women reducing their hours or leaving the workforce entirely because of the cost of care.

The price tag is significant but achievable. Universal statewide child care has been estimated to cost up to \$12.9 billion, or 5% of the state budget. Universal care in New York City is pegged at between \$5 billion and \$7 billion — about 5-7% of the city budget.

Compare that with the \$9.2 billion the city already spends on criminal justice. Redirecting even part of that to preventive supports like child care would save money in the long run and create a safer, healthier city. There are other solutions, such as adopting a modest payroll tax like Vermont's. What's needed is political will.

The city has made important strides. New York's nearly universal 3K and 4K programs are a model, and Gov. Hochul has expanded access to subsidies and funding for children with special needs. The city's latest budget added \$220 million to the voucher program, \$70 million for children with special needs, and \$10 million for a pilot program for toddlers under 2.

The state is at a turning point. If we fail to act, families will continue to leave, children will continue to miss out, and our city's future will be diminished. But if we invest in child care, we will keep families here, nurture the youngest New Yorkers, strengthen our workforce, and establish the city as a national leader in family policy.

The next mayor must not treat universal child care as optional or aspirational. It must be a priority on day one. What happens there will create momentum for it to expand to the rest of the state.

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