

Abstract

This article will examine an often-overlooked need for a vulnerable population- childcare for single mothers. Single mothers endure a combination of financial stressors, economic hardships, and family instability. These factors have all been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors of this article suggest long overdue policy solutions, including a case study of an organization meeting a critical childcare need in their community; social work education changes; and key research questions necessary to change the trajectory of single mother family outcomes and poverty in America.

Keywords: childcare, single mother, COVID-19, social work education, family, policy

Child Care Challenges of Single Mothers:

A look into societal weaknesses and innovative solutions

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has spared no government from facing the excruciating truths of their own limitations -- long-existent infrastructure gaps and societal weaknesses that have culminated in great disparities between groups of people can no longer be realized by a few and ignored by many because people are dying in large numbers - *physically and economically*. The effects of the virus can, arguably be felt by 100% of people living in the US, it has had disproportionate impacts on vulnerable groups (Hashikawa et al, n.d.); the ability to effectively adjust to lockdowns, large-scale industry closures, job loss, and childrens' remote learning depends largely on one's place on the socio-economic scale.

The traditional pillars of social work have supported the march towards social justice and greater equity amidst long-standing, complex societal problems, but if this pandemic has taught the world anything, it has taught people everywhere of the need for an *effective* response to acute systemic distress and failures. When big systems and entire governments fail, it is small local systems that are meeting the needs of suffering people. It is the quiet, oft-unrecognized work of local agencies and organizations in every state, doing their best to fill in these gaps on shoe-

string budgets, that makes all the difference. The world will likely always need advocates for the vulnerable, that work for systemic change; however, these changes are hard-won, taking many years to enact, with millions of people suffering the consequences of legislative waiting games. Small, grassroots organizations need greater funding to do the hard work necessary to uplift people when our national leaders and systems fail. The time for partisan ideology and decision-making needs to come to an end, with all influential stakeholders implementing a both/add mindset --it is not big government vs small government; it's both, so that when there is a failure of one, the other can readily fill in the gaps and mitigate suffering.

This article highlights a case study of a PA organization that addresses an overlooked need of a vulnerable population -- childcare for single mothers who work non-traditional hours. A comprehensive discussion of this case is presented, including an analysis of underlying societal weaknesses relevant to this group, the unique challenges they face resultant of COVID-19, and a proposal for changes to social work education if the field is to exert the necessary influence to make sustainable and long-lasting societal progress for this and other vulnerable groups; it concludes with an easy-to-follow blueprint detailing the ways in which social workers and all people of goodwill can effectively advocate for single mother families, and recommends key research questions relevant to ensuring the health and well-being of single mothers and their children.

Systemic Injustice for Single Mothers and Its Impact

Raising a child(ren) as a sole parent is a very difficult responsibility that is made even harder by a childcare system that does not work for all. The authors acknowledge that single fatherhood also presents significant challenges, and explicitly state that this article's focus on single mothers is in no way meant to diminish the experience of fathers or other

caregivers/guardians raising children alone -- indeed even two-parent households “need a village” to rear children. The focus on single mothers is rooted in the systemic injustices faced by women and the statistical fact that 4 in 5 single-parent families are single-mother families; despite their prevalence, they are an oft-overlooked vulnerable population (Livingston, 2020). In the U.S., nearly 16M children are being raised without a father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Forty-one percent of single mother families live in poverty (Wright, 2012). Research shows that women are more likely than men to make work sacrifices, such as taking unpaid leave to care for their children, making sustained participation in the workforce difficult even pre-COVID-19 (Parker, 2020). According to a recent study, 42% of women admitted to reducing work hours to care for children or a family member, while only 28% of fathers said the same (Parker, 2020).

The impact of an ineffective, one-size fits all approach to childcare in the U.S. is severe, with ramifications on at-risk families who find it nearly impossible to get out of poverty, and on American businesses and local/national economies. The US annual economic cost of an inefficient childcare system is estimated to be \$57B when lost earnings, productivity, and revenue are taken into account, with American businesses losing an estimated \$12.7B annually, directly resultant of diminished productivity due to their employees’ childcare challenges (Bishop-Josef et al., 2014). Losses for working parents total \$37 billion yearly, with an individual average loss of \$3,350 per year and even non-parents lose an average of \$630 each year that the childcare crisis continues (Bishop-Josef et al., 2014). This is an *average* factoring in families at all SES-levels; however, research provides compelling evidence for low-income families enduring disproportionate risk and negative outcomes as a result of issues related to inadequate childcare access.

The National Women's Law Center (2019) reports that women are disproportionately working low-wage jobs with nonstandard hours and inconsistent schedules, making a lack of childcare one of the *biggest obstacles* to obtaining and maintaining employment for this vulnerable population (Entmacher, et al., 2014). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) reports median hourly wages for the following women-dominated fields: home health aides (\$12.15), child care (\$11.65), fast food (\$11.31), restaurant servers (\$11.10), maids (\$11.95), and cashiers (\$11.38); even assuming adequate child care and no time off, working in these jobs full-time, 52 weeks a year, yields a gross annual wage of \$24K -- a figure very close to the \$21,720 yearly income that qualifies a family of 3 as within 100% the federal poverty level (Connecticut Department of Social Services, 2020). In fact, the median income by family type is as follows: married couple \$105,168; single father \$46,201; and single mother \$28,780 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Single mother incomes this low jeopardize the basic needs of food and housing and render paid childcare completely unattainable.

Critics of childcare reform may point to the childcare subsidy as a viable option for low-income families; however, this is a very limited and currently only approved for regulated center-care and in some cases, family care (Ryan et al., 2011). For single mothers living in one of the rare communities with 24-hour daycares, the childcare subsidy can be used to gain access to quality childcare during non-traditional work hours -- if they are able to obtain it. Of the 13.3M families that were eligible to receive this subsidy, only 2M actually did (Chein, 2019). Twenty-four hour daycares may be one effective option for families who work non-traditional hours and warrant impact analyses on child development; nonetheless, they are largely non-existent in communities throughout the country (only 8% of center care and 1/3 of home-based care offer services after 7pm, overnight, or on the weekend; National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015), leaving a low-income single mothers' child care options during

these times to hiring a caregiver or kinship care -- an often fragile or nonexistent safety net for low-income people (Hill et al., 2021). The average hourly babysitting wage in the United States is \$17.73 for one child, \$20.30 for two children, and \$21.49 for three children (UrbanSitter, 2020) -- a wage well beyond the pay rates of the single mothers who, largely, hold low-wage jobs that yield somewhere between eleven and twelve dollars per hour (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In fact, on average, in-home childcare for 2 children is 63% of a single parent's income (ChildCareAware, 2019); while hard to believe, this figure actually accounts for all single parents, including single fathers -- a group whose median income was reported as \$17,421 more than that of single mothers (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). This wage gap may be partially explained by a deeply entrenched societal injustice faced by women -- wage penalty for motherhood. Women of all SES groups still earn less than a man doing the same job (Meara et al., 2019) -- 80.5 cents for every dollar earned by a man (U.S. Census bureau, 2020). This inequity both contributes to and compounds the difficulties imposed by a lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare among low-income mothers.

COVID-19 Presents Unique Challenges for Single Mother Families

The pandemic has called national attention to the long-standing health and economic disparities that have ravaged under-represented populations in the United States (Khatana & Groeneveld, 2020). It is perhaps, women with the following intersectional identities: single mothers; low-income earners; Black and brown individuals, that most acutely feel the impacts of a society turned completely upside-down by a microbe. The pre-pandemic stress of economic hardship is compounded by the loss of employment or reduction in work hours due to pandemic-related industry closures in sectors dominated by a predominantly female workforce (i.e. maids, cashiers, restaurant servers, etc.; Kashen et., al, 2020) and rather suddenly, these families are

threatened with housing loss (National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 2020) and are relying on eviction moratoriums to keep a roof over their heads. An estimated 1.5M mothers had exited the workforce due to school closure by October 2020 (Tedeschi, 2020). Mothers who were able to maintain employment through the pandemic because they are considered essential workers (home health aides, child caregivers, certified nursing assistants, etc) face different challenges; they risk contracting the virus themselves and/or spreading it to their children -- many of which have underlying conditions that are positively correlated to poverty (i.e., asthma, obesity (Mohan, et al., 2014). For a sole parent, with weak social/family support (Hill et al., 2021), the possibility of hospitalization may create near intolerable stress for mothers already struggling to *do it all* day in and day out.. Single mothers with adequate family support systems are not exempt from challenges; grandparents and family care may not be a viable option amidst a pandemic driven by a contagious illness, with high mortality rates among the elderly. The accumulation of racial disparities in health care, exceedingly low-incomes, systemic racial and gender injustice, and the lack of adequate childcare reveal a harrowing look into the lives of all single mothers and single mothers of color during this pandemic.

At the peak of school closures, an estimated 55.1 million students in 124,000 private and public schools were affected (Education Week, 2020). In addition to employment, household maintenance, and child-rearing duties, parents have the additional responsibility of assisting their children in virtual learning, which depending on one's school district may be tantamount to homeschooling. Parents who have the privilege of working from home are expected to be their child(ren)'s teacher. Single mothers who are unable to work from home during school hours (largely low-income workers) are in a serious bind, and left to make choices no parent should have to -- leave children unattended or with an unsuitable caregiver-“teacher” and go to work to provide for their family *or* ensure their children's safety and education by staying home with

their children and suffer the economic consequences. Mothers who work non-traditional hours (2nd and 3rd shifts) are expected to care for and teach their children during times when they had previously slept -- a requirement to function, especially amidst all the roles they are expected to fulfill.

The convergence of wide-spread, extended school closures and an already floundering childcare system might be the tipping point that firmly relegates low-income families to a life of poverty unless innovative childcare and single mother supports are embedded into American culture as strongly as the inequity that got them to the point of poverty in the first place.

While these statistics illuminate a bleak reality for low-income single mothers, there is a clear path forward. Strong evidence exists positively correlating the alleviation of the cost burden of childcare and mothers' participation in the workforce (Schoshet, 2019). For single parents -- particularly mothers, to succeed in the almost insurmountable task of climbing out of poverty and achieving economic self-sufficiency, they plain and simply *need* safe, reliable childcare during non-traditional working hours. The existing wage gap and gender disparities in the workforce have been exacerbated by novel challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it likely that these disproportionate negative effects on working mothers will outlast the actual pandemic itself unless appropriate mitigation efforts are prioritized. Part II of this article will highlight one example of an effective solution to the childcare crisis that one Pennsylvania community has undertaken, followed by policy and research recommendations.

Case Study

Despite the foreboding statistics, COVID-19 has invited societies around the world to greater consciousness and even greater innovation. One such innovation exists in the suburbs of Philadelphia; Along The Way Inc is a small nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide

acceptance, community, and hope to single mother families through the provision of a holistic, non-traditional workforce development program. Along The Way provides free, quality, in-home child care to low-income single mothers living in the Philadelphia suburbs, enabling them to invest in their financial and family stability through the pursuit of their career and academic goals. The organization recognizes the reality that this article has made clear; *single mothers without adequate childcare cannot work at all or enough*. It is the only organization in their service area meeting this high-demand community need.

To qualify, a mother's income must be within 200% of the federal poverty threshold, have up to three children less than 13 years of age, and attend work, school/training between the hours of 3pm-7am. In response to the pandemic's impact on employment changes, childcare provision has temporarily expanded to include day-time hours to women in need of childcare before the standard service time of 3pm.

With an ever-growing waiting list, some mothers wait for an opening for several years; however, the wait is worth it because once admitted, single mothers have reliable caregivers -- all of whom: pass rigorous background checks; are certified in pediatric CPR, first aid, and relief of choking; are competent in assisting with age appropriate tasks, such as feeding, bathing, bedtime routines, and homework help; and who receive on-going training in best practices for child behavior management, as well as cultural awareness and poverty training aimed at helping caregivers better understand and respond to cultural differences and the impacts of poverty.

As a startup organization, Along The Way has served 12 unique families; in the first few years of service, cohorts have been intentionally small as the organization developed its program, operations, and budget. Initial program evaluation indicates the following outcomes: 50% of clients received primary or secondary employment through the administration's networking

efforts, and 100% of mothers in the program were able to retain employment with reliable childcare. Over 7700 childcare hours have been provided, with individual clients' childcare support averaging between 10 - 15 hours per week, depending on need. A community needs assessment and program analyses have determined that the organization is meeting a critical need and is able to sustainably deliver the service; 2020 saw a plan to scale up service being ushered in alongside COVID-19.

Globally, the pandemic has introduced a new set of challenges and also brought much needed attention to problems that have been ignored for far too long. Small organizations such as this one have been working to fill the gaps for vulnerable populations where large-scale policies and resources are severely limited and/or cease to exist, and they continue to do so, despite some traditional fundraising efforts being upended by the "new normal" the virus has imposed. Fundraising events have been cancelled, postponed, or taken a virtual format, amounting to significant revenue loss, and an already small operating budget has become more thinly spread amidst the need for greater service to vulnerable populations; these circumstances are not unique to this organization. In fact, many grassroots social service agencies are struggling to fund their much-needed work during the pandemic; according to a recent study, 80% of nonprofit organizations indicate financial struggle, with the average expected rate of decline in revenue being 38% (Charity Navigator, 2020).

Despite challenges, the organization's administrator and board of directors are motivated by a strong commitment to service of this under-supported vulnerable population and approach the current times as the perfect opportunity to pursue alternative and creative funding streams. Historically, the startup has been funded by private local donors and marketed largely by word-of-mouth; however, with individuals and business owners in all stratospheres of financial health experiencing unforeseen challenges, the director knew that sustainable growth to meet womens'

needs required a financial plan that drew funding from diverse sources. The organization deployed a successful 47-day year-end crowdfunding campaign that allowed 3 additional single mothers families in their community to receive childcare support during non-traditional hours for an entire year; they are currently in the process of launching a monthly giving society to invite current donors to increase their impact, and to invite all people who resonate with their mission to stand together for vulnerable families by committing to a monthly financial gift through a Giving Society subscription.

The organization has also strongly focused on collaborative partnerships as a way to leverage existing resources -- cost-sharing with partnering organizations disperses the cost burden of providing an expensive service for free, while increasing the number of families served; mutual referrals; and professional relationships with local service providers to offer wraparound services to clients, including easy access to free parenting support groups, employment referrals, ongoing mentorship, and free legal consultations -- all in addition to core child care support. These wraparound services allow women with ever-changing, non-traditional schedules to access needed support *easily* -- a factor which is invaluable to a population for whom very little in their lives can be described as *easy*; there's no waiting lists or long lines to connect to the necessary support. The organization's director is readily available to clients in the same way she is available to all stakeholders (i.e. board members, donors, corporate sponsors, local business sponsors, existing and prospective partnering agencies, and mothers seeking service) -- via phone/text, and a standing scheduling link that allows anyone with it, to schedule themselves into her calendar for a zoom meeting at a time convenient to them.

The described ease of access is indicative of the guiding belief that, generally, people *want* to make the world better but amidst the vast societal and sometimes personal struggles that people face, it can be hard to know where to begin. Utilizing a strengths-perspective, Along The

Way approaches each and every partnership in recognition of the unique time, talent, and treasure capacities and limitations of individuals, businesses, and organizations, and closely collaborates with stakeholders to affirm these differences and create mutually beneficial relationships. The strengths-perspective informs every relationship the organization has, from interactions with large-gift donors and foundations to the high school students who volunteer time for the organization to the mothers they serve. Everyone is important. *Everyone matters.*

Along The Way invites its supporters and all people of goodwill to directly invest in community capacity building, and in so doing, the organization's sustaining members unquestionably know their contribution to making the world better -- business' lost revenue is mitigated by a child care system that works for all. Single mothers have an essential support that is necessary to thrive. Homework gets done. Child routines are kept. Children sleep in their own beds. Children are safe and nurtured while mothers are working hard. Mothers gain economic self-sufficiency. And communities' inch closer to vitality.

Policy Recommendations

At this point, readers' excitement for this community may fall short against the knowledge that there are many communities with no such support network for single mothers; it's a valid concern. Even in the counties where Along The Way provides service, there are many more single mothers that need this service than spots for it. As the world moves towards greater consciousness of others' realities, and deeper understandings of the limits of government -- big and small, the authors advocate for the following:

- A both/and cultural mindset shift -- Social workers, civically engaged citizens, and policymakers would benefit from diverting national conversations away from whether it is the responsibility of the federal government or local governments to fund social support services; if the pandemic has taught anything, it has taught

that when one system fails, there *needs* to be a viable alternative to minimize human suffering. Specifically, the childcare subsidy should expand beyond regulated child care centers and kin care, to also include vetted organizations like Along The Way that provide in-home child care by fully trained professionals. The childcare system in the United States is ineffective, making it critical for federal and state policy and program expansion, *alongside* allocating monies towards organizations that are supporting single mothers in this largely unmet childcare need; the path to social progress is paved with diversity in viable care options, which introduces the next recommendation.

- The social progress index (SPI) designed to complement measures of economic vitality (i.e., GDP) should expand its indices to include “Access to Quality Child Care,” so that decision-makers are empowered to make data-driven social change in the lives of low-income single parents living in the United States. This is warranted given that the SPI is meant to be an implementation tool to localize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s; Social Progress Imperative, 2018), and access to quality childcare is implicated in the following SDG’s: no poverty; decent work and economic growth; gender equality; reduced inequalities; good health and well-being; and peace, justice, and strong communities (Social Progress Imperative, 2018).
- Support of H.R. 1364: Child Care for Working Families Act and The Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act are examples of promising legislation that could make positive impacts on this crisis, with the former ensuring that no family pays more than 7% of their income for child care (Congressional Research Service, 2019) and the latter by doubling the number of families eligible for child

care assistance through “the federal government partner[ing] with sponsors – states, counties, cities, school districts, tribal organizations, or other nonprofit community entities – to administer the [universal child care] program in a way that prioritizes local community needs and coheres early childhood systems” (The Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, 2019).

Single Mother Advocacy Guide

Recognizing that increased access to affordable childcare during non-traditional hours is one of the biggest anti-poverty measures that can be undertaken for single mothers, social workers and concerned citizens need to advocate for the expansion of affordable and flexible childcare by contacting their state representatives and voting for legislators that understand the implications of increased access and expanded options. The severity of the childcare crisis in America warrants drastic changes, open minds, and a willingness for all people of goodwill to cross party lines -- voters and elected officials alike. Allegiance to ideology needs to be replaced with allegiance to data, if the United States is to conclude its retrogression of social progress indices (a distinction held only by two other countries of the 163 which are measured). The U.S. is the *only* country in the G7 that has seen diminished social progress over the last decade (Merelli, 2020).

Advocates for single mothers can also help employers recognize the importance of investing in childcare. As previously stated, the impact of an underperforming child care system costs American businesses *billions* of dollars yearly; with these financial losses, Schochet (2019) points out that “there is widening agreement on the interconnectedness between access to child care, parental employment, and overall economic growth; businesses rely on employees and employees require child care, and when parents don’t have it, they are left scrambling to find

care even if it is not ideal or they have to call off/reduce hours.” Employers can reduce these financial losses by offering flexible work schedules, on and off-site childcare, childcare reimbursement, and back up childcare programs. Evaluation of employer administered childcare support shows fifty-four percent of businesses reporting that access to childcare services reduced missed workdays by 30%, and on-site childcare programs can reduce missed workdays by 60% (Child Care Aware of America, 2019). Access to reliable, quality childcare not only assists families, but can decrease employers’ losses and boosts economic growth.

Changes to Social Work Education

Not only has the pandemic demanded innovative ideas and solutions from government leaders and nonprofit organizations, but it has also invited potential changes to social work education. For social workers to exert the influence necessary to *effectively* advocate for *bold* changes in the name of societal progress and increased equity during these challenging and unpredictable times, social work education needs to take stock of the profession as it currently stands; only 7.8% of MSW students entered indirect social work practice post-graduation, whereas 82.1% chose direct practice (Salsberg, et al, 2019). The rates by which social workers are represented in government are worse -- 0.81% in the federal executive branch, 0.48 in state government and 0.26 in local government (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2020). The time for a renewed emphasis on macro practice in social work education is now; curricula should provide a thorough exploration of the impacts of policy on vulnerable populations, with a close examination of family policy in real-time. Inequitable access to childcare is just one of many policy issues that is a perennial threat to poverty reduction and equity. For the profession to stay true to one of its six core values -- social justice, macro-practice needs to *drastically* increase.

Research Recommendations and Conclusion

The pandemic has economically devastated *many* populations; however, underlying equity issues (i.e. gender wage gap, lack of affordable child care during non-traditional hours) paired with post-hoc societal responses to the virus (i.e. school closures requiring remote learning, sustained closures of industries dominated by a female workforce (i.e. service and hospitality industries) have contributed to disproportionate COVID-19-related impacts on single mothers, thus increasing the vulnerability of these families and of communities with high rates of one-parent, female-led households. An appropriate social response to this inequality-fueled suffering, requires a clear understanding of the scope of the childcare crisis and its full impact on single mother families and the economy at-large. Research evaluating the extent of the pandemic's impact on this population is warranted in order to understand the social support that is necessary to help single mother families gain economic self-sufficiency through this pandemic and beyond. Potential research questions include: To what extent were low-income single mothers able to obtain childcare subsidies and emergency aid/unemployment insurance during the pandemic, and how did these rates compare to pre-pandemic rates? How did school closures impact maternal employment for different SES groups? In what ways does non-traditional childcare access during non-traditional hours affect single mothers': parenting behaviors, retention of employment, economic self-sufficiency, and generational poverty.

Social workers and advocates across disciplines should understand that the lack of adequate access to safe and reliable childcare is a *crisis* that threatens child developmental outcomes, gender equality, and poverty reduction, ultimately undermining community and large-scale societal vitality. The world had little control over COVID-19 -- a virus that has both exposed in full view and magnified societal weaknesses; however, what happens next *is* within societal control. Research will allow lawmakers to enact policies that are data-informed and create support systems robust enough to better weather challenges such as COVID-19. An ounce

of prevention is worth a pound of cure; let's not wait for another national catastrophe to equip mothers with the necessary support to gain financial health and family stability; instead, may all social workers illuminate the lessons learned during one of the most trying times in modern history until policymakers listen, and become policymakers themselves.

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