

Testimony of Rosa Walker
House Budget Committee Hearing:
“Ensuring Women Can Thrive in a Post-Pandemic Economy”
March 16, 2022

Good morning Chairman Yarmuth, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the committee. My name is Rosa Walker, and I live in Oregon City, just outside Portland, Oregon. I'm an occupational therapist working in early education with young children and their families. I am also the mom of three incredible boys: Matías, age 11, Tomás, age eight, and Gabriel, age four. And I'm a proud member of [MomsRising](https://www.momsrising.org) (<https://www.momsrising.org>).

Like so many families across the country, the pandemic has taken a terrible toll on my family's physical and mental health and our financial security. We've struggled mightily because our country hasn't invested in basic policies like paid family and medical leave, home care and high-quality affordable child care, leaving moms like me to pick up the pieces and hold everything together.

I am testifying today to urge you to create a care infrastructure that can provide meaningful support to families. Unless you do, my family and so many others will not be able to recover from the pandemic. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story.

At the beginning of 2020, both my husband and I were working full time, my husband as the foreman of a roofing company and I as an occupational therapist in early intervention supporting children ages 3 to 5 with a delay or disability and their families. All three of our children were thriving in school, our two eldest in first and third grade, and our youngest in a small local preschool.

When COVID hit, our lives changed overnight. Preschool closed, and our older children suddenly switched to remote learning. Like so many parents, my husband and I scrambled to teach and care for our kids at home, while also trying to work enough hours to put food on the table and pay our mortgage.

Then, despite masking and all our efforts to stay home and stay well, our entire family contracted COVID. Both my husband and I were very sick, long after our boys had recovered. Now we were taking care of our kids and still trying to educate them, with both of us suffering the effects of long COVID. A healthy 37-year old, I would tire after walking across the house to make lunch for our children, and for the first time in my life, I needed an inhaler. I still struggle with long-term symptoms today, and have been diagnosed with an autoimmune condition likely provoked by COVID. My husband lost work and income as he made time to recover from COVID without any paid leave.

The downward spiral had begun. My husband and I worked reduced hours – often up to 50 percent less – for more than a year as we dealt with the health issues resulting from long COVID and supported our children in remote learning. Virtual learning was not effective for our two older boys during that first year of the pandemic, despite the tremendous energy their teachers invested. It was also difficult for my husband to help our boys, as the virtual curriculum was available only in English, and not his native language, Spanish. So despite our daily efforts to make remote learning work for our sons, they quickly fell further behind in reading and math.

Meanwhile, the bills kept coming. Forced to put basics like groceries and medical treatments on credit cards, our debt mounted quickly. Today we have \$11,000 in credit card debt – an unthinkable situation in our carefully budgeted pre-COVID life.

Our lives grew more stressful when my husband fell and broke his rib while at work during the first winter of the pandemic. He needed time to rest and heal, which meant we lost even more income during that recovery. He went back to work as quickly as possible, but in the meantime, our kids began to struggle with their mental health for the first time in their lives. We problem-solved safe ways for them to socialize and be active, and in the midst of our own struggles and stresses, found the time to listen to their worries. But it wasn't enough. We were fortunate enough to find counseling for our boys despite the burgeoning youth mental health crisis. This counseling had to be paid for, too, of course.

When the Child Tax Credit payments arrived in July 2021, it was as if our elected leaders finally recognized what families like mine were facing. That \$800 per month was world-changing for us. It helped us pay down our credit card and medical debt, cope with the rising cost of groceries, and even enroll our older kids in soccer, which has really helped their mental health after the first difficult year.

We also used it to send our youngest back to his preschool. The fee had jumped from \$800 to \$1100 per month (for four days of care weekly), more than we could really afford. I work directly with child care programs, so I understand why – I see how stretched these providers are, and how they struggle to stay afloat. And we had little choice: Our son, and our family, needed that preschool.

Then in January, just as the Omicron variant was surging, Congress failed to extend the Child Tax Credit. The extra income that was helping our family recover simply disappeared.

The past two months have been a nightmare. Our son's preschool has had to close twice because of COVID outbreaks. All three children became ill with COVID-19, and our oldest, while still recovering from COVID, contracted Epstein-Barr virus and needed to stay home for many weeks. Then the school bus driver contracted COVID, so we had to rearrange our work schedules to get our kids to school.

Through all this I have juggled work, child care, meals, transporting kids to school and soccer practice, and then working late at night to make up for work I couldn't get done earlier in the day. My 15-hour days of incessant activity mean I can't rest enough to keep my newly diagnosed autoimmune condition from flaring up, stressing and exhausting me further.

Two years into this pandemic, Congress still hasn't guaranteed workers paid family and medical leave. My family, like so many others, is struggling without the help of even this basic safety net. My husband has no paid leave, and I have already drained nearly all my paid time off for the year. In fact, I am using my last couple of hours to testify before you today.

I'm here because it's so important to tell you – our elected leaders – about the impossible trade-offs my family, and so many other families, are forced to make.

Without adequate care infrastructure, we have to choose between working enough hours to pay our bills and getting well. Between paying down debt and getting tutoring for our older sons, who need help catching up after so much interrupted learning during the pandemic. Between counseling for our children and keeping enough food on the table.

That's not right. And we're not unique. Every day I talk with daycare providers, preschool teachers, early-childhood educators and parents. Across diverse life experiences, all of them are experiencing the same thing: continual exhaustion, financial anxiety, and making choices no parent or early education provider should have to make.

Families can be resilient, but only if they have the resources they need to adapt and move on. Our children deserve the best we can give them: not merely because they are our future leaders, politicians, doctors and teachers, but because of their inherent worth as humans *right now*.

As a country, we say we value our children and our families, but current policies do not support this value. Because our country hasn't invested in care infrastructure, the burden has fallen on moms to step in and "figure it out." But we simply can't anymore: We are at the end of our ropes.

After two years of pandemic-related trauma, we are at a crucial decision point. Will Congress fund the care infrastructure that children and families need to recover, and to thrive? Will Congress provide comprehensive paid family and medical leave, quality child care and Child Tax Credit payments? Or will you turn your back on children and allow families to keep on sliding from insecurity into disaster?

As you discuss how to rebuild from this pandemic, please remember my family and all of our families and build a better America--one that works for *all* of us. Thank you.