



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Create Your Own Bipartisan Lame Duck Legislation: A Student Policy Challenge

HELPING OUR HEROES: CHILD CARE FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

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The Problem:

Child care is one of the greatest strains on the American family – 34% of families with young children [have “serious problems” finding affordable childcare](#) options. As a result of high costs, [100,000 Americans have to stay home from work every month](#). Not only does this [cost the economy \\$122 billion each year](#), but families who do reduce working hours are often worse off as a result. Furthermore, low-income people tend to be the most impacted by the high prices of child care, the diminishing number of child care providers, and the non-traditional hours that many low-income families work.

Those with nontraditional working hours, such as first responders have unique difficulties finding adequate child care. These families have no choice but to resort to often unreliable home-based providers or family members. Non-traditional hours make child care more difficult and expensive. Only [8% of child care centers are open during non traditional hours](#). While [1/3 of regulated child care homes may be open during these times](#), the price of child care is often much more expensive and the prevalence of this type of child care has diminished over time in favor of centers. First responders play an important role within communities and are often the people who have non-traditional work hours. As such, these key people often face difficulties with finding stable child care providers. The lack of child care options is often a deterrent from working the demanding job of a first responder.

Presently, the Federal government allocates some funding toward child care for low-income families through two major programs: Head Start and The Child Care Development Block Grant. Head Start provides free early childhood education, and additional services to low-income children and families, but [only addresses the deeply impoverished](#) (less than \$31,000 for a family of four). The Child Care Development Fund aims to address child care concerns with low-income families, often through direct subsidies. Both policies have helped low-income families afford childcare, but it does not expand access beyond traditional working hours, or provide anything for the working class where first responders are categorized.

Policy:

We recommend establishing a grant pilot program for child care services for the minor children of first responders. Eligible first responders include police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics, employees of volunteer organizations, and others as determined by the states. Grants are provided to eligible states to provide assistance in the establishment and operation of child care programs catered to first responders during shift work and non-traditional work hours (outside 9AM-5PM on weekdays). By expanding child care services for first responders, our policy will support front line workers and reduce barriers of entry for the purpose of enhancing recruitment and retention in such positions. The goal is to reduce the burden placed upon families of first responders by offering more stable child care options. The pilot program will give states the discretion and flexibility to use the funding for projects that are catered to local needs and the opportunity to explore cost effective child care programs.

Evidence:

There have been many recent initiatives at the local level to support first responders through child care. One example was in San Diego, where a [first-of-its-kind child care center for law enforcement opened in 2022](#). Not only does the center charge 50% less than the market rate, but the workers are paid above the local average. The state of Illinois also recently passed the Off Hours Child Care Program, a state initiative that aims to support first responders and other workers through access to off hours, night, or sleep time child care. Other states and jurisdictions, from conservative [Idaho](#) to liberal [Washington DC](#) have recently proposed programs aimed at supporting child care options for first responders.

Implementation:

The Department of Health and Human Services will house this program. Grants will be awarded to states for the purpose of expanding existing child care programs that aid first responders, offering funds directly to their first responders for the purposes of childcare, support on-site care, or however they see fit. The grants may also be used to establish new first responder focused child care centers, along the lines of the San Diego example. The funding will be more substantial for these requests and help cover the cost of training, maintenance, and construction. Grants will be awarded over a period of 5 years with no less than \$25,000 and no more than \$500,000 awarded per grant. No less than 20% of the money set aside for this grant will be used to make grants to eligible units of state and local governments. To ensure the awarded grant money is spent for the purpose of providing child care to first responders, an audit will be required to ensure funds are not misused. Additionally, a two-year and four years study will be conducted to determine the efficacy of this program and the individual projects within it.

Funding:

With the election of President Trump, and an anticipated Republican governing trifecta, Speaker Johnson and House Republicans will [likely push for another continuing resolution](#) to last through the 118th Congress. Working within the constraint of H.R. 9747, these grants will take \$50 million from the [\\$8,746,387,000 in funding](#)

[allocated for the Childcare and Development Block Grant Act of 1990](#). The Childcare and Development Block Grant Act is aimed at helping States in delivering high-quality child care and maximizing parental choice for families who need assistance. This policy diverts some of the funding from a program with similar aims with the anticipated funding restraints in the upcoming *Lame Duck* session.

Sponsors:

This policy will be proposed by Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA-50) and Sen. Todd Young (R-IN). Both legislators have offered their own versions of bipartisan-sponsored child care legislation in the 118th Congress. At the end of 2023, motivated by the novel law enforcement child care facility in his home district, Rep. Peters proposed legislation that provides grants to law enforcement agencies to assist in opening child care centers. Rep. Peters's bill, [HR. 2722](#), is [endorsed by the Problem Solvers Caucus](#) composed of 32 House Democrats and 27 House Republicans. Sen. Todd Young proposed [S.976](#), a bill that would establish a pilot program for the Administration for Children & Families to award grants to child care providers aiming to offer services in non-traditional hours. Given the lawmakers support for grant programs aimed at funding child care for workers in non-traditional hours, which law enforcement and other first responders would fall under, they are inclined to work together on a bill with pre-existing structural markup during this Congress that would bring relief to some of the most crucial and overworked employees in their communities.

Lame Duck:

The *Lame Duck* session must result in the passage of either a continuing resolution or a budget. Appropriating funding for grants related to an innovative pilot program that offers child care assistance to first responders would be an impactful close to a mostly gridlocked 118th Congress. If offered for a vote, a bill that supports giving assistance to first responders would be a difficult piece of legislation to publicly oppose. Child care is also an issue that [has seen some bipartisan support](#). While Democrats argue for more Federal support of off-site child care programs like Head Start, Republicans believe that subsidizing workplace or at-home child care is more beneficial long term. Our proposal offers the opportunity for grants to state and local governments to make the decisions about whether to invest the Federal money directly to first responders, the employers, or small businesses. The audit of the funding included in the study assuages conservatives' concern about wasteful spending, and we can better understand where Federal resources towards child care can be maximized. While there appears to be bipartisan support for an expanded Child Tax Credit that would go directly into the pockets of families, we determined there will likely be no changes to the tax code until the provisions of the 2017 TCJA expire in 2025. With the passage of bipartisan child care legislation, the 119th Congress will be primed to take more expansive action.

President Biden's View:

The Biden Administration has made concerted efforts to lower childcare costs for working families. This legislation will offer funding support for [recent actions](#) taken by the Small Business Administration to provide resources for starting new childcare businesses. In 2023, President Biden also signed an [executive order](#) focused on increasing access to high quality care, which included directing federal agencies to identify funds that can be used to support child care for workers on Federally-funded projects. While The White House is limited to assisting Federal employees via executive order, our grants direct funding towards first responders in municipalities that would not otherwise have the necessary funds to invest in child care.

Stakeholders:

[First responders](#) will benefit as a result of the program from the increased access and affordability of child care. Additionally, in a male-dominated profession, child care is one of the biggest barriers of entry for women. As such, we expect that the proportion of women in these fields will increase as a result of the policy. [Child care providers](#) will benefit as another recipient of the grants. Similar programs, such as in San Diego, have higher wages for the providers compared to the local wage. Additionally, these grants are expected to support small businesses and help with the cost of startup and expansion. [Local government](#) benefits from this bill because of the expected increase in the number of first responders as a result of newfound benefits. This increase will not only diversify the workforce, but also help retain current staff and save money on training.

Obstacles:

Due to the competitive nature of grants and the relatively small nature of the program, we expect some stakeholders may not receive the full benefit as a direct result of the policy. Many local communities have difficulties accessing these types of grants and often have issues with managing the funding. Additionally, it is necessary to spend resources ascertaining how the money was spent and its effectiveness. However, because this policy is a pilot program, we expect that the results from this program will help inform more extensive child care bills in the future. Additionally, we did not include match requirements, which could double the impact of the funding, as a part of the grant to help reduce barriers to entry and support small businesses.

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