

## OP-ED

# Think beyond concrete, toward care

By Thomas P. Foley and Stephanie Nycum Doliveira



President Joe Biden (right) joins Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and fellow Democrats at the U.S. Capitol to discuss the latest progress on his infrastructure agenda. AP

In the depths of the Great Depression, a new word took hold in the American lexicon.

*Infrastructure* would embody an innovative approach to propelling the economy forward by hardening the ties connecting a patchwork nation.

We still rely on physical infrastructure to get people to work and goods to market, but language changes and the *infrastructure* label has flexed to accommodate the 21st century. This so-called “infrastructure week,” when Democrats (and some Republicans) in Congress are trying to push through President Joe Biden’s \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package, demonstrates how that term has evolved.

Since as far back as 1998, leading economists have cited the “care infrastructure” as a key pillar upholding a U.S. economy that depends, in large part, on its 29 million working parents with children under 6. But in 2020, another great upheaval came along. This one laid bare the inextricable ties between work and family duties. People get in their cars and drive down highways to get to work, but before making that trek, they must assure that their children are cared for in a safe and nurturing environment. If a bridge collapses between home and the workplace, people can’t get to work. If quality child care is unaffordable, unavailable, or unreliable, parents can’t take the jobs that employers are desperate to fill.

Consider the plight of working mothers, pre- and postpandemic. From 1975 to 2019, the labor force participation of women with children under age 6 leaped from 34% to 66%. But the pandemic struck at the heart of this traditionally reliable labor pool. One in five working-age adults who weren’t working said it was because the pandemic disrupted their childcare arrangements, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Break down that figure by gender, and you know what comes next. Among the pandemic unemployed, women ages 25 to 44 were nearly three times more likely than men to leave work due to child-care demands, 32% to 12%. The post-pandemic recovery provides the rare opportunity to repair those frayed ties and reshape child care into a force that truly helps power this nation’s economy. Let’s hope the final infrastructure package makes appropriate investments in the care economy and not just in concrete.

It's a win for families, businesses, and the U.S. economy. Investments in quality child care yield payback via unbridled economic activity, today and tomorrow. Businesses employing reliable, well-trained, and skilled people have the capabilities to innovate and grow. Their employees strive for self-sufficiency.

And the children of those employees grow developmentally, on their way to school readiness and academic success. In only one generation, they are the highly skilled people who fuel our global competitiveness and build a stronger, more secure nation by contributing their talents to industry, business, nonprofits, education, and the military.

A strong child-care investment also addresses another burning issue of our age: equity for women and people of color. Child care is a key piece of the fast-growing care infrastructure, and the vast majority of child-care business owners and employees are women. The majority of that segment are people of color.

During the pandemic, declining revenue and falling enrollment forced one in four of these small businesses to close. When they shut their doors, the doors to opportunity closed for their owners and employees.

A viable care infrastructure marries the economy-boosting benefits of quality child care with living wages and benefits for those entrusted with the care of our kids. Researchers note that investing in care infrastructure after the Great Recession of 2008-09 would have yielded twice as many jobs as our investments in traditional physical infrastructure alone.

It's time to recognize the changing nature and meaning of infrastructure. It was an idea born of the Great Depression that helped salvage a teetering economy. Today, the concept remains agile enough to help restore a fragmented economy and, with child care as a foundation, bring people back to work.

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