



Sunday, October 31, 2021 | Today's Paper | 79°

## EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES

# Column: Women need paid leave, child care help

Today • Updated 1:05 am

The 117th Congress must take steps to provide greater support to American working families trying to meet the demands of work and life. Women continue to bear a disproportionate burden in the ongoing health and economic crises. Congress must take bold measures which include:

**>> Establish universal paid leave.** Unlike the majority of developed countries worldwide, the United States does not guarantee paid annual leave, paid time off for illness or family care, or paid parental leave. For many women, unpaid time off work is untenable and it threatens their and their families financial security. During a pandemic, this can mean choosing between livelihood and life. The hope was that the Build Back Better would create a paid family leave program, improving the health of new mothers, decreasing infant mortality, and reducing family's income loss.

**>> Make child care affordable.** Local families do not have access to care when they need it. Families have limited choices for affordable, high-quality child care and public preschool. For 57% of children under age 6, there are no good choices for child care where they live. Only 44% of 4-year-olds are served by public preschool programs. Nearly 4 in 5 private-sector workers have no access to paid family leave. The Build Back Better plan aimed to ensure that no middle-class family pays more than 7% of their income for high-quality child care up to age 5 — and that working families most in need won't pay anything — saving the average family \$14,800 per year.

The Build Back Better plan also would make universal preschool a reality, partnering with states to offer every parent access to high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in the setting of their choice. Fully implementing this investment is projected to benefit 5 million families and save the average American family \$13,000 per year.

The Build Back Better plan is well worth our attention. However, many of our current government representatives in Congress are not willing to risk their political careers to fully back such programs. It may be time for us to take a more assertive approach in communicating with our community leaders and government representatives to ensure that these issues are addressed in a timely manner.

For many working families who know how important these issues are this may be a challenge to maintain focus on what is needed in their state because their government representatives are distracted by other issues that face the country as a whole. Additional stress is being highlighted as communities are divided by the COVID-19 pandemic. Focus on child care and paid leave become lost as communities focus on whether mandated actions are required by community leaders trying to restore local businesses so they can continue to be viable enterprises for their community.

It becomes very important to keep these issues of child care and paid leave in front of our leaders because so many positive outcomes would benefit our communities and provide financial security to many women and their children. The Build Back Better plan is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the lives of millions in Hawaii, and our congressional delegation must be willing to stand up for their constituents and support it.

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**Rosemary Scavuzzo is an AAUW of Hawaii board member.**

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