Issue Paper

Confronting Poverty:

Affordable High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education for Ages Zero Through Five

The Jewish Labor Committee is a founding member of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, a network of 14 national and 125 local independent partner agencies that serves as a catalyst to "heighten community awareness, encourages civic and social involvement, and deliberates key issues of importance to the Jewish community." The JLC helped secure this resolution's adoption at the JCPA's Town Hall Town Hall Plenum in October, 2015, in Washington, DC.

Children, when born, do not choose their parents or their circumstances. No child, once born, should suffer through poverty and adversity. Every child should be viewed as equally precious and worthy.

In the U.S., a child's prospect for the future is more dependent on a parent's income and education than in any other advanced country. Rabbi Michael Rothbaum of Danville, California observes: "As Jews, who've suffered generations of personal and economic degradation, we should know better. As Jews possessed of a timeless text that links us to our economically exploited ancestors in Egypt, we should do better. And as Jews who gifted the world the concept of *tzedek*, of a just and fair economic order, we should be better. It is our job, our sacred task."

Recent neurological studies draw a connection between the effects of poverty on young children's brain development, such that living in poverty subjects them to additional stress and hindered development compared to their counterparts of greater economic advantage. Stress and adversity (emotional, physical, chemical) that occur before age two in the human brain result in long-term irreversible damage. Before the age of six, the brain quadruples in weight and reaches 90 percent of its adult size. The brain is the most flexible early in life and its capacity for change decreases with age.

In the United States, 38 percent of three-year-olds are enrolled in early education programs; whereas in the other 34 industrialized countries, on average 70 percent of children are enrolled.

What Works

The most solid evidence-based programs to support healthy infant development from high-risk poor and low-income homes include:

(1) Access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) beginning by age three, (2) developmental screening and assessment and services for children at risk for developmental delays, (3) access to affordable high-quality child care to promote greater development in low-income and at-risk children, and (4) home visitation programs for pregnant and low-income new mothers for a two-year period. These measures can minimize the effects of poverty on a young child's development and therefore help children break out of the cycle of poverty.

Expanding the availability of early childhood education inevitably means the influx of many children with special needs who are often overlooked, and whose care requires specialized training for existing staff as well the need for additional professional staff to address the special needs of these children. Finding quality staff is very difficult, especially given the low pay scale for early childhood teachers.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs believes:

- Poverty is the highest predictor of poor developmental and educational outcomes in children. For example, children from low-income families are more likely to experience physical and emotional challenges that can lead to developmental delays and disabilities. Therefore, one of the most important actions our nation can take to reduce inequality and create opportunity is to invest in children from birth in order to stop the cycle of poverty.

- Programs should be available and funded by the government that provide for:
  - ◊ High-quality ECE for children by age three for poor and low-income families.
  - ◊ Beginning this assistance by age three can reduce the achievement gap between groups of children. ECE can reduce the effects of risk factors on young children's development and well-being, increasing their chances of success.
  - ◊ As we strive to increase the availability of high quality early childhood education, we should be mindful of the necessity to recruit, train, and retain talented early childhood educators. All of these professionals should receive job training and professional wages.
  - ◊ Early and periodic developmental screening and assessment services—children do best when developmental delays are identified early and they receive the necessary treatment or intervention as soon as possible.

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- ◊ Access to high-quality affordable child care for all children ages zero through five years in order to support the economic stability of families, especially among low income and high-risk populations.
- ◊ Public and private sector policies that would expand access to affordable child services and subsidies (block grants, etc.).
- ◊ Home visitation programs for poor and low-income and at-risk pregnant women, expectant parents, and families with newborns and infants. These programs have been shown to be an effective way to increase the chances of a child's healthy development and educational success.

The community relations field should:

- Urge the federal administration and Congress to require and provide funding to create, support, and implement high-quality and affordable early childhood care and education programs for all children.
- Participate in coalitions to grow the visibility and availability of affordable early childhood care, education, and developmental assessment services; and advocate for robust funding for high-quality programming at the state and community levels.
- Partner with state and local entities that provide effective direct service home visitation education programs for high-risk poor and low-income pregnant women and mothers of newborns and infants.
- Educate the Jewish community on the pervasive nature of poverty as the highest predictor of poor developmental and educational outcomes in children, and on the need to make early childhood care, education, and developmental assessment services available and to adequately fund these services.

Jewish Labor Committee

The Jewish voice in the labor movement, and
the voice of the labor movement in the Jewish community.

Founded in 1934, the Jewish Labor Committee was formed to mobilize unions, Jewish organizations and mutual aid societies across North America to help fight Nazism in Germany. The JLC supported anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist forces throughout Europe, and aided Jewish, trade union and democratic socialist leaders targeted by the Nazis.

Today, the JLC brings together the organized labor movement and the organized Jewish community to promote workers' rights, civil rights and human rights in the workplace and the community-at-large; to combat anti-Semitism and all other forms of prejudice; to strengthen the historic relationship between American and Israeli trade unions, and to promote a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Aware of the key role that the labor movement can play to combat income inequality, the JLC mobilizes support in the Jewish community for union activities across the U.S. in support of workers and all others fighting for dignity, security and representation on the job. We are also active in working to increase the minimum wage on the federal and state levels, securing passage of earned sick days legislation, as well as fair and comprehensive national immigration reform.

Together with our partners and supporters, the JLC is committed to creating a fairer and more just society for all.

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