

State, congressional leaders push for child care overhaul

By **ROB MANNING**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Members of Oregon’s congressional delegation and its Legislature are working to improve support for families with young children.

Megan McMillan has known for a while how important quality child care is, and how difficult it can be to find in the Portland area. The pandemic also taught moms like her how hard it is to go without it.

“After enduring attempts to work from home full time, with two kids under 5, I can tell you with no doubt that child care is the work that makes all other work possible,” she said.

The growing consensus that child care is a necessary part of a functioning economy — and that Oregon’s patchwork of providers isn’t up to the job — has pressed elected leaders from Salem to Washington, D.C., to pursue major changes.

Oregon leaders at the state and national level are pushing for major investments and structural changes to child care, pointing to inequities and gaps in support for young children — problems that were made deeper by the yearlong pandemic.

At a state level, Oregon legislators have advanced a major overhaul of how the state supervises programs for the state’s youngest children, through the creation of a new early learning agency, with the backing of the governor’s office and children’s advocacy groups.

At the same time in Congress, Oregon Democrats Sen. Ron Wyden and Reps. Suzanne Bonamici and Earl Blumenauer are touting plans to make huge investments in ramping up support for child care nationwide. The congressional members said at a press conference Friday, April 30, outside a Portland child care center that they’re working with



Instructor Tammy Hillmick watches as a group of students test aluminum foil boats during a science experiment in the after-school program at Sherwood Heights Elementary School on Nov. 19, 2019.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

the Biden administration to expand the supply of child care while also increasing the earnings of the historically low-paid provider workforce.

Economics, equity and infrastructure

Advocates and elected officials are presenting the push for child care in terms of equity, economic development and as part of an expanding definition of what “infrastructure” means.

“It matters to families and it also matters to our economy,” Bonamici said. “Child care is infrastructure.”

In economic terms, child care took a beating during the pandemic. But advocates in Oregon and elsewhere say the difficulties of the last year highlighted problems that have affected centers and preschools for years.

“This is an issue that is finally getting the attention it deserves,” Blumenauer said at the April 30

press conference.

Child care in Oregon has been in short supply everywhere, with every county categorized as a “child care desert” according to a 2019 analysis by Oregon State University. And that was before the pandemic closed more than half the providers in the state, at least temporarily. The result is child care is difficult to find and even harder to afford.

“The cost of child care for two children under 5 is almost double what I pay for housing,” parent Megan McMillan said, adding that she can afford can be a “full-time job on top of my already full-time job.”

The massive spending proposal follows a more modest, but still significant federal investment of \$40 billion from the American Rescue Plan. Federal recognition of child care also showed up as \$3.5 billion in block grants to child care

providers, as part of the CARES Act, passed under the Trump administration.

At the same time that child care can be in short supply and overly expensive, its employees — teachers, caregivers — tend to be underpaid. Bonamici, who calls herself the only “congressmom” in the delegation, tied the need for living wages in the child care sector to efforts to support communities of color.

Bonomici called for passing President Biden’s American Families Plan, which the president highlighted in his first address to a joint session of Congress last week. Among the spending provisions of Biden’s \$1.8 trillion proposal is a cap on the amount middle and low-income families pay toward child care.

Oregon proposes new child care agency

At the state level, Oregon officials have learned that

funding is only part of the problem. The state’s child care system is a patchwork of private-pay centers, Head Start programs and school-based pre-kindergartens, along with informal networks of nannies, relatives and friends. State management of child care is also a mosaic with different agencies handling regulation and spending.

Oregon House Bill 3073, aims to consolidate early childhood programs under one roof, called the Department of Early Learning and Care, or DELC. Right now, much of the policy and regulation of programs for preschool-aged kids are within the Early Learning Division, established eight years ago within the Oregon Department of Education. But the state’s largest child care subsidy — the Employment-Related Day Care program — is within the Department of Human Services.

Elected officials say a previous round of significant federal spending, highlighted shortcomings in the current structure and the fledgling Early Learning Division.

In spring 2020, child care centers were struggling to stay afloat as the pandemic wreaked havoc on Oregon’s economy and raised questions about how to care for children safely, and in a way that the businesses could manage financially. Millions of dollars came to Oregon to help child care centers stay open, but providers say the money seemed to be dribbling out, slowly, with too many rules and not enough support and guidance.

“We saw during the pandemic that there was the \$70 million that we’d allocated for child care and we had real trouble trying to get that out,” said Rep. Jack Zika, R-Redmond at a public hearing on HB 3073 in front of the House Rules Committee.

“And we found that the need was really within the department.”

HB 3073 is a lengthy bill, but its main aim is to create the DELC, as a stand-alone agency with its own top administrator reporting directly to the governor.

Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie, said the idea of the restructuring is ultimately to affect children and to help families “both recover from the pandemic and thrive.”

“Long-term, (it) will position Oregon and our agency that oversees policy, but currently doesn’t oversee the bulk of funding expenditures, to align these functions so that under one roof we have an agency that both sets policy for the state and spends dollars to effect that policy,” Power told the Rules Committee this week.

The bill passed out of the Rules Committee to Ways and Means, but not without drawing questions from Republican lawmakers.



Andrew Selsky/Associated Press, File

Pro-Trump and anti-mask demonstrators hold a rally outside the Oregon Capitol on Dec. 21, 2020, as legislators meet for an emergency session in Salem. Prosecutors leveled two criminal charges on Friday, April 30, 2021, against a Republican member of the Oregon House of Representatives who let far-right rioters into the Capitol that day. Rep. Mike Nearman was charged with official misconduct in the first degree and criminal trespass in the second degree.

Oregon lawmaker charged for breach

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
Associated Press

SALEM — Prosecutors leveled two criminal charges on Friday, April 30, against a Republican member of the Oregon House of Representatives who let far-right rioters into the Oregon Capitol in December 2020.

Rep. Mike Nearman, R-Independence, was charged with official misconduct in the first degree and criminal trespass in the second degree. Oregon State Police struggled to force the rioters back out of the Capitol, which was closed to the public, on Dec. 21, 2020, as lawmakers met in emergency session to deal with economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

Marion County Deputy District Attorney Matthew Kemmy told Nearman’s attorney, Jason Short, in a letter on April 30 his client must appear in court on May 11 or face arrest.

Short was out of his office on April 30 and not available for comment. Nearman did not immediately respond to phone and email messages seeking comment.

Nearman had been seen on security cameras letting violent protesters into the Capitol. They attacked authorities with bear spray.

Outside the building, some of the protesters assaulted reporters and broke glass doors on the marble-sheathed Capitol. State police investigated the case.

In January, after Nearman’s role became clear from the security footage, House Speaker Tina Kotek called for his resignation and stripped him of his committee assignments.

“Rep. Nearman put every person in the Capitol in serious danger,” Kotek said on Jan. 11.

She referred to the deadly storming of the U.S. Capitol that had occurred just days before, on Jan. 6, by

supporters of then-President Donald Trump: “As we tragically saw last week during the insurrection at the United States Capitol, the consequences (here) could have been much worse had law enforcement not stepped in so quickly,” Kotek said.

According to court records, the misconduct charge alleges Nearman, who is from the town of Independence west of Salem, “did unlawfully and knowingly perform an act ... with intent to obtain a benefit or to harm another.”

The charge is a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum 364 days in prison and a \$6,250 fine.

The trespass charge accused him of unlawfully letting others into the Capitol. It is a Class C misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum of 30 days in jail and a \$1,250 fine.

Oregon Public Broadcasting was first to report Nearman being charged, later announced by the office of Marion County District Attorney Paige Clarkson.



Nearman



Gillian Flaccus/Associated Press, File

Birds take off from a marsh in the Tulelake National Wildlife Refuge in the Klamath Basin along the Oregon-California border on March 2, 2020. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a drought emergency in Klamath County and the U.S. Interior Department has promised ‘an all-hands-on-deck approach’ to mitigating effects of drought in the region.

Almost all of Oregon is poised for drought to start the summer

By **BRADLEY W. PARKS**
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SALEM — More than three-fourths of Oregon is in some stage of drought entering May — and forecasters expect it to stay that way into the summer.

The National Weather Service’s Climate Prediction Center projects drought will persist across Southern, Central and Eastern Oregon and even the Willamette Valley throughout the summer. The center’s latest monthly drought outlook released Friday, April 30, also shows drought is likely to develop in the northeast corner of the state.

“Drought varies from year to year in its coverage and severity,” said Brad Pugh, a meteorologist with the Climate Prediction Center. “But during the past

decade, across the Western U.S., drought has become more common and more intense as well.”

Oregon saw little precipitation through March and April of this year, and once-promising snowpack levels have plummeted during an unseasonably warm, dry start to spring.

All but one watershed in the state had below-normal snowpack by the end of April. Many had about half the snowpack typical for this time of year.

Snowpack in the Malheur Basin in Eastern Oregon ended the month at just 12% of normal, the lowest in the state.

Drought results from prolonged periods of insufficient precipitation, leading to water shortages. That has implications for fish and wildlife, wildfire, irrigation, drinking water and recreation. It will force diffi-

cult decisions about how to ration water to make it through the dry season.

Those problems compound the longer drought persists, which is the issue currently facing the Klamath Basin. Year after year of drought has set the conditions for what could be one of the driest years there in the past century.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a drought emergency in Klamath County and the U.S. Interior Department has promised “an all-hands-on-deck approach” to mitigating effects of drought in the region.

The National Resources Conservation Service is set to release Oregon’s next water supply outlook report the first week of May.

More than 97% of Oregon is abnormally dry or worse, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.