Historically, times of crisis have brought out the best in U.S. policymaking. The Great Depression ushered in the New Deal. The Cuyahoga River burning due to industrial pollution in 1969 gave us the Environmental Protection Agency. What might the coronavirus-fueled public health and economic emergencies lead to? If we follow another example from history, the answer just might be universal child care.

The crisis facing our nation today shines a spotlight on the shortcomings of our health care delivery system, flaws in our democratic process, and racial and environmental injustices. Perhaps more than anything though, it has illuminated the child care crisis in this country.

Even in “good times,” child care comes with a steep — and daunting — price tag. Among working families with children under the age of 5 that pay for child care, the average family spends nearly 10% of its income on child care. This is 40% higher than what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has defined...
as affordable. In more than half the states in the country, one year of infant care costs more than one year at a public four-year university.

So overwhelming is this burden that many young adults are having or planning to have fewer children than they’d like, and citing the cost of child care as the number one reason.

Parents aren’t the only one getting a raw deal. The average hourly wage for an early childhood caregiver is $10.60. Nearly one out of every three preschool teachers and one out of every two home-based child care providers are enrolled in a public assistance program to help support their own families. In other words, the people we look to help halt the cycle of poverty, by educating our youngest children and by supporting parents’ efforts to work, are living in poverty themselves.

It’s become clear that as a nation, we’ve abandoned our caregivers. Health care workers are left to improvise their own personal protective equipment as they care for the sickest among us. Child care providers worry they may not be able to afford reopen their doors once it is safe to do so. Parents are meant to figure out how to foot an unaffordable bill for child care in good times — and how to make do without it in bad.

Our caregivers simply cannot bear this burden alone any longer.

A popular meme that proclaims “Your grandparents were called to war. You’re being called to sit on your couch” certainly downplays the very real consequences of social distancing for many Americans. But in drawing a comparison to World War II, it also reminds us of a time when the federal government did finance child care as a response to an urgent need. In that case, the need for women to enter the war effort.
In 1940 Congress passed the **Lanham Act** in order to fund public works, including child care, in communities with defense industries. All families in which the mother was involved in the war effort, regardless of income, were eligible for child care for up to six days a week. Parents paid the equivalent of about $10/day in today’s dollars to send their children to one of the **3,000+ centers funded by the Lanham Act**, many of which featured the hallmarks of **high-quality** child care programs: they had low student-teacher ratios, served meals and snacks, and taught children arts and educational enrichment activities.

But they didn’t last long, despite the pleas and protestations of many who wanted to keep them open. When the war ended, the Lanham Act was terminated, federal funding for child care dried up, and the majority of programs established during the war shuttered. But not before an estimated 600,000 to 1.5 million children were served. Recent studies indicate that the Lanham Act programs led to **successful long-term outcomes** for many of the participating children. Their mothers benefited too — participating women experienced a substantial increase in maternal employment, even years later.

Just as it did in 1940, our nation today faces an incredible challenge and an incredible need. At least one part of the solution remains the same. The federal government absolutely must take steps to provide and fund universal child care. And it should last well beyond our current crisis. Like the Social Security Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency that emerged from past national calamities, we should emerge from this period with an enduring universal child care program, robust system of parent support, and government entity responsible for its management.

More than 70 years ago, **Eleanor Roosevelt** said of the wartime child care centers, “Many thought they were purely a war emergency measure. A few of us had an inkling that perhaps they were a need which was constantly with us, but one that we had neglected to face in the past.”
In the decades since, our nation willfully returned to a state of denial with regard to its child care needs. But once again, a crisis has made the need for child care support painfully apparent. It’s an almost inexcusable tragedy that we find ourselves back here, but it presents an opportunity to make up for past mistakes, by renewing and sustaining the short-lived effort to provide universal child care. Our caregivers deserve nothing less.

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