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Rescind the Child Support Requirement by Fatima Goldman

By Fatima Goldman

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With his recently announced Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, Gov. Spitzer has made low-income working families a priority. The governor noted when announcing this effort to simplify applications for food stamps that, "by expanding access to the program, fewer families will be forced to risk missing work in order to put food on the table."

We commend the governor for his attention to these issues. However, the truth is that low-income families need a lot more than food to build financially independent lives. A parent who can now put food on the table as a result of the new food stamp initiative still can't go to work in the morning if he or she doesn't have child care.

Low-income families across New York State face many barriers to accessing child care, including a Pataki-era rule that requires single parents to actively pursue a child support court order in order to qualify for subsidized child care. While proponents cite the promotion of family responsibility as a reason for this requirement, limiting child care access undermines other important policy goals: providing single parents with the support they need to work and keeping young children in quality early-care programs.

Parents seeking child care are usually struggling with a multitude of problems, including employment, housing, transportation and food security. The added stress of engaging in the court process to pursue child support is simply too much to take on. There are also many other reasons preventing parents from complying, including an inability to miss days of work for court appearances or fear of a potentially abusive ex-partner.

Furthermore, some parents are committed to voluntary arrangements that allow the non-custodial parent to maintain a relationship with the child while providing some financial support. The positive emotional impact on the child is often more important to the single parent than receiving the full amount of child support owed. Forcing these parents to pursue court-ordered child support can unnecessarily introduce conflict and jeopardize the unique and often fragile arrangements families have created.

What does this mean for families? Without subsidized child care, parents are forced to place their children in the only care they can afford, which may mean a compromised level of safety and a learning experience that falls short of high-quality, developmentally appropriate care. Parents also lose the reliability of a subsidized care arrangement for

their children, thus jeopardizing their job security and the financial security of their families.

There are other ways to encourage non-custodial parents to participate financially and emotionally in their children's lives. The New York State Earned Income Tax Credit for non-custodial parents uses the promise of a tax credit to encourage young fathers to make child support payments. By educating young families on the benefits of child support rather than mandating pursuit, we can help families seek child support in a way that promotes safe, healthy relationships for parents and children.

The expansion of Universal Pre-Kindergarten, the creation of the Children's Cabinet and the Economic Security Cabinet, and innovative policies like the Working Families Food Stamp Initiative all demonstrate Spitzer's strong commitment to providing early learning opportunities for New York's youngest and to bolstering supports for poor working families. Removing the child support requirement is critical to achieving both goals. We urge Governor Spitzer to do what is right for New York families and rescind the child support requirement for families seeking subsidized child care.

Fatima Goldman is Executive Director and CEO of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies.

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