

Keynote Address – Minding the Gap

Thank you, Congresswoman Tsongas, I am delighted to be here today in honor of Kathy Reticker. I did not know Kathy personally but learned of her dedication and passion for children and education through this newly formed legacy foundation. It is so important we all continue her work in advocating for social and economic justice, especially for marginalized populations.

As Congresswoman Tsongas said, I'm Joan Wallace-Benjamin president and ceo of the Home for Little Wanderers for two more months, as I am retiring after 15 years of service on January 2.

The Home's legacy dates back to 1799, when it was known as the Boston Female Asylum with Abigail Adams being a founding donor. We have always wondered at the home what was meant by calling it an asylum. It was a place for unwed women and their children. Where the women were there as a place of safety. After all, the scarlet letter a was worn because Hester was a woman having a child with other than her husband. Or was the word asylum meant to connote that the women there were not of sound mind and needed to be put away. Were I the scribe of the history, I'd choose the former definition over the latter. The Home has always been there to protect and care for those most in-need women and their children. And it has evolved over the centuries to better serve Eastern Massachusetts and its needs.

After the civil war in 1865, orphans were found wandering the streets of Boston. The business and clerical community came together to address the issue of Boston's first homeless, and the organization was then named *the new england* home for little wanderers. The home for little wanderers – or the home – as it is now called, stepped in to care for the commonwealth's most vulnerable children. Throughout the 1900s we were Boston's iconic orphanage. As services to children evolved, it became evident that children need to grow up in families and not institutions. While we still run adoption, foster care, and group home programs, more and more work is community-based. Our goal is to get children into families, biological, extended, or adopted where they can thrive. And the younger we are able to provide children this kind of security, the better their outcomes.

Currently, we serve more than 12,000 children and families each year with the majority being treated in community-based programs such as our child and family counseling center.

Most recently, we've launched an initiative focused on the development of very young children because we've learned, as the old adage and saying by W.E.B. Dubois goes, '**It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men.**'

pause

My presentation today is titled 'Minding The Gap: The Importance Of Early Childhood Development.'

Now what does “minding the gap” mean?

Well, if you’ve travelled abroad to England you have heard the train conductor in their subway stations say ‘mind the gap’ at every stop. He means watch your step because there is a small space where the train doesn’t reach the platform. There is a gap. There have been enough times people have fallen into or dropped their belongings into the gap that they need to remind you at **every stop**.

The gap that I’m here to talk about is the 5-year span where children are not required to participate in any formal education before being enrolled into kindergarten. The science concerning early brain development has exploded the past few years. Much of the research is being done right in our own back yard at the center for the developing child at Harvard university, by Doctor Jack Shonkoff. Jack was a member of the Home’s board a few years ago.

Studies show that 90% of the brain is developed by age five. And birth to three years old is the period of the fastest rate of brain development across the entire human life cycle.

Healthy development during this time hinges on the foundation of a responsive relationship with a caregiver.... Caregivers help children make sense out of their surroundings and manage their reactions and interpretations of their world.

Stress is a normal part of everyone’s life and is part of a child’s development. The body responds to stress with a brief increase in heart rate and release of a mild level of hormones. A supportive caregiver acts as a buffer by helping a child positively manage the stress. A perfect example would be a child receiving an immunization. Sally is in an unfamiliar doctor’s office with a nurse she has never seen before and receives a shot that is a little painful. Afterward, her mom showers her with praise, hugs, and lots of love. In this example, the stress of the immunization is counteracted by the parent’s support, shaping how the child understands the situation... this is a reframing of a stressful encounter into something more positive.

But what about when that stress is constant and there isn’t always an adult to help sally interpret the stress. Let’s think of a child whose primary caregiver comes from a past of neglect themselves and now is under the constant pressure of working multiple jobs and keeping the lights on for their family. In this circumstance, Sally is unsure if she will have dinner tonight and she has not eaten since lunch yesterday. She is too afraid to tell her mom she is hungry because in the past her mother has snapped at her. But Sally cannot stop worrying if she will eat or not. Biologically, Sally’s heart rate and blood pressure is continuously elevated and her body is pumping the stress hormone cortisol. Sally is experiencing what we call toxic stress.

Unfortunately, we see the second scenario with many families we serve at the home. Parents are unable to help their children positively deal with stress, and many times are unable to deal with it themselves because of past trauma.

When this is the case, parents are not able to help young children through difficult times which create the foundation for their social and emotional health.

Prolonged exposure to stress without a positive adult intervention results in toxic stress and the continued activation of the body's response to stress . Studies have shown that continual exposure to toxic stress is detrimental to brain development that can result in developmental delays and behavioral challenges. The wires of the brain are literally gnarled by the overwhelming presence of these hormones. Not only does toxic stress affect mental health, it can cause later health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and substance abuse.

Fortunately, we know that parents can learn the techniques and tools to avoid exposing their children to stress; and to manage that stress appropriately when unavoidable. Parents who are able to be supportive through stressful circumstances can raise resilient children and can help to buffer them from developmental disruption. The younger the child when intervention is provided, the more successful the outcomes are. Even more encouraging is that the damaging effects of toxic stress can be reversed with the correct interventions.

The problem we as a community face is that parents do not know they need this tool kit or that there are services available that can help them, many times at no out-of-pocket costs.

This is where early childhood education becomes so critical. Not only are children cared for and mentally stimulated in day care and preschool... they are observed and screened for everything from gross and fine motor function to emotional delays. Their brains are like sponges in this early stage of development and so our society must insist that our youngest children get the most effective interventions there are to promote healthy brain development. Jack Shonkoff, in his work, has found that the relationship between early intervention and healthy brain development; and the long-term impact of that interaction on a strong, vibrant, capable, and skilled workforce of the future is most compelling to business leaders on both sides the political aisle. They get it.

As it is with so many opportunities in today's society, early education is difficult to access especially for poor and working-class families.

The Home, the people in this room, the providers of services across the commonwealth, must mind the gap; we must make sure that our children do not fall into the proverbial crack between the train and platform. The research tells us that there are real, tangible negative impacts if this support does not happen.

Mothers, many of them young, face a difficult choice after having a child, between how much time they can afford to take off; and who will watch their child when they return to work, and the affordability of staying home. With limited options, many

struggling mothers choose to stay out of the workforce until their children can go into full-day public school. The option not to work places a real burden on our economy. All we need to look at are the revenue streams for the past two fiscal years which are not keeping pace with projections despite very low unemployment and an otherwise booming economy. Having mothers stay home full-time also requires that young mothers know what they need to know to support the development of their infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

So many mothers must get creative about how to secure their childcare. This might mean having children stay with a grandparent, neighbor, or friend. While this is **an option**, it is not always the most ideal for a child.

As noted earlier, a major challenge our community will face if this issue continues to go unaddressed, is the reality of the next generation being unable to meet society's demands for the workforce. Remember, children who have adverse early experiences are more likely to suffer from developmental delays and later health problems.

To help children and their parents succeed we need to bring together political, social, educational, and other community systems to change policy.

All of these systems must come together to at least ensure the following three-pronged approach:

- First: to create greater access to quality affordable early childhood education opportunities...at approximately 17 thousand dollars per year for an infant and more than 12 thousand dollars for a 4 year old. We are one of the least affordable states in the nation!
- Second: to create better training and access for early education providers... these teachers are caring for young minds that are creating more than 1 million new neural connections every second!
- Third: we must compensate early education providers at a livable, competitive wage. We cannot expect early education teachers to get bachelor's degrees and then only pay them minimum wage. We can approach this through not only increasing their pay but advocating for loan forgiveness and other incentives.

There has been some progress within Massachusetts. Last year, Senate President Stan Rosenberg launched his 'kids first' initiative focused on issues relating to early childhood development. In a proposal unveiled earlier this spring, the initiative detailed strategic multi-year investments addressing several key domains including education and workforce development. This report was based on prevailing research that investments made during the early stages of life result in the greatest human capital return on investment.

Similar reform has been happening in the House of Representatives where Speaker Bob DeLeo has been working to form partnerships with business leaders regarding early education and care. Speaker DeLeo's initiative identifies this need as a

business imperative. Seeing that our children will be tomorrow's innovators, it is in everyone's best interest to ensure that the workforce serving our children are the best prepared they can be.

But more needs to be done than studies and incremental funding. We need to put the rubber-to-the-road.

We need to fund more programs like the Boston Basics. This organization formed by a group of African American scholars and philanthropists, is committed to closing the skills gaps that exists between certain socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups.

They have developed five evidence-based and simple parenting and caregiving principles that every parent should know, and can do with their child

- Maximize love, manage stress
- Talk, sing and point
- Count, group, and compare
- Explore through movement and play
- Read and discuss stories

Not only does Boston Basics have handouts and pamphlets with the five principles, it also provides videos on their website (thebasics.org) which further describe the importance of each principle, and model how each is done.

The funding partners of Boston Basics, the Black Philanthropy fund, the achievement gap initiative at Harvard University, the Department of Pediatrics at Boston Medical Center, the Boston Mayor's Education Cabinet, WGBH Public Broadcasting, and Boston Children's Museum, have come together to design the program develop delivery strategies, and goals

We need more common-sense approaches like Boston Basics to spread far and wide. The Home, the Department of Children and Families and many others have begun to incorporate the Basics into their work with families.

[segue to the Home's approach]

For more than a decade the Home has been working on solutions to better serve children throughout Massachusetts.

Just this year, we launched our Center for Early Childhood with the mission of ensuring all children have a strong start in life and a foundation of solid social-emotional skills. Through the Center we provide children, their caregivers, and

educators the tools they need to foster young minds and build resiliency. Within the Center for Early Childhood there are three specific programs that carry out our mission in unique ways.

Our Preschool Outreach Program, also known as P-O-P, grew into its current iteration about a decade ago when preschoolers and kindergarteners in Boston were being expelled at an alarming rate. Sadly, this trend is still alive and well. Who ever heard of expelling a preschool-aged child? It's outrageous.

P-O-P, through a state contract, provides classroom consultations, child-specific consultations, and coaching for teachers and caregivers in how to best deal with the behaviors of children in the classroom and at home.

The Training Institute for Early Childhood is another program in our "Center" which provides training and consults to early education providers regarding social and emotional growth. It offers customized training packages which include – trauma informed practices, pyramid model training, infant and toddler development and more. We provide these trainings during professional development days, nights, and weekends to make it more accessible to educators.

Our newest program in the Center for Early Childhood is the Rice Center for Young Children and Families. This program focuses on families with children under five who are struggling with issues related to trauma, attachment, chronic stress, postpartum depression, and general social and emotional health. Through parent-child psychotherapy, counseling, and coaching we help give parents the tools they need to positively parent their children while building a strong social and emotional foundation.

We are doing great early childhood work at the Home, reaching thousands of children and their families. But we cannot do it alone.

Our children deserve better and the future of our communities depends on it. We need to push our legislators to prioritize and fund the services for children under five, and support the professionals in the early education field. Employers must lead and be proactive in their approaches with members of their workforce who are parents.

No matter one's socioeconomic status, the cost of quality childcare is shocking. This is one of the few issues that has support on both sides of the political aisle.

The legislative initiatives led by Senate President Rosenberg and Speaker DeLeo are important first steps. If we want to serve families at the most critical times, we need our state government to work for and with us. But if we are to really "mind the gap," and in turn close the gap, it will require that our investments be meaningful and forward thinking. It will require that we better connect funding and policy interventions to the science of what works.

A first step for each of us would be to educate our state legislators and hold them accountable for their latest initiatives put in place by the Senate President and Speaker of the House.

We also need businesses to be more accommodating to families. They should take the lead of Treasurer Deb Goldberg who in 2015 implemented a policy granting 12-week paid parental leave to all her employees.

Our communities need to support legislation like senate bill 221, filed by Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz which would task the Department Of Early Education and care to develop and administer a high quality pre-kindergarten expansion.

By no means, is this an exhaustive list of steps we need to take but it is a start. It is up to all of us in this room and at our respective organizations, businesses, churches, fraternal organizations, and neighborhood groups to challenge the status quo and demand better for the children of our communities. Their success depends on it. Thank you.