

DC Dispatch May 1, 2008 - Save the Mothers!

DC Dispatch- May 1, 2008

Endangered Species on Capitol Hill - Save the Mothers!

The US Congress is no longer populated entirely by white males. Happily, the mix of genders, races, ages, and cultural backgrounds continues to grow, albeit slowly. Those who serve our legislators and staff their offices similarly reflect this growing diversity, except for one, critical exception: mothers of young children.

Each member of Congress sets his or her own staff rules for maternity or paternity leave and the ability to access flexible or non-traditional work schedules. Some offices have no set rules at all - especially if there has never been an employed new mother or father on staff. This is not uncommon as many, if not most, congressional staffers are freshly out of college, single and in their 20's. Even if a pregnant or newly adoptive parent has a leave plan which allows for recovery, adjustment, and parent/child bonding, and manages to pay the bills for a couple of months, the return to work can be brutal - late-night sessions on the floor, out of town travel to the district office, and totally unpredictable office hours. Wherever the Member goes, he or she is always trailed by a handful of staffers. Congress is not an easy workplace for those who care for others. Many leave - most especially mothers of young children.

Why is this a problem? Because congressional staff are the gatekeepers for their bosses. They determine who gets in to the office for actual face time with the legislator. They decide what information, requests, and news the member reads or hears. They influence what the Senator or Representative thinks. The fact is, your elected officials are more influenced by highly educated, single 20 somethings than by parents or, for that matter, anybody responsible for the care and welfare of another person.

The job congressional staffers do, and the priorities they perceive, are filtered through the lens of their relative youth and limited life experience. While brains and talent alone may develop trade policy, or tackle the mortgage debacle, or calculate the Defense Department's budget, child care remains neglected - the orphan of public policy.

We see a deplorable state of child care in this country - there isn't enough of it, and what there is is too expensive and not of optimal quality. This impacts women's economic insecurity. Members of Congress are not paying attention because their staff is largely ignorant of how long a shadow child care throws over our lives. Most of them have never needed it. When it does become a factor in their lives, they are no longer working on the Hill, no longer have direct access to policy makers, and no longer influence the agenda of national priorities. They have been swept away on the undertow of parenthood.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research will soon release a report stating that college-educated mothers in the United States are less likely to be employed outside the home than in 20 other industrialized countries. Why do fewer highly skilled mothers keep going to work here? Do you think they were all perfectly content to leave paid employment without a second thought after their children were born? Or do you think child care had something to do with it? Hmmmmm.....

'Til next time --

Your (Wo)Man in Washington

[Click here to read archived DC Dispatches](#)