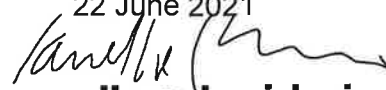


From the desk of
Janelle Bynum
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Soliday: Let's do the math on child care for small and mid-sized business owners

Sharon Soliday June 14 2021, Pamplin Media

Sharon Soliday is chief executive officer of the Hello Foundation, a company providing speech and occupational therapy and school psychology services across Western states.

I have lived in Southeast Portland's Pleasant Valley area for two years. Previously, I was a Gladstone resident for 12 years. I love our communities, and plan to stay in Oregon long-term.

However, as a business owner, I have never been more worried.

The Hello Clinic and the Hello Schools side of my business have been in operation for 16 years. We are licensed therapists who specialize in speech language therapy, occupational therapy, school psychology, assistive technology, autism support and early intervention for children. We serve students and families across six Western states, offering onsite services and a hybrid teletherapy service model to meet the needs of kids and their families long before the pandemic. However, when schools closed in March 2020, the lack of affordable, reliable child care options left our staff scrambling to figure out how we would keep working.

Child care was sometimes an issue for my employees pre-pandemic, but we've always tried to give folks enough freedom to make it work — for example, allowing our staff to craft their own schedules and how much they'd like to work (i.e., we offer full-time benefits at .75 employment). However, our past practices were not enough to suddenly address employees working full-time from home while their own children were not able to go to school or access child care. There was not a sufficient child care infrastructure in Oregon to support businesses before the COVID-19 crisis, and during the pandemic it got even worse. As a business owner who runs a values-based business rooted in community, it pained me to see my staff out of options.

Now that the threat of illness appears to be lifting, my worries have not. The real crisis is unfolding. 50% of child care centers closed their doors at the beginning of the pandemic, and although some are re-opening, many do not have the support or staff they need to serve families. Even before the pandemic, every county in Oregon was a child care desert for at least one age group. This puts business owners like me in a huge bind. As much as I want employees to work, I understand their primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of their own children.

State legislators need to do the math and see that businesses need significant investment in a public child care system. My workforce is reduced because Oregon doesn't have the child care infrastructure it needs. I'm actually hiring employees from other states in part because Oregon does not have the reliable, high-quality, well-paid preschool and child care options families need. When I hire out of state, my employees' income doesn't stay in Oregon, it flows to some other state and boosts their economy.

Re-opening businesses is not as simple as hanging out the open sign. We need to support the workforce wanting to come back to work. Oregon must invest in our child care infrastructure, and we must do it now. We can start by passing House bill 3073B, which will ensure our most vulnerable families have care, and streamline our systems so that we have a public program that actually meets the needs of families and providers when we receive federal funding and future state investments.

If we care about a thriving economy for Oregon, we first need to account for the needs of our employees. Failure to do so will slow our economic recovery.

Sharon Soliday is chief executive officer of the Hello Foundation, a company providing speech and occupational therapy and school psychology services across Western states. She spent seven years as a member of the Gladstone School Board and is on the board of Our Children Oregon.



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