I am a family child care provider, one of many providing care and education for young children on a shoestring

As a family child care provider, I represent on one hand all the myths one has ever heard about the job of caring for children - myths that this U.S. Congress would have the American public continue believing.

Myth #1 - Anyone can do this work because training and skills are irrelevant.

Myth #2 - Our income doesn't support a family, so it's okay that we only earn $8,600 a year working 50 hours/week.

Myth #3 - Our work is “cute” and not serious business.

Myth #4 - We are all “motherly types” doing what we do best.

At the same time these outrageous myths are dished out, we are asked to be the bedrock of welfare reform by caring for a few extra children so the mothers of America’s poorest children can enter the labor force. We are asked to continue being the cornerstone of a healthy U.S. economy by providing care for America’s currently working families. And we are asked to do all this on a shoestring, of course!

Well, I am here as one grossly misunderstood, undervalued, hard-working, skillful, well-educated and angry family child care professional who is saying NO! No to this latest insult to providers and to children. And there are thousands of others like me. We are saying today and we will say everyday until we are heard - that we unite with our professional colleagues in child care centers, nursery schools, Head Start programs, public school and school-age programs to send a simple message to this White House and this Congress. Our message: We need more money to do the job and you need US to do it right! We need more money not just to meet an ever increasing need for child care as a result of welfare reform ... but we need more money to do it better! We have tried for years to cope with a child care system where availability and affordability have determined what the system looks like ... and it hasn't worked. We've created a system that is mediocre at best, a system that exploits its work force by paying meager wages, does not guarantee healthy development for children, and cannot sustain a society in the long run.
It is time for us to focus on quality and outcomes for children as our top criteria for the provision of child care because in the long run it is the best investment in our future. Young children do not define their own potential in life based on their socioeconomic status ... even though that is exactly what our current public policies do! This Congress has made welfare reform about trimming the federal deficit, not about reforming a system and making this country one that dignifies the worth of all people. I do not believe that the American public elected a Congress to make poor children, their mothers and their child care providers sacrificial lambs for a balanced budget.

In my 20 years as a child care provider, this is one thing I know for certain. There is not a parent in the world - whether he or she is a U.S. senator, the President of our country, a factory line worker or a mom on welfare - who is able to give the best to her job, any job, when she worried about her kids and their care situation. It is unconscionable to take away the most basic right to a healthy and safe environment for every child. Certainly there is no better place to ensure those basic rights than as national policy. National standards for health and safety are essential. The child care food program is essential because food expenses often make up 30% of a provider’s budget. It is the one program that has successfully combined meeting the important need of feeding children and enhancing program quality. Don't mess with it!

And about welfare recipients doing family child care in order to receive their benefits ... I personally welcome moms on welfare, as I welcome U.S. congressmen seeking a career change, into my profession. I welcome anyone who shares with me the gift of intimately relating to young children and shares with me a knowledge and understanding of their development. The gift I am referring to is the ability to use your eyes, your touch, and your voice to soothe a needy infant, even when you cannot discern the exact need: to give up some of your big person power to a toddler struggling to discover her own; to see past the anger of an impulsive preschooler to discover the frustration, fear, desperation or repentance that is surely there. Anyone who has that gift and is provided the opportunity and is willing to be educated in the important aspect of children's growth and tutored in skills that promote their learning, while at the same time able to manage a small business, please do join us. Family child care is a wonderfully challenging place to be ... Oh, but be prepared to fight for your self-respect and for your economic survival, because the policy makers of this country demand it of you!