

9th International Congress
Geneva, September 12th-14th

Getting on a Path to Just Distribution: The Caregiver Credit Campaign

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**DRAFT, SEPTEMBER 2002. NOT TO BE QUOTED
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Contents

Preface	v
1. Caregiver credit campaign briefing	1
2. Fundamentals	2
3. Three practical goals	4
3.1 Our first win: making the child tax credit refundable	4
3.2 Convert the child tax credit to a caregiver credit	5
3.3 Increase the value of the credit	5
4. Advantages of the caregiver credit	5
5. Next steps.....	6
6. Observations	7

Preface

After working on guaranteed income for some 27 years and reaching only a limited audience, we at Social Agenda decided to build a much broader coalition for income support for all people who give care directly to, or take primary responsibility for the care of, another human being. We are redefining work and value group by group with remarkable success. The failure to acknowledge the actual economic value of unwaged labour is as much a result of the liberal/left Greek chorus on “jobs” as it is of any right wing incursion into the field of social policy. Changing our approach through an active campaign, we went around right/left paradigms and in just over one year, won 9.2 billion in cash dollars for millions of families with children.

The same strategy described in the briefing on the Caregiver Credit Campaign that follows can and should be extended to other groups over time – to artists for the work they do, etc. While income support for surfers may be a philosophic ideal, it makes for losing politics. So alas, the surfer in our approach falls way to the bottom of the food chain.

The paper was explicitly designed for the circumstances and politics of the United States.

1. Caregiver credit campaign briefing

World wide, billions of people - largely female people - do the work of having and caring for children, ensuring the very survival of the species, without pay. Women are also the vast bulk of those who give care to adults in need. The seeming invisibility of this “gender apartheid” as it is called in South Africa, not only fails hands-on caregivers, but also negatively affects their wages when in the market. After all, if you are worth zero when not in the marketplace, how much is your labour worth?

The Caregiver Credit Campaign speaks to families who confront the tension between care giving and earning a living. It also speaks to all those who want to achieve a more human-centred society in the 21st Century. Social Agenda is the catalyst. The campaign works in part because it is a practical way to engage people around sweeping but winnable concrete issues: redefining work and value, counting traditional “women’s work” in the Gross Domestic Product, and getting social and economic benefits for care giving performed or purchased by families.

The Caregiver Credit Campaign is a populist model of national, state, and local networks. It educates participants, is educated by them, and provides a forum for ideas and emerging leadership. It is multi-partisan and constitutes a majority bloc of caregivers, people who need care, and supporters. The Campaign joins the need for social, political, and economic support for low-income single mothers, middle income married homemakers, grandparents raising their children's children, spouses and partners caring for their significant others dying of cancer or living with AIDS or disabilities, professionals juggling two careers and the needs of aging parents, and even affluent caregivers whose work is often essential but undervalued in the home and community.

The campaign's appeal is virtually boundless. If you are a parent or other primary caregiver, an underpaid care giving professional, an adult who needs care, a woman who does not receive comparable pay for comparable work, or are concerned about how we live as a people, the Caregiver Credit Campaign is for you.

2. Fundamentals

Care giving is as essential to human life as land, water or air. It is as important as paying jobs at McDonalds, Ebay or Boeing. Without caregivers, no one would be alive today. No one.

Caring work within families is an essential component of economic, social, and political well-being. It is largely unacknowledged, and as work, usually unpaid. Yet, from the moment caregivers "leave home" for the marketplace, the former nurturing work is extracted from the nation's economic resources by way of day care centres, fast food, nursing homes, etc. This exchange may be in the best interests of many families and society, but certainly is not always.

In the United States and world wide, well over 90 per cent of all caregivers are women. Traditional "women's work" is represented as altruistic and falling outside the marketplace, as if rendered valueless. Every nation is tethered to this "free" or unpaid labour. The market is believed to operate apart from it but instead competes for human resources formerly devoted to it. Despite the fact that care giving is key to every nation's economy, political and corporate leaders have been reluctant to acknowledge the true economic value of caregivers or to recognize the role of interdependence in a just society.

Interdependence is a central and informing value as well as a key structural element of society. It virtually defines families and is what transforms groups of families from isolated units into communities. Interdependence underlies the will to subsidize the smooth functioning of the economy by funding social and

physical infrastructure e.g., public schools, sanitary sewer systems, or social security payments to limit poverty among elders. At present, neither the burdens nor benefits of interdependence are broadly or equitably distributed.

Families of blood or choice are the building blocks of community. Optimal nurturing tends to occur within families and ideally produces happy, healthy, active, engaged children (society's "replacement parts") and preserves the dignity of adults in need of ongoing care. People, who choose to work at care giving full- or part- time, still need the means to survive. Those who give care need productive choice to decide rationally, when or whether to enter or leave market (paying) jobs and whether to give care directly or purchase care services outside the home. The ability to make sane care giving decisions in the best interests of the family needs to cover rich and poor people alike.

Most caregivers agree. Social Agenda's recent survey shows 95 per cent respondents across race gender and class "agree" or "agree strongly" that Caregivers of children and adults ought to receive income support. Eighty percent of responding parents between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine chose family time as their top priority in a Radcliff Public Policy Centre poll. A Democratic Leadership Council poll of likely voters showed 85 per cent of all parents would prefer if one parent did not have to work outside the home full time. As far back as the mid 1980s, a New York Times poll showed the majority of lower middle income mothers would prefer to raise their children full time, if money were not an issue. In 2000, 72 per cent of respondents in A Parent magazine poll said they would rather raise their children than "work" [outside the home].

The time/poverty gap of single parent families is most stark. Single fathers are time-stretched to the limit, though few will be income-poor. Equally time-deprived, single mothers lack income equity when in the marketplace. Most often their wages alone are insufficient to meet any semblance of a decent living

standard. As often as not, single mother families are income and time poor with or without paying jobs.

Families with children and/or disabled, ailing, or aged adults who need regular attention of a (preferably loving) human have two options. One is a paid alternative to a “mother,” the other is mother (or father, sister, partner, etc.). Quality alternatives are expensive and often unavailable even to those who can afford the price. The home caregiver option means diminished or no paid work and an effective income opportunity-cost of 100 per cent, hour-for-hour of that person’s time. Either way families pay. Society can ill afford to ignore their need for recompense.

Estimates of U.S. savings resulting from home care giving to frail elderly parents or disabled or dying family members were pegged at \$200,000,000,000 in 1999. Similarly, replacing a good “mother” with all the “intangibles” is all but impossible and very expensive. Current annual estimates range from \$100,000 to over \$500,000 to substitute enough quality paid help for one mother. If care giving were not done within families of blood or choice, the cost to society of substitute care would be huge. A fully refundable Caregiver Credit would set us on a political trajectory toward “just distribution,” beyond a corporatist/unionist version of work and life on the planet.

3. Three practical goals

3.1 Our first win: making the child tax credit refundable

The child tax credit minimally supports caring for most children directly in the home or through purchased alternative care. Until 1992 it was not refundable so low-income families were unable to take advantage of it in part because they didn’t make enough money to owe taxes. In the very first year of this campaign the many thousands who participated in the effort with us succeeded in making it

refundable. For those in the refundable category, checks are mailed from the IRS. Universal refundability is not yet in place to cover all children (including the very poorest) but we're getting there. It has been increased 20 per cent from \$500 to \$600 this year, and will rise to \$1,000 over the next few years. As a result of our campaign, millions of low-income families are now eligible for a substantial share of an estimated 9.2 billion new dollars, including an over-all increase in the per-child value of the credit to all qualifying families (from \$10,000 to \$150,000 annual income for two-parents). The credits are low and still cover only children, but they are clearly susceptible to popular pressure.

3.2 Convert the child tax credit to a caregiver credit

Phase two of the campaign in which we are now engaged is to seek converting the credit to cover care of adults in need as well as children and to shift focus the credit on the giver of care, not the qualifying individuals. The psychological and sociological affects of rewarding the caregiver cannot be underestimated.

3.3 Increase the value of the credit

Increase the value of the credit to more reasonably represent the actual cost of giving care. Care giving is not free to the giver. Those who sacrifice part or all of their market income to do caring work that individuals and society needs ought not suffer severe economic deprivation.

4. Advantages of the caregiver credit

§ It is “mommy neutral”, applying equally to at-home and employed mothers.

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- § Caregivers tending to the needs of other adults are a large and growing part of the population that will increase as baby boomers' aging parents become needy, followed in mere decades by their own aging concerns. This group has and will continue to have substantial political clout.
 - § If the benefit were offered at a reasonable level, the potential for community-based reforms to the service delivery system for families with children and adults in need would expand exponentially.
 - § Its range of appeal is intergenerational, gender and sexual preference neutral, class, ethnicity, ability, and race balanced, and multi-partisan.
 - § Caregiver Credits can be implemented at federal, state, and/or local levels, commensurate with varying fiscal needs and levels of consensus.

5. Next steps

- § Grow the critical mass of people for change.
- § Promote individual and family activism. This year we expect to launch a two-year pilot project to maximize application for, and receipt of, the child tax credit.
- § Capture the vast bulk of the mainstream women's movement from all political parties to engage a dialogue on the political benefits of inclusiveness of mothers and other caregivers and on the social and economic benefit of counting unpaid care giving labour in the GDP.
- § Generate state-by-state press to influence opinion-leaders and decision-makers, and provide a feedback loop for polishing our tactics to build on initial public policy achievements.

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- § Continue recruiting intellectuals, celebrities, prominent folks to form host committees and participate in ways they best can. For instance, this year a 60s teen rock star, Lesley Gore, performed at the first of several fund-raising events.
 - § Influence political polls. Already, the issue scores high - above even crime and education.
 - § Promote the economic development basis of the campaign. A universal caregiver credit is ground-up. Money is spent in communities, circulates fast, and creates paying jobs on the way.
 - § Put circuit riders in place to assist and encourage formation of state groups.
 - § Hold regional meetings, leading to a national convention.

The New Economy has profound implications for Americans - less job security, more time between paying jobs, more hours of formal education, more involvement in politics, more financial investment skills, more expertise in health insurance coverage and administration. Some argue, implausibly, there should also be more time for child rearing. Even functioning at superhuman capacity, the day remains 24 hours. From where can the time come? Faster-smarter-better works to produce things, but it still takes 18 or so years to raise kids successfully. Robots may soon be able to sweep our floors, but when will they be able to teach our kids ethics or comfort the dying?

6. Observations

Access to the means (currently money income) through which necessities are normally acquired is indispensable to the proper functioning of a democracy. The relative monetary muscle of seniors (whose poverty rates have dropped precipitously since the 1930s, due to Social Security), their extraordinary stake in

public policy, and the availability of leisure time help explain why such a high percentage vote and are active in political associations.

The universality of Social Security confers the often asserted but rarely achieved, “inalienable” right of equality on recipients, homogenizing not so much income as regard. By public policy, beneficiaries are equal simply because they are human. One need only look at the price of movie tickets to see how this good will toward perfect strangers has extended to private behaviour. We know nothing of their integrity, motivations, sex lives or work habits. We do not know whether they were good younger people by any definition, but we deliver them collectively from the bell jar of public scrutiny. Having conferred and sustained a measure of social and economic justice by law, policy, and culture upon them (historically once forgotten, too) the nation has been justly rewarded. Liberated from having to appraise the relative merit of each supplicant, we leave reckoning to a higher power.

Can the nation support caregivers and those they care for fairly, too? Is there another way to build a secure and civil society based on common human decency? If you think the nation can and don't have a better idea for how to get on an appropriate political trajectory, join the Caregiver Credit Campaign. If not, ask some questions. Let us see if we can't convince you. If you have a better idea, try and convince us. We are all ears.