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Conversations with the Experts

The Balancing Act: Legislation to Help America's Working Families



Lynn Woolsey

Bio: Lynn Woolsey is in her seventh term as the representative from California's 6th District, just north of San Francisco (including all of Marin and most of Sonoma Counties). As the senior Democrat on the House Subcommittee on Education Reform, Rep. Woolsey is a key point person on all issues affecting pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade education. She is currently working on reforming the No Child Left Behind Act to fully fund the law and make it more flexible and less punitive toward schools and school districts.

Rep. Woolsey has used her seat on the Committee on Education and the Workforce to give children and families the tools they need to realize the American Dream. She has been an advocate of special education and vocational education, has fought against job discrimination in Head Start and other federal programs, and authored a School Breakfast Pilot Program that was signed into law by

President Clinton. Rep. Woolsey's top domestic priority has been a legislative package called "The Balancing Act," so called because it helps parents manage the balance between work and family. The Balancing Act provisions include paid family leave, public pre-school for every family that wants it, major investments in child care, universal school breakfast; benefits for part-time workers and telecommuting incentives.

Rep. Woolsey's dedication to family issues and her belief in a strong social safety net are rooted in her personal history. She is the first former welfare mother to serve in Congress. As a young single mother, she struggled to raise three children by herself. Despite the fact that she was employed, she needed public assistance just to make ends meet. That experience of needing a helping hand from her government has never left her. Eventually, Rep. Woolsey worked her way off welfare and became a Human Resources Manager for a large high-tech manufacturer in Marin County. In 1980, she opened her own human resources consulting and employment agency, Woolsey Personnel Service, while finishing her bachelor's degree at the University of San Francisco. She began her public service career in 1984 when she won a seat on the Petaluma City Council, where she served until she was sworn in to the United States House of Representatives in January 1993.

Since then, 6th district voters have returned Rep. Woolsey to office six times. In 2004, she received 72.7 percent of the vote and was the actual top vote-getter (more than 226,000 votes) of all 53 California members of the House.

Rep. Woolsey was born on November 3, 1937 in Seattle, Washington. Now living in Petaluma, California, she is the mother of four grown children and a grandmother of five.

An Interview with Lynn Woolsey

By Sandee Shulkin and Michelle Wong

Shulkin: How did you become such an advocate for working families?

Woolsey: I am a working parent, although thirty-five years ago I never intended to become one. I have a long career as a working mother, and it was tough at first. Now I see my grown children, and many other women and men, working outside the family. I also see fathers engaged at home, doing just as much of the childcare and housekeeping. I see how hard it can be to juggle work and family.

I continue to see too many parents being pulled between their careers and their children, and the children are negatively affected as a consequence. The parents want to put food on the table and to provide for their children in terms of education, but then the children suffer from parental absence. That is why legislation such

as the Balancing Act is so important.

Shulkin: Can you talk a little more about the Balancing Act legislation and how it affects working families?

Woolsey: Balancing Act involves a collaboration of multiple members of Congress. I found many pieces of legislation that have different authors – this is a single piece of legislation which represents the ideas of various stakeholders. The goal of the Balancing Act is to help families to better balance work and family, instead of having to choose one at the expense of the other. There are multiple components of this legislation:

First, the Balancing Act provides paid family leave for three months after the birth or adoption of a child. This leave would be for both mothers and fathers. The first three months is an important bonding time for both the child and parents. There is also a need for time off to care for a spouse, partner, aging parents, children with disabilities, or children who are sick. Such legislation would promote a more family-friendly work environment.

The second part focuses on child care, and proposes increased funding for infant care, care for children with disabilities and child care for families that work weekends and nights. A lot of families on welfare need help with child care. Sometimes, employees take jobs which mandate that they work night and weekend shifts. Parents need these child care options. In addition, this component of the Balancing Act calls for an increase in the federal child care tax credit and other ways that the Federal Government can support our working families.

The third component of this legislation is universal and voluntary access to preschool for all families. We often see legislation that offers afterschool and child care benefits to poor families, but what happens to the families with two working parents who aren't poor? Their children need quality care, supervision, and structured programs too. In addition, the Balancing Act suggests school breakfast programs for all children, not just those who are poor. I introduced this legislation under Clinton.

Lastly, afterschool care is so important. A lot of kids get in trouble during the time between the end of school and dinner time because they are unsupervised. Speaking from personal experience and my own research, parents whose children are unsupervised after school experience stress and distraction at the workplace. There is no more important job than parenting, but parents are also committed to their paid jobs. Support is needed in the form of afterschool programs for parents who commute long distances and work long hours.

Shulkin: What do you think the potential is for state-level legislation to impact the lives of working families?

Woolsey: State-by-state legislation is a good idea, and can supplement what the Federal level has offered, but it is not good enough. California, for example, has some great paid family leave legislation, but the federal legislation would encourage the state to extend paid leave to three months. California can be an example to other states, but I would also encourage us to look at other industrialized countries that offer paid leave. The United States is the only industrialized country (and is the wealthiest country) that does not offer paid leave. It's important that we have support for these programs at the state level. The Balancing Act can be a floor, a solid foundation, from which states can build up their own programs to help working families. Some states have already begun to implement family friendly legislation.

Shulkin: You have used the term “family-centric legislation” to describe the direction in which you are advocating. In moving forward, what could be the focus of future family-centric legislation?

Woolsey: If I had my way, we would screen every single piece of proposed legislation to see how it affects and impacts children. They are the future workers, the future family members. Take the war with Iraq, for example. If we screened those policies to see the impact on children, we would look at legislation differently. We've spent over \$300 billion on the war in Iraq. With that money we could have paid for four years of state college for 61.2 million students, or given health insurance to every child in America. Money spent on this war affects every aspect of policy making and that affects our children.

Shulkin: How can our users, specifically from the workplace and academic arenas, benefit from an awareness of this legislation?

Woolsey: In terms of the workplace, I was a human resources professional, and from first-hand experience, I know that when parents are comfortable with what's going on with their children, they are much better workers. When I first went to work, I had three young children (ages 5, 3, and 1), and there was not a lot of good child care available. In my first twelve months working we had thirteen different child care arrangements, and it was a hell year. What I ended up doing was moving my mother close to us, and having her pick up my children from school and care for them until my workday was completed. After a couple of months of that arrangement, I was promoted. For the first time, I was able to dedicate 100% of myself to the job. I was a better worker. I

would not have been able to make that career advancement without quality child care supports.

Employers need to be able to support flex time and telecommuting requests. Working from home or having a flexible schedule can make a world of difference for work-family balance. Businesses have to be open to more flexible ways of working.

Shulkin: Oftentimes there is a divide between the interests of academics and legislators. How can researchers, another one of our user groups, work together with policy makers?

Woolsey: For academics and researchers, I would love to see them researching these theories to confirm that what I am saying is true. I would like to set up a pilot program like the school breakfast program in California. We absolutely proved that in schools where they served a good breakfast, kids did better in testing, needed less discipline and had higher levels of attendance. I would be glad to work with academics on this research.

Legislation affects academics just as much as anyone else, because academics themselves are working people. They can use their knowledge to affect legislation by contacting their own members of Congress or other members of Congress, such as myself, that support this type of family-friendly legislation. I would welcome a conversation with a researcher who has data on these work-family topics.

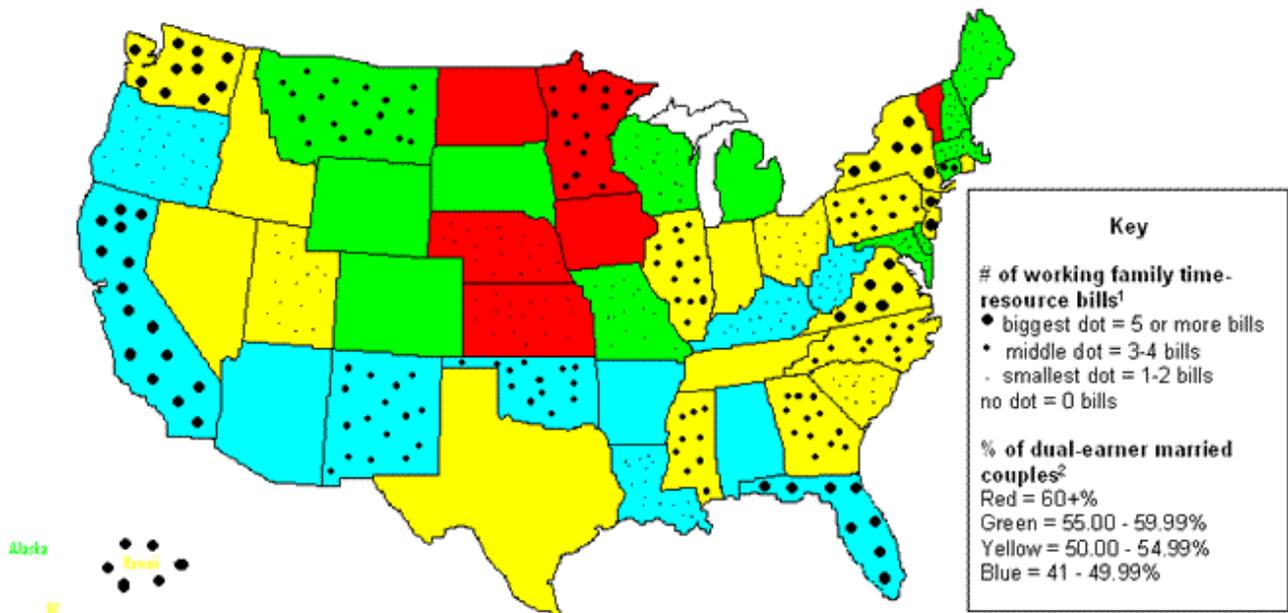
Shulkin: Is there anything else you would like to add to the conversation on work-family legislation?

Woolsey: We are a nation that appears to want children to be born and to have a vigorous workforce, but we refuse to put our money where our mouth is. Children are 25% of the population but 100% of the future, so we must invest in them, from birth on, but especially between birth and graduation. We must be a positive role model for our kids because they will be parents someday. We want them to learn that children are worth every investment that we make in supporting them.

Don't think that I am blaming the parents. They are doing everything possible; it's the expectations that society has of them. The people who are getting left out are children of all ages, not just little ones. In particular, it's teenagers who need special attention after school because of the stress they are dealing with in applying to college and the pressures to play sports and be an achiever. Our children want to be achievers, and they need parental support.

For more on the Balancing Act, click here: <http://woolsey.house.gov/balancingact.asp>.

Percentage of Dual-Earner Families in Each State (2004) with the Number of Working Family Time-Resource Bills* Introduced (2005-2006)



***Working Family Time-Resource Bills:** Proposed legislation that addresses the time resources and time mismatches experienced by working families, specifically including flexible scheduling, part-time work, remote work or telework, family leave, and phased retirement.

Source(s): ¹Lexis Nexis State Capitol and Westlaw databases. ²United States Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/>), 2004.

Additional Resources Related to Work-Family Legislation and Policy

Integrating Work and Family Life: A Holistic Approach: This 2001 report from the Alfred P. Sloan Work-Family Policy Network discusses the need for a systemic, societal response to the needs of working families that would involve governments, firms, unions, and community groups. The report includes "mini case studies," including IBM's Global Dependent Care Fund, SAS Institute's Work-Family Initiatives, the New York State Health Workers' Unions, the UAW-Ford Partnership, and Eli Lilly's public/private partnership.

- To access the call to action, endorsements, executive summary and report, click here: <http://lsir.la.psu.edu/workfam/integrate.htm>.

 **Global Perspectives – The Work, Family, and Equity Index:** This index “is the first venture to systematically define and measure successful public policies for working families globally. The Work, Family, and Equity Index has two functions. First, the index identifies essential goals for work-family policy. Second, the index enables us to measure progress in implementing public policies for working families relative to global standards.”

- To access the index, click here: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/globalworkingfamilies/images/report.pdf>.

Work-Family Policy: Its Critical Impact on American Women and Families: Jody Heymann’s presentation on work policy in relation to women and the American household. The presentation emphasizes that other countries have successfully provided employees with benefits such as paid maternity leave, implying that it’s possible for the United States to install similar policies.

- To access the PowerPoint presentation in PDF format, click here: http://www.kaisernetwork.org/health_cast/uploaded_files/Heymann_presentation1.pdf.

Workplace Flexibility 2010: “Workplace Flexibility 2010 is a campaign to support the development of a comprehensive national policy on workplace flexibility at the federal, state and local levels. The vision of Workplace Flexibility 2010 is an American workplace where viable flexibility options, benefiting employers and employees alike, are the standard.”

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/workplaceflexibility2010/index.cfm>.

State Policies That Affect Working Families: Katherine Ross Phillip of the Urban Institute summarizes key policies in the areas of job-protected family care policies, child care subsidies, early childhood education and elementary school schedules, and tax credits and makes recommendations for future state policy-making.

- To read a summary of the report, click here: <http://www.urban.org/publications/311048.html>.
- To download the entire report, click here: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311048_DP04-05.pdf.

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