

Crisis Conversations: Essential stories—and essential lessons—from a year in crisis

December 11, 2020

BRIGID SCHULTE, HOST: Well, hello and welcome everyone to the year-end wrap-up of the Crisis Conversations Live from the Better Life Lab. I'm Brigid Schulte, the director of the Better Life Lab. Today, we reflect. When we started this weekly live interactive conversations, it was at the beginning of the pandemic. No one had any idea what was going to happen, how long it was going to last. I anticipated we would do six. I thought we would do six episodes. Today, this is our 26th.

The crisis continues, the pandemic drags on. What we wanted to do when we started these conversations was to create space. We all felt so isolated and the changes were happening so rapidly and so much was being disrupted, and work and care, that we wanted to create space to come together and share stories, to understand what was really happening to real lives. What we were learning and what we needed to do to not only survive this pandemic but really to help all working families thrive.

How could we have real work-family, justice, and gender equity in the pandemic and beyond? With that, what we've done is we've listened to all of these episodes and we've come together based on the stories that we heard, we put together what we're calling a bold agenda for work-family, justice, and gender equity in the pandemic and beyond.

We're releasing that today and we're really excited to be able to share that. What we wanted to do today was to have a minute to talk about, well, what have we learned over the past year? This is a Better Life Lab Roundup. Let me turn it over and have every team member introduce themselves. Vicky, let's start with you.

VICKI SHABO, PANELIST: Sure. Hi. I'm Vicki Shabo, Senior Fellow for Paid Leave Policy and Strategy at the Better Life Lab.

ROSELYN MILLER, PANELIST: Hi. I'm Roselyn Miller. I'm the Policy Analyst for the Better Life Lab.

JAHDZIAH ST. JULIEN, PANELIST: Hi. My name is Jahdziah St. Julien and I'm a Research Associate at the Better Life Lab.

EMILY HALLGREN, PANELIST: Hi. My name is Emily Hallgren. I'm a PhD intern working on our Better Life Lab experiment project.

STAVROULA PABST, PANELIST: Hello. My name is Stavroula Pabst and I am a PhD intern working on our communications.

BRIGID: What I've asked everyone to do is to bring a clip, an actual clip, or a story that really stuck with them, that can really help us understand where we are. I want to begin by grounding us in the moment because here we are nine months into the pandemic. I'm sitting here, I've had COVID and recovered. I've given plasma. I don't think I've worn shoes in nine months.

At the same time, jobless benefits are at their highest levels in a long time. Cases are rising again, hospitalizations are rising. There's so many programs that were designed to help work and family, help people combine it that are expiring. If Congress does not act in the next week, paid leave, paid sick days, unemployment protection, student loan protections, all are expiring. Unemployment protections have already expired in July. Childcare, which we've talked a lot about, which is an enormous crisis before COVID and certainly in COVID, it got \$3 billion in March.

Advocates and economists and lawmakers have said it needs \$50 billion just to survive and it's never happened. We've got one week. If Congress does not act, things could go from bad to worse. To really ground us in what people are really experiencing, let's start with the clip from an episode where we featured a number of parents and we had Justin Ruben, who's with Parents Together, a group of parents from all walks of life. Let's hear what Justin had to say.

JUSTIN RUBEN (CLIP): This is the hardest thing that's happened to families in 80 or 90 years. Absolutely, parents feel abandoned and desperately in trouble right now. Either because in some cases they don't have enough to eat or they can't make rent, or they've had to cut back on work or quit work entirely to do childcare, or because they're doing remote learning and it's not going well, or the kids aren't getting the services they need,

or they're just doing remote learning and it's going okay, but it's still breaking them. This incredible squeeze, total desperation, and frustration.

BRIGID: Vicki, let's start with you. You've been really active with what's happening. We've got one week and this emergency paid family leave and paid sick days bills, these programs are expiring. Talk a little bit about what's happening and what you're hearing and really what's at stake.

VICKI: What's happening in Congress right now is a mess. There's an effort earlier this week to reach a bi-partisan agreement starting last week into this week to reach a bipartisan agreement. Even within that framework of the agreement, these key essential, very inexpensive provisions that guaranteed up to 10 paid sick days for workers that had to quarantine or self isolate or get a COVID diagnosis or care for a family member who did. A total of 12 weeks to care for a child who was out of school or doing virtual school or childcare was closed.

These provisions were in the act that were passed in March, but they expire at the end of this year. If you think back to that time in March, who would have known that we would still be in essentially the same place that we are, that cases would be rising, that parents would have dropped out of the workforce in record numbers to be able to care for their children? We just didn't know.

Those provisions, they were in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. They were imperfect. It only limited paid sick time and almost no paid family and medical leave for serious health issues. They carved out about half of the workforce, but they were something. For people who they have helped and businesses who received reimbursement, they were a lifeline. Yet, those provisions run out at the end of the year.

What that means if Congress doesn't act, instead about 87 million workers that received protections or should have received protections through the emergency paid sick and family leave provisions will not have that guaranteed leave anymore. That's about 60 million private-sector workers whose employers were also getting help by getting reimbursed for that time, 31 million parents have an estimated 50 million children.

BRIGID: Wow.

VICKI: The access to that emergency paid leave according to Sarah Jane Glynn at the Center for American Progress. What we're doing is cutting off a policy that has been proven by academic researchers to prevent about 15,000 COVID cases per day, at a time

when cases are rising. We're cutting off benefits to parents who are still at home, who are running out of time if they've used it, and who need more while their kids are still virtually schooling or virtually schooling again as schools that had kids go in-person are starting to shut back down.

What this does is push people into the unemployment system. Again, those provisions too are expiring. Although, hopefully, they will be part of a package. They're not guaranteed. It pushes people into other programs that are funded through either federal state or local revenues which are starting to dry up. It pushes people into precarity with respect to food and homelessness and those provisions too. What we're doing is through an action really defining down what it is that we expect people to be able to make do with.

For women and for communities of color, in particular, this is devastating. These are the communities that have been hardest hit by COVID. These are the communities that are most in need of paid leave but may not have it through an employer. These are the folks who are most likely to be hurt as this pandemic continues and until we have a vaccine that's available to everybody.

BRIGID: We're talking about how this has been a lifeline for so many families and it wasn't perfect. One of the clips that we brought is of Marissa Korbel. She is a lawyer in Portland, Oregon. She felt like she couldn't do it all. What she described was that this paid leave was a lifeboat. Let's hear what she had to say.

MARISSA KORBEL (CLIP): What I had to realize for myself is that me not taking this leave isn't going to fix that for anybody else. It's not like by taking this leave, that means that some working single mother doesn't get to take it, it's really they're independent problems. It's frustrating and terrible that we have a system that would create a lifeboat that really only helps people who are somewhat privileged.

BRIGID: Which the point she was making, just the point that you had made that there were these carve-outs for so many workers. If you worked for a large company that had over 500 employees, you were not covered by this. If you worked for a small company, there were all sorts of exemptions you could claim.

What so much of the research showed is that the people who were carved out were the very essential workers who worked at large big-box retailers. People who were out there all the time and most exposed to the virus, they were the ones that did not have

access to this paid leave. We're talking about, can we even protect this imperfect program? What are the prospects for fixing this, for really making paid leave really work?

VICKI: Well, before the pandemic, we were seeing tremendous momentum in congress on the issue of universal paid family and medical leave program, similar to what exists and now, soon to be 10 states. That's one of the good things that happened in 2020, was two new states got their programs up and running. Another new state, Colorado passed its program in the 2020 election through the ballot for the first time ever. Congress was looking at this.

I think the other interesting thing is that organized business groups are starting to think that it might be better to have a national standard as well. There's a lot of daylight between what a strong universal, comprehensive, affordable, and accessible paid leave program would look like that guarantees a baseline to everybody, and what some of the other alternative proposals look like. The fact that there is a cross-business and consumer and advocacy conversations, the fact that there is some interest on the Republican side--

Although I would say that this series of negotiations that happened has really, to me, shone a light on the difference between lip service to an issue and actually being willing to provide support to families by providing paid leave. We haven't seen Republicans step out to champion the extension of this Families First emergency paid leave, notwithstanding the lip service that some paid that they voted for and that some paid when the law first passed.

We need a national paid family medical leave program that guarantees leave to all working people, no matter where they live or work or the job that they have, or whether they're a traditional employee or an independent contractor. We need access to paid sick days in normal times for things like the flu or to go see the doctor or to get preventive care, as well as for pandemic paid sick days or emergency health paid sick days that get baked into any permanent law so that we're not in this position again. States that had paid leave in place, actually, were able to handle people's needs much better at the beginning of this pandemic than every other place.

BRIGID: There's fascinating research that shows that people who were in places that did have the universal paid sick days, the number of cases was actually much lower so that it was actually good for everyone. It was a good public health benefit. I want to just

really briefly play a clip of Marilyn Washington. She's a home health aide, she's 71. When I had this interview with her, her comments have just stayed with me all through the pandemic, just heartbreaking. Marylyn did not have any access to paid leave. She was exempted from the paid sick days proposal. This is what she faced every day.

MARILYN WASHINGTON (CLIP): Make you feel like you're not worth it. We have been going to take care of people that are sick to make sure that they'll be able to do things they can't do for themselves, that we have to go out there and do it but oh, well, if we get sick. It's like, "Oh, well." That that's your job as a health care worker, you have to go out and take care of the people even if it means you're risking your own health and potentially your own life.

BRIGID: That's one of those comments that just has hung with me. Roselyn, let's turn to you. Introduce the clip that you want to play, and then we'll listen to it and talk some more.

ROSELYN: It's interesting to see how social policy benefits have actually been able to support people. Looking at the ones that are going to expire at the end of the year, one of the two benefits expiring are pandemic unemployment benefits and pandemic emergency unemployment compensation. Latrice Wilson was a furloughed payroll supervisor and advocate for unemployed action, who spoke on our Crisis Conversations podcast and her story just really resonated with me. We can play that clip.

LATRICE WILSON (CLIP): The \$600 is a cinch, and to hear from congress stating that it will keep people from going back to work. I don't have a choice but to wait because I am furloughed unless I choose to go find another job. There's my health care benefits and that I need medication for my autoimmune disorder, so I have a choice, but I don't have a choice.

ROSELYN: Right now, about 20 million Americans are receiving some form of unemployment benefits. About half of those people will lose benefits at the end of the year when these programs expired, and we know that that's going to have huge equity implications as well with black unemployment rate changing at almost twice percentage points for every one percentage point change in national unemployment rate.

BRIGID: The thing that struck me so much about Latrice is she was really stuck. She had been furloughed, which means she could not go and look for another job. She had an autoimmune disorder, so she needed medication. She had to end up paying her portion of her healthcare that her employer would normally pay if she were employed. She's picking that up and then she had the \$ 600-week supplement that helped her do that. She was already worried.

That expired in July, and she was already starting to dip into her savings. Here's somebody like Latrice who was in a real dire situation in August, and now the supplement is gone, and like you said, these extended benefits are gone, that also covered gig workers. Talk a little bit about what are we learning from this, that not only do we need this short-term response but what do we need in the long term?

ROSELYN: We know that the average American family can't afford \$400 in emergency expenses. The \$600 add to unemployment is really important. In the short term, we definitely need to extend and expand emergency unemployment benefits and longer-term, we need to work on looking at the unemployment system as a whole and the infrastructure which we use to support families.

We heard from Violet Moya, who was a retail worker in the beauty industry. She was part of the mass firing. She called 800 times to try and get someone on the phone to get these unemployment benefits, which she needed immediately. A lot of that is the tech infrastructure. Long term, we really need to invest in how we deliver these benefits, how we implement them to make sure that we have equitable access to all communities.

BRIGID: I'm really struck. Vicki, one of the things that you were talking about is some of what the sticking points are. The Republicans want to take out aid to state and local governments. Yet, just Roselyn to your point, we heard from so many people who came on and shared their stories that the technology is old and doesn't work all that well, and so many of these state unemployment systems were just overloaded. You did have stories of people calling hundreds of times and still not getting through. In interest of time, let me move on to Jahdziah. Jahdziah, talk a little bit about the clip that you brought today?

JAHDZIAH: The clip that I brought today is from Dr. Michelle Holder, who is a labor economist. When she came on to the show, it was for the episode around why we need to center women of color when we're thinking about the pandemic, and we're thinking about policy solutions to help workers and families. She shared her story about what it

was like to grow up in New York City and then watching her own mother struggle to make ends meet in a nation that had more than enough wealth. If we could just share her story really quickly, that'd be great.

MICHELLE HOLDER (CLIP): I basically watched her struggle in a country with so much wealth. I was really trying to understand why public policies seem to be failing my family, especially a woman who wanted to work, who did work, but because she didn't have a college degree, she didn't make very much, and because she had three children, she also had caregiving duties. Sometimes she lost the job because she had to take care of a sick child.

BRIGID: Jahdziah, we've had an episode around why we need to center relief, again, on women of color. We've had episodes really looking at the racial justice reckoning and that's a big part of the bold agenda that you and Roselyn helped put together and we put out today. Talk a little bit about what we've learned and what we need to do now, and also what we need to do moving forward to really center equity in these work-family justice conversations?

JAHDZIAH: Definitely. Something that we've all learned and something that the pandemic has revealed is really the disparate economic and social outcomes that are most harmfully impacting people of color and women of color. Very clear ways in which we can see this during the pandemic is just the mere fact that the brunt of the unemployment numbers have been impacting not only women but women of color, who are in sectors that are most impacted by the pandemic in terms of service sectors and food sectors.

You think about the people who are on the front lines and those people being disproportionately again, women of color, they're either losing their jobs or they're exposed to the virus in unprecedented ways. That is really just forcing us to think about, okay, so when we're thinking about policies like paid sick leave and paid family leave, and we are thinking about the fact that millions are excluded, you have to wonder, "Who's being excluded?" It's women of color. The thing is these exclusions is from public policies that should be benefiting everyone and have been impacting women of color historically.

This isn't necessarily a new phenomenon but it's something that we're being exposed to and we're being forced to reckon with. When Dr. Holder is talking about watching her mother growing up in Bedford, New York and just seeing not only her mother but a

neighborhood of women struggling to make it, it is because those public policies that we're talking about today were also failing women of color in the '70s, in the '80s, in the 19th century.

It's because, let's think about for example the unequal pay, women of color making less money than their white and male counterparts. Think about the racial wealth gap. What should be helping people stay afloat during this pandemic? Savings, assets, income which helps fuel wealth and people of color coming short each and every time.

When we're thinking about Latrice Wilson and the unemployment extensions and supplements, the \$600, that is supposed to help her make ends meet and supposed to try to address the compounding effects of racial inequity as a pretense to what it looks like in the labor market, what it looks in the housing market which informs wealth.

These policies really are about economic justice at the end of the day, they're about racial justice at the end of the day. I think that's a really crucial part of the conversation that Dr. Holder was drawing our attention to is this is an opportunity for us with immediate legislation and long term legislation to address inequity across race, class, and gender. I think that's a huge takeaway point.

BRIGID: Yes, that's so important. That's been our mission all along to really focus on equity across race, class, and gender as you say. I think it's as horrible and as miserable as this year has been and so many people have been under such struggle. It has really laid bare so many cracks in the system. I said once, "I don't think we can unsee what we've seen." I hope that's true. I hope that we don't fall back.

At this moment, I think we're seeing the reality for so many people so much more clearly and we're seeing so much more clearly what we really need to do to really support. We say we're a nation of family values. What we really need to do as Vicki says, to really make that real, more than lip service. Another thing that's also become very clear and I think all of us with our work we know this, but Emily, talk a little bit about the clip that you've chosen and why, and then we'll play that quickly.

EMILY: Sure, thank you. It was actually in early April that there was a crisis conversation looking at how the pandemic has affected the balance or the imbalance of household labor. I chose a clip featuring Eve Rodsky, the author of the book *Fair Play* which talks a lot about how families can create systems to fairly balance the labor in their homecare work, housework. It just really spoke to this crisis of invisible labor and

how invisible labor can no longer remain invisible, that this unprecedented time is really pointing that out. Should we go ahead and play it?

BRIGID: Yes.

EVE RODSKY (CLIP): The core premise you brought up before was really important because while we're all fighting over drunk guy's jackets, who's picking up the broken beer bottle for the sponge in the sink or who is setting the table for dinner, the small details right now are the dirty dozen are causing a huge problem.

The real finding of fair play and it's really more important even now with this idea that society and men view women's time as infinite like sand and society will view men's time as finite like diamond. We know that equal pay because even in the same job women are paid less especially women of color, but what about women? This is what I want to say to any women who are on this call, it was women who are devaluing their time the most.

BRIGID: I'm struck by that. That, that was the whole idea that for so long we've thought of women's time as not as important, as not as valued. It's also true with care. We have not valued care in a way that the pandemic has really shown us is so shortsighted and how central time and support for care is for making everything else work. Stav, let's go to you for the final clip because it's really right at the center of care and making time for what matters with family and also supporting that.

STAVROULA: That sounds great. Essentially, yes, that's why I picked this quote. I think this quote encapsulates a lot of the problem for me in the sense that a lot of people don't even think about care in their day-to-day lives despite the fact that I think about 21% of Americans are in fact curious. I think this quote does such an excellent job of showing that discrepancy I suppose. Let's go ahead and play, and then I'll comment.

BRIGID: Great.

JENNIFER OLSEN (CLIP): We think of caregivers as a critical element for our social sector, our healthcare sector and yet, we don't see very many opportunities where the caregiver is the center of that conversation but usually the afterthought.

BRIGID: That was Jennifer Olsen. She's the Executive Director of the Rosalynn Carter Institute where they do a lot of work on supporting family caregivers. Stav, what struck you about that? This is family caregivers are often invisible and especially during the

pandemic when there have just been so many health issues, they've really been under a lot of pressure without a lot of support.

STAVROULA: I actually picked that quote because in some ways it relates to my own life and I think a little bit about the caregiving that I've seen in my own life. I don't think I realized how important it was until my grandmother who passed away last year. My dad was really doing a lot of the work in taking care of her throughout the rest of her life. For me, it was an afterthought too until it became something personal. She also talks a little bit about how complicated some of the tasks are in caregiving and how we're not really addressing any of this.

When my grandmother was ill, my dad would go there to her house two or three times a week. He would drive to her house. He would make sure her groceries were done, he would make sure the lawn was mowed, all these types of things but he would do a lot of more complicated things. One of them was making sure there was no kind of tax fraud and my grandmother's identity wasn't stolen. It's very difficult work and it's unbelievable that we don't even think to address it in a lot of public policy considering the reality of the matter is that many caregivers don't even have time to work.

I picked the quote because there's some amount of I suppose, somewhat personal but it's also just like, "Wow, I can't believe this major phenomenon that many of us go through at some point in our life isn't even part of the conversation?" I think this encapsulates some of the problem. Our economy was never structured around understanding care should be at the center. It was never structured to allow for that.

I suppose if there's one thing I would like to think we all hope is that COVID-19 at least brings us a new opportunity to discuss this and say, "Look, things need to be restructured so that care actually can be centered more meaningful in public policy but also in public life." It's unbelievable to me that I wasn't treated to take it that seriously until it happened to me and my family. That's really all I have to comment on it.

BRIGID: I think that that's probably a great place to leave it. We try to keep this to 30 minutes because we know that everyone is busy and we respect their time. I think the big takeaway from me and I think from our conversations for many of you is really just how central care is and how central it is to not only our lives, what makes life worth living but it is central to a healthy economy, central to families, central to communities.



Now is really the time. Can we learn this lesson? Can we make these changes quickly that can help people in the immediate moment and can we all work together for real equitable work-family justice, and gender equity moving forward? With that, I want to thank all of my wonderful Better Life Lab team. I also want to recognize that our wonderful Deputy Director is out on paid sick leave. She needed it and, thankfully, we were able to help give her the support that she needed while she's recovering.

I want to thank the Better Life Lab team, thank you all for being a part of this and for being so wonderful to work with. It's just a place that I'm excited to work every day and honored to be working with you. I want to thank David Shulman, our amazing producer who's really made these crisis conversations podcasts happen even in the craziest times when we have people calling in in the middle of the show and I have to use my phone and the technology falls apart. He's been amazing.

Thank you to the New America Events team who have really helped us through all of this. They're juggling a million different things and they've made time for us. Thank you to the people who tune in and ask us questions and share stories. I want to thank all of you for listening, so please take some time to rest and reflect at the end of the year. Wash your hands, wear a mask, and recognize we'll get through this together. Let's work together for work-family justice in the coming year. We'll see you next year. Thanks, everybody.