THE KATRINA GILBERTS OF CALIFORNIA

HBO’s documentary “Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert,” produced in partnership with The Shriver Report, profiles a single mom living on the edge. Despite working full-time, Katrina Gilbert is barely hanging on to the basics her kids need – food, a place to live. As hard as she works, Katrina never knows if an unexpected doctor visit or bill will push her family over the edge.

In California, millions of moms like Katrina are barely holding on. These are some of their stories:
Message from Katrina Gilbert:

While my story has made national headlines, I don’t for one minute forget that there are thousands of mothers who are confronting the same daily struggles my children and I face. Their stories may never be heard, but they’re counting on us to help them and their children succeed.

The Katrina Gilberts of California are not just women who are caught in a cycle of poverty that leaves us struggling paycheck to paycheck, they are strong women determined to share their story. Together, we are part of a movement that is demanding the leadership and policy changes needed to break the cycle of poverty.

As mothers we have no choice but to wake up everyday – feeling tired or even hopeless – and still do everything that needs to be done for our children. It is time we demand the same from our state and federal leaders. A child’s future should not be determined by the size of their parent’s paycheck; the only way to give the children most in need a real fighting chance in life is to set them on the right path during those first few years when it matters the most.

Access to affordable, full-time, quality child care is at the heart of us mothers being able to provide for our families. Without child care choices that include care early in the mornings or late into the nights, those of us who have to work non-traditional hours can never catch up. I am grateful for the family child care providers who, despite facing their own financial uncertainty, wake up before the sun even comes up and are ready to take our children into their arms so that we mothers can go off to work and keep our families afloat.

Child care providers are the first teachers we trust with our kids. Even when my day is chaos, when I stress over how to stretch every cent to pay all the bills, I am in awe to realize how much my little ones have learned at day care, numbers and colors and shapes and songs. Thank you, child care providers. I know that aside from feeding and keeping my children safe, you are also giving them the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life.

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http://raisingcaliforniatogther.org/
I can’t even begin to say what worries me the most, seeing the last two diapers at the bottom of the diaper bag knowing I don’t have money to buy more or not having gas money to get my younger daughters to day care, my older boys to school and then myself to work.

I’ve run out of gas in the middle of the street more times than I can count. I still remember one afternoon when I went to pick up my kids from Marta’s child care, the plan was to pick the kids up, drop them off with my mother at home, and then head out to my evening college classes. Long story short, I barely made it home and I was too embarrassed to ask my family for gas money again so I ended up missing class. The thing about always running out of money is that you also begin to run out of people to borrow money from because it’s just too embarrassing to keep asking them again and again.

And it’s not like I’m unemployed, I actually have a full-time job as a receptionist. I simply don’t earn enough to keep up with the basic expenses of raising four kids on my own. Everything just costs too much: groceries, baby formula, the electricity bill, and, of course, the overdraft charges I get pretty much every month when I run out of money.

I am working hard to get us out of this situation. I work full-time and I’m also in school trying to open more doors for my children and myself. But at times I feel like the system works against us rather than helps us. I used to
qualify for food stamps, and relied on them for much of what was in my refrigerator, but since I’m now making a few more dollars an hour, I no longer qualify. Now I have to wonder how many times a week I can get away with feeding my kids quesadillas for dinner. As a mother, it’s heart breaking to hear my kids telling me that they are hungry when I have nothing but some tortillas and cheese to make a “meal.”

Sometimes I feel the only thing that keeps me from drowning in guilt is having Marta in my children’s life. At Marta’s child care, I know they are getting well-balanced meals, including fruits and vegetables. Without subsidized child care and Marta in our lives, my kids and I would be in an even more hopeless situation.

One time I made a mistake and missed the deadline for some paperwork with the state. The next thing I knew, the child care subsidy was suddenly taken away from my kids. I had no choice but to pay out of pocket for the child care so I could keep working, but without the subsidy the cost was more than what I paid in rent and bills! I had to borrow money from family, I had to rely on those “cash advance” services and it took me months to repay everything including the interest. It took a whole month and a half to sort the whole thing out, during that month I literally thought about just giving up on school, on work and just everything. I remember wondering what the point was in working if pretty much all of the money went into day care and gas money to get to and from work.

I never thought that at 26 years old, my four children and I would be living in one room rented in my mother’s home, much less that I wouldn’t have money to do laundry. It pains me to admit I’ve sent my kids to day care and school wearing clothes they’ve already worn.

“As a single mother, its easy to feel helpless and on my own, but every time Marta keeps my kids late into the night so I can make it to class after work, I know I’m not alone.”

“At times my life is about fighting against the thoughts of hopelessness, other times it’s about challenging myself to stretch every single penny and about not getting overwhelmed by the feelings of embarrassment – but mostly my life is about looking at my children’s faces an knowing that it has to get better.

As a single mother, it’s easy to feel helpless and on my own, but every time Marta keeps my kids late into the night so I can make it to class after work, I know I’m not alone.
Unfortunately, for the parents who count on my day care, situations like Brenda’s are the rule rather than the exception. Everybody seems to be struggling just to make ends meet.

I often send Brenda home with a cooked meal for her and her children because I know things at home aren’t easy. I know, technically my job is to prepare her kids for that first day of Kindergarten and beyond, but sometimes giving her children a real chance at life means giving her $10 for gas money so she can get herself and the kids home safe.

I help Brenda and other parents like her because I am also a mom. I know what it’s like to struggle to financially support our children. As a child care provider, I’m caught in the middle between the families who need me and a broken state system that pays us rates from ten years ago. With my costs for food, electricity and everything else rising, but my income flat, my own children have gone without some essential things including health insurance. Like Brenda, I also know what it’s like to get hit with the overdrawn bank charges and every time I have an added expense like an unexpected car repair I have no choice but reach for the credit card.

I know that if I didn’t work hard to keep the doors of my child care open, the little stability these children have would be lost. The reality is that most parents wouldn’t be able to keep working if they didn’t have reliable child care like mine to count on everyday. Monday through Friday I work from 6:00am to 11:30pm, it’s the only way I can accommodate the different work shifts of the moms who rush in here to drop off their kids and then rush off to work.

It’s common practice for me to get a call asking if I can keep the kids a little longer. The parents can’t afford to not pick up extra hours at work when they can, and I help in whatever way I can.
I’ve seen the difference that quality early learning and care can make in these children. Growing up in poverty is also very stressful for the children, so part of my job is to create a peaceful and secure environment where they can be as worry-free as possible and just focus on learning and playing. As young as 3 years old, the children I care for can identify the water cycle; by the time they head out to Kindergarten they know how to write their name or at least recognize it when written down.

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I know the positive impact early learning had on my own children’s success, and I take my job as a brain builder very seriously, never forgetting for a second that 80% of a child’s brain will develop in the first 3 years of life. My goal with my own children and the children I care for is to set them up for a better future. Now, when I see Brenda’s older boys excelling in school and excited about learning, it gives me hope that they too will be able to break the cycle of poverty.

I believe we all have a duty to fight against this cycle of poverty, and while I do my best to stretch myself as much as possible and continue to be a support for these working parents and their kids, the truth is that some days I’m just not sure how much longer I can keep going like this. When Brenda went on maternity leave to have her youngest child, the system took the child care subsidy away from her five-year-old. This is an example of how disconnected our system is with the real needs of single mothers, because if there was ever a time when she needed help with her five-year-old, it was definitely while she was in labor and the first weeks following the birth of her child.

But the broken system fails everyone involved. Brenda struggles on her own to get the two oldest to school, care for her five-year-old and take care of a newborn. Me? I’m left with an empty child care slot and no pay; I can’t fill the slot with another child because in just a few weeks Brenda will bring in her five-year-old and her newborn to me so she can get back to work.

It’s living and surviving these realities right along with the moms and children who depend on me that gives me the inspiration to keep fighting for a fix to our broken child care system. In my heart, I know these working families deserve better, I know my fellow child care providers and I deserve better — and so I’m fighting for our right to collectively bargain for improvements to our child care system and for a chance to no longer live paycheck to paycheck.

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Carolyn Carpenter,
Family Child Care Provider
Oakland, CA

As a child care provider, I am too often the person witnessing the everyday struggles of working parents. I am the person who sees tired moms dropping off their kids early in the morning and heading off to a full day of work. I see these same moms at my doorstep, when they are sick and clearly in no condition to go into work, but still, there they are – early in the morning – dropping off their children and heading out to complete a full day of work.

I am also the person who is often asked to take in children who are “kind of getting sick” but who I can clearly tell are actually very sick. I see parents who want nothing more than to stay home and care for their sick child; I see them force themselves to pretend that “it’s not that bad,” because they really have no other choice.

The reality for working families is that taking time off work to care for a sick child is not seen like a good enough reason or it is simply not an option.

During the cold season, the little ones can be sick every other week, and that’s not an exaggeration. Sometimes it’s a cold, other times a fever, other times pink eye. They are little and they are developing their immune system and it takes a lot of runny noses to do that. But it’s a huge pressure for parents to have to care for a sick child when work doesn’t offer paid leave. You have moms who are afraid to take time off because they will get in trouble and you have moms who are afraid to take time off because if they don’t go to work they don’t get paid and can’t pay the bills. It’s an impossible situation.

As a child care provider, my job is to prepare children to succeed in school from day one. My job is also to support working families who may not have the typical “9 to 5” jobs. That means opening my doors earlier in the morning or keeping a child later into the night whenever a parent suddenly needs to work late.

But I am also a mom myself. I know what it’s like to be the sole breadwinner for a family and to struggle when you are making less than minimum wage. As a child care provider, I also lack paid leave and sick days, and am left to struggle whenever I or my child gets sick.

My own personal struggle never felt so tough as when I gave birth to my youngest son. When he was born, there were some medical complications during labor. My little baby was immediately whisked away from me and placed in the intensive care unit with a ventilator. Nothing is more painful to a mother than not being able to see or hold her newborn child. After just two days in the hospital, I was faced with a choice no parent should ever have to make – do I stay in the hospital to be close to my newborn? Or do I pretend that I am ready to go home because I have to get back to work, because bills have to get paid, because my other children have to be fed, because the parents who depend on me to take care of their kids also have to go to work? And so, with a broken
heart, I left the hospital and left my baby there.

Because I didn’t have maternity leave, or any type of paid leave, during those two weeks I had no choice but to work during the day and then make my way back to the hospital late at night. All I could do was see him, caress his tiny little hand through the incubator – it took weeks before my son was well enough to go home with me.

With very little sleep, I had no choice but to get up each and every day and go to my full day of work, when what I really needed was time off to fully heal and care for my child.

But parents like us don’t get time off. Workers like us don’t get time off. Working families like ours have to just suck it up.

All it takes is one illness, one little car accident, one trip to the hospital, one of any of those curve balls that life throws at you and we working moms find ourselves on the verge of losing it all.

If our leaders are serious about improving the lives of the families who most need it, then we must improve our child care system. Providers must have a seat at the table to negotiate better working conditions, and we must have a voice to advocate for the families and children we serve.

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Laura Barron,  
single mother of five  
San Jose, CA

With four children and one on the way, my family would be on a pretty tight budget even if I had two incomes to rely on. But I don’t have two incomes, just mine. Still, I’m one of the lucky ones; among the many families who need subsidized child care, we are one of the very few that managed to actually find open slots. Without this reliable and affordable child care, I’d never be able to keep a job that pays enough to keep our heads above water.

My family’s entire luck depends on Rita, our family child care provider, who for the last five years, has been my partner in raising my kids and allowing me to not just go to “a job,” but actually start a career. Knowing my children are safe in Rita’s care, I was able to complete the trainings and obtain the licenses that allowed me to get promoted at work, earn enough money to keep food on the table, and buy the basics needed to raise my kids.

However, I know that all of it can be lost in a blink of an eye if one morning I knocked on Rita’s door and it didn’t open for any reason.

Even with all the training and hard work I’ve done to earn my recent promotion, there is no way my kids and I could make it if we lost the low-cost child care that keeps us going. Before I had access to subsidized child care, I really couldn’t even picture making it through the week, much less planning a future. What people often don’t realize is that the worst thing about living paycheck to paycheck is losing hope and feeling like you can’t do better as a woman and a mother.

Having access to quality child care that I can afford has given my children the skills they need to do well in school. Rita has given my children the self-confidence they need to learn and dream big. And in many ways she has done the same for me too.

Because I can show up early in the morning at her home, leave my children in her care, and trust that they are being taken care of, I’ve been able to trust myself as a professional woman and excel at my job. When I first had my eldest daughter, I remember feeling like I wouldn’t be able to find a way to be both a mom and have a career, but now I have the confidence I need to do both.

My kids and I have a shot at a good future because we have child care we can count on. That’s why I take every opportunity I can to speak out in support of family child care providers. I know child care providers in California are struggling just to get by themselves, and many of them are on the verge of closing their doors because the rate of pay is so low.
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If just one provider is forced to close her doors because our state hasn’t brought their pay up to date for nearly 10 years, several parents would lose their jobs through no fault of their own, and entire families would be set back. That’s my reality and that is the reality of thousands of moms throughout California. For us, child care is not a safety net, it’s a necessity.