PS for 8/31/89

Giving Parents Real Options

AT&T recently made headlines by signing a pact with its two unions that includes what the press called an “unprecedented breakthrough” for a “family benefits package.” The centerpiece is a $5 million fund to subsidize daycare, and the accompanying picture showed happy female employees cheering the idea that AT&T will help with their babysitting.

The fine print of this agreement, however, reveals that AT&T was not generous but very shrewd. It received a big rah-rah for a low-cost daycare proposal that will benefit only the small minority who want to turn their babies over to AT&T, while the company cut back on wage increases and will also save $20 million in health-care costs by requiring employees to use “preferred providers” instead of choosing their own doctors.

If you are an AT&T employee NOT patronizing a daycare center, that’s not a good deal. You might even feel you were discriminated against because all employees were forced to forgo significant benefits so that a handful can get institutional care for their preschool children.

About the same time, an entirely different approach was put into practice by the R. W. Beckett Corporation of Elyria, Ohio. Instead of setting up a daycare center, the corporation is making it easier for mothers to care for their own babies.

The Beckett maternity leave policy includes generous coverage of maternity expenses plus the following options: unpaid prenatal leave of four weeks, pro- and post-birth disability pay, 25 percent pay for 26 weeks after the disability pay stops, and an interest-free loan to be repaid after the employee returns to work.

In addition, after a new mother decides to return to her job, she is offered job sharing and work-at-home alternatives. If she decides to give more time to her baby, she is given “priority return” privileges for up to three years.

This is a plan that employed mothers can really cheer about because it gives them real options, unlike the AT&T plan which pays a benefit only if you “choose” what the employer has already chosen for you. The Beckett benefits are also available to mothers who adopt children.

Freedom of choice in everything legal is the hallmark of the American way. An opinion survey made by Kinder-Care, one of the nation's largest daycare provides, found that parents selected "freedom of choice" as the single most important factor among eleven issues pertaining to child care, ranking ahead of safety, cleanliness, and qualifications of the caregiver.

When parents exercise their freedom of choice about care of their preschool children, 76 percent choose care by the mother or other relatives. The majority of the other 25 percent choose a baby-sitting arrangement that is Unlicensed, and only about 6 percent choose licensed secular daycare centers.

So, the liberals want to dictate our "choices" have developed two main strategies: (1) to get taxpayers and corporations to subsidize secular daycare centers so they will become financially more attractive, and (2) to set up a bureaucratic network which will go on search-and-destroy missions to discover all unlicensed baby-sitting and either run it out of business or force it into the government regulatory system.

How this works is demonstrated by the present situation in Olean, New York, where a daycare "crisis" was deliberately fabricated by the state regulators. The New York Department of Social Services (DSS) sent a letter to ten women who do babysitting in their own homes stating that, if they care for three or more children under age six *including their own children*, they must get a state permit within a week and a half or they would be "closed down."

The babysitters, who are usually known as neighborhood daycare mothers or family home providers, notified the parents that they would terminate their babysitting rather than go through the hassle of dealing with state inspectors and paperwork.

Since this case directly affected 160 children and has the potential to affect several hundred more, it caused a community-wide uproar with town meetings attended by angry, frustrated and desperate parents who love their babysitters and don't want state regulations to interfere. A newspaper survey found that 86 percent of the mothers affected would have to quit their jobs if these in-home babysitting arrangements were terminated.

The babysitters then asked the DSS for "waivers" from the regulations. The state assigned a different caseworker to each babysitter, which indicates either a

deliberate attempt to keep the babysitters from getting together, or that the state agency had a lot of staff doing nothing until they created this “crisis.”

Child care is a parental, not a governmental, responsibility, and parents know a whole lot more about what and who is right for their children than government busybodies do.