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Elections

NC child care director speaks at DNC. Here's the thing she says Democrats should know

By Mary Ramsey



Charlotte preschool director Emma Biggs, left, is in Chicago to talk about caregiving as part of the 2024 Democratic National Convention. Provided by Emma Biggs

Earlier this summer, Emma Biggs was arrested while protesting for child care funding at the North Carolina General Assembly. That advocacy led the Charlotte child care provider to speaking roles at the Democratic National Convention. Biggs, director of Pathway Preschool off of Eastway Drive, is in Chicago as delegates gather from around the country to ceremonially name Vice President Kamala Harris as the party's 2024

nominee for president. Biggs participated in a panel on caregiving Tuesday and planned other appearances, including in a prerecorded video expected to air at the convention's main stage. "My message is to let people know that care work, what we do when we care for people every day, is the backbone to our economy," she said. "Without an investment — a bold investment, a robust investment — in care work, our economy will collapse."

The focus on caregiving — for children, the elderly and people with disabilities and other health issues — comes at a critical time for an industry that hasn't recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, Biggs told The Charlotte Observer. Child care facilities received government grants during the pandemic, allowing them to pay employees, cover some operational costs and subsidize child care costs for some families. But with that funding gone, the industry is falling off a "funding cliff." "Times are very bad right now. We're in crisis," she said of her field.

Biggs also lives in a key battleground state in the upcoming presidential election. Both the Harris and Donald Trump campaigns are focusing on North Carolina, where Trump posted his slimmest margin of victory of any state in 2020. Polls show a tightening race in the state since Harris took over the Democratic ticket, and the University of Virginia's Center for Politics moved North Carolina from "lean Republican" to "toss up" Tuesday. Harris could be the first Democratic presidential candidate to win North Carolina since then-Sen. Barack Obama in 2008 if she picks up the state's 16 electoral votes.

FROM CHARLOTTE TO CHICAGO

Biggs' journey to Chicago started in June, when she was among eight people arrested at the North Carolina Legislative Building during a day of action to call on lawmakers to provide funding to child care centers ahead of what they dubbed a "child care funding cliff," The News & Observer reported at the time. Her protest brought Biggs to the attention of the communications director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance, who invited her to Chicago, Biggs said. "The energy is really amazing," she said of the experience so far.

Biggs participated Tuesday in a panel dubbed "Care Can't Wait: Our Economy Runs on Care" as part of the convention, and she was part of another event Wednesday. She's also recorded a video with other care workers to air during the convention and is still waiting to hear whether she'll have a chance to address delegates from the convention's main stage, she told the Observer Tuesday evening. "It's a possibility," she said. Full schedules

of speakers at the convention this year haven't been released until just before the night's events begin.

'AMAZING TO SEE IT MAGNIFIED'

Biggs wants all people to understand the importance of care work — not just to those who work in the field or those who need assistance.

It hurts the economy, she said, when people can't go to work because they don't have care for their kids, elderly relatives or loved ones with disabilities. "When people can't go to work because they don't have care ... It impacts everyone," she said. That's especially true for women, she noted, who research shows often take on the bulk of caregiving responsibilities in families. "We need a bold investment in care work, not just in North Carolina, but everywhere," she said.

Biggs described it as "a breath of fresh air" to see the Harris campaign highlighting caregiving at the convention. "A lot of times in care work, we feel that we aren't noticed, that no one pays attention, that what we do is often done in isolation," she said. "But having it noticed, having it magnified on a national level tells us that we're being recognized, that people see our worth and they know our value. And so it's amazing to see it magnified on a national level."

OTHER NORTH CAROLINIANS AT THE DNC

Biggs isn't the only North Carolinian getting a chance to speak out at the convention. Gov. Roy Cooper and Raleigh education Eric Fitts are expected to address the convention Thursday. Durham Mayor Leonardo Williams and singer James Taylor — who grew up in Chapel Hill — were scheduled to appear at the convention but got bumped because of time constraints.