Time is money

The new child tax credit hides a bigger problem: society not valuing child care. One group's program is trying to tackle that.

By Jonathan Lipman

The new federal expanded child tax credit, which since July 15 is sending monthly $300 checks per child to many working and middle-class families, is clearly an important policy that will help many people. But it's a little bit like offering passengers on a crashing plane a refund on their ticket. The money's nice, but it's not a real solution. The problem is that we're not valuing the work of caregiving.

Our nation, compared with other countries and societies throughout history, does very little to support new parents with raising their children. Because you can't sell the work you do as a parent, our capitalist economy assigns it zero market value. Put simply, parents aren't paid. It's a classic example of a place where free markets fail, just like national defense and roads, which are notoriously underfunded. The way it works day-to-day: A local hairstylist participating in the project could spend an hour doing someone's hair and then exchange it for an hour of child care later. People with little money but “time wealth,” Phipps said, such as retirees or parents home caring for their own children, could provide that care and then trade their time credits for services from others. Most importantly, no one could take from the community without also giving back. "People and societies flourish more readily where relationships are built on reciprocity and equity: enabling people to give freely, yet also facilitating the give-and-take of time, knowledge, skills, compassion and other assets," Phipps explains in the orientation. "These are not commodified through allocating them a ‘price.’... Timebanking recognises that everyone, even those defined as disadvantaged or vulnerable, has something worthwhile to contribute."

And, she said, “Timebanking can help give people more control over their lives, prevent needs arising, and grow what we call the ‘core economy’ — our ability to care for and support each other and to engage in mutual and non-materialistic exchanges and civic activity.”

The collective's original pilot project was limited to members but became enormously popular. With just 27 participants and a few community groups over just a few months, they had 139 exchanges totaling over 416 hours of traded time. This month the collective relaunched the project and is now welcoming new members from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color throughout the city.

The time bank project will not work for everyone, nor should it have to. But it does point to a different way we can think about problems like child care that capitalism treats as unimportant “externalities.” We have to be willing to challenge the presumption that the cost of something in dollars is equivalent to its value. Too many of our political debates are centered around dollars. Every new policy is equated with a cost, which is tied to a tax. In the end, the key question is always the same, from schools to police to climate change: How will this affect the economy?

It shouldn't always be about the money. Sometimes, it should be about what we value, what we don't, and how we can challenge and change our society to match those priorities.

Jonathan Lipman is a strategy and communications consultant for progressive organizations and nonprofits. He lives in South Philadelphia.

Camden residents are the most invested in fixing their communities...
By Rann Miller

A few weeks ago, I watched a video on Facebook posted by a community activist and educator highlighting the scene at the Seventh and Clinton Street Park in Camden. What she saw was alarming: drug paraphernalia and drug use happening alongside children playing, at daytime, and in the full view of police.

This activist rightly called out that such a scene isn’t tolerated in the suburbs, and rightly asked: Why is it tolerated in Camden? She declared at that moment, as others had as well, “not in my park.”

She and others have turned a moment into a movement, starting with a community day at the Seventh and Clinton Street Park on Aug. 7 to make that park, and others, the safe havens for children they were designed to be—by encouraging local kids to take ownership of the parks and having open communication with drug users about safety in those spaces. These organizers have partnered with organizations such as Volunteers of America to encourage re habilitation, not punishment.

While this initiative has the backing of various stakeholders in the city, including government, law enforcement, and social service organizations, this initiative was created and is led by members of the community, public servants such as educators, retired residents, and leaders of community organizations—individuals I am proud to say that I’ve gone to school with and worked with.

This isn’t the only community-led initiative in Camden. Yet, it’s a story about the city that doesn’t often get told.

Residents are currently organizing to combat a safety problem happening in senior housing throughout the city. Residents also sparked the movement against the illegal dumping of waste that poses a health hazard to the community.

Yet the narrative surrounding Camden residents, since I was a child, was that residents don’t care; that the crime and poverty that cloud the circumstances of Camden residents is because of their own actions, as opposed to policy decisions or neglect. I remember a former white colleague at work telling me that she and her husband would drive their children through Camden to show them what a lack of hard work will yield them. Corporate executives whose companies received millions in tax breaks—due to policy decisions from city and state officials—have said similar things.

These comments reflect a common stereotype—one that demean the people of Camden and flat-out ignores the activism of residents tackling issues from park and senior citizen safety to environmental hazards.

It reminds me of when Black folk call out racism, including in policing, and get asked: What about “Black on Black crime”? Beyond referencing a myth that wrongly assigns a broad trend—most murder victims are killed by someone of their own race—Black communities, the question ignores how often Black folk call out the violence in our neighborhoods and organize to combat it. While others may give up on the education of Black and brown students, Black and brown folk organize to both support and supplement student learning in schools.

Whether it is violence, environmental racism, or the struggles of addiction, Black and brown people are the ones organizing and advocating on behalf of our communities.

Because the truth is that the noise we hear from others about fighting racism, poverty, or inequity of any sort is because they heard the noise of Black and brown folk first.

Change is happening in Camden because the residents care. They care about parks being safe for children. They care about how city functions are carried out and how their children are educated.

Camden residents care about their own—and they care about those from the outside who find themselves in our city. The question is, who outside of Camden and among those tasked with serving it really cares about Camden residents?

Richard G. Jones
MANAGING EDITOR, OPINION

Elena Gooray
OPINION COVERAGE EDITOR

Abraham Gutman
OPINION WRITER

Will Bunch
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COLUMNIST

Rann Miller is an educator and freelance writer based in South Jersey. His "Urban Education Mixtape" blog at urbancedmixtape.com supports urban educators and parents of children attending urban schools. UrbanEdDJ