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# Hilda Solis: June Cleaver, meet Juana Solis

12:00 AM CDT on Wednesday, October 20, 2010

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Today in Dallas, the U.S. Department of Labor – which I head – will host the first of several national dialogues on workplace flexibility. Nearly 300 leaders from business, family advocacy groups, academia, labor unions and government will convene at [Southern Methodist University](#) to share best practices, forge partnerships and explore strategies to address issues to help workers balance work and family life, and keep employers – especially small businesses – competitive.

Over the weekend, while I was preparing my remarks for the event, I couldn't help but think of June Cleaver, the iconic stay-at-home mom from TV's *Leave it to Beaver*. The actress who played her, [Barbara Billingsley](#), died on Saturday.

I watched endless reruns of the show when I was a kid. [Hollywood](#) wasn't geographically far from La Puente, the working class neighborhood where I grew up, but it was, in reality, a world apart. My mother, Juana Solis, immigrated to the U.S. from [Nicaragua](#), had seven children, and – after my younger twin sisters were born – worked the late shift at a toy factory. She sewed, cleaned and cooked in the morning, and then "went to work." Most of my mother's friends were working mothers, too – long before the term became popular, and a rightful badge of honor. Balancing work and family wasn't something they thought about or debated. They just did it.

June Cleaver certainly wasn't reality for my family, or in "real life" for Billingsley herself – who, at one point in her career was a working single mother of two sons. Whether it was for other families growing up, it's likely not the case today.

Now policymakers, employers and workers must find better ways to help people succeed at home and on the job. Products need to be made and parent-teacher conferences need to be attended. Aging parents need to be cared for and work deadlines must be met. Children get sick and have to stay home from school on the same day the big presentation is due at work. Yes, women now comprise nearly 50 percent of American workers, and in the majority of U.S. families, women are co-equal or even primary earners. But this isn't just a women's issue. Men today have nearly doubled the amount of time they spend on child care, according to recent studies. Nearly half of all children in the U.S. live in households where all parents work full time. More than 43 million Americans serve as unpaid caregivers to family members over the age of 50. We are all in this together.

Work-life balance policies and workplace flexibility initiatives aren't niceties; they're necessities for working families. For employers, they aren't just the right thing to do; they're the smart thing to do. A

recent report by the President's [Council of Economic Advisers](#) found that when businesses adopt accommodating policies, it adds to the bottom line.

Government has a role. This administration supports the Healthy Families Act, which would allow working Americans to earn up to 56 hours per year of paid sick time to care for themselves or their families. It would assure them job security when they take leave, and provides short-term continuation of workers' incomes while they recuperate from illness or provide needed care to a family member.

Earlier this year, my department clarified the definition of "son and daughter" under the Family and Medical Leave Act. Our interpretation ensures that the FMLA reflects the reality and true diversity of all families, so workers who assume the role of caring for a child receive parental rights to leave regardless of the legal or biological relationship.

Dallas employers are extraordinarily innovating in this area. Business Access LLC, a small, woman-owned business, offers flexible start and end times, telecommuting options, short- and long-term disability, flex time, personal leave and job sharing – efforts that impact productivity as well as employee loyalty. One third of its staff has been with the company for 10 years or more.

We still have a way to go in fostering and creating workplaces that support and acknowledge the realities of workers' lives. Today is an important first step. The real June Cleaver and my mother should be very proud.

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