



WHATCOM
CHILD CARE
COALITION

BRIEFING PAPER
NOVEMBER 2020

CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING FOR EVERY FAMILY: SOLVING WHATCOM COUNTY'S CHILD CARE CRISIS BY EXPANDING OPTIONS AND INCREASING ACCESS

KEY POINTS

- Whatcom County is in the midst of a child care crisis: the high costs of child care and early learning, combined with a shortage of options has impacts on children, families, and the local economy.
- In 2019, Whatcom County had a shortage of 1,910 child care slots. COVID-19 has since exacerbated the instability and financial health of child care providers.
- Lack of affordable, high-quality child care and early learning results in children being less prepared for entering kindergarten, parents and caregivers having difficulty obtaining and retaining work, and businesses bearing the costs of turnover and lost productivity due to child care issues.
- The Whatcom Child Care Coalition (WCCC) is forming to address the child care crisis and ensure all families have easy access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning options.
- WCCC will work with parents, caregivers, and stakeholders to commission a demand analysis and develop a countywide child care and early learning expansion plan. This will result in increased access to childcare, improving families' economic security and increase kindergarten readiness.



United Way
of Whatcom County



BACKGROUND:

Child care leaders and community members are forming the Whatcom Child Care Coalition (WCCC) to increase access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning options that fit families' work schedules. Child care impacts our entire community: the future of our families, economy, and children hinge on our child care sector.

Impact on Families: Child care is necessary for parents and caregivers to obtain and retain a job; yet inadequate availability, high costs, and lack of staff education have left quality child care out of reach for many families. Those lacking access are more likely to miss work, report lost wages, or leave the workforce altogether. Their children are also more likely to enter school without being adequately prepared, putting them at a persistent disadvantage behind their peers.

PRE-COVID CHILD CARE DATA:

of Households With At Least
One Child Under the Age of 5: **8,460**

Child Care Shortage: **-1,910**

Source: Washington State Child Care Industry Assessment,
Washington Department of Commerce, 2020.

Even when it's available, quality child care is out of reach for many working families. Full-time, infant child care has a median annual cost of \$10,920, more than the combined cost of tuition, books, and fees at Western Washington University. When having a job barely covers the expenses of child care, many end up leaving the workforce altogether. This particularly affects women, who leave the workforce at higher rates due to lack of child care access. But with 76% of female-headed households struggling to cover a basic budget of food, housing, health care, and other essential costs, work is a necessity (ALICE Report, 2019).

Impact on Economy: Washington employers bear the direct costs of employee turnover, missed work, and lost productivity due to child care issues,

estimated at \$2.08B per year. Further, Washington's economy loses an estimated value of \$6.5B per year via "opportunity costs"—the amount spent on child care-related issues that could have been used for other economic opportunities (Department of Commerce, 2019).

Families working from home during COVID-19 have reduced their reliance on child care. This temporary drop in demand is exacerbating the instability of child care providers, leading to closures. As a result, the child care shortage may be even greater after the pandemic.

Impact on Children: High-quality child care is more than a place for children to go while adults work. It offers a safe, stimulating environment where they are nurtured and thrive. Early learning is integrated into care, preparing children with the necessary skills and competencies for entering kindergarten. Caregivers and teachers understand child development, teaching for various learning styles and respecting childrens' diverse backgrounds.

When children don't have access to early learning opportunities, the results are devastating. Early learning lays the foundation for later success; when children start school unprepared, they stand in stark contrast to their peers for years. Because high-quality child care and early learning are associated with higher costs, damaging racial and economic disparities develop before children even begin school.

Prior to COVID-19, Whatcom County was already experiencing a child care crisis; the pandemic just exacerbated the issue. Providers continue to work hard with limited resources, but the lack of child care threatens the well-being of our community. It is in this context that WCCC is forming to strengthen our child care system.

ABOUT WCCC

In late 2019, a group of community and child care leaders convened to address Whatcom County's growing child care crisis. These leaders recommended that a coalition be formed, aimed at better understanding families' needs and leading the effort in expanding child care and early learning opportunities. WCCC is being developed as the result of their work.

United Way and Mt. Baker Foundation will co-staff the Coalition, which will continue to collaborate with other organizations to create an effective and sustainable coalition with the goal of bringing the community's vision of child care to life in Whatcom County.

At the center of this work are parent and caregiver voices. As WCCC plans for the expansion of child care, coalition members will take important steps to

learn from local parents, caregivers and other child care consumers about what they want in a child care program, where they need care, and in what context. There will be special intention to hear from those who are most marginalized in our community. By amplifying and honoring their needs, preferences, and requests, WCCC is helping create a community where all children and families thrive.

Efforts will be made to engage a wide variety of stakeholders representing education, business, local government, health care, faith-based communities, Lummi Nation, and Nooksack Tribe.

WCCC will partner with other coalitions, including Generations Forward, Healthy Whatcom, and NW Center for Child Care Retention and Expansion.

WHATCOM COUNTY VISION FOR CHILD CARE:

All families have easy access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning options that cover most work days.

Children and Families:

- Families have options, including friends and family care, licensed providers, and enrichment programs
- Choice of early learning options that cover a variety of work schedules
- Child care is easy to find near peoples' homes and workplaces

Child Care Programs:

- Classroom communities are racially and economically diverse
- Support services are accessible, including language support and behavioral health
- Safe, high-quality, and enriching
- Seamlessly connected to school districts

Child Care Workforce:

- Staff earn a livable wage
- Access to resources that promote professional development
- Part of an effective credentialing system
- Positive work environments

Child Care System:

- Demonstrated, community-wide belief in the value of child care through public support, funding, and partnerships
- Child care industry is healthy, sustainable, and well-funded
- High staff retention with the potential for career advancement

WHAT WILL WCCC DO?		THE RESULT:
1. Commission a child care demand analysis	2. Develop Child Care Expansion Plan	Increased access to childcare, which will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve economic security 2. Increase kindergarten readiness
<p>The analysis will consider location, cost, subsidy, and therapeutic support services needs, particularly for families with barriers to child care.</p>	<p>This county-wide plan will offer steps to meeting the child care needs and preferences for our most vulnerable, marginalized children.</p>	

NEXT STEPS:

1) Formalize the Coalition: The WCCC will be formalized in December 2020, the first step toward implementing the Whatcom County Vision for Child Care.

2) Center Voices of Parents and Caregivers: WCCC will listen and learn from child care consumers, seeking to understand diverse needs for child care options, child care costs, family preferences,

barriers and potentials for provider expansion, credentialing and staff education, and the impact of child care on the workforce. Parent and caregiver voices will be included in this data collection.

3) Building a Path Forward: WCCC will use the demand analysis to create a child care expansion plan, putting forth strategic recommendations for achieving the WCCC’s vision and families’ needs.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

The expansion plan will provide a path toward the following measures of success:

- Increased number of child care slots available
- Reduced time on child care wait lists
- Household budgets can comfortably afford child care
- Child care centers exist in rural areas across Whatcom County
- Increased number of child care programs offering on-site behavior supports



**Have questions?
Want to get involved?**

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