



Childcare Infrastructure in Erie County: Challenges & Solutions



*Presented by the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women
and the
University at Buffalo Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies
Public Policy Internship Class*



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Linking the theoretical with the practical can seem like a daunting task even to the most seasoned policy wonk! However, it is crucial that we understand the importance of research and the theoretical constructs that research yields, as a vital component to understanding complex systems and always necessary to consider when addressing large scale social issues. This is why I am so pleased that the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women has forged a collaborative relationship with the University at Buffalo's department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies with the creation of the Women's Studies Internship. This partnership provides students an opportunity to gain insight into how to best utilize research and theory to inform public policy and practice while offering those of us serving the public to gain greater insight into how to create policies to address issues impacting women in Erie County. Over the past three years the internship collaboration has created four policy briefs focusing on some of the most pressing circumstances facing women in Erie County including paid sick leave, the impact of diversity, equity and inclusion policies on women in the workplace and our current policy brief focusing on childcare infrastructure issues.

I want to thank Gwynn Thomas, PhD, Chair and Associate Professor, Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies, for her commitment to sustaining this collaboration. Thank you to all of the students who participated in this semester's internship class; your thirst for knowledge and gender justice is both inspiring and reassuring. A very special thanks to Katie Kicinski, MPH, CHES®, doctoral candidate and the Women's Studies Internship instructor for her tireless commitment to this project and her contributions to the introduction and to internship students, Alexi Heng and Lisarie Martin for their contributions to the conclusion and appendix and editing the entire document! Finally, I want to thank our interviewees for their ceaseless service to our community and for taking the time to meet with our students to share their invaluable insights.

**Karen King PhD,
Erie County Commissioner of Public Advocacy and Executive Director of the ECCSW**

The importance of using feminist theory to understand and address the challenging issues of our day has never been more urgent. We critically need more citizens who can help us to analyze our society and make concrete changes. This booklet presents a policy brief designed to do just that. Students in Global Gender and Sexuality Studies, with the guidance Dr. Karen King, Executive Director of the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women (ECCSW), and the course instructor, Katie Kicinski, researched the childcare infrastructure in Erie County.

Through working directly with childcare providers, students sought to put theory into practice by developing possible policy solutions that could be implemented locally. The current COVID 19 pandemic exposed the many cracks in our childcare infrastructure and the need for more attention to this critical area of need in our community. Students developed their brief in an environment of intensive experiential learning where they could put into practice the feminist public policy, gender analysis and research skills developed in the classroom.

This innovative course formula responds to a growing demand for people with real world experience and expertise in analyzing differentiated effects of our society and economy on citizens, depending on gender, race, class and sexual orientation. I would like to particularly thank the community members who took the time to talk with our students and offer their experiences. I am so happy to support our partnership with Dr. Karen King and the ECCSW, and the opportunities it presents.

**Gwynn Thomas, Associate Professor and Chair,
Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies, University at Buffalo**

Biographies:



Diane Abram

*Group Family Day Care Provider
Toot-Toot Daycare, Inc.*

Founder/CEO

Workforce Solutions Consortium, Inc

Diane recognizes that it is essential to build wide-ranging partnerships to support children and families. And that no one entity in a community has the resources and skills capable of providing comprehensively for their needs. Beginning her career in early childhood education she opened a group family daycare in 1989. As current CEO of Workforce Solutions Consortium, Diane is a strong advocate for the needs of family daycare providers and the families they serve. She serves on non-profit child care organizations and various initiatives to ensure that the voices of family daycare providers are heard. Diane is committed to collaborating with local, state and national organizations to increase the awareness of and improve the quality of child care in family daycare businesses.



Colleen Brecker

Co-Owner

Early Bird ChildCare Centers, Inc.

Colleen Brecker is the Co-owner of Early Bird ChildCare Centers, Inc. and the Universal Pre-Kindergarten liaison for both the Pioneer and Springville-Griffith Institute Central School Districts. Early Bird ChildCare was founded by Mrs. Brecker's parents, Pat and Phil Marcello 46 years ago. Mrs. Brecker returned to her family's business 12 years ago after receiving her certificate in school administration and master's degree in educational leadership from Leadership Initiative for Tomorrow Schools program at the University at Buffalo. Mrs. Brecker is also a certified public school music teacher and a professional soprano. She has been a featured soloist with the BPO, and just recently, the Camerata di Sant'Antonio.



Vonetta T. Rhodes Ed.M

Child Care Advocate

Vonetta T. Rhodes is a proud Mother, Educator, Administrator, Trainer/Consultant, Adjunct Professor, and Advocate. She has worked in the field of Early Childhood Education since 1993. She also earned a Master's Degree in Elementary Education (n-6) with a concentration in Language Arts from the University at Buffalo. Rhodes is a Co-founder of the Western New York Child Care Action Team (2019) and humbly serves as an active member on: Erie County Emergency Child Care Task Force, Empire State Campaign for Child Care- Steering Committee, Erie County Cost of Care Group- Steering Committee, ROW: Reimagining Our Work by the Exchange Leadership Initiative, Buffalo Kwanzaa Committee, Juneteenth Festival of Buffalo- Maafa Committee, and the National Board of Malika Kambe Umfazi Sorority, Incorporated. Her motto is "Care is Education and Education is Care." Vonetta Rhodes believes this is a monumental and unprecedented time of recognition, accomplishment, and life-changing advancement in the field of Early Care and Education, therefore her work is just beginning.



Kimberly Suminski

Chief Executive Officer

Child Care Resource Network

Kimberly Suminski, Chief Executive Officer of Child Care Resource Network, located in Buffalo, New York. She has dedicated the last 25 years to working in the early childhood field. She works to foster high-quality child care by providing resources and education to parents, providers and legislators. Kim serves on many local and statewide boards and committees to increase advocacy for the rights of children, families, and child care professionals. She is committed to improving the lives of children and families in Erie County and WNY. Kim was recognized in January 2021 by Women in Leadership for the Buffalo Niagara Chapter: New York State Women in Leadership, Inc. She was also accepted into the Leadership Buffalo Class of 2022 and is a graduate of the Harvard Business School Buffalo Not-For-Profit Program.



Sheri Scavone P.T., E.H.S.A.

*Chief Executive Officer
WNY Women's Foundation*

Sheri Scavone is the CEO of the WNY Women's Foundation. In her role, Ms. Scavone uses Foundation research data to educate, convene, advocate and forge collaborations with key community stakeholders to address gender inequities and other issues preventing women from achieving economic self-sufficiency. She leads the Foundation to create opportunities for all women to learn, earn and lead. Ms. Scavone is a tireless advocate for girls and women.

Sheri has over 40 years of experience leading and growing public and nonprofit organizations to achieve strategic goals through collaboration, communication and connections. Ms. Scavone is a tireless advocate working to drive change towards greater acceptance and tolerance - particularly for women, families experiencing poverty, those living with mental illness, LGBTQ and marginalized youth.

Ms. Scavone is a licensed physical therapist, earned an MS Executive Leader degree in Health Systems Administration and has an advanced post-graduate certificate in Palliative Care. Ms. Scavone is a Health Foundation of Western and Central New York Health Leader Fellow and a Trauma Informed Champion.



Marie Cannon

Commissioner

Erie County Department of Social Services

Marie A. Cannon was appointed Commissioner of Erie County Department of Social Services by Mark Poloncarz, County Executive in 2018. She leads the largest department of county government with a \$618 million annual budget, and a staff of nearly 1,600. The department includes: Temporary Assistance, Medicaid, SNAP, Day Care, Employment, HEAP, Homeless services, Domestic Violence services, Adult and Child Protective Services, Children Services, Adoption, Foster Care, Independent Living, a Youth Detention center, a Youth Bureau, a legal department as well as a human resource department. She is the first African American to hold this position.

Marie has served as Chief Executive Officer for several not for profit organizations and has over 34 years of executive management experience in community-based organizations. She started her career as the Director of the 1st Faith Based Child Development Center in Buffalo, NY.

Her commitment and expertise in the field of Early Childhood was recognized when she was selected to sit on the New York State Governor's Inaugural Children Cabinet Advisory Board. She is a speaker/presenter at local, state, and national conferences. She has worked as a national consultant through the Department of Health and Human Services and has served as an Adjunct Professor for Empire State College.

Marie's community involvement includes being the Co-Chair of the Live Well Erie Taskforce, as well as Co-chair of the COVID 19 Emergency Child Care Taskforce and the Live Well Erie COVID 19 Housing Taskforce. She has served as a past board member of Western New York Women's Foundation, past President of the Buffalo and Erie County Girl Scouts, Director and Treasurer of Breath of Life Ministries, and several other community boards and taskforces.



Maria Whyte

*Deputy County Executive
Erie County, New York*

Maria Whyte is currently the Deputy County Executive (DCE) in Erie County, NY. She has served in this post since January 2015 and is the first female in a generation to hold the title. As DCE she advances the County's most significant economic development projects and provides strategic operational support for the County's many departments.

From January 2012 to January 2015, Maria served Erie County as the Commissioner of the Department of Environment and Planning (DEP). Prior to becoming the DEP Commissioner, Maria served six years as the 6th District Erie County Legislator, representing Buffalo's Westside, Black Rock, and Riverside. She also served as the Democratic Majority Leader during her entire tenure on the Legislature and is the first freshman Legislator to ever be elected Majority Leader.

Maria graduated summa cum laude and has a B.A. in International Relations with Honors from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. She was named one of Buffalo's "10 MOST POWERFUL WOMEN" by the Buffalo Spree magazine in 2006 and was featured in Business First's list of "40 under 40" in 2016. Maria was also named one of the "Power 125 Women" by Business First in 2019.

Maria is originally from Kansas City but moved to Buffalo in October 1999 and currently lives with her husband and two children on Buffalo's west side.



Jill Ann Robbins-Jabine

*Chief Executive Officer
YWCA Western New York*

Jill Robbins-Jabine is the CEO of YWCA Western New York. For nearly 150 years, YWCA Western New York has been dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

After spending over twenty years in corporate America, Ms. Robbins-Jabine made an intentional segue into the non-profit sector, leveraging skills honed in private industry to drive social justice and community reform efforts. Working in partnership with myriad community stakeholders, Jill re-imagines the status quo through the lens of sustainable and just systems that benefit marginalized individuals and communities, and society as a whole. Ms. Robbins-Jabine holds a BS in Business, Management and Economics, and an MBA from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Jill resides in Buffalo, NY with her husband of 26 years, Bill. Their cats, Pierre and Josephine, do their level best to keep them entertained and distracted from missing their children - Zachary, a 2021 graduate of Ithaca College who recently relocated to Philadelphia, and Clio, a 2022 graduate of St. John's College in Annapolis where she remains until grad school.

Introduction:

Since the onset of COVID-19 in late 2019 and early 2020, the pandemic has upended family life, shuttered daycare centers and pushed millions of women out of the workforce. Between February 2020 and February 2021, 2.4 million women dropped out of the workforce. Numbers still indicate that women's workforce participation is not back up to pre-pandemic employment levels and the current state of the childcare system could be a significant reason.¹ The gaps in the caregiving infrastructure make it hard for women to go back to work, especially those who work low-wage service jobs due to unpredictable and unstable work schedules. These factors created challenges with caregiving responsibilities before the pandemic, but now if kids are not in school during the day or if a child care provider has closed over the pandemic, these difficulties are further exacerbated. Adding to the challenges is the rise in childcare costs.



The Center for American Progress found that the cost of center-based child care — as opposed to family child care — jumped by 44 percent in 2021.¹ While childcare should be thought of as the responsibility of both parents, it is unfortunately still women who are primarily responsible, with many comparing a woman's salary to the cost of childcare to decide whether or not it's worth it, and it's less likely to be worth it if childcare costs are soaring. In addition to the rising cost of childcare, the low wages and poor benefits for childcare workers exacerbate childcare industry issues even further.

According to the Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab primary findings on the True Cost of Childcare, three-quarters of all child care workers earn less than \$15.00 per hour, compared to just one-third of all workers in Erie County, and more than half of all child care workers lack employer health care, compared to one-quarter of the county-wide workforce.²

Additionally, child care workers in Erie County are disproportionately women (88%) and people of color (35%), and thus their low wages and poor benefits further worsen existing patterns of economic and racial inequality.² Given the foundational role that child care work plays in support of the entire workforce, allowing these dynamics within the childcare infrastructure to continue has devastating effects throughout the economy and society.

In Spring 2022, University at Buffalo students, under the guidance of the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women, conducted interviews with nine community members, including childcare advocates, providers and government officials, who shared their thoughts on what issues exist in the current system and what was needed to fix it. This policy brief outlines some of their most pressing concerns and thoughts on how to fix our childcare infrastructure so everyone in our community will benefit from this necessary resource.

Definitions³:

- **Childcare Market Rate Survey:**
Used to determine the prices that licensed, registered, and permitted childcare providers charge parents for childcare throughout New York State.
- **Market Rates:**
Also known as the New York State Child Care Block Grant (NYSCCBG) subsidy program for low-income families. The market rates are a ceiling for state and federal reimbursement for payments for childcare services.

- **Childcare Modalities:**

- **Family Day Care (FDC):** A program caring for children for more than three hours per day per child in which child day care is provided in a family home for three to six children. Providers are usually self-employed.
- **Group Family Day Care (GFDC):** A program caring for children for more than three hours per day per child in which child day care is provided in a family home for seven to twelve children of all ages, except for those programs operating as a family day care home, which care for seven or eight children. Providers are usually self-employed.
- **Day Care Center (DCC):** A program or facility which is not a residence in which child day care is provided on a regular basis to more than six children for more than three hours per day per child for compensation or otherwise.
- **School-Aged Child Care (SACC):** A program or facility which is not a residence in which child day care is provided to an enrolled group of seven or more children under 13 years of age during the school year before and/or after the period such children are ordinarily in school or during school lunch periods. School-age child care programs also may provide care during school holidays and those periods of the year in which school is not in session, including summer vacation. Such programs must operate consistent with the local school calendar.



Montserrat Cubos Interviewed Diane Abram

Gender, Race and Economic Class and Childcare

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***“The assumption is we care for
kids because we love them,
and there’s no need of
paying us more money.”***

- Diane Abram, Director of Toot Toot Day Care, Inc.

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Gender expectations for women influence the U.S. childcare system. Since reproductive labor has historically been considered women’s labor that happens naturally, these misconceptions surrounding women and childcare undeniably lead to childcare workers not earning living wages. According to Diane Abram, the director of Toot Toot Day Care, Inc., a family day care center in Buffalo, New York, when it comes to thinking about how the childcare system in the U.S. could improve, we need to go straight to the workforce of childcare facilities.⁴ One of the primary concerns is the living wage of childcare workers. A study developed by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in the University of California, Berkeley reveals that the childcare workforce has not seen a substantial increase in its salaries since 1997, resulting in impoverished workers.⁵ Additionally, this has been further supported by Cornell’s study, “The True Cost of Child Care,” which reports an average wage of \$23,000 per year and \$10.38 per hour for child care workers in Erie County.² Both studies and Abram’s words confirm the urgency to prioritize childcare workers’ wages and employment benefits.

Furthermore, this limited living wage afflicts Women of Color the most. Abram argues that this working condition increases racial inequalities and the feminization of poverty: “We’re minorities as well, or more than half, are also

Black and Brown. So, we're looking at discrimination to tell you the truth."⁴ All these characteristics of the childcare system in the U.S. have provoked an unstable childcare workforce that affects workers, families, communities, and the U.S. economy.



The lack of a living wage reflects the fact that childcare work is undervalued due to the absence of recognition of what is required to provide this service. Abram notes that "so many people have no idea what it takes to provide quality early childcare programs."⁴ Moreover, a report of childcare challenges and opportunities carried out in 2012 by the National Research Council in the U.S. observes that childcare work is mainly associated with work whose "primary purpose is enabling parents to work."⁶ This limited understanding of the qualities and training required of childcare workers does not correspond with the real work and responsibilities they carry out, overshadowing their legitimate experience. Consequently, women in the childcare workforce earn less than other women with similar academic qualifications in other professions.⁶ In addition, Abram emphasizes that childcare centers and family care centers are forced to cut off the cost of care to provide an affordable service; however, those efforts to reduce expenses have also impacted the quality of the service. "The cost of care has been subsidized by the daycare businesses. We're cutting corners in every kind of way so that parents would be able to afford the childcare. The money paid to Daycare to cover the cost of care, the actual cost of care that will prevent so many Daycares from closing,"⁴ she states.

This brief description of the conditions under which the childcare workforce functions reveals one of the obvious steps to take in order to improve the system: better living wages. Thus, from Abram's perspective, an ideal childcare system would pay a living wage to childcare workers. Consequently, they would have enough funding to support their families without the need from public assistance programs. Abram confirms this: "Many childcare workers, because of the current pay, are on public assistance, food stamps, Medicaid. When you can support your family without receiving public services, you're going to be happy."⁴



Another step for improvement comes from the economic support that childcare centers need to exist. Abram asserts the importance of having additional supplies for children to keep a quality service such as learning instruments, tools, and technology: "I'm on the East side; the families that I serve, 99% are subsidized. So, when the kids break their computer or something like that, [I would be able to] provide computers."⁴ Aside from a living wage and learning resources, Abram knows the benefits of working together by including childcare providers, parents, and communities to improve the childcare system. Collaborative work between childcare providers reveals the potential to better understand how daycare centers work within their variations and possible ways to fix problems. Abram states, "When we come together as one, I believe this is where we get our strength. In terms of advocating."⁴

According to Travis in “Cultivating a Thriving Childcare Workforce: A Theory-Driven Qualitative Analysis,” establishing support with other childcare providers is essential since they help each other with multiple issues that child care centers might face, which vary from one another.⁷

Lisarie Martin

Interviewed Colleen Brecker

Childcare in Rural Erie County: You Can’t spell Fundamental Without Fund

“I don’t think the childcare system is broken in the United States. I think it’s broken in New York State”

- Colleen Brecker

High Standards Without Financial Health

According to the Cornell report, between 2019 and 2020 the childcare sector dissipated by 11%.² To help bring these statistics to life, we spoke with Colleen Brecker who maintains a fulfilling career as a childcare provider at Early Bird Childcare Centers, Inc, in Springville, NY. This rural daycare center had seen better days before the pandemic and the minimum wage raise in 2019. Brecker helped shed light on how COVID-19 regulations and mandates have compounded the decreasing percentage of workers in childcare. She begins the interview by explaining how the faltering sustainability of the childcare system began before COVID-19. “I don’t think the childcare system is broken in the United States. I think it’s broken in New York State. New York State has a lot of unfunded mandates and regulations. Their requirements for teachers are much higher, and they don’t provide any help. There’s no problem with there being high standards, but you can’t have these high standards without financial health.”

She believes this was, in large part, due to the minimum wage increase for employees⁸, as government funding to help bridge this new wage raise was non-existent. This left underfunded childcare providers unable to pay their workers a livable wage and health benefits. According to Brecker, this lack of financial health has led many employees from childcare centers like Early Bird to work at Delta Sonic, Wal-Mart, and Target.⁸



This creates a larger problem outside of childcare and this loss of purposeful work is detrimental as Brecker explains during the interview: “I feel like they [government figures] just want this class of people who have no purpose. I still have my teachers because they work with a purpose. They [teachers] know what they do is important and meaningful...” She continues to list the many grievances of being underfunded and the inability to be compensated by charging families more money: “It would be at least \$375 a week for a baby, just to provide everyone for \$15 an hour, and that doesn’t even include health insurance.”⁸ Early Bird’s rural location is at risk of losing business if they charge any more than what they currently do. Brecker remarks that parents will rely on neighbors, family, or remain at home to avoid costly childcare. This fact is documented in a recent report on rural and urban childcare by The Daily Yonder: “Rural parents were 13% more likely than their urban counterparts to rely on family and friends for childcare.”⁹

Due to the long waiting lists, parents are enrolling their children in daycare at a much later stage in their cognitive and social development. This is creating a hindrance to childcare centers like Early Bird because they are not sufficiently funded to provide additional services to accommodate these new needs of incoming children. Brecker states that the fight to raise the minimum wage again makes for a bleak future for childcare providers because they're scraping by with the current wage rate. Additionally, she also expresses tensions between childcare centers and qualified teachers who work at the centers. According to Colleen, teachers with mandated credentials don't attend to a soiled child.⁸

This attitude hinders the flow of daily life at childcare centers because not all children are potty trained and who is going to help with diapers? Legislators offering to take over the group of children for free daycare is not as helpful as you may think. According to Early Bird, this robs them of any potential income. Why would parents enroll their children in expensive childcare when the school district is designated to give free babysitting? These gestures are hurting childcare centers more than helping. The government is using alternative ways to put a Band-Aid on a growing issue instead of investing the money where it is needed most. Brecker exclaims, "It's either help us or get out of the way!"⁸



Bianca Sponaugle
Interviewed Vonetta Rhodes
Erie County Child Care Workers:
Burdened and Neglected

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***"It's kind of difficult for me
to call the childcare system
a system."***

- Vonetta Rhodes, Child Care Advocate
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When it comes to financial health for the childcare sector, it's imperative to remember a livable wage for childcare providers is only one side of the issue. These facilities are also expected to provide high quality care with barely enough funds to pay their workers.



We spoke with Vonetta Rhodes, a childcare advocate for Erie County, and learned about other costs that accumulate daily in childcare centers. The generalized market rate at which the amount of funding is based on for childcare centers doesn't "include the daily costs for food; breakfast, lunch, or snack," states Rhode plus other costs that need funding as well.¹⁰ "It doesn't include the countless hours of care that it takes in the classroom, or in the home environment or outside the home environment. It doesn't include the community partnering it takes, the many phone calls, it doesn't include utilities, doesn't include the constant care and connection that it takes."¹⁰

In Erie County, the median effective hourly wage of childcare workers is lower than New York’s minimum wage, which was \$12.50 at the time of the Cornell report.² Childcare workers should have pay parity with primary and secondary educators, but also have their service recognized as its own. Rhodes elaborates, “What we do is precious, it is unique, you must be skilled a certain way, and not everybody can do it. Early care and education are terribly underfunded, criminally underfunded.”¹⁰



A transformation to the sector is needed. Addressing the current needs of everyone involved in childcare must include proper funding requirements, and proper compensation for childcare providers.

Skylar Ronacher
Interviewed **Kimberly Suminski**
Combating Issues Impacting Resource Networks: Providers, Childcare, and Early Intervention

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“We need to be able to address the needs of the childcare providers. People can’t go back to work if they have children that require childcare.”

- Kimberly Suminski, Chief Executive Officer of Child Care Resource Network

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The longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the deficit in the workforce and subsequent childcare services.² An interview with Kimberly Suminski, Chief Executive Officer of Child Care Resource Network, examines the decline in availability of early intervention childcare for working parents and how the effects are detrimental for children’s development.

First, childcare providers earn dramatically less income when accepting a child who receives government subsidies. This implies that childcare providers who are accepting more disenfranchised families are not able to provide adequate wages for their employees which can impact the quality of early childcare interventions.¹¹ Providers may also be unable to charge low-income families enough to complement the standard of early intervention needed due to the state of subsidy limitations.¹¹



Ultimately, this leads to families asking neighbors and family to watch their children. In other cases, parents are not returning to work in order to avoid waitlists and high prices.¹¹ According to Suminski, this is a ripple effect that is felt by all in the community. This means each component of childcare impacts the other, and to address the issue at hand is to address the entire infrastructure of childcare. Suminski also mentions how children are more likely to experience behavioral problems in their later years without early childcare intervention by professional childcare workers versus well-intentioned neighborhood babysitters.¹¹

Alexis Heng
Interviewed Sheri Scavone

Childcare: An Investment into Human Capital

“So, we don’t value caretaking as work; we don’t value it in the home; we don’t value it outside of the home.”

- Sheri Scavone, the CEO of the Western New York Women’s Foundation

Over the years, childcare has been a chronically underfunded and ignored industry. Providers in the industry are overworked and underpaid for their labor, while parents are not given sufficient government assistance to afford quality childcare. This becomes a cycle that eats itself, as the most affected demographic tends to be women of color who are already disadvantaged. As childcare is an infrastructure issue, its neglect leads to further inequity for those demographics.² Sheri Scavone, the CEO of the Western New York Women’s Foundation (WNYWF) who has focused her efforts towards advocating for better childcare policies, has said that as a society, “...we have this devaluing of women’s work, and quite frankly, of caretaking... So, we don’t value caretaking as work; we don’t value it in the home; we don’t value it outside of the home. And so, we have not looked at it as a public good and invested any funding in it.”¹² The neglect of this industry has resulted in lower wages for providers and employees, families undergoing financial hardship just to get childcare, and overall, insufficient resources for everyone involved, resulting in harm to the economy as a whole. Additionally, the pandemic has also given us an idea of how a world with even less adequate childcare would look like, and thus has proven that a significant amount of economic activity is dependent on the current childcare system alone.

Hence, investments into childcare are crucial and should be seriously considered by legislators for the benefit of not only the people, but the economy as well.



Such economic influence from an already struggling industry presents numerous possibilities for the future, especially one where there is adequate access to quality childcare for all. Scavone emphasizes childcare as not only a significant part of the infrastructure of a society, but as an economic asset: “...what we’ve started to talk about is investing in human capital, because that return in terms of our community, and our state, is unmatched with anything else. When you think about capital, think about human capital as the building block for our society.”¹² Viewing child care not as a convenient service with short-term benefits but also as a beneficial long-term economic investment emphasizes the immediate urgency of this matter—the sooner investments are made in child care, the sooner we will see its long-term benefits. Scavone herself and the WNYWF have advocated for the Facilitated Enrollment Fund, which seeks to benefit families who do not make enough to support their children without struggle, yet do not fall under the required poverty level.¹³ Additionally, Senator Brisport of New York introduced a bill in 2021 to amend the criteria for the qualification of certain child care assistance programs.¹⁴

Most notably, Child Care for All has recently submitted a budget request for 5 billion dollars and to pass a Universal Childcare Act in New York State.^{1,15} These investments in child care are all steps in the right direction, as various studies show returns on investment for child care exceed other forms of investments that can be made.

¹This budget bill was passed shortly after the interview with Scavone and during the process of writing this policy report. Refer to the Conclusion for more insight.

Sara Bachraty
Interviewed Marie Cannon

Childcare: a key component of workforce development

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“This is absolutely not a women’s issue, not a parents’ issue, but a workforce issue.”

- Marie Cannon, Erie County Commissioner of the Department of Social Services

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At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, Erie County created the Emergency Child Care Task Force to ensure essential workers had access to childcare. We spoke to Task Force Co-Chair and Commissioner of the Department of Social Services, Marie Cannon, to better understand why the childcare system is broken, and she states, “What the pandemic really did was . . . elucidate and exacerbate the issues that were already part of a flawed system.”¹⁶



The problems with the childcare system originate from the lack of funding. Cannon explains that the true cost of care is “more than the cost of a year at UB” at around “\$15,000 for a year of childcare.”¹⁶ This means that families cannot afford childcare unless they are affluent, and providers cannot afford to charge what is really needed to provide quality care, so they are left to subsidize it on their own. On top of that, staff members must be qualified and well-educated, and 75-80% of childcare costs go to staff.¹⁶ While that percentage may seem high, the average childcare worker in Erie County makes only \$10.38 an hour.² Without livable wages, the childcare system lacks workers, and “if childcare goes, so does the workforce,” says Cannon.¹⁶ In the absence of a safe place for their children, people will not be able to go to work. Amidst COVID-19 closures, 51.5% of women had to alter their work hours to meet childcare needs in a study conducted by the Institute of Women’s Policy Research.¹⁷ The childcare system is too often treated as a women’s issue when, in reality, the workforce and the economy rely heavily on its existence.



The solution lies in raising the market rate, so centers are able to pay staff a livable wage and cover the true cost of childcare. While Commissioner Cannon understands that the market rate is too low, there is little the Department of Social Services in Erie County can do by itself. Instead, all policies come from the New York State Government, and Cannon and her department have to follow state funding regulations: “I can’t advocate, I can educate to give the information to

those who can advocate and lobby, but we were able to . . . in the Emergency Childcare Taskforce . . . identify where the policy pieces are to say, 'here are the places that need to be changed,' and one of the areas is increasing the market rate."¹⁶ In order to fix the problems within the childcare system and ensure a functioning workforce, policy needs to be introduced that increases funding for childcare.

Sara Bachraty
Interviewed Maria Whyte

The Childcare System: Undervalued and Underfunded

"As somebody who has power to do something about the problem or . . . influence over the problem, it's really important that I remain proximate to the problem."

*- Maria Whyte, Erie County
Deputy County Executive*

Though the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the challenges facing the childcare system, they certainly did not start there. We spoke to Maria Whyte, Deputy County Executive and Emergency Child Care Taskforce Co-Chair, to better understand the problems within the childcare system from a governmental perspective. "A budget is a moral document . . . where you fund what you value," says Whyte.¹⁸ The childcare system is undervalued and therefore, underfunded.

In order to fix the childcare system, Deputy County Executive Whyte advocates for an increase in the market rate. If wages were to remain as low as they are, the childcare system would need an additional \$8 million just to meet the true cost of care, but providing these workers with a wage increase would bring this number to \$20 million.¹⁸

"Erie County does not actually have the power to set the market rate on what we pay providers for subsidized childcare," says Whyte.¹⁸ These rates are set by the state and federal government. However, those who create policy are often not proximate to the problem. Without truly understanding the root of the issues within the childcare system, time and resources will be spent solving the wrong problem. One example Whyte gives is the proposed change in eligibility for subsidized childcare in this year's New York State budget. Governor Hochul wants to make government subsidies available to more families. While this change may seem beneficial, it does not address the low market rate and therefore, the low wages of childcare workers.¹⁸ If policy-makers wish to fix the childcare system, they must be proximate to the issue in order to understand what needs to be done.



Making childcare more accessible is an important component in addressing the shortcomings of the childcare system; increasing the market rate is fundamental in order to make significant changes. "The cost of care model has to be calculated and incorporated into the wages for childcare workers."¹⁸

While universal accessibility to childcare is the ideal scenario, the current problems the childcare system faces are due to lack of funding. Whyte says, "I'm a woman with white privilege, with resources, who can throw cash at the problem, and it [the lack of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic] still almost killed us."¹⁸ Providing more families with access to subsidized childcare will not solve the problem if there are not enough workers and funds to provide that care.

Matthew DePlato
Interviewed Jill Robbins

Putting the Power in the Hands of Families

“The whole childcare system has a fundamentally inadequate distribution of resourcing.”

- Jill Robbins, Chief Executive Office, YWCA, WNY

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the underlying issue of childcare which is woefully underfunded. Unfortunately, the obstacles facing childcare providers are not one-dimensional. Subsidies are not an adequate fix for childcare and have shown to cause more hindrances than benefits.

In an interview with Jill Robbins, Chief Executive Officer of YWCA, WNY we learn “over 80% of subsidized providers report inadequate revenue compared with 50% of providers who do not care for subsidized children.”¹⁹ Furthermore, parents who receive DSS subsidies have not been able to receive quality childcare services due to subsidized care providers’ inability to afford competitive wages,¹⁹ as most care providers that accept subsidies cannot compete with, for example, the wages of fast-food service.

Throughout 2019-2020, Erie County has had an increased deficit in the childcare workforce by 11%, and most in that percentage have gone into food service.² Robbins’ also mentions that “society as a whole does not value...the role of [Child Care Providers] ...we are among the lowest paid industries...That is largely because we are ...90-95% female,” which is further supported by the Cornell report.¹⁹



Childcare is a vast sector affecting many. The industry requires reconfiguration to survive because there are many issues within it that need to be solved. Robbins believes that “you cannot pinpoint it to one thing... There are so many vested parties that nobody wants to give up their piece of control.”¹⁹ It is critical to fix our view on childcare with the importance it holds and require people who are in a place to make changes to do exactly that. Our future depends on it.



Conclusion:

This policy brief has showcased how childcare workers have been devalued with insufficient compensation for years before the COVID-19 pandemic and their financial struggles exacerbated by ever-evolving State mandates and regulations without additional funding. Erie County is exhaustively advocating for adequate and deserving compensation for the childcare sector, which ultimately affects the community. If our children are not receiving the best care, WE all feel it.

Our interviewees ranged from rural childcare providers to an Erie County Deputy County Executive, which highlights that this is an issue for the entire community and requires all hands-on deck. The necessity for more funding cannot and should not fall solely on the shoulders of families or providers who are still recovering from the multiple effects of the pandemic. It is also important to note that the high cost of childcare is not due to the high wages the care workers are receiving. Because of this, we have learned that childcare workers have migrated to new fields of work, such as fast-food restaurants, to maintain a livable wage.

We have learned that the childcare field is undervalued therefore underfunded. As Erie County advocates for new approaches to make childcare more affordable and equitable for families and providers, it is essential to remember that quality reflects funding. There cannot be enhanced quality without more funding. The quality of childcare will suffer because there are not enough workers employed to match enrolled children. This is detrimental not only to the overall health of the childcare infrastructure but to our economic and community infrastructure as well.

High-quality childcare requires a multi-column criteria checklist, and it is not easily remedied by simply allowing more children into rooms. The need for quality dependable childcare is a crucial infrastructure issue for all of our community.

We need policies that acknowledge the complex nature of this issue, including raising wages and benefits for childcare workers, ensuring providers have the resources and support they need to provide quality childcare and enrollment access and affordability for families.

What do we do now? We must invest in solutions to support and sustain childcare infrastructure.

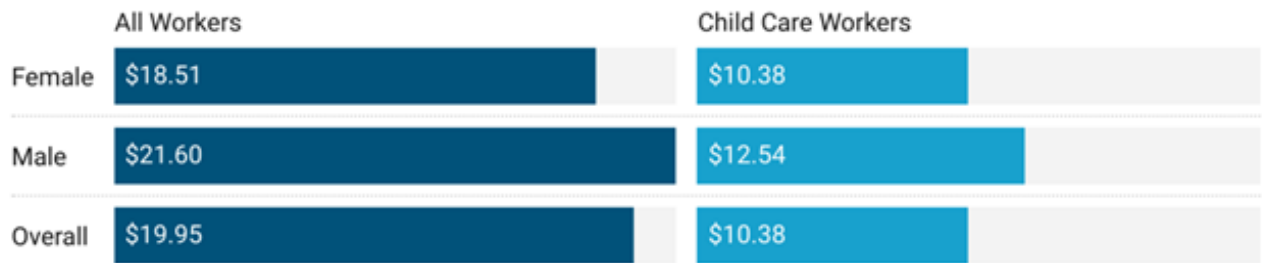
The recent New York State budget proposes a beacon of hope for the path towards universal childcare.⁵ This investment embodies the language necessary to allow a healthier relationship between state leaders, local governments and childcare providers. The budget's most notable initiatives for the childcare industry include "investing \$343 million to continue stabilization funds for childcare providers, with 75% of the funds to be used for workforce initiatives" and "making modifications to requirements that often are used to exclude family childcare providers and some center-based programs from participating in universal pre-k."⁵

These efforts are essential for the integrity and future of childcare. The foundation must be re-evaluated and restructured so it may continue to support the children who will need it and the employees who dedicate their lives to this field.

Though this budget illuminates Governor Hochul's valiant effort to invest \$7B over four years into childcare, it is far from enough. New York State must restructure how they calculate the cost of childcare—for example, paying childcare subsidies based on enrollment, not attendance, and including permanent funding to retain qualified childcare providers on their payrolls. These concerns need addressing if there is a future for universal childcare. The NYS funding mindset needs reevaluation to encapsulate the bigger picture so it may continue to support the children and the employees who dedicate their lives to this field. Finally, immigration status and non-traditional work schedules must not suffer penalties. The childcare structure is not one-size-fits-all and should provide access to all the unique families who call New York State their home.

Appendix:

Median Effective Hourly Wages in Erie County, NY



Effective hourly wages computed from self-reported data on usual hours worked, weeks worked, and earnings

Fig. 1: Graphs comparing hourly wages by occupation and gender in Erie County, NY from: Cornell IRL. "The True Cost of Child Care: Erie County, NY." 2021, p. 13.

Is your child care business making enough money to provide the services you would like to provide?

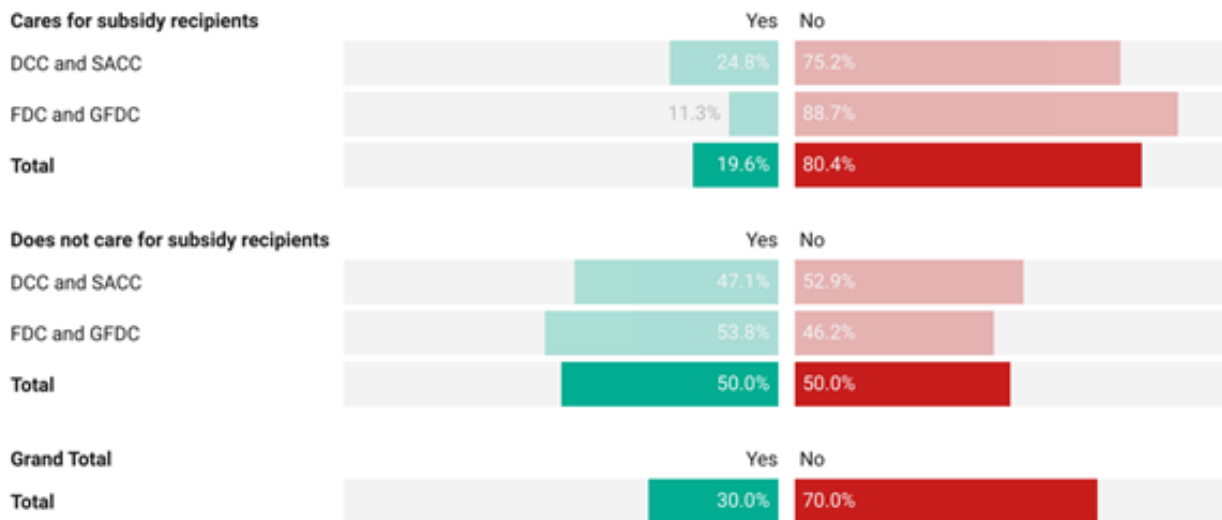


Fig. 2: Graphs displaying results of a survey that asked child care providers their thoughts on their revenue and adequate services from: Cornell IRL. "The True Cost of Child Care: Erie County, NY." 2021, p. 21.

Does the current Erie County DSS child care subsidy fully cover your costs of providing care for the child(ren) receiving the subsidy?

■ No ■ Yes ■ Not Sure

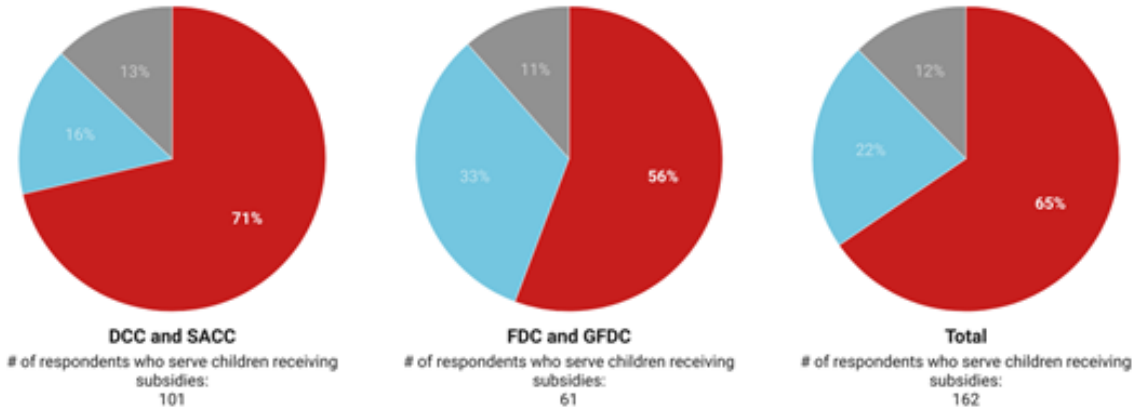


Fig. 3: Charts displaying results of a survey that asked child care providers their thoughts on current child care subsidies, divided by types of care centers from: Cornell IRL. "The True Cost of Child Care: Erie County, NY," 2021, p. 22

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