

Child Care Focus Groups

FINAL REPORT

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for the Governor's Task Force on Child Care

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Introduction and Key Findings

A robust child care system is critical to ensure the healthy development of Alaska’s young children and families and to enable parents to participate in the workforce and drive economic growth across all sectors. Sixty-one percent of Alaskans reside in communities where there is an insufficient number of State licensed child care facilities for the number of children who need care.¹ Alaska has lost nearly 10% of its licensed child care providers since January 2020, and more licensed facilities are anticipated to close after federal pandemic relief is spent.¹

Through [Administrative Order No. 346](#), the [Governor’s Task Force on Child Care](#) was formed in February 2023 with the intent of developing a plan that improves the availability and affordability of quality child care in Alaska. The Task Force has an initial report due to the legislature on December 31, 2023, with a final report due on July 31, 2024. To help inform their recommendations, several studies have been commissioned to better understand the child care issues facing Alaskans, as well as to identify specific solutions to improve the situation. As part of that effort, the State of Alaska contracted with Agnew::Beck to conduct twenty-five focus groups during the fall of 2023 with providers, families, and employers across Alaska, to gather their ideas on how to improve child care in Alaska. This report summarizes key findings and recommendations from the focus group effort.

Governor’s Task Force on Child Care Focus Areas

- Current child care landscape
- Licensing and background checks
- Equitable access to child care
- Quality of child care
- Workforce and sustainability
- Payment mechanisms

Focus Group Goals

- Participants shared about their sense of the current child care system.
- Participants focused on finding specific solutions and recommendations that the Task Force could bring forward.

¹ *Source: Governor Dunleavy’s Administrative Order No. 346

Key Findings

Over the course of September through November 2023, Agnew::Beck held 11 focus groups with families, 10 focus groups with providers, and 5 focus groups with employers. A total of 130 people participated from across Alaska. The following are key findings and solutions from the conversations and input provided by the participants. Additional findings and recommendations identified by focus group participants are included in chapters three through seven of this report.

- **Key Finding:** The current child care system is financially unsustainable. The rates that are affordable for families are not sufficient to cover the cost of operating child care and providing adequate staff compensation. This results in a lack of child care options and an inability to open new facilities.
Proposed Solution: Increase the level of State Child Care Assistance (State CCA) so that State CCA payments are in alignment with the costs of providing care. Introduce a stepped approach to the State CCA income threshold like Alaska Housing and Finance Corporation’s housing assistance program. As providers raise rates to a sustainable level, families on the edge can receive some level of support. Adjust State CCA income levels to account for cost of living and the corresponding increase in income.
- **Key Finding:** Recruitment and retention of the child care work force is the single biggest obstacle to operating a child care system. Career trajectories are not apparent, training is not easily incorporated into the work flow, illness is common, pay is typically low, full benefits are not typical, and co-worker synergy can only be developed in the presence of the children. These factors create stressful jobs not adequately valued by society given the importance of early childhood development for the individual and the broader community.
Proposed Solution: Increasing awareness and advocacy through visibility. Strengthen the child care workforce pipeline through partnerships with high schools and establishing and promoting clear career pathways. Look at methods to provide funding or incentives to child care centers to provide retirement and benefits packages. Allow child care providers to organize for the purpose of collective bargaining. Establish mentorship and training opportunities that help support and engage individuals interested in pursuing a career in child care or getting licensed. Reengage retired, semi-retired, and former child care professional through the establishment of substitute lists for care providers and administrators.
- **Key Finding:** Social, emotional, behavioral, and financial/economic issues are more common now, possibly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The added stresses of these higher needs children, along with a lack of training or support were identified as factors that are increasing staff burnout and turnover. Additionally, child care scarcity and lack of mental health support and training for staff, means that private providers can—and often must—say “no” to higher needs and more vulnerable children. This ends up placing a burden on programs like Head Start that cannot turn children away and are experiencing a much higher ratio of these higher needs children.
Proposed Solution: Establish mentorship and training opportunities that help support and equip staff as they work with higher needs children. Establish a network of mental health providers and support programs that child care providers can refer families to.
- **Key Finding:** Quality child care means very different things to different people and in different communities, but many times the realities of community infrastructure, staffing, and resources and the desired child care solutions did not align nicely into one of the licensure options.

Proposed Solution: Work with communities and local providers in a collaborative way, to understand and create licensure options that have the flexibility to enable the kinds of care that communities want and that are in alignment with the realities of their community (infrastructure, culture, etc.), while still meeting safety and child development best practices. Schedule and engage providers and communities in periodic reviews of licensure options.

- **Key Finding:** The licensing process was reported to be slow, confusing, inflexible, and very time consuming, with providers facing difficulties in navigating varying interpretations of regulations by different licensing officials.

Proposed Solution: More effective communication with user-friendly tools like checklists and online tracking of the licensure process and requests. Expand economic support and technical assistance or mentorship programs to help providers get their programs licensed and open.

- **Key Finding:** Challenges within the child care industry have been a concern for many years. It is only recently there has been enough shared attention to these issues and their impacts on families, providers, and communities.

Proposed Solution: Leverage this moment and continue to engage families, providers, and employers to ensure their perspective are heard throughout the process.

Terminology

For purposes of this report, licensing refers to licenses issued and enforced by the State of Alaska Child Care Program Office (CCPO) and the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) which conducts their own licensing and inspection process. Once licensed through the CCPO/MOA, providers can access subsidized support programs such as State Child Care Assistance (federal funds allocated to the State of Alaska for disbursement to families who meet income requirements), Child Care grants, and the Child Care Food Program.

A CCPO/MOA license is required when a provider delivers care to more than four non-related children. There are three different types of licenses that the CCPO offers: 1) Licensed Home with up to eight children 2) Licensed Group Home with 9 to 12 children (not within the MOA) and 3) CCPO Licensed Center with 13 or more children, or MOA Licensed Center with 9 or more children. There are certain types of facilities *exempt* from State licensure pursuant to AAC 57.015 where 11 different exemptions are identified. Below are a few exemption types and unique providers/programs that are worth defining as they relate to participation in the focus group conversation.

Military provider exempt. A facility located on a United States Department of Defense or United States Coast Guard installation is not required to secure State of Alaska child care licensure. Military child care providers attended several focus groups.

Exempt home. When a provider offers regular care to four or fewer children who are not relatives of the caregiver. Some focus group participants either currently or previously utilized this type of child care or had offered it in the past, as a provider.

Tribal providers and funds. Tribes receive funds to support child care in their communities for Tribal citizens. Tribes can use funds to support the cost of child care for individual families and use funds to operate child care programs. For Tribal members to also receive State CCA, the provider must be licensed through CCPO/MOA, or approved through the CCPO CCA Program. Based on the contact list provided by CCPO

for families receiving State CCA, 85% of those receiving State CCA in Alaska are from Anchorage, Mat-Su or Fairbanks. Many rural areas, including Bristol Bay, the Y-K Delta, the Northwest Arctic Borough/Maniilaq region, the North Slope Borough/Arctic Slope Native Association region, or the Aleutian Pribilof region, do not have any households receiving State CCA. A small number of State CCA recipients are from other rural areas or Southeast communities (see table below). We share this data because it is relevant to the focus group process in that it highlights a gap in resources for rural communities; many rural families may not be aware of State CCA, for example, and consequently did not share much about that topic during the focus groups. Additionally, the recruitment method for families included emails to all families on State CCA but for many areas of the State, there are no families on State CCA. Only 5 of the 51 family participants were those who participated due to outreach through the State CCA list, meaning that in areas where State CCA is widely used, outreach through email to those on State CCA did not yield substantial turnout of this group of families.

Figure 1. Child Care Assistance by Census Area in Alaska, August 2023

Anchorage	569	47%
Mat-Su	337	28%
Fairbanks N Star	130	11%
Kenai	82	7%
Kodiak	24	2%
Ketchikan Gateway	19	2%
Petersburg	15	1%
Sitka	14	1%
Juneau	10	1%
Chugach	7	1%
Nome	5	<1%
Skagway	2	<1%
Haines	1	<1%
Prince of Wales	1	<1%
Denali	1	<1%
TOTAL	1217	

Participation and Recruitment

Participation

A total of 130 people attended the focus groups, representing 29 different communities. A list of communities from which individuals participated either in person or virtually is shown later in this chapter. The three different types of focus groups (families with young children, child care providers, and employers) are broken down as follows:

- 52 families representing 15 communities.
- 50 participants from 43 different providers representing 20 communities.
- 28 participants from 25 different employers representing 9 communities.

We find that focus groups are most successful when they have between four and 10 people participating, which allows for a small enough group to have a meaningful conversation and enough people for information to be shared. Data on participation is as follows.

- Overall, two-thirds of the focus groups had at least four people in attendance.
- The average size of the focus groups is five participants.
- Approximately, 70% of the participants attended an in-person focus group.
- 91% of the participants who RSVPed that they were attending showed up and participated.
- Of the 43 providers who attended the focus groups, 63% were licensed. The remaining were “exempt,” which includes child care facilities on military bases, Tribal providers, Head Start, centers which have been recently closed, or unlicensed for other reasons.
- Of the 25 employers who attended the focus groups, 80% were nonprofit organizations.

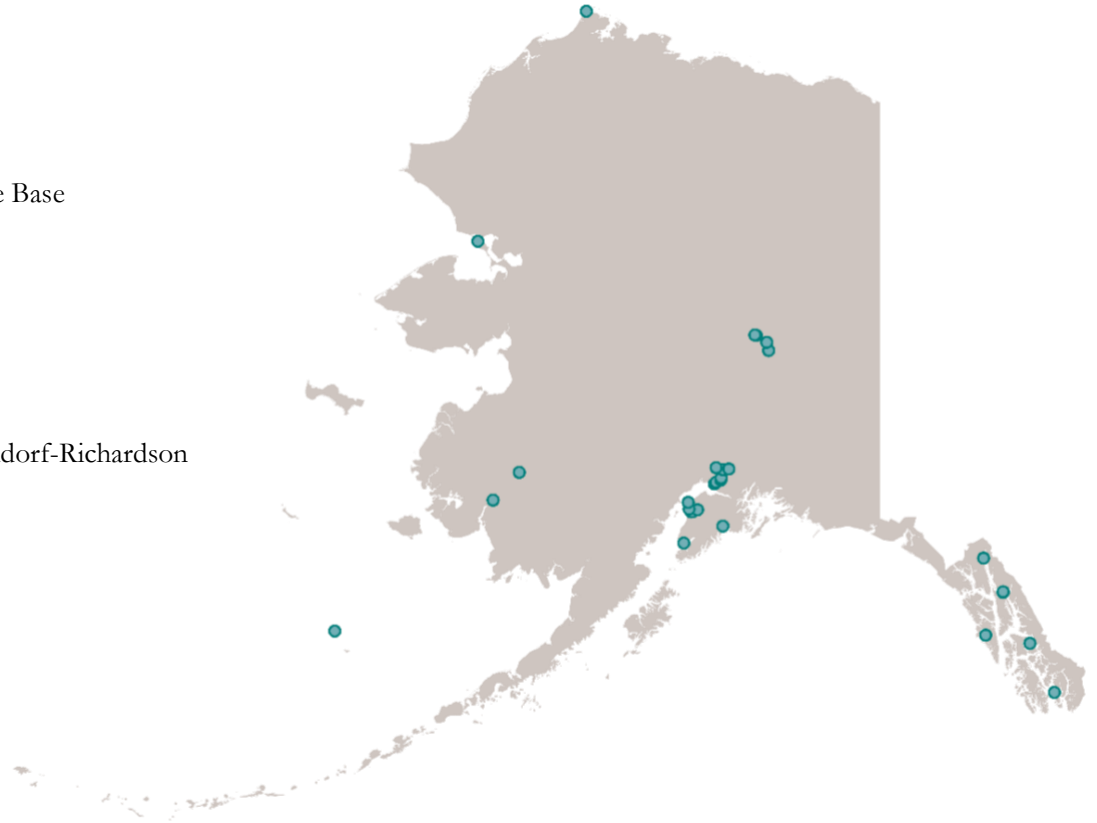
Focus Group Locations

	Families with young children (11)	Child care providers (10)	Employers (5)
1	Kotzebue (in person)	Statewide Licensed (virtual)	Fairbanks (in person)
2	Anchorage (in person)	Statewide Licensed (virtual)	Mat-Su (in person)
3	Fairbanks (in person)	Statewide Exempt (virtual)	Anchorage (in person)
4	Mat-Su (in person)	Anchorage (in person)	Yukon-Kuskokwim region (virtual)
5	Juneau (in person)	Fairbanks (in person)	Statewide (virtual)
6	Saint Paul Island (in person)	Mat-Su (in person)	
7	Kenai/Soldotna (in person)	Juneau (in person)	
8	Utqiagvik (in person)	Kenai/Soldotna (in person)	
9	Yukon-Kuskokwim region (virtual)	Arctic Slope region (virtual)	
10	Statewide (virtual)	Statewide Providers (virtual)	
11	Bethel (virtual)		

Note: A family focus group was held during the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) annual 2023 convention and in person provider focus group in Utqiagvik; however, no attendees were present.

Participants came from the following communities:

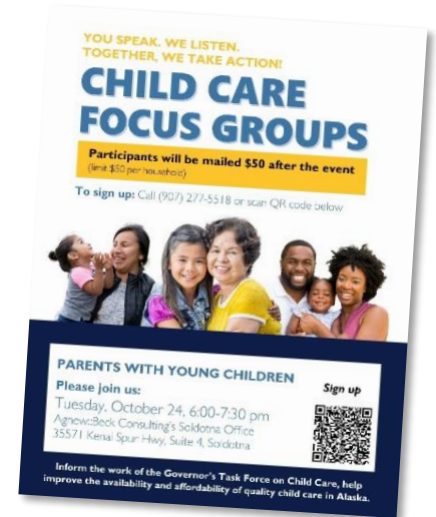
- Anchorage
- Bethel
- Chugiak
- Douglas
- Eagle River
- Eielson Air Force Base
- Fairbanks
- Ft. Wainwright
- Haines
- Homer
- Houston
- Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
- Juneau
- Kalifornski
- Kenai
- Ketchikan
- Kotzebue
- Lower Kalskag
- Nikiski
- Palmer
- Petersburg
- Salcha
- Seward
- Sitka
- Soldotna
- St. Paul
- Sterling
- Utqiagvik
- Wasilla



Recruitment Process

The process of recruiting parents and caregivers, child care providers, employers, and other interested parties to attend the 26 focus groups involved an array of tactics. Families were paid \$50 for their time to participate.

- The first step was creating a platform where participants could “register” for a focus group. The Eventbrite platform allowed tracking the number of registrants and created a database of contact information for reminders and announcements.
- Mailchimp was utilized to send emails to large groups of people such as the six statewide virtual focus groups, and for the focus groups in more populated regions in the state, including Anchorage, the Mat-Su Valley, Fairbanks, the Kenai Peninsula, and Juneau.
- The State provided a database of families on State Child Care Assistance (State CCA), and a database of licensed and exempt providers. The database included contacts for approximately 1,200 families who are on State CCA as well as approximately 500 licensed and exempt providers. Families in the communities where we were holding focus groups, and all licensed and exempt providers in the database were sent at least one email offering an opportunity to participate. Many of the 51 providers who participated were recruited through this direct email list. Less than 10 of the 52 families who participated were from the State CCA list.
- Contacts in local communities, organizations, and businesses were utilized to identify possible participants for family, provider, and employer focus groups, and direct emails were sent to them. These direct emails allowed recruitment in smaller, rural communities where the state-provided databases had few to no contacts, including Kotzebue, St. Paul Island, the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, and Utqiagvik.
- Phone calls were placed to community organizations, providers, and employers where in-person focus groups were held to recruit participants and to spread the word to other possible participants.
- Organizations, including several Chambers of Commerce and at least one school district, included information in their newsletters and/or printed and distributed flyers.
- A supplemental recruitment plan was established for communities where direct email and phone recruitment was not enough. The plans included a combination of targeted Facebook ads, radio PSAs, and flyers and were developed based on community preferences identified by experience and trusted partners in the community.



Reflections on Process

To follow are some reflections on process to help inform next steps and additional outreach to Alaskans around child care.

Tight timeline. Agnew::Beck and the State of Alaska worked under a very tight timeline to conduct 26 focus groups throughout Alaska. The short timeline was necessary to meet the Task Force deadlines associated with their report to the Governor that is due on December 31, 2023. The quick turnaround to prepare, recruit and conduct focus groups created a “buzz” and excitement around the process and helped to get people to the focus groups. However, the tight timeline reduced the extent to which we could utilize intermediary groups to thoughtfully recruit and tailor recruitment strategies to different parts of the state.

Emphasis on recruitment. As always, the process to recruit participants takes time, resources, and partnerships. We were able to successfully recruit within the budget and timeline provided; however, additional time and resources could have improved that process, particularly in terms of working with intermediaries to recruit participants. Additionally, stipends of closer to \$150 per family (instead of \$50) may be needed to help with recruitment.

Multiple processes at the same time. There are several local and statewide initiatives around child care happening at the same time. The Governor's Task Force on Child Care, thread, the Municipality of Anchorage, and several smaller communities, all had meetings, focus groups, surveys, and studies happening in and around the timeframe of this project. This both added to the excitement and caused confusion around which process and what meetings to attend.

Ready for additional feedback. There is now a database of contact information for the 130 people who participated in the focus groups. Many participants expressed an interest in providing additional feedback and input as solutions and recommendations are crafted. Drawing on this contact list provides an opportunity for additional meaningful feedback in the future.

Geographic Distinction: Current Landscape

In the vast geographic and cultural diversity of Alaska, child care providers, families, and employers grapple with very different challenges that significantly impact access, affordability, and cultural appropriateness of child care services. This chapter delves into the multifaceted landscape of rural Alaskan communities, shedding light on the limitations in infrastructure, professional development opportunities, and access to services that set them apart from their road-system counterparts. Additionally, this chapter will address how Tribal and State programs interface in these regions.

Access and Affordability

The number one thing that we heard from families in rural Alaskan communities was that the availability and affordability of care was a huge issue. In most road system communities, families described issues accessing quality, licensed care. In rural Alaska, the challenges around finding care were much more extreme with families stating that they were unable to access any care, licensed or unlicensed.

"It doesn't matter how much money you have if there's nobody there." – Family Focus Group, Bethel.

When families could find care, the costs were extremely high, and far above the levels of support they were able to receive from the State or Tribe. Additionally, they expressed that the break point for receiving State Child Care Assistance (State CCA) did not reflect the increased cost of living, and therefore the wages paid, in rural Alaskan communities.

"The threshold for the State [Child Care Assistance] doesn't cover our region. It just doesn't match the wages and cost of living. If we're putting someone as low income, they wouldn't qualify because the wages are not covering our region." – Provider Focus Group, Utqiagvik

Summary of Findings

- Rural communities have very few, if any, licensed options.
- Even unlicensed in-home care isn't available in some communities.
- Cost is too high to be feasible. Providers cannot charge enough to cover operating costs because families cannot afford to pay (commonly as much or more than the wage earner can bring in, especially if more than one child).
- Interaction with other children is important; without trusted child care, there is less of this.
- The single income threshold for the state does not reflect the increased cost of living and therefore wages in rural communities.
- The amount of the state child care support is way below the cost of providing care, in part because there are few if any licensed providers in rural Alaska and the cost of care study focuses on licensed providers.

Culturally and Regionally Appropriate

In rural Alaskan communities, one theme we heard consistently was that the needs, desires, and realities of the culture, infrastructure, and geography were not accounted for in the current State child care system.

“A lot of us here aren't comfortable representing our people with sovereignty, because we were never allowed to. And it's only now that we're able to speak on these issues. And suddenly, we have an invitation to a table that's already set for not us.” – Family Focus Group, St. Paul Island

“It's unfortunate because we get forgotten out here. I've lived in villages. I've seen the conditions. When we look at these regulations, they're not right for us. They're not ready for us. They're not culturally competent.” – Family Focus Group, Kotzebue

Summary of Findings

- Tribal governments, organizations, and health providers need to be at the table, as well as large employers.
- Trust is critical in communities with high levels of child maltreatment making informal care less feasible.
- When there is a high degree of trust, in-home and family provided care options are preferred over child care facilities in many rural Alaskan communities.
- Subsistence is not currently an allowable reason to need and access child care support from the State, but most Tribally supported child care does recognize this.
- State licensing requirements for in-home child care are challenging to meet in rural Alaska, due to a high number of multi-family homes and the quantity and physical state of the housing and infrastructure available.

Administrative Infrastructure

In rural communities, current, potential, and former licensed providers, as well as employers who looked into opening facilities, consistently stated that one of the major challenges they faced was the lack of administrative infrastructure and the need for licensing tasks to be done in-person outside of their community. Providers spoke about needing to fly staff to other communities with fingerprinting equipment, VUE Testing facilities, or to receive necessary contact time with children to secure their child development associate (CDA). These trips often include one or more overnight stay and were very costly.

“It's hard to find anyone that has the hours of contact time with the children, the appropriate age groups and then to get them to have the CDA completed. That's going to be a hard one to cover in order to open our center. I'm working on my CDA, but we're still going to be looking for someone that has the contact time as well. And in order to keep the center up and running, we need two people with the CDA, the contact time, everything.” – Provider Focus Group, Utqiagvik

We heard from providers in Sitka and Petersburg that the pelican box program University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is offering has been a game changer. UAA ships a pelican box with a 360-degree Owl teleconference camera to a community and a UAA instructor conducts a virtual class with the Owl camera serving as their eyes in the classroom. This may be a model that can be expanded upon as an alternative to in-person courses and inspections.

“Juneau has put something together to go in-person and take these classes, but it's not available and realistic for a lot of other people. Through UAA, Dr. Ducey has created a pelican box with an Owl teleconference camera. The Pelican box comes, and you have a UAA instructor and you're basically doing an online class as a group. You've got an Owl, that's the eyes in the classroom. Anyhow, UAA is creating some ways to help do that occupational endorsement for early childhood [in rural communities].” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Summary of Findings

- Requirement for in-person assessments or inspections (e.g., Fire Marshall, Food Assistance, etc.) is a barrier for rural communities without these positions.
- Rural communities without finger printing equipment or testing facilities requires additional time and expense to fly staff to other communities with that infrastructure.
- Licensing requirements for staff trying to achieve their CDA to spend required hours within specific age groups is not realistic in rural regions with smaller youth populations and requires staff to travel to meet these requirements.

Need for Coordination Between Tribes and State

Families also spoke about a lack of access to non-Tribal child care and non-Tribal child care assistance. We understand from the State CCA database that many communities in rural Alaska have no families in receipt of this assistance or very few. Additionally, in many cases families expressed that they were slipping through the cracks because they were not Tribal members and could not receive Tribal child care support and there were no State licensed or eligible child care option for them so they could not access State CCA funds.

“I would say the Tribe is pretty okay at trying to get low-income Tribal members hooked up with the licensed care givers that they do have. But you know, Bethel is 60% Alaska Native so you have 40% that's non-Native. And so usually, when you think of equitable you think of the Alaska Native population, but here, I'd say that the non-Native population has a harder time accessing licensed child care.” – Family Focus Group, Bethel

When talking with providers and Tribal organizations who provide or have provided care, we heard that the cost of providing a livable wage for their staff members and meeting State licensure requirements (staffing levels and facility construction or renovation in particular) to be eligible for State funding was very high. Because the income threshold for State CCA does not reflect the increased cost of living and pay rate in rural Alaska, there are very few people who can qualify for State CCA and therefore there is not motivation enough to secure and maintain licensure with the State.

“We could utilize the State of Alaska Child Care Assistance, but unfortunately the [threshold], how much you're making and to be qualified, it does not line up with what's needed to live up here...” – Provider Focus Group, Utqiagvik

Rural providers expressed an appreciation for the access that they had to thread trainings and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic and were interested in pursuing opportunities to work together with the State. This idea of wanting to collaborate or coordinate efforts between communities, Tribal child care, and State child care resonated in several of our rural focus groups.

Summary of Findings

- Non-Native Alaskan families are not eligible to receive child care support from the local tribes, but also are unable to find State licensed care options that would allow them to access the State CCA program.
- Tribal child care centers and tribally licensed providers are interested in working more closely with the State.
- Very few families in rural Alaska receive State CCA.

Families: Current Child Care Landscape

Family focus groups engaged in discussions that primarily centered around the shared frustrations and challenges of finding and affording quality child care in Alaska. There were differences between families on the road-system and families in rural Alaska, but in most cases the differences were orders of magnitude with rural families facing a lot of the same issues but to a higher degree.

Challenges Finding Care

The consensus feeling was that finding reliable child care is ‘harder than it used to be’, especially for infants (zero to 18 months) and for weekends, evening, and overnight shifts. Many of the families we spoke with stated that this was a big reason they did not enter or return to the work force after having children. The lack of available child care was also identified as one reason families move out of state or rural communities.

"Zero to 18 months is brutal. You can't find child care for zero to 18 months, because it doesn't exist." – Employer Focus Group, Mat-Su

Summary of Findings

- Little or no care options, especially for infants. People are planning families around child care availability.
- Smaller communities are losing residents because there is not enough child care.
- Waitlists are very long ranging from three months to two and half years and can cost \$200+ per child to be placed on the waitlist.
- Families with child care pay even when they don't "need" it (i.e., summer or holiday breaks) to maintain their slots.
- It is nearly impossible to find care for evening, weekend, and overnight shifts. This impacted workers across numerous industries in Alaska including health care, construction, tourism, and fishing.
- Lack of care is worse than statistics show, because families are making do by working opposite shifts, relying on teenagers and grandparents, using unlicensed care, or performing remote jobs with children in the background.

Cost of Child Care is Too High

The prohibitive cost of child care was a common topic of conversation across all regions and demographics. Families consistently spoke about realizing that they were working to pay for the child care that was allowing them to work, or in some cases even realizing that they would need to pay more for child care than they could earn by working.

"Even with Child Care Assistance (State CCA) it is very expensive to have child care. I used to work as a server, but now I stay home with the children. All of my wages would go to child care if I returned to work right now." – Family Focus Group, Fairbanks

Based on what we heard, circumstances are sometimes hardest for single parents.

"I had to switch jobs because I was losing Child Care Assistance. If you go a few dollars over, there's no, gray area, you drop off the cliff. Dropping off the cliff like that, going from coverage to no coverage, is a hit, especially as a single parent. If you make \$300 more at your job, you're getting \$600 less. And that shouldn't be the idea." – Family Focus Group, Juneau

However, even dual-income earners with the flexibility to work remotely and who have extended family nearby to assist with child care expressed concerns over the cost and availability of child care.

"My family planning is built around the lack of infant care. We have to wait for care and that is with local grandparent help and flexible jobs." – Family Focus Group, Juneau

Summary of Findings

- Cost of care is extremely high. One family reported paying \$40,000 per year for their care for their children.
- The cost of child care outweighs the economic benefit of having another job.
- The State CCA rate does not cover the cost of the care that is available.
- When the State CCA rates go up to reflect the actual cost of care, the corresponding rate that providers charge also increases, which creates hardship for those paying for child care without assistance.
- The State CCA threshold is too low, discouraging families from working or from seeking

Quality of Care

The families we heard from had varied opinions about the quality of programs that were available to them and what quality care looked like. However, one theme we heard consistently was that the high staff turnover rate was impacting their children. There was a desire to find trusted providers who were willing to stay long-term so that children could form attachments that aren't regularly disrupted.

"We've been there a year and she's had 12 different providers. There's been one person that stayed there, but not in the room with her. We've had to go over to say hi to the teacher that she knew and then go back into her room to be able to drop her off without a tantrum." – Family Focus Group, Juneau

"There was a questionnaire from our daycare. It was why did you choose daycare? And I shared, 'desperation'...I didn't have a choice. It was that or have a nervous breakdown and quit my job and not have an income to support our family and pay our mortgage. It's not a choice. We're not in a choice system." – Family Focus Group, Anchorage

Summary of Findings

- Attachment to caregivers is a concern given such high provider turnover.
- Quality of care was of less important than availability and cost of care, but this was very frustrating to the parents who wanted to choose child care based on quality not only availability.
- There were significant differences in how families defined “quality” child care.

Providers: Current Child Care Landscape

Provider focus group attendees included unlicensed providers, licensed in-home providers, employees and owners of licensed centers, employees and owners of exempt programs, Head Start and co-op preschool teachers and administrators. A prevailing theme from employees of the various child care centers was what a hard job child care is and how little respect they feel. In addition to lack of adequate pay, benefits, and career pathways, they have the feeling that society does not value investment in children from infancy to the start of school (0-5 years) the way education is valued from kindergarten through high school (5-18 years).

"Our state says that education for children starts at age five. And that is where the discussion and the emphasis and the investment starts." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Workforce

Workforce was consistently described as the biggest obstacle to operating a sustainable child care program. Providers have trouble recruiting and retaining staff at all levels of provider type, from nonprofit to those that can pay benefits and better compensation.

"For better or worse, I think that that this whole worker shortage that we're experiencing is finally drawing attention to this problem that's existed. Now it's like, we need to get people back working." – Family Focus Group, Soldotna

One of the root issues identified for workforce availability is a lack of desire, respect, and awareness of child care as a meaningful profession. There is a persistent perception of child care providers as 'glorified babysitters', ignoring the developmental and social impacts the child care field provides communities.

"I always point out that most of the world calls our profession daycare providers, because we help to care for their days. But we're not caring for their days, we're caring for their children. We are child care providers. And we are taking care of little humans, we're not caring for the days of the adults. But that's again, that is kind of the difference in how our field and our sector has been looked at." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

"I think it would help if people could see numbers and data of positive change that comes through early childhood education. And honestly, I feel like that would be a huge changing point. If you do the math and look at the numbers, crime rates go down [when early childhood development is invested in]. It makes you feel like your work is more important than just changing nappies. You're actually part of the 80% of the child's brain development happened in the first five years, and you have a more important role, you feel like you're meaningful versus just child care." – Provider Focus Group, Mat-Su

Summary of Findings

- Limited staffing options makes it difficult to maintain appropriate staffing levels to ensure coverage to meet regulations and manage any callouts for illness or abrupt departures (e.g., quitting without notice) as well as time away.
- Many facilities operate under capacity, while having wait lists primarily due to staffing shortages.
- Workforce retention is negatively impacted because most child care providers pay lower wages and are unable to offer benefits to employees compared to other entry-level positions.
- One key factor contributing to workforce issues is the societal dismissal of the field as a profession.

Payments and Rates

Providing child care services, whether facility or home-based, is expensive. Operating costs, combined with hesitancy to put more financial burden on families, limits wages and benefits available to child care workers compared to other jobs.

“One of the biggest problems I experienced as a private provider was the cost of having an adequate facility for running a child care. It's so expensive, that there's no chance to be able to pay our staff reasonable wages.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

“If I wanted to start my own program right now the challenges would be finding a location, being able to afford that location and then figuring out how I'm going to take care of myself...I'm a single income parent and I don't have a spouse to get retirement from to get health benefits from. So how can I provide that for myself?” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Focus group participants expressed that operating expenses and low wages are also often exacerbated by administrative burden of insufficient and sometimes delayed subsidies from the State of Alaska. Providers also expressed frustration with the State's current market rate survey process used to determine the amount of State Child Care Assistance (State CCA).

“ You're serving more than 30% of families that need assistance, and it's going to be more administrative costs for you, because there's going to be a lot more funding sources and [obligation to fill out forms]. And then you don't get paid that money until into the next month.” – Provider Focus Group, Juneau

“The child care reimbursement rate schedule, while it has been updated, is so unbelievably all over the place, and it doesn't make any sense. So, for an in-home provider the maximum rate that a family can qualify for is significantly lower than the maximum rate for a center.”
– Provider Focus Group, Virtual

“Child care providers need to be pulled out of that equation. It just needs to be set. As far as the childhood or child care grant, when I was a licensed program, I applied for it numerous times and was denied every time, and the amount of work that goes into even applying for it

just to be told no was ridiculous. It was worth it, though, to try to get some of those other expenses covered, but I just got told no.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Summary of Findings

- Rates families can afford to pay are not sufficient to cover the cost of operation and to pay a living wage, let alone provide benefits.
- State CCA payments do not come in a timely manner. Providers report that sometimes payments lag close to 90 days.
- Process for authorization of State CCA is too complex and time consuming, with reports of hours-long waits on phone calls.
- Providers are dissatisfied with the State’s current market rate process and are uncomfortable being ‘put in the middle’ of state reimbursement, family economic burden and deciding what to charge for care.

Licensing and Background Checks

Child care providers reported a range of experiences with licensing, background checks and working with State of Alaska licenser employees. However, we did hear some consensus that the current trend in licensing in regulation has become about administrative ‘checking boxes’ rather than ensuring the quality of child care.

"And that's what happens in a little town like this. I have to keep my CDA person even if they are not good. But you have to keep them because you have to have the CDA, so I end up having to walk on eggshells around them or accommodate all these things because I have to have that CDA. " – Provider Focus Group, Soldotna

“It's really frustrating when the vast majority of my licensing visit is not actually looking at my classrooms. It's sitting in my office, going through staff files.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

“I think mentoring is huge. Having someone who's good at early childhood assigned to your site not to criticize you, not to play gotcha.” – Providers Focus Group, Juneau

There were differences between rural and road system communities about the feasibility of meeting current licensing regulations and limited infrastructure for support, as discussed in Chapter 3.

We did hear near consensus that the current practices for background checks need revision. Background checks may take several weeks or up to two months to complete, and potential employees choose another job during the interim wait. Child care employers are also frustrated at the inefficiencies of State-mandated background checks that don’t ‘talk’ to one another, increasing cost and administrative burden.

“I also think that we have an issue with the different State agencies where a person has to go through the background check over and over and over and over. I've had students coming from us doing a student teaching and, if they're going to work with me, they need to get a separate background check, do another set of fingerprints and another process of the same thing. Because the Department of Education, the University background check system, and

child care licensing cannot talk to each other. It is absolutely ridiculous. It's a waste of resources, a waste of time.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Summary of Findings

- General sentiment that licensing should be more customer service oriented.
- There is high turnover in licensors and each one may do inspections substantively differently.
- Issues around ongoing compliance and choices about what to focus on, such as whether it's the role of child care facilities to be responsible for maintaining child shot records.
- State licensing requirements do not necessarily generate quality staffing or programs and instead create an environment of having to 'check boxes' to meet and maintain licensure.
- There is a significant administrative burden with licensing, and more resources for technical assistance in navigating the system would be appreciated.
- Background checks take too long, and applicants find other jobs while waiting for them to process.
- Background check systems do not communicate with each other and require a check per facility, making hiring teachers for the summer or substitute staff challenging and time consuming.

Mental Health

Child care providers shared how intense and challenging the field has been historically and how much harder it has become since the COVID-19 pandemic. While the relationships with children and families are considered immensely rewarding, there are a lot of demands on child care workers and historically limited external recognition or value.

"It is everyone's problem, and it will continue to be everyone's problem until we get support outside of child care providers. I know that I can speak for some of the people I've met with—we're just on our own. We've been on our own. We've been fighting this battle ourselves. We've been burning ourselves out. I'm back in child care. I don't know how or why I'm still here, but I am. There's burnout, and then you come back because this is what we do. We're not supported by anybody else, and it's time that we get that support." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

As with many people across Alaska and the country, the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging personally and professionally for child care workers. There is growing burnout from baseline staff and child/family mental health needs that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

“And we specifically serve a population that is homeless, in foster care, or below poverty guidelines. So, in some form or fashion, all of our children and families have experienced trauma. When you think about adverse childhood experiences and trauma in that child's life and family's life, that in the classroom, that looks different now. Our staff are not equipped for that. Children need more than what we have been giving them with that mental health

support. We are only in week three of our school year, and it's just been an incredible [level of] staff burnout.” – Providers Focus Group, Virtual

Summary of Findings

- Child care is a challenging field and there are fewer people willing to do it, especially for the pay rates available.
- Child care providers do not feel equipped to deal with the baseline traumas children and families experience, some of which were noted to be exacerbated during the pandemic. There is a need for improved mental health and wellness supports for the profession and for children and families.
- Burnout occurs for multiple reasons, including long hours, feeling a lack of respect, and very limited or no vacation.
- There was consensus that without the positive relationships with the kids, people would not be in this profession.

Employers: Current Child Care Landscape

Employer focus groups included both employees and owners of a diverse range of businesses by size and sector. These focus groups noted the challenge of developing a workforce without adequate child care and the need to prepare for a shifting economy. Employers described trouble recruiting and retaining workers, exacerbated after the COVID-19 pandemic when many caregivers left the workforce or had to adapt their work availability and needs. Overall, employers noted a need for universal public support of early childhood education as an essential element to growing the work force and economy.

Access to Child Care

Employers noted that it is hard to grow or maintain a workforce without a healthy and robust child care sector. Existing challenges with child care availability worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic with reduced hours or classroom availability. Some caregivers have the privilege of working remotely, when necessary, with their children home in the background. This flexibility is not an option for sectors of the workforce in shift or seasonal work such as construction, tourism, or emergency services. People are leaving the workforce or even the State of Alaska to be able to work and have adequate, quality child care.

“Thinking of what that's doing to our workforce, thinking what that's doing to our kids, and you're looking at the data, and younger people just aren't moving up here at the rate that they used to. Younger families aren't staying here at the rate in which they used to. If it weren't for child care, I would have moved back to the lower 48. So many of us are up here without family because we're transplants, [so we need access to child care].” – Employers, Virtual

"If there aren't enough spaces or the quality is not certain, we can't get people to take [our] jobs. And there has to be a financial incentive to returning to the workforce. Because they can't afford to return to the workforce [when child care is so expensive]." – Employer Focus Group, Fairbanks

Employers were open to rethinking the current approach to child care and were interested in cross sector ideas on how to resolve this statewide issue. They shared ideas including using extra space in school buildings or hospitals to provide care aligned with caregiver working hours/seasons that could be open to other community members. Housing child care in elder care facilities for the shared experience of both populations was also of interest.

Summary of Findings

- Lack of child care is a crisis in Alaska. It is impacting the ability to recruit and retain workers, especially new parents/moms or for positions that involve field/shift work of any kind.
- Employers that can provide flexible schedules are doing this; some more of this can help but lots of Alaskan businesses are shift work, including tourism.
- There needs to be creative, cross-sector solutions to resolve issues with child care availability.

Employer Provided/Supported Care

Employers appreciated the chance to discuss with one another ideas and viability around providing child care at work. For small businesses, providing child care at work is too much for ‘the bottom line’ to handle and for larger ones it would need third-party support given that running a child care center is totally different than the business model/expertise in place. There was general support for exploring ways that the State could incentivize employer supported child care.

"As an employer, we considered opening our own child care facility. So, when we really look at that budget, and if we were going to pay a decent wage for good qualified certified people, ideally, with some kind of child care background and training, being able to pay for that, and not having to charge \$500 a week per kid was next to impossible. We looked into organizations that could subsidize so we could offer a sliding scale, things like that. But at the end of the day, it didn't break even." – Employer Focus Group, Bethel

Summary of Findings

- Some larger employers are looking into or have been providing or supporting child care with positive results in recruitment, retention, and workforce availability.
- Many small businesses can't afford to provide or support child care on their own. They might contribute to the cost of care for an employee but that doesn't create more availability of child care.
- Employers want to be part of the solution but don't often know how or where to begin.
- The startup cost and lack of a sustainable child care business model are a barrier to employers, especially if facilities are not in established.
- The shortage in the child care workforce is a problem even if businesses want to/are supporting or providing care.

Solutions: What We Heard

The firsthand accounts shared during the focus group discussions provide insights into the real-world challenges faced by providers, caregivers, and employers. From the impact of high staff turnover on children who have experienced trauma to the financial constraints hindering professional development for child care providers, these narratives paint a vivid picture of the intricate web of factors influencing the quality of child care in Alaska. In this chapter, we look at the solutions that families, providers, and employers suggested to address these challenges and to improve the availability, affordability, and quality of child care in Alaska. The solutions are organized by the focus areas that the Task Force has identified and reflect the ideas that focus group participants had to address the challenges they are facing. Some of these solutions are already in existence or in development at the time this report was published.

As we navigate through these findings, it becomes evident that the pursuit of quality child care is not only a matter of regulatory adjustments and training, but a collective commitment to addressing systemic challenges. The voices shared in this chapter beckon us to consider innovative solutions, foster community collaborations, and reevaluate existing structures to ensure that every child in Alaska receives the high-quality care they deserve.

Quality of Care

Quality of care within early childhood education and child care settings is a critical component that directly influences the well-being and development of young children. In our exploration of the challenges and perspectives shared by various stakeholders, including parents, providers, and employers, a multifaceted picture has emerged. This section delves into recommendations drawn from focus group discussions about quality of care, including training and education, staffing and retention, licensing and regulations, caregiver-to-child ratios, and providing relevant child care options.

Training and Education

Our focus group discussions identified the need for training, allowing staff to learn to work together and to better replicate the reality of their care situation. For road system providers, it was preferable to have this training in-person, where rural providers were equally excited about the virtual option given the challenges of getting a trainer to their community. Participants expressed a desire for more trauma-informed and conscious discipline training programs, underscoring the importance of practical, on-site learning experiences with the kids they are working with and their teams.

Licensed providers also expressed their appreciation and support for the continuation and expansion of educational reimbursements, tuition waivers, and apprenticeship programs to help entry-level providers access the courses they need to move up the career ladder.

“Having that ability to earn as you learn is really important as an entry into the child care field.” – Employer Focus Group, Fairbanks

“We've got all the entry level staff that we need. With those sign-on bonuses and the CDA incentives, we have the entry level staff. With the free child care for the first child and multi child discount, we have those entry level staff. Now I'm looking to grow the lead teachers. I'm

working with the University and they're going to design courses just for us to grow those staff from entry to intermediate level.” – Employer Focus Group, Fairbanks

Also, there was a desire to ensure that training was available to all care providers regardless of licensure. The feeling was that broader training would help ensure that quality care is provided to all Alaskan children and would serve as a connection to, as well as an entry point for unlicensed providers.

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Professional Development and Support:
 - a. Provide sessions at local facilities, making them more accessible, engaging, effective, and opportunities for team growth. The choice for in-person or virtual should be made in consultation with providers based on what makes sense for each community of child care providers. Sessions should be in-person where feasible, but online virtual sessions (like UAA’s Owl-based courses) are also an option especially in rural communities off the road system.
 - b. Provide ongoing support for child care providers, addressing the challenges they face, such as stress management and dealing with trauma.
 - c. Continue supporting ongoing education through reimbursements, tuition waivers, and apprenticeship-style programs.
 - d. State-funded programs for higher education, supporting providers in obtaining relevant certifications.
2. Support for Unlicensed Providers:
 - a. Coordination with school districts to provide child care and child development coursework to high school students that provides baseline understanding but also serves as progress toward a CDA.
 - b. Allocate resources to support unlicensed providers in obtaining necessary training and resources.
 - c. Create a network for unlicensed providers to access training opportunities.
 - d. Connection of unlicensed providers to licensed providers and the State to encourage and enable transition to becoming licensed.

Staffing and Retention

When talking about quality of care, providers and families consistently spoke about turnover as one of the largest challenges and talked about solutions for increasing staffing and retention. This topic area is covered in depth in the following section on workforce.

Licensing and Regulations

Concerns were raised about the impact of licensing and regulations on the child care landscape, while also acknowledging the risks associated with a lack of oversight and support for training. Solutions proposed by providers focused on three main areas: lessening the burden on providers and administrators, moving toward a supportive mentor style licensing and inspection process, and improving the consistency between inspectors.

"I considered dropping my license due to increasing state regulations." – Provider Focus Group, Soldotna

"Regulations may not always ensure quality; focus on the individual qualities of caregivers." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Streamline regulations:
 - a. Evaluate and streamline licensing regulations to make them clear and manageable for providers.
 - b. Balance oversight with flexibility, ensuring regulations contribute to quality without creating unnecessary barriers, especially in rural Alaska.
2. Change inspections to focus on improvement:
 - a. Invite inspectors to serve as mentors. Providing education, encouragement, and gratitude during the inspection. The goal being to help the child care provider and facility improve, not to find problems and penalize.
3. Increase consistency in inspections:
 - a. Provide training and spot review of inspections to ensure consistency between inspectors.
 - b. Use a standardized inspection checklist and process.
 - c. Consider a guidebook that helps inspection staff prioritize areas to focus on.
 - d. When hiring, have preference for inspectors with a background in child care and early childhood education.

Maintain Staffing Ratios

When sharing about the quality of care, providers spoke at length about staffing ratios. Most providers agreed that the current ratios are appropriate, and many stated that their facilities operate with more intensive staffing ratios to ensure quality care. For in-home and group home providers, we heard that lowering the threshold on the maximum number of infants/toddlers from “under the age of 30 months” to “under the age of 24 months” would allow them to provide care to more children without negatively impacting quality.

“I opened recently when I became a group home, which means that I'm allowed to have 12 kids at a time, and five of them are under 30 months, which by the way, is a stupid number. Five kids under 18 months I can understand... but 30 months? Those kids are potty trained. They're running around. They're talking communicating. There's no real saying that they should be considered infants.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Staffing ratios should not become less intensive. Maintaining existing ratios are important to quality care.
2. For in-home ratios of care, the 30-month break should be lowered to 24 months. This lower breakpoint would allow providers to care for more children without reducing the quality of care.

Relevant Child Care Options

Our family focus groups spent a lot of time discussing what quality child care meant. In some communities, child care facilities with formalized programming are preferred, in others in-home small group settings are preferred, while some preferred grandparents and extended relatives providing care, and yet others preferred outdoor models like a forest school. Participants expressed interest in the State working with communities and local providers to find ways to enable the kinds of care that communities want and that are in alignment with the realities of their community (infrastructure, culture, etc.).

"There needs to be specific licensing requirements for a village not on the road system, for rural and remote Alaska. Because they're not even going to attempt to get licensed. And then the State of Alaska keeps saying 'Why don't [these programs get licensed]' and they just don't understand the realities of those programs, and then the challenges and barriers that they're overcoming on a daily basis." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

We heard from several providers of non-traditional models of care, like forest school, that the licensure process was extremely challenging. In some cases, we heard that the providers opted to not get licensed or to not pursue opening their child care facility.

"Because we're an outdoor program, we don't fit the mold of child care. So, we applied for legally exempt status and since then, it's been great. We just got rid of licensing, and it reduced a lot of our barriers. And thankfully, we're not licensed because we were renting a classroom at the elementary school and then they needed the classroom [we had to leave the space]. Had we been licensed we would have been shut down for a minimum of three months. Because we're exempt, we were able to find a different space." – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. More opportunities to support grandparents and relatives sharing in child care, financial support as well as training.
2. Offer high school and community classes in child development to increase the general understanding of child development and child care for unlicensed providers.
3. Look at license options and methods to help educate new programs understand the licensure option that best fits their program with a focus on using the exemption options for specific types of child care and locations off the road system.

Workforce and Sustainability

Maintaining and increasing the workforce—recruitment, development, and retention—was identified as one of the biggest challenges providers currently face. As providers discussed this topic, several themes emerged, providing valuable insight into potential solutions for addressing the workforce problem. The following key points have been identified: advocacy through visibility, compensation and benefits, career pathways and education, mentorship and training, substitute lists and retired staff engagement.

Advocacy Through Visibility

Providers recognized the importance of highlighting the positive impact of effective child care and early childhood education to the broader community. Providers also expressed that focusing on these positive impacts increased their job satisfaction and helped alleviate some of the burn out.

“I think it would help if people could see numbers and data of positive change that comes through early childhood education. And honestly, I feel like that would be a huge changing point. It makes you feel like your work is more important than just changing nappies. You're actually like part of the 80 of the child's brain development happened in the first five years. You feel like it's a meaningful job.” – Provider Focus Group, Mat-Su

Solutions: What We Heard

1. State or thread could “market” the child care workforce; like essential workers and place more value on this career.
2. Highlight the positive change for society that comes through strong early childhood education (brain development, crime rate, etc.).

Compensation and Benefits

The consensus among providers is that wages within the child care field are not livable or competitive, let alone commensurate with the responsibilities and importance of the job. They felt that a critical aspect of

attracting and retaining qualified staff is addressing the issue of underpayment and lack of benefits, as it serves as a significant barrier for those with a desire to work with children.

“I've been around in this because children are my passion. And so, I invested my life and preparing myself to work with young children and to advocate for the care of young children. But it's not something you can do without having somebody that can support you. Without my husband, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing. It's that's not right. If I wanted to retire, I would be on the streets, because this doesn't provide any kind of retirement or decent life even for a child care provider.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

In addition to addressing the issue of low wages, providers felt that their employees were looking for a competitive benefit package including additional benefits and retirement plans. The costs of providing these benefits are extremely high, and several providers mentioned the desire to have collective insurance options or funding/incentives to provide these benefits.

“I think that the state should support child care employees and child care facilities. And what and I mean, actually support us... let us collectively bargain and let us come to the table. Because right now, we cannot do that. And that was a bill that was in the legislature two years in a row, but now they're saying, ‘Oh, we're going help support you. We want to know what the issues are.’ [This process could have been] streamlined if they let us come to the table to begin with.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Increase level of support to families while also increasing the maximum income levels to qualify for support. This will allow centers to increase rates and allow providers to increase employee compensation and provide benefits.
2. State or thread provides a group health insurance option.
3. Provide funding or an incentive to provide retirement and benefits like vacation, health insurance, moving stipend, housing allowance, free child care for employees, and signing bonuses.
4. Providers seemed to prefer having additional resources go directly toward increased compensation for the workforce as opposed to additional childcare assistance to families; but that wasn't always the case.

Career Pathways and Education

During discussions about recruitment and retention, providers talked about needing to establish solid career pathways. Several providers mentioned the work that thread, UAA, and UAF are doing establishing a structured career pathway and corresponding educational programs. The pathway begins at the entry level, often as courses taken during high school, and progresses through the CDA, associate degree, and into a bachelor's degree. They felt that connecting high school students to courses that earned them credits towards their CDA, could serve as a foundation for a long-term career in child care, promoting continuous professional development.

One of the things that I have proposed to the school district is to start creating courses, educating young students. The school develops the child development courses, they can send [the students] to programs like ours. By the time they're done with high school, they already have some credits towards their CDA, and are able to work in this field. So, train them early, and show them the value of this field. – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

In addition to clear pathways, providers expressed that programs that supported and incentivized ongoing professional development and training were effective at attracting people and keeping them. Discussion around this topic brought up the tuition waivers that UAA was providing, thread's programs, and apprenticeship programs.

“Thank goodness we have the money from the State to go to UAA right now. That's one reason why my employee is still with me, because she's getting free classes through UAA and she's working on a degree. That is one thing I would like to see the State fund.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Continue the work UAA and thread efforts to establish and strengthen the workforce pipeline. Integration with high schools, establish career pathways.
2. Support high school and community courses in child care and childhood development.
3. Continue and expand incentive-based training programs, where individuals receive compensation for attending educational sessions.
4. Apprenticeship program could be an option to financially supports individuals while they receive hands on training, and could contribute to a larger, more skilled workforce.

Mentorship and Mental Health Support

Providers express a need for more comprehensive mentorship and support programs that go beyond formal education. Existing training opportunities are focused on care, but there is a call for mentorship programs that cover business aspects, mental health support, and policy development for child care providers.

“There really isn't anything in place for a supportive mentorship. I would have really benefited from someone like me to come into my home and say, ‘this is what you should put in your policies’. This is how to word that. Let's write a policy about that. Let's make a rule about that. Let's have that under contract. Maybe we can create a position at thread that is focused on helping the business part and the mental health part of those providers. There just really isn't anything like that in place right now.” – Provider Focus Group, Anchorage

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Connect providers with mental health professionals and/or mentors from the child care sector to help staff cope with challenging positions, low pay, as well their own trauma and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The State or thread could provide, or support mentors from within the child care field, to provide support related to business aspects, policy development and licensing.

Substitute Lists and Retired Staff Engagement

Another theme we heard was that child care facilities need to overstaff to ensure that they have enough care providers available to maintain staffing ratios. Providers expressed the desire to establish a substitute list or pool with experienced and licensed individuals so that they could increase the number of students they provide care for. There was a feeling that retired or those semi-retired licensed providers and administrators, may be interested in participating in this substitute pool. The administration related to this, including background checks and certifications, was identified as a major barrier to allowing this to happen.

“One of my goals is to start a substitute co-op, where we have substitute child care providers that have gone through the licensing process, fingerprints, and trainings that can fill in. All CDA quality, so a center can stay open if a CDA is ill. There's several of these co-ops in the lower 48.” – Provider Focus Group, Mat-Su

“I invested my life and preparing myself to work with young children and to advocate for the care of young children. But if I wanted to retire, I would be on the streets because this doesn't provide any kind of retirement and there wouldn't be anyone to take my place.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. A substitute list would allow facilities to provide time off, and to reduce their staffing or increase enrollment while still having security that they will meet ratios.
2. Retired and semi-retired providers and administrators could be encouraged and recruited to fill this substitute list.

Equitable Access

Families, employers, and providers all identified a lack of child care options, prohibitive costs, and long waitlists as challenges related to accessing child care. Solutions around access and making care equitable tended to focus into four areas: supporting the establishment of more facilities and providers, increased support to families, and increased coordination between governments and organizations.

Support Establishment of New Facilities and Providers

We heard from many providers that the facility costs, the complexity of the licensure process, and time commitments to get all the paperwork in order are major hurdles to opening a new facility. These providers stated that we need to commit to helping new facilities open through grants and tax incentive to help with startup and facility costs, support the exploration of cooperative models where administration can be run through a third party, and a mentor or licensing liaison to guide new providers through the licensing process.

“Startup programs and existing programs who are past the establishment phase should be considered differently. To start a program from scratch is an intense development and there is not enough support and funding for this. The support that exists are maintenance and improvement strategies.” – Provider Focus Group, Juneau

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Long-term commitment to fund and help facilities open and grow.
2. Grants and tax incentives to support startup, facility construction/upgrades, and employer supported or provided child care.
3. Continue and possibly increase support for programs like thread’s Start Up Initiative that provide grant money, professional development, training, and technical assistance who are getting licensed or are in their first year of licensure. (Note: Funding is from the CCPO.)
4. Support the exploration of cooperative models. Licensing and business models need to be established.
5. Enhance the child care grant program.

Increased Support to Families

Across focus groups we heard that families are not able to pay the full cost of child care. There was consensus that the level of support to families needed to increase and that the threshold for support needed to be higher and utilize a stepped model. Cost of care studies and cost of living adjustments were brought up as key steps to understand how far the level of State CCA needed to increase, and to shaping a stepped income threshold for State CCA.

“We need to up the up the bar. It seems like it's both the level that they're supporting, but also the threshold at which it cuts off.” – Provider Focus Group, Soldotna

“When you're trying to get cost of care information, it tends to be based directly to licensed programs or licensed family child care or licensed this. So, if you're close for a couple of years, you end up defaulting back to the State's formula.” – Provider Focus Group, Utqiagvik

Additionally, families and employers expressed some interest in child care stipends as a component of benefit packages. This was seen as more feasible by employers than providing care directly and many families state a preference for this as it would allow them to choose their provider.

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Income thresholds need to match the real cost of living in each community or region and should have a stepped approach like AHFC’s program for housing assistance.
2. The level of State CCA support needs to increase to reflect the actual cost of child care in the community or region.
3. In communities with no State licensed child care facilities, studies need to be done to understand the full cost of providing care in the community or region.
4. Expand awareness of and support for family member to become Approved Relative Child Care Providers.
5. Look at models for universal child care in other countries and other states and long-term costs/benefits of stable and effective early childhood education.
6. Explore programs that would allow corporations to contribute to child care costs as part of employee benefits.

Coordination Between Governments, Businesses, and Communities

Employer and provider focus groups spoke about the importance of collaboration between governments, organizations, and child care providers to address systemic challenges and create a more supportive environment. Exploring opportunities for technical assistance, financial support, subsidies, incentives, or grants to increase child care and enhance accessibility for families.

“Somehow, we have to change the mindset among ourselves, to get together to be that partner. Colleges, military, private and public sector, public school, private school, homeschools. We need to get together as a team, as a partner. And that’s the only way it’s going to work.” – Employer Focus Group, Fairbanks

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Work with communities to understand and provide support for child care that matches needs, desires, and opportunities.
2. Information clearinghouse about employer supported or provided models and technical assistance to facilitate development of employer supported or provided child care program.
3. Community led programs and partnerships to improve the child care landscape. *Example: marijuana tax revenue being designated to child care and early education in Anchorage.*
4. Better coordination between Tribal organizations that are providing support and the State.

Payment Mechanisms

During discussion of ways to make the payment mechanisms and the State CCA program work better, participants identified the need to review and adjust the State CCA program, and to streamline State CCA authorizations and payments.

Review Child Care Assistance

As previously stated, focus group participants felt that a review of the State CCA income threshold and payment levels was needed and should occur on a regular cycle. In particular, there was a feeling that the cost of being a single parent was not currently captured well, and that the cost of living in rural Alaska was also not accurately reflected. There was also discussion about providing assistance directly to providers in the form of grants or subsidies. This direct support would allow facilities to keep their rates low and would provide a more stable support for providers.

“I appreciated the grants that we were able to get and things like that to be able to afford to [keep rates down and] let parents kind of slide by on fees, when they just couldn't keep up with payments.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Review State CCA reimbursement process and amounts regularly.
2. Consider a stepped approach like AHFC's housing eligibility so that people don't “drop off a cliff”.
3. Providers and families felt the level of assistance should increase, and that the maximum income level should increase as well to make more families eligible.
4. Consider all expenses and whether another adult is home in the house to support if child is sick when determining the amount of assistance needed.
5. Enhance the child care grant program to support providers directly and reduce their reliance on family payments.

Streamline Child Care Assistance Authorization and Payments

Many families and providers talked about the challenges caused by how slow State CCA authorization and payments took place. Participants simply expressed that the processes needed to be simplified and sped up. There was some discussion around mechanisms that allow providers to work directly with caseworkers as families are going through the State CCA authorization process.

“When they enroll, we have all of our parents sign a release that gives us permission to speak to any and all caseworkers in reference to their authorizations. It's really great to have it on hand because then we can actually advocate for them.” – Provider Focus Group, Soldotna

Solutions: What We Heard

1. Streamline State CCA authorization processes.
2. Set up mechanisms to allow providers to assist new families with the process.
3. Look at methods to speed up receipt of payment.

Licensing and Background Checks

Providers and employers expressed a lot of concern about the licensing and background check system and process. Among the prominent concerns were the need for better communication and collaboration throughout the licensing process and making the background check system centralized and less of a burden.

Better Communication and Collaboration

Focus group participants expressed that the licensing process itself is laborious, with providers facing difficulties in navigating varying interpretations of regulations by different licensing officials. The importance of efficient communication and streamlined processes within the licensing system emerges as a central theme, reflecting the collective call for a more supportive and child-focused regulatory framework.

“We need separate licensing package for school age programs, we need a separate licensing package for outdoor based programs, and we need to have some flexibility for seasonal programs as well, because it doesn't all go in that one licensing package. And that leads to us, either cutting corners or just doing work to check the boxes. It's a waste of our time, my staff being required to take training on how to diaper and feed an infant is a waste of our time when we work with four- to 14-year-olds.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. More consistency between licensors and inspectors.
2. Faster turnaround times on applications and background checks.
3. Clear checklist style approach to licensure and an emphasis on supporting licensure of new programs.
4. Payments to existing providers to mentor new programs.
5. Promote open lines of communication between experienced providers and licensing specialists, fostering an environment of collaboration and mutual understanding.
6. Establish technical assistance programs to guide providers through the intricacies of licensing and compliance, ensuring they can continue offering essential services.
7. Specialized licensing packages for school-age, outdoor-based, and seasonal programs with flexible regulations that cater to the unique needs of each program, eliminating the need for irrelevant training and paperwork.

Background Check Systems

The solutions that we heard regarding background check challenges focused on a need for streamlined processes using digital fingerprinting that included a provisional status, a single centralized system for background checks, and subsidies to help offset the cost of background checks.

“The background check process for the state of Alaska is a mess. It’s through the Department of Public Safety, and then the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services, they have some signed agreement with the Department of Public Safety. And it just takes weeks and weeks. In the State of Rhode Island, the Attorney General's office handles all of the background checks. And they have those background checks turned in within a day turned around within a day. In addition, the state of Rhode Island has waived the fee for child care programs for background checks.” – Provider Focus Group, Virtual

Solutions: What We Heard

1. One centralized system that enables sharing of background check results across State agencies, reducing duplication of efforts and saving valuable time and resources.
2. Subsidizing the cost of background checks for child care workers.
3. Allow hiring with a provisional status using trooper fingerprinting and background check.
4. Make electronic fingerprinting more available.