

A black and white photograph of a young child, likely a toddler, sitting on a play mat. The child is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and is holding a book in their right hand. They are looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The play mat has various patterns and illustrations, including a sun and a bear. In the background, there are more toys and a table with a white cloth.

# Barriers to Providing High-Quality Child Care

Even though parents and child care providers have similar understandings as to what constitutes high-quality care there are providers who are unable to provide high-quality care for a variety of reasons. Over half (52%) of providers indicated that retaining qualified staff had a significant negative impact on their program. There are several reasons providers indicated they are having trouble retaining competent staff. The number one reason was low wages and an inability to competitively compensate for backgrounds in higher education, followed closely by burnout.

Demographic data indicated that the child care workforce is an aging population.

This could be due to the fact that younger people are choosing to leave the early childhood field to take more lucrative positions in K-12 schools. Providers also indicated that rising overhead costs, as well as a reduction of resources create significant barriers to providing high quality care.

A smaller number of providers (20%) indicated that regulations provide a significant barrier to providing high-quality care. Other difficulties providers noted were communication with parents, not being taken seriously as a trained professional, competition with free or reduced programs, and the poor quality of required online trainings.

# Provider Focus Group Results

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Every CCR&R participating in this study held two focus groups. One for parents, and one for providers. The provider focus group questions centered around, what high-quality care looks like, as well as what barriers they experience in providing high-quality care.

## What does high-quality care look like?

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*"I feel like a quality program or quality teachers are, it's the intuitive ones. It's the ones who know when I have to get down on the floor and deal with that child. It's the ones who know, I'm going to leave that kid alone because he's going to work himself out."*

*"Quality childcare is treating each child as they were your own. When it comes to interaction, play, manners, emotions, because sometimes they're not getting that got home and sometimes they're with you, way more than there with their own parent or parents and at the same time we have to balance what they need to know going into kindergarten so they feel ready and happy and hopefully instill that lifelong learning and not the frustration that often comes with children who aren't ready in kindergarten."*

*"having that knowledge and understanding of children and development where they're at, but being able to hook up with whatever other resources are available."*

*"I think quality childcare starts with being accessible to the parent. I mean, realistically, that's what it is. We can't provide a service if the parents don't know we're here."*

*"I think that what we do, as high-quality, it's all about the people and the relationships they have, the skills they have, the abilities they have to take a child and family and work with them and developing that young child into a young person."*

## What are the barriers to providing high-quality care?

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*"Child care is at a crossroads in this community. The ability to provide affordable child care while facing a NYS minimum wage that has increased by 70 cents each year for the last 5 or more years, is nearly an impossible task. I think many small non-profit and private child care centers will decide to close because they are tired of fighting this on-going balancing act."*

*"Year after year I see the struggle to find, and then hold on to qualified staff with a great work ethic becoming more and more of a challenge. As a result, children are supervised by staff who may not possess the skills needed for the classroom, and then negative behaviors and lack of safety become a problem. Childcare centers cannot afford to charge the parents the full cost needed to operate a high quality child care center and as such, the children and the program suffers from lack of financial support."*

*"Look at the reality of what we do every single day is, you know, and like for staff turnover we can't even get them in the door we can't even turn over because they're not even coming in. We are trying to hire a floating person probably 20 hour a week position, we put it out on everywhere that you're supposed to put it out. We got two applicants."*

*"There is not enough licensed care in my area. I get tons of calls for infant spots"*

*"We need MORE child care in WNY. And we need a regulatory climate and wages that make this possible"*

# Provider Focus Group Results

Every CCR&R participating in this study held two focus groups. One for parents, and one for providers. The parent focus group questions were centered around challenges parents had in accessing child care, and what they looked for when accessing care.

## What challenges did you have accessing child care?

*"For my past four years, I've had to turn down job opportunities because we were running into dead ends. Calling--No, we're full; No, no, I can't. Alright, well, I'll stay and be a full-time mom. Things are going to get tighter and it's gonna be tricky, because we didn't have that other opportunity."*

*"We actually don't use any child care right now. My husband found an overnight job, kills himself, working 8pm to 5am. But we used to do a daycare. It was actually in town in Niagara, but they were a little home daycare. We absolutely loved them. They were the best price in the area. And when I had my son, they were full. And they had promised a whole spot--so we had lost both their spots. And then we struggled with finding a daycare we liked and could afford."*

*"Our youngest is three. For the longest time, I couldn't work a full time job because we couldn't afford daycare. So now to save on daycare costs, my husband works second shift, and I work first shift, and between that like three hour period where he leaves and I'm not home yet, my son goes to my mom's, but he goes to Pre-K two days a week and we have two full time incomes coming in, and it's still rough paying for two days of Pre-K."*

*Just finding a registered daycare that has any openings. It's just so hard. Everybody's full, they're full for years ahead of time. They've already got people on the waitlist for kids that haven't even been born yet, parents that are pregnant."*

## What did you look for in child care?

*"Flexible hours. I have a three and a one year old. I'm a single mom. So I work two jobs. So during the daytime I have one daycare they go to, and then when I do my overnights they go to another overnight daycare."*

*"In my area there is a lack of daycares. There is only 2 I think that actually do daycare in the evening or overnight. Most daycares hours don't go past 5:30-6 and don't open till 7am. However most jobs want you in earlier or stay later."*

*"I also found actually going in and touring was important. I went and toured one day care that my friends raved or raved about. And I just did not like, the head lady there. There was just something I didn't like about her. And I was like, I can't send my kid here. I feel like you have to listen to the instinct when you're a mom."*

*"I don't think it's necessarily about how fancy their like their facility is or their houses. I think it's more about it's more quality than quantity and just treating make sure each kid knows that they're cared for and that they're safe where they are."*

*"And so it's just like quality of daycare, is the person up on their first aid, their CPR...Things can happen so fast. You know, what kind of food are they feeding the kids, or are the kids coming home, you know, saying, Oh, I had chocolate, I had ice cream, I had this and that. So it's like, Are you eating anything nutritious? So with daycare there's all of those factors, really."*

# Key Findings &

## *Potential Solutions*

Overall, 41% of parents reported having had problems with child care arrangements. Nearly one-third of all parents surveyed were single-parents and 90% of all parents reported working either full- or part-time. As almost one-quarter of respondents have still not been able to find regular child care options. These ratios demonstrate the severe impact Western New York child care deserts have on working families. This severity is heightened when considering the shortages of infant and toddler care, as close to a quarter of providers indicated having no infant/toddler capacity. Specifically, over two-thirds of providers do not have any open slots for infants and less than 40% have 1-2 open toddler slots. As children's brains produce more than a million neural connections every second in the first 3 years of life, high-quality infant and toddler care is critical to the health and well-being of all Western New York children.

One of the most interesting results of this study involved learning how parents and providers discern high-quality child care programs from informal arrangements with untrained providers. Although it was hypothesized the two understandings would differ (and potentially contrast largely), the study revealed both parents and providers hold high-quality child care as primarily involving: qualified providers; organized, safe, and clean environments; and educational & developmentally-appropriate programming. This suggests that current efforts to regulate quality child care have

been effective. As a result, potential solutions to child care desert issues may not need to involve elaborately defining features of high-quality.

Instead, the biggest barrier for providers appears to be the general need for supports related to professionalizing the field of child care. With more resources available to open and maintain high-quality child care businesses throughout Western New York, issues related to capacity and open slots for infants and toddlers could be resolved. The specific factors most commonly cited by providers were: rising overhead costs or issues with funding/resources; staff salaries or low wages; and retaining qualified staff, which included problems related to the increase in minimum wage, caregiver burnout, and high turnover rates. More specifically, over half of providers who described staffing issues explicitly linked the barrier to low wages, as many qualified early childhood professionals can seek out higher-paying opportunities and leave the child care field altogether.

One movement towards professionalizing the field of early childhood is NAEYC's "Power to the Profession" program, whose vision is "each and every child, beginning at birth, has the opportunity to benefit from high-quality early childhood education, delivered by an effective, diverse, well-prepared, and well-compensated workforce." Power to the Profession is a national collaboration whose ultimate goal is to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for

career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards and compensation.

Another promising practice that has seen marked increase in child care availability is All Our Kin's (AOK) peer network program, which is generally referred to as a staffed family child care network (SFCCN). AOK is resource and referral agency based in New Haven Connecticut. Between 2004 and 2007, the number of child care slots increased by 27% with the use of their research-based 'toolkit,' which includes a SFCCN component. However, other Connecticut cities during this time saw the number of child care slots decrease by over 30%. Though the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership identifies SFCCNs as promising approaches to increasing both quality of care and professional development, the institute also stresses that any type of solution to child care programming issues must involve a combination of supports. One single resource, like a startup grant or one training, is not effective in bringing sustainable change to the field.

Child Care Resource Network additionally proposes a workforce development project be implemented with support from Western New York Regional Economic Development Council's Workforce Development Initiative (REDC WDI). This would involve facilitating a training program for sustainable child care businesses, developing a staffed family child care network across the region, and expanding CCRN's helpline services. Through the training program, participants will learn the child care business field from start-to-finish – culminating in licensure and an established mentor relationship with an experienced local provider. After opening

new child care programs, providers can join the SFCCN for regular support and assistance from peers to address issues of caregiver burnout and ongoing education and training. The SFCCN would also provide an opportunity for routine collaboration amongst all WNY child care resource and referral agencies, where each community can learn more about the needs and barriers of others in the field and collectively develop ongoing solutions.

Currently, CCRN has a proposal submitted to the REDC WDI to fund 83% of the provider training program. If accepted, CCRN will be able to enroll 40 potential new child care providers and train them over 12 months. If at least 50% of participants complete the program, nearly 20 programs will open throughout WNY for local working parents, offering over 160 new child care slots. This creative solution will increase the total programs available in Buffalo by 9% and those in Erie County by 4%.

There is no one solution that will fix our ever growing child care crisis. It is our suggestion that by crafting a multifaceted system of resources for child care providers that address key barriers identified by providers in this study: rising overhead costs or issues with funding/resources; aging child care field, staff salaries or low wages; and retaining qualified staff, will only serve to strengthen the supply and choice of child care available to our community. It is critical now more than ever to increase investments to our early childhood systems. The benefits of sustainable high-quality child care programming for Western New York children and parents will far outweigh any investment.

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<sup>6</sup> A national collaboration to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation

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