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Child Care Workforce Shortages Eliminate more than 34,000 Spots for PA Children

More than 25,000 children sit on wait lists, according to new survey; state and federal action desperately needed to stabilize and strengthen system

HARRISBURG (September 16, 2021) – A new survey conducted by partners of the Start Strong PA Campaign quantifies Pennsylvania’s current child care crisis, which threatens parents’ ability to work and the overall economy. The survey, conducted between August 30, 2021 and September 8, 2021, details the current child care staffing crisis in 1,163 Pennsylvania child care programs across 63 counties and its effects on working families' ability to access care.

According to the survey:

- **Nearly 26,000 children currently sit on waiting lists.**
- **More than 34,000 additional children could be served at respondents’ sites if they were fully staffed.**
- **92% of respondents reported staffing shortages.**
- **51% of respondents have closed at least one classroom.**

Child care providers also continue to incur additional pandemic-related costs while operating significantly under capacity. Between March 2020 and August 2021, over 850 Pennsylvania providers have closed permanently and another 350 have temporarily closed.

“The current child care crisis poses a real threat to Pennsylvania’s economic recovery,” said Minesh V. Pathak, Executive Director of the Lower Bucks County Chamber of Commerce. “Staffing shortages among child care programs cause staffing shortages in all other economic sectors. Efforts to strengthen and stabilize the child care industry will benefit the overall economy.”

The Start Strong PA survey results depict a deepening crisis in the child care sector. In August 2021, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released a survey showing that 79% of Pennsylvania’s child care centers were experiencing a staffing shortage. Of those experiencing shortages, 60% of programs were serving fewer children.

“We would love to enroll more children from our center’s 160-child waitlist. But we desperately need more staff just to survive with our existing operation and maintain quality. Quality, in my opinion, should be the focal point of the conversation. Kids need so much more right now, as do our staff,” said Betty Lisowski, Executive Director of

Riverview Children's Center in Allegheny County. "Everyone is working even harder and longer to make things work. We can't do this forever. It feels like this whole industry is ready to break."

Earlier today, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) released a calculation tool that allows eligible child care providers (child care center, group child care homes, family child care homes) to estimate how much American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Stabilization Grant funding they can anticipate receiving when they submit an application. The formula includes add-ons for infant / toddler service, Keystone STARS designation, and reduced child care subsidy enrollment, as well as a rate multiplier based on the provider's geographic region - all of which were raised by child care providers as part of Start Strong PA's Listening Tour in May 2021.

"It is obvious that the child care sector is still reeling and needs an infusion of resources before it's too late. OCDEL's release of the ARPA calculation tool is a positive step for providers to determine the size of their stabilization grant and make plans on how best to weather the current storm and save their programs. However, these funds alone are not enough to solve the crisis." said Jen DeBell, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children. "Looking ahead, state leaders should release details about the disbursement of the remaining \$400+ million in ARPA discretionary child care funding to provide further short-term predictability for providers and get that funding out the door as soon as possible so that parents can return to work. Beyond emergency funding, state and federal lawmakers must make additional recurring investments in the child care system to address ongoing systemic problems."

Congress is currently considering a historic package that would include \$450 billion of recurring funding that would build on child care relief funds and make long-term investments in quality child care and pre-k that are necessary for children to thrive, families to work, and our economy to rebuild.

"We get into the business of child care because we love children, we love learning, and we love the positive impact we can make on those children, their families and our community. We are people too, though." said Shirley Quinan, Director at Kidsville Junction Childcare & Preschool in York County. "This current situation is unsustainable. We are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. Our elected leaders must prioritize additional investments in the child care sector to address systemic issues like low staff wages; inadequate reimbursement rates for providers participating in the subsidized child care program; and a shortage of high-quality, affordable care."

Also adding to the current child care crisis is the scheduled lapse of the emergency order allowing for greater flexibility in the attendance requirement for children enrolled in subsidized child care. Since the beginning of the pandemic, families enrolled in the subsidized child care program enjoyed greater flexibility to keep their children home without the risk of losing their subsidized child care slot. This was an important part of the child care sector's COVID-19 mitigation strategy. As of October 1, 2021, children receiving subsidized child care will only be afforded 5 consecutive absences before risking their subsidized slot. Start Strong PA is urging the Wolf Administration to extend this emergency policy, especially in light of rising COVID-19 cases and program closures statewide.

About Start Strong PA

Start Strong PA is an initiative of Early Learning PA. Through a statewide collaboration of partners, Start Strong PA aims to support healthy child development, working families, and the economy by increasing access to and affordability of high-quality child care programs for young children. Learn more at www.startstrongpa.org.

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