

taking care

Finding good child care remains a major challenge in this country even as impediments from the COVID-19 pandemic begin to fade. The lack of child care options and the relatively low pay for child care workers, which contributes to the problem, are straining family finances and the economy.

By Joyce Gannon

When Abra Kuniak delivered her first child in April 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, she and her husband, Stephen, were living in central Pennsylvania where she worked in a hospital emergency room managing crisis counseling. Shortly after her maternity leave ended, the couple moved to the western end of the state, returning to their roots in Westmoreland County, and settled in Greensburg.

Ms. Kuniak opted to work only two days per week counseling clients remotely from a home office. Her husband, a professor in an all-virtual program for graduate students at Lock Haven University, was able to care for their son on the days she worked and teach at night.

They looked for child care centers but ran into multiple obstacles. Cost was a big one.

A 2020 report from the Institute of State and Regional Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg in partnership with the state's Office of Child Development and Early Learning and Pennsylvania Key, found weekly child care costs ranged from \$148 to \$627 per child or about \$7,700 to \$32,600 annually.

Ms. Kuniak worried child care would eat up much of her earnings and also was concerned about finding a center that enforced COVID-safe practices. Many facilities she contacted didn't return her phone calls.

With her second child due in June, she plans to drop her counseling schedule to one day a week and pick up some online teaching for Southern New Hampshire University while her husband continues to work full time.

"We've had to be creative and it's come with some sacrifices ... but I think this too shall pass," she said.





Abra Kuniak steadily reduced her counseling services during the pandemic and is planning to decrease her schedule from two days a week of remote sessions to one. The primary reason for changing her work calendar has been the challenge in finding affordable and safe child care for her 2-year-old son, Max, especially with another child on the way.

Child care impact on workforce

Although Ms. Kuniak is now providing counseling through her own practice, many who work in the child care sector say uncertainties about child care have contributed to changes in work patterns nationwide, including the so-called Great Resignation — a massive exodus from the workforce during the pandemic. An average of nearly 4 million people per month quit their jobs in 2021, according to the Society for Human Resource Management.

“We still have families who haven’t figured out what they want to do [about child care]” as parents are called back to offices, said Cara Ciminillo, executive director of Trying Together, a nonprofit that provides advocacy and resources for early childhood learning centers.

In the past two years, working from home, remote learning and job layoffs “changed parents’ lives entirely and resulted in fewer children in the child care sector, which is not good for the owner-operators,” Ms. Ciminillo said.

Supporting high-quality learning programs for infants and preschoolers has been a priority of The Heinz Endowments for decades. In 2019, the Endowments committed \$10 million over three years for early childhood programs for mothers and children from pregnancy through age 3.

When the pandemic struck, the foundation provided \$500,000 in emergency funding for child care needs. This

February, the Endowments’ board approved the use of \$4 million from its Learning team’s existing budget to collaborate with the Allegheny County Department of Children’s Initiatives and nonprofit agencies to develop grantmaking that will address “the collective impact of early childhood education” on local families and the region’s economy, said Michelle Figlar, the Endowments’ vice president of Learning.

“We’ve been saying for decades that businesses don’t run without child care,” she said.

“We are definitely still in a challenging place in the early childhood and out-of-school-time field,” said Becky Mercatoris, director of the county’s Department of Children’s Initiatives since June 2021.

Ms. Mercatoris said local employers fear that a consistent lack of reliable child care or after-school care “is indeed a decision point for folks returning to the workforce.”

More child care workers needed

On a rainy morning in February, children ages 3 to 5 huddled around bright red tables inside the cozy Stevens Child Care Co. in Coraopolis, west of Pittsburgh, and played with puzzles and baskets of toys. One girl jumped up to dance while some classmates sprawled on colorful rugs scattered with Lego blocks.

BY THE NUMBERS

48,300

Number of people employed in Pennsylvania child care jobs in February 2020, before the pandemic.

44,600

Number of people employed in Pennsylvania child care jobs in April 2022, according to preliminary jobs data. This represents a 7.7 percent decrease over two years.

26,000

Approximate number of children on waiting lists for child care, according to a survey of 1,163 Pennsylvania child care programs that was conducted between Aug. 30 and Sept. 8, 2021.

\$18.99 | \$10.69

Average median hourly wage of \$18.99 for all U.S. occupations in 2019 compared to \$10.69 median hourly wage for Pennsylvania child care workers in 2019.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: State and Area Employment, Hours, and Earnings
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/sm>

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2020 report
<https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/pennsylvania>

Start Strong PA https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2e545d0bda3cf1389658c/t/614397c47061ad78d9a120fd/1631819716839/Staff_Crisis_Survey_RLS_091621.pdf

“We’re hearing from child care providers and parents that this is all very exhausting.”

Susie Puskar, chief policy and research officer, Partner4Work

Across the room, caregivers kept a close watch on infants and toddlers. All the employees and children wore masks except those younger than 2. Stevens maintains a two-mask-per-day policy for its children — one for the morning and a clean one for the afternoon — because the staff worries that germs will accumulate quickly when the youngsters sneeze, touch their faces and interact with others.

Mask requirements are among the many pandemic-related protocols in place at child care and early learning centers since spring 2020 when the COVID-19 virus emerged in Western Pennsylvania.

But keeping masks on tiny faces is a relatively minor inconvenience compared with the larger issues child care operators and parents have grappled with for the past two years. Staff shortages, low pay for workers and facility closures have all combined to leave the industry struggling for stability. This year, as more employers institute return-to-office policies, child care centers are scrambling to keep up with fresh demand.

“It’s a crisis,” said Angela Reynolds, chief executive officer of the YWCA Greater Pittsburgh which operates child care facilities in Homewood and Braddock Hills. The YWCA plans to open another center in Homestead but has had trouble finding employees, she said.

Even though the YWCA raised its starting salary in February 2021 from \$13 an hour to \$15 an hour — more than double the state’s minimum hourly wage of \$7.25 — it requires that employees hold child care credentials.

“We’re hearing from child care providers and parents that this is all very exhausting,” said Susie Puskar, chief policy and research officer at Partner4Work, a Pittsburgh nonprofit that addresses workforce development issues.

“Staffing pressures [at child care centers] may be why people are choosing or not choosing to work,” she said.

Nationwide, “we’re seeing a lot of chaos not caused by anything but inconsistencies in staff issues,” said Linda Smith, director of the early childhood initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

President Joe Biden’s \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better legislation, which passed the U.S. House but stalled in the Senate, called for investments in child care workers’ pay and other support for the sector.

As lawmakers work to resurrect parts of the package, “we’ve made a number of recommendations, and we’re working with Capitol Hill to set aside money” for child care facilities, Ms. Smith said.

“Women in the workforce are impacted the most,” she said. “But it’s a problem for all of us because some jobs at businesses are going unfilled.”

During the first round of state-ordered lockdowns in March 2020, many child care workers were laid off or temporarily furloughed. Because many parents were suddenly working from home or lost their jobs, “demand for child care outside the home declined,” said Partner4Work’s Ms. Puskar.

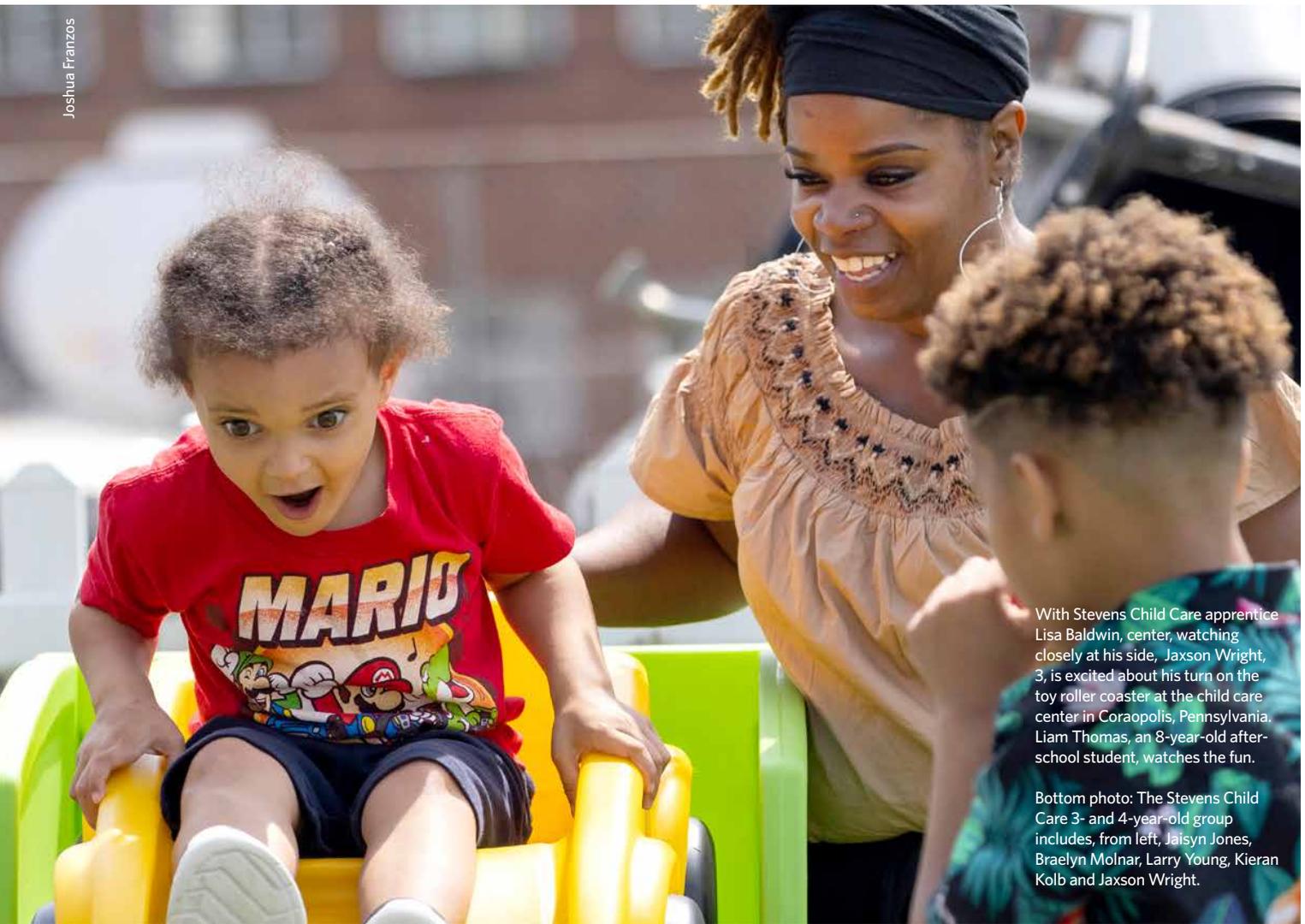
Some centers shut down permanently. When others reopened, some child care employees feared returning to environments where COVID-19 might spread easily. Instead, they looked for new jobs with better wages or retired. Delays in approvals of vaccines for children under 5 added another concern for center workers and parents.

And pay is a top obstacle to recruiting and retaining staff.

When pay is a disincentive

The average hourly wage for child care workers in the Pittsburgh area was \$11.97, according to a May 2021 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

To help build a pipeline of qualified child care professionals, the Endowments in 2020 approved \$2 million in funding to Carlow University for the Western Pennsylvania Early Childhood Apprenticeship Hub. The state-approved program — which includes college tuition for participants and on-the-job experience — has trained approximately



With Stevens Child Care apprentice Lisa Baldwin, center, watching closely at his side, Jaxson Wright, 3, is excited about his turn on the toy roller coaster at the child care center in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania. Liam Thomas, an 8-year-old after-school student, watches the fun.

Bottom photo: The Stevens Child Care 3- and 4-year-old group includes, from left, Jaisyn Jones, Braelyn Molnar, Larry Young, Kieran Kolb and Jaxson Wright.



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Lisa Baldwin, Stevens Child Care apprentice

20 workers to date, said Ms. Puskar of Partner4Work, which helped develop the hub.

Among them is Lisa Baldwin, who is pursuing an associate's degree at Community College of Allegheny County while working with 3- to 5-year-olds at Stevens Child Care. The program pays for Ms. Baldwin's tuition, books and access to a computer. She receives a salary for the days she works and the days she attends classes.

The apprenticeship includes guaranteed pay raises, "which is an incentive and is awesome," she said. Ms. Baldwin is credentialed as a child development associate and plans on earning a bachelor's degree at Carlow after she completes her associate's degree.

Paulette Stevens, owner of Stevens Child Care, said her for-profit center is licensed for 25 children ages 6 weeks to 12 years old but currently has only 20 enrolled. She's down three workers since the pandemic hit.

"Salaries are a big problem," said Ms. Stevens, who offers a starting wage of \$9 an hour.

The state's Early Learning Resource Center, a program of the Department of Human Services, helped cover her overhead costs when the center had to shut down and during periods when enrollment fell because children were kept home due to COVID exposures.

Her employees qualified for unemployment compensation when Stevens was closed. It also received grants of \$1,000 apiece from the Coraopolis Community Development Foundation and Coraopolis Youth Creations to help with operations during the pandemic.

"We're surviving here every day," said Ms. Stevens, who has operated her business for 40 years. "I just prayed the money would come in and everybody would get paid."

Jeremiah's Place, a 24-hour crisis nursery that operates seven days a week in Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood, served 50 percent more children in 2021 than in prior years. The center began experiencing a steady rise in demand last year from parents who were recalled to jobs but no longer had child care plans in place.

Queries about spaces have intensified this year as more people return to their workplaces, said Jillian Long, a social worker and empowerment coordinator at Jeremiah's Place.

"A lot of child care centers closed during the pandemic, so parents call us," said Tammy Aupperle, executive director.

To help maintain staff levels during the pandemic, the center bumped its hourly wage in March 2020 from \$11 to \$13 plus a differential for overnight shifts. Staffing had dipped slightly after the center was closed for two weeks at the

start of the pandemic but has since stabilized to 19 full- and part-time workers.

Jeremiah's Place accepts children from birth to 6 years old but only for temporary periods ranging from a few hours to a week or so. It has capacity for 12 children per day and notifies families on a waitlist when it's not filled. The staff also helps parents place their children in traditional centers.

Many parents who rely on Jeremiah's Place are employed in health care, retail and other front-line jobs and can't work from home. Some families need emergency care for medical appointments or when they apply for or start new jobs, Ms. Aupperle said. Some turn to Jeremiah's Place for respite care when they need to "take a breath" from the stresses of the pandemic, she said.

The Endowments in December 2021 granted the nonprofit \$100,000 over two years for operations. It receives support from other local philanthropies, including the Opportunity Fund and the Grable and Hillman Family foundations.

Child care in the Black community

Rochelle Jackson, founder and director of the Black Women's Policy Agenda in McKeesport, said the Pittsburgh region needs more facilities like Jeremiah's Place — where she serves on the board of directors — to help families with emergencies and for those who work evenings and weekends.

Studies show Black individuals, especially Black women, were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, with the unemployment rate for Black women 20 and over increasing from 5.8 percent to 6.1 percent in the early months of this year while the rate decreased or stayed the same for other demographic groups, according to the National Women's Law Center. Access to child care is among the top challenges for Black women.

"Black women are the least likely to have contingency and backup plans and often don't have access to paid time off or medical leave," Ms. Jackson said.

The Endowments provided a grant of \$35,000 to her nonprofit in 2020 to help develop its agenda, which includes a strong focus on child care. In March, the Endowments made a grant of \$50,000 to the organization to support ways to improve the environmental, financial and physical health of Black women.

"If we're ever going to shift Black women from a place of surviving to thriving, child care has to be part of the solution," Ms. Jackson said. **h**