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Historic Shortage of Child Care Teachers Shrinks Child Care Availability for PA Families by 26,000 Slots

State funds desperately needed to recruit and retain child care workforce

HARRISBURG (January 2024) – A recent survey conducted by The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia’s Policy Lab on behalf of Start Strong PA demonstrates Pennsylvania’s ongoing child care crisis continues to threaten parents’ ability to work and the overall economy. The survey, conducted between August 29, 2023 and September 21, 2023, details the child care staffing crisis in 762 of Pennsylvania’s child care programs and its effects on working families’ ability to access care.

According to the survey:

- **Nearly 26,000 additional children could be served at child care programs’ sites if they were fully staffed.**
- **Programs reported 2,395 open positions resulting in the closure of 934 classrooms.**
- **Child care providers’ inability to recruit and retain staff is having a direct impact on the quality of their programming.**

This historic shortage of child care workers is dramatically reducing the availability of care options for working families, and these incredible numbers are only those reported by a fraction of the total number of child care programs in the state.

“Yes, we still have a staffing crisis within our organization as well as other providers throughout the Southern Alleghenies,” shared Christy Leiato, executive director, The Learning Lamp (Cambria and Somerset Counties). “We have 97 job openings which we have the space and waitlists for but need the staff. We have 546 children on our waitlists and could serve 1,286 more children if we filled our open positions.”

While child care directors felt that previous financial incentives offered through The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) were helpful in making staff feel appreciated, they still were inadequate to sufficiently address the overall costs necessary to pay employees living wages, impacting recruitment and retention of staff. Pennsylvania must prioritize an investment that helps child care providers to maintain their current staff complement and incentivize open positions.

“The business of child care requires qualified staff and needs a competitive wage to be attractive to help those stay in the [early care and education] ECE field. Many start working in ECE and then go into the elementary level for better pay and benefits, leaving providers to begin again with new staff,” said Tina Keefer, Keystone STARS Coach, Early Learning Resource Center 6.

In addition to the survey, child care providers shared their challenges and recommended solutions in 13 Child Care Listening Sessions held by Start Strong PA and The Office of Child Development and Early Learning in November and December 2023. Themes similar to those in the survey emerged and hundreds of participants shared stories illustrating the impact of staffing shortages.

“Another center in our region has closed its doors—that’s two in my communities in the past six months,” shared Denise Storer, Executive Director, Creative Kids (Clarion and Jefferson Counties). “Centers can’t keep waiting for help, doors are closing now. It’s getting very worrisome. We are really struggling.”

Start Strong PA partners congratulate the Shapiro Administration and General Assembly for making child care more affordable for families through the enhanced Pennsylvania Child and Dependent Care Enhancement Tax Credit Program; however, this solution only helps families better afford child care. If child care programs continue to close classrooms, families will continue to struggle to find the child care they need. Start Strong PA is urging Governor Shapiro to prioritize funding to specifically address the child care staffing crisis through recruitment and retention incentives in his 2024-2025 budget proposal in February so that Pennsylvania’s child care supply can meet the overwhelming demand.

“Child care providers cannot fix this crisis on their own. Pennsylvania lawmakers must recognize the fact that low wages are a major barrier to programs’ ability to recruit and retain child care staff.” said Jen DeBell, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children. “We know other states like Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Iowa, Tennessee, Florida, Kentucky, and Nebraska are investing in recruitment and retention programs to cut down turnover rates. And already in 2024, we have seen even more states recognize that funds intended to directly support child care staff help keep child care programs open. In Virginia, Governor Youngkin has proposed putting \$448 million in the early learning and child care system in each of the next two years, which includes educator incentives.”

“At each of the 13 Child Care Listening Sessions this past fall, child care providers were desperate for more from us than just a recognition of the problem,” described Carol Austin, Executive Director, First Up. “They need state and federal elected officials to help solve this crisis so Pennsylvania families have access to high-quality child care options for their children so parents can participate in the workforce.”

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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