Providers care deeply for the children in their care and the families for which they provide service. They listed the following as reasons for dropout: pay that is too low, feeling undervalued, more complex regulations, and difficulty accessing training opportunities. Providers and WCI share solutions and ideas for recruitment and retention efforts.

Regional Family Child Care Provider Survey
West Central Minnesota, Spring 2018
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Child Care Provider Survey
May, 2018

SNAPSHOT

Purpose of the study: Garner insight into the child care shortage in West Central Minnesota

Respondents: 131 licensed home-based child care providers from Becker, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Wilkin Counties and White Earth Nation.

What is great about child care:

Suggestions from providers:
- Establish an orientation and mentoring system
- More free training options
- Build up support systems
- Clearer rules and regulations at the county level
- Workshop offering all required training twice per year in several rotating locations
- Pool of substitute care givers and/or assistance with the cost of background checks
- More flexibility in using substitutes, such as number of hours instead of days
- Licensor visits should be less than 2 hours
- More flexibility using substitutes
- More community offerings that travel to each child care
- Every-other year visits unless there are compliance issues
- Help obtain access to affordable healthcare
- Preschools offer more transportation options

What is not great about child care:

Things that are working well:
- Child Care Aware and Early Childhood Initiatives
- Child care associations
- Current grant programs (could increase)

Additional recommendations from WCI:
- Generate community/public support to help providers feel appreciated
- Consider where potential partnerships could blossom, like businesses, nonprofits, local government, religious organizations, Head Start and school districts
- Explore ways to simplify and improve communications about regulations

West Central Initiative is an equal opportunity provider, lender and employer. wcif.org
Introduction

The child care shortage is becoming detrimental to the West Central region of Minnesota. Businesses depend on a strong workforce, now and into the future. Child care allows parents to be in today’s workforce. Child care plays an essential role in early learning and development, strengthening tomorrow’s workforce. In addition, child care itself is a valuable industry, with revenues up to $41.5 billion nationwide.¹

The Center for Rural Policy and Development² released research in September of 2016 that listed the child care shortage in west central Minnesota at 22 percent. This research was updated in October of 2017 to show a greater shortage of 26 percent, as shown in Figure A. Specifically, the region has a total of 9,455 child care slots (down from 9,626 in 2016), but an additional 2,476 slots are now needed to meet the current demand. In Greater Minnesota, families are more reliant on family child care due to the limited numbers within a geographic location. The research also showed that the number and capacity of family providers across the state has dropped more than 35 percent since 2006. Providers in this study listed the following as reasons for dropout: pay that is too low, getting older, feeling undervalued, more complex regulations, and difficulty accessing training opportunities.

Figure A: Child care shortage in 2017

From Center for Rural Policy (2017) “Child care’s quiet crisis: an update”²

In 2017, the Clay County Early Childhood Initiative conducted an open-ended survey to elicit input from providers in the area. Results were similar to the Center for Rural Policy: Providers listed limited income, feeling undervalued, more complex regulations, and costs and lack of training opportunities. Additionally, they stated there were issues with finding and utilizing substitutes in the way that providers needed.

West Central Initiative, with the encouragement of the West Central Minnesota Early Childhood Initiatives, modified the Clay County Early Childhood Initiative study, and replicated its methods to elicit input from home-based providers across the region.
Methods

Survey requests were emailed to Child Care Aware contacts directly from West Central Initiative staff. Additionally, county child care licensors forwarded the survey request to their contacts. The survey was conducted through the QuestionPro website.

The first two questions asked providers for information about their child care business, including years of operation and county of operation.

The second set of questions included open-ended questions about what they like about being a child care provider. After this question, several questions included feeling appreciated, regulations, support services, school district pre-K offerings, benefits, reasonable expectations, available trainings, community involvement, pay/earnings, and other.

The third set of questions included open-ended questions about what they dislike about being a child care provider. After this question, the same specific topic questions were listed for dislikes (feeling appreciated, regulations, etc.).

The fourth set of questions asked for input on recruitment and retention of child care providers.

The fifth set of questions asked about Parent Aware participation: if they were currently rated, for how long, and their actual rating.

The sixth set of questions asked if they felt appreciated by their community, and how they determined this opinion.

The last set of questions asked for provider input on resources available to them.

Addressing the child care shortage is crucial to the region’s growth and vibrancy.
Results

Respondents totaled 131 out of the more than four hundred requests that were sent. On average, providers spent 14 minutes completing the survey. See figures B through E below.

Figure B: Which timeframe best reflects the number of years that you have provided child care in your present county/area?

Figure C: Where is your child care located?
Figure D: Are you Parent Aware rated?

![Pie chart showing the percentage of providers rated and not rated.]

*Other: represents awareness of the rating system. Some providers are in the process of becoming rated, others have been rated in the past but are not currently rated.*

Figure E: What is your current Parent Aware rating?

![Pie chart showing the distribution of ratings among providers.]

Results from the open-ended questions ranged from simple, short sentences to multi-sentence paragraphs. Themes are represented in this document, but by no means represent all the comments put forth by providers.

*What do you like about being a child care provider?*

Nearly all providers commented on how much they enjoy working with children. This concept includes comments such as teaching children, watching them develop, helping them with social concepts, and providing them meaningful care. Many providers used the word *love* to describe the work they do. Comments also included positive examples such as ‘getting hugs,’ ‘innocence and sense of wonder,’ and
‘watching them hit their milestones.’ The word *teach* or *teaching* was prevalent in the 3-4 star rated providers as well as the unrated providers, but was notably absent from the responses from the 1-2 star rated group. However, this group still discussed concepts of child development. No other noticeable difference was found between the groups defined by Parent Aware rating.

The second most-mentioned concept was the idea that the providers “get” to stay home with their own children and still provide an income source to their family. Several providers who made comments like this mention that this was the reason they became a licensed provider.

In that same regard, another trend was comments related to being self-employed, such as setting their own schedule, no nights/weekend hours, choosing activities they enjoy, setting rates, picking which families they will provide care to, and the absence of a commute.

The last notable trend was comments regarding relationships. This includes both the relationship they have with the individual children, as well as the familial bonds that are developed with the families of the children in their care. Many comments spoke positively of being able to provide the service to parents who need to work outside the home. Many comments described this as being *helpful* or *of service* to other parents.

*What do you dislike about being a child care provider?*

The trends on dislikes were a little less obvious, but tended to focus on three major concerns: regulations, difficult parents, and lack of benefits.

Regarding regulation, the comments focused on changes in the rules. Frustration was expressed toward increased regulation, more and/or more arduous paperwork, the time taken from providing care for paperwork and site visits, and taking the same trainings over and over every year. Some providers expressed frustration that the requirements for trainings cost the business money, either in actual dollars from fees and travel, or with increased hours that effectually reduce the earnings per hour of the provider. Many providers used the word *worry*, especially in relation to compliance with any new rules that may come. Some providers also used the term *overwhelmed* about rule changes and amount of paperwork.
Providers also expressed frustration regarding difficult parents. Comments ranged from untimely or lack of payment, inattention to the rules or schedules, lack of partnership in the care of the child, and lack of appreciation including expressions of the high cost of their service.

Lack of benefits was also a prevalent theme, and included long hours, lack of flexibility, healthcare, break time, and vacation. Some providers expressed frustration regarding inability to use substitutes, either due to lack of qualified subs or using one of the allotted substitute days for an hour-long appointment.

**Pros and cons: Feeling appreciated**

Providers list this primarily as a positive. Some providers comment that they choose to provide care to families who express appreciation. A few providers expressed that some parents will take advantage, or express that their service is too costly, which makes them feel unappreciated.

**Pros and cons: Regulations**

Many providers expressed this as a negative, and included the words excessive, unrealistic, and overwhelming. A few providers specifically say that regulations are causing them to reconsider continuing their business. A few providers chose to comment that the industry needs to be regulated, using words like expected and necessary.

**Pros and cons: Supports, services, and/or resources available**

Responses were mixed: just as many providers listed few or not enough as listed many, different, or good.

**Pros and cons: School district Pre-K offerings**

Some providers expressed negativity towards Pre-K offerings taking three- and four-year-olds out of their care. A few providers listed specific school districts as providing a cooperative method with child care providers.

**Pros and cons: Benefits like healthcare, flexibility, personal life, financial**

Among responses, a few providers listed flexibility and income as positives. However, many more listed these as negatives, specifically that they lacked flexibility and adequate income. Additionally, most providers who responded expressed frustration and concern about the lack of benefits, especially healthcare.
Pros and cons: Reasonable expectations (families, licensing agents, financial institutions, other)

A few providers that chose to respond stated that they felt families and licensors are very reasonable. A few also chose to respond that they felt regulations were becoming unreasonable and some parents can be as well, using terms like overbearing or difficult.

Pros and cons: Available trainings

Some providers used this question to request that there be more variety in the trainings that are offered locally, especially online opportunities. A few expressed that the Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) trainings are expensive. However, many expressed that the variety and opportunities for training are adequate, using words like appreciate, abundance, and quality to describe what is available.

Pros and cons: Community involvement

Most providers who chose to respond to this question stated none or some. Some providers listed specific examples of community groups or projects that incorporate child care providers, such as child care associations, churches, booster clubs, Early Childhood Initiatives, and others. A few providers also stated that when they have infants and younger children in their care, travel to community events is difficult.

Pros and cons: Pay/Earnings

Most providers who chose to respond to this question expressed a frustration that financially they should be raising their rates, but families are already expressing that the cost of their care is too high. Very few providers state that they feel their income is adequate.

Pros and cons: Other

Very few providers provided feedback in this segment that was not already expressed in other areas of the survey.

What challenges or barriers do you feel prevent others from becoming a child care provider or cause others to leave the field of child care?

The most common statements listed changing rules and regulations and lack of flexibility/substitute care were the primary reasons that there continues to be a child care shortage. Less common responses were difficult parents, lack of start-up funds, and wear-and-tear on the home.
Figure F: Do you feel as though your community appreciates you and your business?

Yes, 78%
No, 22%

Please provide details about how or how not.

The most common responses from those who felt appreciated were that they continue to have full enrollment, positive reputation, referrals from parents, and collaborative efforts that are happening between providers within the community as well as with preschool programs, including school district and Head Start.

The most common response from those who did not feel community support was that they are viewed as a babysitter, or not having a real job/business. A few providers expressed frustration at the community conversations about there not being enough affordable child care options.

What resources were the most helpful to you/your business?

Providers listed child care associations, Child Care Aware, Milestones, grant programs, Develop, THRIVE, Child Care & Nutrition food program, West Central Initiative, Early Childhood Initiatives, churches, schools, families, and the county licensor.
Discussion/recommendations:

The survey results were very similar to those of the initial survey of Clay County child care providers conducted in 2017, as well as the research from the Center for Rural Policy and Developmentii.

There appears to be a mismatch of the personal strengths of those who enter the child care field versus the personal strengths required to comply with county licensure. The survey results reveal a group of people who thrive on developing relationships with the children in their care, as well as their parents and families. They are warm individuals who wish to create happy, creative, stimulating environments. These same people are asked to spend time away from children, including their own, to complete paperwork, attend trainings, and attend to other activities related to licensure compliance. Child care providers do not hate the regulations: most understand that they are in place for very valid reasons. However, they perceive that there is an assumption of noncompliance, like safety concerns, lack of common sense or education, etc. They are also asked to spend more of their earnings on trainings and background check fees, and more of their time on activities outside of their regular business hours. When they look at their budgets, they must choose between a decrease in profits or increasing rates on parents with whom they have a strong personal relationship. From statements made in this survey, this increases their stress level and decreases the enjoyment they receive from their business.

Suggestions from providers:

- Orientation and mentoring system for new providers
- More free training options
- Build up support systems, including associations, licensor-provided support, Child Care Aware
- Clearer rules and regulations at the county level: provide guidance not just penalties
- Workshop where every required training is offered at one time twice per year in every county and White Earth.
- Pool of substitute care givers
- More flexibility in using substitutes, such as number of hours instead of days
- Assistance with the cost of background checks
- Licensor visits should be less than 2 hours
- More community offerings that travel to each child care location
- Every-other year visits unless there are compliance issues
- Establish a health insurance pool or assistance in obtaining affordable healthcare
- Preschools offer more transportation options for school-aged kids to and from home-based providers.

Additional recommendations from West Central Initiative:

- Generate community/public support to help providers feel appreciated - this doesn’t have to be financial, as positive feedback to providers can make a big impact
- Consider where potential partnerships could blossom, such as between providers and businesses, nonprofits, local government, religious organizations, Head Start and school districts
- Reexamine licensure requirements to potentially reduce the time providers must spend on compliance procedures
- Ensure that communications regarding regulations, especially changes, are clear and distributed directly to the providers whenever possible.
Our most sincere thanks to the providers who took time from their very busy schedules to provide candid input on the issues critical to the child care industry. We appreciate all that you do to strengthen our communities.

Thank you also to the Early Childhood Initiative Coordinators, county licensors, Child Care Aware, and other critical partners who have dedicated time and energy to this survey, and have already acted upon the resulting community need request.

Lastly, thank you to the Clay County Early Childhood Initiative for allowing the reuse of their survey and allowing access to their results.

The six Minnesota Initiative Foundations, including West Central Initiative, formed the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative based on studies that show that strengthening early care and education for young children and their families is the most important investment communities can make for the future. ECIs seeks the involvement of parents, senior citizens, educators, business and community leaders, the faith community and policy makers. The ECI is about working with others to assess current early childhood efforts, figuring out what more your community can do and then acting together to make change. Pictured above are some of the west central ECI team with the Governor’s Proclamation of Early Childhood Initiative Day, March 20, 2018.

