

JULY 2021

# Grays Harbor, Mason, Thurston Child Care Task Force

## Summary Report and Recommendations

**GRANTEE:**

THURSTON COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

**PROJECT LEADS:**

CHILD CARE ACTION COUNCIL, KNOXWORKS CONSULTING

**LEAD PARTNERS:**

GREATER GRAYS HARBOR, SHELTON-MASON CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE, THURSTON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
COUNCIL, THURSTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, CIELO,  
YMCA OF GRAYS HARBOR, SOUTH SOUND YMCA

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WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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## Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

As well-documented in state studies and local evidence, parents and employers were greatly challenged by child care accessibility and affordability across our region BEFORE the COVID crisis. The Grays Harbor, Mason and Thurston County region has a shortage of child care slots that give parents options and choices to meet their employment responsibilities, affecting employers and stressing family budgets. The COVID crisis was an extreme shock to the already financially unstable care industry of small businesses and nonprofit providers.

Beginning in October 2020, the Child Care Action Council and its partners began a process to assess how child care opportunities and challenges impact parents, employers and child care providers and develop locally driven strategies to respond. Working with our partners, Thurston Economic Development Council, Greater Grays Harbor, South Sound YMCA, YMCA of Grays Harbor and CIELO, we convened action teams from each county to develop locally driven goals and strategies to support child care recovery and capacity expansion for our three-county region. Leaders of our partner organizations met monthly to advise and guide project leaders, Gary Burris and Paul Knox.

## Our specific objectives included:

- Assess needs and gaps and plan for and support recovery, growth and success of child care providers in our region – learn from presentations on child care needs from existing data and surveys of parents and employers.
- Engage our region’s parents, with an emphasis on low income and Latinx community members to ensure their child care needs are being met and supported and to develop bi-lingual providers.
- Develop near- and medium-term action plans for more accessible and affordable child care in our counties, including support existing providers to recover from COVID challenges.
- Understand and address specific local access barriers and capacity gaps.
- Build ongoing partnerships and link systems to address local pre-k and school aged care issues.
- Connect and learn together with other child care task forces in our greater region and across the state.

## Child Care Action Teams Composition

Over 60 individuals participated in three county-level action teams which met monthly since February 2021 to review data, hear from parents, employers and providers and develop action strategies. Members are listed in the appendix.

# What We Learned

Below are short summaries of each of our assessment surveys and interviews with parents, employers and providers. In all, a total of 512 parents, employers and child care providers participated on our assessment process across the three counties. Below are summary data and findings from each survey.

## Parents Survey: Summary and Key Take-Aways

### Mason-Thurston Parent Responses

62 Mason-Thurston parents responded to the survey. Overall, most respondents expressed dissatisfaction with availability and affordability, while 45% questioned the quality of available child care in Mason and Thurston counties. The need for after-school care is a pressing concern that was echoed by 47% of respondents.

51% of parents stated that the cost of care was unaffordable for their families:

"I don't get paid enough per hour to make it worth it. I make \$15 an hour and work a few hours here and there. If childcare was even \$10 an hour, I'm only now working for \$5 before tax."

"I am a single parent and struggle to meet the \$400-\$500/month for care through the YMCA."

"Depending if full or part-time but full-time I would be comfortable paying \$650. I've only been able to find childcare centers that are about \$1,000 or more per month".

36% of respondents reported that availability of child care was lacking due to hours of operation. For example, 27% of respondents reported that they work random hours and 3% reported working overnight shifts. Both groups expressed a desire for flexible hours in child care availability.

"For parents who work early morning hours (6:30-7 drop off time), finding open childcare centers is very difficult."

"I have looked into YCare in the past but have found it to be unworkable/hard to justify drop-in fees or notice. I work in education, and my husband is a first responder. The nature of his work means that we need inconsistent and off-hours child care. We have relied on family for this childcare."

## Latinx Parent Responses

Project partner, CIELO, being a “by and for” organization, reached out and interviewed Latinx community members representing 44 families in Thurston and Mason counties.

Census figures report that 9% of Thurston County and 4% of Mason County identify as Latinx, and from that, more than 60% identify as immigrants. Historically marginalized, the Latinx immigrant community has to deal with multiple challenges and barriers to be successful and gain services.

When asked if they are satisfied with their childcare, the average answers were an emphatic YES. When we went ahead and dug for more information, we realized that between 68% and 80% of our clients prefer family or friends for childcare, other sources of this service are considered non-safe, unreachable, or are for “other” people. When asked about using licensed child care:

- 82% of interviewed families consider traditional childcare is expensive
- 80% of interviewed families believe they are not eligible for assistance.
- 78% of the interviewed families are not comfortable leaving their children with others.
- 62% commented that they would like to have culturally appropriate childcare to maintain their heritage from an early age.

Parents reported needing flexible and off-hours and infant care. Mason County parents shared that most of the work they do is seasonal. That means that their need for childcare varies. When one source of income finishes, one of the guardians will go to another place and the other might stay home to take care of the children.

Given respondents have childcare taken care of by family and friends, their perception of the quality is high. It is close to home; it is in a language they prefer. The downside that was consistently mentioned is that they know their kids are not getting appropriate early learning opportunities that can cause a bad start once they go to kindergarten.

## Grays Harbor Parent Responses

222 Grays Harbor parents responded to the survey. Over 50% of families are currently relying on Family, Friends or Neighbors (FFN) to care for their children outside their home. 27% have their children remain in their own homes by either having someone come in to provide care, having them stay home alone, or piecing together care as they go. 41% rely on licensed child care homes or centers to consistently care for their children while almost 15% only receive part-time care through either an after-school program or developmental preschool type setting.

- Cost and location of child care seem to be the two largest concerns besides mere accessibility of the finding care.

“No child care available, need part time only, need half days, need drop-in care, need 1-2 days per week, need part time 3 days...”

“I have autism needs”, “children with special needs”, “can’t find care to handle child’s care needs...”

“Need safe before and after school for young teens with responsible adults, after school clubs or activities, tweens need programs, transportation to school activities...”

- Almost 60% of families indicate that the cost of child care is more than they can comfortably afford.

“I cannot afford the child care costs and do not qualify for subsidy.”

“I no longer qualify for subsidized child care. As a result, I cannot afford to send my children to daycare...and it’s far too costly to do drop-in care.”

“We cannot pay \$12,000 a year its half the net income of the house but cannot get help from the state.”

- Location of care has proven tricky especially depending on the school where children attend and the transportation offered (or lack there-of).

“There are no childcare centers that will deliver or pick up from this school. This (transportation) is my primary barrier to full time work, I get off work after hours and rely on others to help transport my kids.”

## Employer Survey: Summary and Key Take-Aways

This regional assessment was designed to elicit information specific to determining the current state of child care from employers' perspectives and its effect on their business and employees across all three counties. Questions focused mainly on how child care options affected employees and, subsequently, their business operations. Employers were encouraged to share their thoughts about child care and a sampling of those responses is included in this summary.

Of the 202 employers who started the survey, 129 completed and submitted a response. This assessment combines responses from Grays Harbor, Mason, and Thurston counties.

- Employers ranked availability of child care as a concern than quality of care in most areas. “Good” and “Very Good” came in with the fewest responses (6% and 3%, respectively), while “Poor” received 35% of responses, and “Very Poor” received 21%.
- When asked their opinion as to the root cause of child care unavailability, 29 of 90 respondents cited cost for business operations/overhead, and 24 said non-COVID restrictions/state requirements.
- Child care issues have had a significant impact on business operations across the three-county region. The top three most common issues are employee absences from work (21%), distraction at work due to child care instability (18%), and tardiness (15%). Nine respondents reported that employees declined promotions due to child care concerns, whereas 7% of employers reported that they have not had any issues related to child care.
- Many employers also reported difficulty attracting and/or retaining employees due to child care issues, and 58% of employers said that the “shortage of child care options” has impacted their business in some way.
- Employers outlined a number of potential short- and long-term challenges that child care providers will be facing in the future. The four main recurring themes were COVID-19 restrictions; non-COVID state-mandated restrictions and requirements; retaining a quality workforce; and finding adequate funding to sustain the business.

“We have employees that come from all three counties. Many of them have had trouble finding child care that fits their needs and budgets. A big issue for school age children is the lack of transportation for kids to get from daycare to school or vice versa.”

“All reputable daycares are full and not counting the random people who volunteer to watch children on the local online ones, availability for child care is almost non-existent.” – Mason County, fewer than 25 employees.

“Astonishingly expensive if available.” – Thurston County, fewer than 25 employees

## Employer Child Care Supports

Many employers also reported a commitment to assist in addressing the child care shortage including: creating a flexible schedule as the most popular response (45%), providing flexible spending accounts (22%), and providing space “on a company site for a child care business” (11%).

“We offer employees the ability to bring their children to work. We provide a 'daycare' space, and full flexibility to employees for feeding, care, etc. By supporting families in this way, we turn the challenges of child care into a way to attract high quality employees.” – Thurston County, fewer than 25 employees.

## Licensed Child Care Home and Center Owners and Directors Assessment : Summary and Key Take-Aways

Many issues impact the viability of licensed child care in our region. A survey of licensed family child care homes and licensed centers was administered to learn about needs, desires and concerns of owners and directors of licensed child care homes and centers. 69 phone and video conferencing interviews with owners and directors were conducted by Early Achievers Coaches from the Child Care Action Council in May and June. Respondents were asked to list their top three business challenges and below were the top issues cited:

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>Additional</b>
<i>Bringing in enough money each month to keep the business going</i>	14	4	2	4
<i>Having to work too many hours</i>	6	9	2	13
<i>Retaining staff</i>	4	5	3	7
<i>Maintaining full enrollment</i>	6	5	3	2
<i>Bringing in enough money to make this job a sustainable career</i>	5	6	5	8
<i>Money to pay staff better</i>	14	6	4	9
<i>Regulations (WACs) Cost of having to do or buy more</i>	7	3	1	11
<i>Regulations (WACs) Complexity of doing things in a specific “correct” way</i>	9	9	2	14
<i>Regulations (WACs) Time to do everything</i>	6	5	5	10

Additional questions asked providers are in bold below with summary answers:

- **What do you need or do your staff need to make this a sustainable career?** Sixty-seven people responded and, in some cases, mentioned more than one need. The most common answer was the need for increased compensation for themselves and their staff (26 responses) and the need for benefits, including health care, retirement, sick leave and vacation (30 responses). Eight owners and directors raised concerns over regulations. Six responses identified needing access to substitute teachers and to the sub-pool.

“Good pay, benefits, retirement. We need a public program (state/federal funded).”

“Ability to afford help when I need it. More stability in income and less oversight from people who do not seem to understand what we really do.”

“Less regulation and more trust that we are doing what is best for children even if how we care for them looks different.”

- **What do you wish you had more money for?** Twenty-eight responses mentioned the desire to pay staff better and provide benefits. The need for toys, materials, equipment, curriculum and furniture was raised in twenty-three responses. Twenty responses cited repairs, replacement and expansion of facilities, with several mentions of the desire to make outdoor upgrades.

“I would like to have affordable health and dental insurance with better premiums because the one we have from the state does not cover all medical expenses.”

“A new facility would help expand my services to the community.”

“To pay my staff more, to be able to draw a full salary, and to hire a part-time person to cover when one of us want to take a sick/personal day. Right now, if one of us is out, we have to either send a child home or not allow someone scheduled to come so we stay in ratio.”

- What do you wish people knew about child care?

Many respondents (24) wished people knew that they have a major role as educator and that child care is not babysitting. Children are learning and growing across the developmental domains was mentioned by fifteen respondents. Twenty-three respondents wanted to be acknowledged for the important work they do, that their role is essential and that they would like to feel respected and shown appreciation for their work. The most frequent responses (26) was that providers wished people knew what a hard, stressful job this is and the long hours they put in. People knowing what low pay the child care workforce receives was mentioned by 9 respondents.

“The work we do is not easy. We work a lot of hours (14-16 hours a day, plus planning on weekends) and wear many hats; as family child care workers we are teachers, nurses, counselors, chefs, janitors, drivers (to school), and administrators (doing all the paperwork and billing ourselves). And, we are lowly compensated and do not receive benefits for the work we do.”



**"Our job is all about supporting children's development and learning, and not a babysitting job."**

# Action Strategies

Below are the combined priority goals and strategies and actions developed by the county level teams over a five-month period. These are “working” strategies that will require more exploration and advocacy to bring to fruition as we move forward. These strategies require a mix of local and state level actions. The strategies listed were deemed top priority by action team members at their June meeting. The appendix to this report includes a list of other strategies that were considered by the team.

## 01

### Improve Access, Funding and Site Flexibility for Child Care Facilities

- Providers need more flexible space licensing requirements – the multitude of regulations can be a barrier
  - Succession allowances are needed – allow to maintain existing (grandfathered) facility use
  - Mixed age groups requirements are too limited
  - Exemptions and exceptions are not being approved
- Providers need technical assistant when applying for state funds and dealing with local/state permitting
  - Provide incentives and support for commercial building transformation for child care
  - Conduct more outreach to providers about such opportunities to determine interest and follow up

## 02

### Support Child Care Businesses to Succeed and Thrive

- Recruit new start-ups and support expansion of existing providers
  - Ensure start-ups understand true start-up costs, etc.; provide technical support
- Provide more consultation to meet licensing and regulatory requirements
  - Push for changes from DCYF in how they assess and monitor
- Allow multiple sites with one director to increase supply
  - Consortium model
- Support the start up and operation of odd hours care and flexible care (drop-in and not full-time care).
- Start an indigenous cooperative in Mason County that would be made of native Guatemalan community members and provide culturally appropriate childcare. This would provide a training and income opportunity and create an education/career pathway for high school students/young adults.

# 03

## Improve Supply of Child Care Teachers and Managers

- There are frequently staff shortages, what might we be able to do to support (sub-pool bolster)
  - Start-up costs are relatively high – some offset subsidy is needed for both providers and workers per hire (\$500)
  - Background checks, trainings, other tests
  - Even for part-time high school students and non-teaching staff, 30 hours + training is not feasible; high school mentor program
- Develop strategies to attract and retain staff
  - Identify people who are a good fit to reduce turnover
  - Improve pay and benefits
  - Community college scholarships
- Make staff education standards more flexible and scholarships easier to obtain

# 04

## Meet the Care Needs of Parents and Community

- Survey conducted annually to see how we are doing
- Need for more bilingual providers
- Encourage expansion of before and after school programs in local communities

# 05

## Organize Cross Sector Advocacy for Increased State Investment and Policy Change

- Advocate to provide funding to supplement wages and benefits for the child care workforce. Expand the availability of health care to all licensed child care workers.
- Advocate to provide child care subsidy to lower-middle and middle-income families.
- Advocate for state employee ombudspersons, working outside of DCYF, to serve as advocates for licensed child care centers and homes to work through regulatory concerns and improper payment issues.
- Conduct a local or state-wide media campaign on what learning happens in the earliest years and the valuable work of early childhood educators.

# 06

## Organize and Support More Employer Actions

- Create employers' network for child care support and advocacy
  - Provide consultation for employers - connect to resources
  - Employer supports - what is the impact of various benefits, proximity to the worker's children, health care, pay

# Conclusion and Next Steps

Over the past eight months, we organized strong, committed partnerships across our three counties and engaged 65 participants in our county level action teams. We conducted multiple assessments that gleaned valuable data, perspectives, and action ideas:

- We surveyed hundreds of parents in each of the three counties to learn about child care availability, accessibility, cost, quality, and type of preferred care options; we did the first ever survey of Latinx parents in our region and learned about their significant needs and challenges. We know where there are additional needs for licensed care;
- We surveyed employers across our communities to learn about their workforce needs and commitment to supporting licensed care; and
- We spoke with current providers and learned specifically what they would need to be more successful.

Our action teams generated an ambitious set of strategies to pursue implementing over the coming years. The Child Care Action Council and its partners are committed to pursuing these priority goals and their strategies.

We have submitted a Phase II funding request to the Washington State Department of Commerce to expand child care capacity by completing licensed child care center feasibility studies, developing business plans and designs and working with private or nonprofit partners to open one site in each of Grays Harbor, Mason, and Thurston counties.

Resources willing, we will build on the momentum of our action teams' work and members' commitment to pursue implementation of our strategies over time. With our business association partners, we will continue to communicate and engage employers in being part of solving the child care crisis. Current child care providers would be invited to join in the facility planning. We will collaborate with CIELO to take steps to meet the unique cultural and challenging work day needs of Latinx parents.

# Appendix

## Project Partners Leadership Team

- Gary Burris, Executive Director, Child Care Action Council
- Paul Knox, Principal, KnoxWorks
- James Davis, Business Development Manager, Thurston EDC
- Patrick Costelo, Executive Director of Youth and Community Development, South Sound YMCA
- Heidi McCutcheon, CEO, Shelton-Mason Chamber
- Julio Rios, Executive Director, CIELO
- Lynnette Buffington, CEO, Greater Grays Harbor
- Franzine Potts, CEO, YMCA of Grays Harbor
- Allie Blair, Business Solutions Navigator, Thurston Chamber

## County Action Team Members

### Grays Harbor County

- Lynnette Buffington, Greater Grays Harbor
- Franzine Potts, YMCA of Grays Harbor
- Brittany Byrd, South Sound Parent to Parent
- Marah Gannaway, Hoquiam School District
- Molly Leithold, Aberdeen School District
- Tracy Dawson, Family Child Care Provider
- Autumn Causey, Family Child Care Provider
- Stephanie Smith, Learning to Grow Child Care
- Jessica Hoover, Grays Harbor Community Foundation
- Natalie Chavez, Child Care Action Council
- April Messenger, Parent Ambassador Program
- Teneille Carpenter, McCleary School Board
- Ashley Jarvid, Parent
- Stacie Tobey (Vaughn), Vaughn Chopper Pumps
- Brittany Moonan, Parent
- Patrick Dempsey, Quinault Beach Resort
- Merian Juneau, Quinault Enterprises HR
- Kris Homolka, Wal-Mart
- Emily Dillingham, Summit Pacific Medical
- Rhonda Schwerdel, Stafford Creek Corrections Center
- Hannah Mechler, Grays Harbor College
- Brandalee Smith, Oceans Company
- Amber Sexton, Hanner Enterprises
- Jessica Cruz, Express Employment Professionals
- Isabel Cisneros, CCS Network Builder for Latino Communities/Women's Justice Circle
- Chris Reeson, Bundle of Joy family home care
- Dan Brown, YMCA of Grays Harbor
- Beverly Barker, Child Care Action Council

## Mason County

- Heidi McCutcheon, Shelton/Mason Chamber of Commerce
- Patrick Costello, South Sound YMCA
- Julio Rios, CIELO
- Tonya Lunghofer, South Sound Parent to Parent
- Sabrina Green, Squaxin Island Child Development Center
- Margarete Dohring, Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church Center
- Tracy Mitchell, Child Care Action Council
- Jennifer J. Capps, Mason General
- Carlos Rodriguez Mejia, Molina Health Care
- Celeste Vigil, Skokomish Indian Tribe
- Mathew Melendez, Great Bend Center for Music
- Maryann Marshall, Shelton School District
- Michelle Pugh, Joonbug Yoga
- Beth Schilling, Child Care Action Council

## Thurston County

- James Davis, Thurston EDC
- Patrick Costello, South Sound YMCA
- Julio Rios, CIELO
- Amanda Ernst, South Sound Parent to Parent
- Mike Reid, City of Olympia
- Debbie Sioux Lee, Nisqually Tribe
- Stacey Misener, Child Care Action Council
- Caroline Mejia, Thurston County Commissioner
- Stacey Ray, City of Olympia
- Bailey Knaber, Parent
- Jennifer Gallier, Family Child Care Provider
- Charo Portaro, CIELO
- Beverly Barker, Child Care Action Council
- Melodie Stauffer, NTSD
- Vena VillaNueva, Academy of Aesthetic Arts
- Lynn McCarty, Serendipity Child Care
- Amy Nelson, TwinStar Credit Union
- Amy Head, SCJ Alliance
- Allie Bair, Thurston Chamber

# Other Strategies Discussed

## 01

### Improve Access, Funding and Site Flexibility for Child Care Facilities

- Facility costs are a major factor: explore shared facilities, including kitchen and outdoor space.
  - Pursue adult/senior space sharing
- Remove local development impact fees on care facilities
- Incentives for property managers to allow care facilities
- Land acquisition down payment requests by lenders is prohibitive
- Coordination between fire marshals and other agencies for licenses (even within DCYC)
- Facilitate nonprofit or business license transfer to new operators

## 02

### Support Child Care Businesses to Succeed and Thrive

- Expand shared services – supplies, HR, administrative, etc.
  - Compliance coaches, managers (funding needed)
- Provide more training and consultation on core business skills
  - Management learning opportunities – peer and professional learning
    - Provide business coaches
  - Organize communities of practice for owners/managers to reduce isolation and share ideas and skills
  - Business mentoring; expand Imagine Institute offerings
- Explore ways to incorporate some of the cooperative learning centers (expansion of part-time options)
- Hybrid school days make school aged care exceedingly difficult (Travel, staffing, facilities, etc.).
- Increase access to wrap-around services, including onsite offices for services; shared bathrooms, etc.
  - Increase education for providers re: services needed by children available resources
  - Assistance working with licensers
- Promote more user-friendly web access to information for providers
  - DCYF Guidebook should be updated
- Bolster FFN care through ongoing education and additional support opportunities for these providers

## Other Strategies Discussed (Cont.)

### 03

#### Improve Supply of Child Care Teachers and Managers

- Support directors to better reduce worker burnout
  - Leadership training for Directors
  - Mental health days for staff
  - On-the-job training to become administrators
- Share strategies employed by some facilities to engage, train and promote staff leads to increase retention.
- Resources for FFN to increase learning and support
  - Pay incentives to participate
- Start early learning career outreach to middle and high schools and community college (Running Start plus work)
- Provide training space options in Grays Harbor and inform providers

### 04

#### Meet the Care Needs of Parents and Community

- Promote more options for expanded, swing and infant care
  - Firmer count of the extended day and weekend care
- Work together with partner agencies to launch a parent education campaign to offer families access to learning about the benefits of early childhood education with a focus on cultural competence and children's development
- Find solutions to transportation challenges for kids in part school/part care (co-location, funded transportation, etc.)
- Provide additional subsidy support to lower-middle and middle-income families

## Other Strategies Discussed (Cont.)

### 05

#### Organize Cross Sector Advocacy for Increased State Investment and Policy Change

- Lack of understanding and compassion for current challenges due to COVID
  - Licensing needs to understand and respond accordingly – consultative give and take needed
- School district planning connections and communication needs improvement
- Update procedures for COVID
- Advocate to smooth out the state subsidy cliff
- Raise the state number of slots rules for school age kids
- Advocate to provide additional funds for building construction and renovation. Seek to have additional grants for upgrades to outdoor space and play areas.
- Advocate to expand the availability of the substitute bank to all licensed child care providers.
- Advocate with DCYF to work with a group of licensed child care providers and advocates to examine the licensing regulations for places to streamline the regulations and add flexibility.
- Advocate with DCYF to reinstitute/increase the practice of granting waivers – use a common sense approach to licensing.

### 06

#### Organize and Support More Employer Actions

- Recruit larger employers to have in-office child care (run by a provider)
  - Employers could partner to offer care in a group
- Take your kids to work options for some kids
- Market the federal child care pre-tax deduction

### 07

#### Provide Local Funding

- Explore willingness of all to help pay for early learning programs (city, county revenue; a fund similar to Seattle or King County).