

# **Child Care Solutions Syracuse, New York**

**The State of Child Care as Experienced by  
Local Child Care Directors**

June 2018



[www.apteroconnor.com](http://www.apteroconnor.com) • P.O. Box 830, Syracuse, New York 13214  
Phone: 315.427.5747 • Fax: 315.682.8180 • Email: [cynthia@apteroconnor.com](mailto:cynthia@apteroconnor.com)

## **Child Care Solutions, Inc.**

*Building excellence in early care and learning systems while advancing equal access for all children in our community. We accomplish this through education, advocacy and support for families and early childhood professionals.*

*—Child Care Solutions Mission Statement*

Child Care Solutions believes that good child care is a community resource that supports families, contributes to economic productivity, and nurtures children's growth. Child Care Solutions is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1975 to provide information and resources to parents, providers, employers, and community leaders in Onondaga and Cayuga Counties (NY) who seek solutions to their child care needs.

# The State of Child Care as Experienced by Local Child Care Directors

## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Interview Respondents and Programs Represented.....	1
Interview Process.....	2
INTERVIEW FINDINGS .....	2
Strategies for Recruiting Qualified Staff .....	2
Recruitment Challenges.....	3
Retention Challenges .....	4
Retention Activities.....	5
Minimum Wage .....	6
Paid Family Medical Leave .....	10
Background Checks .....	11
Training Requirements.....	12
Other Challenges or Concerns .....	14
ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS .....	15
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	18
APPENDIX - Child Care Director Interview Protocol, Spring 2018 .....	A1

## INTRODUCTION

Child Care Solutions, Inc. (CCS) has embarked on a broad effort to strategically develop child care capacity in both Cayuga and Onondaga Counties. The initiative is designed to assess the current state of child care in Onondaga and Cayuga Counties as well as the impact of state and federal changes on the child care industry. Ultimately, CCS is seeking to assist existing child care programs in mitigating the adverse consequences of these various changes in child care regulations. CCS is examining possible sustainable solutions that local communities can support and that are also likely to generate additional investment by federal, state and local governments and local businesses. As one part of a multi-pronged approach, Child Care Solutions contracted Apter & O'Connor Associates, Inc. (A&O) in April 2018 to conduct interviews with directors of child care centers in both counties. The findings from these interviews are presented here.

### Interview Respondents and Programs Represented

From April to June 2018, Apter & O'Connor conducted fourteen interviews with child care center directors in Onondaga and Cayuga Counties. All interviewees were currently, or recently had been, center directors. Their experience in the field of teaching and/or early childhood education ranged from seven to forty years. Tenure in their current positions varied from less than one year for one director to more than thirty years for another. Educational attainment among them included everything from associate's degrees to doctorates in education. Half of the directors held bachelor's degrees. Six directors were currently or had been New York State certified teachers.

The directors interviewed represented the variety among day care centers in Onondaga and Cayuga Counties<sup>1</sup>. Nine directors ran urban programs, while the others' programs were located in suburban or rural areas. Most centers operated as not-for-profit organizations; however, four programs were for-profit businesses. All of the centers offered infant, toddler and preschool care, and some offered school-age child care programs. Only three centers represented were stand-alone centers; the others were part of multi-site child care businesses, larger not-for-profit organizations, or public educational institutions.

The programs represented employed a minimum of seven employees to a maximum of sixty-five (per individual site). The majority of programs had staff turnover rates of less than 15% per year, with respondents typically noting that only one or two staff members had left in the previous year. Eight of the programs offered health benefits to full-time employees, and several of these programs offered additional benefits, such as access to dental and retirement programs.

Individual centers enrolled approximately thirty to more than one hundred children. The percent of children receiving Department of Social Services (DSS) subsidies for care ranged from zero to 100%. Three directors reported subsidies for 95% or more of the children at their center, and four sites noted that fewer than 10% of their children received subsidies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Small day care centers, family day care homes, and group family day care homes were not included in this study.

## Interview Process

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, consistent with qualitative methodology. As such, the goal of the interviews was to elucidate the experiences among respondents and identify themes from those narratives. The study was not designed to provide generalizable findings—in other words, to claim that a specific percentage of all day care center directors have a particular experience. Rather, the questions were open-ended, designed to offer the directors a flexible structure in which to share their own experiences. Further, while a semi-structured interview format allowed for more nuances of program challenges and strategies to emerge (as opposed to a fully structured interview format), the exact questions used in each interview varied; not all respondents answered exactly the same questions. As an example, directors had varying levels of access to, and control over, budget and human resources information, which, therefore, limited their ability to respond to questions related to payroll, benefits, or overall budget impacts.

Following the interview protocol (see Appendix), directors were asked about

- strategies and challenges related to staff recruitment and retention;
- the impacts of increased minimum wage on program budgets, staff, and tuition rates;
- impacts related to paid family medical leave; and
- their experiences complying with new regulations regarding background checks and training.

Directors were also asked to describe other significant challenges and offer suggestions for addressing the challenges they described. Interviews were conducted by telephone during the directors' regular workdays and lasted, on average, forty to forty-five minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To maintain respondents' anonymity, neither their names nor the names of their child care centers are used in this report.

This report shares themes that emerged from the interviews, organized by topic area, along with quotations that illustrate the themes. An analysis and summary of directors' responses follows, along with recommendations for future actions.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### Strategies for Recruiting Qualified Staff

The directors interviewed noted several fairly typical avenues for recruiting staff: job fairs, advertising in local print and online media (e.g. Syracuse.com), inclusion in the Child Care Solutions database, and postings on social media sites such as Indeed.com, Care.com, or Facebook. Directors also noted some smaller-scale, targeted methods such as bulletins to parents and word-of-mouth. Several directors mentioned using local colleges, high schools, or partner programs as sites for recruiting staff. Only two directors mentioned "recruitment from within" as preferred strategies.

Very few of the directors interviewed noted any incentives related to recruitment. A couple noted that they offer staff a child care tuition discount. Other incentives included sign-on bonuses, flexible scheduling, and monetary incentives to staff for recommending new hires.

*I've given them flexible schedules to choose—what they're looking for more than what I'm looking for. Because if I say I need somebody closing shift five days a week and I want you to have this and I'm offering this pay, I will find no one. So that's how I'm trying to compensate for the lack of what I can offer....It's very difficult.*

*We try to do whatever we can. There aren't many perks in child care so, you know, you don't get paid a lot. It's not why you're here. But we try to accommodate staff in any way we can, if ever anyone has appointments or things like that. We're also set up a little bit differently. We're together throughout the day. We're not just stuck in a classroom throughout the day with our co-teacher....I feel like that really does something to staff members when they work together.*

## Recruitment Challenges

Not surprisingly, the most commonly noted challenges for recruitment are two factors integrally related: pay and qualifications. Directors are challenged to find applicants with appropriate qualifications and skills who seek jobs with the pay and benefits (or lack thereof) that they have to offer. At minimum, centers need lead teachers with associate's degrees and/or Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials. Directors pointed out that, to be accredited, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) strongly recommends that lead teachers have bachelor's degrees. Further, programs partnering with school districts for Universal Pre-K (UPK) programs must staff those programs with New York State certified teachers holding master's degrees.

*There's not a lot of fish in the sea. There's not as many people applying for the programs to go around. I don't know how to fix that, except for more universities offering this program.*

*And the calls I get, they're just not reading the qualifications. They think it's just babysitting...It's very frustrating and I'm to the point, I don't know what to do.*

*We're subbing out a position for months at a time because we can't find a qualified CDA candidate.*

Directors generally agree that the compensation they can offer does not match these required credentials. Based on directors' estimates of the pay range for their teachers, the median low-end pay is just under \$12 per hour (range: \$10.70–\$13); the median high-end pay is around \$13.50 per hour (range: \$11.50–\$24). Only half of those interviewed were able to offer benefits packages including health care to their teachers.

*The UPK teachers especially, if they got into a school district, they would be making way more than \$18.50 an hour. So they're not looking to come to child care centers. And then my lead teachers in the classroom are making \$14.50 an hour with a bachelor's degree. They can go somewhere else, not even in the field, and make more than \$14.50 an hour with a bachelor's degree.*

*How can you not respect that somebody who has education and experience—they need a living wage. Dunkin' Donuts is starting at \$11.25 for someone in high school or just out of school—I don't understand.*

*A lot of agencies in collaboration with the city school district are having a hard time finding that qualified teacher....Sometimes the teachers let [their licenses] expire and don't go back and take the test or renew because I can... make \$200 just for coming in [to a K-12 classroom] for a day, so why should I go back and renew my certification when I can come in and be a sub?*

Directors noted several other barriers to recruitment:

- Programs lose applicants because of the time it takes to process their applications.
- It is difficult to find qualified applicants who are also bilingual.
- Applicants are looking for full-time work, when programs may only have openings for part-time, substitute, or split-shift work.
- Applicants may not follow through if the center is in a neighborhood perceived to be dangerous.

## Retention Challenges

The directors interviewed estimated staff retention rates within the range of 75% to 95% annually. Despite the challenges with recruitment, once staff were hired, retention was not an alarming issue for these directors. Many described having a core staff with teachers who had been with their programs for five, ten, or more years. The frustration arises at not being able to fill a teaching position when someone does leave and the struggle to find qualified substitutes, or to retain teachers (often college students) over the summer.

*It's when someone leaves and I'm getting a new one in....They don't know about the [other staff members] as a family. They don't know the families yet. They don't have an attachment. It takes them a long time to get that attachment, and sometimes it's not easy to get new staff to stay. And then they get paid so poorly, they're always looking for the next deal to come along. So some of the staff I just get them all trained, get them all processed, and—boom—they come in and sit across from me and say, 'I love it here, but I don't make enough money.'"*

Directors noted barriers to retention that often mirrored the barriers to recruitment: namely, inadequate wages and benefits for the demands of the position. Most directors noted that teacher

retention suffers because teachers cannot live on their wages alone. The struggle to live on low wages is compounded when considering the demands of the job and the requirements that may be placed on teachers in order to keep their jobs, e.g. achieving a CDA credential or a college degree in a specified amount of time.

*You can go work in the school district as a sub—I think you have to have a high school diploma—and get more than I could pay you, for longer hours.*

*No matter how much you've gone through and trained with them, they don't really know what they're getting into until they've been in a room with ten toddlers—for six months...it's a lot.*

*We get our money through [the school district], and so some of it has to do with the expectations for advanced training—getting certified as a NYS birth through second grade teacher, which sometimes is very overwhelming for people. They are like, "No way am I going to do that." So they'll look for other jobs in other centers where they don't have the grants that come in through [the district] and therefore don't have the requirements that within a certain amount of time they have to get teacher certification.*

*People don't want to go in the business anymore. There's not enough money to be made...It's not enough to live off of, and, not to mention, it's a hard job with a lot of regulations that come with it. And it's hard! If they're not there for the day, it matters to an entire center. And not everybody wants that responsibility for ten dollars an hour.*

*This is labor intensive work. So they're beat when they leave here, and then they've got to go to another job.*

## **Retention Activities**

Nearly all directors expressed a desire to increase teachers' pay, but only three mentioned giving raises as a retention strategy. More common retention strategies can be best characterized as maintaining a positive working atmosphere. The directors strive to provide flexibility for teachers to balance work schedules with personal needs. They offer flexibility within their classrooms—for example, allowing staff to create their own lesson plans, remain in classrooms with their preferred age range, or share a classroom with colleagues with whom they have developed a level of comfort. They extend one-on-one support and encouragement, listening and empathizing with teachers' concerns, and actively foster the cohesion of their staff. Directors frequently described the importance of creating a sense of community or "family" among teachers and engaging them in group activities both during and outside of work hours. Along these lines, providing food and other tokens of appreciation is a widespread practice.



*I care very much about the staff....we'll have a large training...so I'll make sure there's breakfast food out for everybody. I just try to take care of them and listen to them and pay attention to their needs.*

*Hopefully I've had some impact on that—just making sure they know they're valued.*

*We don't do anything financially. We try to do things like monthly activities to try to keep the staff engaged. We do monthly birthdays and recognition that way. We do a lot of different social kinds of things to keep people engaged and feel like they're connected. But, as far as financial options, we're very limited.*

*We became a family a long time ago and we just kind of stuck with each other.*

Several directors described support that they are able to provide for teachers who wish to continue their education. Four of these directors noted that their centers offer financial support, most often in the form of tuition reimbursement. Others support their teachers' education by offering flexible schedules or help with funding/grant applications.

## **Minimum Wage**

**Context:** In 2016, the New York State minimum wage was \$9.00 per hour. This wage will raise incrementally until it reaches \$12.50 per hour in 2021. The minimum wage in 2018 is \$10.40 per hour. Adding to the fiscal challenges faced by child care programs, there have been no market rate increases (i.e. increased state and county subsidies to families for child care) to offset wage increases.

Among the topics discussed during interviews, the predominant stressor on program budgets is the increase in minimum wage. Within this theme, about half of the respondents noted the problem of proportionality: when the wages of staff receiving minimum wage increase, all staff will anticipate raises so that their wages remain proportionally above minimum wage. For some respondents, this is a reality—raises have been given or planned that maintain proportionality. For example, if a teacher earning \$9.70 per hour received a 7% raise due to the minimum wage increase, a teacher making \$11.00 per hour was also given a 7% raise. For other programs, these “across-the-board” raises are an expectation, but one that they will struggle to meet.

*Most of our staff is [paid] around minimum wage, so then you have to adjust everyone else...as the minimum wage went up, everyone went from this minimum wage to the next one with nothing taken into account for performance and time at the center. It was just kind of you went from this to that because we couldn't afford to do more....As a lead, what you're making above the assistants is not that much; it's not proportional.*

*Minimum wage increase generally means that everyone is looking for an increase....And it's not always doable right away, so that's been a challenge. I would like to, and actually the company would like to. We've increased most people, not*

*necessarily proportionally. When it goes up a dollar, dollar and a half, that's a big increase across the board...everybody expects an increase—a proportionate increase.*

*I've been paying pretty good to the ones that have been here for a long time. They're going to get to the point where they're going to say, "Yeah, but that's not fair to me anymore because minimum wage is going up." I think we're going to come to an impasse where it's going to be harder for us to meet it. Because the teachers can only really make so much from our budget.*

*I'm all for it. It's great for the people who were minimum...but it's very difficult because we know it ups everything. And other staff are looking for raises, I'm sure. It's just very difficult to give when we know the figures that have to go out.*

It is important to note that, while the wage increases may have an impact, one-third of those interviewed felt that the impact would not be burdensome, as their organization already had a system in place for increasing wages yearly for all staff.

*I also feel our board was pretty much right on top of it, and they have given increases right along to stay ahead of the curve.*

*So far it hasn't had a large impact on us, only because we follow the [parent organization] and we kind of go up when they're trying to do their own schedule of raises so they can keep up...with minimum wage.*

The actual and speculated impacts of wage increases varied from impacts on staffing and tuition increases to impacts on program quality. In terms of staffing, several respondents noted that they may need to reduce staff, a measure that only one director mentioned having already taken. They anticipate, and one felt she had already seen, more competition for qualified staff, as some centers are able to start new teachers at higher rates than others.

*What I already see, and will probably continue to see...there's more competition for the right staff. Some places, for whatever reason, have the ability to start higher than we do. So we're going to have to be competitive.*

*If we don't adjust everyone's pay, at some point here, I can see a lot of people leaving...*

In terms of tuition, half of the directors noted that they had raised tuition rates, would be raising rates in the near future, or would be raising their rates more often to accommodate the increase in minimum wage.

*We used to go two to three years with no rate increases, but we now have to raise our rates every year, so it will continue to cost families more to send their child to child care.*

Of those who did *not* plan to raise tuition, three noted that they would keep their tuition at the rate established for DSS subsidies (which has not been raised) due to the large percentage of families who use the subsidies to cover their child care. For those programs, raising tuition rates for “private pay families” would have a negligible effect on their budgets.

*So we’re still getting the same allocation per pupil that we’ve been getting for the last three years. And they want master’s-level qualified teachers with degrees. That’s why it’s hard to retain somebody.*

*But the problem with our DSS families is those rates aren’t changing, and fair market value doesn’t change.*

*The money we get from the District doesn’t go up. It’s a flat rate....So the money coming in doesn’t go up. But the money that will be going out will go up. So we have to think about that; where’s that line where we go into the red.*

Most directors alluded to actual or anticipated sacrifices to program quality to accommodate the increasing payroll expenses. This was especially true for programs that rely on DSS-subsidized families. Directors noted the obvious: the additional money to cover payroll has to come from somewhere. They described cutbacks to materials and supplies, playground improvements, field trips and other special activities, and the possibility of reducing the number of adults per child in their classrooms (to “run at bare minimum”).

*There’s nothing else coming in. We don’t get donations. We don’t have grants. There’s none of that. So the tuition has had to increase. And budgets for doing extra things have been cut. So our budget for materials and any special things that we did do, or bringing people into the center—guests or things like that, field trip opportunities....It basically affected our goals for improvement to the environment, the playground, things like that that we’ve been looking to do.*

*It’s made [parents] a little less able to sign on for extra things, such as dance class...less soccer, less dance, less gymnastics—we can’t do that anymore...fewer people are able to sign on to it, because they’re paying the extra money they had in tuition.*

*We have a smaller ratio for child care so that the kids get more attention....We’re going to have to run at the bare minimum of 1:5 teachers in the toddler room, then that hurts the care of the children, eventually.*

*[Payroll] would have to pull from some other area, like pull from materials or supplies for the classroom, things like that—that’s just, again, higher quality of care will be diminished because there won’t be money to buy materials that would be appropriate.*

Several directors mentioned adverse effects on staff related to program quality. They noted an inability to reward performance through merit raises and threats to staff morale:

*It made it a very big challenge because there is no incentive to be a better performer if you're going to be compensated at the same rate as somebody who, you know, is barely doing the minimum.*

*It affects the morale! My goodness!...Just talking with my staff every day, being in the classroom with them every single day, seeing what they're going through every single day. It's so labor intensive, and the younger the child is, it's even more....We've got to maintain that, and that's hard to do.*

While these factors can certainly affect the overall staffing arrangements on a purely “numbers” level, the relationship to program quality cannot be ignored. Staff turnover is related to consistency of care for children, an important indicator of quality. Furthermore, when staff morale suffers, the emotional climate of the program as whole suffers, inevitably affecting the care provided to children.

Perceptions regarding the impact of minimum wage increases ranged from observations about families' own financial situations to concerns about how changes to program costs or operations may affect families. Most often, directors speculated that parents will have to pay more for child care and, therefore, more parents will take their children out of care.

*I've heard frustration from one of my parents in particular about how it makes more sense for her to work part time and spend time with her child rather than them both working full-time jobs....And I thought, that's got to be frustrating as a parent.*

*But the families who won't be able to afford it—we're going to lose numbers, which will then turn to layoffs for staff because we won't need them because we have less kids.*

*So we're totally funded by parents. So let's say, we keep on going up, we're going to lose parents, because they can't afford it any longer. We're going to have a smaller staff. We're going to have to lay off, you know, a ricochet kind of thing. So I see it getting worse, not easier, for a middle-sized child care center to operate.*

As for families' finances, a few directors reported more use of subsidies and a rise in co-payments for DSS-subsidized families. They have experiences with parents no longer being able to pay for child care, which causes them to accumulate back payments to the center and/or take their children out of the program. One director noted that, while reluctant to do so, she needed to become more aggressive with parents to collect payments.

*The larger our copayments are, the harder it is to collect from parents....So it's a little more aggressive, you know, "Do you have your payment?" You don't want to be the one threatening to say we won't let you return to child care until you've made this payment.*

*I see two working parents who receive subsidies, when I never did before....Two parents, working, still being eligible [for DSS subsidy]. That's different.*

## **Paid Family Medical Leave**

**Context:** As of January 1, 2018, all employers with one or more employees must take a deduction from all employees' pay and establish family medical leave policies specifying how employees may use such leave. Employees may take a leave of up to eight weeks, all at one time or pro-rated until all eight weeks are used. The leave is intended for a parent for a birth or adoption or the placement of a foster care child in their home, or for an individual caring for a direct relative due to illness.

When asked about paid family medical leave, directors generally responded with broad uncertainty about what impact these regulations may have on their programs or how their programs would adjust to accommodate a staff member's absence. Most said they had not yet had any experience with staff taking advantage of family medical leave or, at most, had had only one staff member use it. Several directors noted appreciation that their staff will be able to take time off to care for family members, if needed. It is important to note that several directors, particularly those who are part of a larger organization, mentioned that the human resources processes involved were not part of their purview, and they were, therefore, unfamiliar with leave arrangements or their budgetary impacts.

Given this uncertainty, the most common challenge directors anticipated was finding substitute teachers to cover a staff member's absences, echoing the challenge of teacher recruitment in general. Two directors commented that hiring substitutes adds to their program costs. The challenge of finding substitutes to cover FMLA leave is further complicated when staff members may take partial days or may take their leave with little advance notice. These situations may require other staff members, or the directors themselves, to work extra hours to cover absences.

*I don't have a problem with people taking time, but if it's a long time...someone else has to be in that space with those qualifications.*

*When a teacher or assistant teacher is out you must fill that spot quickly (!), and that adds to our costs.*

*So now I have to find someone that's going to just work for two weeks. Do you know how difficult that is? First, we've got to get them all screened. I mean, by the time we screen, they're gone. And then—we haven't felt it yet, but I know it's going to be difficult....It's hard enough to find help, and now I'm going to have to find an extra person just to do that. Because we don't have extra people around. And subs—they don't exist....We're stuck and we have to move teachers around, keep the ratio and so forth. And keep quality care as we're going through all this, and that's my main concern.*

Though this was not a commonly expressed concern, one director worried that teachers who took time off for maternity leave would likely not return to their jobs at all.

*They have no interest in even finding out more about the paid medical leave...they're just going to resign....Because they can't afford child care.*

Another anticipated the cost to the program if a teacher went on maternity leave and took her own children out of the program during that time, in addition to not placing her newborn in child care.

## Background Checks

**Context:** New regulations, not yet implemented, will require all child care employees to have criminal background checks through both federal and state systems, both requiring fees, every five years.

Only three directors predicted that background checks would have a negative impact on their budgets. The majority believed new regulations for background checks would have no apparent impact on their programs, and said that, furthermore, such regulations were needed and welcomed.

*I don't think that will be a real hardship. I really don't. And you know what—I kind of prefer that. It's fine with me....Those, to me, are strong regulations that I can understand why they were put out.*

*There are a lot of steps I have to go through as the director to make sure someone is cleared before they start, but I feel they are all necessary and very important.*

Aside from that general sentiment, several directors expressed frustrations about the current processes surrounding background checks and felt that the requirement to do more frequent checks would simply exacerbate these existing problems. For example, centers that have partnerships with school districts must perform two sets of state background checks—one for the State Education Department and the other for the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS)—creating duplicate work for the directors and potential employees.

*They're asking now for volunteers and therapists that come in to be screened under your center, which they're already cleared, so I find that to be ridiculous. They're already in the system, so I feel like a quick phone call should be able to accomplish that, or there can just be some other kind of registry set up for that.*

*It's just chaotic. Somebody new that comes in, because you have to go through the paperwork for OCFS, then you have to turn around very similar paperwork—it's not the same paperwork—for the school district for New York State Department of Ed. And so we actually have to send staff twice to go get fingerprinted.*

Others were frustrated by the time it took to get results back, creating a longer time from a potential teacher's interview to being "on the floor" with children. According to one director, the long and complex process reduces the likelihood that interns and volunteers will follow through with their service to the program. Another mentioned that she had lost applicants because of the process; applicants find other jobs while waiting for their background checks to come through.

*When months have gone by, it's a hassle.*

*I think it takes a longer time from having an interview with an individual to being actually on the floor doing her job....We had one person almost three months before everything came back! We've lost people because of it.*

## **Training Requirements**

**Context:** According to new training requirements, child care staff must complete a five-hour health and safety training either online or through certified trainers. All staff are required to complete fifteen hours of training per year and thirty hours in a two-year period. Child care providers may apply for scholarships for required training through the state's Educational Incentive Program (EIP).

As with background checks, directors expressed general approval of regulations related to training; however, they also expressed concerns related to budgets and the format of training. The majority of those interviewed felt that the cost of additional training for staff would further strain their budgets. (Only one director said that it would not have an impact on the program's budget.)

*Sometimes I think even though we do training, we don't ever do enough of it...*

*That is a plus for us....There's so many trainings out here in the community.*

*We do a lot of training here. We make sure that's our number one priority. They do have a required training right now that each staff member that has to do. Personally, I love it. It's a great training.*

Many programs take advantage of free training; they appreciate and seek out free training online, from OCFs, and in their local communities:

*The cost of training is obviously going up, so that is sometimes difficult, so I try to find as much free training as I can.*

Over half of the directors described their use of in-house training, working professional development into regular staff meetings and/or using resources available through their corporate office, parent organization, or community partner. Furthermore, several directors encourage their teachers to apply for professional development funds through the state's Education Incentive Program (EIP) and assist them in completing the applications.

Directors' concerns about cost focus on either paying substitutes to cover classrooms while teachers are in training, or paying teachers overtime to attend training outside of their regular work hours.

*It has caused us to have overtime because I need my staff here during the day and working with the children, and they frequently will take some of the OCFs trainings at home and then print them out, and then, therefore, we're paying them for the extra hours. It's made training time more expensive.*

*The state is requiring more and more, and we have to pay staff for that time out of the classroom. That is a significant cost, and, in our case, it is not the best method to train our employees.*

Directors' perceptions about the format of trainings were mixed and often conflicting. While several mentioned that the training required was "too much, too soon," others were satisfied, and even took pride in their ability to meet the training requirements for new hires in their first few days on the job.

*This year, one of the things that hit us—hit us hard on staff—was the five-hour training. Getting people in that health and safety training....The training itself wasn't bad, but the timing you have to do that is a challenging.*

*I feel it's vitally important. But it's just that, again, how much time do you take away from getting the person in with the kids?*

*Having to be done before you get into the classroom—I don't think we need any more of that. There's too much that has to be done before they can be with the children*

*But the training requirements that have come about over the last, maybe two years, it's just ridiculous....It's almost getting so, almost overwhelming.*

Similarly, directors had mixed feelings about the use of online training. Several directors found the online training useful, not only because it is free, but also because teachers could complete the trainings during breaks or rest periods during the normal work day.

*Their first day with us is really sitting at the computer beginning those online things through OCFS, doing that five-hour one, mandated reporter, the shaken baby. We get them started from the get-go doing a lot of that stuff, and then it's open all the time....So we throw it out to them and then in their spare time or when they have down time they'll be able to get online and start hacking out those things.*

Those not in favor of online training cited their preference for face-to-face group training, the dated content of some online training, and what they perceived as the tediousness of multiple hours of online training.

*The trainings—most of them are a waste of time. It's the same thing. There's not a lot of current information. So I guess if it was more meaningful, it would probably be something that people would be more willing to do, or more eager to do.*

*Most of my staff have been in the field for a very long time. They've done all the free online training—and with other directors there was a heavy reliance on that because of the expense...I try not to utilize that—as much as I can, I avoid it.*

*I have no problem with additional training, and that includes training regulations from the state. The only problem I have is that sometimes we have difficulty getting into the programs and it would be nice if we could train a group....Everybody sitting*



*down together, and they can talk about it. Versus you sitting by yourself in a room, or even at home where I can't supervise all that to make sure you understand what you're looking at.*

Only one respondent noted that the program had lost a potential staff member because of the amount of training required, indicating that the in-service training requirements may have fairly weak impact on staff retention:

*We generally take a few days and don't do anything but training. People get very bored with that. I've lost people in the middle of training because they couldn't understand why they had so much to do on the computer....Because it takes days.*

## **Other Challenges and Concerns**

Some directors noted other challenges that affected the operation of their centers:

- The Department of Social Services no longer pays a subsidized child's daily fee when the child is absent, greatly reducing the center's income. This was felt to have a financial impact on par with the increase in minimum wage.
- It can be difficult for staff members to attain the CDA credential in a timely fashion. Some teachers find it difficult to complete the portfolio requirement.
- Centers experience significant hurdles when having to move their location, modify a new location to meet regulations (which may not have applied to previous locations), and get the new location licensed.
- The implementation of regulations varies between Cayuga and Onondaga Counties; programs that operate in both counties need to navigate varying interpretations of regulations.
- State agencies do not allow programs enough time to address required improvements and do not seem to understand the challenges of funding those improvements.
- Some directors have experienced challenges in what could be perceived as jumping through bureaucratic hoops to meet regulations. It creates great frustration when in-house training may not "count" toward requirements, or when a program needs to duplicate data entry to comply with a state-designed format.
- There is a lack of publicly funded programs for three-year-olds, particularly toddlers who turn three after the deadline for Head Start.
- Getting credentials recognized for teachers who are immigrants and bring their certification from another county can be challenging.
- Keeping the environment secure and children safe is an ongoing challenge.

## ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Impacts are Interrelated

It is impossible to understand the impacts of state and federal changes on the child care field without acknowledging that the impacts are interrelated. Any new requirement that has an associated cost affects the program's budget as a whole, and, as such, it impacts everything else for which a program is able to spend money. More money spent to train teachers, for example, may mean an elimination of field trips for students. More money devoted to wages may result in delays to playground improvements. What may be examined from an isolated policy perspective as a trickle of new regulations is experienced holistically by many child care programs as a looming financial storm. Changes to one area of a budget inevitably impact other areas.

Other than making adjustments in their daily practice to meet requirements, e.g. tracking staff members' training hours or managing the paperwork for background checks, the directors we interviewed spoke generally in terms of "money in, money out." Directors spoke about income and expenses over which they had no control versus those for which they had more discretion. Programs reliant on static DSS subsidies for their income cannot balance budgets with tuition increases; they must decrease expenses (training costs, materials, etc.) Programs reliant on "private pay families" can raise their income through tuition increases but, in doing so, feel they are gambling with parents' ability to pay; they are likely to combine tuition increases with reductions in expenses as well.

The overarching message from the directors interviewed is, "The money has to come from somewhere." Whether program budgets are strained by increasing payroll, training, fingerprinting, or insurance expenses—or any other increase in required expenses—the funds to cover those expenses will come from somewhere else in their budgets. Programs pursue logical solutions: budget cuts to "extras," relative to the program's tolerance for perceived decreases in quality of care; and tuition increases, relative to their perceptions of parents' ability to pay.

### The Economic Status of Families and the Burden of Increasing Expenses

As programs weigh the changes they can make to balance budgets, decisions ultimately come down to who will bear the burden. Directors of programs with a higher percentage of private pay families acknowledged that these families would ultimately bear, or partially bear, the burden through increased tuition payments.

*Ultimately, our private pay families are going to be the ones who are going to have to help with that bump in pay, because they will have their rates changing...the private pay families, the ones who are not receiving subsidies, are carrying the burden for everyone.*

*It's hard to find that balance. Would I love to raise all my employees' salaries? For sure, but we only have so much to work with, and we don't want child care costs to be so unreasonable that families can't afford it.*

Directors of programs that rely more on DSS subsidies or Universal Pre-K payments from school districts have less leeway in their decision making. Since they are not able to raise “market rates” established by state agencies, they must look to more flexible expenses within their programs in order to balance their budgets. In these cases, unfortunately, the children themselves bear the burden through decreased program quality and opportunities.

*As it is, my budget every year, I have less and less surplus, and I’m kind of cutting things out that I never had to cut out before....I cut down on field trips a lot. There were some we always really liked to offer our children because they don’t have the opportunity to go to a lot of places. So we always like to run the summer as a camp with different themes and bring a lot of people in. Parents used to ring the phone off the wall because they wanted to get their kids in the summer program. That’s something I’ve had to cut back on, because buses are too expensive now, and just getting them into any function is expensive....This is all kind of unfortunate, because it’s the children that are losing on that end of it.*

It seems logical to project that, as costs continue to rise for programs serving urban and/or low-income populations—and subsidies or grant payments to these programs do not rise accordingly, disparities in program quality based on socioeconomic status will continue to widen.

Aside from potential disparities, continually rising costs without comparable increases in income threaten the quality of care that children receive on the whole. The directors interviewed expressed concerns that families may not always be able to afford continually rising child care costs. When this happens, families are forced to find more affordable options, potentially sacrificing critical levels of quality:

*When price becomes the driving factor over quality, then child care will change dramatically. People will look elsewhere for care, meaning they will look for what is unsafe and unlicensed care rather than regulated providers. We saw this happen in 2008 when jobs were scarce and wages were down, and we heard horror stories. Quality should always be first, not price.*

## **The Role of Relationships**

While directors often stressed a “money in, money out” perspective, their comments alluded to other important aspects of their programs in which they exercise more control: in many ways, financial limitations are assuaged by relationships. This was clear in the ways that many of the directors talked about personal relationships among staff as well as organizational relationships.

Nearly all directors noted the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified staff for jobs that offer so few monetary rewards. Furthermore, directors are challenged to find staff who meet the qualifications and “have their heart in it” to the extent that they will stay in the job. Among those interviewed,

challenges of staff retention were not described as isolated problems, but rather as a subset of recruitment challenges. If they find the "right people," those employees will stay in the job. Whether by design or out of necessity, directors address retention primarily through strategies that don't strain their budgets—most notably, creating a caring, flexible, family-like environment.

Organizational relationships also surfaced as resources that directors draw upon to meet increasing demands. Directors talked about the importance of community partners or their parent organizations in providing resources such as training and staffing. Directors from multi-site programs noted that losses seen in one site may be offset by other sites.

*Being that we are a sister company of another organization, sometimes we're able to cover from another spot to keep things manageable.*

Finally, for better or worse in terms of program budgets, a few directors described efforts made to maintain relationships with families, from providing additional discounts when families struggled to pay tuition to allowing flexible schedules for children's attendance. While these allowances may not make obvious logical sense to the program's bottom line, they contribute to—and are evidence of—the complex network of social relationships that supports the system as a whole.

*Families come to me when they can't do it. And, of course, sometimes I have to give them breaks. I hate to see a child leave.*

The flexibility and care shown by child care programs to the families they serve (and vice versa) strengthens the bonds between families and staff members, supporting a nurturing environment in which to raise children—one in which staff making poverty-level wages often choose to remain.

While it is apparent that these personal and organizational relationships support child care programs in complex ways, these relationships may also be threatened by increasing financial pressure. Decisions and actions that undercut these relationships—disproportionate wage increases or staff cutbacks, increasing aggressiveness in collecting payments from parents, diminishing quality of care, increasing competition for qualified staff, increased burdens carried by parent organizations—all threaten the norms of caring, family and sacrifice that, along with funding, the system depends upon. Throughout the interviews, this fear was conveyed by directors:

*It's getting harder and harder because the thing is, with the minimum wage increase, where do you make it up? And so then the burden comes back onto the parents, because you have to increase the rates. And where do you get to a point of no return? I mean does that make sense? How much impact can the parents take before it's just—I don't know.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges described by directors point toward a number of potential strategies for developing child care capacity in Cayuga and Onondaga Counties and mitigating the negative consequences of policy changes. These recommendations are presented below in four broad categories:

1. Support for meeting new requirements and creating efficiencies
2. Support for planning and capacity-building
3. Leadership in advocacy efforts
4. Continued research

### Support for Meeting Requirements and Creating Efficiencies

All the directors interviewed had earned credentials in early childhood education or a related field. As such, many need help meeting the business- and management-related challenges presented by policy changes. Further, most directors are challenged by the “in the moment” demands of their day and do not have time for reflecting on how they might improve their own processes. Child Care Solutions may consider the following:

- Developing a system or service that allows programs to easily access qualified pre-screened substitute teachers who have met the training requirements and background checks—something like a “temp service” to help centers meet sporadic staffing needs.
- Helping to craft and implement a service in which state agency staff or other qualified professionals help directors review their programs’ policies and procedures. Such a service may help directors to more efficiently manage budgets, background checks, and training activities, or other areas of need.
- Consider the potential for centralization of and/or collective effort around some human resources tasks, such as tracking background checks, providing training activities, and recruiting/hiring employees..
- Explore alternative training models that better fit the structure of child care programs, and advocate for their recognition by state agencies. Alternative models may include competency-based training, blended learning, peer coaching, and on-the-job training components. The goal of such models would be to minimize out-of-classroom time and maximize the perceived effectiveness and value of the training.
- Support collective use of in-house trainers. A number of centers helped their staff meet the training requirements through in-house training but also appreciated opportunities to hear from professionals from outside their centers. Child Care Solutions may consider supporting a “bartering system” that would allow programs to share expertise with their colleagues in the field and meet training requirements for their own staff.

## Support for Planning and Capacity-Building

As mentioned, most directors do not have formal training in business or management. If their center is part of a larger company or organization, they may have little direct knowledge of the budget or authority over it. Many directors, therefore, are looking for answers from leaders within their organizations or within the field. Child Care Solutions could offer leadership and structure through the following:

- Develop venues to provide in-depth information about policy changes. Help providers (directors and other organizational leaders) foresee future challenges presented by minimum wage increases and other policy changes and plan for future needs. These could take the form of policy forums (e.g. policy breakfasts), strategic and/or budget planning workshops for leaders, an online planning toolkit, or onsite technical assistance for budget forecasting.
- Help programs identify new sources of funding and develop the skills needed to secure that funding. Consider strategies such as a funders' forum during which directors meet with community leaders who may be able to support activities for children in centers (e.g. field trips, classroom visitors) or capital improvements (e.g. playground upgrades). In addition, offer grantsmanship training that will increase the capacity of programs to pursue multiple sources of funding, from public or private grants to internet-based approaches (e.g. GoFundMe.com).
- Support programs in building relationships and agreements with other child care centers and/or community organizations that increase capacity (e.g. benefits packages, cooperative training). Consider using a Collective Impact model to build capacity among area child care centers, with CCS serving as the backbone organization. (See [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact).)

## Leadership in Advocacy

Most directors do not have the background, skills, time, or information to advocate effectively for policies that reflect their needs and capacities. Child Care Solutions can offer strong leadership for advocacy from the early childhood education field through the following:

- Build and share an advocacy agenda, with detailed talking points about current challenges, to share with the child care field and families. Make it easy and quick for staff and families to share advocacy messages with policy makers. Insure that staff are aware of any limitations surrounding advocacy activities, depending upon the structure of their organizations, while also offering acceptable alternatives (e.g. sending messages to policymakers on personal time, using personal email, etc.)
- Raise the visibility of the realities and experiences of programs related to the impacts of policy changes. Local celebrity champions and education campaigns for staff and families could help get advocacy messages out.
- Engage the field in advocacy around changing regulations that hurt programs overall, as well as those that hurt programs serving lower-income families disproportionately (e.g. the stagnancy

of DSS & UPK subsidies). Consider holding events to engage stakeholders in advocacy efforts like email/letter-writing events.

- Explore the potential for collaborating on advocacy efforts with other organizations governed by the Office of Child and Family Services. Consider partnering to address issues of mutual concern.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

Continue to explore and illustrate the ripple effects of changes that have associated costs, and share findings with stakeholders. Further research into the impacts of recent policy changes could be geared toward triangulating the findings of the directors' interviews. In particular:

- Conduct a focus group with an additional cohort of directors to see if the themes presented here resonate and if important subtleties are captured.
- Use findings from interviews and focus group to develop questionnaires to survey the broader field, allowing for an interpretation of prevalence of experiences, challenges, and strategies—being aware that directors may not be in the best position to answer budgetary and HR questions.
- Survey staff members about their experiences in child care centers, their wages, educational backgrounds, career goals, etc. (To insure the highest response rate, surveys for staff members should be offered in English and Spanish versions and should be available online and on paper.)
- Secure partnerships and/or funding to review literature and investigate changes in the field over the past twenty to thirty years. Placing current policy changes within a broader historical context may shed light on how the field can best position itself to meet future challenges.

# APPENDIX—Child Care Director Interview Protocol, Spring 2018

## Introductions

1. **Purpose of the study:** The goal of the project is to assess the current state of child care in Cayuga and Onondaga Counties and the impact that state and federal changes are having on the child care industry. Child Care Solutions would like to examine possible sustainable solutions that the local communities can support and that are also likely to generate additional investment by federal, state, and local governments and local businesses.
2. **Role of Apter & O'Connor:** Child Care Solutions has engaged Apter & O'Connor Associates to interview and survey day care providers for their perspectives and ideas.
3. **Confidentiality:** Responses will be kept confidential and the recordings erased once they are transcribed, so please be honest. If we need to attribute a quote that might in some way identify a participant, will we contact the participant for permission, but our analysis is planned to summarize themes and cogent findings. Participants can have a copy of the report.
4. **Questions:** Any questions about this interview process.

## Background

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your center program:

1. How long have you been in the child care field?
2. How long have you been with this center? In your current position?
3. What is your background? Education? Certification?
4. Approximately how many children do you care for? How many classes (infant, toddler, preschool after-school)?
5. What percentage of the children in your care receive subsidies?
6. Approximately how many staff do you employ? Rate(s) of pay?
7. What benefits do you offer to your staff? What is the cost to your program for this package for individual employees?
8. How do you recruit qualified staff?
  - Do you do anything special (incentives, bonuses, tuition, etc.) to recruit qualified staff?
  - What are the barriers or challenges for recruiting qualified personnel?
9. Do you know your center's / program's annual turnover rate?
10. How do you retain qualified staff?
  - Do you do anything special to retain qualified staff (incentives, bonuses, tuition discount, etc.)?
  - Do you do exit interviews? If so, what are the primary reasons for staff turnover? Any themes as to why people leave?



## Challenges of Operating a Child Care Program

### *Minimum Wage*

1. What changes have you seen in the last year or two as a result of the minimum wage increase?
2. What has been the impact for your center/school/program? ...on your staffing? ...on your tuition rates?...on your overall budget or “bottom line”?
3. What impact or changes do you anticipate going forward for your center/school/program?
4. What impact has the minimum wage increase had on the families you serve?
5. What impact on families do you anticipate going forward?

### *Paid Family Medical Leave*

1. What changes have you seen in the last year or two as a result of Paid Family Medical Leave?
2. What has been the impact for your center/school/program? ...on your staffing? ...on your tuition rates? ...on your overall budget or “bottom line”?
3. What impact or changes do you anticipate going forward?
4. Any impact on the families you serve?

### *New Regulations (Background Checks, Training Requirements, Etc.)*

1. What changes have you seen in the last year or two as a result of the new regulations for background checks, training requirements, (other?)
2. What has been the impact for your center/school/program? ...on your staffing? ...on your tuition rates? ...on your overall budget or “bottom line”?
3. What impact or changes do you anticipate going forward for your center/school/program?
4. Any impact on the families you serve?

### *Other Concerns*

Do you have or anticipate any other significant challenges or concerns for operating a child care program in Onondaga / Cayuga County? In New York State?

### **Suggestions**

Do you have any ideas or suggestions for addressing some of your concerns/ these challenges?

- For Child Care Solutions
- For the county
- For New York state
- Other