

A Greater Salisbury Committee White Paper Addressing Childcare on the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland: ***Putting Children First, Strengthening Families, and Building a Resilient Economy***



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Introduction

What happens to our workforce, local economy, and children's future when families cannot find reliable childcare? Put another way: imagine what would happen to our families, our workforce and our economy if one day the following sign was, suddenly and inexplicably, placed on the front door of every Childcare Center on the Lower Shore: "Sorry, we're permanently closed."

Childcare is one of the most valuable services in our communities. It shapes children's early development, allows parents to work and provide for their families, and keeps local economies running. Yet, too often, childcare is treated as a secondary issue. It is time to bring it to the forefront of community and economic planning. ***It's time to take childcare out of the quiet corner of the room.***

The scarcity of childcare is a significant challenge on Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore, especially because many local industries such as agriculture, tourism, healthcare, and manufacturing rely on workers with a wide range of schedules. Parents who work nights, weekends, or seasonal shifts often struggle to find dependable, high-quality care, and families with more regular hours face similar barriers. Meanwhile, childcare providers are dealing with staffing shortages, rising costs, and complex regulations, making it increasingly difficult to meet the community's growing needs.

Even programs intended to help, like the Maryland Blueprint for Early Childhood Education, can unintentionally strain providers. New licensing and credential requirements, classroom ratios, and facility rules have forced many small, home-based providers to close, reducing the number of available childcare slots just as demand rises.

A major contributor to this crisis is the gap between public and private teacher qualification requirements. In Maryland, licensing, credentialing, and degree expectations differ sharply for educators in home- and center-based childcare versus public schools, creating a structural divide. Private providers operate under a six-level credential system, with a bachelor's degree as the highest qualification, but meeting public school licensing standards while keeping businesses operational is extremely challenging. When staff achieve higher credentials, they are often drawn to better-paying public programs, leaving private providers understaffed and limiting childcare availability across the region. Policies guided by the Four A's (Availability, Accessibility, Affordability, and Accountability) can help bridge these divides by creating a more aligned, stable, and equitable system, ensuring that all families have access to consistent, high-quality care.

A Community Feeling the Strain

Imagine Jamie, a single parent on the Lower Eastern Shore, juggling two jobs and caring for young children. One morning, Jamie learns the childcare center they relied upon for three years has closed. Panic sets in. Their sister lives 45 minutes away, and their workplace offers no flexibility. Jamie scrambles to call relatives, adjust work shifts, and search for another program, only to discover limited options. Jamie is not alone, and this is a daily reality for many families.

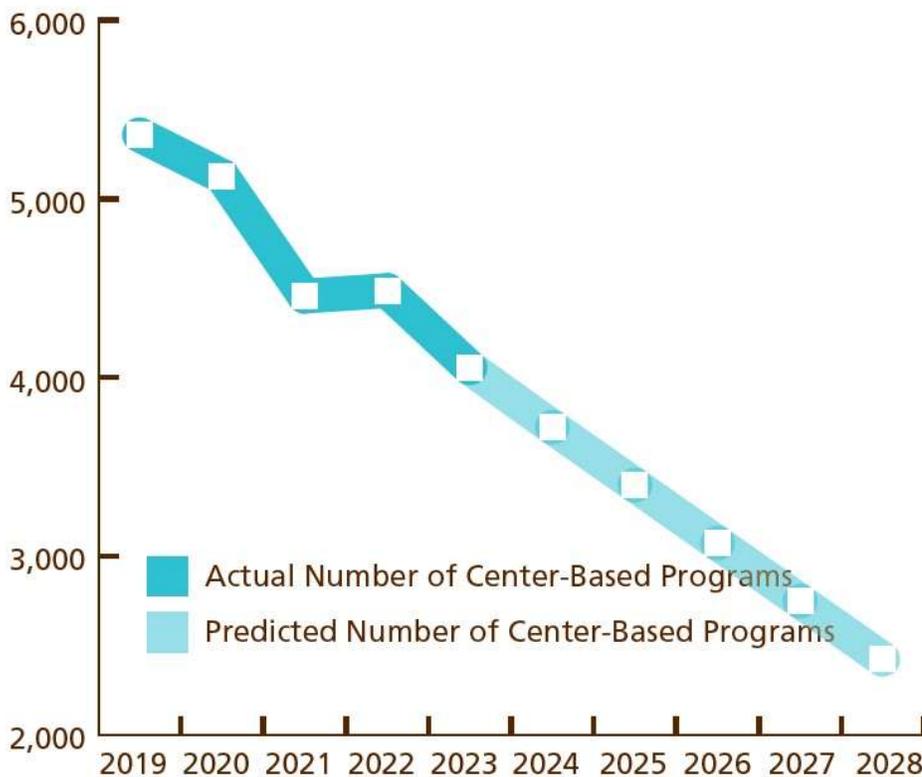
These stories echo across the region. Employers struggle as employees arrive late, leave early, or miss days entirely. Children miss early learning opportunities, and families face impossible

choices without reliable support. The childcare crisis is mounting steadily, and with every center closure, the pressure intensifies.

Reliable childcare is not optional and is essential to the stability of families, the workforce, and the economic future of the Lower Eastern Shore. The gap between childcare supply and demand is already stark. In Wicomico County, licensed childcare programs have a total capacity of approximately 3,385 children. However, according to the U.S. Census, more than 6,690 children ages 0–4 live in the county. Even accounting for parental choice or informal care arrangements, the numbers reveal a significant structural shortfall. This means that even if every licensed slot were filled, thousands of young children would remain without formal childcare options.

As shown in Figure 1 below, the number of childcare centers is projected to decline sharply if current trends continue.

Figure 1: Projected Decline in Childcare Providers



Source: Trends in Child Care 2024 Maryland Family Network
<https://www.childresource.org/wp-content/uploads/trends2024-final.pdf>

The Cost of Childcare

Finding affordable childcare is one of the toughest challenges for families. Parents often wait months or longer for a single spot. Infant care can reach \$18,000 per year, and preschool about \$13,000. In Wicomico County, with a median income of \$47,500, these costs can consume up to

37% of a family’s income for infants and 27% for preschoolers. For single parents, this leaves almost nothing for rent, food, or emergencies. (see figure 2)

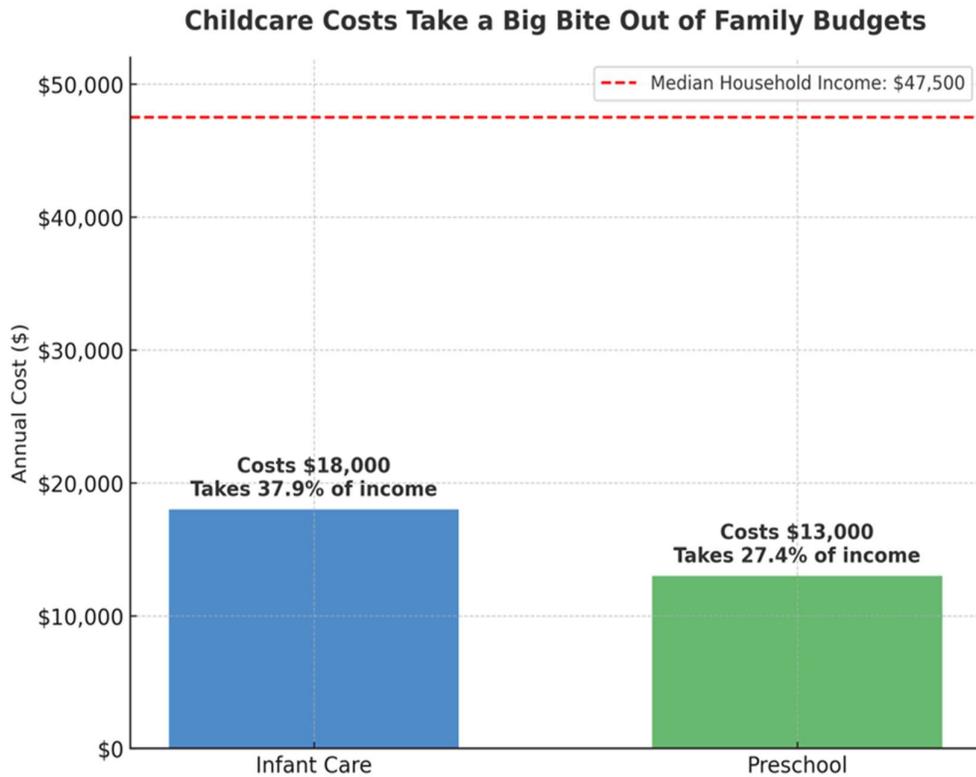


Figure 2: Childcare Annual Costs (Infant and Preschool)

Beyond cost, families face limited options, with too few programs for infants and toddlers. Recent closures of childcare centers and home-based programs force parents to reduce work hours, pass up promotions, or leave the workforce entirely.

Limited Availability, Access and Staffing Shortages

Limited childcare availability reduces the region’s appeal to new families and professionals. Employers face growing recruitment challenges, and when prospective employees encounter long waitlists or too few program options, many choose to live and work elsewhere, resulting in a shrinking local talent pool.

Staffing shortages exacerbate the strain on childcare services. Many private providers are unable to compete with salaries and benefits offered by public school Pre-K programs, leading to a migration of qualified teachers and a reduction in available childcare slots. This increases waitlists and intensifies stress for families.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate staff turnover and key factors driving workforce shortages, highlighting the critical need to stabilize childcare employment. (see figure 3 and 4)

According to the Maryland First Five Years Fund (October 2025), “Maryland’s economy loses \$2.2B annually due to childcare challenges. This statistic highlights the direct economic costs of inadequate childcare access, linking family needs to statewide economic productivity.

Source: First Five Years Fund
<https://www.ffyf.org/states/maryland/>

Total Staff and Exiting Staff at Responding Child Care Centers

Staff Level	Number of employees at start of year	Number of employees that left during the year	Percent of employees that left during the year
Director	207	20	10%
Teachers	1159	305	26%
Assistant Teachers	348	103	37%

Figure 3: Exiting Staff at Childcare Centers

What factors contribute to the turnover rate among center-based child care staff?

Wages are the major factor affecting staff turnover.

In the survey cited above 171 respondents provided reasons why those in child care left their positions. Some respondents gave multiple reasons. Many responses pointed toward wage related concerns (42% wages, 15% Health Benefits and 2% paid leave), 16% answered that turnover was due to employees who moved and 21% indicated a return to school as a reason. Twenty-three percent reported that employees were terminated or laid off. Of the 171 centers in the survey, only about 14% did not have any turnover during that time period.¹⁵

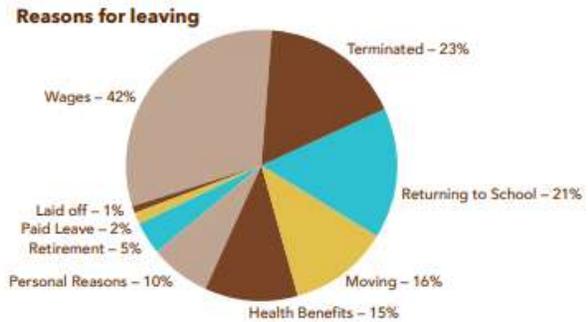


Figure 4: Key Factors Contributing to Center Turnover Rates

Source: Trends in Child Care 2024 Maryland Family Network
<https://www.childresource.org/wp-content/uploads/trends2024-final.pdf>

Current Challenges

Childcare options are rapidly decreasing. The Lower Eastern Shore faces a severe shortage of infant and toddler care, with some families on waitlists exceeding 100 names. Home-based providers, often the only option in rural areas, are limited to eight children total and just two under age two, restricting supply even as demand grows. Pandemic-related closures and continuing staffing shortages have further intensified the problem.

These challenges demonstrate significant gaps in both availability and accessibility. (see below Figure 5) Even when programs are available, strict capacity limits and long waitlists prevent families from accessing care when they need it.

Affordability presents an additional barrier. Maryland families spend well above the federal affordability benchmark of 7% on childcare, and for many, the cost exceeds college tuition. As a result, parents often reduce work hours, decline promotions, or leave the workforce altogether.

Addressing affordability is essential to ensuring families can remain engaged in the workforce without excessive financial hardship.

Wicomico County

Children’s Programs by Type with Capacity

	# of Programs	Capacity
Registered Family Child Care Providers and Large Family Child Care Homes	85	654
Licensed and Letter of Compliance Child Care Centers	32	2,731
Public Pre-Kindergarten	11	N/A
Head Start	1	NA
Early Head Start	N/A	N/A

Worcester County

Children’s Programs by Type with Capacity

	# of Programs	Capacity
Registered Family Child Care Providers and Large Family Child Care Homes	19	148
Licensed and Letter of Compliance Child Care Centers	18	1,108
Public Pre-Kindergarten	5	N/A
Head Start	3	NA
Early Head Start	N/A	N/A

Somerset County

Children’s Programs by Type with Capacity

	# of Programs	Capacity
Registered Family Child Care Providers and Large Family Child Care Homes	20	152
Licensed and Letter of Compliance Child Care Centers	8	384
Public Pre-Kindergarten	3	N/A
Head Start	2	N/A
Early Head Start	1	N/A

Figure 5: Availability and Accessibility Gaps to Childcare in Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset County

Source: Maryland Child Care Resource Network- Child Care Demographics 2025
<https://www.marylandfamilynetwork.org/>

Economic Impacts of Childcare Shortages

The childcare shortage produces a wide ripple effect across families, employers, and the broader economy. Parents cut their hours or exit the workforce entirely, leaving employers struggling to retain staff and maintain stable operations. Sectors such as healthcare and agriculture, which depend on irregular or extended schedules, are especially vulnerable.

The Lower Eastern Shore loses millions of dollars in wages, productivity, and tax revenue each year, further weakening the local economy. Nationally, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports that inadequate childcare results in \$122 billion in lost earnings and productivity annually.

Barriers to Expansion

Expanding childcare on the Lower Eastern Shore faces multiple, significant challenges for both families and providers. Complex regulations make it difficult for new programs to open and for existing programs to expand. High startup costs further discourage potential providers from entering the field. Staffing shortages, fueled by low wages and competition from public Pre-K programs for three- and four-year-olds, stretch providers beyond capacity and limit available care.

Differences in credentialing and licensure create additional hidden barriers. Public programs require state-licensed teachers, while private providers operate under a tiered credential system, often resulting in qualified staff leaving for higher-paying public-sector positions.

Quality of care directly impacts children’s readiness for school. Program accountability to meet or exceed state regulations depends on the professionalism of early childhood educators and their ability to access curricular materials and support for teachers. Even when federal resources, such as the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), are available, they are often underutilized because prospective providers do not know how to access them. Improved oversight and reporting would help ensure resources are used efficiently while addressing these barriers.

Together, these challenges create a critical risk: families struggle to find care, providers face closure, and the region’s workforce and economy suffer. Immediate action is required to stabilize the childcare system, protect families, and prevent further economic decline.

Call to Action

A strong childcare system rests on four essential pillars that guide effective policy decisions and regional planning:

- Availability – Ensuring that enough childcare options exist to meet the needs of all families.
- Accessibility – Aligning childcare programs with parents’ schedules, transportation realities, and daily routines.
- Affordability – Reducing financial barriers so families can fully participate in the workforce and community.
- Accountability – Upholding quality standards, professional expectations, and responsible use of resources.

Together, these pillars create the foundation for a childcare system that supports working parents, prepares young children for lifelong success, and strengthens the regional economy. However, principles alone cannot solve the challenges facing the Lower Eastern Shore.

Turning the Four A’s into real, measurable progress requires coordinated action across state agencies, lawmakers, employers, and local governments. The following key actions outline the concrete steps that must be taken to translate these pillars into meaningful change and lasting stability for families and providers.

Key Actions to Strengthen Childcare:

- Community leaders and local policymakers establish a coordinated regional childcare initiative that prioritizes the needs of children, families, and the workforce.
- We encourage local government to streamline licensing processes and provide clear, user-friendly guides to help new providers enter the system confidently.
- MSDE and the Legislature fully leverage CCDBG funds, grants, and targeted tax credits to expand access and make childcare more affordable for families.
- MSDE addresses credentialing and licensing disparities between public and private programs to create a fair and sustainable workforce pipeline.
- State and local leaders recognize and plan for gaps between Blueprint expectations and current workforce capacity to ensure practical and effective solutions.
- Employers engage as proactive partners by sponsoring sustainable childcare solutions, offering shared childcare spaces, or providing flexible schedules. Even small contributions, like part-time care support, shift flexibility, or partnerships with local providers, can make a meaningful difference in reducing staff turnover and supporting families.
- Local policymakers and community organizations launch outreach initiatives to recruit and support new childcare providers, particularly in underserved areas.
- Local governments and nonprofit or community partners provide startup grants, reimbursements, and other incentives to make home-based childcare financially viable and attractive.
- All leaders, state, local, and private sector coordinate efforts to build a unified childcare system that strengthens children, families, and the local economy.

Putting children first, strengthening families, and building a resilient economy is not just a goal, it is a necessary call to action our region cannot afford to ignore. The time to act is now. Every leader, including those in state, local, and private sectors, shares the responsibility and the opportunity to build the childcare system that the Lower Eastern Shore's children, families, and economy urgently need.