



Hidden Champions:

Recognizing Family Child Care Providers as Critical Early Care and Education Professionals in San Diego County

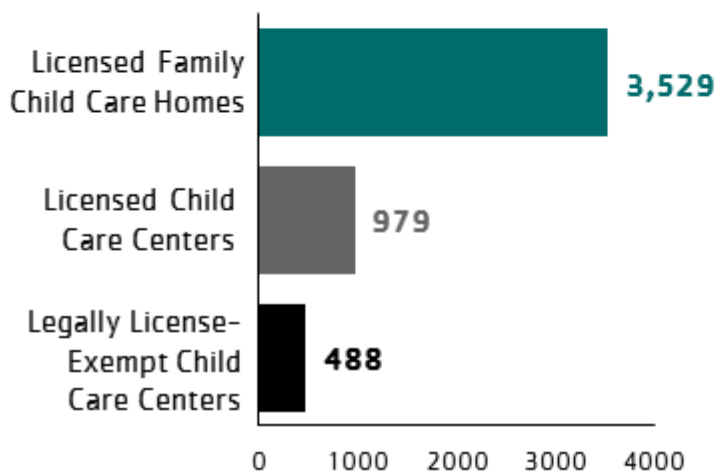
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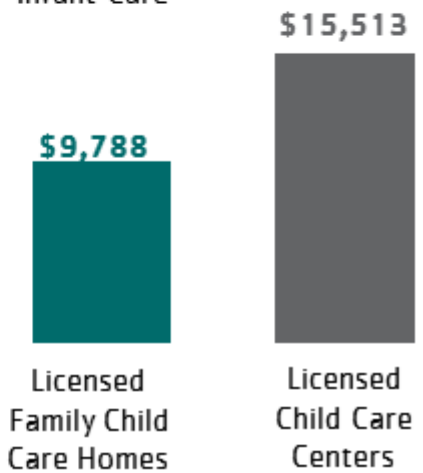
Spotlight: Family Child Care Providers

San Diego County is facing a child care crisis with a lack of available licensed child care spots in the region leaving **44%** of children of working parents without access to child care and the meaningful learning opportunities that cultivate optimal development.

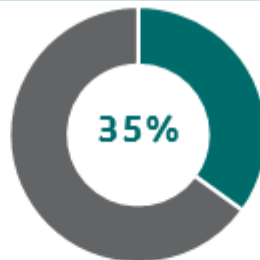
Breakdown of Child Care Options in San Diego County



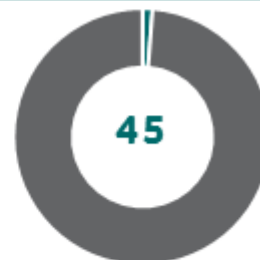
Annual Price of Full-time Infant Care



In San Diego, **62%** of low-income families use their child care vouchers in family child care homes



35% of family child care homes are able to offer care after 7 p.m.



YMCA CRS is only able to engage **45** providers in QRIS* efforts annually, out of a field of 3,529 family child care homes

The average take-home pay of a California family child care provider is **\$9.76/hour**, when adjusted for cost of living, nearly **\$3** below California's **\$12.00** minimum wage and below the living wage threshold for a single adult with one child.



*Quality Rating and Improvement System

Executive Summary

Family Child Care Homes are licensed child care businesses operated out of the provider's home where children are cared for in a family-like setting, in mixed age groups, and with day-to-day activities often mirroring those experienced in a child care center.

Family child care providers are small business owners, a critical support to full-time, working families, and change-agents on the front lines of child development. Strategic investment in this specialized workforce is critical for a community to realize the benefits of high-quality early care and education for all families.

The whitepaper that follows discusses the importance of family child care providers in supporting optimal child development and the needs of working families, the challenges they face in running their businesses, and recommendations for investing in this workforce to ensure they are supported in their work to nurture the next generation.

Introduction

Family child care homes are licensed child care businesses operated out of the provider's home and can range from a neighborhood parent who cares for a few children to a larger home-based facility. This means children are often cared for in a family-like setting, in mixed age groups, and with day-to-day activities mirroring those experienced in a child care center.

The California Department of Education explains that licensing requirements for providers include minimum health and safety standards, pediatric CPR, first aid, and health and safety classes. Family child care providers must be licensed if they care for the children of more than one family.ⁱ

A typical day at a quality, licensed family child care home begins when the parents drop off their children at the home and build bonds with the provider. This allows the provider and parent to prepare for the day and achieve a sense of synergy in their shared caregiving roles. Throughout the day, the provider nurtures children through activities that build brain structures, increase social and emotional skills with the adult provider and peers in the care setting, and encourage healthy habits. Providers serve healthy meals and model appropriate mealtime behaviors and interactions with other children in care. Parents may begin to pick up their children in the early afternoon, though many providers adjust their schedules to meet the needs of parents who work on evenings or weekends.

Access to quality, affordable child care yields immediate community benefits by ensuring parents can continue to work and earn wages that prevent or end cycles of poverty. Child care is also critical for the well-being of the next generation, and children who receive quality early childhood education are healthier, stay in school longer, and earn more in their careers.

Family child care providers are small business owners, offer critical support to full time working families, provide care for our most vulnerable infants and toddlers, and act as change-agents on the front lines of child development. Strategic investment in this specialized workforce is critical for a community to realize the benefits of high-quality early care and education for all families.

Brain Science and the Role of Providers in Child Development

Families do not exist in isolation, and a network of relationships, structures, and systems must join together to foster optimal child development. After a child's parents, a child care provider is a key player in ensuring the child develops crucial skills, meets developmental milestones, and is set on a path to a successful life.

Increased understanding of the young brain reveals that children do not passively absorb the world happening around them...Providers can play a part in this process of molding a child's brain.

Nationally, 11 million children under age 5 spend an average of 36 hours per week in some type of child care setting.ⁱⁱ This presents an enormous opportunity for providers to mold a young child's brain during an important phase of development.

A child's experiences between the ages of 0-5 build critical brain architecture, and what happens in the brain is inextricably linked to a child's ability to process emotions and navigate social environments, setting the foundation for learning, behavior and physical and mental health throughout life.

A more sophisticated understanding of the young brain reveals that children do not passively absorb the world happening around them. Rather, a complex blending of genes and experiences shape the developing brain to actively react to the world around it.

Providers play a part in this process of molding a child's brain using responsive interactions. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child has named this process Serve and Return and describes it as "when an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug."ⁱⁱⁱ

Responsive relationships that follow this model take on added significance when children are exposed to adverse experiences and extreme poverty. Parents who face chronic stress, financial struggles, isolation, substance use disorders, and mental health or ongoing physical health concerns may struggle to engage in the Serve and Return process. As a result, the child misses opportunities to build and strengthen the neurological connections that lead to optimal development of communication and social skills.

Regardless of the home environment, it is clear that family child care homes are an important piece of ensuring a child is surrounded by a network of adults that are invested in their wellbeing. The quality of a child care setting can determine whether a child is exposed to positive or negative experiences and can change the trajectory of a child's life and prevent reliance on costly public benefits, like healthcare, behavioral health, or juvenile justice systems.

Family Child Care Homes in San Diego County

San Diego County is facing a child care crisis with a lack of available licensed child care spots in the region leaving 44% of children of working parents without access to child care and the meaningful learning opportunities that cultivate optimal development. Even when a slot is available, quality of care varies widely, and the prices are often out of reach for families.

San Diego County has more than **3,500 licensed family child** care homes, compared to 979 licensed child care centers.

Family child care homes are an option for many of the families seeking care in San Diego County, with a total of 3,529 licensed family child care homes compared to 979 licensed child care centers and 488 legally license-exempt Child Care Centers.^{iv}

Many families intentionally seek out family child care homes for reasons, including:

- Price – the price of child care has ballooned in recent years and poses a significant expense for families. In San Diego, the annual price of center-based child care is reported at \$15,513 for full-time infant care while enrolling an infant in a family child care home will cost a family on average \$9,788. For families with enough economic need to qualify for subsidized child care, access to affordable, quality child care is crucial to ensuring they can continue to work and provide for their families. In San

Diego, 62% of low-income families use their child care vouchers in family child care homes.^v

- Cultural alignment – San Diego is home to a large population of immigrants and refugees and is considered a majority-minority region with no one ethnic group comprising more than 50% of the population. Many family child care providers are members of that immigrant and refugee community and have carved out a niche for themselves serving families with an interest in preserving their cultural traditions, language, and food ways while running a business from their home.
- Flexibility – family child care homes are particularly useful for parents who require child care beyond a child care center’s operating hours. In San Diego, most subsidized child care is part-time, though 83% of families who request child care require full-time care.^{vi} Families who work nights (after 7 p.m.) or over the weekend face additional challenges as data reveal that only 4 licensed childcare centers in San Diego are open after 7 p.m., drastically underserving the 2,012 families who have requested non-traditional hours.^{vii} In comparison, 35% of family child care homes are able to offer care during those times.^{viii}

Discussion: Obstacles Facing Providers

Providers face a number of barriers that limit their potential as early care educators and business owners.

Inequitable Access to Coaching

Family child care providers are an essential piece of the early care infrastructure, and their environments, interactions with children, and knowledge and strategies make a difference in the life of a growing child. However, due to funding limitations the majority of family child care homes are unable to access targeted guidance to improve the quality of their services. Currently, funding from the Quality Counts California (QCC) State Block Grant only allows YMCA CRS to serve 45 providers annually, out of a field of 3,529 family child care homes.

“Because of the coaching and trainings, my childcare, my family, my children and their parents have all benefited from this. We have applied all this knowledge, trainings and it has given us such rewarding and amazing results.” - family child care provider

Improving the quality of child care settings for children, ages 0-5, takes place under the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative (SDQPI), a standard approach to assessing, improving and communicating quality in early care and education programs. Funding for this quality improvement approach has mainly targeted child care centers contracted with the California Department of Education.

With limited Block Grant funding from the state, YMCA CRS is able to offer one-on-one, comprehensive coaching to help family child care providers improve their services according to the following elements of quality early care and education:

- Understanding Child Development
- Effective Adult-Child Interactions
- Child Observation and Individualized Instruction

- Developmental and Health Screenings and Referrals to Services
- Quality Learning Environments
- Continuing Education and Professional Development
- Licensing, Ratios, and Group Sizes
- Healthy Eating and Physical Activity
- Supporting Social-Emotional Development
- Family Engagement and Strengthening
- Director Leadership

The process begins when a YMCA early learning expert visits a family child care provider to assess the provider’s goals and level of need. YMCA staff use the first consultation to develop an improvement plan and schedule follow- up visits to help the provider implement and operationalize the necessary changes. Progress is monitored using the California Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) matrix, and efforts aim to have providers demonstrate a commitment to quality by progressing through the rating system to eventually achieve a score of 4 or 5 (out of 5) at the end of coaching.

In collaboration with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), YMCA CRS offers additional resources for providers interested in improving the quality of their family child care homes. These tools include the [Early Care and Education Quality Journey](#) booklet and training approach, a variety of in-person workshops and trainings provided by YMCA CRS or SDCOE at a low cost, access to additional YMCA CRS programs for early care and education professionals (such as the California Child Care Initiative Project), and access to a book, video, and toy library.

The resources YMCA CRS offers are aimed at bringing equity to the early childhood and education field so that family child care providers are able to access the same level of coaching and support as many of their counterparts at child care centers.

Isolated Workforce

Family child care providers work independently and take sole responsibility of caring for each child in their home, preparing and providing meals, managing communication with parents, and fitting in planning or professional development in rare moments of free time when they are not providing care.

They do not have consistent exposure to peers, staff, or administrators nor opportunities to problem solve and plan with colleagues in the same ways as their peers in child care settings. As a workforce of one, family child care providers operate their businesses without constructive feedback available from mentors or other experts as in other industries.^{ix} This isolation denies family child care providers the biological need for connection inherent in all people and can contribute to feelings of increased stress, burnout, and depression.

“Before, I was nervous or unsure of the steps to take to better serve the families in my program. Now I have the confidence, knowledge and continuous support, much like a family of individuals that I can turn to” – family child care provider

When employees or business owners experience genuine connection with others, their happiness increases and positively impacts their workplace performance. For child care providers who play such a crucial role in child development and juggle the operations of their businesses, the

emotional support that comes from connecting with others is imperative.

YMCA CRS offers trainings and support groups for providers and uses these opportunities to build community and establish connections for professional and emotional support that improve the provider experience and quality of care.

Limited Opportunities to Pursue Higher Education

The majority of family child care providers do not have a college degree, with only an estimated 33% of licensed family child care providers possessing an associate or bachelor's degree.^x

A number of barriers limit a family child care provider's ability to participate in higher education programs, including financial constraints, limited English proficiency, insufficient previous coursework, and competing demands for time.^{xi}

In spite of these challenges, obtaining an advanced degree yields multiple benefits for a family child care provider's professional development. The increased knowledge and skills attained in higher education coursework keeps providers at the cutting-edge of the early care and education field and better equips them to engage in the early learning and family engagement processes during the critical early years of a child's life.

Providers who have obtained advanced degrees have higher earnings and, as a result, are more financially stable.^{xii} According to national 2012 data, family child care providers who have at least a bachelor's degree in the early childhood education field have the potential to earn \$15.59, compared to \$12.21 for providers with an associate degree and \$9.91 for providers without a college degree.^{xiii}

YMCA CRS knows the value of offering its provider's opportunities for advancement and runs the SD CARES (Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Education Standards) program, a stipend program for child care providers working in State-funded child care centers or in State-funded Family Child Care Home Education Networks.

Eligible providers receive stipend payments by successfully completing application requirements, continuing to work in the same child care program for nine additional months, and completing applicable college coursework toward an SD CARES approved degree or higher level permit or completing 21 hours of professional development training activities towards renewing a permit.

The program incentivizes successful participation in a higher education program by alleviating financial barriers and offering providers a structured approach to completing their higher education goals.

Disparity in cost of care and provider earnings

In San Diego, similar to California averages, the cost of running a family child care home is roughly double the amount families are able to afford for care.^{xiv} Providers often prioritize the needs of their clients and will not raise prices even if it jeopardizes their own financial stability.

YMCA CRS maintains a [database of average cost of child care](#) in San Diego by zip code to help providers determine rates that are reasonable for themselves and the families they serve. While it costs a family child care provider in Central San Diego \$252.53 per week to care for one infant, they can only earn as much as families are able to pay and/or what the state will reimburse.^{xv} The average take-home pay of a California family child care provider is \$9.76/hour, when adjusted for cost of living, nearly \$3 below California's \$12.00 minimum wage and below the living wage threshold for a single adult with one child.^{xvi} Additional demographic data on family child care providers is included in Appendix B.

The data demonstrate that, though child care providers play a crucial role in the development of young children, they are compensated significantly lower than educators of school-age children. Following that trend, wages continue to decrease as providers work with younger and younger children, even though the most important brain building occurs during this period of time.^{xvii}

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As providers seek to improve their quality, they face increased expenses to their operations that are difficult to accommodate because of low wages. Provider earning potential is often limited because what providers earn is based on what family capacity and state reimbursement rates. As a result many family child care providers are pushed into poverty – 53% of providers in the early care workforce, compared to just 21% of the total domestic workforce, are part of families that are enrolled in at least one of the following: Federal Earned Income Tax Credit, Medicaid/Children's Health Insurance Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.^{xviii} When providers face economic insecurity of their own, they are exposed to chronically stressful conditions that make it difficult for them to remain focused on their business and the interactions that foster optimal child development.

In the current landscape, child care subsidies do not cover the cost of quality early care across the nation. As a result, families and providers are forced to shoulder the burden of early learning even though society at-large has a stake in the optimal development of children.^{xix} Access to quality early childhood programs becomes a matter of privilege, and under-resourced families are further barred from opportunities to thrive.

The lack of earning potential in the field is significant, discouraging graduating students from pursuing the field altogether, contributing to high employee turnover that impacts the nurturing settings of early care environments, and limiting the abilities of current professionals to deliver on their intentions for running high quality programs. Such consequences disenfranchise the children and families seeking care by inhibiting the growth of an already impacted field.

Recommendations

Given the growing knowledge around brain science and child development and the prevalence of family child care providers in San Diego County, it is imperative that early education professionals have access to all available tools and supports that create an environment that fosters the optimal development of children in their care.

- **Invest in coaching and support for family child care homes:** a collective commitment and investment in supporting family child care providers is the most significant way to impact the local child care landscape. For example, \$150,000 will provide access to quality supports for 80 providers, while an investment of \$3.9 million will close the gap for the 3,470 family child care providers currently ineligible for QPI coaching. Supplementing these investments with grants or mini-grants directly to providers will also make a difference in the expanding access to resources for family child care providers.
- **Help providers build supportive networks:** creating venues for interaction among other family child care providers will improve the businesses and well-being of family child care providers. Hosting in-person workshops, support groups, or even online forums for professionals to convene and discuss work-related matters are viable options for helping providers increase their sense of connection with peers.
- **Provide incentives for providers to pursue higher-education:** minimizing barriers to higher education will increase the likelihood family child care providers will obtain advanced degrees to improve their quality of care and increase their earning potential. Options such as stipends or access to education case managers to help navigate education systems and requirements can simplify the process for providers who are already juggling multiple responsibilities.

Child development is a shared responsibility among parents, child care providers, and the community at-large. Adopting the listed recommendations will ensure the structures and practices are in place to facilitate that process for the well-being of our next generation of leaders.

About YMCA CRS

YMCA Childcare Resource Service (CRS) opened its doors in 1980 to ensure access to quality, affordable child care for working families and foster the development of early care and education professionals. Since its inception, the agency has served more than 1 million children and parents throughout San Diego County, ensuring children are cared for in environments that foster optimal development while parents continue to work and support their families. YMCA CRS is the only State-funded child care Resource and Referral Agency in the county and maintains a database of more than 4,000 licensed child care centers and family child care homes. YMCA CRS is a branch of the YMCA of San Diego County, an organization dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential as children of God through the development of the spirit, mind and body.

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