



Testimony from Natalie Renew, Executive Director of Home Grown for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania

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Home Grown

Home Grown is a funders collaborative working across the country to ensure that home-based child care is visible, valued and well-resourced. The mission of [Home Grown](#) is to increase access to and the quality of home-based child care inclusive of family child care (FCC) and family friend and neighbor (FFN) care. Home Grown works to remove policy barriers, strengthen home-based child care practices and business models, and support the growth and recognition of the sector so that all providers offer quality care and parents have early learning and care options.

Home Grown works in 32 states, including Pennsylvania and supports program and policy efforts reaching over 31,400 child care providers serving 162,000 children. We primarily focus on strategies that situate home-based child care providers and the families they serve as designers, implementers and decision makers in the early learning system. I am grateful to the following Pennsylvania home-based child care providers who contributed to this testimony: Denise Cressman (Montour County), Kelly Boerner (Schuylkill County), Tonya Fisher (Centre County), Anita “Tina” Butz (Schuylkill County), and Danielle Crone (York County).

Home-Based Child Care

Today there are 5.2 million home-based child care providers caring for 12.3 million kids under the age of 13 including 6.4 million children aged from birth to 5 years old. Home-based child care is a mainstay in rural communities where the business model for child care centers is often not feasible. Home-based child care is flexible, small scale and adapts to families’ needs; effective child care centers rely on a model of efficiency that requires large and stable child enrollment (ideally 100 or more children). In communities with low population saturation, diverse work arrangements and spread out housing, home-based child care is more viable and likely to be the solution families rely on.

Here are some key data regarding home-based child care nationally:

- **Infants and toddlers:** Parents want care in small settings that they trust for their babies: 30% of infants and toddlers attend home-based child care as their primary care arrangement compared to just 12% in centers ([Child Trends, 2018](#)).
- **Rural communities:** Rural children are less likely to use child care centers than children living in urban and suburban areas. Although rural children were as likely as

urban children to be in some form of nonparental care, they were more likely to be cared for by relatives and had lower rates of center care participation. ([Urban Institute 2018](#)). Home-based care is the first choice for rural communities due to the continuity of care and ability to serve multi-aged groups ([Child Trends, 2018](#)).

- **Children whose parents work nontraditional or nonstandard work hours:** A large share of young children—about 40 percent of those in nonparental care or 5 million young children in 2019—were in care during at least some nontraditional hours. ([Urban Institute 2022](#)). Care during nontraditional hours is most commonly offered by regulation exempt home-based child care providers (commonly called family, friend and neighbor or FFN caregiver) and least likely to be offered in center-based settings. National data reveal that 82% of unpaid FFN providers and 63% of paid FFN providers caring for children under age six offered some care during nonstandard hours (evenings, overnight, and/or weekends), compared to just 8% of center-based providers. ([ACF 2016](#)). A recent study found that across most nontraditional-hour periods, most parents preferred care in the child’s home by a relative or friend as their first choice during early mornings, evenings, and over-night. This was true of families across locations and racial/ethnic groups ([Urban Institute 2022](#)).
- **Parent preference:** Many families want and choose home-based child care; this care accommodates their family circumstances and aligns with their families values, preferences and child creating practices. Families across the country report selecting this care option because they trust caregivers to support their children’s learning and development. Parents report dissatisfaction with a child care market that does not include home-based child care ([Child Trends 2023](#)).

Read more: [2023 Home-based Child Care Fact Sheet](#)

Despite parental preference for home-based child care and its unique ability to meet the needs of families in rural communities, licensed home-based child care (family child care) is declining. This decline is driven by the overall failure of the child care market that is characterized by unmet parent demand, low provider wages and the shuttering of child care businesses. The pandemic made existing decline trends worse.

Creating new supply of and maintaining existing supply of family child care is essential to support the thriving of rural communities. High quality home-based child care ensures young children are developmentally on track and ready for school and that parents are working and contributing to the economy. There is much work to do to reverse the steep decline trends and nurture this critical child care option.

Home-based Child Care is a Solution to America’s Child Care Crisis

Home Grown works across the country and is excited to surface several solutions that can support the supply and maintenance of home-based child care.

1. **View home-based child care as a community asset and elevate child care providers as leaders, designers and advisors for early learning system decisions.**

Home-based child care providers are experts in child development, family support and community well-being. They are also experts in the business of child care. These providers need to be engaged in decision making regarding regulation, quality systems and learning programs. When system processes, tools, and resources include providers' perspective and place emphasis on equity for children, families, and providers, they are most successful. Read more: [No Decisions Made About You Without You: Nevada's Strategy for Supporting Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care](#)

2. Improve the operating conditions for child care providers via system coherence and common sense regulation

Home-based child care providers typically offer care 56 hours per week, they then need to create lesson plans, clean, shop and enter system-required paperwork. These providers are passionate about caring for young children; however, the current system requirements often pull them away from this most important job or have them working until early hours of the morning to remain in compliance. Research from the [Erikson Institute finds](#) that among family child care providers who have left the system, 80% cite early learning systems including licensing, subsidy policy, and quality ratings and improvement system requirements as a reason for discontinuing participation.

Home-based providers interact with multiple sets of requirements, different system regulators and monitors, and various data repositories. These rules, players and data requirements are often duplicative, contradictory and overly burdensome. For small businesses whose primary responsibility is caring for children, there needs to be much more streamlining and coherence among the monitoring systems and regulations.

Regulations do not account for the unique attributes of rural programs and need further clarification to support rural programs. Rural programs are designed around assets that include abundant outdoor space and nature; however, regulations find that "sand is a choking hazard and tomato plants are poisonous" (Provider quote 2024). Opportunities to bring providers to the table to inform licensing regulations and monitoring procedures will improve these regulations and support the strengths of rural home-based child care. Furthermore, training and support opportunities are often offered at times and places that are not accessible to home-based providers.

Family child care providers are currently excluded from the PA Pre-K Counts program despite having similar or greater credentials to center and school-based pre-k teachers and programs that offer child care in addition to the pre-k learning program. Access to Pre-K Counts would strengthen the business model of rural home-based child care. Read more: [Hidden treasures: celebrating and supporting family child care in pre-K systems](#)

Family child care providers and residential group home providers are struggling to attract and retain staff to support their programs. High cost to credentialing new staff and high turnover persist as issues. Currently, Pennsylvania does not allow child care workers to work in the same classroom of their own child (when they receive state subsidy). In home-based child care,

because there are no classrooms, this means that workers cannot work in the same program as their own children. Providers in PA surfaced that allowing home-based providers and their workers to serve their own children would encourage participation in the child care workforce. This was a benefit previously offered in Pennsylvania. The idea of expanding child care subsidies to child care workers is gaining national popularity. Read more: [Kentucky had an outside-the-box idea to fix child care worker shortages. It's working](#)

3. Create comprehensive networks of support to streamline and deliver effective programs and resources to home-based child care providers

Comprehensive networks are the connective tissue that joins individual home-based providers to each other and to system infrastructure, including funding and policy. In Home Grown's vision, comprehensive networks may take many forms, such as staffed family child care networks, child care resource & referral agencies, shared service alliances, associations, and more. Regardless of the entity type, comprehensive networks are durable infrastructure that are positioned to tackle the big issues facing our home-based child care sector: quality; building supply and retaining existing high quality operators; and connecting providers and families to additional services. Networks can align resources and serve as a single stop for providers to access appropriate resources. Networks can also be a connection point for employers seeking to ensure their staff have access to home-based child care. [Networks are particularly important in rural communities](#) where resources are hard to access. Read more: [Home-Based Child Care Networks: Making Connections to Make a Difference.](#)

4. Engage local employers to support the unique child care needs of the rural workforce

Rural businesses often have specific and unique workforce needs whether they include shift work, seasonal fluctuations in schedules, or unpredictable expectations due to weather or other factors. Rural employers are well positioned to contribute to meeting the unique child care needs of their employees. A worker-owned factory in Schuylkill County currently offers workers a \$2,500 per child childcare benefit; employees can access this funding directly or the employer will direct it to their care providers. More programs like this should be encouraged; states can match employer funds or otherwise incentivize employer action in this way.

5. Invest in innovation at the intersection of child care and housing to address two high priority issues in rural communities

Rural communities face multiple challenges with child care chief among them. Housing is also a barrier for young families staying in the communities where they were born or hope to live. Projects like the [Rural Homes Early Childhood project in Colorado](#) could be replicated to address the dual challenges of child care and housing shortages. Rural Homes developed affordable housing communities and set aside several homes in each community for the operation of licensed home-based child care.

Additional Reading:

Bipartisan Policy Center: [Rural Child Care Policy Framework](#)

Fortune: [‘The thought of it makes my chest hurt’: Many rural families are stuck in an impossible situation, and fixing the childcare crisis is a first step to help them](#)

Daily Yonder: [Home-Based Care: Fixing the Childcare Drought in Rural America](#)

Public News Service: [Report: Lack of child care in Wyoming threatens viability of rural communities](#)

KFF Health News: [Child Care Gaps in Rural America Threaten to Undercut Small Communities](#)

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