

BRINGING CITIES,  
COMMUNITIES, AND  
PROVIDERS TOGETHER

# Creating Equity for the Early Childhood Workforce

To **recover**, **rebuild**, and **thrive**, our nation's cities, towns, and villages need powerful leaders that prioritize the well-being of all who make up the early childhood workforce.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our nation to produce innovative prevention measures and work toward ensuring that the early childhood system is reimagined in a way that all early childhood providers have the opportunity to both succeed and be supported throughout their professional journey.

Sadly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, working parents struggled with child care closures and access to the very people they relied on to provide care for their children. This pandemic has brought some acknowledgement by local governments and business leaders that the early childhood workforce is crucial. However, the nearly 5 million formal professionals and countless informal providers that make up this workforce continue to be unseen, underpaid, and undervalued.

The early childhood workforce, both informal and formal, is instrumental and valuable in building an equitable recovery.

They often lack resources for professional development and are unable to access financial and business supports to improve their own economic well-being. Local leaders are acknowledging these inequities and recognizing that child care and the workers who provide it are a key element in the infrastructure of a thriving community. To achieve success, cities must embed equitable policies and practices that embrace the workforce, and create a system of opportunity where all can thrive, including early childhood educators.

These providers, both formal and informal, foster children's development, facilitate parents' employment, and comprise a strong, critical workforce. As a result, local leaders across the nation recognize the value of investing in these essential providers as a central strategy for equity, financial success, and a strong, resilient future for their community.

### The purpose of *Creating Equity for the Early Childhood Workforce* is to:

- Bring clarity to the **important role local government and community stakeholders** play in prioritizing and supporting the early childhood workforce.
- **Address the inequities** faced by early childhood educators by recognizing and elevating their work as a profession.
- **Examine the unlevel playing field** between informal and formal providers by addressing the historical context.
- **Provide considerations for municipal leaders** to leverage this workforce to help build a robust, thriving economy.
- Examine how **community stakeholders can take action** across their city, town, or village to provide resources for the early childhood workforce.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS


### THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

- **Is part of a city's infrastructure** and key to a thriving economy.
- **Operates in a mixed-delivery system** of informal and formal providers.
- Consists of **small businesses**.
- **Relies on city leaders** to ensure they are fully supported.
- **Depends on collaboration with community stakeholders** to insure adequate support.

### SUPPORTING A VALUABLE CITY PRIORITY

The early childhood workforce is a critical component of a city's overall workforce and economic growth. To ensure success and positive outcomes for early childhood educators, city leaders should consider prioritizing this sector's needs. It's important that policies and practices are grounded in equity as they work toward an equitable recovery that builds back better with strong public will and equal investments for formal and informal providers. In fact, municipal leaders are well-positioned to ensure local growth and success through coordinated investments in programs and services that elevate the lived experiences of the early childhood workforce and support its stability.

This workforce plays a crucial role in providing high-quality care for children so their parents or other caregivers can go to work, focus on their job, provide for their family, and consistently be productive members of the general workforce. Likewise, city leaders are responsible for promoting their city's economic vitality, making it a place where their constituents can be productive and engaged. Ensuring a thriving economy for all can only happen if local leaders work together to create policies and programs that prioritize the needs of the entire early childhood workforce. This includes ensuring there is a sufficient number of available providers, the children in their care are safe, and learning is guided by developmentally appropriate practices.



The **early childhood workforce** is a critical sector of any city's economy and ensures families can return to work after pandemic restrictions ease. Lack of access to child care opportunities affects not only the current productivity of employees, but also impacts employers, taxpayers, and the economy—to the tune of **\$57 billion annually** prior to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

## THE TIME IS NOW

The early childhood workforce was part of a broken system prior to COVID-19 and has been decimated by the impact of the pandemic in cities and towns across the United States. Before the pandemic gripped the nation, the system was buckling under the weight of inadequate compensation; the unevenness of opportunities for professional and workforce development and growth; and the absence of a strong pipeline to meet the professional needs of the providers. As local leaders work to promote an equitable economic recovery for all, there is an opportunity to address the challenges faced by these workers who are a key part of a city's economic and social infrastructure, and to ensure a productive workforce so that businesses of all sizes can thrive. Without access to care, the increased

burden has historically fallen disproportionately on women, particularly women of color, and will continue to, with one in four women contemplating leaving the workforce.<sup>3</sup>

Now is the time for cities to focus on designing transformational policies and programs that reduce the economic burden on early childhood educators by ensuring this sector earns livable wages and has equal access to opportunities that can dramatically change their quality of life. So, as the pandemic picture brightens slowly, and local leaders convene to restart, boost, and strengthen their local economies, it is critical to include innovative policies and programs that are grounded in equity and ensure the sustainability and overall well-being of both formal and informal early learning providers.

## Challenges and Inequities Faced by the Early Childhood Workforce

Despite their key role, providers have spent decades facing a multitude of challenges. Our society has long undervalued early childhood educators, a field which has historically been filled disproportionately with Black, Latinx, and immigrant women. This profession has traditionally been overlooked despite the critical role providers play in ensuring that everyday lived experiences of families and institutions run smoothly. Just like critical sanitation workers, the early childhood workforce is essential to the everyday functioning of a city or town. They provide important services that benefit government, businesses, and families in various ways.

Nearly half of early childhood educators receive government assistance due to the persistently low wages that reinforce existing racial, gender, and economic inequality. This economic reality hinders their financial success and economic mobility and diminishes their ability to care for their own children.<sup>4</sup> The magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these inequities, revealing the necessity and urgency for local leaders to acknowledge the complexity of the early childhood workforce and create a coordinated, local response to the need for support and address the different child care settings within this indispensable workforce.

### THE MANY TYPES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE SETTINGS

The varied configuration of today's national workforce includes full-time and part-time employees, and freelance, gig, and crowdsourced individuals all working in a wide assortment of settings. The child care needs of these employees are also varied. And, while many families can find available choices and access the child care they need, many are struggling to find affordable, high-quality options, accessible when they need them. The early childhood workforce offers many types of child care options to meet the varying needs of families and children through a mixed delivery system. While there is a tendency to focus solely on the larger, more visible child care centers, there are, in fact, a variety of care settings (formal and informal) and types of providers, and the payment and financial structure within each care setting can be complicated. To build a strong economy, local leaders need to understand the ecosystem of their local, county, and statewide child care infrastructure and the experiences of the important workforce that creates and supports the system.



- **Center-based child care:** Center-based care operates at a larger scale than other care facilities both in terms of class size and the number of providers staffing the facility. This setting is easily accessible for families who work during the traditional hours of 9–5.
- **Family child care homes:** Child care in this setting, run out of the provider’s home, cares for smaller groups of children. These providers, who are small business owners, are able to provide care that is closely aligned with the needs of the children and their families.
- **Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN):** Most children are in informal settings whether due to affordability, family or cultural preference, or convenience. FFN providers are often able to accommodate families who are employed during nontraditional hours, such as second (e.g., 3–11 p.m.) or overnight shifts.
- **Preschool programs:** Preschool programs are typically offered for children ages 3–5 years old through schools, faith-based organizations, non-profit organizations, and child care centers.
- **Early Head Start/Head Start:** Administered by the federal Office of Head Start, these are free of charge programs available to families with incomes below the poverty guidelines, which are determined by the Department of Health and Human Services. Early Head Start programs are available for infants and toddlers under 3 years old; Head Start serves children 3–5 years old.

**All child care facilities fall into one of two categories of regulation and licensing:**

- **Regulated:** Regulated child care means that the child care facility has met licensing standards and guidelines (e.g., health, safety, child-provider ratio) as set forth by state or local licensing departments.
- **Unregulated:** Providers considered unregulated have not been licensed or certified through the state or local licensing department as meeting health, safety, and professional standards.

From the brick-and-mortar regulated child care center serving families from 9–5 to the unregulated FFN provider down the street serving families working nontraditional hours, local leaders are increasing their understanding of the various forms of care available in their cities and towns, as well as the needs of providers. As more municipal leaders recognize and appreciate the diverse needs of families, it is equally important to ensure that regardless of their setting, each child care provider is fully supported to thrive and provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate care. Municipal leaders are well-positioned to champion the needs of this diverse offering of child care providers by ensuring they all have equal access to professional development, business resources, and financial supports necessary to improve their professional acumen and success.



**5.2 M**

children were in the care of a non-parental relative



**2.8 M**

were in non-relative home-based care

# THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE: Central to Local Government’s Infrastructure

As local governments take on the challenges of investing in traditional infrastructure, including constructing and maintaining roads, bridges, and buildings, now is a critical moment to think about the need for the human infrastructure within communities. Just like roads and bridges ensure accessible and safe travel, investments in improving the early childhood workforce infrastructure must be considered to ensure the viability and sustainability of the sector. Parents and other caretakers must be able to work and provide for their own families’ needs. And during times like the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, lack of access to child care opportunities diminishes employees’ productivity and career opportunities, resulting in lower economic growth, which causes local recovery to suffer.

Local leaders searching for opportunities to build an equitable, robust, and thriving local economy through investments in infrastructure must include investments in the human infrastructure, particularly early childhood educators.

Elected officials can consider equitable investments in local strategies for both

the informal and formal workforce that are aimed at retaining and growing a pool of diverse, talented providers. This includes giving them the time, resources, and support (e.g., coaches, training and education opportunities, benefits, financial stability), which can lead to a certificate, such as registered apprenticeships, and ongoing, job-embedded training and professional development.

**When local leaders invest in their community’s human infrastructure, such as supporting the early childhood workforce and the needs of the larger workforce, they help protect the availability of essential services.**



# Empowering the Early Childhood Workforce with Equity and Justice

Families want to live in cities and communities where they have the ability to choose from diverse care options that accommodate their varied needs and work schedules. Having a robust supply of quality care options is also key to meeting the demands of employers and the local economy. No one form of care supersedes any other, and equal investments should be allocated with the necessary tools and resources available so that the entire early childhood workforce, regardless of setting, feels valued and their sense of value for providing high-quality care is elevated.

At the local level, we should be able to see this in practice in many forms. In their economic development speeches, local leaders can use the bully pulpit to acknowledge the important role of child care and the critical role that providers play in ensuring that the economic engines of cities run smoothly. In playing such a key role, local leaders can also push for increased compensation and benefits for all that reflect the value of the profession. Additionally, all forms of care can be highlighted, as well as the resources available and accessible to the various informal and formal workforce. Cities, towns, and villages in America are incredible engines for change and innovation.

Local leaders can become champions in addressing the racial and economic inequities across the sector, positively impacting economic development within the city, and helping providers improve their own financial success and economic well-being and mobility, while simultaneously meeting the demand for caregivers.

# Partnerships — Creating Ways City Departments and Agencies Can Work Together

While not all local governments are structured the same, local elected officials are tasked with the role and responsibility of ensuring a thriving economy and fully supported workforce, including those within the early childhood sector. Municipal leaders have many resources available to them to support this crucial workforce, from leveraging municipal policies and practices to partnering with their communities, businesses, and other government agencies to build a fully supportive system. Building a strong, resilient economy—intentionally ensuring equity is embedded in policies and programs that target historically underserved populations—creates solutions, stability, and coordinated alignment between and among government agencies. Local leaders can take action to support the early childhood workforce as they manage funds that promote economic growth, and leverage these funds to execute and implement programs and policies that build equitable systems that work for all.

Providing robust programs and services for the early childhood workforce takes commitment and resources of more than one department within local government. Various municipal departments can play a role in supporting these providers even when the “how” is not immediately apparent. With careful examination, it is easy to see how departments that provide direct programming can integrate the early childhood agenda. Other municipal departments, however, can play an important ancillary role in program and service offerings. Regardless of where the city’s early childhood agenda sits, all municipal departments play an important role in supporting this crucial workforce. Knowing this, many city leaders are placing providers at the center of policymaking. As local governments continue to deepen their understanding of the importance of a fully supported early childhood workforce to a thriving community, they can accomplish this in a number of creative ways:

## UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT CHILD CARE LANDSCAPE

- It is critical that city leaders come together collaboratively to understand how providers are impacted by citywide policies and practices, determine what a child- and family-friendly city might look like, and ascertain how each department can be part of the solution.
- City leaders are well-positioned to address inequities and create policies and programs that increase compensation and benefits, build training and professional development opportunities, allocate necessary financial resources, and provide investments in early childhood providers' success to break the cycle of poverty that has plagued generations.

## PROMOTE EQUITY PRACTICES WITHIN AND AMONG CITY DEPARTMENTS

- City departments can accomplish this by implementing equity plans that include provisions to support early childhood educators, programs, and practices, and that facilitate diversity at tables within government that are charged with decision-making and procurement policies favorable to educators who have less access to resources.
- Through infusing data-driven equity considerations into the broader city landscape, city departments can deepen their understanding of historical inequities, and make intentional investments that support the complexity and diverse needs of the early childhood workforce, thus creating a more level playing field for achieving success.

## ALIGN EARLY LEARNING EFFORTS AND REMOVE BARRIERS AMONG CITY DEPARTMENTS

- Local leaders can work to identify city departments, such as economic development, workforce development, licensing, and small businesses to utilize existing platforms to provide and expand services that are inclusive of both formal and informal early childhood providers. In doing so, local leaders can coordinate services, develop a common set of outcomes, and intentionally ensure equity among this diverse group of essential workers.
- Create policies such as zoning laws that allow family child care providers to start businesses in neighborhoods where there are lots of children.



## COLLABORATE ACROSS CITY DEPARTMENTS TO SUPPORT FINANCIAL SUCCESS

- While providers navigate operating at lower ratios, rising overhead costs, and evolving health and safety guidelines, city leaders must work together among city departments and with community stakeholders to establish measures that support the financial stability of this sector.
- Through collaboration and partnerships with workforce development programs, city leaders can lighten the burden of obtaining professional development opportunities by including benefits such as child care, transportation, and materials.

## Creating Financial Supports and Opportunities for the Early Childhood Workforce

Through economic hardship, natural disasters, and national health emergencies, the early childhood workforce has continued to work without sufficient pay, benefits, and often lacking the resources needed to fully support their own families. When thinking about equitable recovery investments, such as the Payment Protection Program (PPP) established to assist small businesses that are impacted by changes in the economy,

municipal leaders are well positioned to think about investments in the early childhood workforce.

Many of these providers are located in small, family child care settings operated out of their homes, and owned by women, in particular women of color. Historically, African American owned businesses have lacked access to business-related financial services and often use their own checking accounts for their business accounts.

Local leaders are well-positioned to create financial levers of opportunity, with equity in mind, that promote stability and sustainability for the early childhood workforce:

### RECOGNIZE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AS A SMALL BUSINESS

- The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have severely hit the early childhood community. Providers in all settings are faced with increasing financial burdens and uncertainty due to changing health and safety regulations.
- Local leaders must acknowledge the important role small minority-owned businesses, such as the early childhood workforce, play in ensuring an equitable economic recovery.

### SUPPORT EQUAL ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

- Because providers are disproportionately women of color, and as city leaders look to support an equitable recovery, investments must be made available to all who make up this workforce, regardless of setting.
- Such local investments include access to financial resources and wealth building tools necessary to obtain financial stability to alleviate the cultural and historical financial burdens this sector and women of color have faced. It includes backend office support and business mentoring to bolster their business acumen.

### BUILD PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT

- Local leaders must ensure equity is embedded in local policies and practices that address the needs of those women operating small, family child care businesses out of their homes, and create equal access to resources for financial and professional success.
- Municipal leaders can do so by positioning collaborations with community partners, local community development financial institutions, philanthropic organizations, institutes of higher education, and small business organizations to include assistance and supports for this sector.

### LEVERAGE EARLY CHILDHOOD FUNDING

- City leaders can propose that a local tax levy—or a specified portion of existing taxes—be used to support professional development for this workforce. As local leaders look to create a thriving economy, connecting early childhood and the early childhood workforce to broader citywide issues that impact the entire community can increase the city's capacity to be a leader or partner with philanthropy and local businesses on these issues.
- Local leaders can be effective advocates for increased federal and state funding for early childhood programs to connect providers with professional development training and local small business supports.





# Moving Beyond Traditional Partnerships to Support the Early Childhood Workforce

While the role of local governments and elected officials is key, we know that supporting early childhood educators cannot happen in a silo. It must be undertaken as a community and we should consider inviting nontraditional allies and sectors that have not historically been at the early childhood table. As local leaders continue the work of rebuilding systems and programs to ensure the equity and stability of their communities, we must establish a clear understanding of, and strategic conversations around, the early childhood workforce. Local leaders must work together with community stakeholders to create solutions that ensure providers have access to the necessary tools and resources to thrive.

Together with community stakeholders, local leaders can support, stabilize, and help early childhood educators grow in the following ways:

## PROMOTE EQUITY IN AND AMONG COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

- Equity, like the complexity of the early childhood workforce, looks different within each city and among community stakeholders from school districts, child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs), local health agencies, and employers.
- Equity begins with ensuring a well-trained and fully supported workforce; local leaders together with community stakeholders can begin to identify and address gaps in services and create an equity plan that incorporates this workforce.

## BUILD SUPPORT NETWORKS

- Early childhood providers, especially family child care and FFN providers, often work long hours with low wages and few opportunities to engage in professional development. Creating neighborhood support groups that are held during various hours can ensure accessibility and create connections.
- These networks, sponsored or funded by municipal governments, can help relieve stress, provide opportunities for trainings on running a small business, finances, and employee benefits, and encourage this workforce to learn from one another.

## COLLECT AND MAKE DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS

- Leverage data to deepen understanding of the makeup and needs of the early childhood workforce to address challenges and provide targeted, responsive supports. Through data metrics, local leaders can build support and understanding for early childhood educators beyond policies and programs.
- Use data to provide culturally competent training, anti-bias training, and a sensitive, clear understanding of trauma-informed care that is reflective of the needs of the workforce and responsive to the sometimes challenging lived experiences of the children and families they serve.

## PROVIDE EQUAL ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCES

- Coordinate with community organizations and businesses to identify non-traditional partners to create learning opportunities needed to build providers' businesses—available virtually, in-person, and within neighborhoods to include the informal workforce.
- Through partnerships with institutes of higher education and workforce development programs, local leaders can reconfigure and reallocate existing services to lighten the burden of accessing and obtaining professional development opportunities in all child care settings. This can be accomplished by providing culturally relevant courses offered in different languages and during non-traditional hours, and including benefits like child care, transportation, and materials.

## CREATE AN EARLY CHILDHOOD COALITION THAT INCLUDES EDUCATORS

- Bring key stakeholders together to increase community buy-in for the early childhood workforce, identify barriers providers face, and allow for more effective and coordinated planning. Strong coalitions include public school officials; child care and early learning programs; local child care resource and referral agencies; community and faith-based organizations; employers and business organizations; workforce development organizations; local chambers; and parents or other guardians.

# How Local Leaders Can Take Action

Local leaders across the country can leverage local policies and practices to ensure a strong and thriving community for young children, families, and the workforce. As local leaders create a shared vision of a robust economy, supports to ensure the stability of the early childhood workforce must be part of that vision. To do so, local leaders can build awareness and public will in a number of ways:

## USE THE BULLY PULPIT

- Local leaders are well-positioned to be advocates and champions for equity within the early childhood workforce through their influence and visibility in the community. Elected officials can raise awareness of the role the early childhood workforce plays at the local level, and the complex needs of families and the providers within each form of care.
- As leaders, they can also model best practices and create on-site child care centers for city workers and provide child care during townhall meetings to promote civic engagement.

## LEAD A MESSAGING CAMPAIGN THAT SUPPORTS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

- Through public service announcements leveraging community partners in local media outlets and news channels, or through billboards and printed materials, elected officials can elevate the early childhood workforce as essential, build awareness of its complexity, and advocate for the needs of those who work within it.
- Such messaging campaigns should be culturally responsive and reflective of the workforce and the community being served.

## TIE THE WORKFORCE TO LARGER CITY AND ECONOMIC PRIORITIES

- Local and business leaders understand that a strong, competent, and reliable workforce is critical to business success. As local leaders promote policies and practices that support businesses, including the early childhood workforce in those considerations will be key to building a strong economy.
- Elected officials can make the business case by purposefully engaging in conversations that help tie economic success to providers.





## ACTION STEPS FOR LOCAL LEADERS:

### CONSIDER

A strong early childhood care system as an integral part of local infrastructure and economic development.

### SERVE

As catalysts for change using convening power and the bully pulpit.

### LEVERAGE

City departments' policies, practices, and programs that promote early childhood efforts.

### ENGAGE

With and be a strong partner for families in the community.

## ESSENTIAL POLICY AND PRACTICE LEVERS:

### Recognize

early childhood providers as small business owners.

### Place

this important workforce at the center of policy and practice.

### Use

your influence and authority to establish a focus on the early childhood workforce.

**Support and create** equity-centered, shared service models.

### Establish

interdepartmental meetings to coordinate and support those efforts.

### Create

a Children's Cabinet of stakeholders to inform decisions and recommendations regarding early childhood policies and practices.

### Leverage

existing city departments and local financial resources.





## While moving toward action, ask yourself the following questions:

- How can addressing the needs of formal and informal providers help our city meet the goals of its overall equity agenda?
- What is the current political landscape across departments?
- How are we currently connecting and collaborating across departments?
- Which specific department leaders and/or staff are supportive of an early learning agenda, and how can we engage them?
- What barriers/challenges have we encountered in collaborating across departments in support of the early childhood workforce?
- What opportunities can we leverage to improve collaboration across departments in support of the early childhood workforce?
- Where do our early childhood plans and priorities intersect with other departments' plans and priorities? How can we support each other?
- How are we connecting the early childhood workforce to the larger citywide agenda?
- How can we bring sectors not typically associated with early childhood to our strategic planning table?
- How can we bring informal and formal early childhood providers into crucial conversations?
- What data is available to make the case for supporting the early childhood workforce?

## Resources

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Want to learn more about how to support the early childhood workforce? Reach out to the National League of Cities' Early Childhood Success team within the Institute for Youth, Education & Families at [ECTeam@nlc.org](mailto:ECTeam@nlc.org).

# Endnotes

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