Partnerships Provide Critical Supports to Sustain Family Child Care

By: Caroline Kohler, Ounce of Prevention Fund

Featuring: From Tulsa, Oklahoma—Jackie Evans, owner, Aunt Jackie's Family Childcare (partner of Tulsa Educare) and Brittany Egger, director of child care partnerships and quality assurance, Tulsa Educare; From Central Maine—Sarah Lavallee, program director, Early Head Start, Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) and Educare Central Maine

Sarah Lavallee, program director of Early Head Start at Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) and Educare Central Maine, understands the mounting stress licensed family child care home partners in their Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (Partnerships) program confront as they struggle to serve their community during the pandemic.

"When one of our eight family child care partners was asked to serve children of first responders, she welcomed children into her home within an hour, despite the potential health risks to herself, her own family, and uncertainty about how she'd cover the costs of ensuring health and safety in the face of COVID-19," shared Lavallee.

Although family child care, defined as care and education provided to children in a private home or other family-like setting, is often the most familiar, flexible, convenient, affordable, and sometimes only option for many families, these providers are in a precarious financial position due to decades of underfunding, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.
Uniquely positioned in the rural communities they serve, KVCAP's Partnerships with family child care providers is part of the fabric supporting local working families and employers. As the Early Head Start grantee, KVCAP serves as the hub to a network of eight family child care home providers, offering a variety of supports to meet Head Start quality standards, including sustainable funding to increase compensation and benefits, purchase new materials and supplies, and provide increased staff capacity. The Partnerships model makes it possible for families who are eligible for state child care assistance and Early Head Start to access comprehensive, high-quality early education in the warmth of a home setting.

...meanwhile about 1,750 miles away…

In urban north Tulsa, Oklahoma, providers have stayed open in hopes of maintaining revenue to cover fixed expenses. But as attendance dwindled and the costs of protective gear, cleaning supplies, and staff salaries rose, their fixed costs began to greatly outstrip revenue. Since state child care assistance funds in Oklahoma only pay for child attendance, providers have lost revenue that cannot be replaced. Without immediate action to alleviate this financial strain, many child care providers, especially family child care providers, are in danger of bankruptcy.

"We are just trying to stay above water," says Jackie Evans, the owner of Aunt Jackie's Family Childcare, one of six family child care programs in Tulsa Educare's Partnerships program. "But I'm lucky to have the support of Tulsa Educare through the Partnerships…it's the best thing to happen to my program."

Brittany Egger, director of child care partnerships and quality assurance at Tulsa Educare and responsible for coordinating relationships with family child care partners like Evans, joined forces with the

Birth Through Eight Strategy for Tulsa (BEST). This network of over two dozen organizations designed to offer a continuum of support to Tulsa's families with young children made it possible to provide Tulsa Educare's family child care providers with operating stipends, diapers, and Walmart gift cards to alleviate their financial worries.

Similar Stories of Struggle and Support

As states re-open and more parents with infants and toddlers return to work, parent surveys reveal that many families in urban, suburban, and rural communities prefer smaller family child care settings. Generally, it's nearly impossible for family child care providers to survive because family fees and state subsidies don't cover the costs of quality care and small providers can't capitalize on economies of scale. Now, in the context of COVID-19, survival is even more difficult as providers must serve fewer children, adhere to more costly health and safety standards, hire additional staff to meet lower ratio requirements, and address the impacts of trauma resulting from this global emergency.

Additionally, given public school closures nationwide, many family child care providers may look to lessen their financial worries by providing care to elementary age children – a practice that has proven financially lucrative for family child care providers in the past during school breaks – but could seriously impact the immediate availability of infant and toddler care in family child care.

The pandemic didn't create these challenges; it just exacerbated them. These vulnerabilities are the direct result of poor public policy and investment choices our nation has been making for decades. With thousands of small, independently licensed family child care businesses nationally, Partnerships between Head Start and child care offer an opportunity to build sustainable provider-based systems that maximize the potential of children, families, and our economic prosperity.

The financial and hands-on technical assistance provided by Tulsa Educare and KVCAP to their family child care partners to navigate the challenges of federal and state funding relief processes have not only kept their partners afloat but enabled them to provide critical services to families in their communities during this unprecedented time.

"The financial support I am receiving is helping me get through," one of KVCAP's family child care providers recently told Lavallee, speaking volumes to the impact of the Partnerships on family child care providers' stability right now.

Big, Bold Policy Visions

As our nation copes with the pandemic, the importance of family child care has never been more evident, yet these small businesses have never been more vulnerable. To ensure the viability of family child care for years to come, we must act now to address the long-standing financing challenges family child care providers confront that are further compounded by the demands of COVID-19. Lavallee, Egger, and Evans offer bold visions for where policymakers can start:

"In order for family child care homes to resume operations to their pre-COVID-19 levels, loan forgiveness, stipends/grants, health benefits, and the ability for all child care programs to pay their employees during fiscally unstable times must be prioritized, especially as programs may have to operate with fewer children long-term as families weigh health and safety risks. We must acknowledge that the financial strain on this critical field has been devastating." **–Sarah Lavallee**

"All states should ensure that subsidy is based on child care enrollment not attendance. Sometimes policies make sense when they are established, but then things change. Nobody thought something like the COVID-19 pandemic would happen. But, now that is has, states need to adjust their policies accordingly so they are helping—not hurting—child care programs." **–Brittany** Egger

"We need to expand the Partnerships program so more family child care homes can access the financial, educational, and resource supports that my program has through our partnership with Tulsa Educare. I want to spread the wealth more widely. I'd love to see hundreds of family child care homes be part of the Partnerships program to strengthen quality early learning and business operations." **–Jackie Evans**