

# AN EVALUATION OF CHILD CARE DESERTS ACROSS FIVE WESTERN NEW YORK COUNTIES



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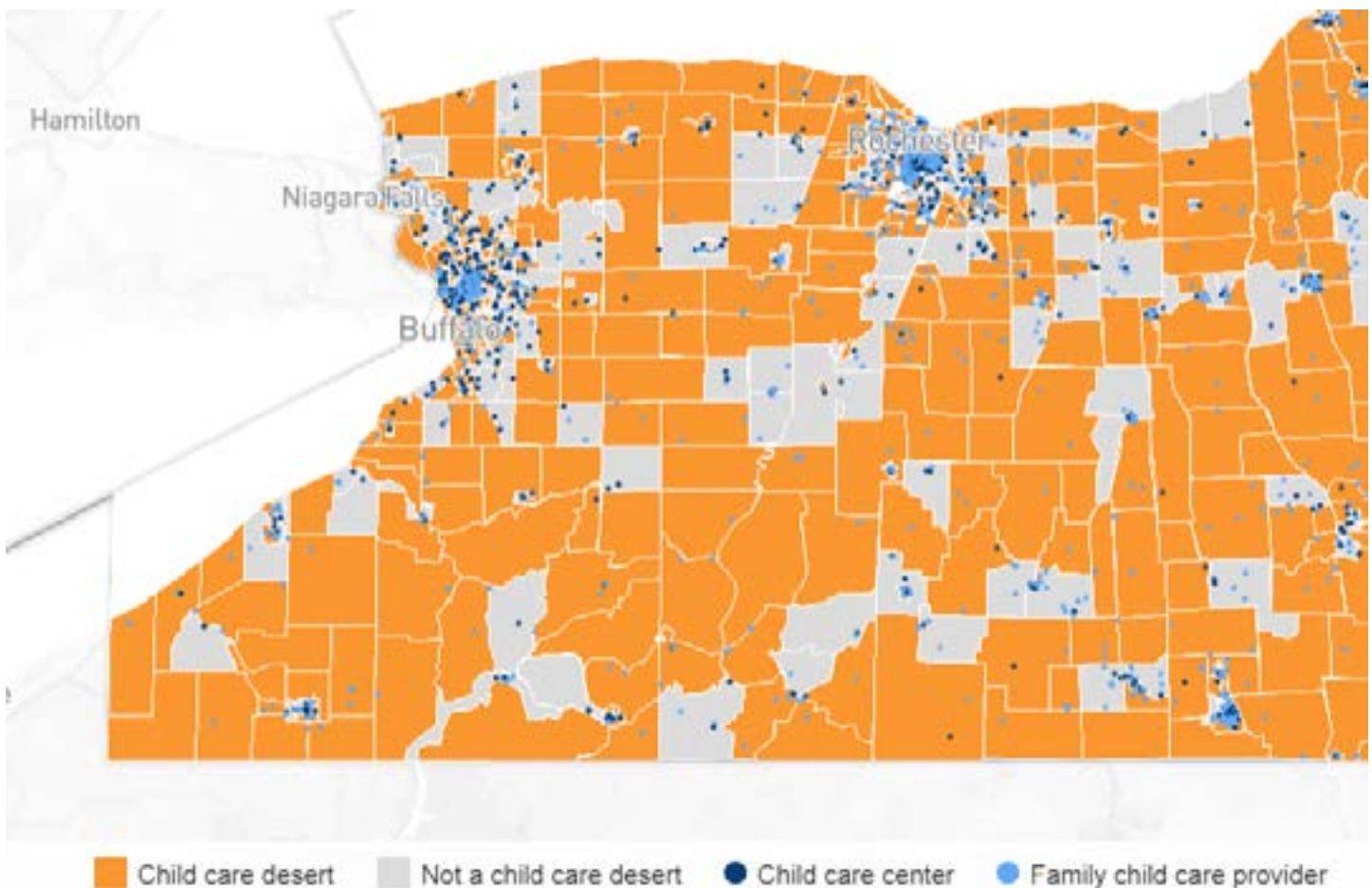
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# Child Care Deserts

Recently, New York State was identified as having the second highest amount of child care shortages nationwide, where 64% of the state demonstrated a severe lack of regulated child care options. This shortage is often referred to as ‘child care deserts,’ which is defined as having more than 50 children under age 5 in a census tract that contains either no child care providers or so few options there are more than three times as many children as there are licensed child care slots. Deserts exist across urban, suburban, and rural communities – significantly impacting the majority of working families throughout Western New York.



**Image Source:** Center for American Progress. (2018). *America's Child Care Deserts in 2018*. Retrieved From: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/12/06/461643/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>

# Child Care Needs of Western New York

Nearly three-quarters of Western New York families with children under age 6 have all parents in the workforce, and the region is reported to have an average of only one available child care slot for every five children under age 12. This demonstrates the regularity with which child care is a barrier for working families. One factor contributing to this Western New York crisis is the lack of sustainable programming. In Erie County alone there was a net loss of over 50 child care programs between 2012 and 2017. After closely observing this regional trend, Child Care Resource Network (CCRN) posits that not only does Western New York need an increase in available child care slots, it also needs new programs that are well-equipped to become reliable, long-term child care solutions for working families. Additionally, to avoid a net loss of programs more supports need to be put in place to make sure that existing programs continue to grow and serve the Western New York community.

In the last year, nearly 1000 Buffalo working families have solicited CCRN for assistance with securing child care, and approximately one-quarter of all clients participated in followup surveys. As a result of our services, 61% found care, and 95% of those clients placed their children in licensed/registered child care programs. Those who offered details surrounding their difficulty with finding care most frequently cited two reasons: high cost of care and the lack of available child care slots. Although for over 30 years CCRN has regularly trained providers, helped new programs open, and shut down illegal programs, additional data is necessary in order to learn how best to: cultivate sustainable programs that parents can rely on, continue professionalizing the early childhood field to ensure high-quality care is routinely provided, and facilitate information to all working families about child care options that best fit their employment needs.

**“We desperately need more options. I am on 8 wait-lists”**

**-WNY Parent**

# Project Overview

Child Care Resource Network (CCRN) partnered with three other child care resource and referral agencies to conduct a brief regional study of current child care conditions. The partner agencies include: Allegany County Community Opportunities and Rural Development (ACCORD), Inc., Community Child Care Clearinghouse of Niagara, and Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. This collaborative effort primarily targeted the Western New York counties of Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, and Niagara. Each agency was provided with the following materials in early October 2019: links for online surveys, focus group directions and scripts, advertising materials, gift card incentives for focus group participants, and one \$2000 stipend for services rendered. Focus groups and surveys were designed specifically for two different types of participants – parents and child care providers – so each resource collected two different data sets. Audio recordings of focus groups were submitted to CCRN by mid-November 2019, which were transcribed word-for-word. Online surveys were closed on November 22nd, 2019 at 5pm. CCRN finished reviewing all study findings by early December 2019.

## Project Aims

Overall, the main goal of this study was to assess the needs and barriers related to current child care conditions in Western New York.

To perform this assessment, Child Care Resource Network worked with three resource and referral agencies to:

- Collect quantitative data and demographic information from child care providers and parents across Western New York
- Collect qualitative data on: providers' experiences with facilitating care; parents' experiences with finding child care; and the relationship dynamics between parents and providers
- Research approaches to the needs and barriers suggested by this study
- Assess potential solutions to employ in the Western New York region



# Survey Demographics

## *Parents*

There were 156 respondents to the parent survey from across six different counties and 66 different zip codes. Roughly half of parents surveyed were from Erie County, Allegany and Chautauqua accounted for 40% of respondent. Less than 10% were from Cattaraugus, Niagara and Steuben Counties.

Respondents self reported gender, race, employment status and household income. An overwhelming majority of respondents reported as female, only 4% reported as male and 1% reported as other. Over half of the parent respondents identified as White, 18% as Black, African, and/or African American, 7% as Hispanic and/or Latino and 2% identified as Other. 85% of respondents indicated they were employed either full or part time, 11% were unemployed, and less than 1% indicated they were students. A diverse range of household incomes were

reported with no income bracket making up an overwhelming majority. 35% of respondents self reported income below the federal poverty line for a family of four, which is in line with the 35% that indicated they were receiving some sort of assistance from social services. 65% of parents self reported that they made above the federal poverty level for a family of four and were not receiving assistance from social services.

## *Providers*

There were 262 child care provider respondents to the survey from across six different counties and 66 different zip codes. Over half of the child care providers who responded were from Chautauqua and Allegany Counties, 40% were from Erie County and less than 10% were from Cattaraugus, Niagara and Steuben Counties.

Similarly to the parent survey 95% of respondents to the child care provider survey self reported as female, 4% self reported as male with 1% preferring not to answer. 83% of child care providers responding self reported as White, 10% reported as Black, African, and/or African American, 8% reported as Hispanic and/or Latino and 2% reported as Other.

The results of this survey indicate an aging child care provider population with almost half (46%) reporting that they are 50 years old or older. Income levels of child care providers are similar to the parents they serve 35% reported a household income of less than the federal poverty line for a family of four.



# *The Struggle to* **Find Child Care**



**O**ver one-third (35%) of respondents began searching for child care either before their child was born or when their child was a newborn (0-6 weeks). However, nearly 30% waited until their child was 1-2-years-old before finding care. This potentially reflects the issue many parents have with being forced to leave the workforce for a year or more due to current child care desert conditions.

Depending on what type of child care parents are looking for can change the length of time it takes to find care. Nearly

one-quarter (22%) of parents surveyed have been unable to find care. According to survey results, some parents (27%) were able to find care for their child in two weeks or less, but the same number of parents (27%) spent one to two months searching for appropriate care for their child, while another 18% of parents spent two to four weeks searching for care.

Over two-thirds of providers indicated that they do not have any open slots for infants. Nearly 40% of providers have no open slots for toddlers, and over half of providers do

not have any open school-age slots. If they do have open slots, most providers indicated they had no more than 1 or 2 open slots for any given age group. Many parents indicated a need for evening or weekend care hours, but less than 30% of providers indicated they offered evening or weekend care hours.

Over 40% of parents found care by word of mouth, 19% searched on their own using the internet or other resources, 17% used a child care resource and referral agency, and 10% found care through their employers.



## Definitions of High-Quality Care

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**B**oth parents and providers most often times identified the following three factors as features of high-quality care: qualified providers; organized, safe, and clean environments; and educational & developmentally-appropriate programming. Over half of providers indicated that provider credentials & developmentally appropriate curriculum were essential to providing high-quality care. According to parents the four things they considered the most when choosing child care were child happiness (78%), cost (60%), proximity to home or work (44%), and provider credentials (39%).





# Barriers *to* *Providing* High-Quality *Child Care*

Even though parents and child care providers have similar understandings as to what constitutes high-quality care there are providers who are unable to provide high-quality care for a variety of reasons. Over half (52%) of providers indicated that retaining qualified staff had a significant negative impact on their program. There are several reasons providers indicated they are having trouble retaining competent staff. The number one reason was low wages and an inability to competitively compensate for backgrounds in higher education, followed closely by burnout.

Demographic data indicated that the child care workforce is an aging population.

This could be due to the fact that younger people are choosing to leave the early childhood field to take more lucrative positions in K-12 schools. Providers also indicated that rising overhead costs, as well as a reduction of resources create significant barriers to providing high quality care.

A smaller number of providers (20%) indicated that regulations provide a significant barrier to providing high-quality care. Other difficulties providers noted were communication with parents, not being taken seriously as a trained professional, competition with free or reduced programs, and the poor quality of required online trainings.

# Provider Focus Group Results

Every CCR&R participating in this study held two focus groups. One for parents, and one for providers. The provider focus group questions centered around, what high-quality care looks like, as well as what barriers they experience in providing high-quality care.

## What does high-quality care look like?

*"I feel like a quality program or quality teachers are, it's the intuitive ones. It's the ones who know when I have to get down on the floor and deal with that child. It's the ones who know, I'm going to leave that kid alone because he's going to work himself out."*

*"Quality childcare is treating each child as they were your own. When it comes to interaction, play, manners, emotions, because sometimes they're not getting that got home and sometimes they're with you, way more than there with their own parent or parents and at the same time we have to balance what they need to know going into kindergarten so they feel ready and happy and hopefully instill that lifelong learning and not the frustration that often comes with children who aren't ready in kindergarten."*

*"having that knowledge and understanding of children and development where they're at, but being able to hook up with whatever other resources are available."*

*"I think quality childcare starts with being accessible to the parent. I mean, realistically, that's what it is. We can't provide a service if the parents don't know we're here."*

*"I think that what we do, as high-quality, it's all about the people and the relationships they have, the skills they have, the abilities they have to take a child and family and work with them and developing that young child into a young person."*

## What are the barriers to providing high-quality care?

*"Child care is at a crossroads in this community. The ability to provide affordable child care while facing a NYS minimum wage that has increased by 70 cents each year for the last 5 or more years, is nearly an impossible task. I think many small non-profit and private child care centers will decide to close because they are tired of fighting this on-going balancing act."*

*"Year after year I see the struggle to find, and then hold on to qualified staff with a great work ethic becoming more and more of a challenge. As a result, children are supervised by staff who may not possess the skills needed for the classroom, and then negative behaviors and lack of safety become a problem. Childcare centers cannot afford to charge the parents the full cost needed to operate a high quality child care center and as such, the children and the program suffers from lack of financial support."*

*"Look at the reality of what we do every single day is, you know, and like for staff turnover we can't even get them in the door we can't even turn over because they're not even coming in. We are trying to hire a floating person probably 20 hour a week position, we put it out on everywhere that you're supposed to put it out. We got two applicants."*

*"There is not enough licensed care in my area. I get tons of calls for infant spots"*

*"We need MORE child care in WNY. And we need a regulatory climate and wages that make this possible"*

# Provider Focus Group Results

Every CCR&R participating in this study held two focus groups. One for parents, and one for providers. The parent focus group questions were centered around challenges parents had in accessing child care, and what they looked for when accessing care.

## What challenges did you have accessing child care?

*"For my past four years, I've had to turn down job opportunities because we were running into dead ends. Calling--No, we're full; No, no, I can't. Alright, well, I'll stay and be a full-time mom. Things are going to get tighter and it's gonna be tricky, because we didn't have that other opportunity."*

*"We actually don't use any child care right now. My husband found an overnight job, kills himself, working 8pm to 5am. But we used to do a daycare. It was actually in town in Niagara, but they were a little home daycare. We absolutely loved them. They were the best price in the area. And when I had my son, they were full. And they had promised a whole spot--so we had lost both their spots. And then we struggled with finding a daycare we liked and could afford."*

*"Our youngest is three. For the longest time, I couldn't work a full time job because we couldn't afford daycare. So now to save on daycare costs, my husband works second shift, and I work first shift, and between that like three hour period where he leaves and I'm not home yet, my son goes to my mom's, but he goes to Pre-K two days a week and we have two full time incomes coming in, and it's still rough paying for two days of Pre-K."*

*Just finding a registered daycare that has any openings. It's just so hard. Everybody's full, they're full for years ahead of time. They've already got people on the waitlist for kids that haven't even been born yet, parents that are pregnant."*

## What did you look for in child care?

*"Flexible hours. I have a three and a one year old. I'm a single mom. So I work two jobs. So during the daytime I have one daycare they go to, and then when I do my overnights they go to another overnight daycare."*

*"In my area there is a lack of daycares. There is only 2 I think that actually do daycare in the evening or overnight. Most daycares hours don't go past 5:30-6 and don't open till 7am. However most jobs want you in earlier or stay later."*

*"I also found actually going in and touring was important. I went and toured one day care that my friends raved or raved about. And I just did not like, the head lady there. There was just something I didn't like about her. And I was like, I can't send my kid here. I feel like you have to listen to the instinct when you're a mom."*

*"I don't think it's necessarily about how fancy their like their facility is or their houses. I think it's more about it's more quality than quantity and just treating make sure each kid knows that they're cared for and that they're safe where they are."*

*"And so it's just like quality of daycare, is the person up on their first aid, their CPR...Things can happen so fast. You know, what kind of food are they feeding the kids, or are the kids coming home, you know, saying, Oh, I had chocolate, I had ice cream, I had this and that. So it's like, Are you eating anything nutritious? So with daycare there's all of those factors, really."*



# Key Findings & *Potential Solutions*

Overall, 41% of parents reported having had problems with child care arrangements. Nearly one-third of all parents surveyed were single-parents and 90% of all parents reported working either full- or part-time. As almost one-quarter of respondents have still not been able to find regular child care options. These ratios demonstrate the severe impact Western New York child care deserts have on working families. This severity is heightened when considering the shortages of infant and toddler care, as close to a quarter of providers indicated having no infant/toddler capacity. Specifically, over two-thirds of providers do not have any open slots for infants and less than 40% have 1-2 open toddler slots. As children's brains produce more than a million neural connections every second in the first 3 years of life, high-quality infant and toddler care is critical to the health and well-being of all Western New York children.

One of the most interesting results of this study involved learning how parents and providers discern high-quality child care programs from informal arrangements with untrained providers. Although it was hypothesized the two understandings would differ (and potentially contrast largely), the study revealed both parents and providers hold high-quality child care as primarily involving: qualified providers; organized, safe, and clean environments; and educational & developmentally-appropriate programming. This suggests that current efforts to regulate quality child care have

been effective. As a result, potential solutions to child care desert issues may not need to involve elaborately defining features of high-quality.

Instead, the biggest barrier for providers appears to be the general need for supports related to professionalizing the field of child care. With more resources available to open and maintain high-quality child care businesses throughout Western New York, issues related to capacity and open slots for infants and toddlers could be resolved. The specific factors most commonly cited by providers were: rising overhead costs or issues with funding/resources; staff salaries or low wages; and retaining qualified staff, which included problems related to the increase in minimum wage, caregiver burnout, and high turnover rates. More specifically, over half of providers who described staffing issues explicitly linked the barrier to low wages, as many qualified early childhood professionals can seek out higher-paying opportunities and leave the child care field altogether.

One movement towards professionalizing the field of early childhood is NAEYC's "Power to the Profession" program, whose vision is "each and every child, beginning at birth, has the opportunity to benefit from high-quality early childhood education, delivered by an effective, diverse, well-prepared, and well-compensated workforce." Power to the Profession is a national collaboration whose ultimate goal is to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for



career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards and compensation.

Another promising practice that has seen marked increase in child care availability is All Our Kin's (AOK) peer network program, which is generally referred to as a staffed family child care network (SFCCN). AOK is resource and referral agency based in New Haven Connecticut. Between 2004 and 2007, the number of child care slots increased by 27% with the use of their research-based 'toolkit,' which includes a SFCCN component. However, other Connecticut cities during this time saw the number of child care slots decrease by over 30%. Though the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership identifies SFCCNs as promising approaches to increasing both quality of care and professional development, the institute also stresses that any type of solution to child care programming issues must involve a combination of supports. One single resource, like a startup grant or one training, is not effective in bringing sustainable change to the field.

Child Care Resource Network additionally proposes a workforce development project be implemented with support from Western New York Regional Economic Development Council's Workforce Development Initiative (REDC WDI). This would involve facilitating a training program for sustainable child care businesses, developing a staffed family child care network across the region, and expanding CCRN's helpline services. Through the training program, participants will learn the child care business field from start-to-finish—culminating in licensure and an established mentor relationship with an experienced local provider. After opening

new child care programs, providers can join the SFCCN for regular support and assistance from peers to address issues of caregiver burnout and ongoing education and training. The SFCCN would also provide an opportunity for routine collaboration amongst all WNY child care resource and referral agencies, where each community can learn more about the needs and barriers of others in the field and collectively develop ongoing solutions.

Currently, CCRN has a proposal submitted to the REDC WDI to fund 83% of the provider training program. If accepted, CCRN will be able to enroll 40 potential new child care providers and train them over 12 months. If at least 50% of participants complete the program, nearly 20 programs will open throughout WNY for local working parents, offering over 160 new child care slots. This creative solution will increase the total programs available in Buffalo by 9% and those in Erie County by 4%.

There is no one solution that will fix our ever growing child care crisis. It is our suggestion that by crafting a multifaceted system of resources for child care providers that address key barriers identified by providers in this study: rising overhead costs or issues with funding/resources; aging child care field, staff salaries or low wages; and retaining qualified staff, will only serve to strengthen the supply and choice of child care available to our community. It is critical now more than ever to increase investments to our early childhood systems. The benefits of sustainable high-quality child care programming for Western New York children and parents will far outweigh any investment.

# Acknowledgments

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Child Care Resource Network also acknowledges the time and thoughtful feedback of all participating Western New York parents and providers, for without which no study could have been conducted.



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