

OPINION EXCHANGE

# Child care in Minnesota: A no-longer-'quiet' crisis demands attention

A lack of available care, particularly in greater Minnesota, is a major barrier to the economic well-being of families and to communities.

By Tim Penny and Anna Wasescha | MARCH 20, 2019 — 5:48PM



Access to affordable child care is a challenge.

A 2016 report from the Center for Rural Policy and Development (CRPD) spotlighted a “quiet crisis” in our state: the serious lack of child care. Three years later, this crisis is no longer so quiet.

This has become a major barrier — not only for the economic well-being of families, but also for the ability of our communities to thrive. The Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs) are working together with numerous partners in the public, private and nonprofit sectors to be part of the solution for greater Minnesota.

Founded in 1986 and representing all 80 counties in greater Minnesota, the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations share goals of supporting the existing child care supply while increasing availability and access to high-quality care.

A 2017 update to the CRPD report estimates that there is a shortage of 35,447 slots outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Two-parent households that would like to have both parents working but lack child care end up having to make the choice between career advancement and family well-being. Parents sometimes withdraw from the workforce or move to a different community where they can find child care. Single-parent households face impossible choices when child care is unavailable.

And with an already tight labor market, greater Minnesota businesses need all who want to be active in the workforce.

The Initiative Foundations are working with communities to identify solutions and provide technical expertise for child care solutions. Often, the assumption is that building a new child care center will solve the problem, but we know this is not always the case. Some creative examples include partnering with faith communities or senior living facilities to use existing space, employers providing on-site care or sponsoring outside care, or using existing commercial space rather than building an entirely new center. For rural areas, where population density is so much lower, licensed in-home child care is and will continue to be key.

A large piece of the child care shortage puzzle is ensuring that the providers we do have decide to stay in the field. Greater Minnesota lost 15,000 licensed, family-based child care slots between 2006 and 2015, according to the CRPD. Some in-home providers are “aging out” while others have chosen other employment paths.

Family-based child care is a challenging, labor-intensive field that requires licensure and ongoing training and long hours. It demands child development and business skills, and, despite the strain on family budgets to pay for their child’s care, the compensation for front-line child care workers is typically low and offers few if any benefits. Supporting the field as a whole, both existing providers and those considering entering this work, is as important as promoting expansion.

The Initiative Foundations offer different tools depending on the organization, including business loans or grants to support in-home and center-based child care, and training for child care providers. Providers who attend these trainings receive credit hours and many have moved on to Parent Aware, Minnesota’s quality rating system. According to the early childhood organization Think Small, providers that become Parent Aware-rated are twice as likely to stay in business as nonrated programs.

Addressing the child care shortage is a complex issue that will take a concerted public and private effort to resolve. Organizations such as Child Care Aware, First Children's Finance, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and others are joining us to support and promote training, financing, research and other programming. Perhaps most importantly, it takes community members representing all sectors sitting down together to think big, plan ahead and act now.

The Initiative Foundations stand ready to continue our role in addressing the rural child care shortage and in providing quality training so that all children are placed on a path to success. There is no question that the future of our children and the economy depends on how our state addresses the not-so-quiet child care crisis. The newly introduced Child Care Bills (SF 2 and HF 422), which appropriate resources to the foundations for continuing training opportunities and facilitating community solutions to the shortage, are an important step in the right direction.

*Tim Penny is president and CEO of Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation. Anna Wasescha is president and CEO of West Central Initiative. This article was also submitted on behalf of: Diana Anderson, president and CEO of Southwest Initiative Foundation; Tony Sertich, president of Northland Foundation; Matt Varilek, president of Initiative Foundation; and Nancy Vyskocil, president and CEO of Northwest Minnesota Foundation.*