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Families And Providers **United For Child Care**



A lack of sufficient public investment in the child care sector is causing a crisis for working families and care providers in Massachusetts. One of the biggest gaps is our system's inability to accommodate families with nontraditional schedules.

The labor of care, at its best, leads to significant and long-lasting benefits for the children and families that receive care AND for our society and economy as a whole. Each one of us spends years in the position of relying on others for help to survive and thrive. Today there are over 950,000 children under 13 in Massachusetts who may need care and supervision while away from their parents.² The labor of care cannot be outsourced overseas, and it cannot be streamlined without disrupting the basic, relational nature of care.³ The care sector both merits and requires strong public investment.

Without such investment, our care sector is splintered by cracks and gaps. Public school and preschool cover only a portion of the day. Outside of those hours, families face market prices for licensed child care that are among the highest in the nation, higher even than in-state college tuition. Our public subsidy system is so underfunded that tens of thousands of children linger on waiting lists, and providers must weigh the risk of accepting subsidies that cover only a fraction of what it costs to provide care. And many working families find they cannot access licensed child care because providers struggle to accommodate their schedules. This struggle of families with nontraditional hours and schedules is the focus of this brief.











For too many working families, licensed child care is not available during the hours when it is needed. In Massachusetts, one study found 42 percent of low-income children under 13 have parents who work when most licensed providers are not open.

The typical licensed child care provider in Massachusetts opens on weekdays around 6:00-7:00am and closes around 5:00-6:30pm. For too many working families, this means licensed child care is not available when it is needed. Working parents may start early in the morning or work late into the night, before or after licensed providers are open, or they may work on weekends, when most licensed providers are closed. Such hours are particularly prevalent in certain industries—for example, construction, hospitality, health care, and the service sector. For low-income parents seeking education or training, classes and apprenticeships may also be scheduled outside of the hours when licensed providers operate.

These "nontraditional" work hours are actually all too common. For 20 percent of workers in the United States, more than half of the work day falls outside the typical hours of operations for providers of 6:00am to 6:00pm on weekdays. While some workers choose nontraditional schedules, the majority said their hours were a requirement rather than a preference. Among low-wage workers these hours are even more common—28 percent of very low-wage workers have nontraditional hours. In Massachusetts, 42 percent of low-income children under 13 have parents who work nontraditional hours.

Similarly, many workers have schedules that change by day or by week—one study found over 70 percent of young parents work hours that change significantly week to week.

Many working parents have unstable schedules where the start and stop times or the number of hours they work changes by day or by week. When variations in a work schedule are driven by worker preference it can represent welcome flexibility. However, it is common for these variable schedules to be set by employer preference instead, such that workers have little control over their schedules and sometimes little or no advance notice. In industries such as retail and hospitality, where the need for workers can vary by season, week, or time of day, low-road employers may rely on "just-in-time" scheduling practices to minimize what they pay to workers. ¹⁴

Low-wage workers, part-time workers, and workers with nontraditional hours are particularly vulnerable to these variable schedules. In one study of low-wage hourly workers, 31 percent were frequently required to work overtime without notice. This increased to 83 percent for those with part-time and nontraditional hours. Additionally, 20 percent of low-wage hourly workers experienced frequent reductions in hours or were laid off when work was slow. For those with part-time and nontraditional hours, it was 79 percent.¹⁵

But scheduling challenges are relatively common across the spectrum of workers. Another study, looking at workers of all income levels, found that many young parents (ages 26-32) with children under 13 experienced limited notice, limited control, and significant hour fluctuations:



- 32 percent of mothers and 46 percent of fathers only had one week of notice or less.
- For 46 percent of mothers and 50 percent of fathers, their employer determined their hours with no input.
- 69 percent of mothers and 79 percent of fathers experienced significant fluctuation in hours week by week.

One estimate found child care troubles causes about 60,000 parents of young children in Massachusetts each year to change or turn down jobs. In other cases, the crucial labor of care falls to unpaid family or friends.

Higher-income families with nontraditional hours and schedules may be able to afford to hire a nanny and provide living wages and benefits to the caretaker of their children. For other working families with nontraditional hours or schedules, they are left with few good options: change their jobs, or cobble together informal, unlicensed care arrangements. In Massachusetts, the mismatch between work hours and child care options causes an estimated 60,000 parents of children under six, every year, to quit a job; *turn down a job; or greatly change a job.* This accounts for nearly 13 percent of parents with children under six.

Some parents try to struggle through the mismatch in order to keep their jobs. Parents with more stable schedules, even if their hours are nontraditional, may be able to "tag-team" caregiving responsibilities and take care of their children with limited expenses (even as the parents ultimately see very little of one another). Other working parents may be fortunate to have a family member—often a grandparent—who can provide reliable care. And other working parents are subject to a daily "scramble" to cobble together care arrangements based on their everchanging schedules.¹⁸

Many licensed care providers already struggle to keep their business afloat because working families cannot afford the true cost of providing care. It is even harder for licensed providers to accommodate nontraditional or changing hours.

Market prices for child care are unaffordable for the typical family. At the same time, the market price of care does not reflect the *true* cost of providing care. Child caregivers typically work full-time and their work requires considerable skill and dedication, but even the most experienced and credentialed caregivers are among the lowest-paid workers in society. Child care providers are in a bind, caught on one side by rigorous demands that reflect the challenge and importance of care labor and on the other side by a lack of public investment in that care labor that leaves only what working families can (often barely) afford to pay.

Thus, for providers who are already struggling, there may be little incentive to provide care for those families with nontraditional hours and schedules, especially if they can easily fill weekday and daytime slots. Nontraditional hour care can create additional administrative work (up to 50 percent more in one case 1.2). A majority of providers in Massachusetts said they would have to raise their rates in order to provide care during nontraditional hours. And care workers may be reluctant to sacrifice time spent with family or for rest, even when offered higher rates.

Additionally, those child care providers that are more likely to provide nontraditional hour care have been struggling to get by in recent years. In the United States, family child care providers are more likely than child care centers to provide care before 6:00am or after 6:00pm (34 percent and 8 percent offer nontraditional hour care, respectively). But the number of family child care providers overall has been dropping steadily over the past several years, and the combined capacity of family child care providers has always been much smaller than that of centers.

It may be that the child care sector, with increased public investment, could accommodate families with nontraditional hours and schedules while also raising wages, benefits, and worker protections for the care workforce. However, the child care sector should not be used as a buffer for the burden on families caused by unfair scheduling practices and stagnant wages. A robust care sector should support working class families in conjunction with a sturdy foundation of worker protections, including fair scheduling, paid family medical leave, living wages, and others.

The solution is to strengthen public investment in the care sector.

Our state's care sector must reflect the realities of our state's economy, our workforce, our changing population, and the developmental needs of our children and next generation. With so many workers facing nonstandard hours, with women in the workforce as a rule rather than an exception, and as grandparents transition from potential caregivers to potential care recipients, child care options available around the clock have become a necessity. Worker protections like fair scheduling and paid family medical leave will also play an important role in supporting working families. But it is clear too that stronger public investment in the care sector is critical to support the provision and accessibility of care during nonstandard hours, and to ensure care providers earn living wages and benefits that reflect the full value of their labor.

◯ NOTES

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