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Improving the Infant and Toddler System of Care in Los Angeles: Lessons from the Field

November 2023



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Executive Summary

Within the already fragmented and under-resourced early learning field, the system of care and education of infants and toddlers in Los Angeles County is an especially vulnerable one. The problems which are generally faced by the field of early care and education (ECE) become even more pressing when considered within the realm of infant and toddler care: a shortage of spaces, underpaid educators, a shrinking workforce, small businesses in danger of failing, and underdeveloped facilities.

The infant and toddler care system in Los Angeles includes over a quarter of the state's early educators, who work in centers, Family Child Care (FCC) homes, and private homes. Most of these workers are women of color or White women. Many are Spanish-speakers and immigrants, and many are 50 years old or older.



BACKGROUND

The need for this study was to learn about the experiences, successes, and challenges that form LA's infant and toddler care and education landscape. The stories shared with us by parents, teachers, FCC owners, directors, and other leaders – those closest to the system – would allow us to connect ECE advocates with the experiences of our “proximity experts.” Our key goal is to ensure that a highly qualified and diverse workforce is able to thrive in the coming years. Through the findings and recommendations in this report, we hope to tell an important part of the ECE system's story, and to enable planners and implementers to envision and support the spectrum of children from birth to age 5.

Using a Culturally Responsive and Racially Equitable Evaluation lens, we designed and carried out our study under the advisement of an Advisory Committee, composed of LA County ECE community members from diverse backgrounds. We interviewed parents of infants and toddlers, FCC owners, FFN providers, center directors, center teachers, and leaders of ECE-focused organizations, for a total of 65 interviews.

58%

*of participants
were Latino*

More than half of the study participants were Latino (58%), with smaller proportions identifying as White (11%), African American/Black (9%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (5%). Additionally, the vast majority of respondents were female (92%)—only eight percent of study participants were male. These demographics reflect the overall demographics of the field of ECE. On average, ECE leaders, center directors, FCC providers, and FFN providers had 18.1 years of experience in the ECE field and 13.7 years of experience in infant and toddler care. Interviews were conducted on Zoom in participants' preferred language; 78% of the interviews were conducted in English and 22% were conducted in Spanish. Participants lived and worked in locations throughout Los Angeles County.

92%

*of participants
were female*



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents are struggling to find care for their babies and toddlers. Despite calls to action like the Advancement Project’s recommendations for decision makers related to babies and toddlers in Los Angeles County, conditions remain stark for families (Advancement Project, 2018). Our study identified parents’ persistent difficulties in finding and paying for high-quality care. Parents need financial support, user-friendly tools (like a well-advertised central database of providers with up-to-date, easy-to-find information), and processes (supported by parent navigators) for finding and accessing care that is provided by loving, well-qualified, trusted caregivers .

A robust infant and toddler system of care must include a mixed-delivery approach that is responsive to the needs of the community. Parent choice is a key feature of a high-quality early care and education system. For infant and toddler care in particular, Family, Friend and Neighbor care is an integral component. As we contemplate how best to increase capacity to serve infants and toddlers, we must ensure that we are taking a comprehensive approach that includes all types of care for all types of families. Systems-change advocates in other parts of the country affirm that “Families with young children, across all neighborhoods, want child care support. The type of support may differ” (WeVision Early Ed, 2022, p. 22). Increasing responsiveness to the needs of LA County families also means removing any biases that may constrain our conceptions of the families we serve or the ways in which we can serve them.

As a result of the systemic oppression of women and people of color in the ECE system, teachers are receiving unfairly low wages and minimal benefits, and are suffering in stressful working conditions. Teachers need to be “compensated,” a term used by Brandy Jones Lawrence from the Center for the Study of Childcare Employment to refer to a teacher’s right not only to fair compensation, but also to workplace conditions that support her physical and mental health, allowing her to be present for the children she serves and to use her complete skillset in her work. These conditions include health care and retirement benefits, high-quality professional development focused specifically on infants and toddlers, and a supportive social mindset that uplifts the ECE profession as worthy and nuanced.

Providers need materials and training tailored to the needs of infants and toddlers. They need equipment, books, educational materials, funding to expand their facilities, and comprehensive training that is specifically designed to cover the development of children aged 0 to 3. Additionally, providers and parents recommended the creation of educational materials for parents, to help caregivers understand the stages and milestones of their infants’ and toddlers’ development, as well as their needs at each stage.





The needs of families and ECE workers serving infants and toddlers are not mentally present for decision makers. Several study participants suggested the need to build stronger connections between decision makers, who are less proximal to the work, and caregivers. This may take the form of creating access points, such as visits to care sites, allowing decision makers to learn about the work and experiences of those in the field and to understand what it takes to care for and educate children. Other opportunities for contact could also be created, to encourage ongoing openness to the voices of parents, teachers, and providers.

Our voices have been heard, but they have been ignored.

Tonia McMillian,
Advocate and FCC Owner

Mindsets and public perceptions in general must shift, to encompass more complete and nuanced understandings of the daily efforts undertaken by parents, teachers, providers, and leaders to care for infants and toddlers. The poor conditions of the system described in this report are not new, yet they are not clearly understood or received by Los Angeles County. Much work remains to be done in shifting mental models and changing persistent

narratives. Speaking about California’s mixed early-learning delivery system, Tonia McMillian, Advocate and FCC Owner, said, “Our voices have been heard, but they have been ignored.” The public at large needs to understand a day in the life of a teacher or caregiver of an infant or toddler, including their struggles and the difficult choices they make.

Several key efforts are emerging with potential to address these problems and strengthen the Los Angeles County system of care for infants and toddlers in the coming years (please see pg. 50).

Our study participants shared their experiences and insights around the infant and toddler system of care, bringing to life the persistent and well-documented numbers that are familiar to many ECE advocates.

Although the numbers and stories paint a bleak picture in Los Angeles County and across the country, there are bright spots – emerging initiatives throughout Los Angeles and at the national level, offering collaborative opportunities improve the system. We can contribute both individually and as members of united efforts to bring about critically needed reform for infants and toddlers.

At the center of any enduring reform is a shift in the mindsets of decision-makers and the public at large. Public perceptions must move toward more complete and nuanced understandings of the daily work done by parents, teachers, providers, and leaders to care for infants and toddlers. The poor conditions of the early care system are not clearly understood or heard by LA County.



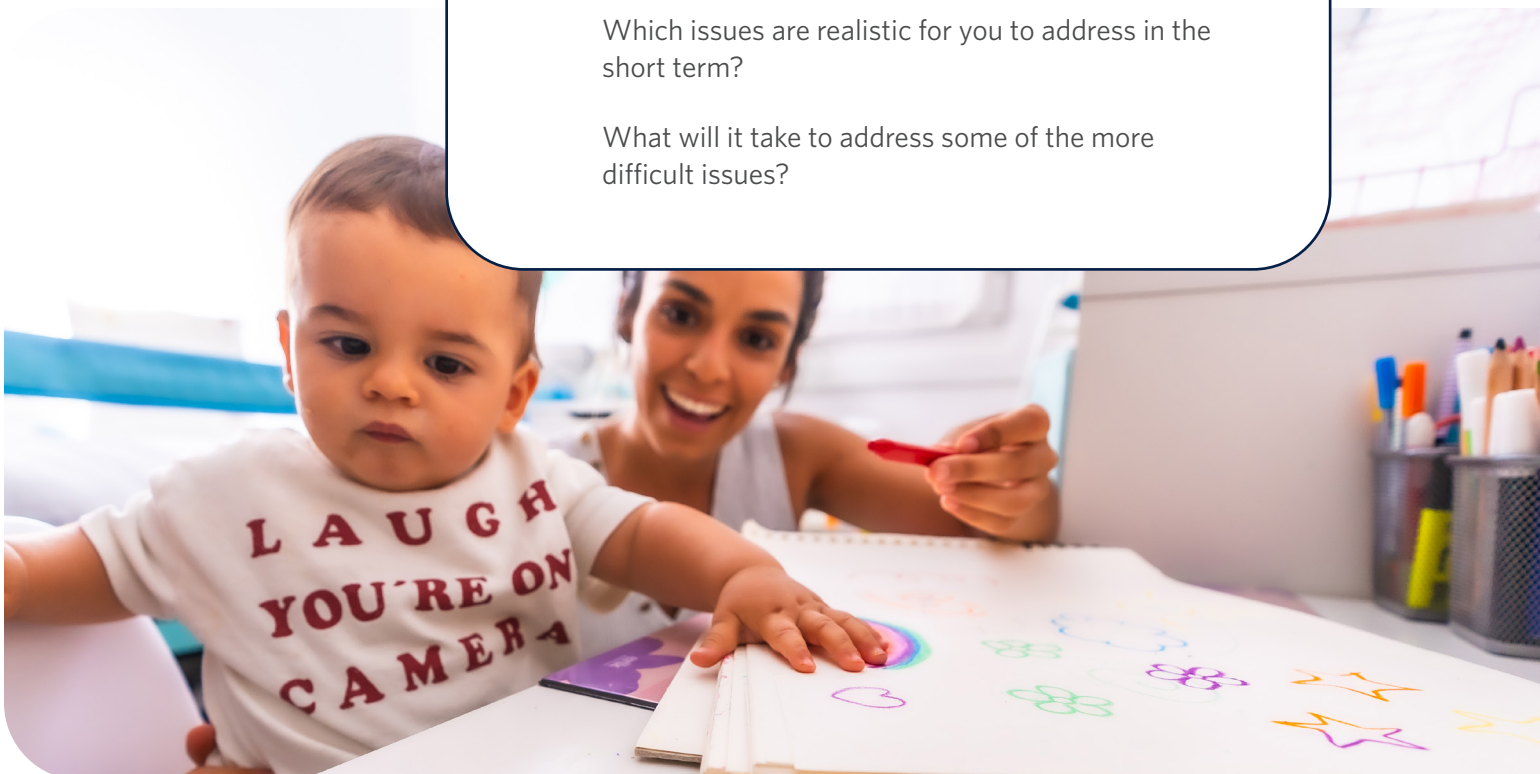
MINDSET CHECK

What are the personal benefits to you of quality care for infants and toddlers?

How do these insights and recommendations from participants in the LA County infant and toddler system resonate with you?

Which issues are realistic for you to address in the short term?

What will it take to address some of the more difficult issues?





Improving Care for Infants and Toddlers in LA County

Within the already fragmented and under-resourced early learning field, the system of care and education for infants and toddlers in Los Angeles County is an especially vulnerable one. The following problems which are generally faced by the field of early care and education (ECE) are even more pressing when considered within the realm of infant and toddler care:



Lack of spaces. There are not nearly enough spaces, especially subsidized spaces, to serve the more than 300,000 infants and toddlers in Los Angeles County, who represent half of all children ages 0 to 5. Only 14% of eligible infants and toddlers who qualify for subsidies actually receive them (OAECE, 2022).



Underpaid educators. The vast majority of ECE educators caring for infants and toddlers are immigrant women of color from low-income households, earning poverty-level wages. On average, ECE educators make \$13.43 per hour (OAECE, 2022).



Shrinking workforce. The county is facing a crisis when it comes to retaining and recruiting ECE educators. In addition, the ECE workforce in the county and in the state is aging. In California, a large proportion of center-based teachers (33%) and center-based directors (53%) are aged 50 years or older (OAECE, 2022).



Scarcity in businesses and facilities. The number of Family Child Care homes (FCCs) in the county has been on the decline for the last eleven years (Los Angeles County Child Care Planning Committee, 2017), limiting the care options available for parents of infants and toddlers, parents of color, and low-income parents. Similarly, the lack of facilities to house ECE services, along with the implementation of universal transitional kindergarten (UTK), strain the availability of infant and toddler care in the state and the county.

An important framing of these inequitable conditions is to acknowledge that they exist within racist and misogynistic societal structures, and that the work that we do to improve the infant and toddler system of care in Los Angeles must identify and address these race- and gender-based inequities. Our intent in carrying out this study has been to shift mindsets away from the harmful perceptions that hold these conditions in place and toward more equity-centered approaches. Whatever your role is within the system, our hope is that you will challenge traditional thinking and imagine a system of care and education for infants and toddlers in Los Angeles beyond the persistent negative statistics and the structures of the past.

This historic underinvestment in the child care system that has been ever-present intersects with long-standing gender and racial inequities. Understanding and grappling with that history is a really important place to start, thinking about who we're recruiting into these jobs and whether we're just sustaining these systems of oppression."

Rachel Wilensky (in Wong, 2023)

The purpose of this report is to help build momentum, in partnership with efforts like Supervisor Solis's motion, toward improving conditions for the youngest and most vulnerable in our county. Our research investigated the conditions of the workforce serving infants and toddlers within LA's mixed-delivery system of care and education. We focused on the preparation of individuals, sites, and systems that serve this special population of children. Specifically, we wanted to learn about the experiences, successes, and challenges that are part of LA County's infant and toddler care and education landscape, so that we could provide findings and recommendations to ensure that a highly qualified and diverse workforce is able to thrive in the coming years. Through these findings, we hope to tell an important part of the ECE system's story, and thereby enable planners and implementers to envision and support the spectrum of children from birth to age 5.



A hopeful sign that conditions will improve is a recent motion by LA County Superintendent Hilda Solis, which directs the Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education in the Department of Public Health to "develop a blueprint identifying immediate and long-term efforts to fortify the infant and toddler care system" (Solis, 2023). The blueprint will be shared with the Board of Supervisors in the spring of 2024.

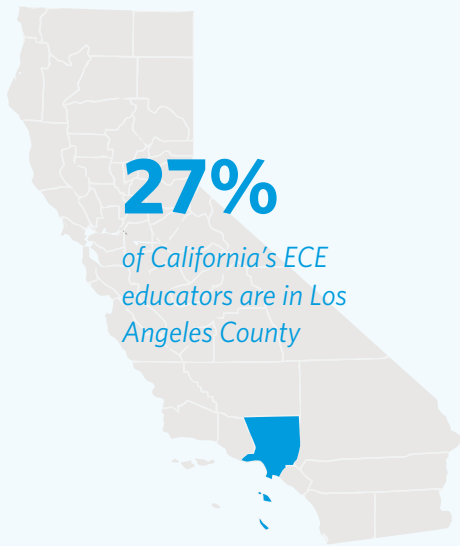
"Ideologies and policies are malleable and do shift... To address compensation issues, child care needs to be viewed as a public responsibility, not a private issue."

(Lloyd et al., 2021)



BACKGROUND

Who cares for LA's babies and toddlers?



- ▶ They work in centers, FCCs, and private homes.
- ▶ Most are women of color or White women.
- ▶ Many are Spanish-speakers and immigrants.
- ▶ Many are 50 or older.

Los Angeles County's complex mixed-delivery system of care and education for infants and toddlers includes community-based and privately owned centers, school district sites, Family Child Care homes (FCCs), and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care. Los Angeles County represents a little over one-quarter (27%) of the state's ECE workforce, with 34,090 individuals working in this field (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021). As Table 1 shows, the largest share of the ECE workforce in the county are child care workers (n=20,680, representing almost 1 in 3 ECE professionals). Child care workers foster the early development and ensure the health and safety of infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. They can work in diverse settings, including child care centers, FCCs, or private homes. Though educational requirements vary, child care workers are generally required to have at least a high school degree or equivalent to work in the field (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). The second most common job role for ECE workers in Los Angeles County is preschool teacher; there are approximately 9,974 of these providers in the county. Preschool teachers typically work with children under the age of five who are not enrolled in kindergarten (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Preschool teachers can provide care and education in child care centers, public experience working in ECE settings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Countywide, there are also 2,150 education and child care administrators, and 1,286 teacher assistants (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021). schools, and private schools, and educational requirements for preschool teachers are higher than those for child care workers; they need at least an associate's degree to enter the field (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Head Start programs and other employment settings may require preschool teachers to have a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education and prior experience working in ECE settings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Countywide, there are also 2,150 education and child care administrators, and 1,286 teacher assistants (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021).





Table 1. Number of ECE Educators and Positions (Source: Thornberg, C. (2021))

ECE Position	Los Angeles County	California
Child Care Workers	20,680	74,348
Preschool Teachers	9,974	38,240
Administrators	2,150	8,114
Teacher Assistants	1,286	6,027
Total	34,090	126,729

Table 2. Racial and Ethnic Breakdown for Los Angeles County’s ECE Workforce
Source: Workforce Pathways LA (2021)

Race/Ethnic Background	Percent
Latinx	58%
White	33%
Other	11%
Black	9%

Nearly all of the ECE educators in Los Angeles County are women (95%), with more than half of the workforce (58%) identifying as Latinx; most are Spanish speakers, and more than half of the county’s ECE educators are immigrants (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021). The ECE workforce in Los Angeles County and in the state is an aging workforce (OAECE, 2022). For example, in California, a third of center-based teachers (33%) and more than half of center-based directors (53%) are aged 50 or older (OAECE, 2022).



76%

of teachers across the country have a credential



63%

of the ECE workforce has a partial or complete college or advanced degree

These women are typically well-educated and qualified; 76% of teachers across the country have a credential, which can take the form of either a higher education degree or a certification in early childhood development (Coffey, 2022). However, this number is lower in Los Angeles County, where about 61% of the ECE workforce has a partial or complete college or advanced degree (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021).

Despite ECE workers’ qualifications, they face numerous problems, including poor compensation. The needs of the infant and toddler system of care in Los Angeles County mirror, and in some cases exceed, those of the ECE system as a whole.

The Younger the Child, the Lower the Pay for Early Educators



According to an analysis of national data,

86% of infant and toddler teachers, compared to 67% of preschool teachers, earn

< \$15/hour

- ▶ African American workers are disproportionately affected by this wage penalty. (CSCCE, 2018).

Most members of the ECE workforce earn low wages.

This forces many ECE educators to work multiple jobs and use public benefits to increase the income they bring home to their families (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021). ECE educators earn an average of \$13.43 per hour, driving almost half (49%) into poverty (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021; OAECE, 2023). The most current research by Los Angeles County's Local Planning Council reveals that the median annual full-time salary for center-based directors is less than \$60,000 a year, with center-based teachers earning slightly less than \$40,000 a year (Local Planning Council, 2022). Small family child care providers (FCCs) fare far worse in terms of their median annual salary (OAECE, 2022). The owner of a small FCC's median annual full-time salary is approximately \$20,000 a year, while a large FCC owner's salary is a little greater than \$40,000 a year (OAECE, 2022). To place these wages in context, the median annual income in Los Angeles County is \$76,367, and the federal poverty line for a single person with no dependents is \$14,580. Of course, many ECE workers also have families and children of their own to support. These already low wages also intersect with existing race-based

income disparities; across the country, the wage gap between White and Black early childhood educators has widened since 2012, from 84% to 76% (Center for American Progress, 2022).

Despite paying low wages to its workforce, infant and toddler care remains more expensive for families than older children's care and education, partly because a lower child-teacher ratio is required to adequately care for younger children. The average cost of infant care for families in LA County is \$1,589 per month, compared to child care for a preschooler, which costs \$1,143 per month (Education Trust West, 2023). A recent analysis found that 71% of LA County residents ranked the cost of child care for families with young children as an extremely serious or very serious issue (Education Trust West, 2023).

FCCs are especially vulnerable. Although working families rely on FCCs because they are affordable, provide flexible hours (including evening, weekend and overnight care), and have lower child-teacher ratios (Los Angeles County, 2017), the number of FCCs in LA County is steadily declining, and their providers earn among the lowest wages. Between 2012 and 2021, the number of FCCs in the county declined by 21%. Considering the additional challenges to providers' livelihoods posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the advent of universal transitional kindergarten (UTK), both of which have decreased ECE enrollment and forced providers to close their doors, this decline is unsettling. A decrease in the number of FCC sites will further exacerbate the child care shortage in the county, and could make it even more challenging for working families, especially parents of infants and toddlers, parents of color, and low-income parents, to access care in the county (Child Care Resource Center, n.d.). FCC providers in Los Angeles with bachelor's degrees have a median annual salary of \$35,300, while center-based teachers with bachelor's degrees earn a median annual salary of \$41,600.

Many ECE educators also lack employer-paid health insurance and retirement benefits (McLean et al., 2017). Due to low wages, ECE educators in Los Angeles County suffer from rent burden (57%) and have



limited access to wealth-building opportunities like property ownership (Workforce Pathways LA, 2021). The low compensation that ECE workers receive for their work has critical implications for retention of the labor force and maintenance of the total number of infant and toddler care sites across the county, since providing infant and toddler care is more expensive and requires more labor than caring for older children (Brown, 2021).

Child care labor is undervalued and poorly compensated in large part because it is linked to and is considered an extension of motherhood (i.e., women’s work) and is also associated with women who are minoritized and women of color. While child care is undervalued and poorly compensated across the board, there is an earnings hierarchy in the ECE profession, and women who are minoritized and women of color are at the bottom. This is due in large part to racism, sexism, and patriarchy, which results in compounded economic burdens for Black women as well as other women who are minoritized and of color. Colonization, racism, and sexism are embedded in local, state, and federal policies that have devalued people who are minoritized, people of color, women, and the field of child care. Federal policies, however, have also served as a vehicle to address racism and inequities embedded in policies.” (Lloyd et al., 2021)

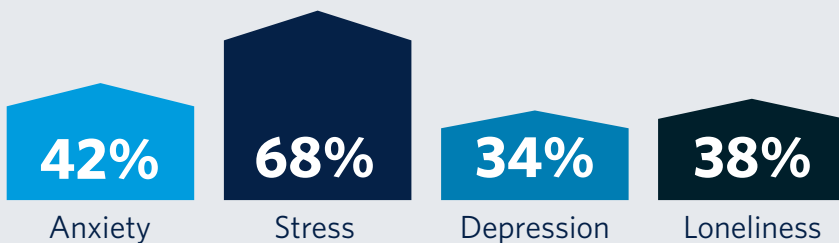
Funding for universal transitional kindergarten may attract teachers away from an already shrinking infant and toddler workforce, increasing the need for recruitment, training, and retention of teachers specialized in working with infants and toddlers. Qualified teachers may be attracted to TK classrooms, which are frequently able to offer higher pay and benefits, better professional supports, and employment stability within a school district setting. Evidence of the need to ensure a balance across care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers comes from New York’s implementation of universal preschool. In New York, unintended consequences of this implementation included reductions of both availability and quality of care for children under 2 years old. The increased capacity of public preschools created a shift among providers away from serving infants and toddlers and toward serving preschoolers, which decreased available infant and toddler spaces by about 15% to 20% (Brown, 2018). Another unintended consequence of universal TK is the drop in enrollment it causes for providers who serve preschool-aged children as well as infants and toddlers. Because child care for younger children is more expensive to provide, ECE sites often rely on the enrollment of children over the age of 3 to partially subsidize their infant and toddler slots, and a decrease in the average age served at a site can threaten a provider’s financial balancing act.

Spaces for infant and toddler care are not nearly sufficient to meet the demand. Recent data highlight the continued shortage of care, and the gaps in access to subsidized care, for infants and toddlers across Los Angeles County. A recent analysis by Beacon Economics and Unite LA shows that only 11% of the care needs of children under two years have been met (Thornberg, 2021). Additionally, current data from Los Angeles County’s Local Planning Council Child Care Needs Assessment shows that there are 140,636 children from ages 0 to 35 months who qualify for subsidized care, but only 14% (n=19,879) are enrolled in subsidized care. This leaves approximately 120,757 (86%) eligible infants and toddlers who are not enrolled in subsidized ECE programs. Furthermore, only 8% of children from ages 0 to 11 months are enrolled in subsidized care. The most recent data from the California Department of Social Services shows that there are 3,397 licensed child care center providers in Los Angeles County. Of these, nearly three-quarters (74%) are day care centers, only 15% are infant centers, and 11% are school-age day care centers (California Department of Social Services, 2022).

THE CONTEXT FOR PARENTS

As part of their ongoing survey of caregivers across California, RAPID surveyed caregivers in Los Angeles County through their RAPID-California Voices project. Highlights from their findings reveal that, around the time of our study, parents of young children were experiencing stress, their children tended to show challenging behaviors, and they struggled to pay for basic needs.¹

Caregivers who participated in the RAPID-California Voices survey in Los Angeles County reported significant negative impacts on their wellbeing.



83%

of caregivers reported that their children aged 0 to 5 years old were fussy or defiant or were fearful and anxious.²

What is helping you and your family the most right now?

Responses from caregivers to this question included financial subsidies like WIC, SNAP, CCRC and other support for child care, Section 8; a strong social support network; and strategies like getting an extra job, seeking therapy, and going without food.

“The kindergarten provides extra care when I work overtime, which relieves a lot of stress and allows us to balance work and family time.”

Many caregivers surveyed through RAPID-California Voices in LA County experienced financial hardships in September 2023.



¹This set of analyses on RAPID-CA Data is based on 1,023 responses collected from 841 caregivers between the dates of 11/08/2022 and 09/25/2023. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 16% are Black/African American, 35% are Latinx, and 37% live below 2 times the federal poverty line. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not out of the total sample size. The data for these analyses are not weighted.




²Analyses based on 1,015 responses based on 815 children reported by caregivers in the survey; analyses unit = individual child.



METHODS

To plan this study of infant and toddler care in Los Angeles County, we first conducted a landscape review of relevant documents, such as research studies and needs assessments. We did this in order to understand the current needs of the workforce and of families served, the state of families' access to care, and other important dimensions of the infant and toddler care system. We also formed an Advisory Committee, which included ECE providers, parents, and thought leaders, to help guide the design and implementation of the study.

The research questions that drove our data collection and analysis were focused on the availability of child care spaces, parents' needs, teacher recruitment and training, implications of funding structures, and the readiness of the infant and toddler system infrastructure to meet the needs of families and the workforce. Our three primary goals were to:

- 1**  Learn about the child care needs of families with infants and toddlers in Los Angeles County, and the existing supports to serve them within LA's mixed-delivery system of care;
- 2**  Explore the professional development resources currently available for the workforce that cares for infants and toddlers, and examine efforts to prepare and support providers at sites where infants and toddlers are served; and
- 3**  Use our collected data to provide recommendations for strengthening this critically important system of care, ensuring that a highly qualified and diverse workforce is able to thrive in the coming years.

Throughout our research process, we focused on the points of view of people who are closest to the system, in an effort to accurately represent their experiences, opinions, and needs. We used convenience sampling, meaning that we relied on our networks to put us in touch with parents and members of the ECE field who agreed to participate in our interviews. Throughout our design, data collection, and analysis, we used culturally responsive evaluation approaches, including our work with our Advisory Committee. The committee was composed of key ECE voices, who lent their experience-based perspectives to our study by reviewing instruments, identifying study participants, and helping to make sense of preliminary findings.





What is Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation?

Culturally responsive and equitable evaluation (CREE) integrates culture, equity, structural contexts, and a systems change approach in designing and implementing evaluation efforts. At its core, CREE uplifts the voices and perspectives of individuals with lived experience and those most impacted by the programs and systems we evaluate. As evaluators and researchers, we use CREE to center equity and justice in all evaluation phases, ensuring that our findings inform decision-making and program design; support systems change and continuous program improvement; and uplift recommendations that create stronger communities.

Source: "Using a Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation Approach to Guide Research and Evaluation" (Mathematica, 2021)

In the spring and summer of 2023, we conducted one-on-one virtual interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, with a total of 65 participants in the system of care and education of infants and toddlers in Los Angeles County. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish. We spoke with parents of infants and toddlers, FCC owners, FFN providers, center directors, center teachers, and leaders of ECE-focused organizations. The purpose of the conversations was to understand the perspectives and experiences of these parents, providers, and leaders, and to identify systems change opportunities that exist to support and strengthen this specialized child care workforce. Prior to their interview, each participant was asked to complete a survey about their background and demographics.

Table 3. Interview Participants, Representing Members of LA County's Infant and Toddler Care System

Study Participants	Number of Interviewees
FCC Owners	16
Parents of Infants and Toddlers	15
Infant and Toddler Teachers	12
ECE Leaders	11
Center Directors	9
Family, Friend & Neighbor Providers	2
Total	65



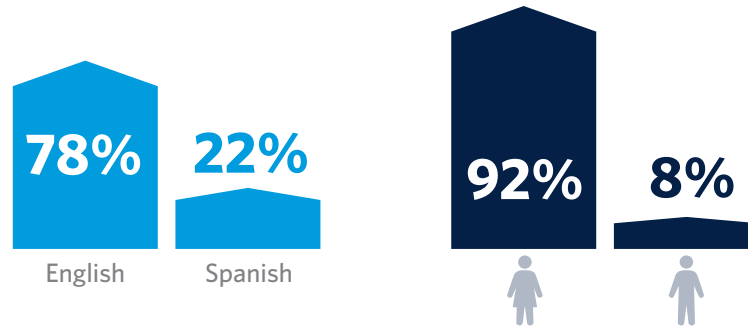
FINDINGS

The following summary presents our key findings, including a demographic portrait of our participants and analysis of the feedback they provided in one-on-one conversations, with recommendations for ECE decision-makers and policy leaders.

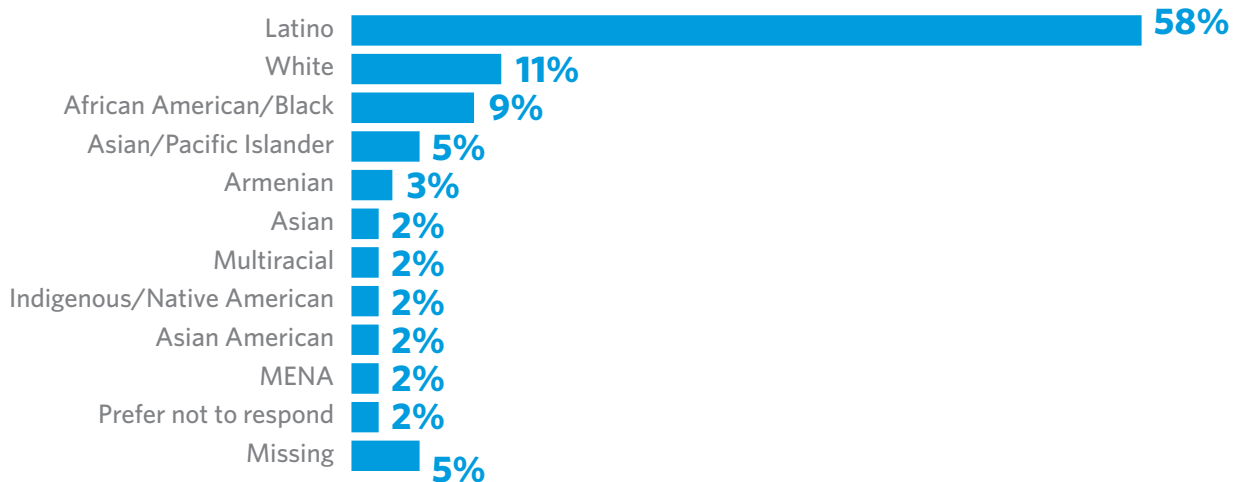
Background and Characteristics of Participants

More than half of the study participants were Latino (58%), with smaller proportions identifying as White (11%), African American/Black (9%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (5%). Additionally, the vast majority of respondents were female (92%)—only eight percent of study participants were male. These demographics reflect the overall demographics of the field of ECE. On average, ECE leaders, center directors, FCC providers, and FFN providers had 18.1 years of experience in the ECE field and 13.7 years of experience in infant and toddler care. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language; 78% of the interviews were conducted in English and 22% were conducted in Spanish.

Most interviews were conducted in English with female participants. (N=65)



Most interview participants identified as Latino (N=65)





Parents

The parents we interviewed all identified as female; however, they came from diverse backgrounds, and they varied both in the types of care they used and in their values connected to child care. Parents identified as either Latina (87%) or White (13%); two-thirds of our interviews were conducted in English, and one-third were conducted in Spanish. Most parents (73%) told us that they relied on relatives or friends to care for their children, or that they cared for their children themselves. About a quarter of the parents had enrolled their children in child care centers; these included an Early Head Start, a Montessori program, and a junior preschool.

By accessing care for their infants and toddlers, parents were able to secure benefits for their children and for themselves.

We invited parents to share with us what they perceived as the benefits of having access to care for their infants and toddlers, whether this was at home, with relatives or friends, or at a child care center. Most typically, they related – usually with gratitude – that their children were receiving individualized attention and appropriate care, and were developing social skills. They also described benefits for themselves, including the ability to advance their careers, improvement to their families’ mental health and wellbeing, access to resources through their child care provider, and the ability to use their child-free time to get medical care and meet other responsibilities. Parents who cared for their children themselves shared that they valued the bonding time they were able to spend with their children. Regardless of their backgrounds or conditions, parents made it clear that care for their children in one form or another was essential for their families to thrive.

Demographic Snapshot Parents



15 interviews conducted

75% English

25% Spanish



All women

87% Latina

13% White



Home-based or center care

11 FFN

4 Center-based

Family Child Care Homes and Family, Friends, and Neighbors

A total of sixteen FCC owners and two FFN providers participated in the one-on-one conversations. The FCC owners who participated in the conversations represented a mix of large FCC homes and small family home providers. All providers were women of color, and were primarily Latina (71%), with smaller proportions identifying as Black (12%), Armenian (12%), and Multiracial (6%). Half of the providers were Spanish speakers.



Demographic Snapshot Providers



16 interviews conducted

14 FCCs

2 FFNs

71% Latina

12% Black

12% Armenian

6% Multiracial



Half of the providers were Spanish speakers

18.3 Average years working in the ECE field

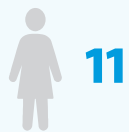
12.8 Average years working with infants and toddlers

When asked what attracted them to the field of ECE, FCC and FFN providers expressed that they had always felt an affinity towards children and enjoyed working with young children in ECE settings. Additionally, operating their own child care business in their homes allowed providers to care for and be present for their children while earning income for their families. Other reasons FCC and FFN providers listed for their participation in the field of ECE included seeing a need for child care in their communities, aspiring to be a business owner, having a passion for teaching dual language learners, and having a commitment to the education of young children.

Center Teachers

We interviewed 12 teachers working at centers. Most teachers were female; only one was male. Half identified as Latino, two as Black, two as White, and one as Asian/Pacific Islander. All of the center teachers' interviews were conducted in English. They had many years of experience in ECE; their average length of time in the ECE field was almost 17 years, and they had worked with infants and toddlers for 7.5 years on average.

Demographic Snapshot Center Teachers



11

All English speakers



1

18.3 Average years in the field

7.5 years of infant and toddler experience

Teachers expressed genuine enthusiasm for and commitment to their profession.

Most of the teachers we interviewed spoke about their love of children, and about the satisfaction of watching children grow and continue to learn about their capabilities. Teachers reported that their aspirations to teach young children started early in life. One shared, "Growing up, I played teacher with my neighbors... teachers would give us handouts that were left over." Another told us, "I had a love for being a



teacher of young children because I had an awesome kindergarten teacher.” Teachers described their sources of inspiration with enthusiasm, and no one named compensation as a motivator, with one teacher commenting, “I don’t do it for the money, I like to work with the children.”

All but three teachers planned to continue working with infants and toddlers, although one said she would not work directly as an infant and toddler teacher but as a college professor, and another expressed concern that she might not have the strength to chase and lift children as she aged. The three teachers who did not plan to continue teaching infants and toddlers shared that 1) the pay was not sustainable, 2) she had outgrown the position, and 3) he would transition to teaching middle school.

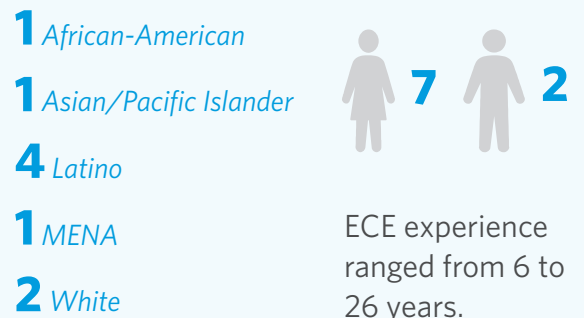
Center Directors

We interviewed 9 directors of ECE centers. Seven were directors at centers that currently offer infant and toddler care, one was working to open an infant classroom in January 2024, and one was the director of a private preschool that offers an infant-toddler parent participation program. One identified as African-American, 1 as Asian/Pacific Islander, 4 as Latino, 1 as Middle Eastern/North African, and 2 as White; two were male and seven were female. All were interviewed in English. The number of years the directors had been in the field ranged from 6 to 26, and half had been in the field for 20 or more years.

Directors expressed a lifelong love of learning, and a commitment to working with young children and helping parents better understand their children’s development.

Many were also committed to giving back to the community. Directors saw their roles as important, not only to the children and families they served, but also as a resource to meet their communities’ needs. The majority of directors (72%) indicated that they planned to stay in the field, and 63% expressed a desire to expand their services so they could support more families in their communities.

Demographic Snapshot Directors



ECE Leaders

The group of ECE leaders we interviewed were employed in a variety of leadership roles within large nonprofits, school districts, county agencies, and local governments. We interviewed 11 ECE leaders from across Los Angeles County, 2 males and nine females. All ECE leaders were interviewed in English. Of the 7 who reported their ethnicity, 1 identified as African-American, 1 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 identified as Indigenous/Native American, 3 identified as Latino, and 1 identified as White. All but one had been in the field of ECE for 12 years or more, and 5 had been in ECE careers spanning 20 to 40 years.



Demographic Snapshot ECE Leaders

1 African-American

1 Asian/Pacific Islander

4 Latino

1 MENA

2 White



ECE experience ranged from 6 to 26 years.

The ECE leaders we interviewed were passionate about the current state of the infant and toddler system of care, and were strongly empathetic about the needs of families in LA County and the needs of the workforce that serves infants and toddlers.

Some of the leaders were in planning positions and had deep programmatic knowledge and experience of the field and its structure. Others, whose roles were more closely connected to the workforce, were uniquely positioned to provide ground-level information, creating opportunities to share data and anecdotes with policymakers and

funders to educate them and inform their decision-making. About half of the ECE leaders we interviewed had worked their way up through the ECE system, while others had transitioned from serving older children. One shared, "I wanted to make a difference with high school children but found that you had to go younger and younger to impact them the most... the formative years are critical." Regardless of the professional paths that had led them to their current roles, all ECE leaders were well versed in infant and toddler development, and were aware of the corresponding need to create infrastructure that appropriately supports infants, toddlers, and their families.





Pressing Challenges

Parents



Parents struggled to find adequate care, or any care at all, for their infants and toddlers.

Typically, parents were confronted with challenges in finding adequate care, including high cost, being placed on long wait lists or turned away, and concerns about safety, such as too-high child-teacher ratios of ten infants per adult. While one-third of parents preferred to stay home or ask a relative to care for their children at home, two-thirds of parents reported varied struggles in finding care outside the home. Only one parent described a smooth experience enrolling their child in a center. Another parent's experience illustrates the untenable dilemmas parents typically face:



It caused more burden on me. I couldn't find anyone and then when I would ask if maybe they were able to help me with CCRC – look, I filled out an application, maybe there's something I'm doing wrong. I'm not asking for free, but I'm asking for assistance because the average I found for childcare per kid was \$1200. It makes no sense for me to work in this county because you get more assistance not working than you do as a working parent. I don't want to leave my job because I have worked since I was thirteen.

Finding child care was just one struggle in the larger context of parents' efforts to pay for basic needs, as recent research has found. In July 2023, RAPID reported that across California, 50% of parents of young children struggled to pay for basic needs like housing, food, utilities, child care, healthcare, or well-being needs, such as mental health services. One parent in that study was quoted as follows: "Reliable, quality, affordable child care (including ideas for what to do when they have mild sicknesses but can't go to school) would relieve major stressors in our family. This would positively impact our work and home lives immensely." (RAPID, 2023, p. 2).

Even among wealthier families, finding high-quality care was a challenge, according to a teacher we interviewed who had worked with affluent families for six years. She observed about the wealthy, sometimes dual-income families with whom she worked, "They're very affluent. They have the money, and they can't find quality child care. They say [to me] please open up some type of program [yourself]. Why isn't there infant care available?"

Case Story:

Parents can't find and can't pay for care.

Like many other parents across California², the parents we spoke with struggled in various ways to care for their children and to find high-quality childcare that was financially within reach. The story of one parent illustrates three important aspects of the childcare struggle – lack of availability, high cost, and confusion.

A steady future. Marla is a Latina raising two daughters in the San Fernando Valley – 2-year-old Emma and 4-year-old Olivia. She sighs with gratitude as she describes how her well-paying job provides good health insurance and summers off for them to spend time together, and has allowed her to buy a home and a new car. In her words, her job has helped her to “lay the foundation down for a steady future,” and she is able to afford ballet classes, gymnastics classes, and learning and socialization experiences for her girls. “Going to a museum, going to the zoo, it’s not always free, and the days that it’s free, it’s not always accessible, right?”

Raising babies and going to school during the pandemic. The three are prosperous now, but just a few years ago, Marla was struggling. Marla attributes their current quality of life to her ability to go to school to get her Master’s degree while working half-time, completing an unpaid internship, and caring for her young children. But her path was a difficult one, and she might not have reached her goals without the support of her mother, who cared for the girls while Marla worked and studied. She used a stipend from the Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) to pay her mother to provide childcare while she attended school, interned, and then rushed off to work for a few hours. Her mother doesn’t drive and requires care herself, so this arrangement was far from ideal.

Strung along. Marla described the amount of time and emotional energy she spent looking for a provider near her campus or home, researching Early Head Start and other programs, and applying for public assistance. She did not qualify for certain benefits, was turned away at multiple sites, and did not feel safe leaving her child in a setting with many other children and few caregivers. Ultimately, she cobbled together care from her mother and from a neighborhood friend. She said, “I had to seek this type of care because I couldn’t afford the other kind of care. ... I tried. I went. I filled out all the paperwork. They strung me along. [For months] they were like, “Oh, we don’t have space, but we’ll let you know in the first week of August. I kept calling like, “Is there space now?” “Oh, yeah, we reviewed your paperwork, and you don’t qualify. You make too much.” I was like, “How do I make too much for you guys, but I don’t make too much for MediCal, [who] says I still qualify for them?””

“I would leave Olivia at my mom’s at 6:30 in the morning and get back to her around 6 in the evening, and I would use my lunch break or in between classes while I was at school to pump and then drop it off in between jobs. If I was closer to home, I would stop by my mom’s. Sometimes I would nurse the baby and then go back to work or to my internship, or wherever I needed to be. By the time I had my second daughter, it was right in the middle of the pandemic, so I was able to stay home a little more. Because of the pandemic, I was able to work from home, but I still had to find childcare. My oldest was still not in school, and we were very scared to put her in school because [everything] was very up in the air.” - Marla (Parent)

² In July 2023, RAPID reported that half of the parents of young children they surveyed across California struggled to pay for basic needs. RAPID Survey Fact Sheet

Family Child Care Homes and Family, Friends, and Neighbors



The top challenges reported by FCCs and FFNs include low wages, limited financial means to hire staff, low subsidy payment rates, lack of benefits, and rising costs in child care.

Low wages were frequently mentioned as a challenge across all types of providers, and this was particularly true for FCC owners. Additionally, providers reported ongoing challenges, including: limited financial stability, which precluded them from hiring additional staff; historically low subsidy payments rates; lack of access to employee benefits such as health insurance and retirement; and the rising cost of providing child care, which leads to tuition increases and places a mental and financial burden on providers. These challenges are discussed in greater detail below.

- ▶ **Finding child care was just one struggle in the larger context of parents' efforts to pay for basic needs, as recent research has found.** FCC owners were vocal about their shared, ongoing experience of earning low wages despite the fact that they provide crucial care and nurturing to young children in Los Angeles County. The rise in cost of living in the county and across the state has made it difficult for FCC providers in particular to make enough profit to earn a worthy livable wage. This finding affirms the data from a study at the University of California, Berkeley, which found that small FCCs have a median annual income of \$16,200 to \$30,000 (Center for the Study of Child

Care Employment, 2022), making them the lowest-paid providers in the ECE sector in California. Providers reported that their stark financial situation is further exacerbated by low subsidy payment rates, which do not fully cover the true cost of providing care to young children. In this regard, one FCC owner explained that she earns roughly \$250 a week per child, and stated that *“at this payment rate I can't make a profit.”* Additionally, when it comes to providing infant care, providers indicated that subsidy payments often do not cover overtime hours. One provider explained, *“Sometimes babies are here 10 to 12 hours. We don't get paid beyond 40 hours, [we're] working for free after that. Some parents are approved for 30 hours of care, but they can request overtime, but we get paid the same, at most \$20 for 10 to 20 hours more.”* The combination of low wages and low subsidy rates makes it difficult for providers to invest in their business. For example, several providers mentioned that due to limited financial means, they are not able to purchase high-quality equipment for infants and toddlers or expand their homes to provide care for more young children. As one provider explained, *“We can't invest in [our business] and provide better [equipment] because we don't have the money. There are many educational games [we could purchase], but those cost like \$100.”*



PROVIDER VOICES

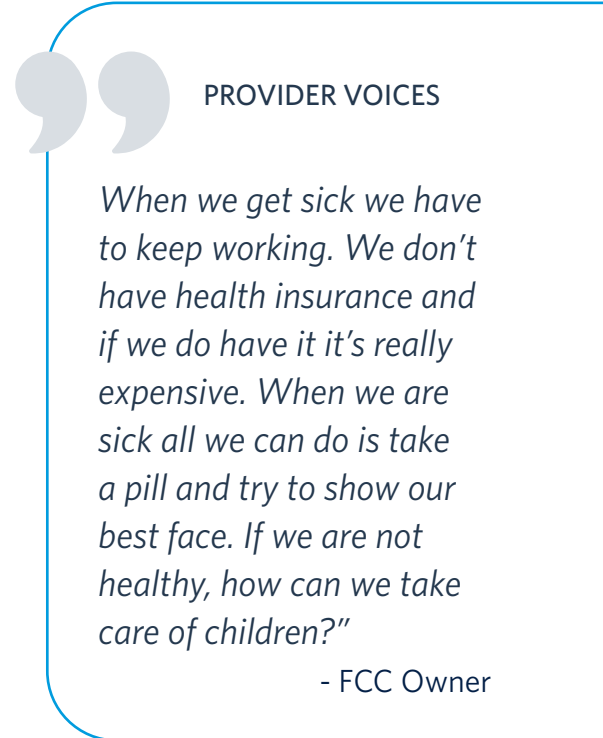
We can't invest in [our business] and provide better things because we don't have the money.”

- FCC Owner



▶ **Inability to hire additional staff due to limited funding and low wages.** Another common challenge reported by providers was their inability to hire staff, assistants, or aides to support their child care programs, due to low wages, limited funding, and lack of profits. Hiring additional teachers comes at a great financial cost for FCCs; some owners can only afford to hire part-time support, or must limit the number of children they can serve. As one FCC owner explained, *“I can’t take additional children even if parents need the care because I don’t have an aide.”* Other FCC owners were able to afford additional staff, but reported that they could only afford to pay their teacher assistants slightly above California’s minimum wage; several providers stated that they paid their additional teachers between \$16.50 to \$17.00 per hour. A number of providers explained that if they had access to additional funding or income, they would hire additional staff to strengthen their programming and gain much-needed support. One FCC owner shared that if she could afford an assistant, she would spend her additional time on lesson planning and ensuring that her educational activities were in greater alignment with the needs of the children in her program.

▶ **Lack of access to employee benefits.** Another struggle that was elevated across several conversations with FCC owners was their lack of access to benefits, including high-quality health insurance, retirement, vacation time, and paid sick days. The lack of vital benefits creates additional worry and stress for FCC owners, who already carry a heavy load and struggle to earn livable wages. For example, one FCC owner who’s been in the ECE field for two decades explained, *“When we get sick, we have to keep working. We don’t have health insurance and if we do have it it’s really expensive. When we are sick, all we can do is take a pill and try to show our best face. If we are not healthy, how can we take care of children?”* Another provider shared, *“Health care is really important and being able to have time off and we don’t get those [benefits].”* Another provider explained that after twenty years working as a child care provider, she does not have retirement benefits. She stated, *“We don’t have benefits. Other workers have retirement benefits. We do so much work so that other people can be in the workforce, and we have nothing. If we don’t save money [we don’t have funds to cover additional costs].”*



PROVIDER VOICES

When we get sick we have to keep working. We don’t have health insurance and if we do have it it’s really expensive. When we are sick all we can do is take a pill and try to show our best face. If we are not healthy, how can we take care of children?”

- FCC Owner

▶ **Rising costs of child care.** Despite the increasing costs of running an FCC, several providers noted that they worry about increasing their rates, because the concurrent rise in the cost of living means that working families will not be able to afford child care costs. One FCC owner emphasized that if she increases her child care rates, she risks losing families. As a result, she is willing to keep her current rates, even though she is



only making a slim profit. Another FCC owner who runs her program from her small apartment explained that the families she serves are primarily employed in the service industry and cannot afford to pay for child care costs, so she resorts to providing care without payment until families are able to qualify for subsidized child care programs, which can take anywhere from one to two weeks. Additionally, the rising costs of care also pressure families to transition their children to more affordable care options, such as center-based care or free programs provided by local school districts, and this ultimately impacts the long-term financial stability of FCC providers.

Case Story: A Need to Access High-Quality Health Insurance.

Adriana is a Latina Family Child Care (FCC) provider in Southeast Los Angeles, with over two decades of experience in early care and education. Through her small business, Adriana cares for up to fourteen children. She also supports their families by connecting them to community resources, and by providing parent education as well as emotional support. While Adriana's small business serves as a beacon of care and stability for families and young children in Maywood, she lacks access to job-based health care coverage, impacting her overall health and her emotional and mental well-being. Adriana represents one of many immigrant women working as FCC providers in Los Angeles County and across the state, who lack access to health insurance despite providing critical services to working families and their young children. In fact, small business owners like Adriana "are more likely to have insurance through Covered California or Medi-Cal, or to be uninsured," resulting in providers "delaying or not getting the care they need often due to affordability concerns" (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2023). Adriana's experience as an immigrant woman of color and dedicated ECE provider highlights the continued need to invest in the long-term health care and wellbeing of FCC providers.

ECE as a career in the United States. In her home country, Adriana gained a higher education degree and devoted herself to studying and preparing academically to teach university-level courses. Throughout her career in her native country, Adriana loved and was committed to teaching and learning about early childhood development. When she migrated to Los Angeles and gave birth to her son, she leaned into her prior professional and academic experiences and decided to open a child care small business. She shared in an interview, *"I have always loved being a teacher, and I love kids, but what attracted me to [the field of ECE] is that I had my son who had just been born and decided to start a daycare. That way I could provide care for my son and other children."* Adriana's experience mirrors the realities of many FCC providers in our study, who saw establishing an FCC as a pathway that enabled them to care for their own children, follow their passions, and achieve their academic goals, all while earning income for their families.

A need for affordable health care coverage emerges. One of the greatest challenges Adriana has faced in her career as an FCC provider is accessing affordable or low-cost health care insurance, particularly because she relies on subsidy payments as her primary source of income. Adriana has had difficulty affording out-of-pocket health care costs, and often prioritizes business and monthly living expenses

before covering health care costs. Like many FCC providers in our study, Adriana also lacks access to paid sick leave benefits, which forces her to continue working even when she doesn't feel physically well. Describing this harsh reality, Adriana explained, "As providers, we do not have health insurance and we have to find ways to pay for our health care. Our pay is very low and that is challenging because we cannot afford health insurance or even our housing or monthly bills...When you are sick you have to keep working because we do not have health insurance. If we do have health insurance, it's too expensive so all we can do is take a pill and show our best face."

OUR PAY IS VERY LOW AND THAT IS CHALLENGING BECAUSE WE CANNOT AFFORD HEALTH INSURANCE OR EVEN OUR HOUSING OR MONTHLY BILLS."

Adriana's story aligns with the grim realities of many FCC providers in California. A statewide study of health care affordability for over 1,000 California home-based providers found that the primary reasons for FCC providers remaining uninsured included high monthly premiums (61%) and high out-of-pocket costs (37%) (David Binder Research and the California Health Care Foundation, 2022, as cited in UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2023). The same study also found that many providers (60%) had delayed accessing the care they needed in the last 12 months because they could not afford out-of-pocket costs (David Binder Research and the California Health Care Foundation, 2022, as cited in UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2023).

As Adriana continues to perform the physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing work of providing care for young children, particularly as ECE recovers from the lasting impacts of COVID-19, access to affordable health coverage will become critical for her wellbeing and for the growth and stability of the children under her care. Adriana wondered, "If we as providers are not healthy, how can we take care of children?"



How can ECE leaders and decision-makers support ECE providers?

Adriana's experience reveals two urgent priorities for ECE leaders and decision makers. Providing support for these efforts will help to ensure that FCC providers have access to equitable and affordable health care coverage.

Advocate for efforts to provide health care assistance or coverage for ECE providers. Adriana was very vocal about the need for ECE leaders to advocate for increased health care assistance and coverage efforts for providers, such as the CCPU Health Care Fund. In January of 2023, FCC providers became eligible to apply for the Child Care Providers United California Workers (CCPU) Health Care Fund. Through this fund, CCPU will provide \$100 million annually for eligible providers to reduce or eliminate health care costs. While this is not full health care coverage, it is a reimbursement plan that works with providers' current medical insurance plans to support

out-of-pocket health expenses. The Health Care Fund is an inspiring example of the efforts that are making strides in improving health care access for providers, and ECE leaders have a responsibility to advocate and highlight the continued need for these types of investments.

Increase subsidy payment rates. In order for FCC providers to afford high-quality health care coverage, they need to earn higher wages that recognize their experience and the true cost of living in Los Angeles County. Providers like Adriana who rely on subsidy payment rates are struggling to keep up with the high cost of living and to cover basic living expenses. Increasing subsidy rates would not only support providers' ability to access health care, but would also allow them to gain a measure of financial stability.



Health Care Fund:

In January of 2023, FCC providers became eligible to apply for the Child Care Providers United California Workers (CCPU) Health Care Fund. CCPU won \$100 million annually for eligible providers to reduce or eliminate health care costs. Through the CCPU Health Care Fund, providers can access the following benefits:

- Reimbursement of health plan out-of-pocket expenses, up to \$8,750 per year
- Reimbursement of insurance premium cost on qualified health plans
- Special benefits for Medi-Cal enrollees
- Special benefits for providers covered under an employer or other group health insurance plan

Source: <https://www.ccpuhealth.org/overview/>

Center Teachers



The challenges most commonly named by teachers at center-based sites were collaboration with parents, lack of specialized training for working with infants and toddlers, and understaffing or lack of other well-trained teachers to help them in the classroom.

Teachers valued their collaborations with parents and mentioned the importance of maintaining good relationships with parents, providing them with good customer service, and creating open communication so that parents could trust them with their children. However, teachers also faced frustration and the need to educate parents on best practices for childhood development. For example, one teacher related that parents can be defensive about their children's needs, including evidence of developmental delays, and often resist specialized support. She explained that those who accept the support are subsequently grateful for it, but that teachers have to work to educate and persuade them first. Another teacher explained that although it is important for children to retain their home language, *"Parents insist that they be exposed to English because they fear their child will be left behind and that they'll be made fun of."*



Several teachers described the challenges posed by receiving insufficient training to work with toddlers and infants. Typically, in ECE trainings, the needs of preschoolers are prioritized. The following comments from teachers illustrate this challenge.

I was excited the first time I got to go to a so-called infant/toddler training, but they focused only on toddlers and went straight to preschool. I would raise my hand to say you skipped the infants!

I took [a course] on special education for preschoolers, but I was able to translate some of it to infants and toddlers.

Combining age categories across infants and toddlers, they don't talk about the infants, they go straight to toddlers. I would like for trainings to focus on infants exclusively because usually, you get 10 minutes on infants, and the rest on toddlers. Even when they say infants, they mean young toddlers.

Some teachers spoke about the lack of well-qualified teachers to help them in the classroom, and said that this understaffing leads to teachers being overworked and overwhelmed. In addition to this sense of overwhelm, teachers described many more challenges, including disagreements with other teachers about approaches to child development, low wages, lack of resources, COVID's impact on children's development, unrealistic funder expectations, need for hands-on trainings, lack of emotional support for teachers, difficulty of the training path for teachers, neglect of their own physical health, and inconsistent child attendance. The following description from a teacher provides a window into a typical morning; it paints a picture of the multitude of challenges teachers face and conveys the overwhelming nature of working in an infant-toddler classroom.

We're expected to do so much by so many people. We're being pulled in so many different directions and not given a lot of time. We're asked to do a lot of documentation -- speech referrals, we need to take attendance, and if someone is absent, we need to call and find out why. If they were absent more than 3 days, I have to secure a doctor's note, or I have to get a COVID test, and they want it done at a certain time, because the office needs to know who's absent and who's not and then the reason. We're expected to do that within 30 minutes of the students coming into the classroom. They get fed in the classroom as well. So, we also have to set food out for them and talk to them while they're eating. And then, I also have to fill out the sheet that the government wants, because they have a free lunch, and then I'm also expected to carry out the lesson plan. It is a lot to do in a short amount of time. I feel that there should not be anything more important than talking to each child and interacting with each child. That is what they're there for. That's what I'm there for. But I feel like, because I'm forced to be a secretary at the same time, I have to divide my time, and I find it to be unfair for them.



It is important to highlight the fact that low wages were not the most frequently cited challenge among teachers, despite well-documented disparities in ECE teachers' compensation. One teacher who did mention this challenge gives us a sense of her loyalty to the profession:

I came from working at a restaurant and I took a pay cut, and it's crazy for me because you go to school and instead of making more money, you get a pay cut. It wasn't until I got a third raise that I [stopped] considering going to Starbucks or In-N-Out. I talked to my director about it, and she gave me a raise and talked about my future here. For a minute there, I was thinking of leaving the position because you need to pay bills.

Center Directors



The most pressing challenges reported by center directors were related to funding, staffing shortages, staff qualifications, and negative impacts on their own well-being.

Infant and toddler providers do not have access to sufficient funding to run their programs.

Most center directors indicated that they plan to stay in business and that they are interested in serving more infants and toddlers. However, a majority said that they would need additional funding to expand their business. For example, numerous structural and physical modifications often have to be made to the facility to meet licensing requirements to serve infants and toddlers. Directors talked about needing space for cribs, changing tables, and other age-appropriate furniture, as well as for smaller toilets, which can involve requesting approval from the city. Another option is to find a new child care space rather than modifying an existing space, but acceptable spaces are expensive, especially in the Los Angeles area. Expansion also requires additional funding to hire more teachers, since the child-teacher ratios are lower in infant and toddler classrooms (more adults are required to supervise younger children). Finally, funding limitations frequently impact recruitment because prospective staff can often make a higher salary working in other sectors, such as the service industry.



PROVIDER VOICES

If they can find another organization that pays 50 cents more, they will decline our employment offer."

- Center Director

Recruiting qualified staff was an ongoing challenge for most of the directors we interviewed. Half of the directors felt that it had been much harder to recruit since the COVID-19 pandemic, and they reported that many applicants were requesting higher salaries than they had been before the pandemic. Most directors said that it was difficult for them to find qualified infant and toddler teachers. Additionally, directors indicated that teachers who need or want to transition from preschool classrooms to infant and toddler classrooms don't



always have the necessary education or experience. One director noted that because they run Early Head Start programs, their teachers are required to have a degree; however, that requirement significantly shrinks the hiring pool. The same director shared that, last year, they were only able to open 5 of their 10 centers due to the teacher shortage. Another director shared that they had been to 30 job fairs in the last six months, which yielded 200 interested candidates, of which they were only able to employ 10 because the rest didn't meet the education requirements.

Directors' responses to questions about staff retention were mixed. Some directors shared that they were able to retain staff by offering incentives such as staff development and retention bonuses. However, one director shared that while they were able to offer bonuses last year, they did not expect to be able to sustain that practice. Other directors said that they often have

workers leave due to low pay or high workload. One called the staffing process a "revolving door," and another expressed frustration because staff stay long enough to get trained and then leave to work in school districts, where they can get higher salaries and better benefits.

There is a need for more training and professional development specifically focused on the care and education of infants and toddlers. Several directors indicated that they are aware that staff need more training to be adequately prepared to care for infants and toddlers; however, they don't know where to access that type of training, or find it difficult to send staff to training due to staffing shortages and the need to maintain required ratios in the classrooms. Because many of the directors oversee sites that are converting preschool classrooms to infant and toddler classrooms, their teachers are used to interacting with older children rather than infants and toddlers. Therefore, more exposure is needed to help teachers feel prepared to move into infant and toddler classrooms. In

particular, staff need professional development focused on topics such as infant and toddler development, early identification, developmentally appropriate practices, parent engagement, and managing challenging behaviors.

Managing staffing challenges may negatively impact director well-being. Half of the directors indicated that they are constantly worried about personnel issues, including turnover and staff morale. One said that she is always worried that if staff get offered more money, they will move to another program. Another said, "Sometimes I can't sleep at night." Yet



PROVIDER VOICES

We could do it [expand services] because we have classrooms, but we don't have staffing. I've been having trouble hiring because of the low salary. Those of us working here are here because of our love of the work, not the pay."

- Center Director



PROVIDER VOICES

I don't like disappointing people. Most negative things that happen, I take personally because I'm the captain of the ship. I probably shouldn't, but I do."

- Center Director



another said that when someone calls in sick, it causes stress because there is also a shortage of substitute teachers, and moving staff from one classroom to another to try to fill the gaps causes disruptions in both classrooms. Understandably, directors find it very stressful to wonder if they will have to close a classroom because not enough teachers are available. Another director shared that she runs a program at a church and she feels pressure to turn a profit. She went on to say, “From a business standpoint, I’m feeling the same way I did when I reopened after COVID. If I can break even, I’ll consider it a success.”

Case Story: The weight of a community on her shoulders.

Kathy’s passion for the children and families she serves as a Center Director fuel her continued striving to keep her ECE program open, but stressful challenges that threaten her program are compromising her mental health.

A nontraditional path to a meaningful career. Kathy is the ECE Director of a large, well-known organization that runs Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Only a few years ago, she was a registered dietician with the organization. But surrounded by children every day, she realized she wanted to serve them more comprehensively, which led her to pursue a career in ECE. Now, Kathy told us, she loves children and is deeply committed to making sure they have access to “all the services they deserve and maybe wouldn’t have received otherwise, if they didn’t come to us.” The EHS programs that Kathy oversees serve nearly 300 infants and toddlers. Based on a community needs assessment and the recent movement of 4-year-olds out of her programs and into transitional kindergarten (TK), Kathy’s agency has had to convert Head Start spaces to EHS spaces, but her agency hasn’t been able to hire nearly enough teachers to open the classrooms they need to serve their families, leaving many infants and toddlers without care.

Is a “livable wage” enough? Kathy’s agency offers an above-average salary for infant and toddler teachers, along with a robust benefits package that includes health, vision, dental, long-term care, 6% employer contribution to 401k, illness days, and vacation days. The agency also offers ample professional development opportunities to ensure that their staff can meet the annual permit requirement for professional development hours. Even with these numerous advantages, Kathy still struggles to retain teachers. She believes that to attract and keep teachers in her program, their compensation needs to be higher than the current \$25 hourly rate, which some consider to be a livable wage.

Making difficult decisions to keep programs open. To cover the increasing cost of providing infant and toddler care, Kathy’s agency has had to make difficult business decisions in the last year, including reducing the number of families they serve and closing their central kitchen. As a result of the national workforce crisis in early childcare and education, specifically in infant and toddler care, the Office of Head Start allowed grantees to reduce enrollment targets in order to increase teacher salaries. This has meant fewer babies and toddlers served, with a still-insufficient increase in teacher salaries. Kathy anticipates that more changes like these will need to be made to accommodate rising operational costs.



Their problems are her problems. Every day, Kathy worries about the wellbeing of the teachers in her center, about the needs of the families in her program, about having to lower the quality of the care that her babies and toddlers receive with so few teachers on staff, and about whether she will need to turn families away. “It’s very stressful to wonder if you’re going to have to close a classroom because you don’t have enough teachers available to meet ratio,” she told us. She has difficulty maintaining consistency of care when she has to find substitutes or move staff from one classroom to another, which happens frequently. Every day, she has to solve problems for her teachers and families, in order to benefit the children in her center’s community. It’s not clear whether Kathy will be able to continue managing all these challenges and still care for her own wellbeing.

ECE Leaders



Challenges consistently noted by ECE leaders included the high costs associated with providing infant-toddler care, the lack of qualified staff, and a general lack of understanding about the needs of families seeking care for their infants and toddlers.

Our interviews with ECE leaders allowed us to take a broader view of the infant and toddler system of care, given the wide landscapes of their leadership positions. Many of their insights aligned with the experiences of participants involved in the day-to-day work of caring for infants and toddlers. However, several leaders asserted that it was difficult for them to accurately assess the state of the field in the aftermath of the pandemic, because the field was already in crisis prior to the pandemic. One leader said that, although needs assessment data indicates that the number of infant and toddler spaces has remained stable over the last several years, this masks the far more unstable reality of the situation, in which some providers have been forced to close and other new providers have opened or recently started serving infants and toddlers. Furthermore, many leaders were concerned about what would happen when COVID-related funding expired.

Note: After our interviews concluded, on September 30, 2023, the \$37 billion in child-care pandemic relief from the federal government expired. Early care and education providers across the nation had been using those stabilization funds to avoid closures by sustaining and supplementing staff salaries and purchasing supplies and materials. During the pandemic, parent fees were also waived. The 2023-24 California State Budget provides up to \$2.83 billion in one-time funds for child care reimbursement rates and commits to continuing the work to move California to a single-rate reimbursement structure using an alternative methodology. This funding also includes \$78 million for permanent family fee reform, which means that families below 75% of the state median income (SMI) will no longer pay a fee for subsidized child care. Analysts with the California Budget & Policy Center point out that saving money on parent fees will support parents with paying for basic needs such as food, rent, and utilities.



PROVIDER VOICES

It’s not demand that’s the problem, they have wait lists. Hiring, staffing, morale are the problems.”

- ECE Leader



Providing infant and toddler care is often cost-prohibitive.

Several ECE leaders acknowledged that following the pandemic, the cost of living and cost of care have increased, making it difficult for providers to offer infant and toddler care in communities where it is desperately needed. Furthermore, when asked how recent changes in the ECE system impacted the business viability of FCCs and centers serving infants and toddlers, the most common response was that it is much more expensive to provide infant and toddler care than preschool services. Historically, many programs have been able to balance the expenses of their infant and toddler slots against the lower costs associated with their preschool slots. However, as one ECE leader noted, “The exodus of preschoolers to TK makes it more difficult to make ends meet and have sufficient funding across programs.” Additionally, an executive from a large nonprofit noted that they have to rely on fundraising to supplement their infant and toddler program, indicating that they rely on \$1 million in fundraising just to “keep the lights on and pay for basics.” Others noted that serving infants and toddlers requires more staff to serve fewer children. Per California Community Care Licensing (CCLD), the ratio for infants (0-18 months) is 1 adult per 3 infants, and the ratio for toddlers (18-36 months) is 1:4. In contrast, the ratio for preschoolers (36 months to kindergarten enrollment) is typically 1:8. When asked what accounted for the changes in the availability of infant and toddler care over the last two years, one of the factors most frequently named by ECE leaders was the high expense related to programs’ transition from serving preschool-age children to serving infants and toddlers. The cost of care is directly related to ratios, which are in turn connected to availability of spaces.

There is a shortage of qualified infant and toddler teachers. Given the low child-to-teacher ratios required in infant and toddler classrooms, there is a significant need to recruit teachers who have the education and experience necessary to run those classrooms. A majority of the ECE leaders we spoke with listed staffing as one of the top problems within the infant and toddler system of care, and many characterized infant and toddler care as a highly specialized field that requires a certain passion, temperament, and training. Several leaders noted that not all ECE teachers are willing to work with infants and toddlers. Furthermore, those that are willing need additional training, educational units, and/or professional development to be prepared to transition from a preschool classroom to an infant or toddler classroom. This was often cited as a persistent area of challenge for providers who are converting Head Start classrooms to EHS classrooms; providers haven’t been able to recruit and re-train the workforce for all of the converted classrooms. One leader shared that in a provider focus group recently conducted by her organization, a majority of participants said that they would need more professional development to feel comfortable serving infants and toddlers.

Fewer qualified teachers means fewer spaces for infants and toddlers. More than half of the ECE leaders we spoke with mentioned that they have been in contact with providers who



PROVIDER VOICES

The State is advocating for low teacher-child ratios, but if you can only serve three or four infants, how are you going to make it financially? It’s more profitable to care for older children.”

- ECE Leader



are not able to open infant and toddler classrooms because they don't have qualified teachers. One leader shared that many centers are operating with reduced spaces and can't even serve their licensed capacity, not because they don't want to serve infants and toddlers, but because there are not enough staff to run the program. Lack of qualified staff has also led centers that are open to reduce their hours, which can have a significant impact on parents who need access to care that extends late enough in the day to accommodate their work hours. Finally, ECE leaders pointed out that qualified teachers are being recruited out of infant and toddler classrooms into TK positions, which pay more and often offer benefits.

Providers need business supports to grow and maintain their programs. ECE leaders underscored the need to help providers, especially Family Child Care owners, develop strong business practices, and to connect these providers to resources that could reduce some of the stress of running a small business. For example, FCC programs could benefit from support with enrollment, advertising, and grant writing. One leader noted that larger, more well-known providers usually struggle with enrollment less than smaller FCCs with no marketing budget.

There is a lack of understanding about the important role of infant and toddler care in the context of the community and society. ECE leaders were quick to point out that infant and toddler providers offer an essential service to families and the community at large. Unfortunately, ECE leaders reminded us that many people do not have a clear understanding of infant and toddler development; they still think of infant and toddler care, especially in an FCC setting, as babysitting.



PROVIDER VOICES

Not all providers have in-house technical expertise to put together competitive proposals. This furthers the gap and inequities. Even if they have the expertise, they don't have the time."

- ECE Leader



Resources Needed

Parents



The primary needs of parents are safe, dependable, and affordable care, offered during extended and flexible hours.

Parents’ top three needs related to infant and toddler care were: 1) safety for their children, including physical and emotional safety; 2) dependability of care, including extended hours to accommodate working parents; and 3) affordability. Parents stressed how important it was for them to trust their children’s caregivers, because of the vulnerability of their babies and toddlers. Since their very young children were unable to speak or protect themselves, parents needed assurance that caregivers would be capable, compassionate, and trustworthy. One parent told us, *“I did look at care.com, but I didn’t feel comfortable because I didn’t know the [providers] and people who I felt were qualified were really expensive. So, there’s no point in me working if I am going to leave [all my pay for care]. It didn’t make sense.”* Other needs expressed by parents included individualized, caring attention, such as attending to children’s special needs; availability of spaces; teachers’ qualifications, qualities, and ways of interacting with children; programs’ proximity to work or home; programs’ focus or curriculum, including cognitive development, routines, play, classroom resources, and environment; state licensure; cultural diversity; and access to nutritious food.

Teachers corroborated this feedback from parents when we asked them what parents typically looked for in a care setting. Teachers mentioned safety as parents’ top priority, followed by compassionate caregivers operating in a loving, calm, welcoming environment; opportunities for their children to socialize; and good communication with the provider.

Parents prioritized stimuli for learning in searching for infant and toddler care. When we asked parents to describe their experiences in searching for a provider, their responses mirrored those they gave about their families’ needs, and they consistently named the physical and emotional safety of their children. Another important aspect of care for their infants and toddlers was the focus of the program. Parents spoke about the need for an educational focus and other stimuli for children (e.g., outdoor play, routines, and emotional development). The children of most of the parents we interviewed were cared for by relatives and friends, and it makes sense that these parents expressed a preference for a more structured, cognitively and socially stimulating environment; additionally, however, half of the parents with children in center-based care also described looking for a stimulating learning environment in their search for care. One parent’s input captured several of these priorities: *“Ideally, they’d have good hours, a lot of play space for running around outside and inside, good communication with parents, checking in throughout the day, a report of what kids did during the day, lots of classroom resources, books, toys, love for kids, [and an] energetic, engaged, happy, child-friendly disposition.”*

Parents cited many limitations of their child care programs. Parents who cared for their children at home, or whose friends or relatives did so, worried that there were not enough



activities in their children's day. This was especially true regarding opportunities for social interaction. They pointed to small spaces with insufficient resources as limitations of their infant and toddler care, and were interested in more structured, skill-building, and academically focused activities, such as arts and crafts, math, and songs. Regardless of their children's care type, parents also named limitations, which included low-quality interactions with children by caregivers, limited communication from providers, not enough access to home-cooked meals or healthier meals, inconvenient locations, inadequate hand-washing routines, teacher turnover, and strict illness policies.

Family Child Care Homes and Family, Friends, and Neighbors



The primary resources needed by FCCs and FFNs were access to high-quality professional development opportunities, access to developmentally appropriate equipment, increase in subsidized payment rates, and ability to serve more children.

Access to high-quality professional development opportunities. Providers reported needing ongoing access to high-quality professional development opportunities. Professional development topics that were prioritized by providers included the following:

- Child development
- Caring for non-verbal children
- Cooking classes
- How to introduce new foods to young children
- Developmentally appropriate discipline practices
- Supporting children with autism / special needs
- Safe sleeping for infants
- CPR

One provider also expressed a need for trainings to be linguistically accessible to providers. She suggested increasing the number of professional development opportunities available in Spanish, and felt that offering more professional development opportunities in person would be helpful and more engaging.

Business operations support. Providers emphasized the need for support around business operations, including recruitment and outreach to potential families, learning how to access business insurance, and support with reviewing and obtaining refresher training on FCC provider regulations.

Access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate equipment and materials.

Providers mentioned that they needed financial support for, or increased access to, learning materials that would be low-cost and high-quality. These materials included toys, equipment, cribs, didactic learning materials, and academic materials for infants and toddlers.

Ability to serve more children. Given the shift to universal transitional kindergarten (UTK), a number of providers voiced a need to be able to serve more infants and toddlers. One provider explicitly requested greater support from California licensing so that she could increase infant



slots in her program. She explained, “We have a huge infant waiting list and with the four infants that we have right now we can’t survive [financially, as a business]. We need to increase the capacity to serve infants who are 6 or 8 months so that we can balance our finances.”

Center Teachers

Teachers need an entire spectrum of trainings focused on infants and toddlers. Although teachers at center-based sites had typically participated in trainings on topics such as social-emotional development, language and literacy development, and others, they expressed that trainings focused on the needs of infants and toddlers were insufficient, and that trainings typically prioritized preschoolers’ needs. When we asked specifically about the professional development topics in which they needed training, teachers commonly named age-appropriate activities, interactions, and supports; social-emotional development, including self-regulation; language and literacy development; and brain development. Additional topics that were called out by individuals were detection of developmental delays, advocacy, conscious discipline, STEAM, motor skills development, onboarding training for teachers, play therapy-oriented supports like Whole Brain Child, trauma-informed care, water play, specific curricula, working with the LGBTQ community, and cultural awareness.

Center Directors

Centers need additional funding to be adequately prepared to serve infants and toddlers. When center directors were asked what resources or supports they need, the most common response was funding, both to maintain current services and to expand services. One director succinctly responded, “Obviously, more money.” Responses related to funding were usually tied to teacher compensation, although many directors noted that expansion would also require additional funding to hire more teachers, since the child-teacher ratios are lower in infant and toddler classrooms. Directors also mentioned the many upfront expenses related to establishing infant and toddler care, including facilities modifications, furniture, plumbing, and creating outdoor play spaces. A common response among directors was that they would need funding for both indoor and outdoor renovations in order to meet the licensing requirements to serve infants and toddlers.



PROVIDER VOICES

Infant and toddler teachers are definitely not paid enough for the amount of expertise they’re required to have and the amount of work they’re required to do.”

- Center Director

Better coordination and alignment is needed with Institutes of Higher Education. Center directors noted a disconnect between the ways in which students are being prepared by higher education programs and the qualifications actually required to be an infant-toddler



teacher. Child development coursework is often misaligned with the qualifications for permits, and multiple directors reported that they had to turn away many applicants who were interested in applying for permits, because they were missing core courses.

CCLD requires staff to check (and document) sleeping infants every 15 minutes for signs of distress or overheating including: labored breathing, flushed skin color, increased body temperature, restlessness, or any other signs of distress.

Additional professional development is needed, both to prepare teachers to care for and educate infants and toddlers, and to keep their knowledge and skills current. Center directors mirrored the input we received from teachers regarding the need for robust training and professional development, and specifically for training and development focusing on infants and toddlers.

Licensing requirements need to be updated to better support providers who are interested in serving infants and toddlers. Challenges related to licensing came up in conversations with several ECE directors. Specific challenges included outdoor space requirements, long delays to receive licenses, and infant/toddler-specific requirements such as a safe sleeping environment. Directors who have been converting Head Start classrooms to Early Head Start classrooms in order to serve infants and toddlers expressed frustration about the time it takes to get a new license. One director said, *“Planning ahead doesn’t always prevent delays. I submitted my application in February, it’s July and I’m still waiting.”*

ECE Leaders



Early care and education providers need additional funding for multiple purposes:

- ▶ **Funding to offer competitive salary packages to infant and toddler teachers.** ECE leaders consistently said that increased funding is needed to ensure that the workforce receives a living and worthy wage. One leader noted, *“If we don’t pay people for the true cost of care and quality, the system will collapse and children will get hurt.”* Another observed, *“People who might otherwise go into the industry might not choose childcare because it’s not fiscally viable.”* Ideally, compensation packages should include benefits such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement plans.
- ▶ **Funding for capital costs and other costs associated with the transition from serving preschoolers to serving infants and toddlers.** Although some facilities improvement funds have been available over the last several years, there is still a significant need for additional funding that will cover renovations and upgrades to existing facilities, as well as funding for new facilities serving infants and toddlers. In addition, funds are needed to purchase furniture and developmentally appropriate classroom materials.

- ▶ **Funding for professional development to ensure that teachers are well prepared to serve infants and toddlers.** Converting preschool spaces to infant and toddler spaces, or expanding services to serve younger children, requires retraining staff so that they feel prepared and confident to care for infants and toddlers. This includes professional development on topics such as infant and toddler development, early identification of developmental delays or concerns, and family engagement.
- ▶ **Funding for business development, fundraising, marketing, and grant-writing support.** In order to expand and sustain services for infants and toddlers, providers, especially home-based providers, need considerable, ongoing business operations support. This might include connecting providers to their fellow providers and business owners in their community, building a network of community support. Providers should also be alerted to funding opportunities, trainings, and sources of technical assistance around business operations.
- ▶ **Funding for Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) Care.** The importance of FFNs in the system of care for infants and toddlers came up repeatedly, and must not be understated. One ECE leader shared, *“We haven’t invested fully the way we need to in FFNs as a critical part of the system.”* A recent landscape analysis by the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles revealed that 49% of FFN providers plan to leave the field in the next 5 years. Furthermore, 92% stated that they do not engage in any formal professional development programs (CCALA, 2023).
- ▶ **Funding for business development, fundraising, marketing, and grant-writing support.** In order to expand and sustain services for infants and toddlers, providers, especially home-based providers, need considerable, ongoing business operations support. This might include connecting providers to their fellow providers and business owners in their community, building a network of community support. Providers should also be alerted to funding opportunities, trainings, and sources of technical assistance around business operations.





Recommendations from Participants

We asked interviewees what recommendations they would share with decision makers, based on their perspectives as parents, teachers, providers, and leaders. Consistently, all groups called for improvement in the funding of the system, including better wages and working conditions, and for increased awareness of the importance of infants' and toddlers' development and of their caregivers' work. The following sections summarize the recommendations provided by each participant type.

Parents

Parents most frequently recommended increased financial and workforce supports, and also suggested the development of readily available sources of information to help them make informed childcare choices and build their knowledge of their children's development and needs. They had many recommendations for ECE decision makers and advocates, including:

- ▶ Increase provider salaries and offer incentives to attract them to the field.
- ▶ Provide support for parents facing unrealistically high child care costs, which can equal or exceed monthly rent payments. Address income eligibility rules to support parents who are not eligible for subsidies but still find payments burdensome.
- ▶ Encourage ECE sites to hire support staff, including case managers, parent navigators, and nurses.
- ▶ Improve parents' access to information about providers; create a central database where parents can find comprehensive information about all licensed childcare sites in their area, including eligibility, costs, available subsidies, and steps to enroll.
- ▶ Provide information to parents about child development, so that parents can understand what to expect and how to support their children's needs.
- ▶ Increase availability of care, especially in high-need areas, and provide extended care hours for parents who work full-time or during non-traditional hours.
- ▶ Provide specialized training for providers serving infants and toddlers, and invest in the quality of FFN care by offering relevant trainings (e.g., CPR or health and safety modules).
- ▶ Improve ECE curriculum and activities; for example, ensure an age-appropriate balance between play and academics, and provide exposure to diverse cultures, backgrounds, and needs.
- ▶ Provide mental health and career supports for parents, including additional days off to care for young children. Infants and toddlers frequently contract common illnesses like cold or flu and must stay home from daycare, which means parents (often, mothers) are forced to miss work.



MINDSET CHECK

How do these recommendations resonate with you?

What is your image of the parents who made these recommendations?

How well do you understand their struggle and needs?

What do you expect of them, as participants in the LA County infant and toddler system of care?

Family Child Care Homes and Family, Friends, and Neighbors

The FCC and FFN providers we interviewed provided recommendations for increased wages and financial support for providers, and for increased training, education, and ongoing learning for all participants in the ECE system. These providers offered the following recommendations to ECE leaders and decision makers:

- ▶ Increase wages and subsidy payment rates, and provide financial support to ECE providers. Guarantee providers' access to benefits like health insurance and retirement.
- ▶ Create opportunities for decision makers to visit and learn about the daily realities of FCC and FFN providers.
- ▶ Increase access to ongoing education, training, and professional development for providers and parents.
- ▶ Provide concrete supports related to business operations, including technical assistance and trainings, to ensure FCCs are financially stable in the long term.

Center Teachers

Teachers called for higher awareness of the existing conditions in the infant and toddler early care and education field, and for improvement of teacher compensation, benefits, and preparation. They provided the following recommendations:

- ▶ Promote awareness and understanding of the complexities of infant and toddler care, so that leaders understand the needs of teachers, parents, and children, and can base their decisions on evidence around the actual conditions of the field.



Even if they love it, even if it's their passion, it's not paying bills! And inflation – it costs more and more to live in the United States. And to expect people to do one of the most important jobs, which is take care of young children, and to pay them no respect, no money, [and] not support them. [You can get to the point of] compassion fatigue. It is so important that there are people out there who continue to advocate and do research and try to support the profession."

- ECE Teacher

- ▶ Demonstrate the value of ECE teachers by providing them with equitable pay and benefits.
- ▶ Educate parents on child development starting at birth, and ensure that parents are aware of their child care options. Help teachers and families to connect and communicate.
- ▶ Invest in teachers' ongoing education and training. Build teachers' skills in providing care for infants and toddlers; offer multi-language trainings to ECE providers.
- ▶ Create programs for provider stress relief, and build awareness of the importance of mental health.
- ▶ Invest in high-quality resources, and provide additional support to sites in low-income areas.



MINDSET CHECK

How do these recommendations from teachers who work with infants and toddlers resonate with you?

When do you believe learning begins?

What do you think are the areas of expertise of these teachers?

How does the work of these teachers intersect with your own experience?

What are realistic next steps in the effort to improve their wages and benefits?



Center Directors

The center directors we interviewed made recommendations around funding for infrastructure and the workforce, support for directors of ECE sites, and professional development. Their recommendations were:

- ▶ Offer additional funding to support increased compensation and benefits for the ECE workforce.
- ▶ Offer additional funding to support facility renovation projects and acquisition of new space.
- ▶ Provide grant-writing support to help center directors identify funding opportunities and write proposals.
- ▶ Provide more professional development on infant and toddler development, early intervention, and engaging parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers.
- ▶ Reconsider licensing requirements for serving infants and toddlers, to make the process of obtaining a license less burdensome.

ECE Leaders

The leaders we interviewed within the ECE space provided recommendations around funding, professional development, and community awareness. They offered the following recommendations to decision-makers and organizations supporting the ECE workforce:

- ▶ Increase funding so infant and toddler providers can cover the true cost of care, including raising teacher compensation rates.
- ▶ Provide business operations support, including business coaching for FCCs and center-based providers who want to expand their services.
- ▶ Increase infant- and toddler-focused professional development options.
- ▶ Participate in efforts to shift the community's mindset away from the idea that early care and education services are just "babysitting."
- ▶ Create opportunities for community members, funders, and elected officials to learn more about infant and toddler development.
- ▶ Provide additional investment in Family, Friend and Neighbor care.



Recently, the Office of Head Start shared five national priorities, among which is investing in the workforce by "Supporting a highly-skilled workforce with competitive pay, benefits, and access to supports for staff wellness." The OHS is developing a plan that would require their programs to benchmark compensation against those offered by local school districts and the industries for which staff are leaving Head Start and Early Head Start. Their plan will focus on total compensation packages including salary and benefits (OHS, 2023).



MINDSET CHECK

What are the personal benefits to you of quality care for infants and toddlers?

How do these recommendations from leaders in the LA County infant and toddler system resonate with you?

Which ones are realistic for you to address in the short term?

What will it take to address some of the more difficult ones?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Parents are struggling to find care for their babies and toddlers.

Despite calls to action like the Advancement Project’s recommendations for decision makers related to babies and toddlers in Los Angeles County,³ conditions remain stark for families. Our study identified parents’ persistent difficulties in finding and paying for high-quality care. They need financial support; user-friendly tools (like a well-advertised central database of providers with up-to-date, easy-to-find information) and processes (supported by parent navigators) for finding and accessing care; and loving, well-qualified caregivers they can trust.



In August 2023, the Long Beach Mayor’s Fund for Education launched the Long Beach Early Learning Hub, a centralized system where families can search for, apply for, and enroll in childcare online. Learn more about this promising new initiative [here](#).

³ Advancement Project (2018). *Babies and Toddlers in Los Angeles County: Prioritizing High-Quality Early Care and Education to Set Children on a Path to Success*. Retrieved January 18, 2023, from <https://advancementprojectca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/AP-Infant-Toddler-Policy-Brief-Digital-Copy.pdf>

2 A robust infant and toddler system of care must include a mixed-delivery approach that is responsive to the needs of the community.

Parent choice is a key feature of a high-quality early care and education system. For infant and toddler care in particular, Family, Friend, and Neighbor care is an integral component. As we contemplate how best to increase the system’s capacity to serve infants and toddlers, we must pursue a comprehensive approach that includes all types of care for all types of families. Systems-change advocates in other parts of the country affirm that “Families with young children, across all neighborhoods, want child care support. The type of support may differ” (WeVision Early Ed, 2022, p. 22). Being responsive to the needs of LA County families also means working to remove internal biases that could narrow our conceptions of the families we serve and the ways in which we serve them.

3 As a result of the systemic oppression of women and people of color in the ECE system, teachers receive unfairly low wages and minimal benefits, and suffer stressful working conditions.

Teachers need to be “compensated,” a term used by Brandy Jones Lawrence from the Center for the Study of Childcare Employment to refer to a teacher’s right not only to fair compensation, but also to workplace conditions that support her physical and mental health, allowing her to be present for the children she serves and to use her complete skillset in her work. These conditions include health care and retirement benefits, high-quality professional development focused specifically on infants and toddlers, and a supportive social mindset that uplifts the ECE profession as worthy and nuanced.

4 Providers need materials and training tailored to the needs of infants and toddlers.

They need equipment, books, educational materials, funding to expand their facilities, and comprehensive training that focuses specifically on the development of children from ages 0 to 3. Additionally, providers and parents recommended the creation of educational materials to help parents understand the stages and milestones of their infants’ and toddlers’ development and their needs at each stage.





5 The needs of families and ECE workers serving infants and toddlers are not present for decision makers.

Several study participants suggested stronger connections between decision makers, who are less proximal to the work, and caregivers. Access points and opportunities to hear from parents, teachers, and providers should be created; these could include visits to ECE sites, which would help decision makers learn about providers' experiences and understand the work of caring for and educating children.

6 Mindsets and public perceptions in general must shift

to more complete and nuanced understandings of the daily efforts undertaken by parents, teachers, providers, and leaders to care for infants and toddlers. The poor system conditions described in this report are not new, yet they are not clearly understood or received in Los Angeles County. Much work remains to be done in shifting mental models and changing persistent narratives. Speaking about California's mixed early-learning delivery system, Tonia McMillian, Advocate and FCC Owner, said, "*Our voices have been heard, but they have been ignored.*" The general public needs to more fully understand a day in the life of an infant/toddler teacher or caregiver, including their struggles and the difficult choices they make.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO SHIFT MINDSETS AND STRENGTHEN THE SYSTEM OF CARE FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Several key efforts are emerging with potential to address the problems within the Los Angeles County system of care for infants and toddlers, and to strengthen it in coming years.

- 1 In September 2023, LA County Supervisor Hilda Solis put forward a motion to **fortify the infant and toddler care system**, asserting that "Low infant-toddler child care capacity has far-reaching consequences, as the struggle to find care requires parents and caregivers to decide between reducing their working hours or leaving the labor force entirely, impacting not only their own family but also the overall economy." The motion directs the LA County Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education (OAECE) to develop a blueprint, by spring 2024, to identify immediate and long-term efforts to fortify the infant and toddler care system. As participants in the system and advocates for its improvement, we have the opportunity to make a significant impact. For example, OAECE will collect data to inform



the development of the blueprint through surveys, interviews, and listening sessions; a strong showing by community members and advocates for change could help to guide the blueprint in meaningful ways.

- 2** **Early Care and Education-Birth Through Three (ECE-BT3)**, an initiative of the L.A. County Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education (OAECE), is a strategy to increase access to and quality of infant and toddler child care services. OAECE is seeking to do this through supporting facilities projects; increasing knowledge and capacity of the workforce through access to resources, training and professional development; and strengthening the infant and toddler system by leading the development of the aforementioned blueprint. To gather and vet information to inform the blueprint, OAECE will leverage several existing ECE groups across the county, including the newly reconfigured **Infant and Toddler Workforce Workgroup**. The workgroup will contribute to the creation of the blueprint, and will serve as a designated body of experts tasked with strategizing and offering solutions for other issues faced by the infant and toddler workforce in Los Angeles. Workgroup members include representatives from institutes of higher education, Resource and Referral agencies, center-based care, home-based care, school districts, city and county offices, and the public.
- 3** The Stein Early Childhood Development Fund will develop and launch a **Birth to Age Three Child Care Communications Campaign** beginning in the fall of 2023. Its intent will be to “inspire action from the general public and policymakers... [to] uplift the voices of parents/ caregivers and child care providers and create a narrative around child care for children 0-3 that drives public urgency and mobilizes policy support for publicly-funded, accessible, and high-quality care.” The campaign will launch in early 2024.
- 4** **Ready2Teach** is a recently launched program funded by the Hilton Foundation to recruit, train, and place **new infant and toddler teachers**. Ready2Teach employs an “earn and learn” strategy in which participants receive free coursework and professional development while getting paid practical experience in Family Child Care (FCC) homes and centers, as well as mentorship from the director or FCC owner. In addition, owners and site leaders who participate receive professional development and business coaching. The program will be implemented by the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), and will support 120 new teachers and 60 site leaders in strengthening their capacity to serve infants and toddlers. The first cohort launched in August and has been met with great enthusiasm among ECE leaders and program participants. Recruitment for cohort 2 will begin in early spring 2024.
- 5** Currently, the state of California is reassessing how it pays for child care through the **California Alternative Methodology Project**, led by **the California Department of Social Services (CDSS)** and national early care and education experts **Prenatal to 5 Fiscal Strategies**. This historic alternative methodology process will help California to “(1) understand how much it costs providers and programs to provide care and education services; (2) develop a tool that will help estimate the cost of care based on the information



collected from providers and other sources” (Prenatal to 5 Fiscal Strategies, 2023). Through this process, California will be able to set new child care subsidy payment rates that are informed by the voices of providers, the true cost of care, and other key variables, such as “program size, geographic locations, and ages of children served” (Prenatal to 5 Fiscal Strategies, 2023). A forthcoming report in 2024 will provide a comprehensive overview of this process and will share key recommendations to inform the new child care subsidy payment rates.

Table 4. Efforts to Improve the System of Care and Education for Infants and Toddlers in Los Angeles County

Forward Movements	Learn More, Get Involved!
Blueprint to fortify the system	OAECE listening sessions for parents, providers and others
Stein ECD Birth to Age Three Child Care Communications Campaign	Contact Alba Bautista, CCF Program Officer abautista@calfund.org
Ready2Teach training program for new teachers	LAEP: collaborate with us
Report on the True Cost of Care of Early Care and Education	Learn more about the California Alternative Methodology work being done by Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies
Office for the Advancement of Care and Education ECE-BT3	Learn about this new initiative to strengthen care for infants and toddlers.





Conclusion

Our study participants shared a broad range of experiences and insights related to the infant and toddler system of care, and brought to life the persistent and well-documented numbers that are very familiar to many ECE advocates. Although the numbers and stories paint a bleak picture in Los Angeles County and across the country, there are bright spots – emerging initiatives throughout Los Angeles and at the national level, offering collaborative opportunities to improve the system. Each of us can contribute, both as individuals and as members of united efforts, to bring about critically needed reform for infants and toddlers.

At the center of any enduring reform is a shift in the mindsets of decision-makers and the public at large. Public perceptions must move toward more complete and nuanced understandings of the daily work undertaken by parents, teachers, providers, and leaders to care for infants and toddlers. The poor conditions of the system are not clearly understood by residents of Los Angeles County.

An important part of our collective reform process is to challenge ourselves as individuals to remain curious about any biases we may carry as members of a system that oppresses the women who care for our children. Alicya Hardy of the Center for Law and Social Policy reminds us that “To create an equitable system and undo the harms caused over many generations, policymakers must move beyond broad policy solutions that overlook the hard truths we must face.”

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