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BUSINESS

# Child care crisis continues to burden parents, providers and employers

High costs and low availability remain in wake of pandemic upheavals



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Working parents in the post-pandemic economy are still facing a child care crisis intensified by soaring costs, low availability and an exodus of child care providers due to low wages.

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As she approached her due date, Mariah Fuente had more on her mind than childbirth and baby names. The single mother from Cohoes also worried about how she would financially support her newborn daughter and who would care for the baby once she went back to work.

From the moment she discovered she was pregnant, Fuente knew she would have to return to work at six weeks postpartum, the earliest obstetricians recommend, in order to make ends meet. “I thought I was prepared for that, but I obviously wasn’t ... waitlists for day cares were six months to over a year,” Fuente explained. “We had to settle on at-home day cares, but then we would be there for a few months and then something would happen.”

The 22-year-old’s first job after giving birth was at a big box retailer, where her inconsistent hours often didn’t match up with when her day care was open. She was ultimately fired because of the amount of time she needed to take off when the home-based day care was unable to watch her daughter, Fuente said.

It was the first of five day cares where she would place her baby in just 22 months.

“Throughout all of this, I lost jobs and started new jobs, and it became that my job had to fit with whatever the day care schedule was,” Fuente said, adding that a subsidy from the state Division of Child Care Services covers her child care costs.

Fuente’s experiences as a parent underscore one aspect of the continuing child care crisis that was laid bare by the pandemic. While parents continue to face a lack of affordable care that meets the needs of modern day work schedules, child care providers either close up shop or struggle to maintain their own low-wage workforces amid other challenges. All the while, employers are failing to hire and retain the workers they need, and even though some are finding novel solutions to help relieve child care pressures, advocates say more needs to be done.

As part of the 2023 state budget, Gov. Kathy Hochul announced a \$125 million investment in early child care. The state also plans to more than double the state’s investment in child care with \$7 billion in funding over four years. The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy says the move,

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which comes as an expansion of last year's historic investment in state-funded child care assistance, is a step in the right direction but is far from what's needed to fully support and rebuild the dwindling child care workforce.

"All of these things are essential and fully supported by the child care community. However, these expansions are going to be meaningless and are currently meaningless for many families, because they can't find a program that can accept their child," said Dede Hill, director of policy for the Schuyler Center.

There are more than 28,000 families in New York without the child care they need because of understaffing, according to a [study](#) conducted earlier this month by the advocacy group Empire State Campaign for Child Care. The survey of over 1,600 child care programs statewide found that 90 percent of child care centers are currently experiencing a staffing shortage, resulting in the closure of over 750 classrooms in the respondents' programs.

"This survey begins to put a number to what we have known for a long time: expanded eligibility for families is an empty promise without direct, sustained state investment in the pay of child care educators," said Katie Albitz, a policy and communications specialist at the Schuyler Center, in a statement.

After nearly two years, Fuente has gotten her daughter into her first day care center, where she said staff members exceed expectations with their standard of care. The center has provided her with the peace of mind to return to the workforce and take on a new position in a doctor's office.

"They quite literally saved our lives," Fuente said, adding that she and her daughter were homeless in between jobs and struggled with the cost of food and diapers. "I always tell them, 'You don't know what you've done for me.' If I didn't find this place, I wouldn't be working, I wouldn't even have an apartment."

### **A shortage of providers**

Most of the time, Jenny Begnoche is surrounded by children. When she's not playing the role of mom, she's busy with her responsibilities as the owner-operator of a home day care.

The Burnt Hills resident has been running the child care operation for the past decade. She  
r home to advertise her day care business. Days later, she received  
a call from her insurance company informing her that her homeowner's insurance had been

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canceled. She learned that because her business is classified as a group-family day care, which is licensed to watch up to 16 children, rather than a family day care, which is capped at eight, she needs different insurance.

“I thought it was just some weird thing about my insurance company so I set out on a search to find a company that would cover us,” Begnoche explained. She called the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), which represents independent child care providers, and was told she had to get commercial insurance.

What once cost her \$900 a year now costs \$8,000, she said.

Child care workers in New York earn an annual median wage of \$33,060, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Begnoche said the salary as a provider isn’t much higher due to insurance, labor and other operating costs. Begnoche pays her workers a bit above minimum wage, and said she is in a constant position of having to turn down interviewees who request upwards of \$17 an hour.

Despite inflation, Begnoche has stuck to her family-oriented policy where the rate a parent signs their child up with is the rate they will continue to pay. She prioritizes providing the kids with nutritious homemade meals, which has become challenging as food costs rise.

“There have been a lot of petitions put in place by CSEA because in terms of a tax write-off, they give you a certain amount per child per meal, but that has not increased with the price of food increasing,” Begnoche said. “Now we’re spending that money, and it looks like I’m making more than I am because I can’t write off all of what I’m spending on food. It’s a huge struggle.”

There are 100,000 fewer child care workers than there were before the pandemic, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Begnoche attributes the worker shortage to low wages and high stress levels. At a day care center where she worked before opening her own business, she said she was paid \$10 an hour and constantly had to work on her own time. When she asked for a raise, she was told no because the director only made a couple more dollars an hour.

“There was just constant turnaround, and it’s really bad for the kids because they never get to h anyone,” she said. “Now, being an employer myself, I understand

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that it's very difficult to keep employees working here when they can go make more money working at Target.”

## Looking ahead

The situation facing parents has made it difficult for businesses to attract and retain talent, but some private employers have made steps toward removing barriers to child care and helping workers, especially women, advance in the workplace.

GTM Payroll Services in Clifton Park subsidizes a service called Pinch Hitter for employees, which provides back-up care for children — or even seniors — so employees can still meet their work commitments. Through the service, offered by New England Nanny, a caregiver goes to the employee's home to care for their dependents when a last-minute need arises.

“Life happens and you're scrambling at the last minute. You don't know that these things are going to happen or they might happen in the middle of the night, and you know that you're not going to make it to work unless you can get that child care, so it's really built for that last minute request,” said Anne Johnson, GTM human resources manager.

Other companies have begun offering on-site child care services or have leaned into the employee-favored remote work model. While steps like these allow private employers to progress toward a more diverse and inclusive work environment, some say the true key to unlocking women's participation in the workplace relies on larger structural change.

Elizabeth Palley, professor and director of the doctoral program at the Adelphi University School of Social Work, says child care assistance and tax credits granted to employers create greater inequality, helping people who could already afford child care while leaving out lower-income individuals.

“When there are tax benefits for employers, what normally happens is upper-middle-class people have greater access to help (with) child care but there's a lot of contract workers that wouldn't be eligible, people who don't have such stable employment wouldn't be eligible, and also a lot of that care is regular hour care and sometimes people need off-hour care,” she said.

Instead, Palley is a proponent of universal child care, which would provide services for children in

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by establishing a network of federally supported child care

options. Advocates say this level of investment is what’s needed to not only improve the economy and employment outcomes for families but also support critical child development.

But for now, providers like Begnoche are asking for the patience and understanding of parents, especially when it comes to the cost of services. “We are raising their children for them, giving them the comfort that they need,” she said.

“We’re hugging them when they get booboos, we’re teaching them their ABCs and manners. We’re helping them to develop as people in the most crucial part of their life.”

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### Meteorologist Neal Estano leaving WNYT

Neal Estano is leaving WNYT after a decade at the station. Estano's departure follows meteorologist Bob Kovachick's, who left in December.

Times Union



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