

# VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The Child Care workforce  
Talks about Work & Wages



Child Care Wage Initiative  
City of Madison & Dane County

The second in a series of reports by the  
Center on Wisconsin Strategy  
University of Wisconsin Madison  
[www.cows.org](http://www.cows.org)

# Voices from the Field: What the Child care Workforce is saying



"A growing body of research demonstrates that early childhood experiences lay the foundation for...intellectual ability, emotional responsiveness and stability, the ability to get along with others, and the ability to focus on tasks." - City of Madison, "The Social and Economic Costs of Poor Quality Early Care and Education"

Linda had a well-paying, comfortable job working in management at a local bank. She enjoyed her work, and says that it gave her a great deal of satisfaction. Nevertheless, one day she decided she wanted a change. "I worked at my bank for almost 25 years. Then I decided, 3 months shy of my 25th year, that I wanted to do something different. I thought, 'I want to work with kids!' My co-workers thought I was crazy," she laughs. "They were like, do you know how stressful that's going to be?" Linda went ahead with her plans anyway. She went back to school part-time to get her Associates Degree in early childhood education, and started work at a Madison-area daycare center. Now, four years later, she talks about what she's sacrificed to do the thing she loves. She took a big cut in pay, has no retirement benefits through her new job, and has gone from 5 weeks of annual vacation time to just seven days. Still, she's glad she did it. "It's the kids," she explains, "Yeah there are some frustrating things that happen...but, you know, then they all run up and give you a hug. You just get so attached to them."

***"Personally for me, I chose this position because it was more meaningful than the offers paying more money. But it's difficult sometimes."***

Child Care  
Director

Each of the women and men who teaches children in area daycare centers, preschools, and in-home day care facilities has a different story to tell of how, and why, they ended up doing the work they do; almost all say they'd like to stay in the child care field because they find it interesting and deeply rewarding. As part of our evaluation of the Local Child Care Wage Initiative (see the table at the end for an overview of the Initiative), the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (UW-Madison) conducted interviews with some fifty child care center directors, teachers, and in-home care providers this summer. In these interviews, people discussed their work, their wages, the local initiative, and what really makes for quality care for kids. This research brief, the second in a series of documents that will chart and evaluate the Wage Initiative, is devoted to telling the stories we've heard in the field, and to letting the workforce speak for itself, through interviews and profiles.

While child care providers nearly always want to remain in the field, child care continues to be a profession with a very high turnover rate. Data from 4C (the region’s child care resource and referral agency) shows that approximately 30 percent of Madison’s full-time daycare teachers leave their jobs every year. Additionally, a recent statewide study conducted by the Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership shows that most of the workers currently employed in the field have not been on the job very long, nor will they stay very long. Well over half (59 percent) of the teachers currently employed in Wisconsin’s daycare centers have been at their current job less than two years. Family or in-home child care providers also experience turnover, although not at quite as high a rate. Approximately 32 percent of currently operating in-home providers began their businesses within the last two years; although about 18 percent have been on the job longer than 10 years.

*“This would be the perfect job if they paid more.”*

## The Wage Challenge in Child Care

But why is attrition such a big problem in the daycare field? Both workers, and those who do research on the industry, say that the major problem is low wages and poor benefits. According to Linda, having another career first was the only thing that made doing child care work now even possible. “If I hadn’t worked at the bank for 25 years with good pay and benefits, I wouldn’t have been able to come here.” It is a depressingly common sentiment: the people who care for our kids don’t make enough to make ends meet. And those who eventually leave child care do not make the decision to do so lightly.



The Local Child Care Wage Initiative puts money in the pockets of child care workers at participating centers and in-home providers, \$750 to \$2,000 annually, in order to alleviate the financial challenges in child care work.

***“I won’t be here for the rest of my life because we don’t make enough money. We never will. There’s no retirement plan either. It’s not my choice; it’s what I have to do. This would be the perfect job if they paid more.”***

**Child Care Teacher**

For those who stay in the field, low wages and poor benefits force many to explore other ways to help make ends meet while staying in the profession. Some rely on financial support from partners, spouses, or family. Others take second jobs or work longer hours in child care to make ends meet.

***“I work a second job, 20-30 hours a week plus my 40 hours a week here. I manage at a group home. I can go there, hand out meds and sleep for six hours, then get up and hand out meds in the morning and come here.”***

**Child Care Teacher**

***“I have kids from first and second shift families here. The first ones come in at around 7 in the morning and the last ones leave at about 11 at night. Every other weekend I watch 2 kids for a friend to make extra money.”***

**In-Home Child Care Provider**

According to a report issued by 4C, while daycare work brings with it a number of challenges, “The most critical variable affecting turnover rates is wages and how competitive they are compared to jobs requiring similar training and skills.” In fact, in 1999, the average child care teacher in Dane County made about \$18,000 annually; just a little more than half the annual salary of a kindergarten teacher, and less than other low-wage professions like hairdressing (\$20,840) and data entry (\$18,590.)

***“I don’t have health insurance.”***

## **The Benefit Challenge in Child Care**

In addition to low wages, many child care workers lack basic benefits like retirement, health care, sick leave and vacation time. This problem is especially acute among in-home providers: women and men who provide care for small groups of children in their own homes. Like many small business owners, these providers typically work extremely long hours, and generally cannot afford to employ other staff. This makes taking sick or vacation leave extremely difficult.

***“I haven’t had a vacation yet. I don’t know how I’m going to do it. (The parents) can’t afford to pay me, and I can’t afford to do it.”***

**In-Home Child Care Provider**

***“I had to have emergency surgery and was unable to work for 6 weeks. My parents came in and took over running the center. Without their help I would have lost my business.”***

**In-Home Child Care Provider**



Moreover, many family care providers note that much of their profit margin goes back into their center — covering expenses like food for children’s meals and snacks, equipment, field trips, and the like. In this business, the money that’s left over isn’t always enough to cover high HMO premiums, leaving many without health insurance. And retirement is generally out of the question.

Trainings are offered to Local Child Care Wage Initiative centers and in-home providers that promote model work standards to improve the child care work environment.

***“I pay for all my own benefits, but I don’t have health insurance. Deductibles and premiums are so high! Still, it only takes one accident. I had a gall bladder attack and needed surgery a while back. Thankfully it was during a time where I was employed somewhere else and had benefits. I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have that.”***

**In-Home Child Care Provider**

***“Kids are learning to be problem solvers.”***

## **Why Quality & Consistency Matter**

Aside from being stressful to workers, low wages also have a strong impact on the quality of care children receive. Since low wages lead to high turnover, children lose the ability to bond with their teachers and must adapt to being cared for by strangers, many of whom are inexperienced. Center workers and directors must deal with having to constantly train new staff, and parents don’t have the opportunity to develop relationships with their children’s teachers.

***“You always want to be as consistent as possible for kids. Kids test and test boundaries with a new sub. And parents don’t feel as confident when there’s a new person every day.”***

**Child Care Teacher**

***“Attachment to staff is important. It helps (kids) learn, it helps them develop communication and social skills.”***

**Child Care Teacher**

The daycare profession is also losing well-trained people to other careers. Less than a third of daycare teachers in Dane County are college educated, and the proportion of teachers with degrees has been declining steadily over the past several years (4C). Education, as well as experience and training, are important, say workers, because better-trained staff tend to use more appropriate disciplinary techniques, are better equipped to handle special needs children, and do a better job developing lesson plans that foster the acquisition of academic and social skills. When trained and educated people leave the field, their absence affects the quality of care our kids get.

***“There’s this misconception that all we do is watch kids play. Kids are learning to be problem solvers. They’re thinking beyond the box and learning to communicate with other kids... I have goals for my group... I teach them pre-reading, pre-writing, those pre-academic skills.”***

**Child Care Teacher**

*"We have some special needs kids, kids with emotional problems. With higher needs kids, training is even more important because they have these rages. The more training and staff consistency you have, the better decisions you are able to make. Also the kids become attached to you and they really need that."*

**Child Care Teacher**

*"The Initiative says 'You're important.'"*

## **Child Care Workers Talk About the Local Child Care Wage Initiative**

*"The Wage Initiative says 'You guys are doing a great job, you're important, you're not just babysitting.' It was nice to think that someone was finally noticing us, that things might finally get better."*

**Child Care Teacher**



The Local Child Care Wage Initiative, a two-year pilot program, hopes to address these job and quality of care issues by assisting workers with some of the extra financial support they need to stay in the field. By tying bonus levels to educational attainment, the Wage Initiative also hopes to motivate workers to seek further training. Although the program has been in effect for less than a year now, it has generated a great deal of excitement from people who do the important work of taking care of Dane County's children.

This year alone, over 2,000 kids (1,887 enrolled in centers and 275 enrolled at in-home providers) across Dane County will benefit from the Local Child Care Wage Initiative.

## The Local Child Care Wage Initiative: Bonuses for Workers

*“I saved the first chunk....I’m trying to go back to school and get my teacher certification.”*

Child Care Teacher

*“The Initiative bonus went into my savings...the one thing we don’t have at this center is retirement. That’s what it went for.”*

Child Care Teacher

*“I think the Initiative helps. A lot of what I’ve done (has been) because I got the extra money. I could take the kids on more field trips. I take them to the library, the aquarium, out for food, or to get supplies for projects.”*

In-Home Child Care Provider

*“All I know is, you guys have been real good to me!”*

In-Home Child Care Provider

## Challenges for Workers, Challenges for Child Care

### High Staff Turnover

According to a report by the Office of Community Service Data (OCCD), the turnover rate for full-time teachers in the City of Madison has been about 30% for the last nine years.

### Low Wages

Nationally, about 70% of the child care workforce earns poverty-level wages. In Madison, a lead teacher makes about \$10 an hour, while teachers and assistant teachers average \$8.74 and \$7.47 respectively. Child care teachers earn less than hairdressers, bus drivers, or roofers. (OCCD)

### Low Incentives for Education

Relative to other professions, child care provides very little in the way of monetary rewards for increased education. For instance, lead teachers in daycare centers earn \$20,833 annually while elementary school teachers earn \$35,460, even with the same qualifications.

### Few Caregivers

Poor wages and benefits makes attracting qualified caregivers difficult. In 1998 alone, the City of Madison lost an estimated 400 child care spaces, because facilities could not find the staff to fill available positions. (OCCD)



Stacey Rossmeissl has cared for infants at the VA Kid's Center for about nine months.

*"We know we're valuable."*

## Stacey Rossmeissl

Stacey's workday at VA Kids begins at 9:30 and ends at 5:30. By 11:45, she's busy preparing lunch for two infants, not quite toddler age. "Usually we have six babies," she explains "today we have three." It'd be a light day, except all three infants are sick. This means that Stacey needs to watch temperatures, make sure all the babies are taking in enough fluids, and deal with more than the normal amount of fussiness. "Parents will often bring their kids in when they're sick," she notes, "It's because they're sick so often, but that can make it really hard for us."

On a fuller day, Stacey would work with another teacher, but today she's on her own. Another

worker will stop in periodically to see if she needs a bathroom break, and an assistant comes by to help during lunch. That's fortunate because, Maia, the third infant and the sickest, wakes up in the middle of everything and starts howling. With another person to assist in the room, Stacey was able to eat a little food herself; at the same time she was feeding two babies during what would have been her break. Stacey felt, "it was just easier to give up my break and help out because it was a rough day and everybody had to eat at once." Meanwhile, Tracey, the co-teacher, hurries over to try to calm Maia down and get her to drink some formula...neither of which she seems willing to do.

Stacey knowingly incorporates the philosophy of the center into her work each and every day. For instance, Stacey works with a primary group of infants and recognizes that "in order to develop strong attachments, both me and my co-teacher have a primary group of three." For that group, Stacey does most of the diapering, feeding, and care. "That way they get to know us really well, and if they get scared or upset they know where to go." Working closely with a small group of babies also helps workers to develop important relationships with parents. When parents come in to pick up their children, each sits down and has a long talk with Stacey. They talk about the babies' health, their new developmental milestones, and swap stories about each child's behavior over the course of the day. One mother asks Stacey for advice about her child's inability to sleep over the past several nights.

At 3:30, once two of the babies have gone home and things have quieted down a bit, Stacey returns to her long neglected lunch. She takes this time to reflect on the Wage Initiative and the difficulty of getting by in the career she's chosen. The Wage Initiative is wonderful, she feels, but she also believes that governments are either going to have to start routinely subsidizing daycare, or rates will have to be raised above the level that many parents can afford, if workers are going to be able to make a living wage and quality of care is going to improve across the industry. "Rates that are being charged right now don't reflect the true cost of care. We develop close relationships with parents, and we don't want to burden them any more than they already are, because it's coming out of their pockets. But unless we can all mobilize to get more support for this industry," she notes, "I just don't see any other option."



Susan Rodin, trained as an elementary school teacher, has been teaching preschool at Creative Learning Daycare for six years.

*"Maybe one day, we'll be paid what we're worth."*

## Susan Rodin

Susan Rodin generally walks into her classroom of four year olds at 8:30am, but her actual working day starts even earlier than that. In addition to serving as a lead teacher at Creative Learning Daycare, Susan has taken on some of the Center's administrative tasks. At seven in the morning, and then for a few hours in the afternoon once her other shift ends, she works answering phones, talking to parents, and trying to make sure there are enough workers coming in to fully-staff all the classrooms. For this, she gets extra pay; which comes in very handy considering that she's supporting five children of her own, and three of whom are in college.

Susan, like many child care teachers, knows how difficult it is to make ends meet. Many work second jobs to be able to afford to stay in the field. Susan would consider doing that as well, if she wasn't already the sole provider for her own kids. The extra administrative work she does for the Center helps some, as did the money she got from the Wage Initiative. "The Initiative is a great idea," she says "it might help some teachers stay who were on the brink of leaving. Often it's the good ones who leave. Maybe one day we'll be paid what we're worth."

Susan's teaching day starts with story time. The eight children in her class listen, mostly quietly, as Susan reads aloud. After that, there's clean up, and breakfast. All of the children are asked to contribute in some way, either by picking up a few toys or by helping to set the table. As it turns out, help from 8 four year olds makes the entire process move along a bit more slowly, but this is part of Susan's curriculum. "We do academic stuff with them, but what we really focus on in this room are social skills. We work on communication, trying to teach them to verbalize their needs and feelings instead of, say, hitting. We do life skills, self-help...they all feed and dress themselves. I also do a lot with manners," she laughs, "that's an old school thing with me."

In fact, Susan's curriculum is fairly wide-ranging and diverse. The kids in her classroom enjoy lots of playtime, and traditional activities like field trips or (this afternoon's planned treat) a romp through the sprinkler in the center's playground, but her class gets more structured learning activities as well. After breakfast, Susan and her co-teacher work with small groups of children on large puzzles in an activity designed to teach communication and cooperative problem solving skills. The Center also offers weekly classes, including Spanish, music, and movement and dance, for children over three. Even playtime is designed to be more than just fun. The Center follows a High Scope Curriculum, which, among other things, asks teachers to observe children at play and design lesson plans around those objects and activities that the kids show the most independent interest in over the course of the day.

Susan started doing daycare after working as an elementary school teacher for a year, and as a special education teacher for five years. She says she was surprised by the nature of her new job. "When I started, I first thought daycare was just babysitting...I'd never been at a preschool before, and when I grew up and my kids were young, it was really babysitting." It wasn't until she was on the job that she found out how much the field had changed. "It really is teaching," she laughs.



Marjorie Williams has been providing daycare to publicly funded infants and toddlers in her home since 1988 when she started her daycare business, Baby It's You.

and bananas. She likes to feed them the same food that they get at home, because she finds that infants are especially disrupted by even small changes. This is true not just for food, but for their care in general. It's especially important, she notes, that infants have the opportunity to bond with one caretaker and get into a routine with them. "I like getting them when they're brand new," she says, "by two months, because after that it's harder for them to adjust. I can tell when there's been a break in their routine — like when they've been to their grandparents, because they're more tired and fussy."

She picks up the first baby, Leigh, leaving her sister, Emily, still asleep in the crib. Leigh sits in her high chair and eats spoonfuls of cereal for a while before she starts to whimper. At that, Marjorie switches over to bottled formula and holds Leigh. Feeding is an especially challenging part of the job because it's so messy. "Babies let you know when they're done eating by spitting food out or refusing to open their mouths," Marjorie says. It's also time consuming. Feeding two infants can take anywhere from one to two and a half hours. These two are even more of a handful right now because they're teething, she explains. This makes eating hard, because their gums are swollen and sore.

Another challenge to doing daycare, Marjorie notes, are the expenses related to running a small business. Infants need a lot of equipment, and when Marjorie was starting out, all of the costs came out of her own pocket. "All the stuff I needed...you gotta have toys, high chairs, cribs: getting the money was hard!" Equipment is still a big expense, she says, but her Wage Initiative check has helped. With the bonus, Marjorie bought two bouncers, a port-a-crib, and some other things for her center, including a rocking chair. Part of her next check will also go to something else she hasn't been able to afford for a long time, a vacation. "I haven't taken a vacation for myself in," she laughs, "it must have been about 8 years!"

After the twins are both fed and down for another nap, Marjorie walks into the next room and pulls out a stack of framed photos of young children. They're pictures of the approximately twenty children she's cared for over the last thirteen years. She still keeps in touch with all of them, and as she flips through the photos she tells a story about each one. When she gets to the last she says that she soon plans to hang all of these photos on her living room wall. "I think what I do, as a Caregiver, I think it's my job to help parents instill the basics," she explains. "I can't imagine not doing this. I think it's a gift to be able to do this."

*"I get joy every day."*

## Marjorie Williams

It's a little before noon, and the twin baby girls Marjorie Williams is caring for today are asleep in a crib together, the way they sleep at home. Marjorie started doing home daycare for infants 13 years ago when her youngest daughter was still a teenager and able to help out with the business. Now, years later, Marjorie wants to hire another staff person, buy a bigger house, and expand her business. Her pastor is helping her out by showing her how to locate grants and other sources of funding.

One of the girls wakes up, and Marjorie starts preparing their lunch, a mixture of rice cereal

# Local Child Care Wage Initiative at a Glance

<b>Annual Cost (Pilot)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• \$250,000</li></ul>
<b>Source of Funds</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A portion of Federal Child Development Grants received by the City of Madison and Dane County.</li></ul>
<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improve child care quality, especially for low-income children, by increasing the earnings of workers in the industry.</li><li>• Provide an incentive for centers and in-home providers to undertake concrete steps to improve their work environment.</li></ul>
<b>Recipients</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 24 child care centers with a total of 150 full-time workers, and 45 in-home providers with a total of 52 full-time providers.</li><li>• A total of 202 full-time workers will receive bonuses.</li></ul>
<b>Effect on Industry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pilot phase covers approximately one-tenth of the area's full-time caregivers.</li></ul>
<b>Center and Home Provider Eligibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All participating centers are accredited, or in the accreditation process, and at least 10 percent of their kids are low-income.</li><li>• All participating in-home providers are licensed or certified, or in the process of becoming licensed or certified, and at least 10 percent of their kids are low-income.</li></ul>
<b>Requirements of Initiative Centers and Home Providers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Distribute Initiative subsidies directly to caregivers.</li><li>• Notify the pilot funders of relevant staffing changes.</li><li>• Participate in trainings and take concrete steps to improve the work environment.</li><li>• Help promote the Initiative to ensure its future viability and expansion.</li><li>• Participate in the Initiative evaluation.</li></ul>
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Annual earnings bonus of \$750-\$2000, increasing with the training of the worker.</li><li>• Payments to child care workers provide incentives for training and education by giving higher bonuses for Associate's and Bachelor's Degrees.</li></ul>
<b>Worker Eligibility for Bonuses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All full-time workers with at least 6 months of tenure at the center or in-home provider.</li></ul>
<b>Requirements of Initiative Participants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Center on Wisconsin Strategy, UW-Madison will study the effect of the Initiative on quality of care, turnover, and workers' willingness to stay in the industry.</li><li>• Results will be released in a series of research briefs.</li></ul>

# Local Child Care Wage Initiative



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**WISCONSIN CHILD CARE IMPROVEMENT PROJECT, INC. (WCCIP)**

For information on quality child care development.

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**WISCONSIN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION (WECA)**

For information on local child care issues.

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**Other Resources**

The Registry  
608-222-1123

Wisconsin Child Care Resource & Referral Network (Wisconsin CCR&R)  
608-271-1230

Wisconsin Council for Children & Families  
608-284-0580

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