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Building Momentum in Northeast Wisconsin to Improve Access to Childcare

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As part of the Chicago Fed’s [Spotlight on Childcare and the Labor Market](#), I reached out to community contacts in Wisconsin to hear perspectives on childcare access within the state. I learned that there is an emerging ecosystem of cross-sector partners who are coming together to address childcare challenges in Northeast Wisconsin. These organizations report that coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to childcare in Northeast Wisconsin has become more difficult for working parents in terms of affordability and availability. The Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance, which is focused on regional coordination to improve childcare access, has identified low wages for childcare workers as one of the key factors leading to challenges in recruiting and retaining childcare workers, ultimately limiting childcare availability. The [Greater Green Bay Chamber](#), which engages the greater Green Bay area’s business community, has reported that employers cite limited access to childcare as a direct barrier to hiring employees. These two organizations in Northeast Wisconsin are aligning their efforts to address the root causes that limit childcare access within the region.

Bringing attention to the childcare sector’s low wages and its women-driven workforce

In 2020, the [Basic Needs Giving Partnership](#) launched the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance, bringing together a network of nonprofit and civic partners in the Greater Fox Valley region to help improve access to affordable and high-quality childcare.¹ According to Lynn Coriano, executive director of the Basic Needs Giving Partnership, the alliance has been “building a movement” by creating a network of partners across the region that are deeply engaged in addressing the challenges surrounding childcare access. Early on in their work, the alliance identified the negative “symptoms” being experienced by working parents and childcare providers, such as the lack of childcare slots and childcare worker shortages.² The alliance found that the low wages prevalent in the childcare sector were one of the primary reasons behind those outcomes. For Coriano, low wages for childcare providers reflect that “we don’t value those positions as a society and we’re not paying what they are really worth.” Both Coriano and Suzanne Brault, an outreach consultant to the alliance, emphasized that these positions are typically filled by women, meaning that the impact of low wages for childcare providers falls squarely on the shoulders of a largely female workforce. According to a 2021 survey conducted for the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, early care and education (ECE) teachers in Wisconsin are almost 100% women.³ Coriano said that “part of moving the needle on this” is overcoming “old mindsets around care” and communicating the economic and social value that childcare provides now and in the future. According to the alliance, childcare facilities are critical infrastructure that has not received the level of public and private investment necessary to build a sustainable system that is accessible and affordable to working parents at the level that they need.⁴ Coriano explained that just as good roads enable us to get to work, childcare services enable parents to access work and employers to access the regional workforce.

Today, the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance is focusing on how to address low wages for childcare workers in Northeast Wisconsin, which are limiting the childcare workforce pool and pipeline. According to Coriano, “we know we don’t have enough people working in the education space because the pay is so poor.” The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) [reported](#) that about 41% of childcare centers in Wisconsin were facing staffing shortages, according to a survey it conducted in January 2024. Childcare centers have shared with the alliance that they can’t keep or attract staff because they can’t afford to pay workers what other industries like retail do or provide benefits as

positions in the public school system offer.⁵ Over the years, Brault observed that the childcare provider landscape in Wisconsin has shifted, pointing out that “small providers in our state have just dissolved.” While larger childcare centers are continuing to operate, Brault said that “many don’t have staff to have all their rooms open.”

Designing childcare solutions with cross-sector partners

The Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance has worked on convening cross-sector partners to collaboratively design childcare strategies and solutions for the region. These efforts have led to the launch of three action teams that are focused on: 1) advocating to set up community-driven funds that can be used to support childcare operations and boost childcare workforce wages, 2) engaging regional employers to invest in childcare infrastructure that should help them recruit and retain more workers, and 3) coordinating efforts among childcare providers across the region to develop and support sustainable childcare business models.⁶ The alliance is also continually working on expanding and building their regional network. According to Coriano, the alliance looks for opportunities to connect with interested parties beyond the Greater Fox Valley region and at the state level, with an aim to “see change on a larger scale.”

Through ongoing engagement with the business community, the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance has forged partnerships with key players to build cross-sector collaboration. The Greater Green Bay Chamber is working alongside the alliance to mobilize regional employers around solutions. According to the chamber’s vice president of talent and education, Eric Vanden Heuvel, the region is “at an unprecedented time when it comes to the workforce.” Vanden Heuvel shared that because of a mix of economic and demographic trends, the business community in the region has been “coming across new problems and situations we’re not used to,” including businesses being unable to “find talent to fill roles.” According to Vanden Heuvel, since the pandemic, many employers have cited childcare as a direct barrier to hiring the talent they need. With limited childcare access coming up frequently as an issue, Vanden Heuvel said he “started to connect those dots” and has since embarked on a four- to six-month tour to learn more from the alliance and partners. Vanden Heuvel stated that “there is a lot of education that needs to take place” in engaging the business community on the issue, acknowledging that “even just six months ago, I don’t know that I fully understood the issue.” Vanden Heuvel noted there is a willingness throughout the business community to talk about childcare challenges, but the next step is to “come up with sustainable solutions” that can work for companies of different sizes and for communities across the region, from rural to urban. To that end, the chamber is working toward hosting a statewide summit on childcare access for employers in the fall of 2024 that will highlight pockets of innovation around the state and will be solution-oriented.

Next steps for Northeast Wisconsin

The Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance and the Greater Green Bay Chamber are building momentum on improving access to childcare throughout Northeast Wisconsin. To achieve this aim, the alliance and the chamber are focusing efforts that address the key factors limiting childcare availability while expanding their regional network. By bringing in more public and private partners into the conversation, the alliance, along with the chamber, wants to position the region to develop cross-sector solutions that can be scaled up for an even greater impact.

Notes

¹ In addition to the Basic Needs Giving Partnership, the following partners are part of the alliance: Achieve Brown County, Child Care Resource & Referral, Encompass, Family & Childcare Resources of N.E.W., First 5 Fox Valley, House of Hope, Outagamie County, Raising Wisconsin, Brown County United Way, United Way Fox Cities, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, Women’s Fund for the Fox Valley Region, Inc., and Wisconsin Partnership. The Greater Fox Valley region extends from the Green Bay area down to Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

² This information is from a PDF leaflet describing the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance, along with its shared vision, goals, and other details, which I received from the alliance. In the rest of this article, I will refer to this as the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance leaflet.

³ Childcare-center-based ECE teachers are 98% female, according to a September 2021 report of survey results prepared by the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families.

⁴ This is from a statement in the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance leaflet.

⁵ Childcare worker wages range from \$12.01 to \$14.82 an hour, while retail pays \$15.00 an hour and entry-level public school teachers can make as high as \$22.59 an hour; these are all 2022 estimates for Milwaukee County, according to a May 2023 report by the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

⁶ Details on the action teams are from the Greater Fox Valley Child Care Alliance leaflet.

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