

**Washington state lacks sufficient licensed child care slots to serve the needs of families.** Creating a waiver process to allow providers with additional licensable space to serve up to 16 children is a small step to meeting this need.

Washington State Department of Commerce and the [Child Care Collaborative Task Force](#) found that while approximately 736,880 children ages 0–12 need non-parental child care, there are only 187,535 spaces in licensed child care programs available, leaving a gap of 549,345 children without access to licensed child care.

Approximately 118,000 families with children four years-old or younger live in “child [care deserts](#),” areas with inadequate child care supply. In 15 Washington counties, over half of families with children four years-old or younger live in a child care desert.

Parents lacking access to licensed care respond by staying home (thus withdrawing from the economy); hiring a private nanny if they have the resources; or using unlicensed care which has no guarantees about safety. This waiver is one component of increasing access to licensed care for more children and families, which has been a legislative priority for the state for years and esp. since the pandemic.

**In 2021, the Legislature passed a sweeping bill, [the Fair Start for Kids Act](#), which sought to expand access to quality care and better support providers and parents.** As part of FSFK, DCYF was directed to create a waiver program to expand capacity for some licensed family homes. That direction is included below, as is the 13-part legislative intent statement in FSFK.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 313.

CAPACITY FLEXIBILITY FOR FAMILY HOME PROVIDERS. The department may waive the limit, as established in RCW 43.216.010(1)(c), that restricts family home providers from serving not more than 12 children. The department must establish conditions for such waivers by rule and must assess, at a minimum, the provider's available square footage and staffing capabilities prior to issuing any waiver of the limit of 12 children.

**As noted in the Legislative intent, [child care is a very low margin work force](#) with limited resources to meet complex requirements.**

Most family home assistants make \$15-16 an hour; as owners, the licensee of a family home is not covered by minimum wage laws, and anecdotally make \$12-\$15 an hour depending on their location and mix of children they care for. This workforce is predominantly women and women of color; DCYF and the statewide union SEIU 925 communicates in 3 languages as a baseline.

## **Fair Start For Kids Act**

NEW SECTION. Sec. 2. INTENT. (1) The legislature finds that high quality child care and early learning is critical to a child's success in school and life. The legislature recognizes that COVID-19 has devastated the existing child care industry, making it unduly burdensome for families to find care. The legislature recognizes that without immediate action to support child care providers, and without expanded access to affordable child care, especially infant and school-age care, parents will not be able to return to work while children lose valuable learning opportunities. In order to bolster a full economic recovery, the legislature finds that every child deserves a fair start.

(2) The legislature finds that access to affordable child care increases economic growth and labor force participation. The legislature further finds that an affordable, accessible system of high quality child care is necessary to the health of Washington's economy because employers benefit when parents have safe, stable, and appropriate care for their children. The legislature recognizes that too many working parents are forced to reduce their hours, decline promotional opportunities, or leave the workforce completely due to a lack of affordable and appropriate child care. The legislature finds that a report commissioned by the department of commerce in 2019 found that working parents in Washington forego \$14,000,000,000 each year directly due to child care scarcity. The legislature recognizes that this disproportionately impacts women in the workforce and that in September 2020 alone, 78,000 men left the workforce, compared to 600,000 women.

(3) The legislature recognizes that quality child care can be a stabilizing factor for children experiencing homelessness, and is a proven protective factor against the impacts of trauma they may experience. Access to child care is also a necessary support for families with young children in resolving homelessness and securing employment.

(4) The legislature finds that the scarcity of child care, exacerbated by COVID-19, most significantly impacts families furthest from opportunity. The legislature recognizes that there are additional barriers to accessing this foundational support for immigrant communities and families whose first language is not English, families who have children with disabilities, rural communities, or other child care deserts. The legislature recognizes that high quality, inclusive child care and early learning programs have been shown to reduce the opportunity gap for low-income children and black, indigenous, and children of color while consistently improving outcomes for all children both inside and outside of the classroom.

(5) The legislature finds that without access to comprehensive, high quality prenatal to five services, children often enter kindergarten without the social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language skills they need to be successful and fall behind their peers, facing compounding developmental challenges throughout their K-12 education. The legislature finds that cascading impacts of inaccessible child care and early learning programs create systemic barriers for children and their families that result in higher special education needs, greater likelihood of needing to repeat grades, increased child welfare and juvenile justice involvement, reduced high school graduation rates, limited postsecondary educational attainment, and greater barriers to employment in adulthood.

(6) The legislature finds the vast majority of child care providers are small businesses and nonprofit organizations. In addition to adhering to federal, state, and local regulations to ensure healthy and safe environments for children, the legislature recognizes that child care providers must ensure their employees are adequately compensated and supported. However, the legislature acknowledges that the

reduced staffing ratios for health and safety, additional cost of personal protective equipment and extra cleaning supplies, increased use of substitutes needed during COVID-19-related absences, and increased technology demands during school closures from the pandemic are further straining the viability of the child care business model in Washington state.

(7) The legislature finds that the health and stability of the early learning workforce is pivotal to any expansion of child care in Washington state. The legislature recognizes that the child care workforce, predominantly comprised of women of color, is structurally afflicted by low wages, limited or no health care, and a severe lack of retirement benefits. The legislature further recognizes that the threat of COVID-19 compounds these underlying issues, forcing providers to navigate increased stress, anxiety, and behavioral issues all while risking their lives to care for children. The legislature recognizes that families, friends, and neighbors who provide care are a critical component of the child care system. The legislature finds that child care workers are essential and deserve to be compensated and benefited accordingly.

(8) Therefore, the legislature resolves to respond to the 35 COVID-19 crisis by first stabilizing the child care industry and then expanding access to a comprehensive continuum of high quality early childhood development programs, including infant and school-age child care, preschool, parent and family supports, and prenatal to three 39 services. The legislature recognizes this continuum as critical to meeting different families' needs and offering every child in Washington access to a fair start.

(9) The legislature recognizes that the federal government has provided substantial additional funding through the coronavirus response and relief supplemental appropriations act and the American rescue plan act of 2021. The purpose of the additional federal funding is to ensure access to affordable child care and stabilize and support child care providers affected by COVID-19. Therefore, it is the intent of the legislature to use the additional federal funding to supplement state funding in order to accelerate these investments.

(10) The legislature recognizes the strengths that multilingual, diverse early learning providers and caregivers contribute to early learning across the state. Therefore, the legislature intends to expand language access services to create an inclusive early learning system that specifically supports underserved providers.

(11) The legislature intends to expand eligibility for existing child care and preschool programs to increase access. The legislature recognizes that expansion must be accompanied by an investment to make child care more affordable. Therefore, the legislature intends to eliminate copayments for low-income families and limit copayments for any family on subsidy to no more than seven percent of their income.

(12) The legislature further intends to stabilize, support, and grow the diverse early learning workforce by funding living wages and affordable health benefits while providing training, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, shared business services, and a variety of other supports that recognize the critical role that early learning providers serve for all Washington children.

(13) The legislature intends to accelerate Washington's economic recovery from the devastating impacts of COVID-19 by dramatically expanding access to affordable, high quality child care and preschool, in order to get parents back to work and provide every child with a fair start.