



# **Survey of Hartford Child Care Providers: Operational Challenges and Needs**

Prepared by Cynthia Willner  
CTData Collaborative  
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## **Background**

The Connecticut Data Collaborative partnered with the Division of Early Learning in the City of Hartford’s Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation on a survey that was distributed to administrators of all Hartford child care programs in March through April of 2023. This survey asked about providers’ current operational challenges and needs, as well as their concerns about children’s development and staff stress levels. This brief report will focus on providers’ perspectives on their operational challenges and needs, including reasons for and consequences of vacant slots and staffing challenges.

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## **Survey Sample**

The child care provider survey was distributed by email to administrators of all child day care centers, family child care providers, and group child care homes caring for children aged 5 years and under in the city of Hartford – 137 people in total – using a comprehensive email list provided by United Way / 211 Child Care. Administrators of

programs that only cared for children before or after school or over the summer were not invited to participate in the survey. The survey and survey invitation emails were provided in both English and Spanish.

In total, **49 responses** were collected between March 16<sup>th</sup> and April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023. These included:

- **22 administrators of child care centers**, representing 49% of the 45 Hartford child care center administrators who were invited to complete the survey.
  - These 22 administrators reported on **25 community-based child care centers and 11 public pre-K's** (with one administrator reporting on all 11 preK's), representing 61% of the 59 child care centers in Hartford.
- **27 family child care providers**, representing 30% of the 89 family child care providers who were invited to participate.

The two administrators of group child care homes on the 211 Child Care list did not respond.

When interpreting the statistics reported below, it is important to keep in mind that responses from this sample of Hartford's child care providers may not be representative of all providers in the city. Additionally, due to the small sample size, small differences in responses between groups or across survey items may not be reliable.

## Respondent Characteristics

Of the 22 child care center administrators who responded to the survey, 12 identified their role as Director, five were Executive Directors, two were Assistant Directors, two were Owners, and one identified as the District Lead for Early Childhood.

Thirty of the 36 child care centers reported on in the survey receive School Readiness funding, and nine receive Child Day Care Contract funding from the state. Only five centers were reported as receiving neither School Readiness nor Child Day Care Contract funding. Care 4 Kids subsidies are accepted by nineteen centers (53%) and

21 family child care providers (78%). One center receives Head Start or Early Head Start funding, and two centers receive no public funding.

Thirteen family child care providers (48%) and 13 child care centers (36%) receive Child and Adult Food Care Program reimbursements.

## Results

### Operational Sustainability

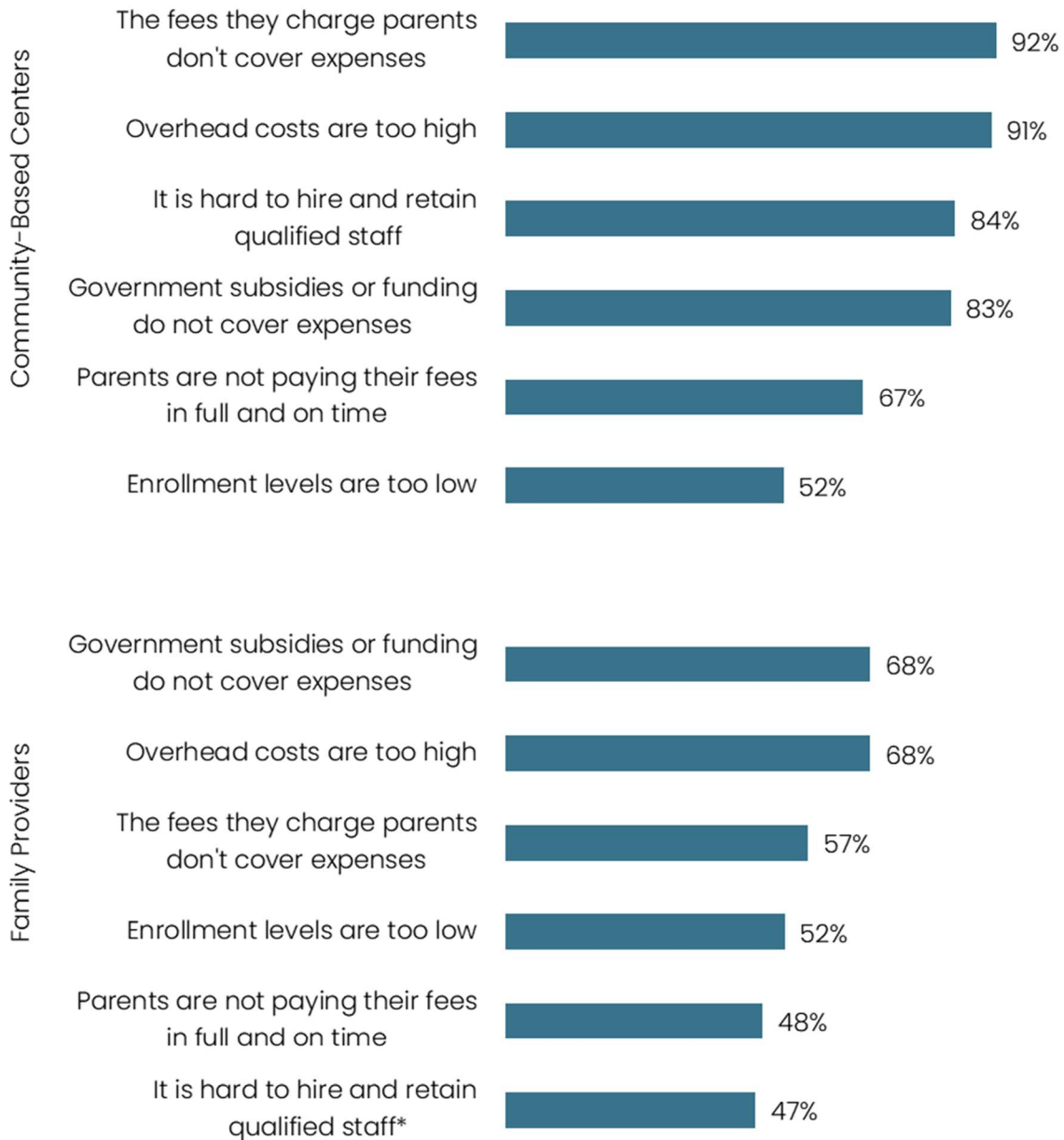
The pandemic has placed additional strain on a child care system that was already struggling with a staffing and funding crisis. To understand providers' current perspectives on operational sustainability, we asked them how confident they are that they will be able to keep their site or program running over the next year. **For 60% of community-based child care centers, administrators said they were "very confident" that they could keep the site running over the next year,** while for 40% of community-based centers they were only "somewhat confident." **Fifty-six percent of family child care providers said they were "very confident" that they could keep their program running over the next year,** while 37% were "somewhat confident" and 7% were "not at all confident."

We then asked respondents about reasons why it may be challenging to keep their site running (see the graph below). Here, we focus on community-based centers and family child care providers, since public school pre-K's have different operational challenges than community-based centers.

**The top challenges to operational sustainability endorsed by administrators of community-based child care centers were: the fees they charge parents not covering their expenses (92%), overhead costs being too high (91%), difficulty hiring and retaining qualified staff (84%), and government subsidies or funding not covering their expenses (83%).** Parents not paying their fees in full and on time was endorsed as a contributing factor for two-thirds of community-based child care centers, and low enrollment levels were endorsed as a contributing factor for about half of the community-based child care centers in the sample.

Family providers were somewhat less likely to agree with the reasons offered on the survey for why it is challenging to keep their program running. **The top reasons family providers endorsed were: government subsidies not covering their expenses (68%) and overhead costs being too high (68%),** followed by the fees they charge parents not covering their expenses (57%). Family providers were as likely as community-based center administrators to agree that enrollment levels being too low is a contributing factor (52%).

## Percent agreeing that it is challenging to keep the program running because...



Note: Percentages are based on responses for between 24 and 25 community-based centers and between 23 and 25 family providers (except as noted below).

\* Only 15 family providers marked their level of agreement with the item "it is hard to hire and retain qualified staff." Thus the percentage for this item is out of 15 responses.

## Child Care Slot Vacancies

Twenty-four of the 25 community-based centers (96%), 10 of the 11 public pre-K's (91%), and 19 of the 27 family providers (70%) in the sample had at least one child care slot vacancy. Median vacancy rates for community-based child care centers were **19% for children under 3 years old** (among the 15 centers licensed to serve children under 3), and **31% for children aged 3 to 5 years** (among the 23 community-based centers licensed to serve children in this age range). The median vacancy rate for the 11 public pre-K's in the sample was 10%. Summed across the capacity of all child care centers and public pre-K's in the sample, the total vacancy rate was 22% for children under 3 years old and 29% for children aged 3 to 5 years old.

Family child care providers reported a median of 2 vacant slots each, for a **median vacancy rate of 33%**.

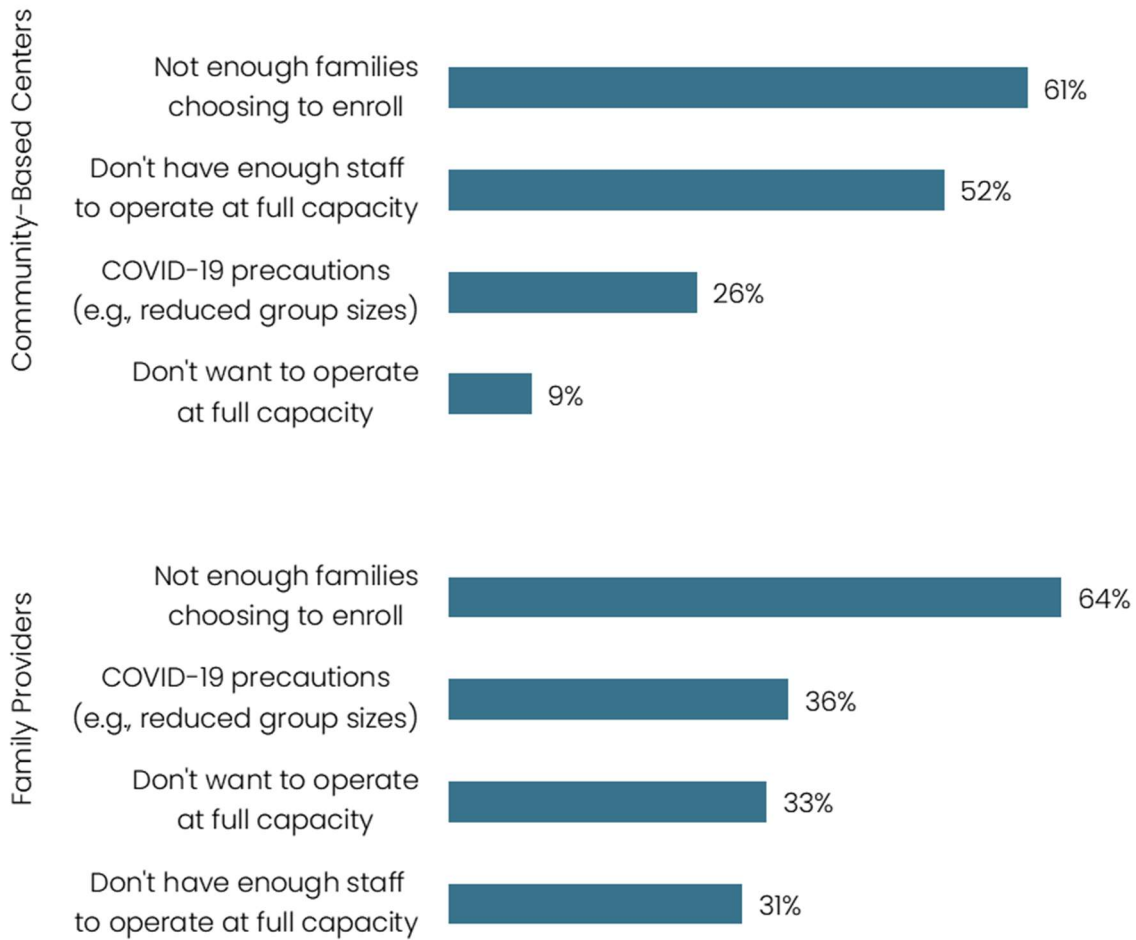
For sites that had any child care slot vacancies, we asked about the reasons for these vacancies (see the graph below).

**For community-based centers, insufficient demand from families was the top issue cited as contributing to vacancies (61% of centers), followed by not having enough staff to operate at full capacity (52% of centers).** Just over a quarter of responses for community-based centers (26%) cited COVID-19 precautions, such as reduced group sizes, as a major contributing factor.

**Family child care providers also cited insufficient demand from families as the top reason for vacancies**, with 64% of providers saying this contributed "moderately" or "a lot" to their current vacancy levels. Thirty-six percent of family providers cited COVID-19 precautions as a major contributor, 33% cited not wanting to operate at full capacity, and 31% cited not having enough staff to operate at full capacity.

No information was provided about reasons for vacancies at the public pre-K's.

**Percent saying that an issue contributes  
"moderately" or "a lot" to the number of vacant  
slots they have now**



Note: Percentages are based on responses for 23 community-based centers (96% of those with any vacancies) and between 13 and 15 family providers (68% to 78% of those with any vacancies).

Nineteen respondents wrote in other issues contributing to the number of vacant slots they have now. These included:

- Families can't afford to pay for child care and/or families who need help paying for child care do not qualify for Care 4 Kids subsidies (4 respondents)
- Workforce or hiring challenges (4 respondents)
- Competition with other child care options such as public school preschools (3 respondents)
- Difficulty filling vacant slots for children in specific age ranges (2 respondents)
- Having reached the maximum capacity of non-Hartford residents for School Readiness slots (1 respondent)
- Suspended operations due to failed inspections (1 respondent)
- Marketing challenges (1 respondent)

## Wait-Lists

Seventy-five percent of community-based child care centers were reported as having a wait-list, with a median of 13 children on the list (ranging from 4 to 150). About half (55%) of the public pre-K's also had a wait-list with a median length of 2.5 children, and about a quarter of family child care providers reported having a wait-list with a median of 5.5 children on the list.

Intriguingly, 18 community-based centers (72%), 3 family child care providers (11%), and 5 public pre-K's (45%) were reported as having a wait-list despite currently having vacant slots.

## Staff Shortages

**Seventy-five percent** of community-based child care centers were reported to have at least one vacant staff position that they would like to fill (18 of the 24 sites for which this question was answered). Not surprisingly, the number of family provider and public pre-K's with staff vacancies was much lower. Only 14% of family providers reported having any vacant staff positions (3 of the 22 family providers who answered the question), and none of the public pre-K's was reported to have a staff vacancy (out of all 11 public pre-K's).



Across the 18 community-based centers with any staff vacancies, there were **45 teacher vacancies and 39 teacher's aide vacancies**, for an average of 2.5 teacher positions and 2.2 teacher's aide positions vacant per site.

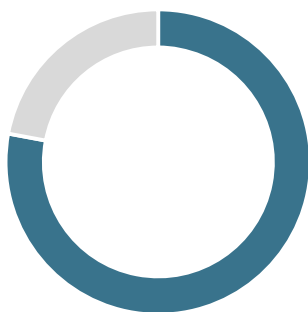
The three family providers with staff vacancies reported seeking in total eight assistants and four substitutes.

For the 18 community-based centers with staffing shortages, we asked about what consequences they've experienced now or over the past year due to these staffing shortages (see the graphic below).

At nearly 80% of community-based centers, staffing shortages had resulted in staff working longer hours or getting shorter break times, and in centers operating with one or more classrooms closed or reduced class sizes. At half of the community-based centers, staffing shortages had resulted in centers providing child care for fewer hours than they would otherwise.

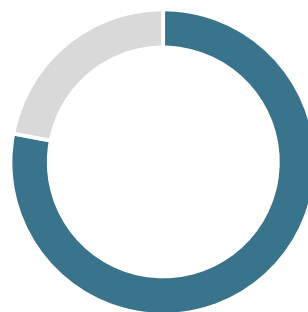
### Due to staffing shortages at community-based centers...

Staff have had to work longer hours or get shorter break times than they would otherwise



78%

Centers have operated with one or more classrooms closed or reduced class sizes



78%

Centers have provided childcare for fewer hours than they would otherwise



50%

*“Staff experience burn out due to short staffing. Often teachers are moved from class to class to accommodate the needs of the center.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

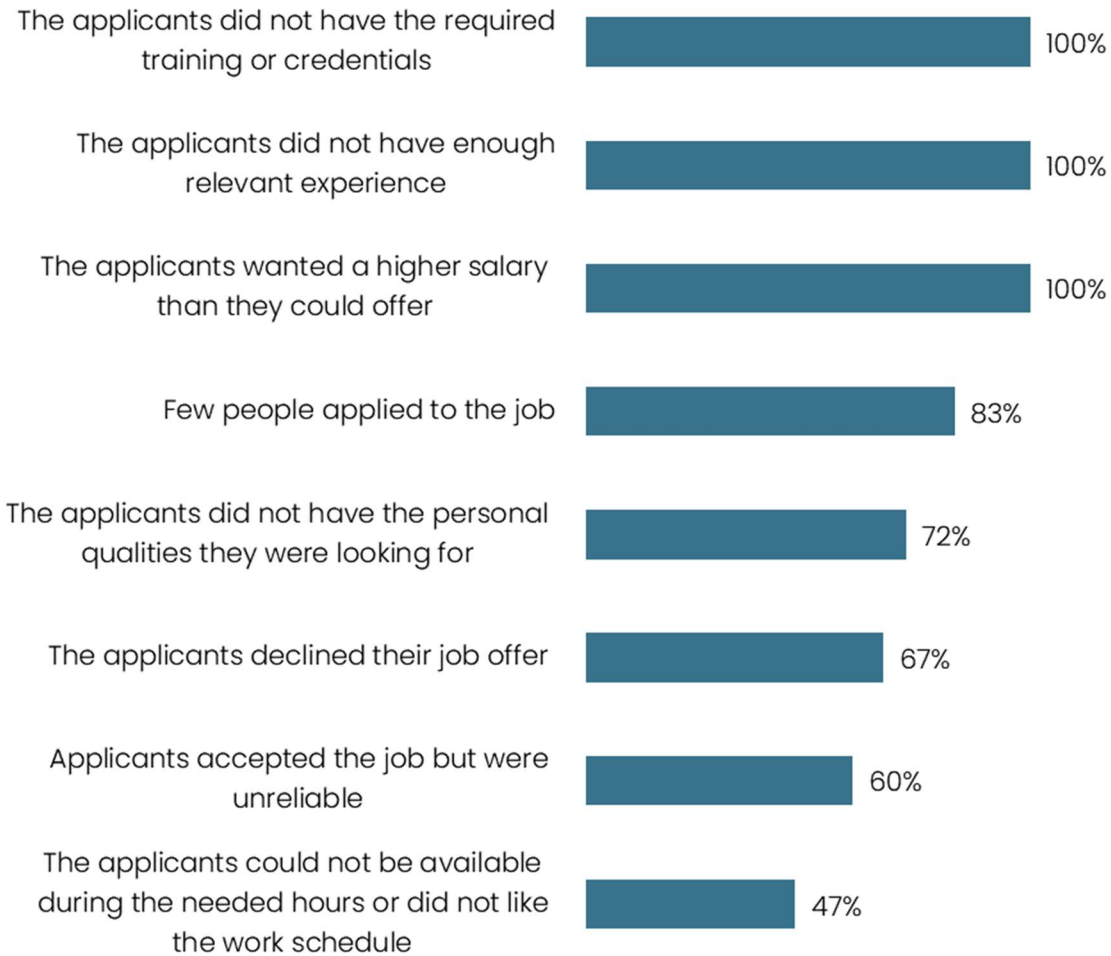
## Hiring Challenges

We asked child care providers about their experiences with hiring new staff **since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022**. All child care center administrators had tried to hire new staff in that time period (out of the 20 that responded to this question), though only two *family* child care providers reported that they had tried to hire new staff. Of the 22 family providers who reported that they had *not* tried to hire new staff, eight (36%) said they had wanted to hire new staff but did not have the funds to do so.

**90% of child care center administrators reported that it had been “somewhat” or “very” challenging to hire new staff since January 1st, 2022.**

For these child care center administrators, we then asked about reasons why it has been challenging to hire new staff. Their responses, illustrated in the graph below, show the multitude of interacting factors that make hiring child care staff very challenging. **All center administrators agreed that applicants lacked the required training or credentials and relevant experience, and that applicants wanted a higher salary than they could offer.**

## Percent agreeing that it has been challenging to hire new staff because...



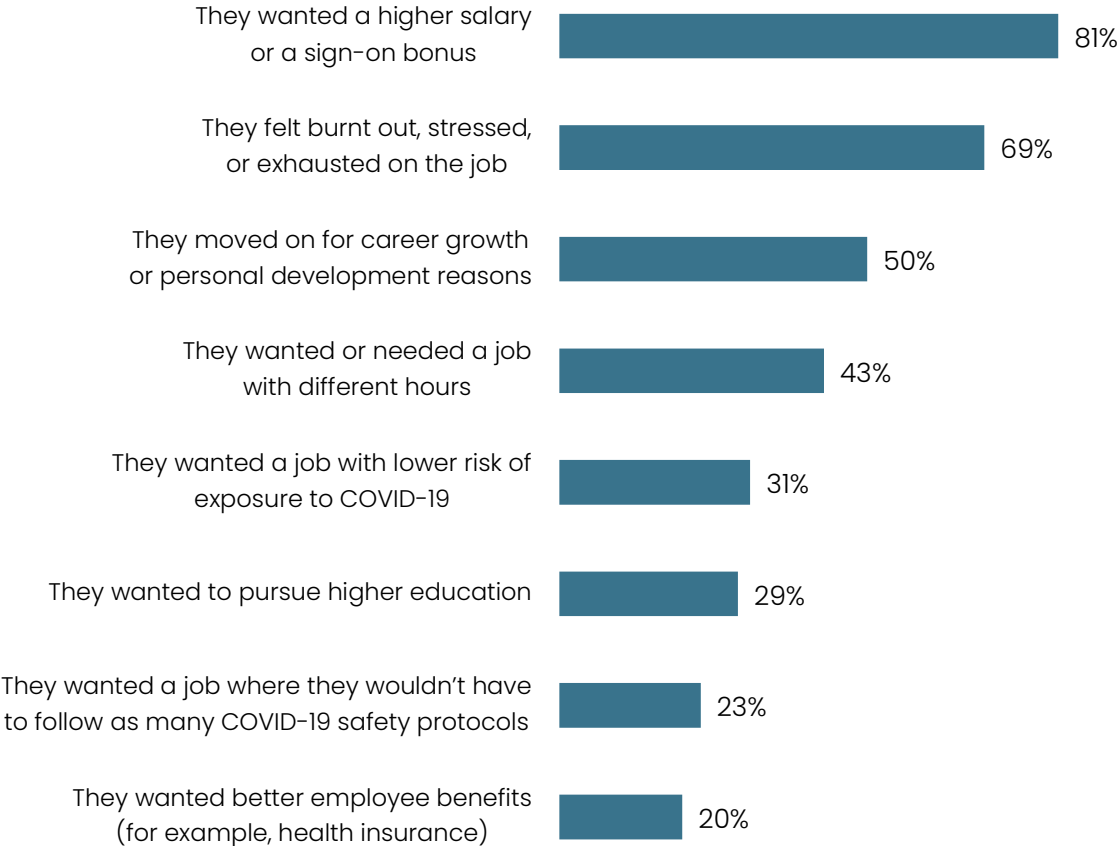
## Staff Retention Challenges

Eighty percent of child care center administrators said that staff had quit since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. Only three family child care providers reported having staff quit in that time period.

We asked providers about the reasons staff had mentioned for quitting. Eighty-one percent of center directors who had lost staff said that they had wanted a higher salary or sign-on bonus, and 69% said that staff quit because they were feeling burnt out, stressed, or exhausted on the job. The three family providers who said that staff

had quit provided a variety of reasons. All three said that staff had wanted a job with better benefits, with different hours, and where they wouldn't have to follow as many COVID-19 safety protocols. Two of the three said that staff had quit because they wanted a job with a higher salary or a sign-on bonus and with lower risk of exposure to COVID-19, and because they were feeling burnt out, stressed, or exhausted on the job.

**Reasons staff gave for quitting,  
as reported by center administrators**



## Providers' Concerns in their Own Words, and How City Administrators Can Help

We asked child care providers to describe other challenges and concerns and to provide suggestions for how City of Hartford administrators and policymakers could help address them. Here we describe some of the themes that arose and provide some examples of each theme in respondents' own words.

Many responses emphasized the urgent need for more **financial support so that providers can attract and retain high-quality staff.**

*"Create a livable pay scale for our teachers so that they can support their families and not rely on state funded programs for housing, food, health and transportation."*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*"Get us the funds to hire & retain high quality staff for our centers."*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*"We do not receive enough money through the subsidies and parent fees to pay the teachers a higher salary to retain them."*

- Child Care Center Administrator

Some family providers expressed that **financial support would help them improve the quality of their care** and expand their operations by hiring an assistant.

*"It is challenging trying to keep up with purchasing supplies and other items for the childcare to make sure the children get the knowledge and skills needed to proceed into kindergarten. More funding will definitely help keep programs running and proving the best care for our children.."*

- Family Child Care Provider

*“...to be able to have the funds to provide excellent education and care for our children, would be a great help so we can be able to add an assistant without having to take funds away from our paychecks since costs are so high.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

*“Que los políticos nos apoyen económicamente para cumplir con las metas de nuestros programas.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

Some providers requested support with offering **better benefits** to themselves and their staff.

*“Create a program that can support our teacher benefits.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*“benefits to retain staff”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*“Claro estamos trabajando sin seguro médico lo cual es muy costoso y no tenemos tampoco un fondo de jubilación.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

Family child care providers, in particular, requested **more professional development** and support for continuous quality improvement.

*“More trainings for providers to be able to provide the best care and knowledge for our children! Webinars, in person, maybe even a convention of educational support and resources.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

*"We need to have programs that can help us to teach more skills to our infants and toddlers. We need free programs to help us to get our toddlers ready for pre-K and kindergarten and programs that are available to us without us having to go and seek it. When we have our yearly inspection they should bring paperwork showing us new programs that are available to us for free and not us coming out of our pocket to pay for it."*

- Family Child Care Provider

*"Se necesita más preparación y desarrollo profesional."*

- Family Child Care Provider

Providers also expressed frustrations with **delays in getting approvals and payments from Care 4 Kids, and eligibility criteria that exclude many families in need.**

*"It's crazy how c4kids is getting all this funding but yet still they do not have enough workers to process the paperwork of parents and they are having providers wait almost 6 months to nearly 9 months to get paid for a child. Unfair. But they're quick to cancel a parent..."*

- Family Child Care Provider

*"El número de niños sube y baja, care4kids tiene en espera los nuevos aplicantes"*

- Family Child Care Provider

*"We have care4 kids at this moment, and hoping get a different funding that can support our parents that are very low income, but deserve childcare."*

- Child Care Center Administrator

Several family providers mentioned that **maintaining steady enrollment** was a particularly pressing operational challenge.

*“Maintaining capacity with school age children and regular daytime kids [is a challenge].”*

- Family Child Care Provider

*“Enrollment is very low, it's hard to afford and keep up with good materials and supplies.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

*“I don't have any kids at this moment.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

One center administrator noted the need for **transportation** between schools and providers who offer before- and after-school care:

*“We have challenges with transportation for our school-aged children. Lots of families from the surrounding areas have issues with childcare being available for after and before school, which we provide we just don't provide the transportation the families would have to figure out transportation on their own.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

Finally, several providers suggested that **systemic changes** are needed to support Hartford's early childhood providers and families with young children:

*“I would like to suggest the School Initiative in Hartford develop a Disciplinary Team that can support Early Childhood Centers to provide services for children and families... [Also] the city of Hartford should have an extended network of services that can provide guidance to families that encounter*



*challenges with children that have special needs and significant delays in other areas of development.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*“Revisit the Early Childhood Profession as a whole. Restructure the system and do not place temporary funds as a band aid to fix it.”*

- Child Care Center Administrator

*“All programs that are designed for child care must be connected each other.”*

- Family Child Care Provider

*“City wide enrollment supports”*

- Child Care Center Administrator