



TOMAH CHILDCARE OPPORTUNITIES

Background Information

Wisconsin has seen a 24% decline in the number of childcare providers in the last decade. 70% of families in rural communities live in a childcare desert, meaning there is 1 regulated childcare slot for every 3 or more children under age 5. The cost of infant care in Wisconsin is over \$11,000 per year. High childcare costs are affecting employees' career choices, including cutting back on hours or quitting jobs ([source](#)).

Tomah has 330 licensed childcare slots. Of those childcare slots, 291 are without income limits and open to any family. The City of Tomah contains 613 children under 5 years old; the Tomah Area School District geographic boundaries are home to approximately 985 children under age 5.

From March of 2020 to March of 2024, childcare providers in Tomah received \$1,560,925 from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families through a program called Childcare Counts to aid the stability of their childcare programs. This program is funded using one-time COVID relief funding. Childcare Counts payments are declining in amount and will cease entirely in June of 2025 without further legislative action to permanently fund the program.

The above research and data coupled with the voiced experience of local employers led Tomah Health and the Tomah Chamber of Commerce to undertake a community childcare work plan in the spring of 2024. This document's purpose is to summarize the work completed related to Tomah's childcare challenges thus far and to offer a roadmap for where we may consider going next.

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Tomah Childcare Survey Findings

In April and May of 2024 a survey was conducted of the Tomah workforce to learn more about their childcare needs and experiences. The survey had 552 respondents; respondents included large employers such as Tomah Health, the Tomah Area School District, the City of Tomah, and Cardinal as well as small businesses such as employees at local gas stations, plumbers, and real estate agencies. Survey respondents indicated that childcare availability, cost and quality is influencing their workforce participation in the following ways:

- 59% of respondents had to take unplanned PTO due to childcare closures
- 43% of respondents had to take unplanned, unpaid time off due to childcare disruptions
- 38% of respondents were unable to work overtime due to a lack of childcare
- 36% of respondents had to reduce or change their work hours
- 30% of respondents were late for work due to childcare issues
- 29% of respondents changed job roles for greater flexibility
- 24% of respondents cannot work to full capacity due to stress about childcare

When asked how many lost hours of work they have had in the last 6 months due to a lack of childcare:

- Almost 40% of respondents experienced up to 20 hours of lost work
- 30% of respondents experienced 21-50 hours of lost work
- Over 5% of respondents experienced 51-100 hours of lost work

When asked about the primary challenge they faced when trying to find childcare that meets their needs:

- Approximately 70% of respondents indicated availability and cost were a challenge
- 45% of respondents indicated that the quality of child care was a challenge

Almost 60% of respondents indicated that they or someone in their immediate family has considered quitting a job rather than utilizing a childcare program due to these challenges.

The comments submitted in the survey demonstrated that many families have family members, including grandparents, augmenting their workforce participation in order to meet childcare needs, therefore detracting from the total labor force availability in the Tomah community. Data backs this up, as only 54% of kids under 5 in Tomah's western census tract have all parents in the labor force, meaning that greater childcare support could lead to more available labor for local businesses.

Survey respondents were asked about what would be important to them in any potential community partnership to improve childcare in the Tomah community. They indicated, in ranked order, that the following items would be the most important factors in determining whether to utilize new or improved local childcare services:

1. Qualifications of Staff
2. Cost of Care
3. Learning Environment / Play Spaces and Materials (Inside and Outside)

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Childcare Provider Engagement

In order to learn more about the experience of childcare providers in the Tomah community, outreach was conducted to current childcare providers. All licensed providers received a written letter and a follow up phone call asking for their input. We were able to gain feedback from 7 current providers through a combination of group meetings, one on one meetings, and one detailed email response.

Overall, Tomah childcare providers shared concerns similar to what childcare providers across the state of Wisconsin have been elevating. Jobs in the early childcare field are challenging: they require education prior to entry, they lack benefits, the pay is low and often uncompetitive, and there is not adequate workforce in order to meet demand for childcare services.

However, the providers expressed a clear passion, professionalism and expertise for the important work they do. In initial brainstorming, they offered the following list of suggestions for consideration to improve Tomah's childcare infrastructure:

- Grow parent and employer engagement in state-level advocacy on early childhood education policy issues
- Have a pediatrician or other suitable clinician offer consults to providers and parents when children exhibit behavior challenges
- Offer free first aid, CPR, and infant CPR classes for local providers
- Partner with a local bank that is a "lender of choice" for family childcare providers
- Partner with local landlords that allow family childcare providers to operate
- Offer support to start up or unregulated childcare providers to help them launch or formalize their businesses
- Grow infant care options by subsidizing the high costs necessary to meet the 4 infants to 1 staff ratio
- Offer support for the following costs: licensing fees, accreditation fees, food costs, supply costs, insurance costs, etc.
- Consider employee assistance programs so providers can raise rates in order to retain staff without hurting already financially struggling parents
- Consider how a YMCA or other, larger organization can operate a space where a childcare center could be partially subsidized
- Consider businesses or building owners making open building space available to interested childcare providers on favorable lease terms, similar to how the VA and the UMC currently support local childcare programs
- Support the high school's school to work program and Dawn Pierce who do awesome work creating a pipeline of childcare staff

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Childcare Interventions for Consideration

The first and primary focus of childcare interventions in the Tomah community should be to sustain the existing childcare slots so that the current capacity to care for children is not further lessened. This can be accomplished by:

- Advocating to state and federal legislators about the importance of Childcare Counts and other programs that support the early childhood education field
- Partnering with existing providers to support their businesses utilizing the ideas laid out in the section above
- Supporting succession planning for existing providers who are operating childcares and reaching retirement age or interested in transitioning out of the early childhood education field

As we move forward to examining how other communities have strengthened their local childcare infrastructure, potential solutions will be broken out based upon the primary challenges that Tomah employees face (cost, availability, and quality) as well as their input that qualifications of staff and the learning environment would be important factors in considering whether to engage with new or improved community-supported childcare solutions.

Cost:

- Employer Contributions or Matching Funds for Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts: Employees can contribute up to \$5000 per household to a dependent care flex spending account that can be utilized to pay for childcare at any childcare location that will provide you with their federal EIN or SSN. Employers can also contribute to dependent care FSAs, however the total yearly contribution cannot exceed \$5000.
 - One Richland Center dairy processor recently offered its employees \$5000 reoccurring [yearly stipend](#) for childcare costs.
- Employer Paid Subsidy for Childcare Costs:
 - The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) ran a limited duration program using COVID relief funding called the [Partner Up!](#) grant program. This program combined state grant dollars, employer contributions, and employee contributions to pay childcare providers a “true cost of care” that helped to stabilize their operations. This program is a great example of braiding funding to lower costs to families and increase payments to providers that could be replicated on a local level.
 - Door County Women’s Fund and the Door County United Way partnered together to [create a program](#) where employers could have their contributions to their employees’ childcare expenses matched in order to provide financial support for childcare costs.

Availability:

The route to greater childcare availability for families is to expand the number of childcare providers, including both group childcare center and in-home family childcare providers. Both are an equally important part of the childcare ecosystem and all efforts should be made to be inclusive and supportive of both provider types.

- **Help Start or Formalize In-Home Family Childcare Programs:** Many employees in Tomah utilize both licensed and unlicensed in-home childcare providers. Other communities have had success expanding their local childcare capacity by utilizing home-based childcare providers. This strategy generally includes the following attributes: identifying those interested in starting an in-home childcare and providing them with business incubation support and services, identifying those running an informal/unlicensed in-home childcare and supporting them through the process of formalizing their business and becoming licensed, and networking existing licensed in-home childcare providers to form a peer support network and encourage cooperative improvement efforts.
- The [Jackson County Childcare Network](#) is one of Wisconsin's most successful childcare support efforts. Their strategy includes funding for in-home childcare providers to complete necessary changes to their homes, such as fencing in the back yard, retention bonuses for childcare staff, and paid Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network memberships to access individualized coaching.
- The [Child Care Business Accelerator Program](#) in Green County is a partnership between the local EDC, United Way and UW Extension with additional support from the Small Business Development Center and WECA that aims to jumpstart and sustain both new and fledgling childcare providers. They are able to offer the program in both English and Spanish to also support Latino childcare providers.
- In North Carolina, [Smart Start of Transylvania County](#) offers salary supplements to childcare workers, one-on-one technical assistance to new providers looking to enter the field, and financial assistance to equip homes appropriately for in-home childcare businesses.
- **Help Start or Grow Group Childcare Centers:** Currently, the majority of group centers operating in Tomah have some form of external support from another organization, such as a church or the VA. This support lowers their operating cost by providing free physical space to house programs and therefore allows for more financially sustainable childcare programs. Other local entities, such as businesses or government entities, could partner with a childcare operator in a similar manner to utilize existing buildings or space they have to house a new group childcare center. Additionally, existing group centers could look to grow their licensed capacity in order to increase childcare availability in Tomah.
- The City of La Crosse in conjunction with The Parenting Place offered [Start Up & Expansion Grants](#) to grow local childcare capacity.

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Quality:

Childcare at its core is exactly what its name suggests – caring for children. The workforce that is caring for children requires compassion, knowledge, education, support, training, and more in order to deliver high-quality childcare where kids thrive and parents feel good about leaving their child to go to work.

Most states use a QRIS – Quality Rating and Improvement System – to assess and improve childcare quality. Wisconsin’s system is called YoungStar. If providers participate in YoungStar they receive a ranking from 1 to 5 stars, with 5 stars being the highest quality ranking. Supporting providers in improving their YoungStar ranking or in pursuing other national accreditations that equate to high YoungStar rankings can help the Tomah community ensure that quality of childcare is improved across the community. Other strategies to consider include:

- Invest in the Workforce:
 - The City of La Crosse in conjunction with The Parenting Place provided [grants for professional development](#) for childcare employees.
 - Madison College launched a [multi-year project](#) to invest in the childcare workforce pipeline in order to get more people into the field and ensure that people were entering the workforce with little to no student debt.
- Invest in Physical Spaces
 - Partnering with new or existing providers to make physical upgrades to spaces, such as ensuring compliance with fire code or making spaces handicap accessible, through donations, grants, employee workdays, or other means can improve the built environment childcare is provided within.

Conclusion

Childcare is a complex, systemic challenge facing many communities. We believe that through committed partnership and incremental progress we can begin to improve the childcare infrastructure in our community so that employees are more able to fully engage in the workforce, children are able to thrive, and employers are better able to meet their workforce needs. We welcome ALL community members to join us in this effort. If you would like to get involved, please reach out to Tina Thompson, tthompson@tomahwisconsin.com, or Derek Daly, DDaly@tomahhealth.org.

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