

2022 ISSUE BRIEF

Early Care Matters. Quality Matters. Families Matter.

Ninety percent of brain growth happens before kindergarten.ⁱ Research demonstrates that positive early childhood experiences – especially within high-quality early learning and child care programs– are linked to increased school readiness, as well as lifelong benefits such as higher earnings, improved health, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.ⁱⁱ

ISSUE RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue 1: Bolstering the Child Care Workforce

The critical human resource gaps in the early childhood field are leading to financial burdens for local families and businesses. Turnover rates in the child care sector are at an all-time high due to pandemic-related working conditions and burnout. Many child care small businesses are working at 75% capacity due to a lack of early childhood classroom teachers.

The high cost of child care does not equate to well-paid child care educators. The average annual salary for a child care educator in Chattanooga-Hamilton County is just over \$21,000, without benefits.ⁱⁱⁱ

Incentivizing, recruiting, and retaining high-quality child care professionals is critical to prepare young children for school and allow families to remain in the workforce.

★ Recommendations

- Invest in public-private partnership efforts to bolster the workforce, such as the 2022 Quality Matters Fund, designed to support child care providers with funds specific to recruitment and retention tactics.
- Support and invest in creative solutions with sector leaders to create a larger pool of quality early childhood talent, such as scholarships or workforce development programs.

Issue 2: Access/ Cost of Child Care

The gap in supply and demand of quality child care has only grown over the last two years of the pandemic, with some providers closing their doors permanently. Child care is not affordable and accessible for all Ham. Co. residents. According to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (HHS),

CURRENT CHALLENGES:

- The greatest number of child care deserts are outside of Chattanooga city limits, along with only 28% of the 3-star providers in Ham. Co.
- 48.7% of the 21,300 children under 6-years-old in our area live in near poverty.^{ix}
- The pre-pandemic lost revenue to Chattanooga-Hamilton County businesses due to child care problems for parents of young children was \$15 million per year.
- Tennessee only invests \$0.16 of every dollar in all early childhood services and the rest is federally funded.
- Despite the benefits, only 1 in 4 of Hamilton County's youngest residents are currently enrolled in an early learning program.
- For 15,940 children in Hamilton County, all available parents work full-time,^x meaning they need reliable child care.
- Every \$1 we invest in high-quality early childhood programs yields a \$7.50 return on investment.^{xi}
- A high ACEs score, and not just poverty alone, is now a strong predictor of poor life outcomes.^{xii}
- 18k children closest to our hospitals do not have access to health care.
- 40% of children who receive sexual assault exams in Hamilton County are ages birth-5.^{xiii}

2022 ISSUE BRIEF

child care is considered affordable if it costs families no more than 7% of their household income. Yet, the cost of care in Tennessee for a household with both an infant and pre-k child is 82% of the median income of a single parent.^{iv}

While *some* experiencing poverty may qualify for subsidies like the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), these high costs make child care unaffordable for many of Chattanooga-Hamilton County's hard-working families.

★ Recommendations

- Conduct a funding stream analysis to calculate the financial burden of a child care system that works for children, families, small businesses and our economy.
- Implement business tax benefits for employee child care subsidies.
- Expand public-private investments to support families on the “benefits cliff” who do not qualify for certificates, but do not earn enough to afford child care.

Issue 3: Trauma-Informed Community

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the impact of traumatic stress on a child include the lack of access to quality health and mental health services. Trauma-informed communities foster positive relationships among residents, police, fire, health, community centers, and family-serving agencies^v and can be a resource for resilience and healing.

★ Recommendations

- Expand access to high-quality health, mental health, and nutrition services to prevent ACEs, utilizing innovative, collaborative solutions with cross-sector partners.
- Increase funding for comprehensive mental health services for children who are uninsured to new or current providers who are at capacity.
- Implement mandatory cultural competence, trauma, and ACEs/resiliency training for child-facing employees from child care educators to public service employees and more.

Early Matters partners are working together to make Chattanooga-Hamilton County, TN the **BEST PLACE IN THE NATION FOR A CHILD TO BE BORN AND RAISED** by promoting equitable access to early childhood programs and services through equity-focused systems building and advocacy efforts. This brief outlines our 2022 priorities that, if addressed, will aid in both Kindergarten preparation *and* our county's economic recovery.

CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM



- A new Early Care and Education Plan is coming June 2022! -