

Transforming Child Care: Cross-Community Voices to Inform Change

Methodology & Learnings

Child Care Aware® of America (CCAOA) is no stranger to research, nor to advocacy. However, given the unusual circumstances in our country this year, we created the **Together Towards Transformation** project. The central question of this project was, If we were to build a better child care system, what would it look like and how would we do it? We desired to gather information that we typically did not come across in our normal course of work, and we therefore decided to convene five focus groups and hold intensive conversations with a variety of stakeholders. Our desire was to deliberately hear from those we routinely speak to, as well as to hear from those who have not traditionally been brought into child care advocacy conversations. As such, we held five virtual child care Roundtables this fall, one each with resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs), parents, employers, child care providers, and CCAOA's national thought partners.¹ We heard from individuals in 46 states and the District of Columbia and with a wide variety of lived experiences. We talked to families with infants, toddlers, school-aged children, children with special needs, families paying out of pocket for child care, and families receiving child care subsidies. We also talked to providers in large centers, small centers, in home-based child care, religious not-for-profit child care, group family day and night care, school aged child care, and more. We talked to employers with thousands of employees and companies with less than 200 employees. We convened almost 40 individuals from our national thought partner organizations.

After the opening panel or presentation, we then divided participants into several virtual breakout discussion rooms. CCAOA staff facilitated the discussion in each of those breakout rooms; the facilitators walked each room through an identical set of questions and enabled participants to engage in open-ended discussion of the topics presented. The breakout sessions were closed after approximately an hour, and all attendees returned to a plenary session, at which the highlights of each breakout room's discussion were summarized and shared with the other attendees.

After we gathered the input of the five Roundtable groups, we knew that we had to bring these findings to our member leaders in order to spark an honest dialogue about the role of CCR&Rs in child care. In October, we convened a three-day virtual Together Towards Transformation Institute (Transformation

Learnings from Roundtables and Transformation Institute

Upon review and analysis of the feedback from the Roundtables, five basic themes emerged throughout:

- We heard about how the child care system might start from scratch;
- We heard about workforce supports (for both providers and for families);
- We heard about financial supports;
- We heard about health and safety supports, and;
- We heard about supports for and from employers.

¹ Each Roundtable resembled a focus group of about 30-50 participants. We opened up the first four Roundtables (all but the national thought partner Roundtables) with a presentation by panelists chosen from the attendee constituency. Most of the panelists were individuals who have previously engaged with CCAOA in its research and advocacy, and were knowledgeable about the work the CCAOA and CCR&Rs do. Each of these panelists described the impact of the pandemic on their status quo – either as parents to a child attending care, as providers of child care, as employers attempting to maintain business operations in the face of a pandemic and schools closing, or as CCR&Rs trying to assist their communities with their child care needs in the wake of the upheaval.

Institute) and invited members of CCAoA's State Network Council, our Membership Council, our Board of Directors, and a group of 20 emerging CCR&R leaders representing diversity in ability, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. At the Transformation Institute, we shared the findings from the five Roundtables. We also had hard and honest conversations with our member leadership about what a truly equitable child care system would look like at the community and state level, and the ways in which CCR&Rs may have contributed to the inequity of the existing system. Then, we assisted our member leaders in thinking through what a re-imagined child care system might look like, and what the role of CCR&Rs might be in that re-imagined system.

Starting from Scratch

When we asked all participants whether or not advocates should attempt to create a new child care system from scratch – as opposed to revising the existing system – responses were mixed. Some felt that it was impossible to scrap the current system and that the best route was to improve it, whereas others felt that the moment called for a completely new child care system. Several participants from the CCR&Rs Roundtable mentioned the importance of combining child care assistance with other services – food assistance, employment assistance and job training, mental health services, and more. One provider at that Roundtable lamented the effect of multiple decision-making layers at the municipal level on the efficiency of the child care system. Another provider said simply, “There is a mother at my center that misses the subsidy by \$60. I suggested she try and decrease her hours to make the cut, but unfortunately, she’s salaried. This system is not working for families with young children, and that is the bottom line.”



Workforce Supports

Regarding supports for child care educators themselves, we heard from participants at more than one Roundtable that the first priority of advocates needs to be paying child care teachers for the true cost of providing quality care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. As others have noted before, the current market rate-based system is insufficient to cover the true cost of quality care, and providers and families are asked to fill that gap with unfair compensation and unaffordable co-pays.²³

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018. Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24984>.

³ VIDEO: “Why Does Child Care Cost So Much Yet Providers Make So Little?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krejcn2ivYU>.

We also heard from many participants about the challenges of virtual learning and accessing pandemic assistance through the web. Whether it was a lack of access to a reliable internet connection, lack of familiarity with online loan/grant application processes, or the frustration of parents when a child care provider lacked the time and support to help children complete their school assignments, we need to do more to make sure that child care providers' technology needs are supported both during and after the pandemic.

Financial Supports

Regarding long-term financial supports for the child care system, we heard from families that any child care policy fights must occur alongside a fight for paid family and medical leave, paid maternity leave, paid sick leave, and better workplace flexibility. For the times that a child is sick and a parent has to keep them home from child care, to the fact that most child cares will not watch a child younger than one month but maternity benefits may not cover longer than a few weeks, we heard that these policies absolutely cannot be separated.

Health and Safety Supports

With regards to health and safety supports during the pandemic, we heard about the need for consistent information from various government officials. Many providers reported hearing changing or conflicting information from local, county, and state officials, making compliance difficult. Providers also reported great difficulty in procuring COVID testing and timely results for educators, making staffing difficult. We also heard about the dire need for Child Care Health Consultants (CCHCs), which are few and far between. Finally, providers also reported trouble convincing parents of the extra steps that providers were taking to keep facilities clean and safe, and that resulted in parents opting to keep their children home instead of sending them to child care.

Employer Supports

Finally, with regards to the supports needed from and for employers, many parents said that they would like financial support from their employer to afford child care (either in the form of a subsidy or in the form of on-site child care). As one parent said, "it is not fair for the full cost of child care to be shouldered by parents when the benefit of child care [i.e., worker productivity] accrues to employers as well."

Employers, on their part, expressed a desire for tax incentives to provide child care to their employees. Employers also expressed that the pandemic has, for the first time, made them actually think about child care as a necessary employee benefit. Some are beginning to have conversations with their legislators about it. Employer Roundtable participants expressed a desire to work in concert with other employers to bring a unified message to policymakers.

Employers also discussed possible changes to the current dependent care flexible savings account (FSA) program. They noted that the "use it or lose it" policy is not helpful," and recommended both increasing the amount that can be set aside for child care and allowing the funds to roll over year to year if they are unused. One employer suggested making dependent care FSA funds portable when an employee changes jobs. Employers also expressed a need for real time data: "We want to know which child care programs are open and have spots. We need real-time data like a hotel has."