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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wisconsin child care programs strained by staffing shortages, low compensation
Deepening uncertainty and looming staffing exodus underscored in national survey

Wisconsin's early childhood educator staffing crisis and a looming staffing exodus are leading to significant child care supply challenges across the state, according to newly released national survey data.

Nearly 50% of Wisconsin child care center directors who participated in the survey say their program is caring for fewer children than they would like to serve, according to data from the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC). Providers say it is due to "not enough staff" because "compensation is too low for recruitment and retention."

"The survey results are striking but frankly not surprising," said Ruth Schmidt, executive director of Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, Wisconsin's state affiliate of NAEYC.

"The trends underscore what we have long known and continue to say: Significant public investment – state and federal – is essential to stabilize and support child care. Anything less will allow the ripple effects to continue to challenge providers, families, businesses, and our communities."

Of Wisconsin survey participants who are experiencing a staffing shortage, more than 45% are serving fewer children, and nearly 52% report longer waitlists. The October 2022 survey included more than 12,000 early childhood educators from all states and settings, including faith-based programs, family child care programs, Head Starts, and center-based care. There were 1,173 Wisconsin participants.

"There is limited supply because there is limited staff," NAEYC CEO Michelle Kang said. "The solution is federal investment to sustain and build the system and put child care providers in a position to do what they do best – serve families, educate children, and support the American economy."

Staffing exodus looms
Survey participants said federal relief funds helped them stay afloat during the height of the pandemic, but as stabilization money runs out in Wisconsin in Jan. 2024, the economic and labor pressures will cause the already tight child care supply to shrink to new levels.

Educators are considering leaving the field, threatening an exodus that will deepen the supply, quality, and affordability crises for years to come. This comes on the backdrop of Wisconsin already experiencing child care deserts across 50% of the state, where there is only one licensed child care slot for every three children age 5 and under. Nationally, there has been a decline of 84,400 child care jobs due to staffing shortages since February 2020, according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE).

Nearly one-third of Wisconsin respondents said they are or maybe are considering leaving their job or closing their family child care program, most commonly citing child care provider wages.

In addition, more than 29% of Wisconsin survey participants who have been in the field five years or less said they are considering leaving the profession. This is in the midst of nearly 8 in 10 survey respondents indicating burnout and exhaustion are contributing to challenges in retaining early childhood professionals as longtime challenges of the field worsened because of the pandemic.

"We hear from providers all the time that they know and believe in the importance of their work but will not be able to continue to work in this significantly under-resourced field," Schmidt said. "Burnout and exhaustion should not be mainstays in a profession that is developing and educating young children and supporting families and communities. We must call for public investments into child care to prevent this looming staffing exodus and its wide-ranging implications."

The national survey data mirrors the results of a recent WECA-initiated staffing survey of 309 child care providers from across Wisconsin. In that smaller sample, 65% said wages are the largest contributor to not attracting and retaining child care staff, while one third of programs have closed classrooms due to staffing challenges. About half have unfilled slots due to staffing shortages.

"We cannot compete with employers that are paying way more than we can afford, as we can only charge parents so much for child care services," a provider shared in WECA's August 2022 survey.

The impact of stabilization funds
More than $700 million in federal pandemic relief funding has been allocated by Wisconsin legislators and policymakers since the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency in 2020, but it expires in Jan. 2024. In Wisconsin, a majority of that funding has supported the Child Care Counts program, which provides stabilization payments to programs to increase provider compensation and offset other operating costs.

"It is already difficult to find and retain quality staff members. Without the stabilization grants, it would be difficult to compensate staff for the extra hard work they are putting in. Keeping comparable with wages in the community is very important and the stabilization grants have allowed us to do that," shared a Wisconsin early educator in NAEYC's survey.

More than 27% of Wisconsin survey participants said their program would have permanently closed without stabilization payment support, and one third said they will have to cut wages or will be unable to sustain wage and salary increases when stabilization funds end. Nearly 61% of center directors said their programs may have to raise parent fees when assistance runs out.

Importance of state investment
WECA and its multi-sector advocacy initiative, Raising Wisconsin, are advocating for a $300 million investment into the continuation of the Child Care Counts program in the state's 2023-25 biennial budget. With the looming fiscal cliff, the significant investment will play a critical role in ensuring an already-fragile early childhood landscape doesn't suffer even worse consequences than those experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have to advocate for significant public investment. Child care's business model is broken, and we can't continue to expect it to work for all when balance sheets are placed on the backs of working families and undercompensated child care providers," Schmidt said.

"The path forward is treating child care like the vital public good that it is. And, that is why we're placing our advocacy efforts firmly behind a significant investment in Child Care Counts."

For more information on Raising Wisconsin and its state budget request, visit the initiative's website.

About Wisconsin Early Childhood Association and Raising Wisconsin

Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA) is a leading state non-profit organization, founded in 1971, that supports and advocates for the early childhood workforce and early care and education in Wisconsin. It is the state affiliate of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). A statewide organization with local reach, WECA administers and leads several key programs for child care providers and programs. Most recently, it launched Raising Wisconsin, a multi-sector statewide advocacy initiative calling for significant public investment in child care and optimal child health and well-being.

About National Association for the Education of Young Children

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional membership organization that works to promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age 8, by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children. The association comprises nearly 60,000 individual members of the early childhood community and more than 50 Affiliates, all committed to delivering on the promise of high-quality early learning. Together, we work to achieve a collective vision: that all young children thrive and learn in a society dedicated to ensuring they reach their full potential.

NAEYC Survey Methodology

This online survey, created and conducted by NAEYC using SurveyMonkey, represents the responses of a non-randomized sample of 13,037 individuals working in early childhood education settings who completed the survey in English or Spanish between October 5-23, 2022. To generate a more representative national sample from the pool of responses, a probability proportional to size (PPS) methodology was used to pull samples by state that are benchmarked to the share of the total early childhood workforce by state. These shares were calculated by the authors from the Bureau of Labor Statistics May 2021 Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (Codes: 11-9031, 25-2011, 25-2051, 39-9011). The final sample size for the national-level analysis is 12,897. In contrast, for the state-level analysis, the entire sample of responses from each state were used. We are unable to supply detailed analysis in states for which there are very small sample sizes across sub-groups. Respondents were asked to select any setting that applied to them. They could choose from the following list: child care center, family child care home, non-profit, for-profit, school-based, Head Start, faith-based, multi-site. For this brief, only the percentages for child care center and family child care are reported. The survey links were shared widely through email newsletters, listservs, social media, and via partnerships, and 10 randomly selected respondents were provided with a $100 gift card for participation in a sweepstakes. Given the constantly changing and widely varying nature of the crisis, the broad analysis from this survey is intended to present the experiences of the respondents, as captured in the moment that they take the survey, with extrapolations for the experiences of the field and industry at large. Additional information and previous surveys are available at www.naeyc.org/pandemic-surveys

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