Child Care Needs Assessment

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Prepared by:

foundations for families

Child Care Needs Assessment

CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

Harrisonburg, Virginia, is an independent city located in the central Shenandoah Valley. From March to October 2026, the City of Harrisonburg ("City") conducted a Child Care Needs Assessment with four primary objectives: to understand the most significant challenges for families in identifying, accessing, and paying for child care services in Harrisonburg; to identify the most significant challenges child care providers face in supplying affordable, high-quality services for children birth to age 5, including their desire for expansion, and identifying the costs for providers to expand; to identify gaps in local coordination and services among providers; and to recommend policy and practice strategies to address challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The needs assessment included surveys and focus groups, in addition to exploration of the costs and factors associated with the expansion of child care facilities in Harrisonburg. Data was also collected from publicly available sources to provide context for stakeholder input. The City contracted with Foundations for Families, a consulting, training, and technical assistance company, to conduct the Child Care Needs Assessment.

CITY PROFILE

Harrisonburg is a diverse and thriving city with a population of 51,329. Residents are primarily White, and nearly one-quarter of the population is Hispanic or Latino. English is the primary language spoken among residents in the City, followed by Spanish, spoken by about 20% of the population. Many children live with their biological, step, or adoptive parents; there are also high rates of children living in single-parent households or with grandparents or other relatives.

The needs of individuals, children, and families in Harrisonburg are multi-faceted and interconnected. There are many factors that influence the social and economic well-being of City residents.



Poverty disproportionately affects young children. In zip code 22801, 76.4% of households with a single-parent mother with young children are living in poverty.



The labor force participation rate is 59.8%, and more than 70% of households with children under age 6 report having all parents in the labor force.



Rental cost burden is high, and costs are increasing. Nearly 50% of renters spend more than 30% of their monthly income on rent.



Median household income lags behind the living wage. Housing, child care, and transportation are significant portions of a household budget.

EARLY CHILDHOOD LANDSCAPE

The City of Harrisonburg has a robust early childhood system that includes licensed and regulated unlicensed child care programs, home visiting programs, state-funded pre-kindergarten (Virginia Preschool Initiative), and public school district pre-kindergarten.

In Harrisonburg, there are 2,731 children under age 5. The poverty rate of children ages 0-5 is 23.5%; 643 young children are living in poverty.

There are 24 licensed and 7 unlicensed child care providers, with a combined capacity to serve 2,304 children birth to school age.

Child care affordability is a challenge for families. The average annual cost of child care is $13,780 for toddlers and $11,570 for preschoolers.

Infant and toddler care is limited. Only 45% of child care providers are eligible to serve this age group, suggesting fewer options for families with very young children.

About 61% of providers accept child care subsidies, and 16 programs are meeting expectations in VQB5, Virginia's quality rating and improvement system.

There are an estimated 256 children ages 0-5 with disabilities. The percentage of students with disabilities in Harrisonburg City Public Schools is 10.4%.

In addition to licensed and regulated unlicensed child care, families in Harrisonburg may access other early childhood programs, such as home visiting. Healthy Families of the Blue Ridge is the primary home visiting program in Harrisonburg, providing families with weekly home visits, parenting support, resources, and referrals to community resources. The 2025 Virginia Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Needs Assessment classified Harrisonburg as a high-risk community with unmet need.

Further, the Virginia Department of Education provides publicly funded pre-kindergarten through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). There are 224 VPI slots in Harrisonburg. Enrollment in public school pre-kindergarten and kindergarten has decreased in recent years.

STAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS

In Spring 2026, surveys were implemented with families residing in Harrisonburg with children ages 5 and under, child care providers, and employers. Focus groups were held with families and child care providers to supplement information gathered through surveys.

Key findings across all three stakeholder groups – families, child care providers, and employers – revealed challenges in four primary categories: Access, Affordability, Expansion, and Workforce Development. While challenges exist, the City and community also demonstrate meaningful strengths, and the survey and focus group respondents reflected strong investment from families, child care providers, and employers.

Access

The Child Care Needs Assessment found that child care challenges in Harrisonburg are not just related to the availability of slots. Child care options that are available do not always meet families' needs. Only about one-third of families report having all the child care they need, with the greatest unmet needs involving flexible, part-time, emergency backup, before and after school, summer, and care during nontraditional business hours. Cost is a significant barrier across income levels, though lower-income families are disproportionately impacted and are more likely to need care that covers all of their work hours.

Families also face a shortage of infant/toddler care, long waitlists, transportation barriers, and difficulties finding information about available options. Child care provider feedback highlights challenges regarding limited coordination among programs, lack of transportation services, and few extended-hour, weekend, or emergency care options.

Affordability

Cost and affordability is a primary barrier to child care for families in the City. More than 80% of surveyed families reported that child care costs are a concern for their family. Similarly, nearly 90% of City employers believe that cost is the main child care challenge for their employees. Families indicated that if child care were more affordable, they could work more hours or complete education goals sooner.

Child care providers almost universally agree that limited access to grants or subsidies; operating costs; and staff wages and benefits impact their ability to offer more affordable rates.

While child care subsidies help some families afford care, gaps remain due to limited awareness, waitlists, and eligibility, in addition to a limited number of providers accepting subsidy. Overall, the findings highlight the high cost of child care, limited access to financial supports, and child care workforce challenges.

Expansion

Half of child care providers indicated an interest in expanding their program to serve more children. Cost of construction or renovation was the leading reason child care programs are not expanding, followed by difficulty securing financing. When asked what supports would make expansion more feasible, the top responses related to financial support and staffing.

Workforce Development

Nearly all child care providers noted that staff wages and benefits were among the factors that keep them from offering more affordable rates. Despite the high cost of staff wages and benefits, wages remain low compared to other employers and make recruiting and retention a top challenge. Further, three-quarters of child care providers believe a workforce pipeline, including internships and apprenticeships, would be somewhat or very helpful in their ability to provide high-quality care.

Among City employers, more than three-quarters noted that child care issues affect their employees' ability to work either sometimes, often, or very often. Similarly, three-quarters of employers believe that child care issues have had at least some impact on business operations.

Half of employers offer some level of child care benefits for their employees. Benefits include flexible hours, Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA), remote/hybrid work, and information/referrals to child care resources. Cost is the leading reason employers do not offer additional (or any) child care benefits. This is followed by being unsure of what benefits would best support employees, lack of employee demand/interest, and lack of space for onsite care. When provided with a list of possible child care benefits, employers are most interested in partnering with a child care program to provide reserved slots or backup/emergency care options for their employees.

FACILITIES

As part of the Child Care Needs Assessment, a facilities review examined Harrisonburg's zoning requirements and established cost estimates to understand the factors and expenses that could impact renovation, expansion, and construction of child care facilities. The City's zoning regulations include three types of child care facilities: Child Day Care Center, Family Day Home Major, and Family Day Home Minor. Each type has different limitations in terms of location and costs (i.e., Special Use Permits) that could impact expansion.

Cost associated with renovation, expansion, or construction of child care facilities is a significant limiting factor for expansion of child care facilities to serve more families. Cost per square foot estimates for the City of Harrisonburg range from $42 per square foot to renovate an existing facility to more than $400 per square foot for an addition or new construction.

Additionally, surveys and focus groups revealed that cost, financing, and staffing are the top reasons child care providers have not moved forward with expansion. Only one provider cited low enrollment or uncertainty about long-term demand as a barrier to expansion. This suggests that a majority of providers recognize the demand and need for expanded child care services in the City, but are limited by financial and staffing challenges.

POLICY AND PRACTICE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Child care is an essential part of the infrastructure in Harrisonburg, a necessity to support a thriving local economy. The quality and accessibility of child care in Harrisonburg affects children and families, as well as businesses whose employees need accessible, reliable, and affordable child care for their children.

Many factors influence child care in Harrisonburg, ranging from federal, state, and local administrative priorities, regulations, and funding requirements. All key stakeholders (e.g., the City, Harrisonburg City Public Schools, community-based organizations, child care providers, employers, families) have a role in the ongoing work needed to support growth and sustainability of the City's child care system. Recommendations that follow present a systems approach to child care enhancements in Harrisonburg.

Policy and Practice Strategies by Primary Stakeholder



Communitywide

Communitywide recommendations include leveraging existing committees, workgroups, and advisories, or creating an Advisory Committee to help advance strategies and recommendations outlined in this report; participating in shared advocacy efforts; and creating a centralized resource for Harrisonburg families, child care providers, and employers to share and access real-time information about openings and waitlists for enrollment in child care programs.

City of Harrisonburg

Given its role in local governance, the City of Harrisonburg is a leader and convener, establishing a vision for the City that embraces its diverse residents and thriving economy. Maintaining a focus on child care as part of Harrisonburg's vision is essential. City recommendations include exploring federal, state, and private funding opportunities to advance the Harrisonburg 2045 vision related to child care; considering dedicating City funding to establish a child care provider expansion grant program to help providers access funding for expansion projects or identifying options to support facilities expansion in municipal-owned facilities; revising zoning code for clarity and support lower cost solutions to expansion; and monitoring the selection of Opportunity Zone 2.0 tracts to determine strategies for the City and stakeholders to support child care and business developments in these high-need areas.

In addition, the City may consider redesigning key aspects and/or expansion of its Parks and Recreation Department child care program in response to family and community needs. This could include expanding to a second location, increasing the hours and schedules that care is offered, and ensuring affordability for low-income working families.

Employers

Employers play a critical role in helping employees find and access child care for their families; however, with limited child care capacity and child care workforce challenges, long-term solutions are complex. Employer recommendations focus on building an understanding of employees' child care needs by conducting an Employer Child Care Needs Assessment; determining how current benefits support working families; and implementing resource and referral services to support child care needs, in addition to exploring subsidized solutions.

Additionally, employers may consider participating in the Virginia Employee Child Care Assistance Program, once it becomes available, which will help employers support their employees' child care costs.

Child Care Providers

Child care providers offer essential services that require investments at the federal, state, and local levels to meet families' needs.

Child care provider recommendations include developing a coordinating committee that meets regularly to strengthen communication and coordination among child care providers, local public school preschool programs, and other early childhood partners to improve service delivery, information sharing, and seamless transitions for children and families. In addition, as staffing challenges present substantial challenges to the expansion of child care programs in Harrisonburg, recommendations focus on recruitment and retention (e.g., conducting wage and benefits comparability study), and establishing collaborative partnerships with stakeholders (i.e., institutes of higher education) to support recruitment and a pipeline of qualified staff.

Child care providers may also continue to explore diversified funding and/or utilization of grant funding to increase staff wages in an effort to retain more staff, alleviate workforce shortages, and encourage expansion; seek partnerships with training programs and employers to support training and workforce development; and engage in ongoing advocacy for state and federal funding to support child care facilities expansion.

LOOKING AHEAD

Moving from recommendations to implementation of the strategies identified in this Child Care Needs Assessment will require a cross-sector and multi-stakeholder commitment. As an independent city, Harrisonburg is well-positioned to be a leader in improving the local child care system and access for families; its vision includes commitments to children, families, child care providers, and local employers alike.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION **1**

METHODOLOGY **2**

Publicly Available Data 2

Surveys 2

Focus Groups 3

Facilities 3

Limitations of Child Care Needs Assessment 3

CITY PROFILE **5**

Demographics 6

Household Composition and Family Characteristics 10

Social and Economic Factors Impacting Wellbeing 10

Labor Force, Industries, and Occupations 13

Opportunity Zone 2.0 Policy Context and Authority 15

EARLY CHILDHOOD LANDSCAPE **17**

Children Birth to Age 5 18

Child Care Programs 19

Home Visiting Programs 22

Publicly Funded Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten 23

STAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS **24**

Profile of Respondents 24

Family, Child Care Provider, and Employer Challenges 30

CHILD CARE FACILITIES EXPANSION **54**

POLICY AND PRACTICE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES **56**

Communitywide 57

City of Harrisonburg 57

Employers 60

Child Care Providers 61

LOOKING AHEAD **62**

APPENDIX **63**

For Reference: Resources and Models to Support Child Care System Improvements 63

INTRODUCTION



Harrisonburg, Virginia, is an independent city located in the central Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It is recognized as the county seat of Rockingham County, and is located along Interstate 81, within two hours of Richmond and Washington, D.C. The City of Harrisonburg ("City") is governed by a five-member City Council, with an appointed City Manager who oversees the delivery of public services through city departments.

The future of Harrisonburg is guided by Harrisonburg 2045: A City for All, a vision adopted by the City Council in 2025 that includes the following focus areas.

- We provide a quality urban living option for everyone who wants to reside here;
- Our diverse population thrives in a welcoming city where all are valued as friends and neighbors;
- Our inclusiveness is our strength and reflects the true spirit of our city;
- The pillars of our multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-generational city consist of a robust economy and a vibrant education epicenter, along with a broad range of amenities and a beautiful natural environment that enrich life;
- This is made possible by the fiscally sound planning of our staff and elected leaders; and
- Bold thinking, community input, and best practices lead the city to consider new paths and structures that have led to our recognition as a model locality.

In alignment with Harrisonburg 2045: A City for All, City Council adopted a 2025-2028 Action Plan that establishes vision areas, priorities, and associated tasks. One such vision area is A Thriving Educational Epicenter, in which the priority is to "assess and determine how to provide additional support to expand early childhood education and after-school programs supported by the City." Early childhood education and care is recognized as essential for early childhood development and wellbeing in addition to being a critical aspect of economic development, allowing parents to work and participate in the labor force.

To help the City achieve its vision, City Council allocated funding to conduct a Child Care Needs Assessment. The Child Care Needs Assessment has four primary objectives:

1. Understanding the most significant challenges for families in identifying, accessing, and paying for child care services in Harrisonburg (e.g., What barriers still exist even if sufficient supply were available?);
2. Identifying the most significant challenges child care providers face in supplying affordable, high-quality services for children birth to age 5, including their desire for expansion, and identifying the costs for existing providers to expand in current facilities or to construct additional facilities, as well as identifying the cost to new providers to establish facilities to meet local demand;
3. Identifying gaps in local coordination and services among providers; and
4. Recommending policy and practice strategies to address identified challenges.

METHODOLOGY



The *2026 City of Harrisonburg, Virginia, Child Care Needs Assessment* was conducted from March to October 2026 under the leadership of Brian Vandenberg, Assistant to the City Manager. The City contracted with Foundations for Families, a consulting, training, and technical assistance company, to conduct the Child Care Needs Assessment. Key components of the needs assessment included data collection, surveys, and focus groups, in addition to exploration of the costs and factors associated with the expansion of child care in Harrisonburg.

Publicly Available Data

In June 2026, Foundations for Families collected data from publicly available sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau and the Virginia Department of Social Services, to provide context for stakeholder input from community surveys and focus groups and to inform fact-finding for the Child Care Needs Assessment.

In addition, Foundations for Families prepared a supplemental report, *Opportunity Zone 2.0 Data Report* to support City planning and potential advocacy for census tract nomination by the Governor of Virginia for designation/redesignation by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The City has five eligible census tracts, two of which – 3.02 and 1.01 – are current tracts that remain eligible under the federal Administration's Opportunity Zone 2.0 initiative. This future redesignation may create pathways for investment in the City and its child care infrastructure.

Surveys

In Spring 2026, the City and Foundations for Families conducted community surveys to support the Child Care Needs Assessment. Three surveys were implemented:

1. **Family Survey.** Families with children ages 5 or under who reside in the City of Harrisonburg were asked to share their opinions and experiences identifying, accessing, and paying for child care. The survey was available in English and Spanish.

2. **Child Care Provider Survey**. Child care providers located in the City were asked to share their perspectives and identify the most significant challenges in supplying affordable, high-quality services. They were also asked about their perspectives regarding local coordination efforts and about their experience and interest in expansion.

3. **Employer Survey.** Employers in the City were invited to share their understanding of the child care needs of employees, their role in helping employees identify, access, and pay for child care, and the impacts of the City's current child care landscape on their ability to recruit, hire, and retain employees.

Focus Groups

In July 2026, focus groups were conducted to further support the Child Care Needs Assessment. The focus groups sought to supplement information gathered from surveys.

Two types of focus groups were conducted:

1. **Family Focus Groups.** Three 1-hour focus groups (virtual) were offered at various times of day for families of children ages 5 or under who reside in the City of Harrisonburg.
2. **Child Care Provider Focus Group.** One 1-hour focus group (virtual) was offered to child care providers located in the City.

Facilities

Foundations for Families subcontracted with inHabit Architecture & Design to research and summarize the average estimated costs for existing child care providers to expand within their current facilities or to construct additional space, as well as to determine the costs for new providers to establish facilities to meet local demand. inHabit Architecture & Design performed a review of the Harrisonburg Zoning map and code to identify potential hurdles in the approval process for facilities; prepared Pricing Narratives to identify levels of possible facility renovation or construction; and established cost per square foot estimates for four different levels of renovation or construction.

An addendum to this report details the facilities review. Key findings are described in this Child Care Needs Assessment and informed findings and recommendations.

Limitations of Child Care Needs Assessment

The City of Harrisonburg has three primary zip codes. Therefore, a substantial amount of data is provided at the zip code and city level.

Rockingham County level data is included as the county shares regional workforce, housing, and service networks with the City. Data is also included for the Harrisonburg Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)[1], a federally defined region used for demographic, economic, and labor-market analysis, composed of the independent City of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

State-level data is provided for comparison and/or to set the context for Virginia within the national landscape. Information from additional sources (e.g., school district) is provided for key data points and to illustrate unique and specific needs in local communities.

Census data used in this report is collected from the American Community Survey (ACS), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. This report relies primarily on the ACS 2020-2024 5-year estimates. Data from daily responses to the ACS survey are pooled together, weighted, and processed as a whole dataset to take advantage of the larger number of records.

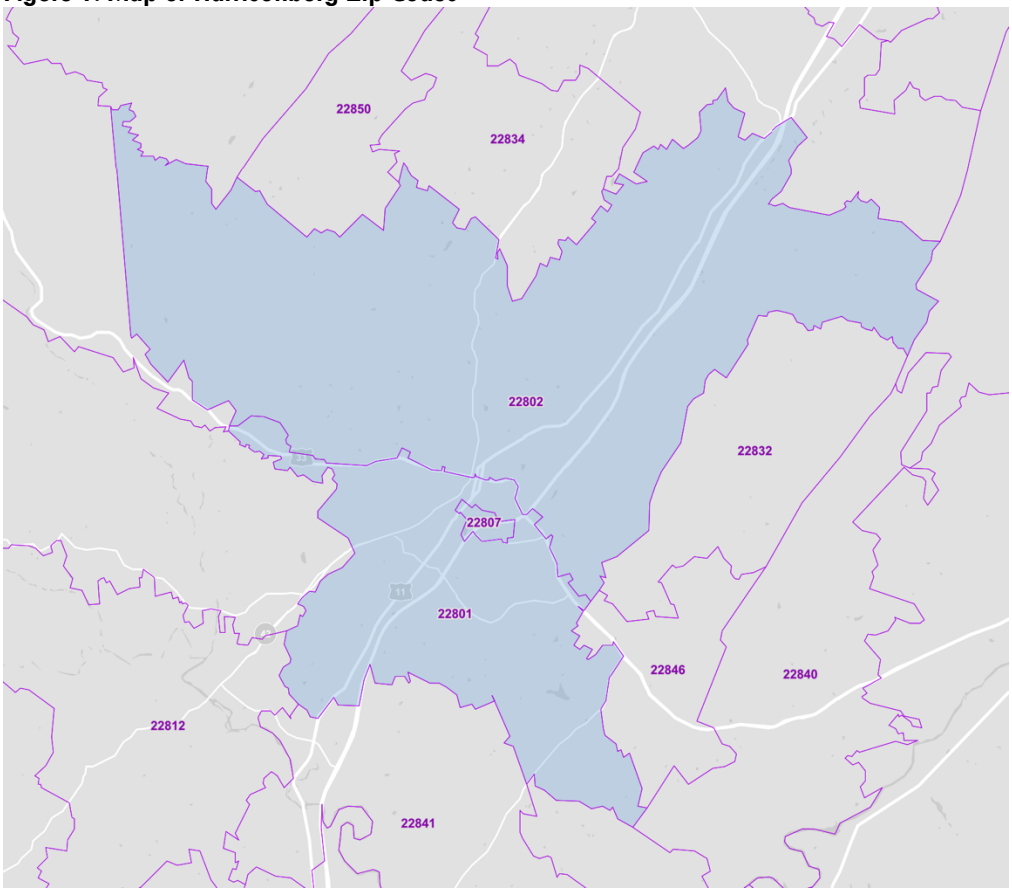
[1] A metropolitan statistical area is defined as having at least one urban area of 50,000 or more inhabitants. Source: U.S. Census. (2026). About Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about.html

When examining U.S. Census data tables, the margins of error for data on communities with small populations may be higher than communities with large populations. This is particularly true for zip code 22807, which has a population of just 5,347, resulting in less stable estimates.

Zip code level data provided in the U.S. Census is a representation of the U.S. Postal Service zip code service area known as a "ZIP Code Tabulation Area."[i] Zip codes are used by the Postal Service for mail delivery routes; these boundaries may cross county, school district, or other geographic boundaries. A sum of zip code level data will not necessarily total the city or county level data.

Figure 1 provides a map of Harrisonburg zip codes. Zip code 22801 encompasses central, southern, and eastern portions of the City, as well as portions of Rockingham County. Zip code 22802 encompasses northern and western sections of the City. Notably, zip code 22807 is dedicated to James Madison University (JMU). The large student population in this zip code likely skews data on poverty, education, employment, and housing as outlined in the tables that follow.

Figure 1. Map of Harrisonburg Zip Codes[ii]



CITY PROFILE

Snapshot Summary: Diverse Needs and a Thriving Local Economy

Harrisonburg is a diverse and thriving city with a population of 51,329. Median age is low in the City, compared to the state, and the greatest percentage of the population under age 5 resides in zip code 22802. The City is more diverse than surrounding Rockingham County; nearly one-quarter of the population is Hispanic or Latino. English is the primary language spoken among individuals in Harrisonburg, followed by Spanish, which is spoken by about 20% of the population.

Poverty is a challenge in Harrisonburg, with a rate of 25.7%, more than double the statewide rate, though it has decreased in recent years. College student populations inflate the poverty rate. When excluding students, poverty rate is approximately 14%. Poverty disproportionately affects young children, and there are nearly 650 children under age 5 living in poverty in the City. In zip code 22801, 76.4% of households with a single-parent mother with young children are living in poverty.

Most children in Harrisonburg reside with their biological, step, or adoptive parents. A combined 7.9% of children live with their grandparent(s) or other relative(s). Approximately 16% of children live in single-parent families.

Social and economic factors impact the wellbeing of individuals and families in Harrisonburg. Median household income lags behind the living wage. For example, while median household income is $62,254, a single parent with two children needs to earn $92,165 annually to make a living wage. Child care costs are significant. Additionally, housing costs have increased substantially in recent years, and rental cost burden is high; nearly 50% of renters spend more than 30% of their monthly income on rent. Economic constraints can affect family stability and ability to access basic necessities.

The labor force participation rate in Harrisonburg is 59.8%, and it is even greater among families with young children. More than 70% of households with children under age 6 report having all parents in the labor force, above the statewide rate (67.6%). A majority of Harrisonburg residents' place of employment is in the City, and unemployment is consistently low in recent years. Management, business, science, and arts occupations, as well as service occupations are the top areas of employment among City residents. Future job growth is expected to be strong, particularly in the health care, logistics, and transportation sectors.

Demographics



Population

In the City of Harrisonburg, in the last two non-overlapping five-year Census periods, the overall population (51,392) has decreased slightly (-3.5%). There is variation within each zip code, with 22801 mirroring the City's slight population decline, while 22802 shows steady growth (Table 1).

While zip code 22807 (the zip code for JMU) shows a large increase (+69%), this is likely reflecting both its smaller overall population and an increase in student enrollment at JMU. In Spring 2026, JMU enrollment included 2,000 more students (22,009) compared to Spring 2015 (20,082).[iii]

Table 1. Population by Geographic Area and Year[iv,v]

Geographic Area	2015-2019	2020-2024	% Change
Zip Code 22801	41,572	39,983	-3.8%
Zip Code 22802	29,069	30,374	+4.5%
Zip Code 22807	3,161	5,347	+69.1%
City of Harrisonburg	53,273	51,392	-3.5%
Rockingham County	80,284	85,600	+6.6%
Harrisonburg MSA	133,557	136,992	+2.6%
Virginia	8,454,463	8,705,170	+3.0%

The City and its zip codes have a lower median age compared to the state. One significant impact on the median age of the City is that zip code 22807 is a student-dominated area with an artificially low median age, as it includes no young children or older adults. The greatest percentages of children under age 5 and of the population over age 65 are in zip code 22802 (Table 2).

Table 2. Median Age and Distribution of the Population by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[vi]

Geographic Area	Median Age	Percent of Population Under Age 5	Percent of Population Over Age 65
Zip Code 22801	28.5	5.0%	13.1%
Zip Code 22802	37.4	7.2%	15.4%
Zip Code 22807	18.9	0.0%	0.0%
City of Harrisonburg	25.0	5.4%	10.5%
Rockingham County	40.1	5.7%	20.1%
Harrisonburg MSA	34.9	5.6%	16.5%
Virginia	39.0	5.6%	16.7%

Racial and ethnic composition in the City of Harrisonburg is described in Tables 3 and 4. Zip code 22802 stands out with the highest shares of Black or African American residents (7.1%) and multiracial residents (15.0%). Again, zip code 22807 reflects the racial composition of a student-dominated population, making it distinct from the City's residential zip codes.

Harrisonburg has a substantially larger Hispanic or Latino population than the state, with 23.6% of residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino compared to 11.0% statewide, concentrated most in zip code 22802 (25.3%).

Table 3. Population (and Percent of Population) by Race and Geographic Area (2020-2024)[vii]

Geographic Area	White	Black or African American	American Indian and Alaskan Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	Some other race	Two or more races
Zip Code 22801	28,603 (71.5%)	2,059 (5.1%)	95 (0.2%)	1,135 (2.8%)	66 (0.2%)	2,150 (5.4%)	5,875 (14.7%)
Zip Code 22802	19,952 (65.7%)	2,157 (7.1%)	293 (1.0%)	702 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2,714 (8.9%)	4,556 (15.0%)
Zip Code 22807	3,976 (74.4%)	500 (9.4%)	0 (0.0%)	344 (6.4%)	12 (0.2%)	84 (1.6%)	431 (8.1%)
City of Harrisonburg	33,036 (64.3%)	3,938 (7.7%)	271 (0.5%)	1,837 (3.6%)	24 (0.0%)	4,146 (8.1%)	8,140 (15.8%)
Rockingham County	73,563 (85.9%)	2,060 (2.4%)	327 (0.4%)	943 (1.1%)	54 (0.1%)	2,240 (2.6%)	6,413 (7.5%)
Harrisonburg MSA	106,599 (77.8%)	5,998 (4.4%)	598 (0.4%)	2,780 (2.0%)	78 (0.1%)	6,386 (4.7%)	14,553 (10.6%)
Virginia	5,240,029 (60.2%)	1,616,256 (18.6%)	30,986 (0.4%)	604,505 (6.9%)	5,710 (0.1%)	384,073 (4.4%)	823,611 (9.5%)

Table 4. Ethnicity as a Percentage of the Population by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[viii]

Geographic Area	Hispanic or Latino Origin (of any race)	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Mexican	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Puerto Rican	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Cuban	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Other
Zip Code 22801	17.7%	2.6%	3.6%	0.5%	10.9%
Zip Code 22802	25.3%	8.8%	2.7%	2.2%	11.5%
Zip Code 22807	6.5%	2.2%	0.5%	0.1%	3.6%
City of Harrisonburg	23.6%	5.2%	3.8%	1.4%	13.2%
Rockingham County	9.3%	3.5%	1.6%	0.2%	4.0%
Harrisonburg MSA	14.7%	4.1%	2.4%	0.6%	7.4%
Virginia	11.0%	2.4%	1.4%	0.3%	6.9%

The primary language of individuals in the City is English, followed by Spanish (Table 5). One in five City residents speaks Spanish at home.

Table 5. Language Spoken at Home (5 Years and Over) by Geographic Area and Percentage of Population (2020-2024)[ix]

Geographic Area	English	Spanish	Other Indo-European	Asian and Pacific Island	Other
Zip Code 22801	77.0%	14.8%	4.1%	1.4%	2.8%
Zip Code 22802	73.7%	21.7%	2.8%	0.8%	1.1%
Zip Code 22807	86.9%	4.1%	5.3%	2.5%	1.2%
City of Harrisonburg	71.6%	20.1%	3.8%	1.7%	2.8%
Rockingham County	89.8%	6.8%	2.5%	0.3%	0.5%
Harrisonburg MSA	83.0%	11.8%	3.0%	0.8%	1.4%
Virginia	82.6%	7.9%	3.9%	3.8%	1.9%

Poverty

As described in Table 6, Harrisonburg's poverty rate is significantly higher than the statewide rate, though it has decreased over time. Zip code 22807 is largely composed of JMU students and reported a poverty rate of 100%, which reflects student classification rather than true economic hardship and should be interpreted as such.

The City of Harrisonburg's Comprehensive Housing Assessment and Market Study (2021) highlighted the impact of the student population on the City's poverty levels. The report noted that the City's overall poverty rate was 28%, but once college-age households were excluded, the poverty rate dropped by half to 14%.[x]

Table 6. Poverty Rate by Geographic Area and Year[xi]

Geographic Area	2015-2019	2020-2024	% Change
Zip Code 22801	28.8%	25.5%	-11.5%
Zip Code 22802	15.2%	15.9%	+4.6%
Zip Code 22807	n/a	100.0%	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	28.3%	25.7%	-9.2%
Rockingham County	8.8%	9.8%	+11.4%
Harrisonburg MSA	16.0%	15.3%	-4.4%
Virginia	10.6%	9.9%	-6.6%

While the percentage of households living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is concerning, many more households are identified as "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed" (ALICE). These households earn above the FPL, but not enough to meet a "Household Survival Budget," which reflects the bare minimum necessary to "live and work in the modern economy and includes housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, technology (a smartphone plan), and taxes."[xii]

These households often have household income levels that are too high to qualify for some assistance programs yet too low to cover the real cost of living in the area. In Harrisonburg, 32% of residents live below the ALICE threshold (Table 7).

Table 7. Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) Households by Geographic Area (2024)[xiii]

Geographic Area	% Below ALICE	% Below FPL
City of Harrisonburg	32%	23%
Virginia	27%	10%

Poverty rates differ by family structure. The citywide poverty rate by family type masks the variation between zip codes 22801 and 22802. In 22801, there is a significantly high poverty rate among female-headed households (76.3%), while in 22802, the reverse is true with married-couple families experiencing higher poverty than single mothers (Table 8).

Table 8. Poverty Status of Families, by Type, in the Past 12 Months by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xiv]

Geographic Area	All Families with Related Children Under Age 5	Married-couple Families with Related Children Under Age 5	Families with Female Householder, No Spouse Present, with Related Children Under Age 5
Zip Code 22801	23.1%	8.1%	76.3%
Zip Code 22802	18.1%	23.0%	15.2%
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	14.3%	17.0%	11.2%
Rockingham County	15.6%	4.1%	40.5%
Harrisonburg MSA	15.3%	7.4%	32.6%
Virginia	9.0%	3.3%	29.7%

In the City of Harrisonburg, the poverty rate for young children (birth to age 5) is 23.5%, and ranges from 18.5% to 28.7% in the zip codes. The City has an estimated 643 children under age 5 living in poverty (Table 9).

Table 9. Child Poverty and Young Children Living in Poverty by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xv]

Geographic Area	Poverty Rate for Children (0-18)	Poverty Rate for Children < Age 5	Number of Children <5 Years Old	Number of Children Living in Poverty		
				Age 0-3[2]	Age 3-5[3]	Age 0-5
Zip Code 22801	15.8%	18.5%	1,933	215	143	358
Zip Code 22802	20.7%	28.7%	2,095	361	241	602
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a	0	0	0	0
City of Harrisonburg	21.8%	23.5%	2,731	385	257	643
Rockingham County	11.0%	14.1%	4,570	386	258	646
Harrisonburg MSA	14.5%	17.7%	7,301	776	513	1,289
Virginia	12.3%	13.1%	482,095	37,892	25,444	63,336

The number of children under age five in the City of Harrisonburg is distributed evenly across income groups, with roughly one-quarter of young children in each family income bracket. Harrisonburg has a higher percentage of young children in low-income households compared to both the Blue Ridge Ready Region[4] and the state.

In contrast, the share of children in higher-income households (above 85% of State Median Income (SMI)) is significantly lower in Harrisonburg (23.9%) than in the region (36.6%) and the state (42.9%). Overall, the City has fewer higher-income families with young children and a greater concentration of families with limited financial resources (Table 10).

Table 10. Children Under Age 5 by Family Income and Geographic Area[xvi]

Geographic Area	0-99% FPL	100-199% FPL	200% FPL – 85% SMI	Above 85% SMI
City of Harrisonburg	23.6%	23.9%	28.7%	23.9%
Blue Ridge Ready Region	14.1%	21.6%	27.7%	36.6%
Virginia	13.2%	18.4%	25.5%	42.9%

[2] Estimated at 3/5 the number of children under age 5 living in poverty.
[3] Estimated at 2/5 the number of children under age 5 living in poverty.
[4] Blue Ridge Ready Region is one of nine regional networks in Virginia charged with strengthening early childhood systems and coordinating early childhood care and education services. Ready Region Blue Ridge serves the cities of Charlottesville, Harrisonburg, Staunton, Waynesboro, and Winchester; and the counties of Albemarle, Augusta, Buckingham, Clarke, Fluvanna, Frederick, Greene, Louisa, Madison, Nelson, Orange, Page, Rappahannock, Rockingham, Shenandoah, and Warren. Source: Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. (2026). About Blue Ridge Ready Region. Retrieved from https://vecf.org/ready-region-blue-ridge/

Household Composition and Family Characteristics

Most children in Harrisonburg reside with their biological, step, or adoptive parents. A combined 7.9% of children live with their grandparent(s) or other relative(s). Both zip codes 22801 and 22802 have a rate of foster children that is above both the City and the state (Table 11). Many children in the City are also living in single-parent households (16.4%) (Table 12).

Table 11. Percent of Children (ages 0 to 18-years-old) by Relationship to Householder and Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xvii]

Geographic Area	Own child (biological, step, or adopted)	Grandchild	Other relatives	Foster child or other unrelated child
Zip Code 22801	93.6%	0.7%	3.7%	2.1%
Zip Code 22802	88.3%	5.5%	3.0%	3.2%
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	91.2%	4.0%	3.9%	0.9%
Rockingham County	89.5%	5.1%	2.1%	3.4%
Harrisonburg MSA	90.0%	4.7%	2.7%	2.6%
Virginia	88.6%	7.1%	2.8%	1.5%

Table 12. Percent of Single-Parent Households by Geographic Area (2021)[xviii]

Geographic Area	Percent Single-Parent Households
City of Harrisonburg	16.4%
Virginia	23.7%

Social and Economic Factors Impacting Wellbeing

Living Wage

In the City of Harrisonburg, median household income is $62,254, well below the median in Rockingham County and the state (Table 13).

Table 13. Median Household Income by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xix]

Geographic Area	Median Household Income
Zip Code 22801	$72,067
Zip Code 22802	$66,423
Zip Code 22807	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	$62,254
Rockingham County	$80,693
Harrisonburg MSA	$75,065
Virginia	$93,170

The Living Wage Model, first developed by Dr. Amy Glasmeier in 2004, "is a market-based approach that draws upon geographically specific expenditure data related to a family's likely minimum food, childcare, health insurance, housing, transportation, and other basic necessities (e.g., clothing, personal care items) costs. The living wage draws on these cost elements and the rough effects of income and payroll taxes to determine the minimum employment earnings necessary to meet a family's basic needs while also maintaining self-sufficiency."[xx]

In the City of Harrisonburg, the living wage for a single adult with no children is $21.24 per hour. A single parent with two children needs to earn more than double that amount, $44.31. For a dual-parent household with one parent working outside the home, the living wage is slightly less, at $37.08 hourly, as it is assumed that one parent is caring for children in the home, eliminating the expense of child care (Tables 14 and 15). For some families in Harrisonburg, living wage lags behind median household income; this is also reflected in statewide data and is true in many communities across the United States.

Table 14. Living Wage Calculator by Geographic Area and Household Type (2026)[xxi]

Geographic Area	Single adult, no children		1 adult, 2 children		2 adults (1 working), 2 children	
	Hourly	Annual Equivalent[5]	Hourly	Annual Equivalent	Hourly	Annual Equivalent
City of Harrisonburg	$21.24	$44,179	$44.31	$92,165	$37.08	$77,126
Virginia	$25.72	$53,498	$55.30	$115,024	$42.05	$87,464

Table 15. Living Wage Compared to Median Household Income by Geographic Area

Geographic Area	Median Household Income (2020-2024)[xxii]	Living Wage (2026)[xxiii]	
		1 adult, 2 children	2 adults (1 working), 2 children
City of Harrisonburg	$62,254	$92,165	$77,126
Virginia	$93,170	$115,024	$87,464

Home Value and Affordability

There is variability in home values, costs, and affordability across the City. The median home value in the City is $299,100, but ranges from $280,700 to $364,300 in the zip codes (Table 16). Median rental costs are described in Table 17.

Table 16. Median Home Value by Geographic Area and Year[xxiv,xxv]

Geographic Area	2015-2019	2020-2024	% Change
Zip Code 22801	$265,900	$364,300	+37.0%
Zip Code 22802	$188,600	$280,700	+48.8%
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	$203,600	$299,100	+46.9%
Rockingham County	$211,500	$313,000	+48.0%
Harrisonburg MSA	$209,300	$309,300	+47.8%
Virginia	$273,100	$383,700	+40.5%

Table 17. Median Rent by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxvi]

Geographic Area	Median Rent
Zip Code 22801	$1,277
Zip Code 22802	$1,186
Zip Code 22807	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	$1,184
Rockingham County	$1,160
Harrisonburg MSA	$1,173
Virginia	$1,579

[5] Hourly wage is multiplied by 2,080 to obtain an annual equivalent, based on a 40-hour workweek, 52 weeks a year.

As current Census data (2020-2024) does not capture the most recent home values, Zillow data is included to provide a real-time understanding of increasing housing costs (Table 18).

Table 18. Zillow Home Values Index: Median Home Value by Month/Year[xxvii]

Geographic Area	June 2026	Change from June 2025
Zip Code 22801	$373,230	+4.2%
Zip Code 22802	$317,075	+3.2%
Zip Code 22807	---	---
City of Harrisonburg	$352,622	+4.2%
Rockingham County	$360,540	+2.5%
Virginia	$414,320	+1.7%

In the City, more than 48% of households spend 30% or more of their monthly income on rent (Table 19). A high rental cost burden can strain a family's finances and make it difficult to sustain stable housing and have enough income available to support other expenses (e.g., food, medical care).

Table 19. Housing Characteristics by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxviii]

Geographic Area	Rental Vacancy Rate	Households Spending 30% or More of Monthly Income on Rent
Zip Code 22801	4.7%	55.6%
Zip Code 22802	2.1%	38.3%
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	4.0%	48.9%
Rockingham County	3.2%	42.5%
Harrisonburg MSA	2.4%	45.0%
Virginia	5.4%	47.8%

As described in Table 20, in 2025, the two-bedroom fair market rent in the City was $1,392, which was 20.4% below the state. To afford the fair market rent in the City, a worker would need to earn an hourly wage of $26.77, over twice the current minimum wage of $12.77.

Fair Market Rent is generally calculated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as the 40th percentile of gross rents for regular, standard-quality units in a local housing market, excluding public housing units, rental units built in the last 2 years, rental units considered substandard in quality, seasonal rentals, and rental units on 10 or more acres.

Table 20. Affordable Housing Data by Geographic Area (2025)[xxix]

Geographic Area	Percent Renters	Two-bedroom Fair Market Rent	Two-bedroom Wage	Work Hours/Week at Minimum Wage for Two-Bedroom Housing*
City of Harrisonburg	37%	$1,392	$26.77	109
Virginia	33%	$1,749	$33.64	137

* Statewide minimum wage is $12.77.

Access to broadband has become foundational in communities like Harrisonburg where education, employment, health care, and public services increasingly depend on reliable internet. As described in Table 21, 86% of households in the City have broadband internet connection. This rate is below both that of Rockingham County and the state.

Table 21. Percent of Households with Broadband Internet Connection by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxx]

Geographic Area	Percentage
City of Harrisonburg	86%
Rockingham County	91%
Virginia	91%

Labor Force, Industries, and Occupations

In the City of Harrisonburg, the percentage of the population in the labor force (59.8%) is less than the statewide rate (65.9%), while the rate of households with children under age 6 with all parents in the family in the labor force (71.2%) is above the statewide rate (67.6%) (Table 22).

Table 22. Percent of Population in Labor Force by Subgroup and Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxxi]

Geographic Area	Population Age 16+	Living in Households with Children Under Age 6, All Parents in the Family in the Labor Force
Zip Code 22801	58.2%	62.1%
Zip Code 22802	66.5%	72.7%
Zip Code 22807	27.4%	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	59.8%	71.2%
Rockingham County	62.9%	71.3%
Harrisonburg MSA	63.0%	66.3%
Virginia	65.9%	67.6%

The Harrisonburg region demonstrates strong local employment, with most residents working within their county of residence. In contrast, Rockingham County residents are the most likely to commute outside their county, reflecting the county's more rural economic structure and reliance on employment opportunities in Harrisonburg and surrounding areas (Table 23).

Table 23. Percent of Workers (Age 16 and Over) Working in or Outside County of Residence (2020-2024)[xxxii]

Geographic Area	Work in County of Residence (in state)	Work Outside County of residence	Work Outside State of Residence
Zip Code 22801	59.5%	39.4%	1.1%
Zip Code 22802	59.6%	40.0%	0.4%
Zip Code 22807	79.8%	16.5%	3.6%
City of Harrisonburg	65.8%	33.3%	0.8%
Rockingham County	54.8%	44.3%	0.9%
Harrisonburg MSA	58.8%	40.3%	0.9%
Virginia	57.0%	37.2%	5.9%

Recent rates of unemployment in the City are low compared to the state. Citywide unemployment tends to be around 3.1%-3.5% (Table 24).

Table 24. Unemployment Rate, Not Seasonally Adjusted, by Geographic Area and Month[xxxiii]

Geographic Area	June 2025	Aug 2025	Nov 2025	Dec. 2025	Feb 2026	April 2026
City of Harrisonburg	3.1%	3.1%	3.3%	3.1%	3.1%	3.5%
Rockingham County	3.1%	3.0%	3.3%	2.9%	3.4%	2.7%
Virginia	3.2%	3.3%	3.6%	3.6%	3.8%	3.8%

Tables 25 and 26 present data on the top local industries and occupations. Management, business, science, and arts occupations, followed by service occupations, make up nearly 60% of the employed workforce in Harrisonburg. Educational services, health care, and social assistance is the top industry as a percentage of the employed workforce, followed by arts, entertainment, recreation, and accommodation and food services.

Table 25. Percentage of the Employed Workforce (Age 16+) by Occupation and Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxxiv]

Geographic Area	Management, business, science, and arts occupations	Service occupations	Sales and office occupations	Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	Production, transportation, and material moving occupations
Zip Code 22801	42.0%	19.4%	16.2%	6.6%	15.7%
Zip Code 22802	37.0%	12.8%	16.3%	11.3%	22.6%
Zip Code 22807	16.9%	50.8%	26.3%	1.4%	4.5%
City of Harrisonburg	37.7%	20.8%	15.7%	7.5%	18.2%
Rockingham County	34.9%	16.4%	20.1%	11.1%	17.4%
Harrisonburg MSA	36.0%	18.1%	18.5%	9.8%	17.7%
Virginia	48.8%	15.4%	18.0%	7.5%	10.3%

Table 26. Percentage of the Employed Workforce (Age 16+) by Industry and Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xxxv]

Industry	City of Harrisonburg	Virginia
Educational services, health care and social assistance	24.4%	22.3%
Arts, entertainment, recreation, and accommodation and food services	15.2%	7.9%
Manufacturing	12.8%	7.0%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	12.2%	16.8%
Retail trade	12.0%	9.8%
Construction	5.2%	6.5%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	5.1%	4.8%
Other services, except public administration	4.1%	5.3%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	2.6%	6.5%
Public administration	2.2%	8.9%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	1.7%	0.9%
Wholesale trade	1.3%	1.6%
Information	1.1%	1.8%
Total	100%	100%

The City of Harrisonburg is in the Shenandoah Valley Local Workforce Development Area, which includes Buena Vista, **Harrisonburg**, Lexington, Staunton, Waynesboro, Winchester, Augusta, Bath, Clarke, Frederick, Highland, Page, Rockbridge, Rockingham, Shenandoah, and Warren.[xxxvi]

Shenandoah Valley's long-term occupational projections are influenced by demographic shifts, an increasing demand for health care, and ongoing logistics and transportation sector growth. The occupations expected to grow stronger between 2022 and 2032 are outlined in Table 27, by both percentage growth and jobs growth for the top five occupations.

Table 27. Shenandoah Valley Local Workforce Development Area Workforce Projections for Greatest Occupational Growth (2022 to 2032)[xxxvii]

Highest Percentage of Growth			
Occupation	Current Number of Positions	Projected Number of Positions	Percent Growth
Nurse Practitioner	407	588	44.47%
Physician's Assistant	247	335	35.63%
Home and Health Aide	4,015	5,193	29.34%
Medical and Health Services Manager	514	652	26.85%
Information Security Analyst	213	269	26.29%
All Occupations			1.78%
Highest Number of Growth			
Occupation	Current Number of Positions	Projected Number of Positions	Number Growth
Transportation and Material Moving	29,072	30,930	1,858
Healthcare Support	9,242	10,895	1,653
Home and Health Aide and Nursing Assistant	6,785	8,101	1,316
Home Health and Personal Care Aide	4,015	5,193	1,178
Material Moving Workers	18,337	19,346	1,009

Child care is part of the hidden infrastructure that enables work. When workers do not have access to reliable child care (among other family-friendly workplace policies, such as predictable schedules), employers may see the effects in higher absenteeism and turnover, lower engagement and productivity, and slower career progression. This is particularly true for women, who carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care at home, and also for lower-income workers, single parents, and employees in part-time, temporary, or informal roles.[xxxviii]

Opportunity Zone 2.0 Policy Context and Authority

Opportunity Zones are federally designated, economically distressed communities identified at the census tract level. Governors nominate eligible tracts within their states, and the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, through delegated authority to the Internal Revenue Service, certifies the final designations.

The original Opportunity Zone program, established under 2017 federal tax reforms, created what is now known as OZ 1.0, designating 8,764 census tracts nationwide with tax benefits. At the time of the original designations, according to 2015 and 2016 U.S. Census data, Virginia had 901 eligible census tracts; per the Tax and Jobs Act, Virginia was able to nominate 25% or 212 tracts. The designations are in effect until Dec. 31, 2028.[xxxix]

The new, permanent iteration of the program, Opportunity Zone 2.0 (OZ 2.0) launched on July 1, 2026, when Governors could begin nominating eligible tracts for designation. These new zones will remain in effect through 2036. Thereafter, Opportunity Zone designations will take place on a recurring 10-year cycle.[xl]

Opportunity Zone 1.0

In Harrisonburg, under OZ 1.0, two census tracts – 51660000101 (1.01) and 51660000302 (3.02) – which stretch from Court Square to the center of the City, were intentionally designated to maximize investment and community impact, supporting strategic development across the City.[xli] The North Opportunity Zone (1.01) provides close proximity to downtown, while the South Opportunity Zone (3.02) provides opportunity for large parcel redevelopment.[xlii]

The North Opportunity Zone (1.01) begins at the northeast corner of Court Square and stretches along Main Street (State Route 11) to the Rockingham County border. The zone includes north downtown, as well as retail, office, residential, and industrial uses.[xliii]

The South Opportunity Zone (3.02) begins at the southwest corner of Court Square and continues south between Main Street (State Route 11) and South High Street (State Route 42) to the Rockingham County border. The zone includes the core of downtown, as well as retail, office, and residential uses. The south zone offers larger parcels than the north zone and includes the city's motor mile area of vehicle dealerships.[xliv]

Opportunity Zone 2.0

For the upcoming Opportunity Zone 2.0 designations, Harrisonburg's two existing OZ 1.0 census tracts – 51660000101 (1.01) and 51660000302 (3.02) – remain eligible, along with three additional census tracts. They are census tracts 51660000204 (2.04), 51660000205 (2.05), and 51660000207 (2.07).

According to statute, Census tracts that are eligible for OZ 2.0 must meet either: median family income ≤ 70% of area MFI, or poverty rate ≥ 20% and MFI ≤ 125% of area median.[xlv] Of the five census tracts eligible for OZ 2.0 nomination, tracts 1.01, 2.07, and 3.02 qualify under both statutory criteria, while tracts 2.04 and 2.05 are eligible on the basis of poverty rate alone.

The City of Harrisonburg distinguishes itself with a robust municipal infrastructure through the City's Economic Development Department, which leads coordinated efforts to attract, retain, and expand businesses by providing targeted support services that strengthen the local economy long-term and create quality jobs for residents.[xlvi]

Located on the Interstate 81 corridor in the Shenandoah Valley, Harrisonburg is the ideal location for businesses seeking to balance quality of life with a low cost of doing business. As a university town, Harrisonburg is a bustling city with a young, talented workforce and a supportive business environment.[xlvii]

EARLY CHILDHOOD LANDSCAPE

Snapshot Summary: A Strong Mixed-Delivery System with Access and Affordability Challenges

The City of Harrisonburg has a robust early childhood system that includes licensed and regulated unlicensed child care programs, home visiting programs, state-funded pre-kindergarten, and public school district pre-kindergarten. These programs help to provide care to the City's estimated 2,731 children under age 5 and their families.

Harrisonburg is home to 24 licensed and 7 regulated unlicensed child care providers, with a combined capacity to serve 2,304 children birth to school age. Most child care capacity is concentrated in zip code 22801; nearly 68% of all child care slots (1,575 of 2,304) are located there. Infant and toddler care is particularly limited, with only 45% of providers in the City eligible to serve this age group, suggesting fewer options are available to families with very young children.

Child care affordability is a challenge for families. The average annual cost of child care is $13,780 for toddlers and $11,570 for preschoolers. The number of publicly funded slots has declined in recent years, potentially reducing access for lower-income families. Quality and subsidy participation are strong. About 61% of providers accept child care subsidies, and 16 programs are meeting expectations in the Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5), Virginia's quality rating and improvement system.

Families in Harrisonburg may access other early childhood programs, such as home visiting. Healthy Families of the Blue Ridge is the primary home visiting program in Harrisonburg, providing families with weekly home visits, parenting support, resources, and referrals to community resources. The 2025 Virginia Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Needs Assessment classified Harrisonburg as a high-risk community with unmet need.

Additionally, Virginia Department of Education provides publicly funded pre-kindergarten through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). There are 224 VPI slots in Harrisonburg. Enrollment in public school pre-kindergarten and kindergarten has decreased in recent years. While kindergarten readiness has improved (from 33% in 2024 to 43% in 2025), the rate is well below the Blue Ridge Ready Region (55%) and the state (56%).



Harrisonburg's early childhood system includes a variety of provider types serving young children and their families. This includes licensed and regulated unlicensed child care programs, state-funded pre-kindergarten, public school programs, and home visiting services, as well as informal child care arrangements (e.g., families, friends).

Children Birth to Age 5

In the City of Harrisonburg, there are an estimated 2,731 children birth to age 5. Approximately half of these children reside in zip code 22801 and half in 22802. The poverty rate for young children (birth to age 5) is 23.5%, and ranges from 18.5% to 28.7% in the zip codes. The City has an estimated 643 children under age 5 living in poverty (Table 28, shown previously as Table 9).

Table 28. Child Poverty and Young Children Living in Poverty by Geographic Area (2020-2024)[xlviii]

Geographic Area	Poverty Rate for Children (0-18)	Poverty Rate for Children < Age 5	Number of Children <5 Years Old	Number of Children Living in Poverty		
				Age 0-3[6]	Age 3-5[7]	Age 0-5
Zip Code 22801	15.8%	18.5%	1,933	215	143	358
Zip Code 22802	20.7%	28.7%	2,095	361	241	602
Zip Code 22807	n/a	n/a	0	0	0	0
City of Harrisonburg	21.8%	23.5%	2,731	385	257	643
Rockingham County	11.0%	14.1%	4,570	386	258	646
Harrisonburg MSA	14.5%	17.7%	7,301	776	513	1,289
Virginia	12.3%	13.1%	482,095	37,892	25,444	63,336

While the number of young children in Virginia has decreased in recent years, the opposite is true in Harrisonburg and surrounding areas. The population of children birth to age 5 increased 1.2% citywide from 2015-2019 to 2020-2024, and the increase was far greater in zip code 22802, 11.6% (Table 29).

Table 29. Number of Children Birth to Age 5 by Geographic Area and Year[xlix,l]

Geographic Area	2015-2019	2020-2024	% Change
Zip Code 22801	1,855	1,933	4.2%
Zip Code 22802	1,877	2,095	11.6%
Zip Code 22807	0	0	n/a
City of Harrisonburg	2,698	2,731	1.2%
Rockingham County	4,394	4,570	4.0%
Harrisonburg MSA	7,092	7,301	2.9%
Virginia	500,471	482,095	-3.7%

[6] Estimated at 3/5 the number of children under age 5 living in poverty.
[7] Estimated at 2/5 the number of children under age 5 living in poverty.

Children with Disabilities

The early intervention program in Virginia is known as the Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia. The lead agency in the area is the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Community Services Board, which serves both Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. From July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025, the agency served 256 children through Part C (Early Intervention) and Part B (Early Childhood Special Education) (Table 30).

Table 30. Number of Young Children Served by Harrisonburg-Rockingham Community Services Board by Year[li]

Part C + Part B Child Count	
2023-2024	2024-2025
270	256

As noted in Table 31, the percentage of students with a disability in Harrisonburg City Public Schools (10.4%) is lower than the state rate (14.7%).

Table 31. Number of Students with a Disability by School District and Year[lii]

School District	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Harrisonburg City Public Schools	10.0%	10.6%	10.4%
Virginia	13.8%	14.4%	14.7%

Child Care Programs

In Virginia, licensed child care includes licensed child day centers and licensed home-based child care.[8] Per the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), licensed child day centers serve two or more children under the age of 13 years in a facility that is not the residence of the provider or of any of the children in care, or 13 or more children at any location. Home-based child care providers must be licensed for five to 12 children; home-based child care is offered in the provider's home or in the home of children in care.[liii]

Registered home-based child care (regulated unlicensed) is for four or fewer children in care at any one time, not including the provider's own child and any children who legally reside in the home. Additional exemptions for child care programs (unlicensed) include religiously exempt child day centers, certified preschools, and other statutorily exempt child day programs.[liv]

The number and capacity of licensed and regulated unlicensed child care centers and family child care programs that are eligible to serve infants/toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children are reflected in Table 32. Altogether, there are 2,304 slots for children birth to school age. Of all the slots in the City, the majority (68.4%) are located in zip code 22801.

Notably, in the City, only about 45% of licensed and regulated licensed programs (14 of 31) are eligible to serve infants and toddlers. In contrast, nearly three-quarters of programs can serve preschool-age children, and over 93% can serve school-age children. Data suggests fewer options for care are available to families with infants and toddlers.

[8] Licensed home-based child care was formerly called licensed family day home. Effective July 1, 2026, the Virginia Department of Education formally changed the classification to home-based child care.

Eligibility to serve infants/toddlers does not necessarily reflect the number of infants and toddlers that a program would typically have enrolled. Other factors, such as staffing levels and class size limits, may impact the number of infants, toddlers, and children served at any given time.

Table 32. Number of Child Care Programs by Age Served and Capacity by Licensed and Unlicensed/Exempt Programs (June 2026)[lv]

Licensed Programs (24)					
Geographic Area	Number of Programs	Capacity	Programs Serving Infant/Toddlers	Programs Serving Preschool (3-5)	Programs Serving School Age
Zip Code 22801	17	1,176	7	12	17
Zip Code 22802	5	351	2	3	5
Zip Code 22807	2	225	2	2	2
Licensed Capacity	24	1,752	11	17	24
Regulated Unlicensed Programs (7)					
Geographic Area	Number of Programs	Capacity	Programs Serving Infant/Toddlers	Programs Serving Preschool (3-5)	Programs Serving School Age
Zip Code 22801	6	399	2	6	4
Zip Code 22802	1	153	1	1	1
Zip Code 22807	0	0	0	0	0
Unlicensed Capacity	7	552	3	7	5
Total					
Zip Code 22801	23	1,575	9	18	21
Zip Code 22802	6	504	3	4	6
Zip Code 22807	2	225	2	2	2
Total Capacity	31	2,304	14	24	29

As shown in Table 33, when comparing the number of children under age 5 to total child care capacity (which includes some school-age children), the number of children under age 5 (2,731) is greater than the total licensed and unlicensed child care capacity (2,304 slots). This does not necessarily reflect unmet need, as children may be served in other settings, such as through family and friends, and not all families with young children will need or want care.

Table 33. Children Under Age Five and Children Under Age Five Living in Poverty Compared to Child Care Capacity in the City of Harrisonburg[lvi,lvii]

Number of Children < Age 5	Number of Children < Age 5 Living in Poverty	Total Child Care Capacity
2,731	643	2,304

Sixty-one percent of child care providers in the City of Harrisonburg accept child care subsidies (15 licensed and 4 regulated unlicensed.[lviii] Virginia's Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) helps eligible families pay for child care, allowing parents or caregivers to work or participate in education and training and for children to experience high-quality early learning opportunities.[lix]

"Virginia utilizes a cost estimation model to determine the cost to deliver quality care and education and set payment rates known as Maximum reimbursement rates (MRR) in the CCSP. MRR generally vary by provider type and level, locality, and for centers, age of child. All providers are eligible to receive the established MRR, regardless of their private tuition rates."[lx] The MRRs for Harrisonburg are:

- $30 (school age) - $70 (infant) based on age, in full-day center-based care
- $21-$49 based on age, for half day center-based care
- $38 half day family day home care
- $53 full day family day home care

Local market data for the City reveals that the median annual cost for toddler care is $13,780 and $11,570 for preschool care. This is below the median cost in the state, but above the median in the Blue Ridge Ready Region. Compared to surrounding Rockingham County, the cost of care for toddlers is higher in the City and similar for preschool-age children (Table 34).

Table 34. Price of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Services (Median Annual Rate) by Age Group and Geographic Area (2026)[lxi]

Geographic Area	# of Classrooms with Rate Information in LinkB5[9]	Infant (0-15 months)	Toddler (16-35 months)	Preschool (3-4 years)	Mixed Ages
City of Harrisonburg	49	*	$13,780	$11,570	*
Rockingham County	57	$14,040	$12,532	$11,544	*
Blue Ridge Ready Region	608	$15,080	$14,040	$12,220	$15,080
Virginia	8,197	$19,500	$16,900	$15,080	$16,900

* Data suppressed due to small sample size (fewer than 10 classrooms)

The number of slots in Harrisonburg for publicly funded programs (VPI, Early Head Start, Head Start, and child care subsidy) are noted in Table 35. Across Harrisonburg, the number of publicly funded early childhood slots has declined over the past four years (Table 36). During the same time period, surrounding Rockingham County experienced steady growth. A reduction in the supply of subsidized and publicly supported slots within the City reduces access for families who may rely on these programs.

Table 35. Publicly Funded Slots by Program Type and Geographic Area (FY2026)[lxii,10]

Geographic Area	Child Care Subsidy Program	Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI)	Early Head Start/Head Start	Mixed Delivery Program	Total
City of Harrisonburg	106	224	60	59	449
Rockingham County	145	333	0	122	600
Blue Ridge Ready Region	1,587	2,563	786	517	5,453
Virginia	26,003	23,699	9,852	2,722	62,276

Table 36. Publicly Funded Slots[11] by Geographic Area and Year[lxiii]

Geographic Area	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025	FY2026	4-Year Trend
City of Harrisonburg	491	459	432	449	Decreasing
Rockingham County	532	513	563	600	Increasing
Blue Ridge Ready Region	5,336	5,286	5,389	5,453	Increasing
Virginia	56,957	61,682	61,646	62,276	Increasing

[9] LinkB5 is the data system of VQB5, Virginia's quality measurement and improvement system.
[10] Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP): Families with a young child (not yet in kindergarten) are eligible if their income is up to 85% of the State Median Income (approximately $113,000 annually for a family of 4), and if they meet parental income requirements (working, looking for work, or participating in training or education). Mixed Delivery Program: Children/families are eligible if they meet at least one eligibility criteria (family income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, family is experiencing homelessness, parent(s) or guardian(s) did not complete high school, child has an IFSP/IEP, or family meets regional eligibility criteria.
[11] Publicly funded slots include VPI, Early Head Start, Head Start, and child care subsidy.

The Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5), measures the quality of infant, toddler, and preschool teaching and learning based on two nationally recognized quality indicators: interactions and curriculum. VDOE annually funds nine Ready Regions to provide regional implementation of VQB5 and support coordination for every birth-to-five provider in the state. Harrisonburg is part of the Blue Ridge Ready Region (Region 9).

In the City, there are 16 programs participating in the VQB5 program, all with a Quality Rating of "Meets Expectations" (Table 37).

Table 37. City of Harrisonburg VQB5 Sites (2026)[lxiv]

Program
1. Agape Center for Care, LLC
2. Bluestone Elementary
3. D.E.M.I. Good Shepherd School and Day Care
4. D.E.M.I. Good Shepherd School and Day Care (Chicago Avenue)
5. Elon Rhodes Early Learning Center (Smithland Elementary School)
6. Harrisonburg Rockingham Child Day Care Centers, Inc.
7. JMU - Young Children's Program
8. Lacey Spring Elementary (Rockingham County Public Schools)
9. Learning Paths Academy
10. Mountain View Elementary (Rockingham County Public Schools)
11. Ms. Aneta Smialek
12. Pleasant Valley Elementary (Rockingham County Public Schools)
13. Shenandoah Valley Child Development Center
14. Shining Star Daycare Center LLC
15. SVHS @ Stone Spring Elementary (Harrisonburg City Public Schools)
16. West Rockingham Daycare and Preschool, LLC

Home Visiting Programs

The Virginia Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) is managed by the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and overseen by the Virginia Home Visiting Consortium. The 2025 Virginia Home Visiting Needs Assessment noted that Harrisonburg is a high-risk community.[lxv]

Early Impact Virginia indicated that in 2024-2025, 54 children were served in the City in either evidence-based or promising practice home visiting models.[lxvi] The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) estimated 586 children are in need of home visiting in the City, while an alternate estimate identified 1,419 children in need based on the number of children, up to age 6, at or below 200% FPL.[lxvii]

The Sentara RMH Medical Center administers the Healthy Families of the Blue Ridge home visiting program for first-time parents in Augusta, Bath, Highland and Rockingham counties and the cities of Harrisonburg, Staunton and Waynesboro. The program offers weekly home visits, parent socials, support and information on child development, and community referrals.[lxviii]

Publicly Funded Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten

VDOE provides funding for school and community-based organizations to provide publicly funded preschool services through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). In the 2026 program year, the City had 200 VPI slots for four-year-olds and 24 slots for three-year-olds, for a total of 224 slots.[lxix]

As described in Table 38, the numbers of children enrolled in public school Pre-K (not VPI) and Kindergarten have been decreasing overall in the City in recent years.

Table 38. Harrisonburg City Public Schools Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Enrollment by Grade and School Year[lxx]

Grade Level	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	Three-Year Trend
Pre-kindergarten	342	329	291	Decreasing
Kindergarten	501	488	465	Decreasing

Harrisonburg's kindergarten readiness levels remain well below the Blue Ridge Ready Region (55%) and the Virginia statewide average (56%) (Table 39).

Table 39. Percent of Kindergarten Students Ready for Kindergarten by Geographic Area and Year[lxxi]

Geographic Area	Fall 2024	Fall 2025
City of Harrisonburg	33%	43%
Blue Ridge Ready Region	49%	55%
Virginia	51%	56%

STAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS

Snapshot Summary: A Local System with Opportunities for Growth

Findings from surveys and focus groups reflect that Harrisonburg's child care system faces interconnected challenges across access, affordability, expansion, and workforce development. While clear challenges exist, the City and community also demonstrate meaningful strengths, and the survey and focus group respondents indicated strong investment from families, child care providers, and employers.



Profile of Respondents

Families

Survey. A total of 209 eligible individuals (parents/ guardians of children under age 6 residing in the City) completed the survey for a response rate of 12.2%.[12]

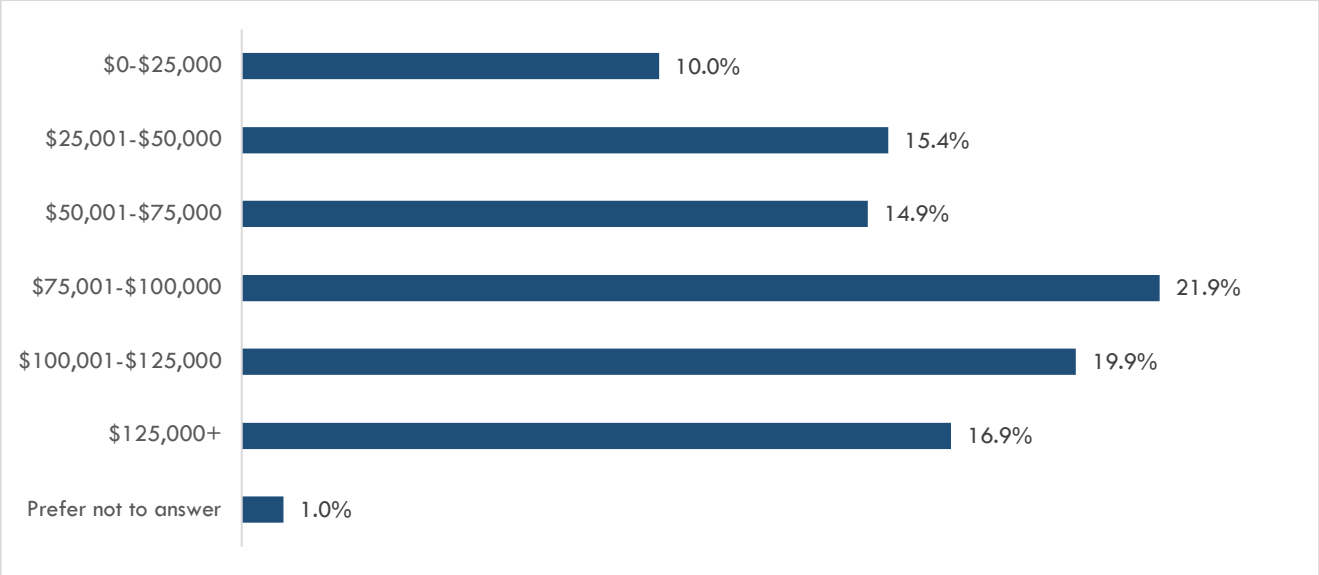
Respondents were nearly evenly distributed between zip codes 22802 (44.7%) and 22801 (41.0%). Just over 10% of respondents live in zip code 22807. Nearly 90% of respondents are the parent (biological, step, or adoptive) of the young children in their household. Approximately 10% represented extended family members, guardians, or foster parents. A little over half (56.7%) identified as White, followed by 27.9% as Black or African American. The remainder identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (8.0%), multi-racial (5.5%), Asian (2.5%), or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.5%). Just under 10% identified as Latino/Hispanic.

Working parents represented a majority of survey respondents with 58.7% working full time and 27.4% working part time. Approximately 10% are in school full time or part time. Less than 4% each are unemployed, retired, disabled, or participating in job training/education program.

The median household income in the City is $62,254.[lxxii] Among survey respondents, annual household income skewed higher, with more than half of respondents reporting income of more than $75,000. Only 10% reported income of $25,000 or less (Figure 2).

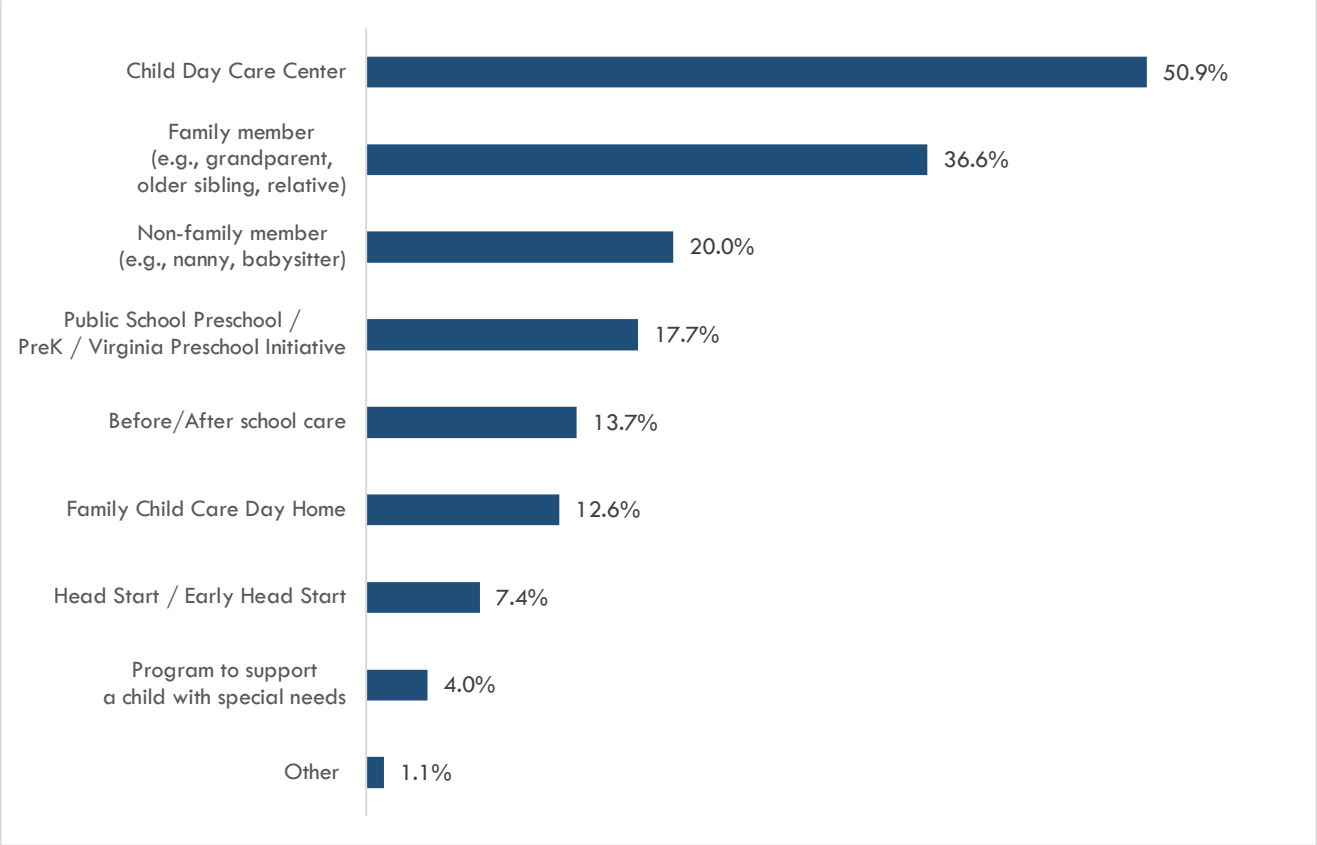
[12] Based on the U.S. Census American Community Survey (2020-2024) 5-year estimate for the City of Harrisonburg: 747 families with "children under 6 years only" plus 966 families with "children under age 6 years and 6 to 17 years."

Figure 2. Total Annual Household Income of Family Respondents



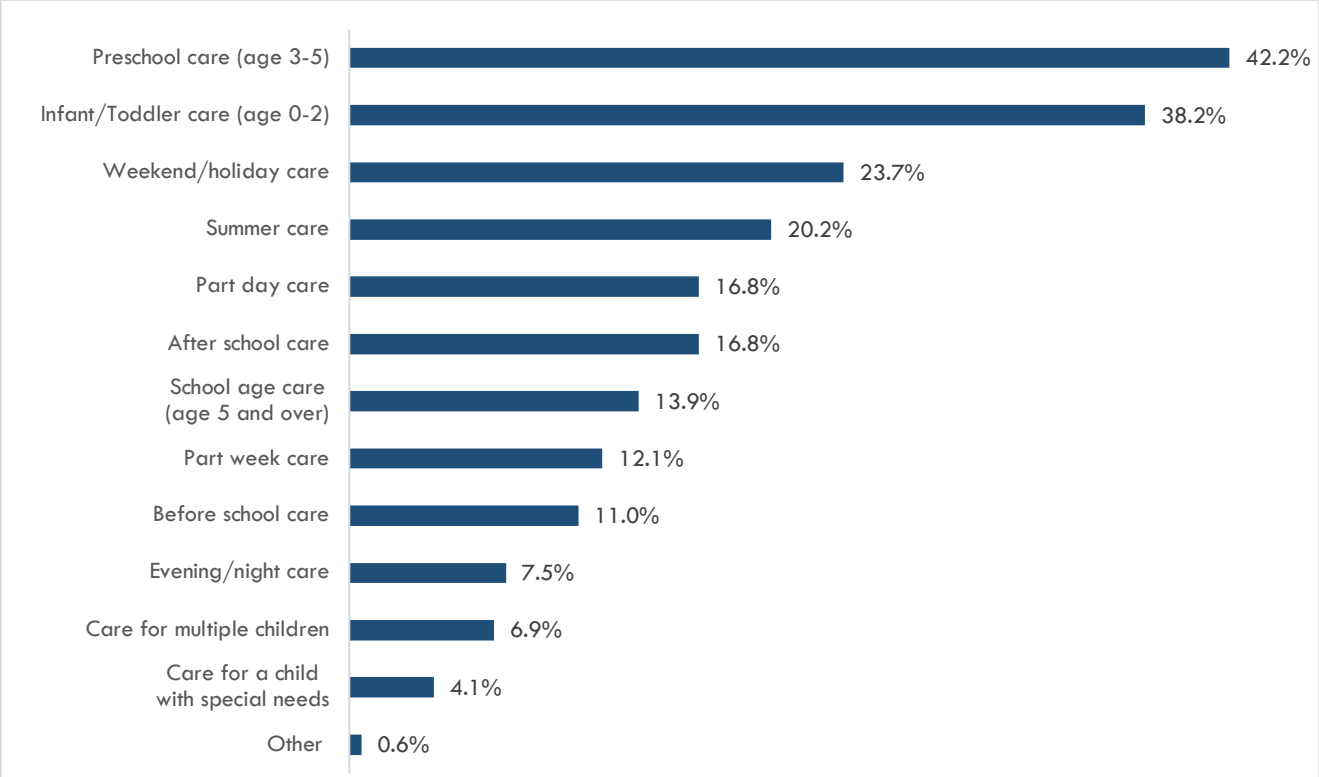
Approximately 88% of families currently use child care for their children (age 5 or younger). Approximately 9% do not use any form of child care. The remaining (2.5%) were currently looking for care. Families that currently use child care rely on a mix of arrangements, with child care centers and care provided by family members reported most frequently (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Child Care Arrangements Used by Families



Families rely on child care services for preschool-age children (ages 3-5) most often, followed by infant/toddler care (ages 0-2). Families also rely on child care arrangements outside of normal business hours (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Type of Care Used by Families



Family Survey responses showed that the type of care families rely on varies by both work status (full or part time) and family income.

Families that work or attend school full time rely mostly on formal child care arrangements outside their home, including child day care center (53.0%), VPI (17.4%), before/after care (18.3%), and family day home (13.0%), as opposed to care provided by a family member (33.0%) or non-family member, such as a nanny or babysitter (20.0%).

Families that work or attend school part time rely more heavily on informal child care provided by a family member (43.8%) or a non-family member (20.3%), likely a reflection of the flexibility this type of care offers for families that need care less than full time. However, these families also report relying on formal care, including child day care center (46.9%), VPI (17.2%), family day home (10.9%), and before/after school care (6.3%).

Household income also has a distinct impact on the type of child care utilized by Harrisonburg families. Notably, those who earn around the median household income rely most often on informal child care – family member (57.7%) and non-family member (30.8%). Families at the top and at the bottom 20th percentiles rely most heavily on child day care centers.

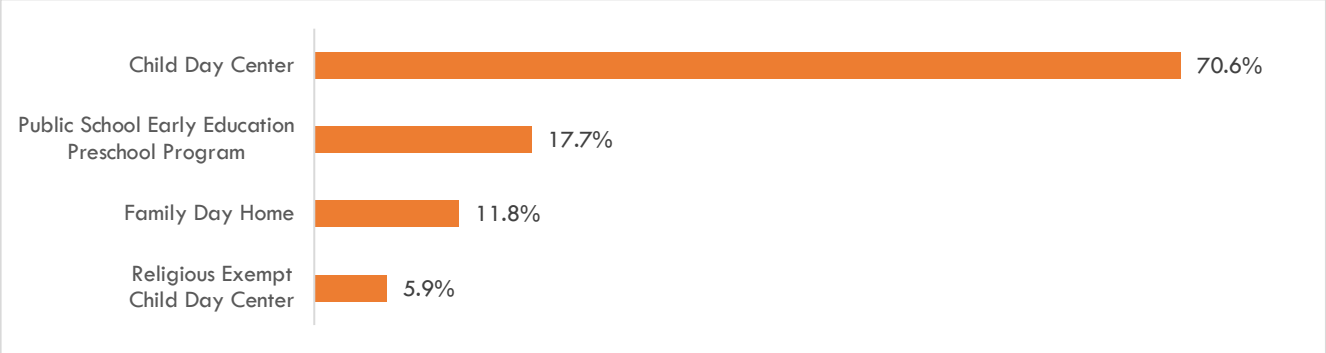
Focus Groups. Of the 59 Family Survey respondents that indicated interest in attending a focus group, 22 signed up, and two individuals attended. This allowed FFF to conduct in-depth one-on-one interviews with two parents, both of whom are full-time working mothers from two-parent working families that utilize child care services in the City. One parent had a 4-year-old in an unlicensed home-based program with someone the family knows and trusts and an 8-year-old child in school-age care. The schedule works well for their needs and provides good coverage. The second parent was new to the area and had a five-year-old who was enrolled in two summer care programs and expected to enter public school kindergarten in Fall 2026.

Child Care Providers

Survey. Among child care providers operating in the City, 17 of 29 completed the Child Care Provider Survey.[13] This is a strong response rate of 58.6%. Most respondents (70.6%) represented child day centers; programs serving preschool-age children were the most common among participating providers (Figures 5 and 6).

Providers reported that they generally maintain full enrollment. Among those that do not, two indicated they do not have enough staff to open all classrooms, one indicated they often have openings for age groups that do not match what families are seeking, and one noted a lack of interested families.

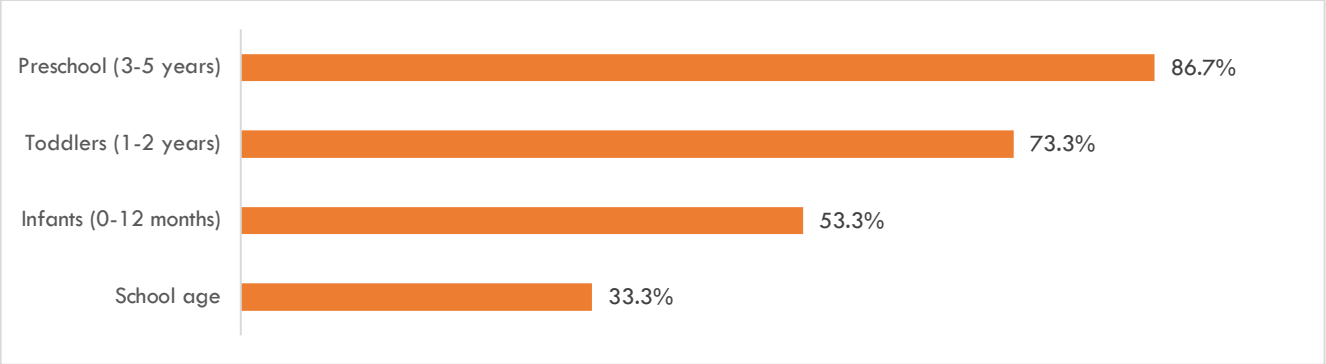
Figure 5. Child Care Provider: Licensing/Program Status[14]



[13] Direct outreach was conducted to all licensed (18) and unlicensed (7) child care providers in the City, including phone outreach to family day homes without published email addresses. Additional distribution included four faith-based preschool and kindergarten programs to ensure broad representation across program types. A total of 29 providers were targeted for response to the Child Care Provider Survey (while there are 24 licensed child care providers in the City, six out of the 24 provide services to only school-age children and were excluded from the Child Care Provider Survey; three of those six also do not provide services to children residing in Harrisonburg despite being located in the City).

[14] Effective July 1, 2026, Family Day Homes are now referred to as home-based child care per Virginia licensing as required by House Bill 258. Both terms will continue to be used interchangeably until all resources have been updated.

Figure 6. Child Care Provider: Ages of Children Served



Focus Groups. Three child care providers attended the provider focus group. This included the Director of a full-day, full-year child day center serving infants through school-age children, a Preschool Coordinator/Director of a half-day child day center serving children 2 years, 11 months to 5 years, 11 months (with a summer and after school program), and the Director/Co-Owner of a newer child day center offering a flexible schedule from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., with optional before- and after-care for a fee, for children 2 years, 6 months to 5 years, 11 months.

Employers

Among employers in the City, 25 responded to the Employer Survey. Employers reflected a wide range of industries, organizational sizes, and business hours (Figures 7-9).

Figure 7. Employer Industries

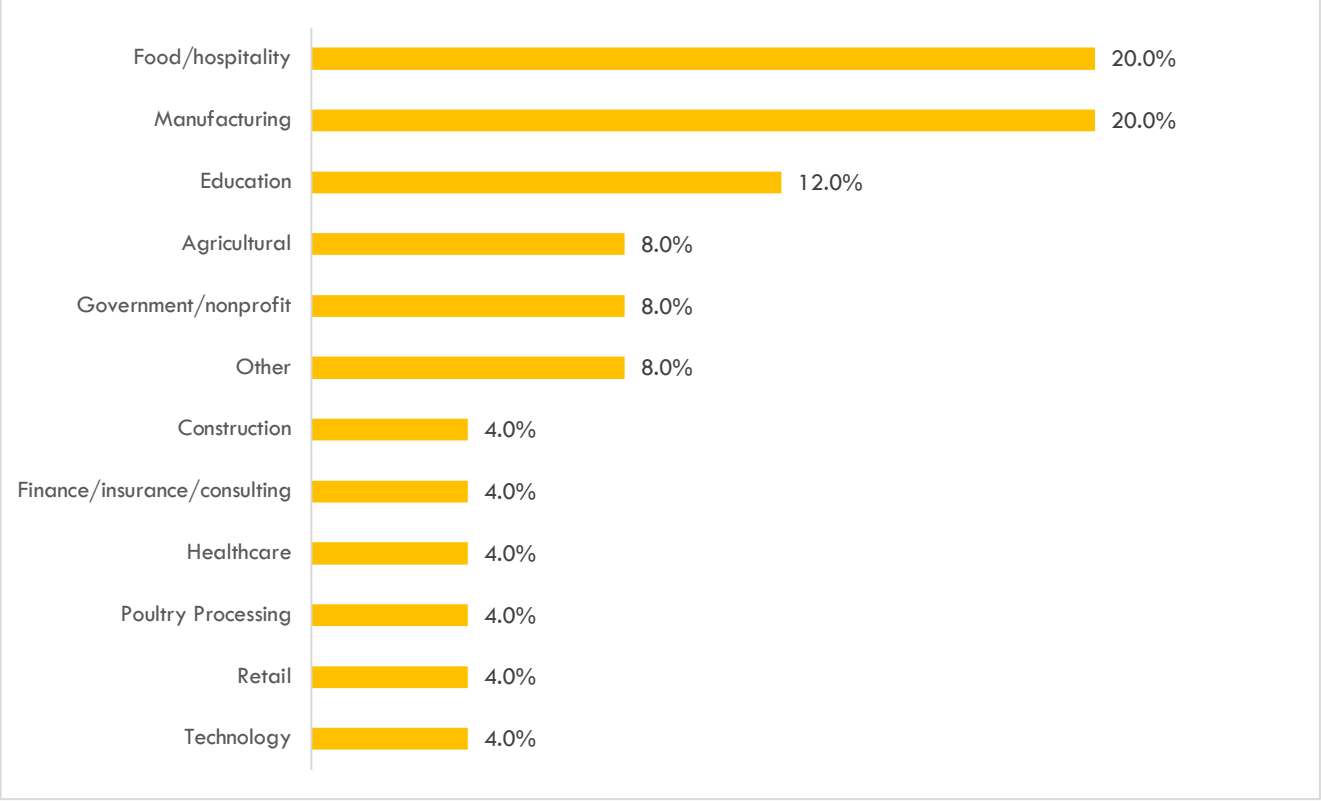


Figure 8. Number of Employees

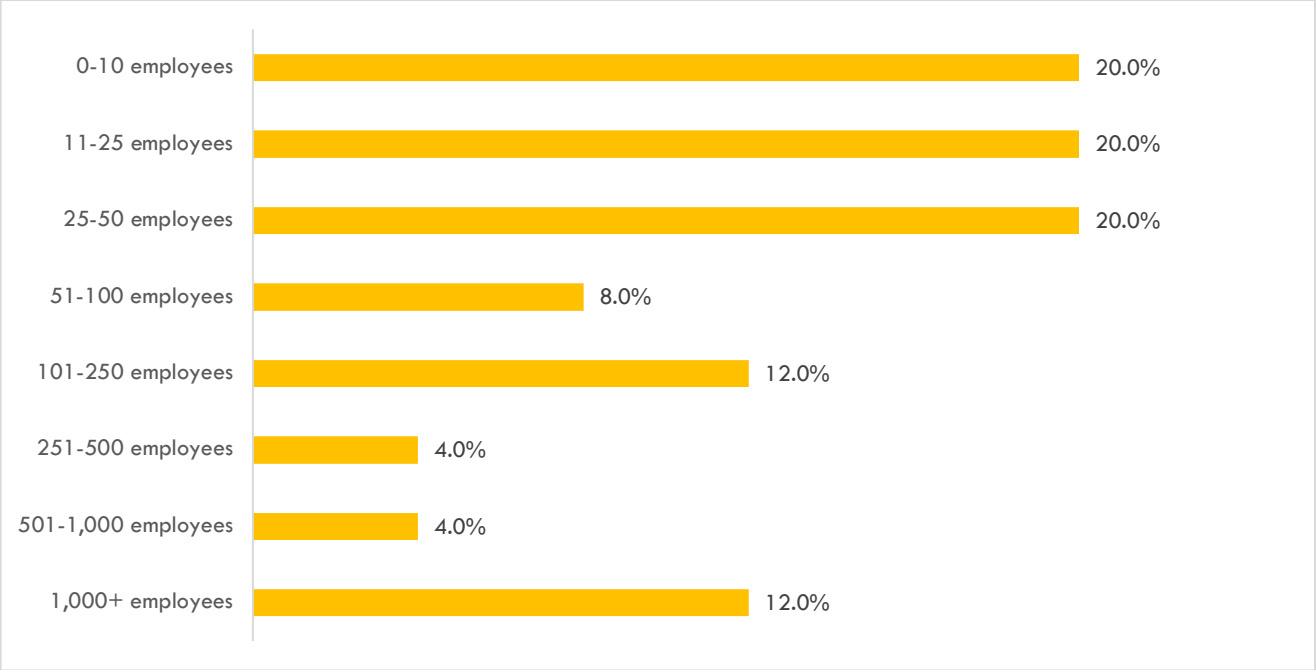
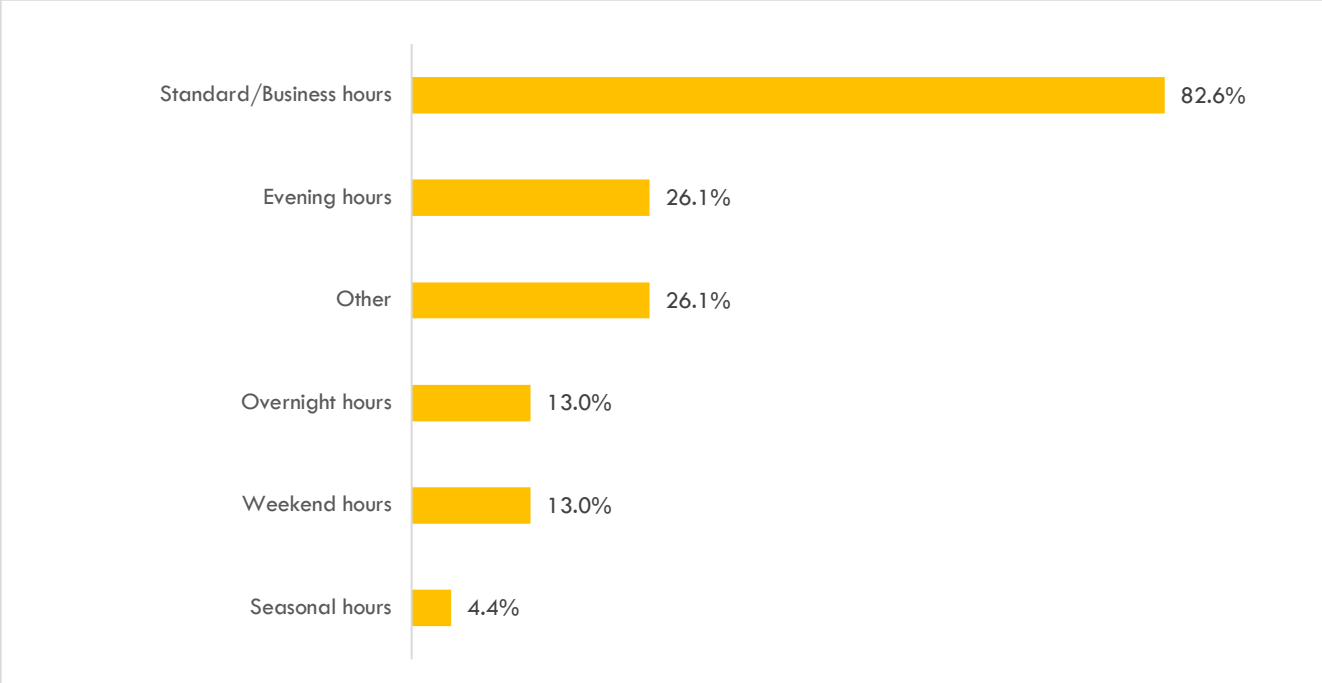


Figure 9. Employer Operating Hours[15]



[15] Five employer respondents indicated they operate around the clock.

Family, Child Care Provider, and Employer Challenges

Key findings and challenges from the City's Child Care Needs Assessment surveys and focus groups, across all three stakeholder groups – families, child care providers, and employers – are organized into four categories: Access, Affordability, Expansion, and Workforce Development, with additional context added as relevant.

As noted earlier, the majority of Family Survey respondents rely on child day centers, followed by child care provided by a friend or family member. Among the 20 families that reported not currently using child care, 41.2% indicated that limited availability was a contributing factor, second only to the cost of care. Families currently looking for child care were most interested in a child day center or public school preschool/Pre-K (Virginia Preschool Initiative) program (Figure 10) and are seeking child care for infants/toddlers as well as preschool-age children (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Families in Search of Child Care – Preference for Care

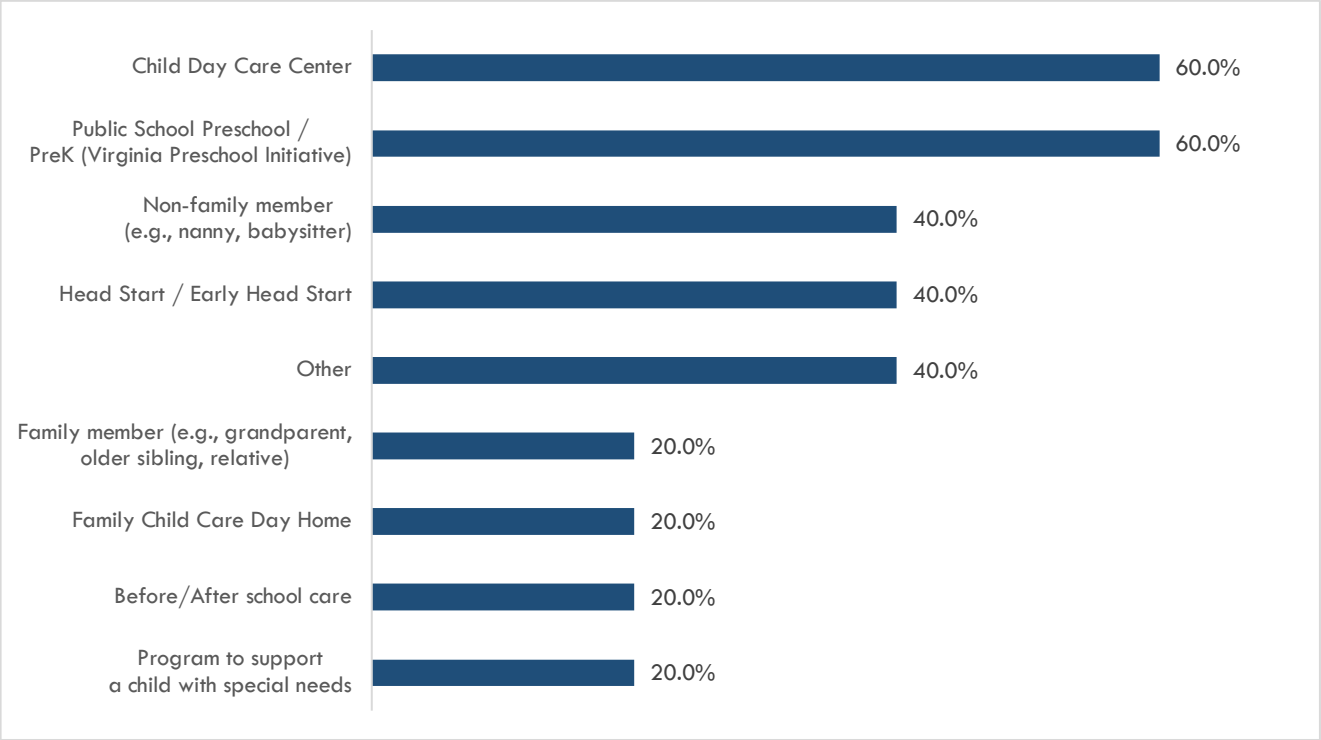
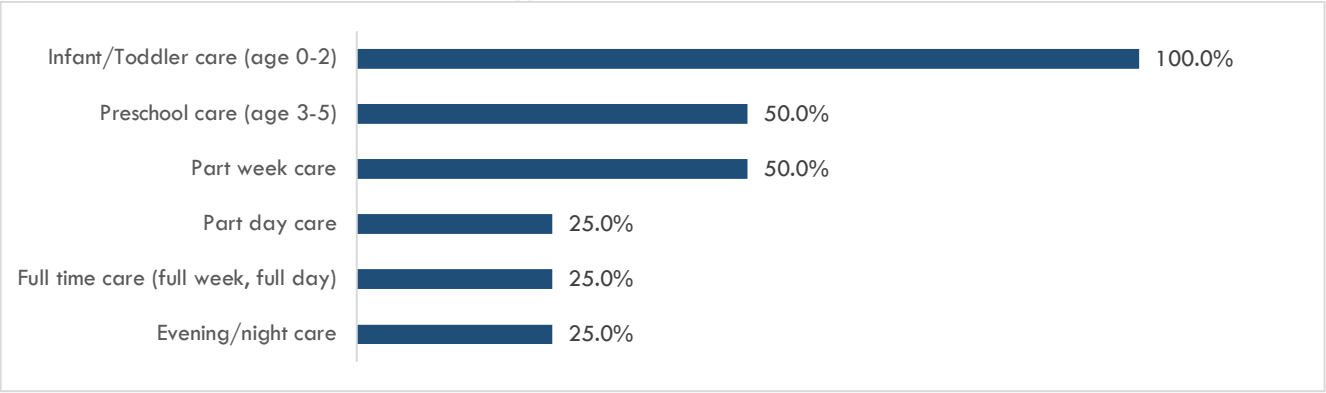


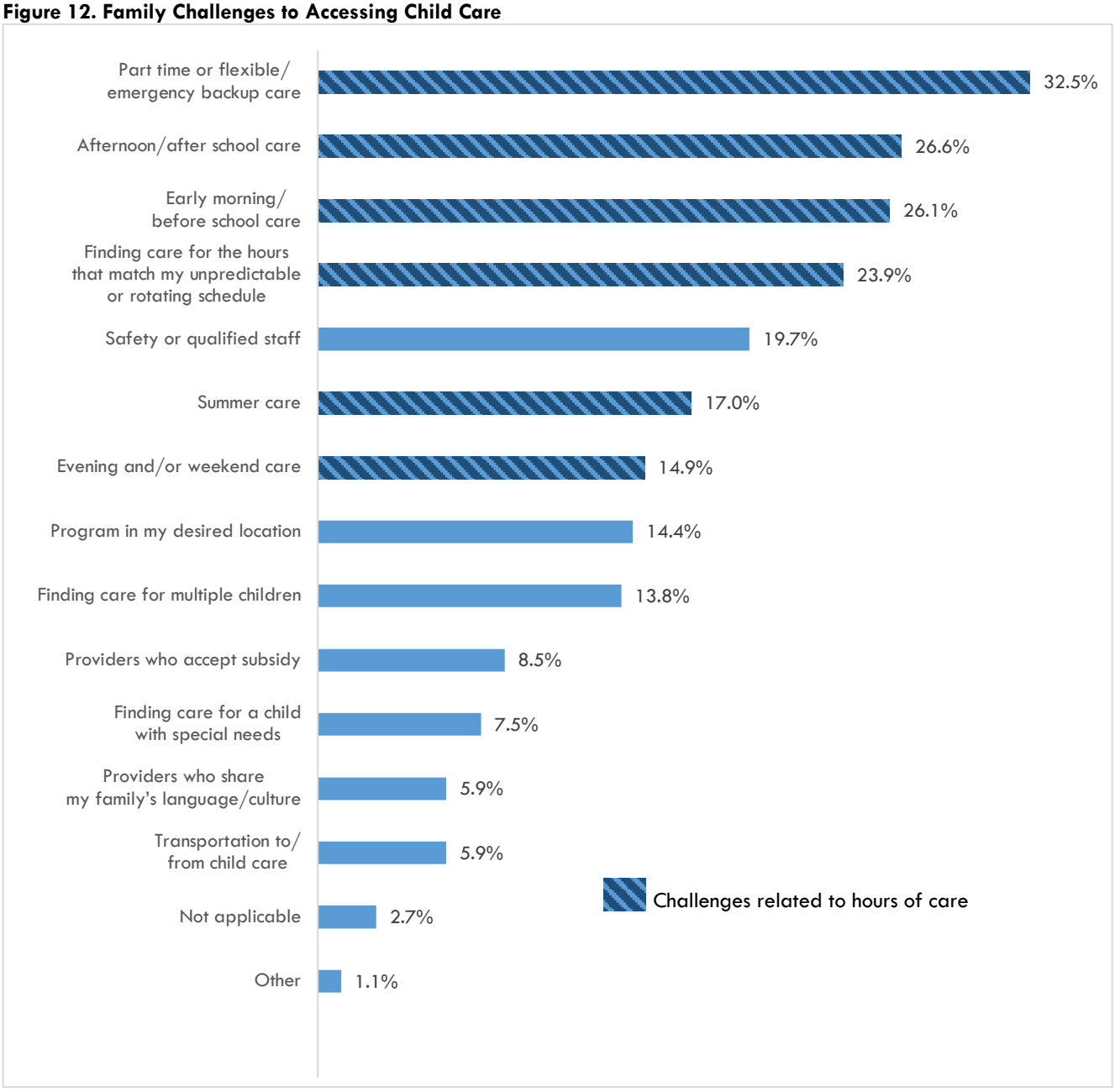
Figure 11. Families in Search of Child Care – Type of Care Needed



Access

Challenges that families face accessing child care are primarily related to hours and schedules of care, with nearly one-third of Family Survey respondents indicating a need for part-time or flexible care/emergency backup care. More than 20% of families also indicated challenges accessing afternoon/after school care, early morning/before school care, and finding care for the hours that match their unpredictable or rotating work schedule (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Family Challenges to Accessing Child Care



Only one-third (33.3%) of families working or attending school full time report having all the care their family needs met. A slightly smaller percentage of families working or attending school part time have all the care their family needs (27.0%).

For both family groups, the top barrier to child care is cost, though it was cited more often by families working or attending school part time (59.7%) than full time (45.5%). Aside from cost, both groups cited many barriers equally (e.g., one-third of both family groups cited a need for part time or flexible/ emergency backup care).

However, the two groups deviate with regard to child care hours. Families working or attending school full time cite a need for early morning/before school care and summer care at much higher rates. Families working or attending school part time are more likely to cite a need for evening and/or weekend care. This suggests that the needs for those working or attending school part time extend beyond traditional working hours, while their part-time status may allow for more flexibility in the mornings and summer than those with full-time status.

Among Family Survey respondents, 20 families reported annual household income at or below $25,000, placing them at the bottom 20th percentile of families in Harrisonburg. Thirty families report earning between $50,001 and $75,000, placing them at or near the median household income ($62,254). Seventy-four families earn more than $100,000, placing them at or near the top 20th percentile. [lxxiii, lxxiv]

Across all three income groups, 24%-30% of families report having all the care their family needs. However, among those who have continued child care needs, household income has distinct impacts. Notably, those at the median or the top 20th percentile share similar needs, while those at the bottom 20th percentile have starkly different needs.

For median income earners and the top 20th percentile, "child care for days when my regular provider is closed or for emergencies" was cited most often (40.6%-48.0%). However, this same need was cited by only 5.0% of the bottom 20th percentile. Among these lowest earners, the need cited most often was "additional care to cover all my work/school hours" (45.0%). This same need was cited by only 25.0%-28% of median and top income earners. This suggests that families at the bottom 20th percentile may be employed in occupations with working hours that are not met by traditional child care.

The need for part-time or flexible/emergency backup care was cited most often by median income earners (48.3%). It was also cited highly by the highest earners (41.5%). Yet, this need was cited by only 10% of the lowest earners. Evening and/or weekend care was cited by 30.0% of the lowest earners, while cited by only 17% of the median and highest earners. Again, this suggests that families at the bottom 20th percentile may be employed in occupations with working hours that are not being met by traditional child care.

Cost was the top barrier to child care among families at the bottom 20th percentile, but also for those at the median. Even among the highest earners, cost was cited by many as a barrier, indicating that the cost of child care is high and poses a challenge for the majority of families in Harrisonburg.

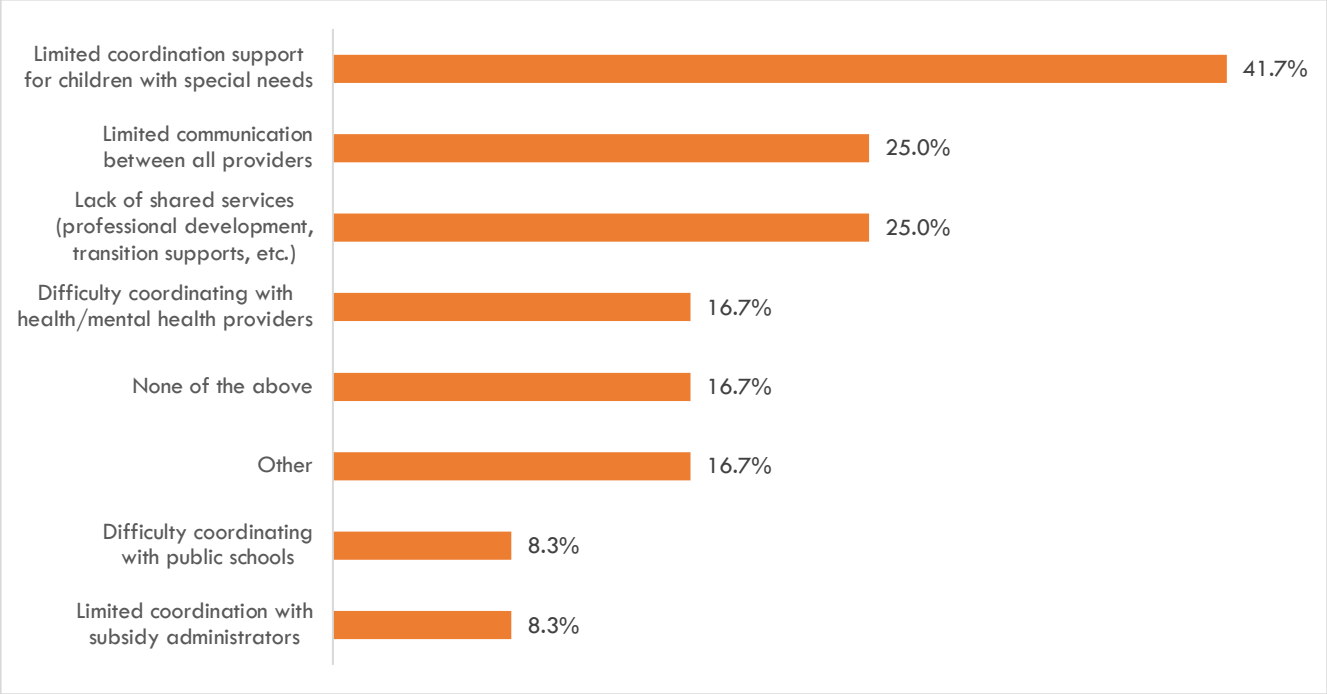
High-Quality Care and Coordination

The Child Care Provider Survey revealed that 41.7% of child care providers believe that programs in the City coordinate "somewhat well" with one another, one-quarter are not sure, and 8.3% believe programs

do not coordinate well at all. This may indicate a need for better coordination among City providers to serve residents and employees.

Specifically, several challenges related to coordination emerged. The most frequently identified strength was coordination with the public schools (27.8%), followed by coordination with subsidy administrators (22.2%). There is a mix of experiences and varying levels of perceived coordination across the system, as one-quarter or more of child care providers identified specific coordination challenges that include limited coordination for children with special needs; limited communication among all providers; and lack of shared services (e.g., professional development, transition supports) (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Child Care Coordination Challenges



Family and child care provider focus group participants also highlighted perceived coordination gaps. Families seeking child care expressed experiences with navigating fragmented sources of information and limited coordinated or centralized sources that reflect what each child care program in the City offers.

Provider feedback aligned with this finding. One provider noted that when their program is full, parents often ask for recommendations for other local programs and that it may be helpful to maintain a shared master resource list of what each child care program offers in order to better support families seeking child care. Another provider noted that their program did not have the time to collect and coordinate enrollment capacity and characteristics of other programs to share with families. While providers collaborate informally, they lack a centralized system for sharing openings, schedules, or subsidy information.

Extended Hours

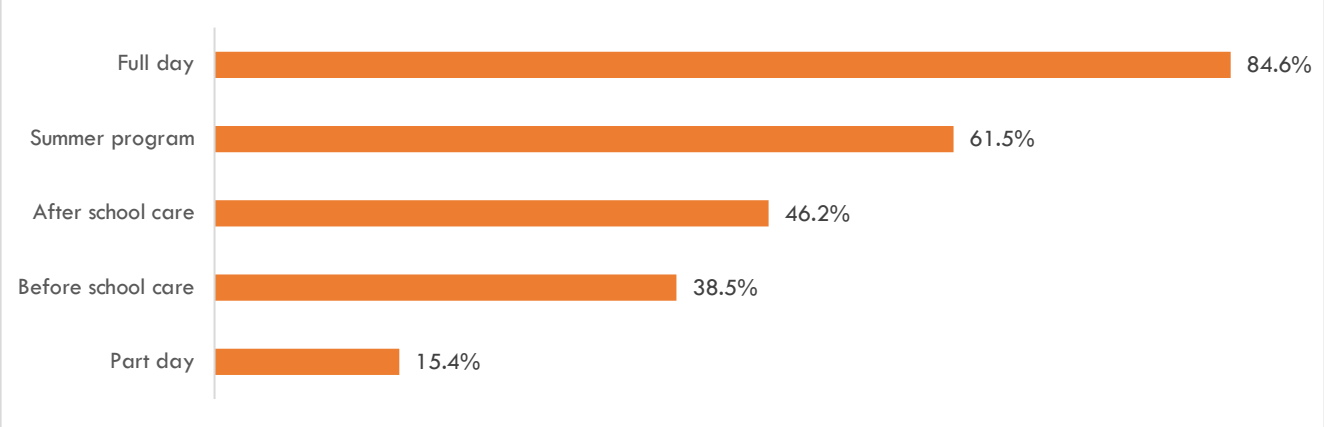
Only 32.4% of Family Survey respondents had all the child care their family needs. The most pressing child care need among families in the City is accessing care outside of normal business hours. Families report needing child care to fill the gaps in traditional child care. They are searching for part-day/part-week care; emergency/backup care when their regular caregiver is closed (e.g., holidays) or when their child is

sick; before and after school care; flexible hours to match unpredictable work schedules; evening/weekend care; and summer care.

While full-time, full-year child care is available for three- to five-year-olds in the City, families who enroll their children in public school Pre-K (VPI) may still face gaps in coverage. For many working families, this means finding summer care and additional reliable before and after school options.

Among respondents to the Child Care Provider Survey, the majority (84.6%) provide full-day child care. Only 15.4% provide part-day care. No providers offer overnight, weekend, or emergency/holiday care (Figure 14), pointing to a critical gap in the City's child care network.

Figure 14. Child Care Services Offered



Notably, the two participants in the family focus groups are from families with two full-time working parents. They described challenges in Harrisonburg that extend beyond the number of available slots. These challenges include child care schedules that do not align with the needs and hours of a working family (e.g., many child care programs offer care only until 3:30 p.m.), limited before and after school options, and fragmented coverage across the year (e.g., summer care, teacher work day coverage). One participant noted that her family is willing to pay for extended hours, but this is not always offered, and there are limited options for programs that would meet her family's needs as a two-parent working family.

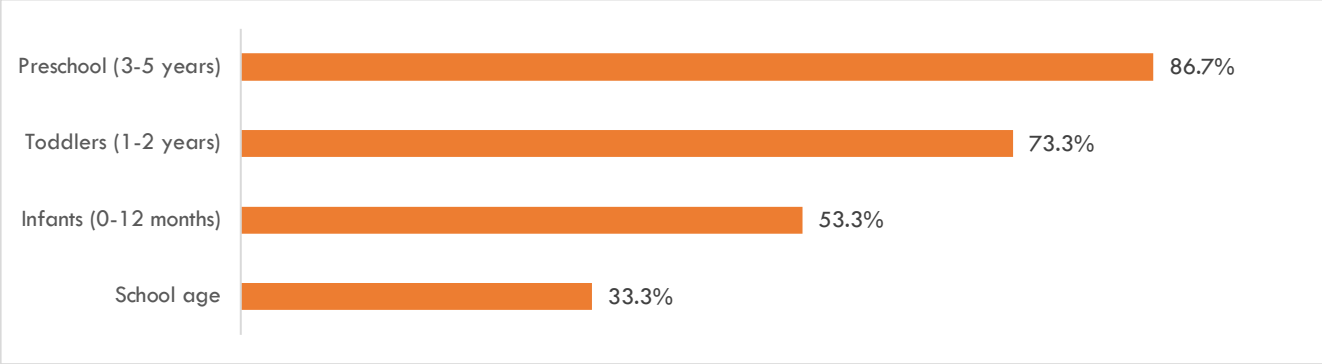
Interestingly, a participant in the child care provider focus group shared that their program offers care from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., with optional before- and after-care. At this program, only 10% of children stay until 5:30 p.m., and most are picked up between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. One full-time program that runs 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. without an option for a part-day schedule added that most of their children stay until 5:00 p.m.

Infant Care

Care for infants is cited most often among Family Survey respondents as an access challenge. One parent noted that the waitlist for infant care can be over a year long. All four parents who reported they are currently looking for care are in search of infant care. One parent noted that the emphasis on Pre-K programming has led to a shortage of slots for infants and toddlers.

Among Child Care Provider Survey respondents, only half offer infant care (under age 1) and three-quarters offer toddler care (ages 1-2) (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Ages Served by Child Care Providers

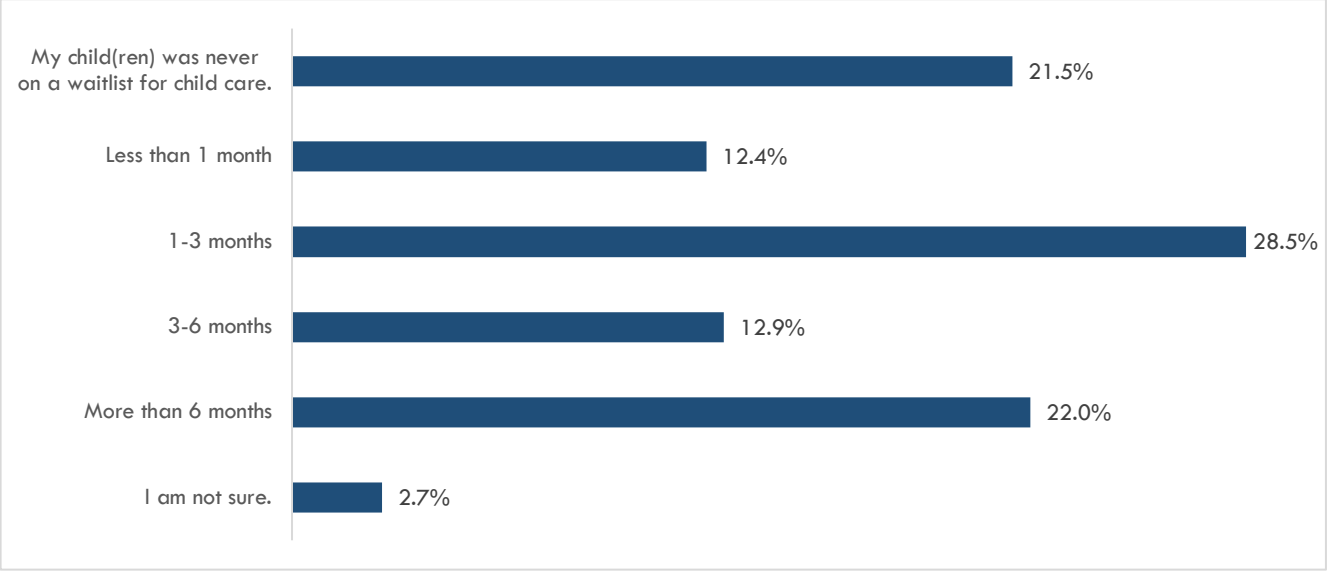


Child care provider focus group participants acknowledged that there is particular demand for infant care, but noted that expansion to provide such care would require additional facilities. One center reported that it "could fill three rooms" of infant care if space were available, highlighting the unmet need.

Waitlists

Among Family Survey respondents who have searched for child care, nearly half (46.6%) noted that waitlists are too long. More than three-quarters of families reported that their child has been on a waitlist at some point. Among those who do not use child care, 17.7% reported currently being on a waiting list. The length of time families spend on a waitlist for child care varied, with some families receiving child care after a few months, while others waited six months or more (Figure 16). One parent suggested a centralized waitlist system to serve the City's child care network.

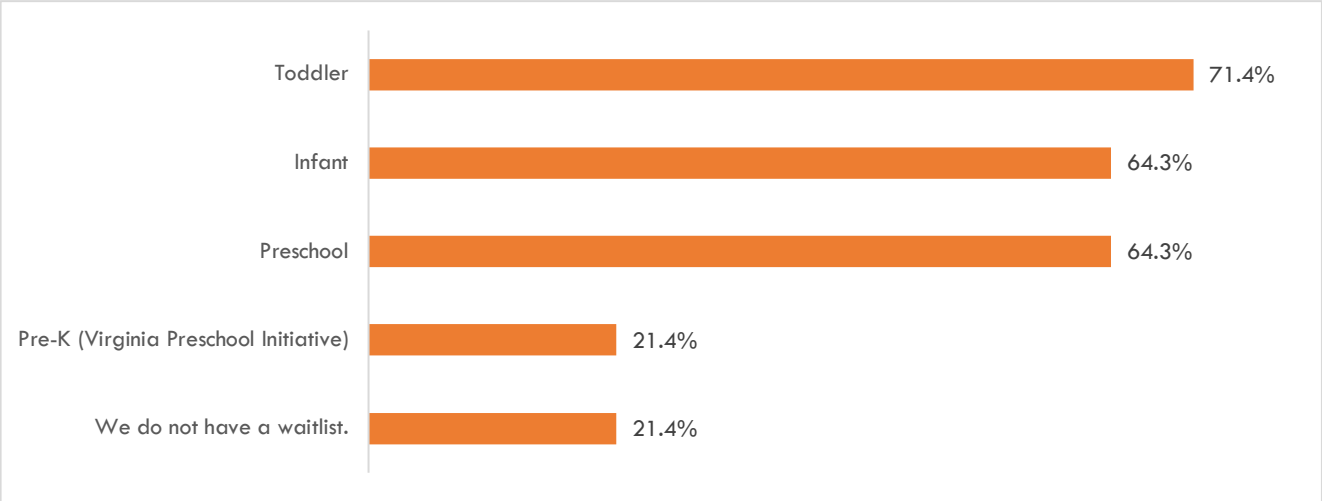
Figure 16. Length of Time on Child Care Waitlist



Of the three child care providers that participated in the focus group, one had only four openings left for the Fall and maintains a waitlist; one had a competitive registration process for half day care, and the program could not serve all who are interested; and one newer provider is not yet fully enrolled.

The majority (80.0%) of Child Care Provider Survey respondents maintain full or near full enrollment. Those with a waitlist indicated that demand is greatest for toddler care, followed equally by infant and preschool care (Figure 17).

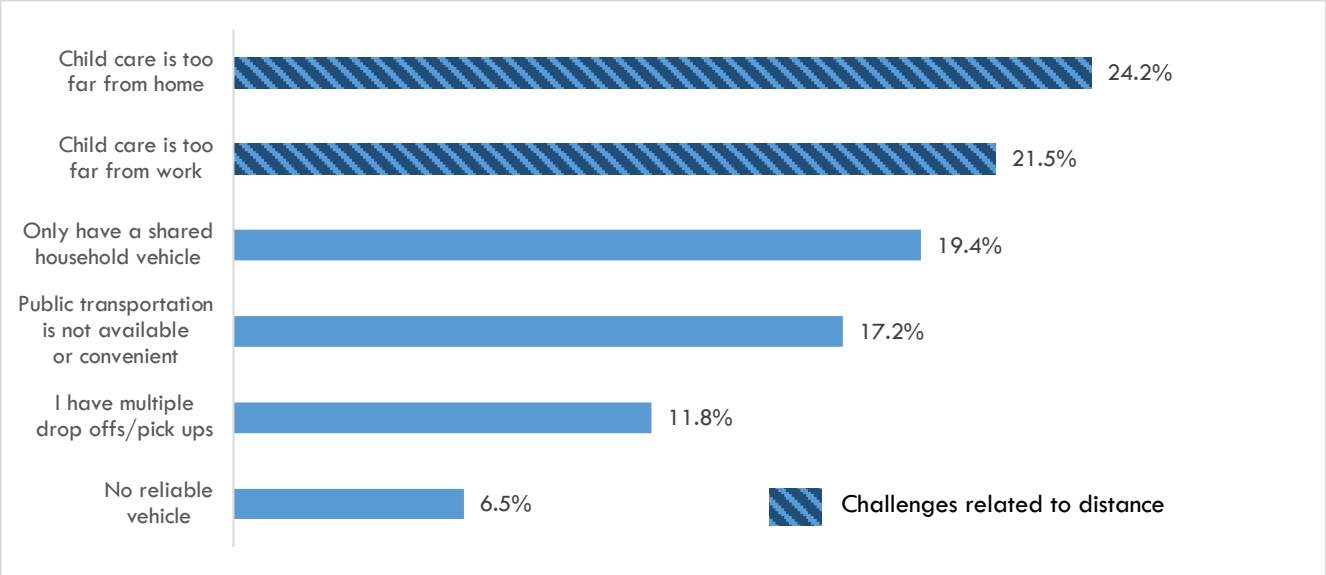
Figure 17. Child Care Provider Waitlists



Transportation

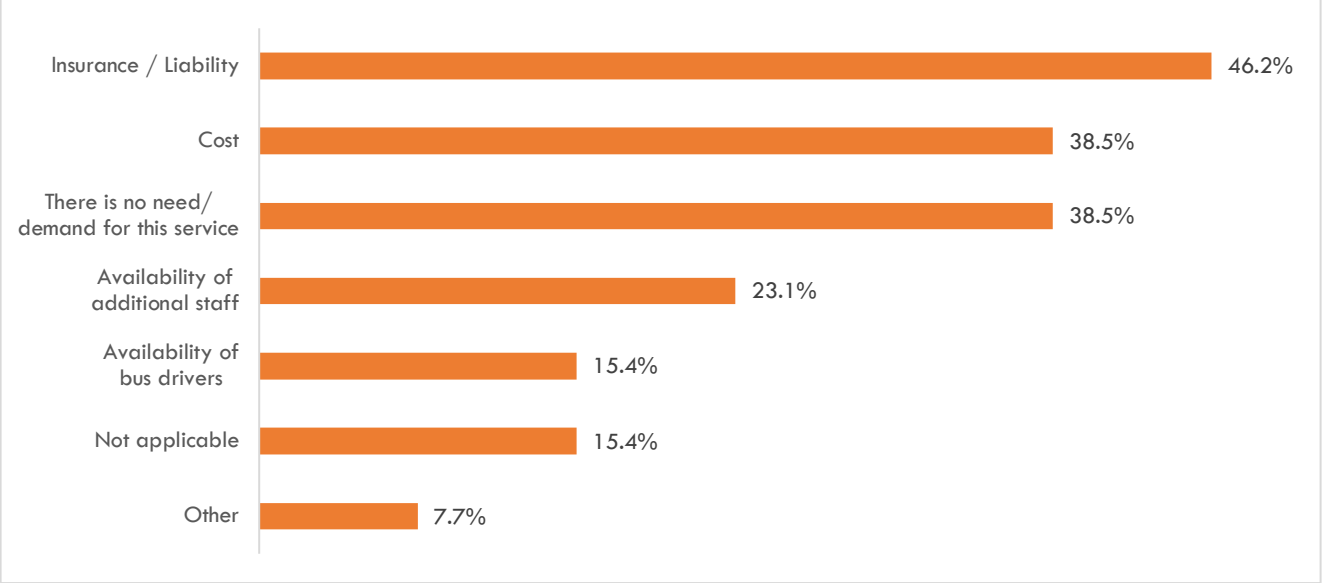
Family Survey respondents highlighted a number of challenges related to transportation as a barrier to child care. The location of child care was a major challenge for families, both in terms of distance from home and from work, and some families have one shared household vehicle or limited access to public transportation (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Transportation Challenges to Child Care



Few Child Care Provider Survey respondents in the City provide transportation. Only one child care provider provides transportation for all children; two offer transportation for after school care. Insurance, cost, and lack of demand are the top reasons why providers do not offer transportation (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Reasons Child Care Providers Do Not Offer Transportation

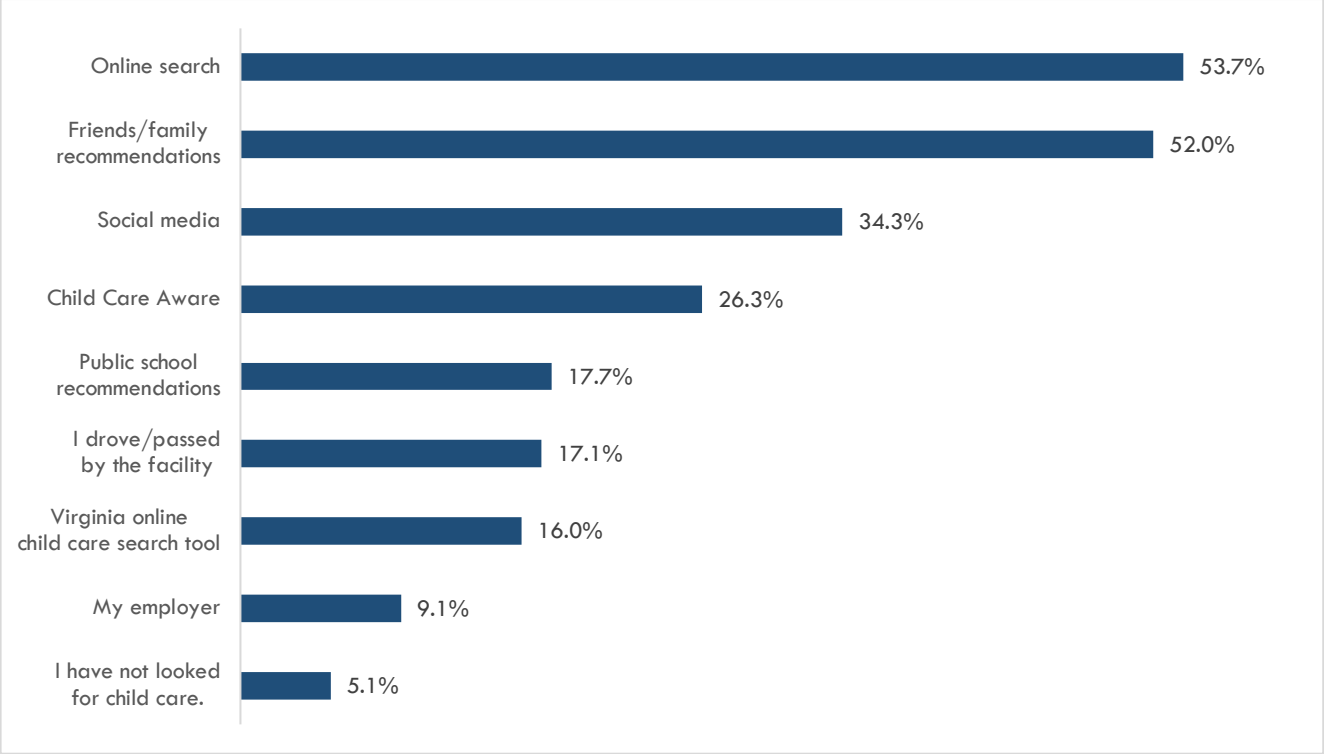


As noted, focus group participants indicated that transportation between programs may allow greater access to before and after school care options for families. It was also noted that child care programs are not evenly distributed across the City, which may create gaps in access for families who live outside the few concentrated areas where programs operate. See the addendum to this report for a map of Existing Facilities Locations.

Information Gathering

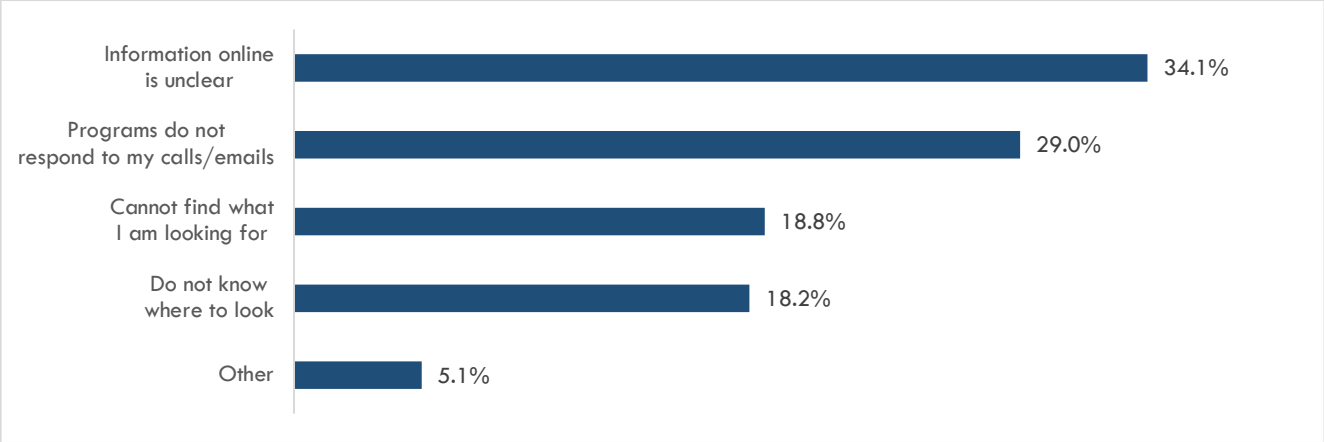
More than half of Family Survey respondents relied on online search and/or friends and family recommendations to find child care. Nearly 10% of families (16 respondents) turned to their employer for assistance (Figure 20). Yet, just over 5% of employers offer their employees information/referrals to child care resources.

Figure 20. Resources Used by Families to Find Child Care



About one-third of Family Survey respondents reported that it was somewhat or very difficult finding information about child care options in the City. The challenge families encountered most often is "information online is unclear," followed by "programs do not respond to my calls/emails" (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Challenges Learning About Child Care Options



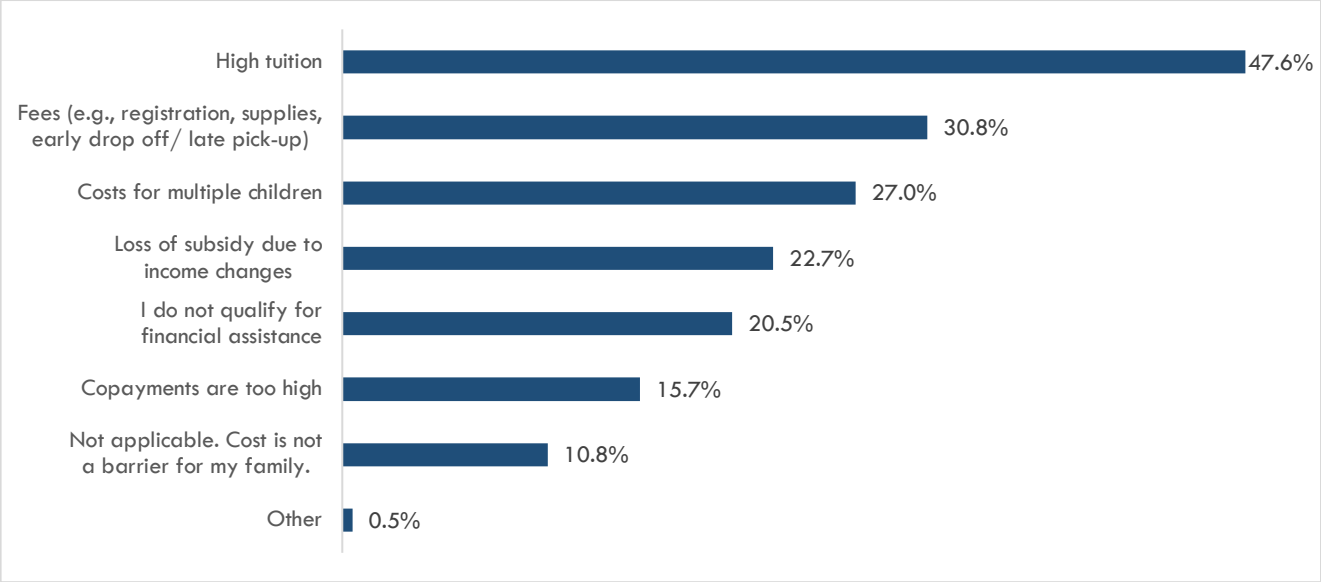
Family focus group discussions revealed that parents may often navigate a fragmented system of information when searching for child care as they rely on their own research and word-of-mouth recommendations to identify available programs that align with their needs. Participants described one program's competitive registration process, the challenge finding child care programs that align with their work schedules, frequently having to piece together multiple child care arrangements, adjusting work routines, or relying on alternative coverage during gaps, like child care vacation weeks or teacher work days.

The two family focus group participants reported that their employers do not provide information or assistance regarding child care, though one said her employer offers a Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account (FSA). One participant added her wish that her employer, JMU, would collaborate with the City to align staff and student calendars to match the timing of the City's public schools spring break.

Affordability

Cost and affordability is a primary barrier to child care for families in the City. More than 80% of Family Survey respondents responded "yes" or "somewhat" when asked if cost is a child care barrier for their family. And, among families that have previously searched for child care, 55.7% noted that a top challenge is the high cost, followed by the cost of fees, and costs for the care of multiple children (Figure 22). Nearly 90% of City employers also believed that cost is the main child care challenge for their employees.

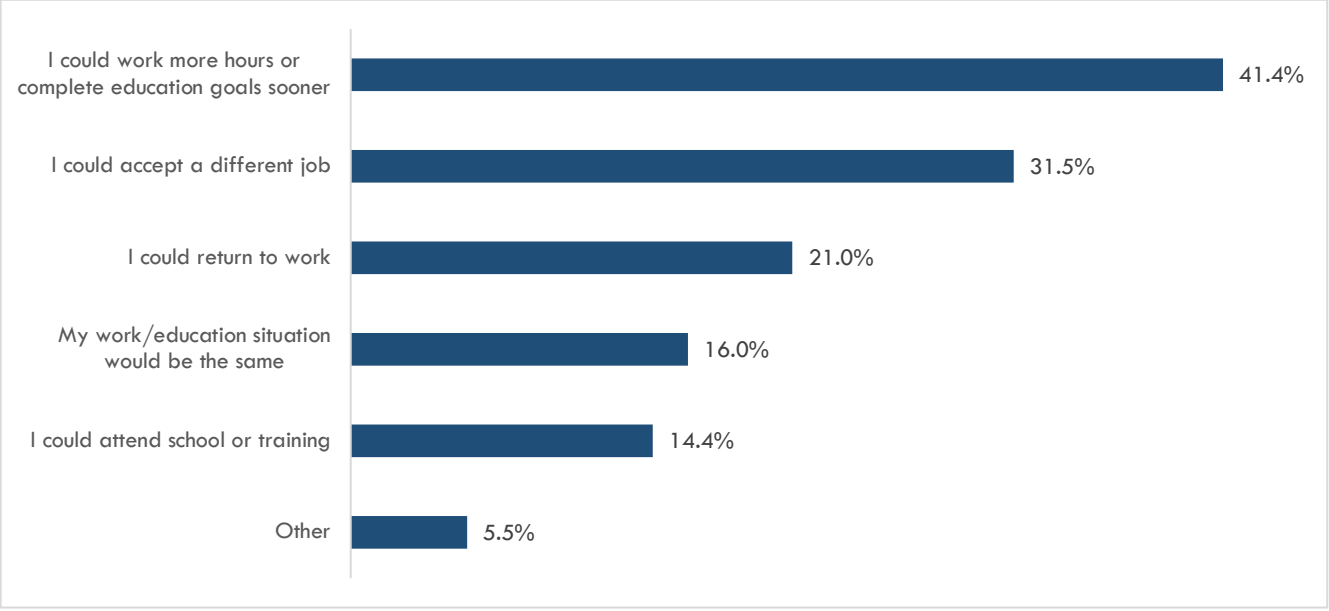
Figure 22. Affordability Challenges



The two family focus group participants rely on a patchwork of programs to care for their children during summer and school vacation/teacher work days, all of which carry additional fees.

If child care were more affordable and accessible, Family Survey respondents indicated that they "could work more hours or complete education goals sooner;" they would also have more purchasing power, save more money, improve their quality of life, or have more children (Figure 23).

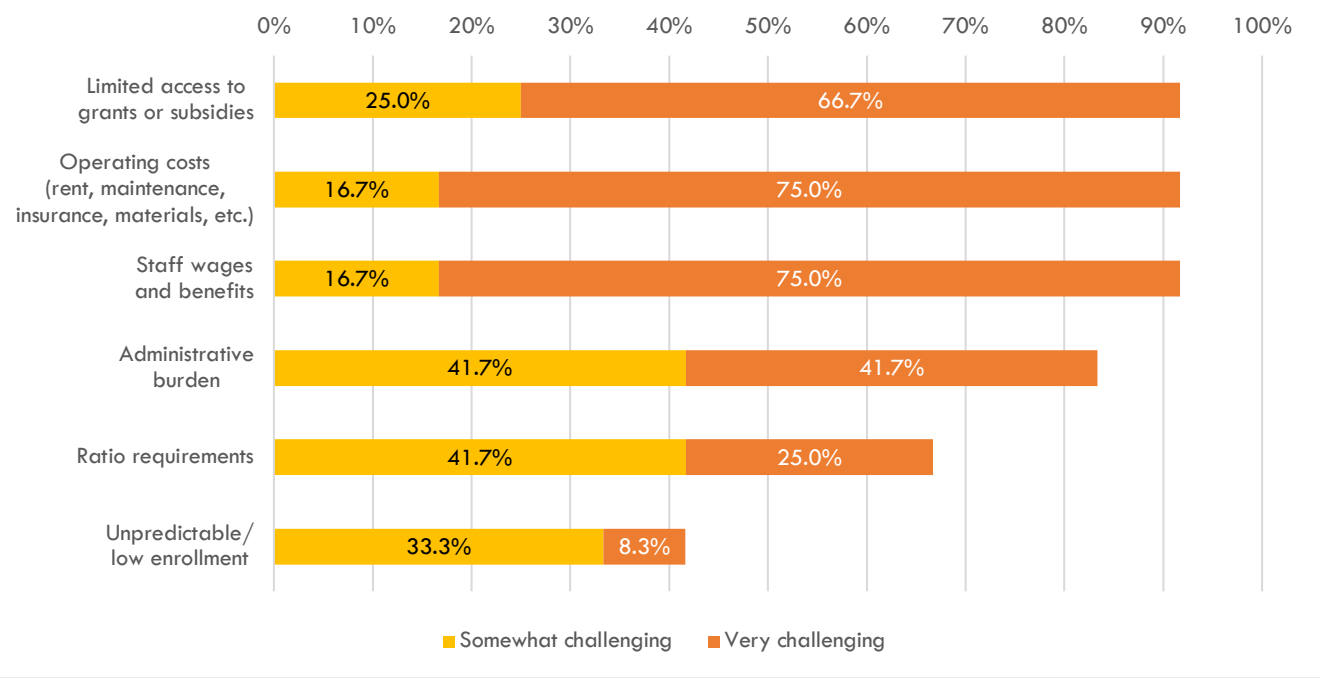
Figure 23. Child Care Affordability Opportunities



The cost of child care is often the biggest part of a family's budget and can be higher than the cost of housing, food, or even college tuition.[lxxv] According to The Living Wage estimate, in Harrisonburg, the average cost of child care for one child is $9,175 annually; for two children it is $17,604; and for three children it is $23,032 (based on a combination of toddler, preschool, and school-age care).[lxxvi] Local market data for the City reveals that the median annual cost for toddler care is $13,780 and $11,570 for preschool care.[lxxvii] For comparison, tuition and fees at James Madison University for the 2026-2027 academic year is $15,120 for in-state and $32,970 for out-of-state undergraduate students.[lxxviii]

Child Care Provider Survey respondents almost universally agreed that limited access to grants or subsidies; operating costs; and staff wages and benefits impact their ability to offer more affordable rates (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Challenges to Affordable Care Rates



Child Care Provider focus group participants noted that balancing the need for accessible and affordable child care while also charging a tuition that supports a living wage is a global issue in the child care sector. Providers reported staffing shortages, low wages, and limited funding streams to support increasing staff wages. One provider spoke to grant funding that helps offset program costs but is restrictive and does not allow support for increasing staff wages, which is a critical need.

While two of the three focus group participants were generally fully enrolled, one Director was from a new program and faced some enrollment challenges, which she felt were potentially due to the cost of tuition or lack of awareness among families.

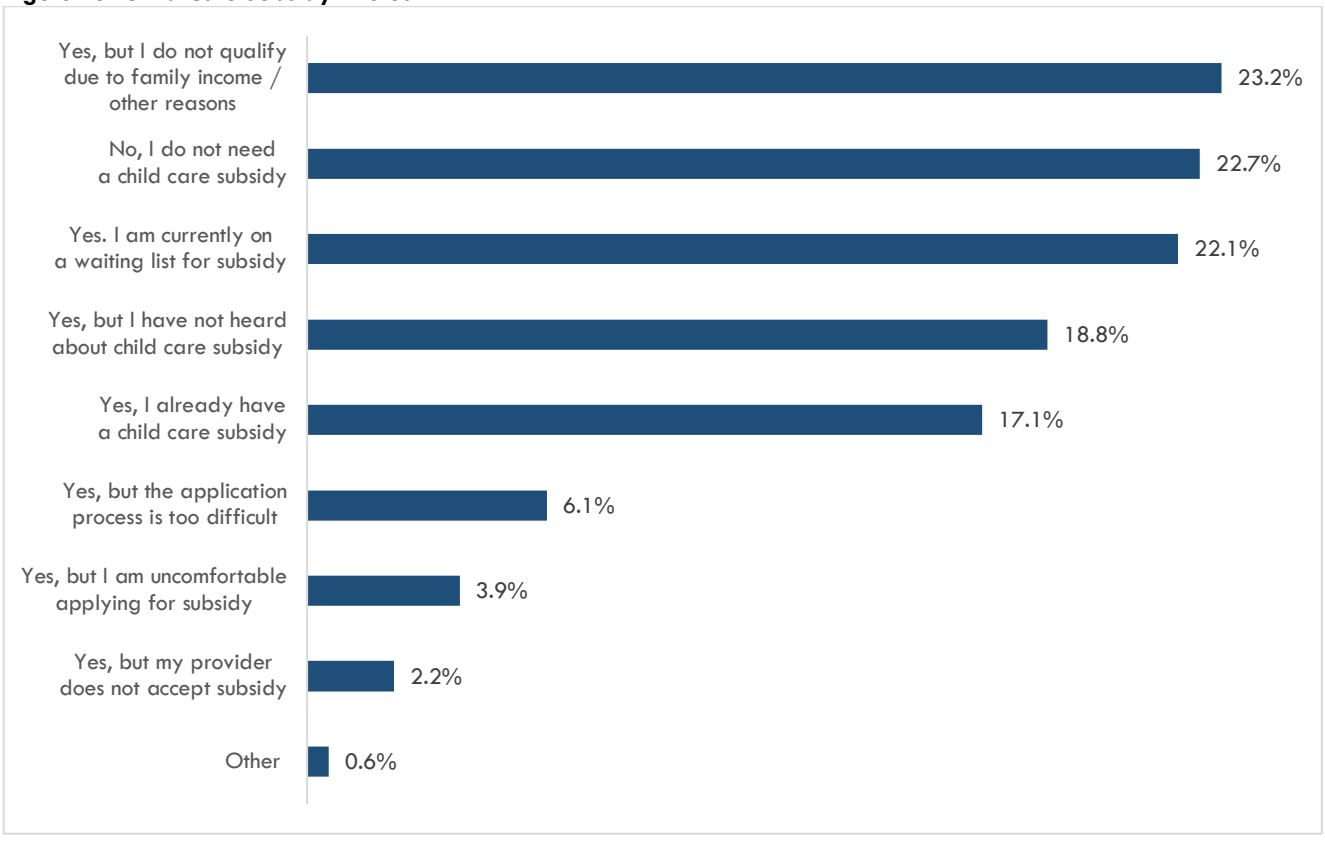
Child Care Subsidy

In Virginia, the Child Care Subsidy Program assists families in paying child care costs for children under age 13 or children with special needs under age 18. To be eligible, applicants must be a Virginia resident who is either: actively employed or engaged in a job search; participating in an education or training program; receiving child protective services; participating in an assigned activity for the Virginia Initiative for Education and Work (VIEW); or participating in a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAPET) plan of participation. Applicants for child care subsidies must provide eligibility verification and documentation that the family's household income does not exceed the limits of the locality in which they reside.[lxxix]

Additionally, the Mixed Delivery Program provides subsidized child care to families with children birth to age 5, while also supporting early childhood care and education providers. Through the program, publicly funded services are available in licensed private settings for eligible children, helping to increase access to full-day, full-year care.

In response to a Family Survey question about interest in child care subsidies, an equal number of families reported that they do not qualify for subsidy, they do not need subsidy, or they are currently on a waitlist for subsidy (Figure 25). One parent reported that they spend more on child care than their mortgage, yet their family earns too much to qualify for child care subsidy.

Figure 25. Child Care Subsidy Interest



Child care provider focus group discussions revealed potential gaps in family awareness of, and access to, child care subsidy. Providers reported that families looking for care do not always know that subsidies are available, and they often share this information with families during the application process. Specific to the Mixed Delivery Program, providers say it is a helpful support but the application window is only open at certain intervals. These providers advertise when the opportunities are available and feel they get a good response.

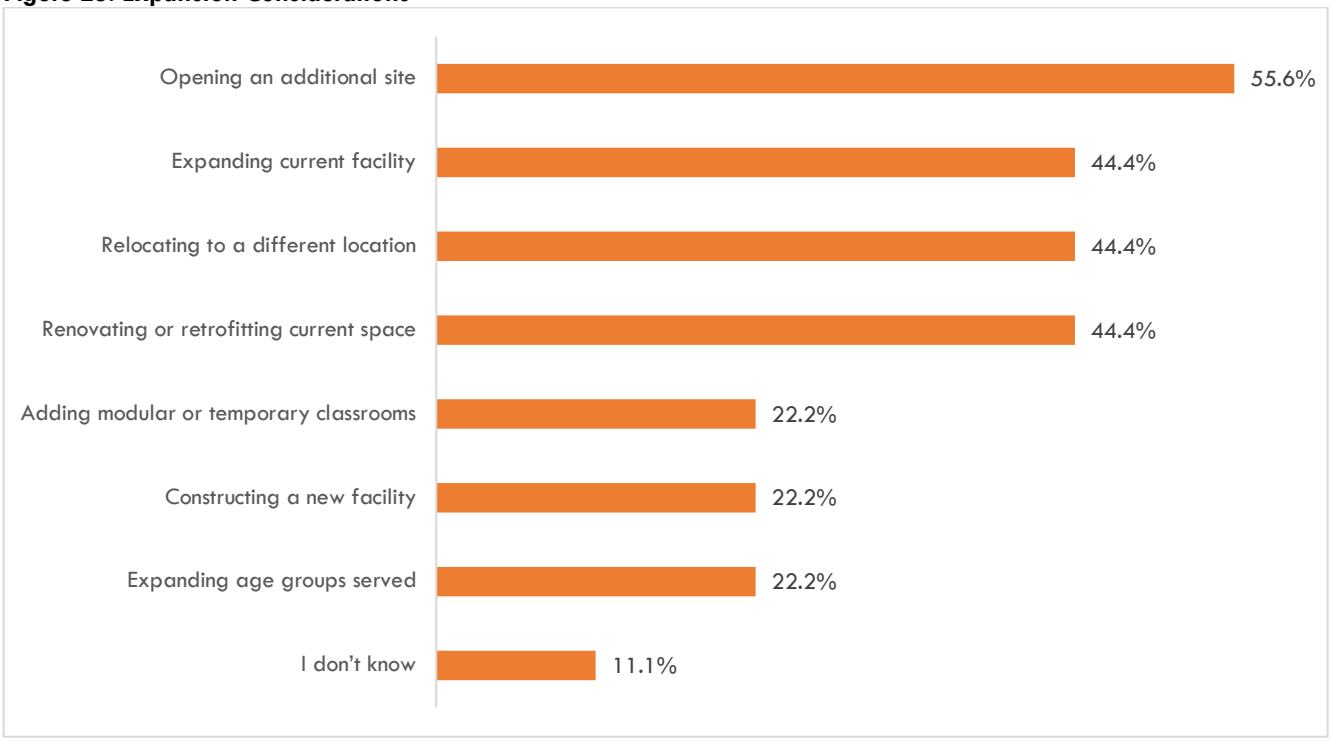
One family focus group participant, who is familiar with local early childhood initiatives, noted that local community programs (e.g., Valley Early Education Reimagined (VEER), Valley Interfaith Action (VIA)) help educate families and assist with navigating eligibility for the Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) and the Mixed Delivery Program.

Among respondents to the Child Care Provider Survey, only half participate in CCSP. Reasons for not accepting subsidy included licensing or other requirements, or low reimbursement rates. Other providers noted that they are funded by the City or participate in the Mixed Delivery Program, which enables them to keep costs low.

Expansion

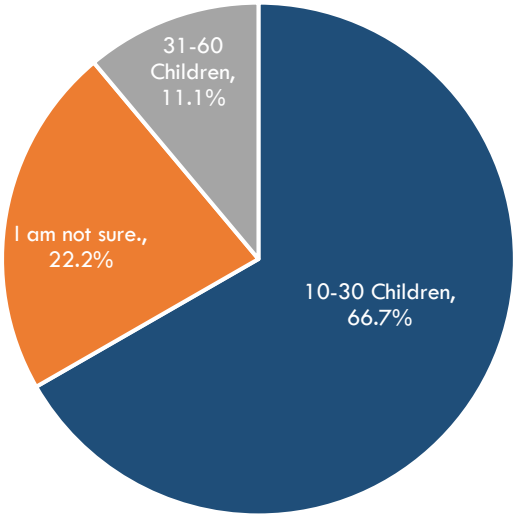
Half of Child Care Provider Survey respondents were interested in expanding their program to serve more children. An additional 25.0% were somewhat interested. For a majority of programs interested in expanding, a possible expansion would involve opening an additional site (55.6%). To a slightly lesser degree, 44.4% of programs would consider expanding a current facility, relocation, or renovation (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Expansion Considerations



Two-thirds of child care providers who expressed some interest in expansion anticipate they could serve an additional 10-60 children (Figure 27).

Figure 27. Possible Additional Children Served by Expansion



Barriers to Expansion

Child Care Provider Survey results showed the cost of construction or renovation was the leading reason child care programs are not expanding, followed by difficulty securing financing (Figure 28). Not surprisingly, when asked what supports would make expansion more feasible, the top responses related to financial support (Figure 29). Providers also largely indicated that technical support and guidance would benefit their expansion efforts.

Figure 28. Child Care Provider Barriers to Expansion

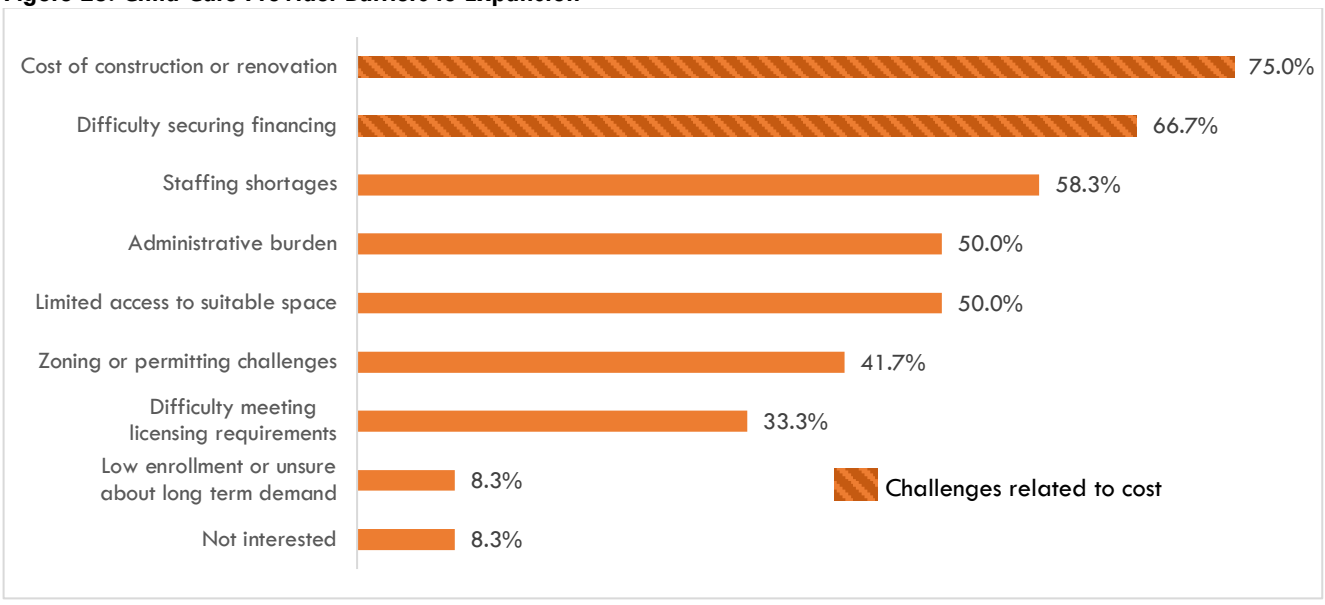
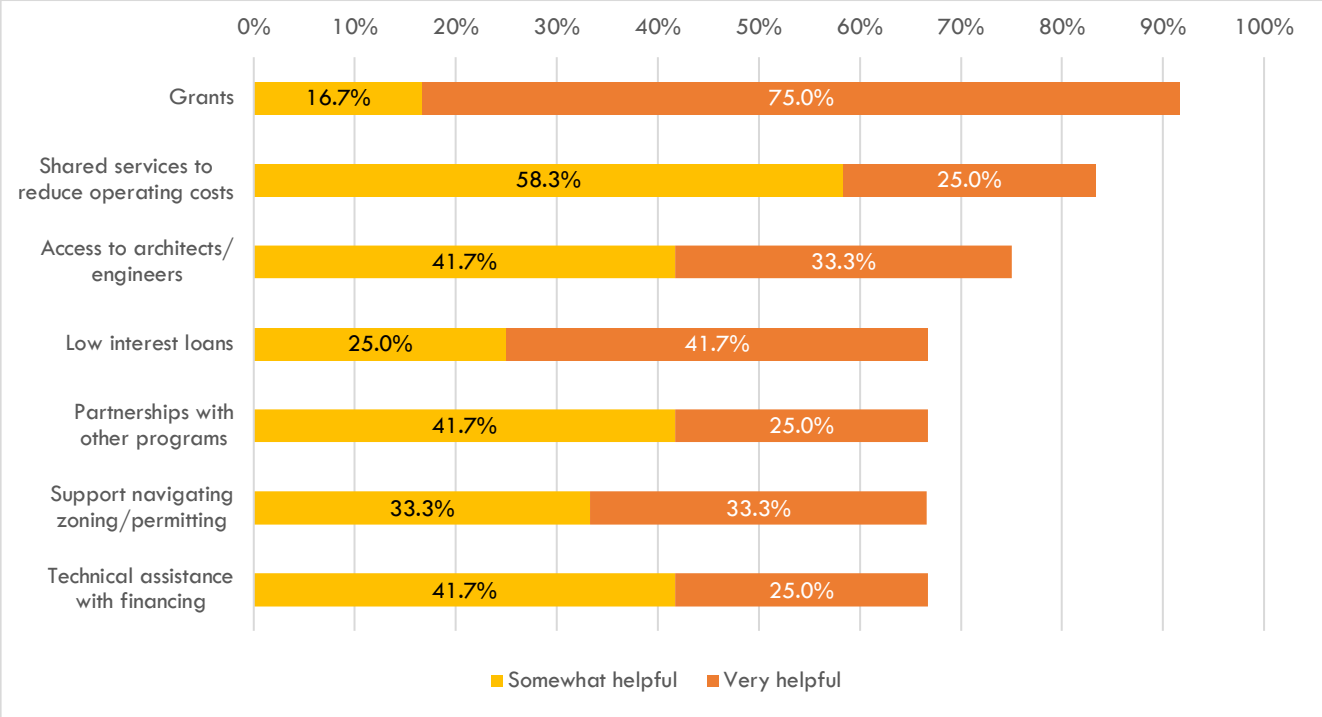


Figure 29. Supports to Make Expansion More Feasible



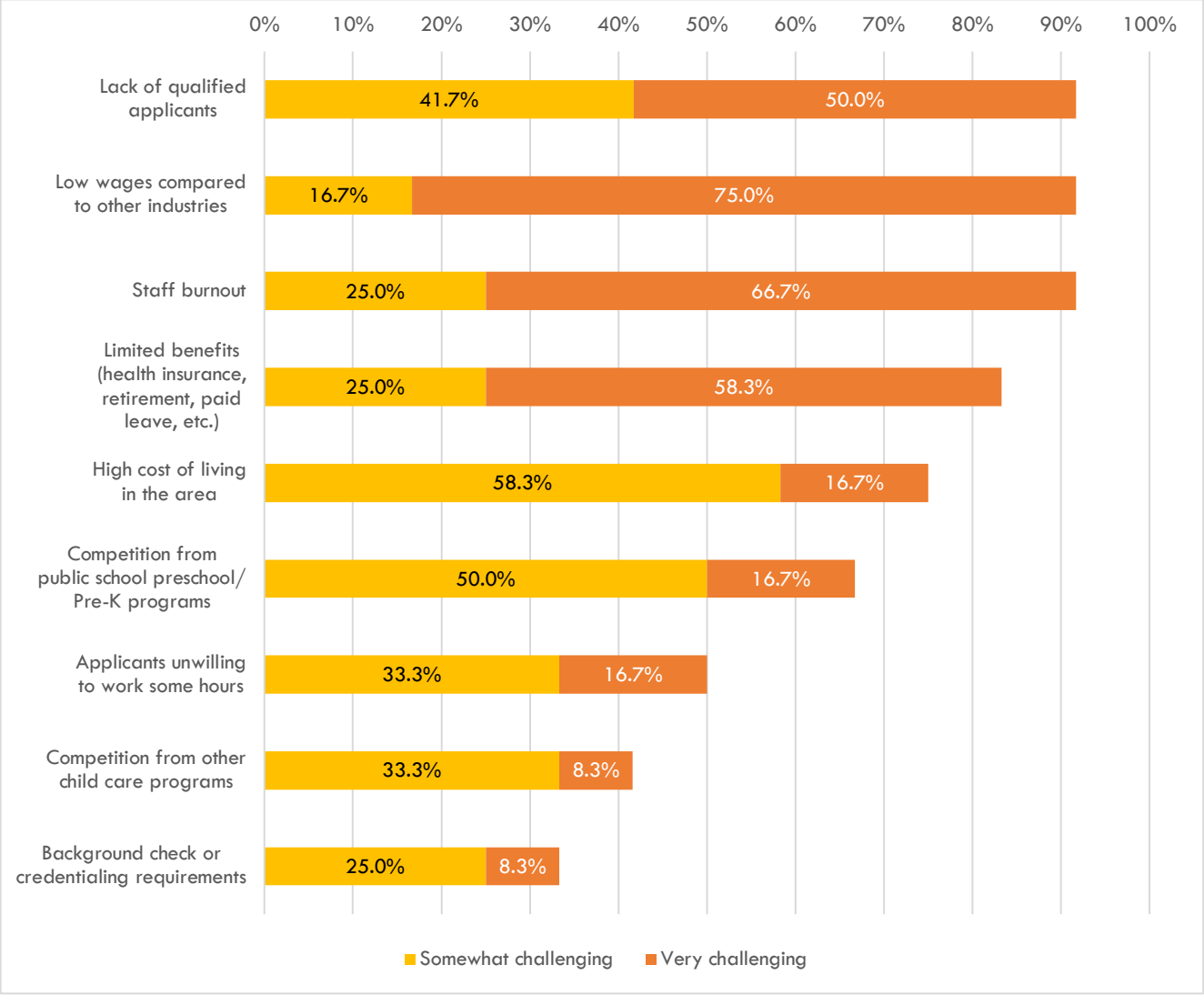
Child care provider focus group participants noted that funding and staffing are foundational to make expansion possible. Two participants added that expansion would require additional facilities, as their programs are at capacity in their current locations. One program spent two years in the renovation process and has no immediate plans to expand again. The part-day program noted that if there was an opportunity to open a second location, they may be able to reach a different family demographic, particularly if they could offer a longer day (currently they are generally serving families with one parent who is not working).

Workforce Development

Child Care Workforce

As described earlier, nearly all Child Care Provider Survey respondents noted that staff wages and benefits were among the factors that keep them from offering more affordable rates. Despite the high cost of staff wages and benefits, wages remain low compared to other employers and make recruiting and retention a top challenge for providers (Figure 30).

Figure 30. Challenges to Recruiting and Retaining Child Care Staff

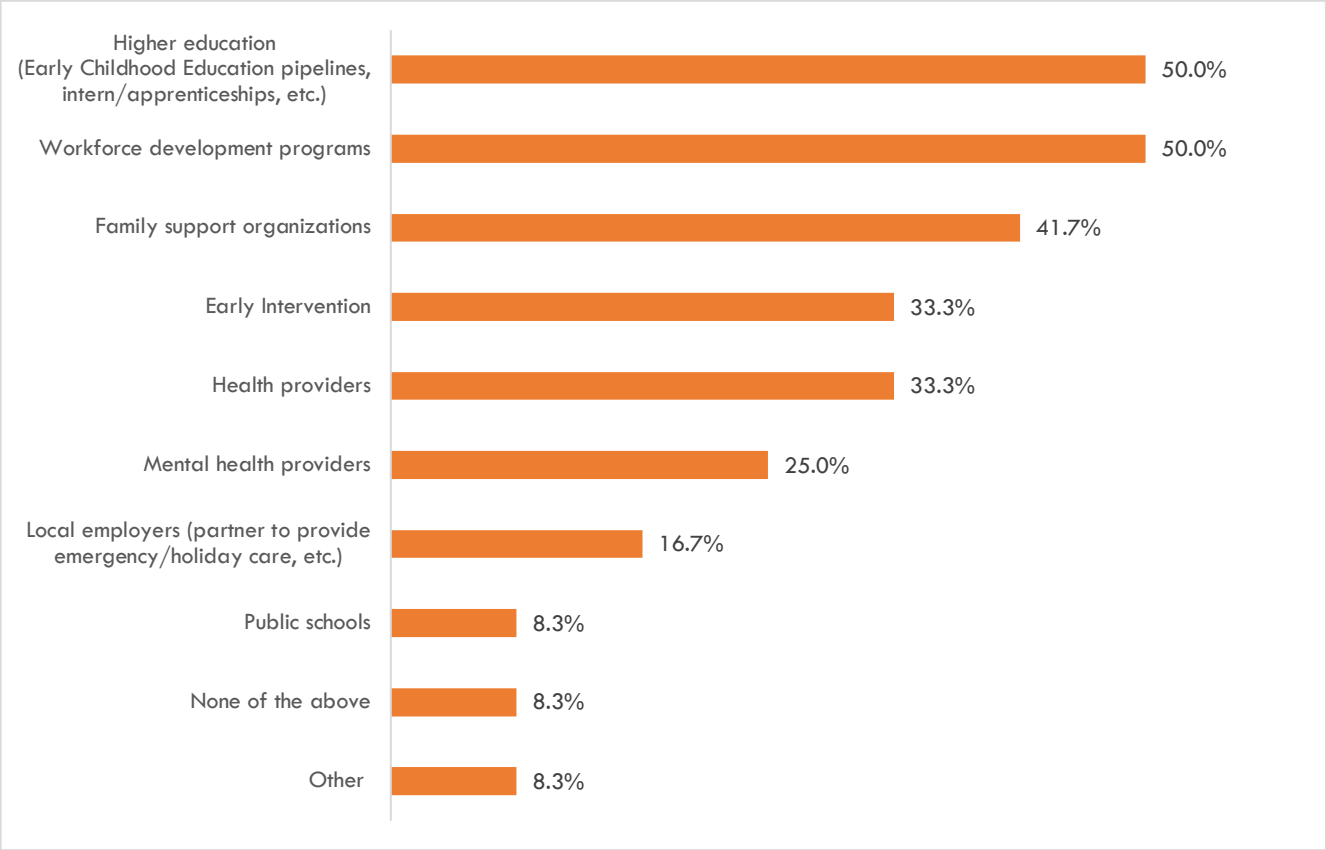


Among the child care providers that do not regularly maintain full enrollment, half "do not have enough staff to open all classrooms." Additionally, three-quarters of Child Care Provider Survey respondents believed a workforce pipeline, including internships and apprenticeships, would be somewhat or very helpful in their ability to provide high-quality care.

Child care provider focus group participants spoke to workforce challenges in Harrisonburg's child care sector and reinforced the need to offer child care staff a living wage. Further, providers described a limited pipeline of qualified teachers, noting that many lifelong staff have retired in recent years and new applicants are limited. There is also competition with the public school system for teachers, especially for bilingual staff, as the schools offer higher wages and benefits. Providers reported that applicants with college degrees often decline positions due to the $17/hour wage, leaving programs only able to hire individuals with High School diplomas and limited experience.

A lack of qualified applicants is also a major challenge for child care providers in recruiting and retaining staff. Half of Child Care Provider Survey respondents believed that partnerships with higher education (Early Childhood Education pipelines, internships, apprentices, etc.) and workforce development programs would strengthen their program's ability to serve families (Figure 31).

Figure 31. Child Care Partnerships to Strengthen Programs



Providers in the focus group spoke to some potential pipeline staffing opportunities in the City with JMU and community college collaborations. JMU utilizes its student population in its child care programs, but staffing with students can be a challenge as their schedules change each semester, making staffing unpredictable, while Blue Ridge Community College's commuter population may limit student availability.

Workplace Impacts

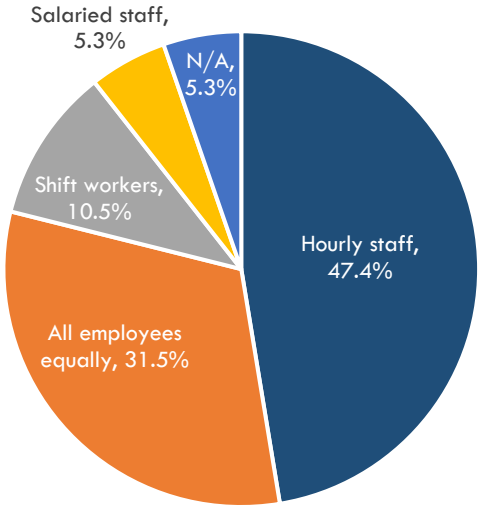
More than three-quarters of respondents to the Employer Survey noted that child care issues affect their employees' ability to work either sometimes, often, or very often. Similarly, three-quarters of employers believed that child care issues have had at least some impact on business operations.

One family focus group participant with a five-year-old who is an incoming kindergartener noted that the late public school start time (9:00 a.m.) creates significant challenges for working parents who must "piece together" coverage for before school care, as well as summer camps, teacher work days, and holidays. It was noted that some families rely on grandparents/parents or working from home. One respondent added that she saved all her paid time off to cover days when school or child care programs are closed.

One additional complexity is navigating child care schedules for multiple children within a family, some of whom may also attend public or private school. This can be a significant factor in understanding the full set of considerations families must manage. Across all Family Survey respondents, households reported 115 children over the age of five, many of whom likely participate in school-age programming or require coordination across different school schedules. These factors shape how families evaluate child care options, availability, and feasibility.

In addition to family structure, employee classification also impacts child care challenges. Compared to salaried workers, hourly workers are more vulnerable to child care issues and interruptions. Nearly half of Employer Survey respondents noted that hourly workers are most affected by child care challenges, and approximately 10% noted that shift workers are the group most affected (Figure 32). This also reflects the finding that 24% of families had trouble finding child care to match their unpredictable/rotating work schedules.

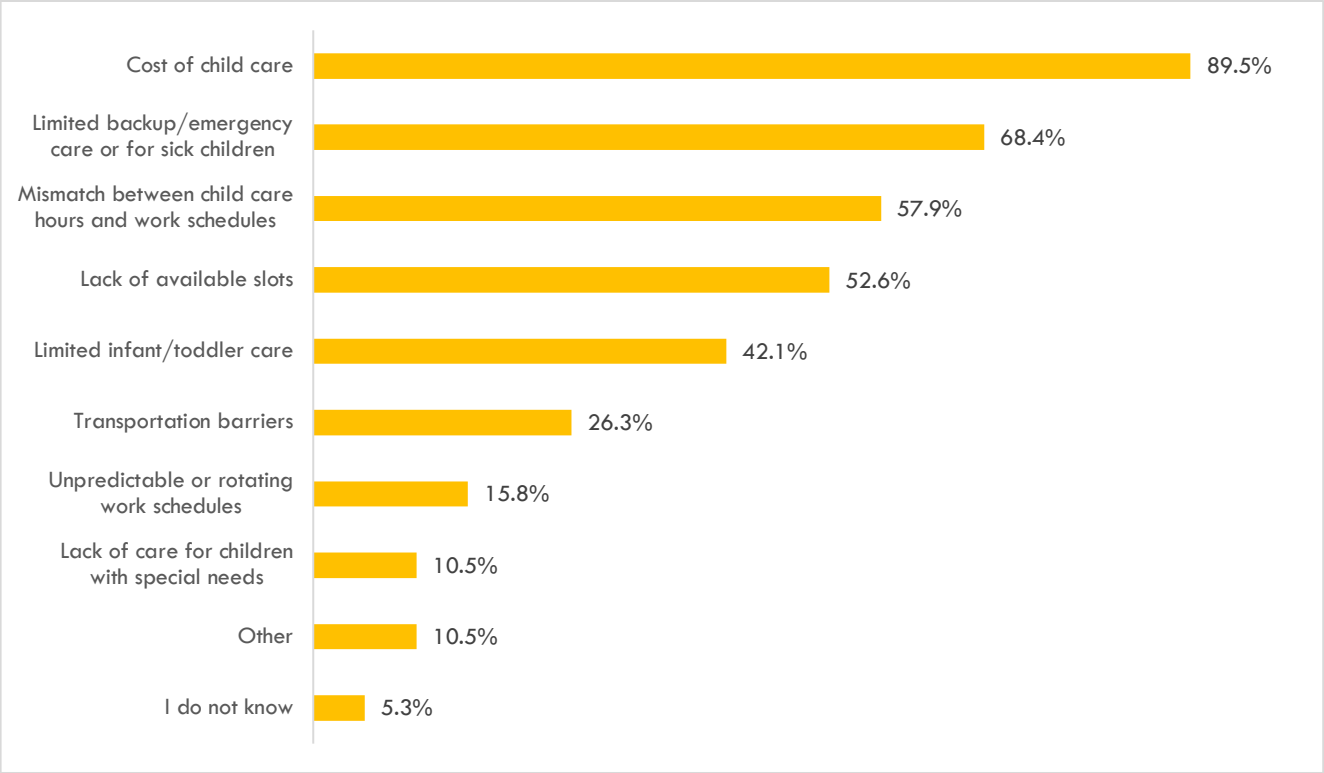
Figure 32. Employees Most Affected by Child Care Challenges



Unlike salaried workers, if hourly workers cannot come to work, arrive late, or leave work early due to child care issues, they do not get paid. Hourly workers, who could include retail, construction, hospitality, and repair/maintenance works, typically lack the job security and benefits afforded to salaried employees, who could include more educated and higher paid occupations like accountants, teachers, lawyers, and engineers.[lxxx]

Also reflecting family concerns, nearly 90% of Employer Survey respondents believed the cost of child care is a challenge for their employees. This was followed by access challenges such as limited backup/ emergency care, mismatch between work and child care hours, lack of available slots, and limited infant/toddler care (Figure 33).

Figure 33. Child Care Challenges Faced by Employees



Recruitment and Retention

When asked about the impact that child care has on employee recruitment and retention, 36.9% of Employer Survey respondents indicated that child care is a "somewhat significant" or "very significant" barrier to recruitment, while 31.6% reported it as a "somewhat significant" or "very significant" barrier to retention (Figures 34 and 35).

Figure 34. Child Care as a Barrier to Recruitment

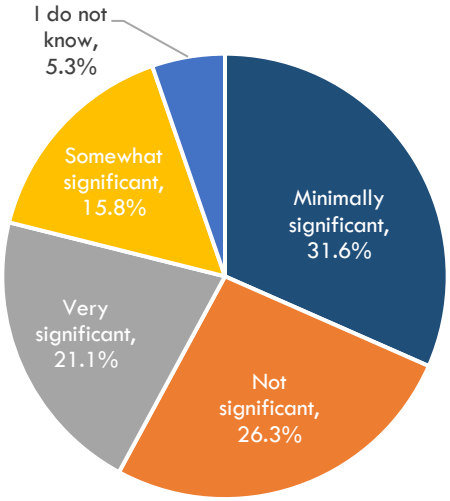
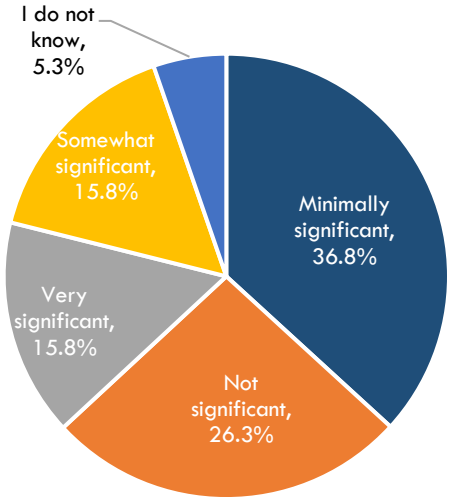


Figure 35. Child Care as a Barrier to Retention



Employee Benefits

Half of Employer Survey respondents offered some level of child care benefits for their employees. Benefits included flexible hours, Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA), remote/hybrid work, and information/referrals to child care resources (Figure 36). Half of employers found that the results of these benefits were somewhat or very effective, while 20% felt they were not very effective and the remaining 30% were unsure (Figure 37).

Figure 36. Employee Child Care Benefits

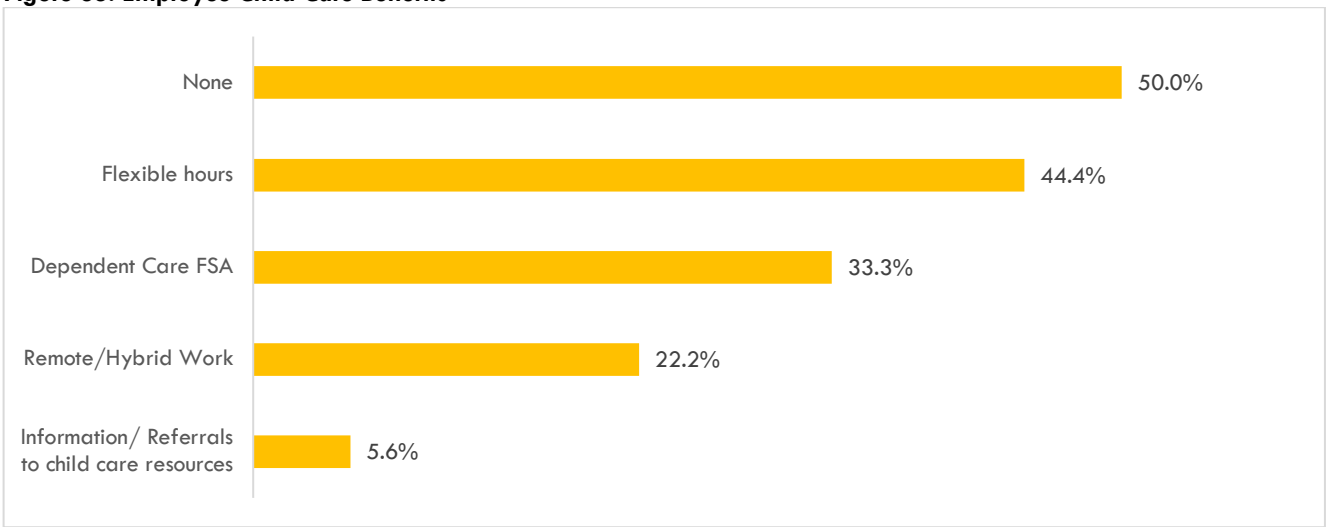
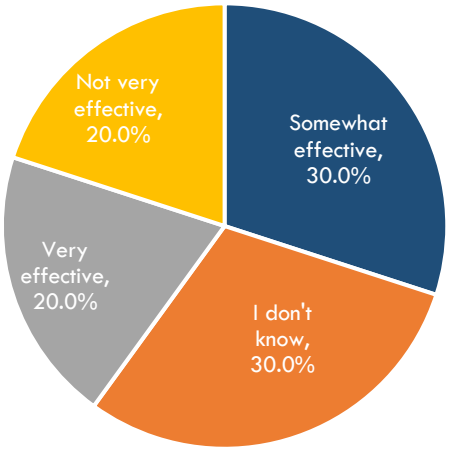
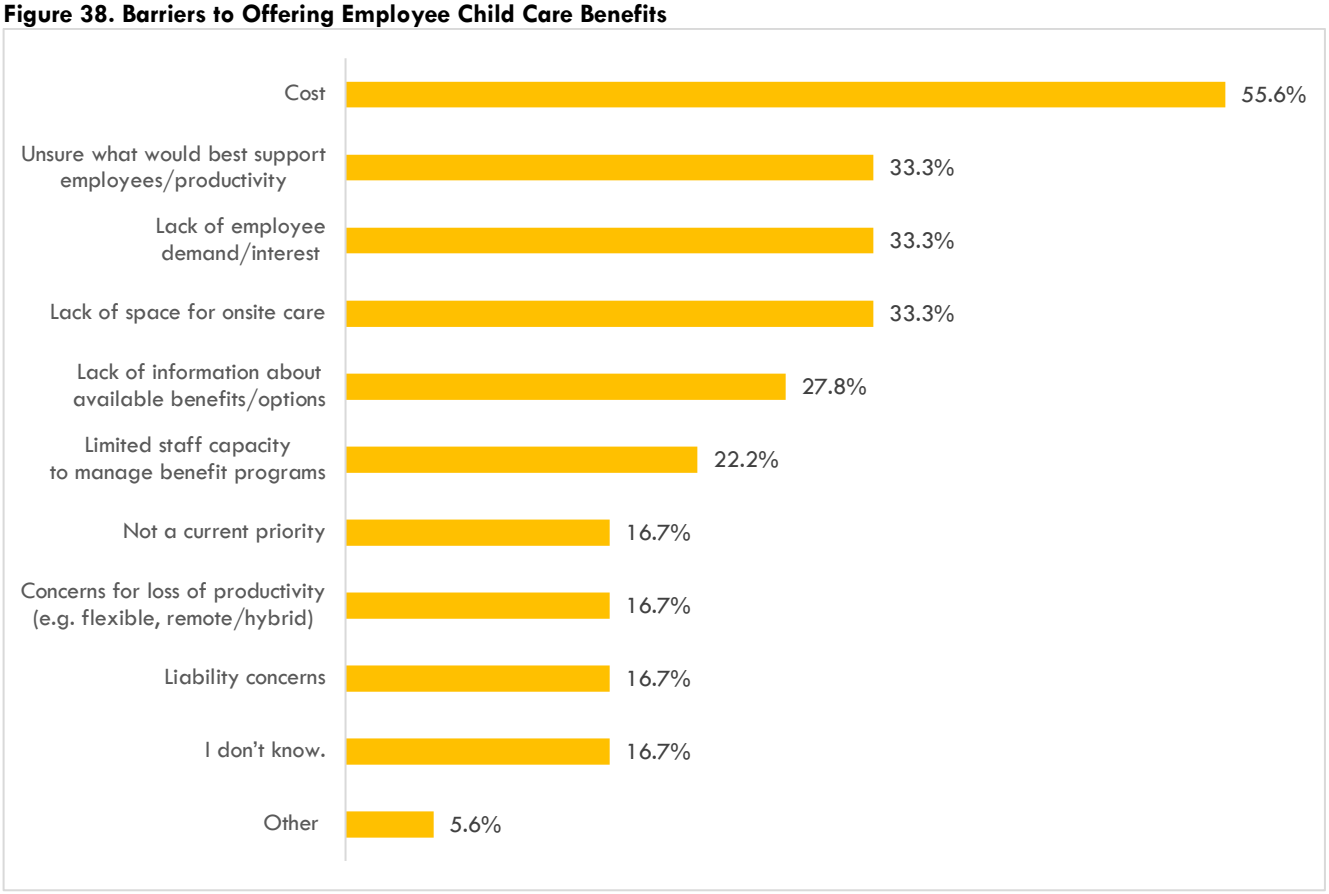


Figure 37. Effectiveness of Child Care Benefits



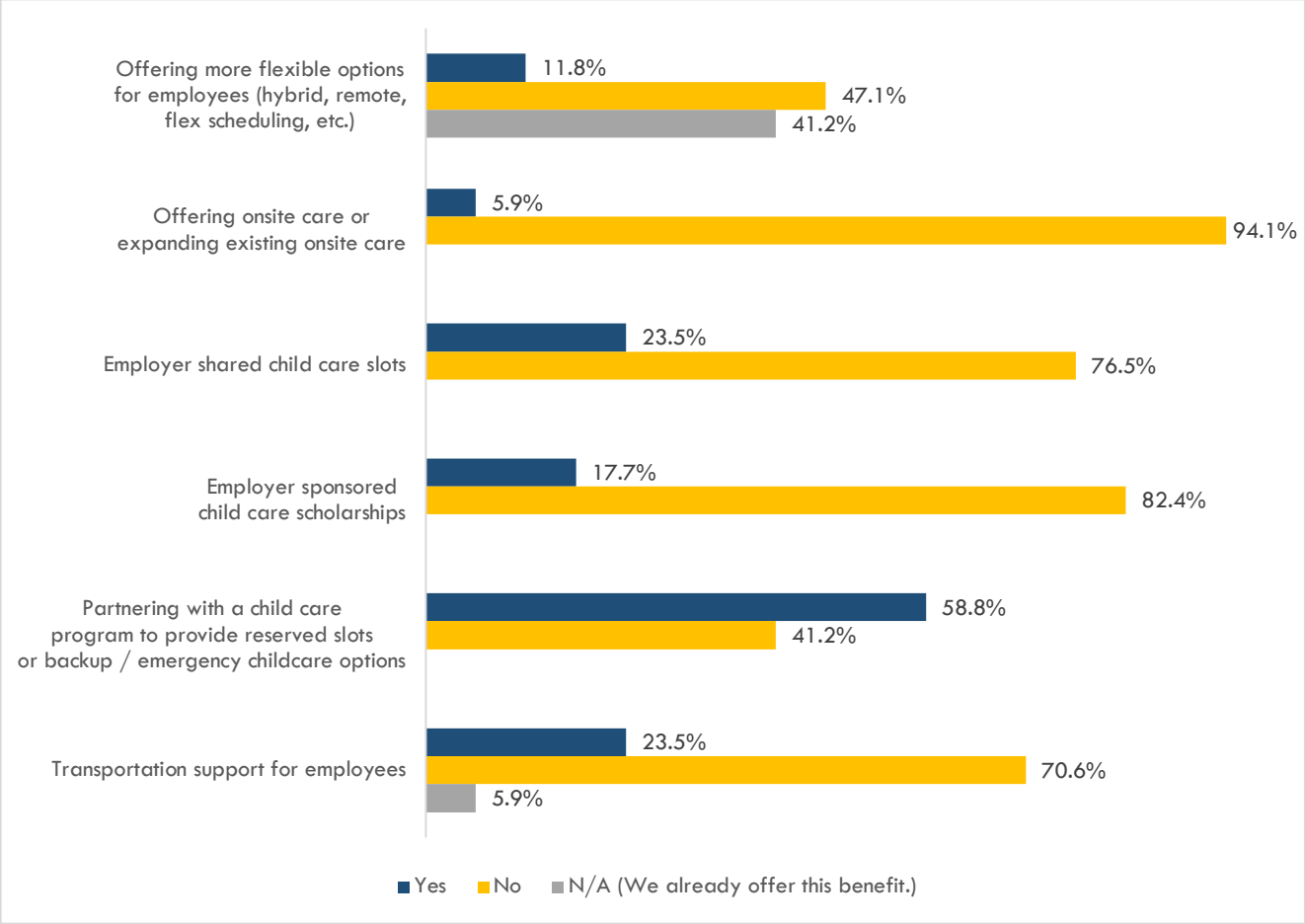
Cost is the leading reason employers do not offer any or additional child care benefits. This is followed by being unsure of what benefits would best support employees, lack of employee demand/interest, and lack of space for onsite care (Figure 38).

Figure 38. Barriers to Offering Employee Child Care Benefits



When provided with a list of possible child care benefits, employers are most interested in partnering with a child care program to provide reserved slots or backup/emergency care options for their employees (Figure 39). During the child care provider focus group, one under-enrolled program noted interest in partnering to provide backup child care.

Figure 39. Employer Interest in Exploring/Offering Child Care Benefits



Most respondents to the Employer Survey indicated they have never completed a Child Care Needs Assessment to learn more about their employees' child care needs (73.3%). Approximately 21% of employers noted they may be interested in completing a child care needs assessment for their employees.

One respondent to the Employer Survey, a mid-size business that operates standard business hours, indicated that child care issues "very often" affect employees' ability to work and impact business operations, in addition to posing a "very significant" barrier to recruiting and retaining qualified employees. This is one of the few businesses in Harrisonburg that has completed an Employer Child Care Needs Assessment, and they reported many child care challenges that employees face, ranging from cost, lack of available slots, limited infant/toddler care, transportation, and limited backup/emergency care for sick children, among others. While this business provides child care information and referral resources to families, and offers flexible hours, challenges in the local system (e.g., insufficient access, affordability) pose ongoing barriers to employment.

Employer Perceptions

When asked about challenges that make child care a barrier for their employees, 89.5% of employers cited cost. Respondents to the Family Survey also cited cost as the top challenge. While cost is a shared concern between both groups, nearly all employers cited cost while only half of families (50.5%) did so.

After cost, the child care challenge cited most often by employers is the need for backup/emergency care or care for sick children. This is likely an indication that when children get sick, parents stay home to care for them, resulting in disruption in the workplace and loss of productivity. This also reflects the finding that employers are most interested in partnering with a child care program to provide reserved slots or backup/emergency care options for their employees. Though this challenge was cited by nearly three-quarters of employers (73.6%), it was cited by only one-third (32.5%) of families.

The mismatch between employer perception and family experience suggests that employers do not always have a full understanding of the challenges faced by their employees. This presents an opportunity to explore family-friendly workplace policies to support what employees really need and what would best support employees/families while maximizing workplace recruitment and retention, and maintaining operations and productivity.

In Virginia, employers are anticipated to have access to a new pilot program, the Employee Child Care Assistance Program (Ready Together VA), that will help them support employees' child care costs. Ready Together VA will be administered by the Virginia Early Childhood Fund. VECF will partner with employers, Ready Regions, child care providers, and community organizations to establish guidelines for the program. Legislation encourages VECF to prioritize participation of small businesses (less than 50 employees). When the state budget was adopted on June 29, 2026, $25 million was allocated for the initiative.

CHILD CARE FACILITIES EXPANSION

Snapshot Summary: Zoning and Facilities Costs May Impact Child Care Facilities Expansion

A facilities review examined Harrisonburg's zoning requirements and established cost estimates to understand the factors and expenses that could impact renovation, expansion, and construction of child care facilities. The City's zoning regulations include three types of child care facilities, however each type has different limitations in terms of location and costs (i.e., Special Use Permits) that could impact expansion. Expansion is also impacted by costs ranging from $42 per square foot for minimal renovations to more than $400 per square foot for additions and new construction.



To develop an understanding of the costs and factors influencing the renovation or construction of child care facilities, a facilities review was conducted as part of the Child Care Needs Assessment. Below is a summary of the highlights of the review, provided as an addendum to this report.

The addendum provides detailed information about Harrisonburg Zoning requirements and code, as well as Pricing Narratives to identify costs associated with renovation or construction.

Zoning

The City of Harrisonburg's Zoning Code identifies three categories of child care facilities: Child Day Care Center, Family Day Home Major, and Family Day Home Minor (which is designated as a Home Occupation). These terms differ from Virginia licensing, which categorizes facilities as licensed child day centers, licensed home-based child care, and registered home-based child care (unlicensed). Other exempt child care programs (unlicensed) include religiously exempt child day centers and certified preschools.

The facilities review revealed that the areas in which child care facilities can be permitted, either by-right or Special Use permit, are distributed across the City. And yet, at initial look, the Zoning Maps appear to present significant areas of opportunity; however, when considering some of the existing land use within the by-right Zones, the areas where by-right permits can realistically be obtained shrinks. This is significant because the process to obtain a Special Use Permit is onerous and can be restrictive to child care facility placement throughout the larger community of Harrisonburg.

Pricing Narratives

Cost associated with renovation, expansion, or construction of child care facilities is a significant limiting factor for expansion of child care facilities to serve more families. Cost per square foot estimates for the City of Harrisonburg range from $42 per square foot to renovate an existing facility to more than $400 per square foot for an addition or new construction. As detailed in the addendum, with these estimates, some typical project costs can be derived (Table 40).

Table 40. Estimated Construction Costs by Type (August 2026)

Construction Type (Cost per square foot)	Sample Cost #1	Sample Cost #2
Minimal Renovation to Existing Facility ($42/sf)	$147,000 for a 3,500 square foot facility	$231,000 for a 5,500 square foot facility
Major Renovation to Existing Facility ($375/sf)	$1,312,500 for a 3,500 square foot facility	$2,062,500 for a 5,500 square foot facility
Addition to Existing Facility ($487/sf)	$1,339,250 for a 3-room addition at 2,750 square feet	$2,191,500 for a 5-room addition at 4,500 square feet
New Construction ($472/sf)	$1,652,000 for a 3,500 square foot facility	$2,596,000 for a 5,500 square foot facility

Additionally, the estimated costs for exterior playground improvements include $299,460 to renovate an existing playground and $1,497,300 for construction of a new playground for a child care facility.

Provider Interest in Expansion

As indicated in Stakeholder Insights, six child care providers indicated interest in expansion, with an additional three indicating that they are “possibly” interested. Providers are most interested in opening an additional site (5), and renovating or retrofitting current space, relocating to a different location, or expanding current facility (4 each). They are least interested in construction or additions, indicated by only two providers.

Cost, financing, and staffing are the top reasons providers have not moved forward with expansion. Only one provider cited low enrollment or uncertainty about long-term demand as a barrier to expansion. This suggests that a majority of providers recognize the demand and need for expanded child care services in the City, but are limited by financial and staffing challenges.

POLICY AND PRACTICE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

The City of Harrisonburg has a robust early care and education system that includes licensed and regulated unlicensed child care programs, home visiting programs, state-funded pre-kindergarten (Virginia Preschool Initiative), and public school district pre-kindergarten. These programs help to provide care to the City's estimated 2,731 children under age 5 and their families.

Child care is an essential part of the infrastructure in Harrisonburg, a necessity to support a thriving local economy. The quality and accessibility of child care in Harrisonburg affects children and families, as well as businesses whose employees need accessible, reliable, and affordable child care for their children.

Many factors influence child care in Harrisonburg, ranging from federal, state, and local administrative priorities, regulations, and funding requirements. All key stakeholders (e.g., the City, Harrisonburg City Public Schools, community-based organizations, child care providers, employers, families) have a role in the ongoing work needed to support growth and sustainability of the City's child care system.

The following recommendations present a systems approach to child care enhancements in Harrisonburg. In other words, the pieces are interconnected and few strategies are dependent on the actions of a single stakeholder. In many cases, there are strategies that lend to a primary stakeholder (e.g., the City, employers, child care providers), with other multiple contributing stakeholders. For clarity, recommendations that follow are organized by primary stakeholder.



Communitywide

The Harrisonburg child care system is a mixed delivery network of providers and programs, supported by a variety of funding sources and regulatory requirements. The system is accessed by families, relied upon by employers to attract and retain employees, and is essential infrastructure to support workforce development and the City's economy.

Strengthening the system will require coordinated, communitywide action, along with identifying organizations or partnerships that are best positioned to guide and sustain the change work.

Partnership and Shared Advocacy. Consider participation in the VECF Virginia Business Roundtable for Early Education. Create cross-sector partnerships among local Chambers of Commerce, regional and statewide early childhood education and business entities, public school districts, workforce and community development organizations, and other stakeholders (e.g., Valley Interfaith Action, Valley Early Education Reimagined) to advocate for and advance a system-wide approach to addressing hard-to-solve child care challenges (e.g., child care workforce shortages, need for additional infant/toddler care, system coordination).

Advocacy can also include a focus on funding at the state and federal levels that increases child care affordability for families through use of Child Care Subsidy Program, the Mixed Delivery Program, and VPI. Community organizations should track the status of current bills via the Gotta Have Child Care 2026 Bill Tracker, operated by VECF, for the most up-to-date information to enhance advocacy efforts.

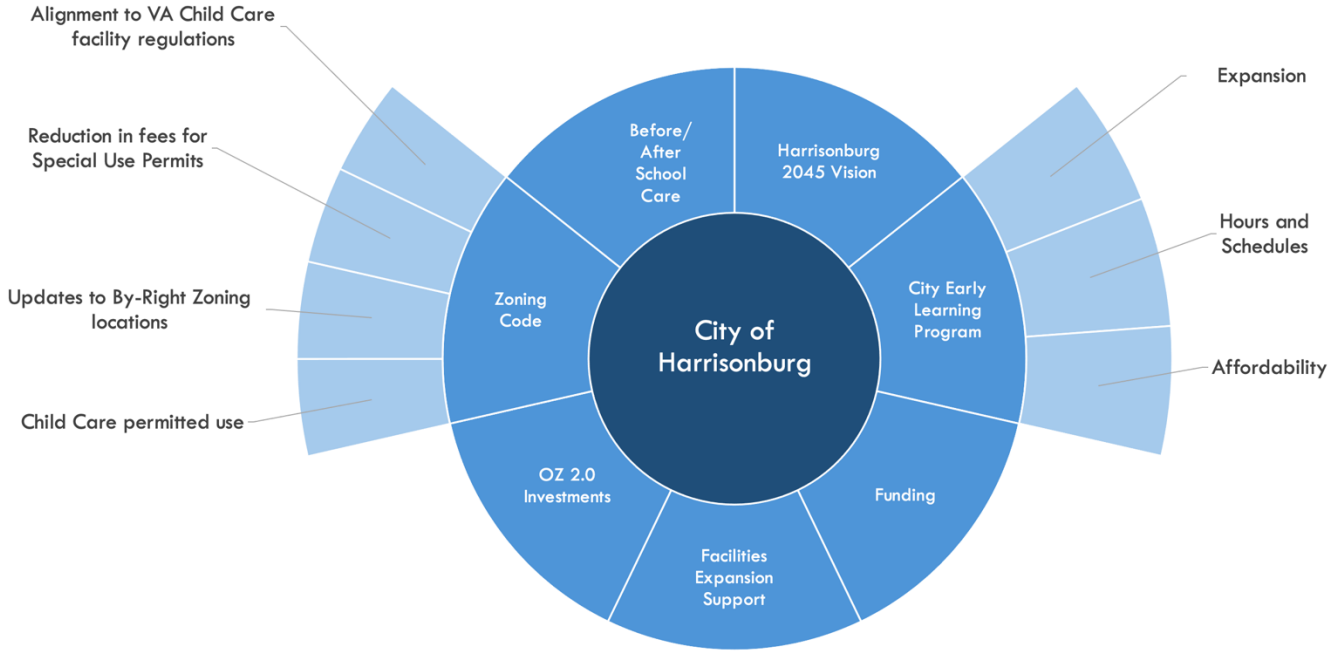
Partnership and shared advocacy may be a component of an Advisory Committee (see below) or complementary engagement tailored by stakeholder group or need.

Information Coordination and Sharing. Create a centralized resource for families in Harrisonburg to learn about available child care and subsidized child care programs, including a direct connection to child care sites that have real-time openings and waitlists for enrollment. Making this resource available to employers so they can share it with employees will create additional efficiencies. Identify a local entity that will oversee the centralized resource and ensure it is distributed broadly to families, particularly low-income families seeking subsidized care.

Advisory Committee. Leverage existing committees, workgroups, and advisories (e.g., Smart Beginnings Greater Harrisonburg) to help advance strategies and recommendations outlined in this report. Consider whether existing groups are able to facilitate continued discussions on child care as part of workforce solutions. If needed, consider creating a Child Care Advisory Committee with City staff, major employers, child care providers, and community organizations to review recommendations in this report and create detailed, actionable implementation steps to strengthen and enhance the local child care system.

City of Harrisonburg

Given its role in local governance, the City of Harrisonburg is a leader and convener, establishing a vision for the City that embraces its diverse residents and thriving economy. Child care providers, businesses, local organizations, and other stakeholders can support City efforts with coordinated advocacy and collaboration, in addition to the communitywide, employer, and child care provider recommendations.



Alignment to Harrisonburg 2045 Vision. Maintain an ongoing focus on child care as part of Harrisonburg 2045 and City strategic and master planning, by continuing to recognize child care as integral to workforce development and the health of the local economy. As part of its vision to be a thriving educational epicenter, the City is a "partner in ensuring that early childhood education is universally available for all children."

Funding. Explore federal, state, and private funding opportunities to advance the Harrisonburg 2045 vision related to child care, including the recommendations outlined in this report as appropriate. Monitor funding opportunities on Grants.gov (federal) and the Virginia Grant List (state and private), as well as conduct direct outreach to private funders.

Available funding may support City efforts directly and/or provide the City with funding to support local child care providers with increasing staff wages, providing stipends, and other activities that are necessary to enhance and expand the child care system.

Facilities Expansion Support. Explore dedicating City funding (including acquired grant funding, as noted above) to establish a child care provider expansion grant program to help providers access funding for expansion projects. This program may help to reduce financial barriers related to planning, renovation, or construction needed to increase child care capacity.

Identify options to support facilities expansion through strategies such as repurposing City spaces in recreation centers, municipal buildings, or other City-owned properties and offering low-cost leases of unused spaces. Additionally, encourage developers within Harrisonburg to include child care space in large residential or mixed-use projects.

Establish a child care "concierge" or single point of contact, or specific page on the Harrisonburg Economic Development website to help current and prospective child care providers navigate regulations.

City Early Learning Program. Consider redesigning key aspects and/or expansion of the City's Parks and Recreation Department child care program in response to family and community needs.

- **Expansion**. Expand the City's child care program by establishing a second location. This will help the City to meet the demand for care by increasing access for families.
- **Hours and Schedules**. Increase the hours and schedules that care is offered, as many families expressed challenges finding part time, flexible, backup, before/after school, and summer care. These gaps in coverage disproportionately affect lower-income families and single-parent families.
- **Affordability**. Ensure the City's child care program supports working families. By offering the subsidized child care program with longer duration (e.g., full day, full week), the City can help to meet the demand for care for working families for whom the primary barrier to care is cost.

Zoning Code.

- Revise Zoning Code to explicitly list Child Care as a permitted use, rather than relying on its inclusion under "educational use" by interpretation to create less confusion and ensure that personnel changes within the Zoning Department will not result in unintended limitations.
- Create By-Right Zoning locations for Major Family Day Homes. The permitting process that is currently required to gain a Special Use Permit is costly in terms of both time and money, and can be a deterrent.
- Consider increasing By-Right Zoning locations for Child Care Centers. The permitting process currently required to gain a Special Use Permit is costly in terms of both time and money, and can be a deterrent.
- Consider revising the code to include waivers or reductions for Special Use Permit fees for Major Family Day Homes and Child Care Centers to mitigate financial burdens to expansion.
- Align the City of Harrisonburg Zoning Code and State of Virginia Child Care facility regulations to create similar language. Having similar terms across agencies would help better classify facilities and create less confusion for residents/business owners.

Before/After School Care. The Child Care Needs Assessment revealed challenges with the availability of before and after school programming, as well as transportation to sites that offer before/after school care. While the needs assessment focused on children under age 5, many families with children under age 5 also have school-age children, meaning that gaps in school-age care directly affect the stability of child care arrangements for the entire household. Consider additional exploration of challenges impacting families of children K-12 (e.g., before and after care, solutions for teacher work days and other school closures).

Opportunity Zone 2.0 Investments. Monitor the selection of Opportunity Zone 2.0 tracts, which are expected to be announced by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in late 2026, and determine strategies for the City and stakeholders to support child care and business developments in these tracts as part of a broader economic development strategy.

Employers

Employers play a critical role in helping employees find and access child care for their families. However, with limited child care capacity and child care workforce challenges, long-term solutions are complex.

Employers can help to deepen understanding of employee needs and take actions to help address child care challenges. Child care providers themselves will also have a role in employer strategies, and collaboration between child care and the business community is essential.



Employer Child Care Needs Assessment. Conduct a child care needs assessment to understand the child care needs of employees and how opportunities and challenges impact recruitment and retention. Use assessment findings to tailor resources, benefits, and workforce supports for employees to help address child care challenges.

Benefits, Resource, and Referral. Determine how current benefits support working families (e.g., flexible work schedules) and communicate this to employees. At a minimum, provide child care information and referrals to employees as a foundational benefit.

Subsidized Solutions. Consider offering subsidized child care solutions to support employees and ensure a stable workforce, resulting in improved employee attendance and performance and contributing to the organization's fiscal sustainability. Those solutions could include providing Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts and establishing onsite child care and/or partnerships with local child care program(s) to provide reserved slots or backup/emergency child care options.

Virginia Employee Child Care Assistance Program. Sign up for updates from VECF as development of Ready Together VA guidelines takes place and monitor updates for participation information. When participation information becomes available, consider if and how the business and its employees meet priority criteria and seek funding, if available, to help meet families' child care needs.

Child Care Providers

Child care providers are part of the infrastructure that supports working families and provide safe and reliable care while meeting children's developmental needs and school readiness goals. The child care system is deeply impacted by workforce challenges and financial concerns. Many of the recommendations presented throughout this section are funding-dependent for long-term success. Child care providers offer essential services that require investments at the federal, state, and local levels to meet families' needs. Coordinated efforts across stakeholder groups are necessary to address early childhood workforce challenges.



Communication and Coordination. Consider developing a coordinating committee that meets regularly (e.g., quarterly) to strengthen communication and coordination among child care providers, local public school preschool programs, and other early childhood partners to improve service delivery, information sharing, and seamless transitions for children and families. Specific to shared services, providers may consider developing a shared substitute teacher pool in partnership with a local coordinating entity.

Recruitment and Retention. Staffing challenges and staffing costs present substantial challenges to the expansion of child care programs in Harrisonburg.

Take continued steps to support staff recruitment and retention to help stabilize the early care and education workforce and expand capacity to serve additional families.

- Leverage wage and benefits comparability data (and, if needed, conduct a wage and benefits comparability study) to ensure staff compensation is competitive in the local market.
- Establish collaborative activities with key stakeholders (e.g., institutes of higher education) to identify and implement recruitment strategies to support efforts to build a pipeline of qualified staff and fill staff vacancies (e.g., marketing materials to highlight the City/regional strengths, job fairs).

Funding to Support Staff Wages. Continue to explore diversified funding and/or utilization of grant funding to increase staff wages in an effort to retain staff, alleviate workforce shortages, and encourage expansion. When grant funds cannot be used to increase wages, consider offering stipends or other one-time incentives (e.g., housing assistance, retention bonuses, recognition programs, tuition assistance). Engage in local and state advocacy with other child care providers to support dedicated funding for early childhood workforce compensation.

Training. Explore funding opportunities for shared staff training and onboarding to alleviate costs for these activities. Where available, seek partnerships with institutes of higher education to participate in or help build connections between training programs and employment in local child care centers. Additionally, encourage and support staff to participate in early educator scholarship programs (e.g., Virginia Early Educator Scholarship Program, VECF Project Pathfinders).

Facilities Expansion. Acknowledging the significant barrier that workforce challenges present for the expansion of child care facilities, consider a staged approach to addressing workforce needs followed by facilities updates/expansion. Partner with the City and other stakeholders to advocate for the allocation of state and federal funding to child care facilities expansion.

LOOKING AHEAD



Moving from recommendations to implementation of the strategies identified in the Child Care Needs Assessment will require a cross-sector and multi-stakeholder commitment. As an independent city, Harrisonburg is well-positioned to be among the leaders in improving the local child care system and access for families; its vision includes commitments to children, families, child care providers, and local employers alike.

Enhancements to and expansion of the local child care system will require both problem-solving and innovation; implementation planning that balances this will help the City and stakeholders develop effective and sustainable solutions to meet community needs.

By completing a Child Care Needs Assessment, Harrisonburg reinforces its commitment to Harrisonburg 2045: A City for All. An accessible and affordable child care system is a family, workforce, and economic development imperative that enables residents, businesses, and the community to thrive.

APPENDIX

For Reference: Resources and Models to Support Child Care System Improvements

The following resources and information may provide models or guidance to support the City of Harrisonburg and other stakeholders as the community moves from the Child Care Needs Assessment to implementation of strategies to enhance the local child care system.

While examples of how other municipalities or states have implemented recommended strategies are provided, it is important to note that the dynamics of each community are unique. Differences in funding sources and levels, stakeholder engagement, state and local policy and regulations, community resources, and local social and economic factors, among others, should be considered. Resources and models listed here are for informational purposes only. Inclusion in this list does not imply endorsement.

Advisory Committee

Louisville, Kentucky: Mayor's Early Learning Action Group

Louisville's Mayor's Early Learning Action Group is a 23-member team of educators, lawmakers, and community leaders created in 2023 to design a five-year plan for universal Pre-K. Among the group's recommendations was the formation of Thrive by 5 Louisville, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization created to build and strengthen the early learning workforce and invest in existing early learning facilities.[lxxxi]

Employer Subsidized Solutions

Tyson Foods: Solving for Employee Child Care Pays Big Dividends

In order for Tyson Foods to stabilize its workforce – to attract new talent and to keep its current employees engaged – the company needed to think outside the box. The answer: Alleviate the child care issue that its workers were facing and build a single solution that benefited its working families while addressing the company's retention goals.[lxxxii]

Expansion

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Child Care Facilities Fund

The City of Philadelphia established the Child Care Facilities Fund to help child care providers address facilities-related barriers to maintaining or expanding child care services. Child care providers may apply for grants to support renovations/improvements, equipment, and other facilities-related needs. A key goal of the initiative is to help alleviate costs associated with expansion in order to help increase child care capacity.[lxxxiii]

Santa Barbara County, California: Child Care Facilities Master Plan

Since 2021, Santa Barbara County has seen some of the largest gains in child care enrollment among California counties. Overall, licensed capacity in the county increased by 15% from 2021 to 2024, compared to a decrease of -2.0% in the state. "Specifically, in 2024, 23% of Santa Barbara County's children eligible for publicly funded child care were enrolled, an increase from 13% in 2022."[lxxxiv]

Funding

Seattle, Washington: Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise (FEPP) Levy

The FEPP Levy is a seven-year, $619M investment in Seattle's youth approved by voters in November 2018. Under the FEPP Levy, the City's Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) partners with families and communities to achieve educational equity, close opportunity gaps, and build a better future for Seattle students. The FEPP Levy funds the following Preschool & Early Learning investments: Child care subsidies to families enrolled in Seattle Preschool Program (SPP) to ensure full-day care; Comprehensive support for SPP providers, including behavioral and developmental training; and Family Child Care (FCC) Mentorship to increase the number of licensed family child care homes in Seattle.[lxxxv]

Information Coordination and Sharing

Iowa Child Care Connect: Vacancy Dashboard

The C3 Vacancy Dashboard is an interactive tool that highlights child care openings by type of program, age group, quality rating and near-real-time availability.[lxxxvi]

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Youth Coordinating Board

Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board (YCB) connects the City, Hennepin County, Public Schools, Parks, and Library into a single inter-jurisdictional system to support youth safety, education, and development. YCB is a group of local agencies that plans and coordinates local services for children, youth and families. It works together to meet the health, educational, developmental and family-related needs of children and youth, and their families. YCB does not offer the services, rather it gives families information about services and supports in their area.[lxxxvii,lxxxviii]

Partnership and Shared Advocacy

National League of Cities: Pathways for Early Childhood Leadership Initiative

Municipal staff – at every level of city government – play a vital role within a broader, collaborative ecosystem that supports young children and their families. This unique technical assistance program is intentionally designed to reach across multiple levels of municipal leadership – equipping both the decision-makers and the on-the-ground implementors with the expertise, confidence, tools, and peer support needed to champion early childhood success in their communities.[lxxxix]

Recruitment and Retention Pipeline

Blue Ridge Community College (NC), Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeship program

The ECE Apprenticeship program allows eligible High School graduates and adult learners to work in partner early education programs while earning an Early Childhood Preschool or Infant/Toddler Certificate. Partner programs have an opportunity to develop and retain their own future workforce, creating a recurring pipeline of trained early educators.[xc]

Zoning

Arlington County, Virginia: Changes to Zoning Ordinance

Arlington County, Virginia, amended its zoning ordinance to improve accessibility and affordability of child care in the county. This included aligning zoning language with the Code of Virginia, creating more consistent definitions, clarifying by-right and special uses, and reducing parking requirements.[xci]

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