

Let's Talk
Marathon County



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Let's Talk Childcare

How do we ensure families in Marathon County have access to safe, quality, affordable child care?

Access to safe, quality, and affordable child care has been identified as a crisis at a national, state, and local level. According to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, “child care providers are at a breaking point after operating on razor thin margins for decades.”ⁱ

The Wisconsin Early Childhood Association describes the child care industry as broken. Parents pay too much, and child care professionals earn too little. Providers face operating costs that exceed their revenue, leading to low wages for workers, a shortage of child care staff, reduced availability of care, and, ultimately, facilities closing their doors. Meanwhile, parents are stuck on waitlists, which often forces them, especially women, to leave or avoid entering the workforce. The affordability of and access to child care is seen as critical to a community’s economy. **In Wisconsin, lost economic productivity, earnings, and revenue due to people leaving or not entering the workforce due to childcare challenges is over \$1.1 billion per year.**ⁱⁱ

The child care crisis directly affects families, schools, employers, communities and government. Child care plays a key role in helping parents work or continue their education to improve their income. Parents face extra challenges finding child care if they have children with special needs or live in rural areas. Shift workers, low-paid workers, and those with multiple jobs are often hit the hardest.

For a list of various forms of child care, as well as definitions and resources, please see the supplemental list.

What can families, employers, communities, and governmental entities do to increase access to safe, quality, and affordable child care in Marathon County? This issue guide looks at three approaches to address the child care crisis, each coming from a different perspective and each reflecting a different set of ideas about what should be done. Most people will find something to agree with in all three approaches, but each approach also has trade-offs, and drawbacks to consider. The approaches presented are not ready-made solutions but are a starting point for weighing alternatives and identifying common ideas.

In Marathon County,ⁱⁱⁱ

The average wage in 2023:

- \$20.95 hourly or \$43,576 annually for a Childcare Director
- \$13.92 hourly or \$28,954 annually for a Childcare Teacher

The average weekly cost for parents, for one child, in 2023:

- \$229.75 weekly rate for group childcare, or \$12,870 per year
- \$176.07 weekly rate for family childcare, or \$9,860 per year

The number of providers and childcare slots:

- In 2023, there were 81 childcare providers, compared to 244 in 2010
- In 2023, the total capacity of childcare provider slots was 3,422, compared to 4,347 in 2010

Approach One: Support Parents to Meet Their Children’s Needs

This approach looks at ways parents, in partnership with community organizations, can find or create solutions to meet families’ child care needs. In the U.S., parents have been viewed as having the primary responsibility for raising their children. There are other countries and cultures where there is stronger support for families through government funded childcare, paid leave to raise children, and stronger family ties.

Extended families, including grandparents, can have a role in being a source of support for parents. However, over the past decades, family structures have evolved where parents with young children often do not live in the same community or state as extended families. In addition, there are more single-parent families and an economy that often necessitates two-income parent households. Sources of support are sometimes not adequate to meet the unique needs of families who have school age children, especially if they have a child with special needs.

A Primary Drawback:

Families may not have the capacity or skill to organize and coordinate care from a variety of resources. Please reference definitions and resources.

Actions	Drawbacks
Encourage extended family members and unregulated “friends and family” care givers to be responsible for assisting with child care needs.	These providers may lack certain knowledge about child development and safe child care, and may not be available on a consistent basis.
Create child care cooperatives to meet the unique needs of children and families (e.g. children with special needs, single parents, and shift workers.)	Cooperatives may be ill-equipped to meet the unique needs of children and families.
Educate families about existing community resources to meet their child care needs outside of the school day (e.g., after school programs, libraries, Boys & Girls Club, UMOS, YMCA).	Many of these resources may not be accessible to the rural parts of Marathon County.
Parents could consider changing jobs, moving to a community with better child care resources, or leaving the workforce to care for their children.	Communities and local economy are negatively impacted when families leave to find work elsewhere.

Approach Two: Solutions Lie With Employers

This approach emphasizes that employers can play a key role in addressing the child care crisis by offering innovative benefits and partnering with other businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community groups. By improving access to affordable child care, employers can boost workforce productivity and retain valuable employees. Supporting employees with child care needs helps prevent parents, especially women, from leaving or not entering the workforce.

Wisconsin is currently experiencing lost economic productivity, earnings, and revenue due to the child care crisis. A strong economy, supported by a stable workforce, is essential for creating prosperous, safe, and healthy communities.

A Primary Drawback:

Businesses of all sizes may struggle to afford child care benefits and may not have the resources to lead these efforts.

Actions	Drawbacks
Increase flexibility for employees in terms of the number of hours worked, when and where they can work, and location of work (such as work from home) to help parents secure child care.	Many jobs don't have the flexibility of hours or location and allowing this would create an administrative burden.
Incentivize employers to contribute to child care costs as part of their employee benefit package.	This strategy could lead to higher consumer costs as companies may need to cover the cost of the child care benefit by raising the cost of their products.
Offer on-site child care through partnerships with local care organizations or by pooling services with other employers.	There may not be enough professional child care workers or willing partners to meet the need.
Encourage employers who have found child care solutions to educate peers on the return on investment and promote similar efforts by other employers.	Employers may not have the capacity or the motivation to help other employers.

Approach Three: Invest in Government-Backed Solutions

This approach encourages government to have a significant role in stabilizing and sustaining the child care industry. Through the Wisconsin Shares Program (a state-funded program) and Good Start grants (funded by local, private foundations), low-income parents and caregivers receive a child care subsidy to enable them to go to work and school. Wisconsin’s Child Care Counts program provides funding to child care providers to increase access to high-quality care and workforce recruitment and retention. Government investments in programs such as these require policy makers to value the child care industry and its impact on the economic development and future success of our children, families, communities, and the State of Wisconsin. (See definitions and resource list.)

A Primary Drawback

Government and privately funded programs require constant renewal, which is never guaranteed. Please reference definitions and resources page.

Action	Drawbacks
Encourage government to invest in online child care matching services to support both family and employer needs. Explore and incentivize new or existing platforms or networks to increase business access to open child care slots. (e.g. Childcaring.org, CCCWI.org)	Child care is not government’s role or responsibility and instead should be driven by market forces.
Create a local, government-led coalition in partnership with community stakeholders to increase awareness of the importance of access to safe, quality, and affordable child care.	This puts a burden on local government to commit staff to lead such a coalition.
Expand government incentives for individuals interested in becoming child care providers (such as tuition reimbursement) and businesses (such as tax breaks) to increase the number of child care workers and services.	It is unclear if there is adequate political will to support child care legislation.
Encourage school-based child care models at public and private schools, and at local colleges and universities.	School districts are already overwhelmed with responsibilities related to K-12 education, and universities are struggling with budget cuts.

Using the Issue Guide

This issue guide presents three approaches or alternatives to encourage constructive dialogue and avoid the polarizing talk which is so common today. Each approach is based on shared concerns and poses different strategies for addressing the problem. The approaches offer potential drawbacks or trade-offs inherent in each action.

You are not required to accept any one approach. You might find that you support parts of each approach while disagreeing with other parts. You are also not bound by what is in this guide. In other words, if you believe there is a relevant action that could be taken to address the problem, you are encouraged to share it with the group.

Ground Rules

- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere
- Listening is just as important as speaking
- Let others finish their thoughts before sharing yours.
- No one or two individuals should dominate
- Consider all options and ideas fairly
- Focus on the actions we can take in our communities.

Sources:

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Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. Breaking Down the Child Care Crisis. <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/efforts>

ⁱ Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. Child Care Counts: Stabilizing and Sustaining The Early Care and Education Industry. <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/press/2023/budget-ccc.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. Breaking Down the Child Care Crisis. <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/efforts>

ⁱⁱⁱ Marathon County Pulse. <https://www.marathoncountypulse.org>

Dialogue Agenda

Introduction

Review ground rules.
Introduce the issue.

Connect to Issue

Think about how the issue affects you, your family, friends, and community.

Consider Each Option

Consider each approach one at a time.
Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the drawbacks?

Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- From whom else do we need to hear?

This issue guide was prepared for the Let's Talk, Marathon County project by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) and the Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship and Civil Dialogue (WICCD) with generous funding from New Pluralists. More information about the grant funding can be found at newpluralists.org. WIPPS and WICCD are units of the Universities of Wisconsin. Visit wipps.org or contact us at info@wipps.org.