The Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) conducted an online survey of working families between May 18, 2020 and June 2, 2020, and received over 500 responses. The survey was shared by many child care and workforce partner agencies to assess working families’ child care needs. The results offer AL leaders direction on what is needed for child care programs to open back up safely, the needs of families, and concerns about returning to work and child care.
The Gaps Assessment identified every available source of child care and provided an estimated 128,959 available slots – showing a gap of 85,554. Even when considering families who don’t access child care outside of their homes, having family members provide care or paying for “nanny” care in the home, we know that the steady reduction of child care slots available requires us to build and now re-build this necessary workforce support.

As reported by VOICES for Alabama’s Children in the Kids Count Data Book, between 2010 and 2019, the total number of licensed child care programs has gone from 2,340 down to 1,698. The heaviest loss is with Family Day Care Homes, providers who are licensed to care for up to six children in their homes. This is often the only option for rural families where there are not enough children to fill a child care center. There were 844 of these providers in 2010, and that number had shrunk to just 428 by 2019.

Because 75% of Alabama is considered rural, an estimated 60% of children under the age of five live in child care deserts – census tracts where there is no child care or only enough to serve one-third of the need. Yet, for low- and middle-income families, the cost of child care is often up to 30% of household income, in some areas more than college tuition.

This was before the pandemic. A national survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) during April 2020, found that in Alabama, 90% of programs that responded were closed entirely, and an additional 5% were closed to everyone except essential personnel. Of the few programs open, all reported operating with less than 50% capacity. Also, 55% reported laying off or furloughing employees or reported being laid off or furloughed themselves. Another 33% anticipated such actions being necessary in the coming 1-2 weeks. This was in April, and we know that many programs have closed permanently.

The challenges of opening child care programs so that working families can return to work are multiple and have no easy solutions. Extra cleaning, extra equipment, limited numbers, and difficulty obtaining any of the needed supplies are the primary concerns, along with the critical concern of opening with limited enrollment and reduced funding.

Background

Prior to the pandemic, recent reports indicate that in “normal” times, there is a child care shortage in Alabama. The Bipartisan Policy Center’s report, Child Care Gaps Assessment: Alabama (April 2020), reports 214,150 child care slots are needed based on the number of children under 6 with all parents in the workforce. This was calculated during a time when Alabama had historically low unemployment and an estimated need for 500,000 newly skilled workers by the year 2025, according to the report of Alabama WORKS, Preparing Alabama’s Workforce for Opportunity and Growth. The report identified lack of access to child care as one of the top three barriers to labor participation and/or attending school or college.

www.alabamapartnershipforchildren.org
**Family Responses about Child Care**

**Did your child care close permanently?**

- No (77%)
- Unsure (17%)
- Yes (6%)

While 23% reported their child care program has either closed permanently or are unsure of their program’s status, 77% believe their program is planning to reopen.

**Are you planning to return to your program if it temporarily closed?**

- Yes (58%)
- No (10%)
- Unsure (32%)

Many families are planning to return to the child care program they used before the pandemic began, and only 10% reported they will not be returning. 32% are uncertain whether they will return.

**Did you continue to pay fees after the program closed?**

- No (72%)
- My program is not closed (4%)
- Only the parent co-pay for the child care subsidy program (…)
- Reduced amount (12%)
- Yes (11%)

72% of families reported they were not required to pay monthly fees while their child care program was closed in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. While 4% reported their program was open at the time this survey was conducted, 24% were required to pay some amount in order to hold their child’s slot at the program. Of those, only 11% continued to pay the full tuition amount.

“Lack of child care has made it near impossible to work for both my husband and me. Our son has unlimited screen time and is borderline neglected while we work from home. While grateful we can continue to work from home, lack of child care has hurt our child and our ability to be effective employees.”

www.alabamapartnershipforchildren.org
Did you stay in contact with your child care during the pandemic closure?

93% of families whose child care program closed in response to the Coronavirus pandemic reported they continued to remain in contact, even while the program was closed. Only 7% of respondents had not heard from their program since the program closed.

For those that responded yes, 71% reported their program used social media or email to correspond with them, while 48% updated families by using text messages. 64% noted that their child care program kept them informed about their closures and plans to reopen, and 44% reported that their programs went as far as to send materials and activities home for families to work on with their child(ren).

A small percentage of families (33%) reported that child care programs checked in by calling periodically, and some even reported programs provided opportunities to interact through video calls, including Zoom meetings.

Did you need to find child care different from what you had before the pandemic?

Nearly half (42%) of families reported it was necessary for them to make child care arrangements different than their program pre-Coronavirus during the pandemic.

53% of families stated someone in their household was able to care for their children at the time this survey was completed. Many parents shared specific concerns related to working and caring for their children at home and their inability to find child care. Several stated that either they or their partner were unable to continue with their employment due to the pandemic, and many others are relying on family, neighbors, or friends to provide care while parents or guardians work.

Are you receiving emergency financial assistance for child care?

"It’s difficult to find adequate child care. Everyone is either immunosuppressed, pregnant, or has recently tested positive for the virus. For me to put my children at risk with having to go back to work at a restaurant with someone that I don't know well or don't trust is out of question for me. It’s a strain to say the least."

Only 2% of survey participants reported they were receiving emergency financial assistance through a child care subsidy voucher from the Alabama Department of Human Resources made available to the health care community.
Parent considerations during pandemic

Through the survey, families disclosed they have multiple factors to consider when it comes to child care during the pandemic, and some extend beyond basic child care concerns. Most notably, 71% of families stated they are worried their child is missing out on important developmental opportunities, and 68% are concerned about the spread of Coronavirus through child care. Other main concerns include not being able to return to work without child care (41%), focusing on basic financial needs (46%), struggling to work from home without child care (43%), and having other school-age children that need to be cared for also (36%).

“For all but two weeks since March 13th I have had to work from home because I couldn’t find a sitter, and when I did, it’s an individual who charged by the hour. Much more expensive than daycare.”

Reasons why families are hesitant to return to child care

Although many child care programs across Alabama are working on a plan to reopen or are reopening in June, many families have concerns and are hesitant to return. This survey found that 78% of families have health concerns about returning, and 23% are uncertain about their employment status or have other financial concerns. Only 9% reported they have no hesitations for their child to return to child care.
During the pandemic, more than 60% of families reported their child is either currently attending or is planning to return to the same provider as before the pandemic began. Many reported they would feel most comfortable with arranging either a relative caring for their child in their home or another hired individual caring for the child in the family's own home. Beyond these findings, families reported they would feel most comfortable using a program licensed by DHR, including licensed centers, family day care homes, group homes, and Early Head Start/Head Start programs, over license exempt center-based programs.

Prior to the pandemic, half of families responded their children attended a licensed center. While during the pandemic, family responses changed dramatically with a much greater percentage preferring smaller groups and home-based care.
**Employment Findings**

**Before pandemic**
- 57% Two full-time workers
- 32% One full-time worker
- 7% One part-time and one full-time worker
- 3% Unemployed
- 1% One part-time worker

**During pandemic**
- 31% No change
- 63% Working remotely
- 20% Working reduced hours
- 12% Furloughed or laid-off
- 7% Working overtime

**Leading supports offered by employers during pandemic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexible hours</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No support provided</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent care flexible spending account</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and medical leave to care for children</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance to pay for child care</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onsite or near site child care available to employees</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly half (49%) of survey participants reported their employer provided no support for child care during the pandemic, while 33% stated their employer was able to provide flexible hours.

“Their precautionary measures include cutting shorter hours and strict pickup/drop-off procedures. This is going to cause a strain on our family in needing to rearrange work hours to accommodate the lack of schedule flexibility. Also, stricter sick policies may cause unnecessary missed days of work.”
Respondent Demographics

Ages of survey participants' children

- Under 2 years old (20%)
- 2-3 years old (33%)
- 4-5 years old (26%)
- Over 5 years old (21%)

The ages of the children represented varied greatly with the largest number of children being 2-3 years old at 33%. This graph may represent households with multiple children, and 21% of families stated they have school age children in their household.

Race/Ethnicity

- White (64%)
- Black/African American (26%)
- Hispanic/Latino (4%)
- Asian (4%)
- American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%)
- Multiracial (1%)

The families that completed this survey are very closely aligned with the race/ethnicity demographic make-up of Alabama with 64% of respondents identifying as White, 26% identifying as Black/African American, 4% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 4% identifying as Asian.

Household income

- Less than $48,000 (34%)
- $49,000 - $99,000 (32%)
- $100,000 and up (34%)

Families participating in the survey reported their overall household income, and the results show a nearly even completion rate by families representing the three income categories.

Families with one or more essential workers in the home

- Yes (61%)
- No (39%)

61% of families that completed the survey reported at least one adult in their household's employment position is considered essential, while 39% identified no essential employees in their household.
When considering Regional Workforce Councils, this chart indicates the percentage of responders by each region. Families completing the survey are spread across many different locations in Alabama, with the largest percentage of participants residing in Region 1 (37%), Region 3 (19%), and Region 5 (15%).

The Alabama Workforce Council was formed in 2015 as an employer-led statewide effort to understand the structure, function, organization, and perception of the Alabama workforce system. A map of the Regional Workforce Councils follows.
The survey was offered to families across the state by the Alabama Partnership for Children through multiple state and local stakeholders using an online survey. Thanks to all families who participated and all partners and advocates who helped to disseminate the survey.

Resources

Alabama Partnership for Children:
www.alabamapartnershipforchildren.org, 1-866-711-4025

COVID-19 Resources:

CDC Guidance for Child Care Programs that remain open:

CDC Guidance on Opening Schools and Child Care Programs:

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