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Home-Based Childcare Providers in Harris County

PREPARED FOR HARRIS COUNTY BY



connective

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Context and Method

Method

There are more than 900,000 home-based childcare providers in Harris County. These providers are a key part of ensuring access to quality childcare for all. Many parents turn to home-care providers for a homelike feeling, putting their child in the hands of someone whom they deeply trust. This is especially true for those in low-income neighborhoods – where childcare centers might not exist or may be out of budget – and for immigrant populations who rely on one-on-one relationships.

Only 25% of home-based childcare providers participate in the Texas Workforce Solutions child care subsidy program. This is in contrast to 64% of child care centers that serve parents on childcare subsidies. Why do so few home-based providers participate in subsidy programs, despite serving eligible kids in their area? What can we find out about how they run their businesses?

How can Harris County best support existing and new home-based childcare providers, ensuring more parents and guardians will have access to quality child care, while increasing the number of childcare providers in the area?

We talked to:

- 6 home-based childcare providers in Alief
- 6 random home-based childcare providers from other areas with varying years of experience in the childcare industry
- 4 out of 12 currently accept or previously accepted parents on the subsidy program
- 6 interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, 5 in English, & 1 in Spanish
- All 12 interviewees were women



Why Alief? Texas Policy Lab noticed that there is a large amount of home-based care providers in the Alief area, predominantly Vietnamese-speaking, most of whom currently don't accept child care subsidies. We decided to zero in on this population. To contrast this, we decided to host an equal amount of interviews with English and Spanish speaking providers outside of Alief.



Provider Personas

Let's Meet the Providers

The providers we met were all one-woman shows. They wear many hats: they are the caretaker, the chef, the accountant, the record keeper, and the housekeeping staff - often without much outside support. They earn parents' trust by providing genuine, homey, quality care to children. However, they may not be the best at business operations like filing taxes on time.

The Experienced

The Experienced is likely in her 50s or 60s and has operated her childcare business in the same way for more than 20 years. While she has industry knowledge on her side, she isn't tech-savvy and therefore not taking advantage of technology platforms that can reduce her administrative burden and best practices that can improve her business.



The Fresh Start

The Fresh Start is young and excited. She's able to navigate changing technology platforms and tools, but the heavy rhythm of regulatory paperwork, state inspections, and other obligations overwhelms her. Sometimes it's so overwhelming that she feels inadequate and wonders if she made the right decision by starting a home daycare!



The Mom-turned-Provider



The **Mom-turned-Provider** started her business because she was priced out of daycare for her own children. A new U.S. immigrant from Vietnam, she's worked a series of jobs to make ends meet. After having children and staying at home to care for them, she began caring for neighborhood kids, too. After becoming licensed, she's now responsible for 12 children full-time at her center. She relies on local Vietnamese organizations and family members to help her recruit placements, and navigate state regulations, programs, and applications.

The Dreamer



The Dreamer has bigger goals than what she is doing today: she wants to become a commercial center. She has started hiring part-time support to help her run an existing home-based day care, hoping to learn management and scale. However, her short-term goals – of keeping her business running, complying with regulations, finding new clients – often get in the way of her being able to dream, invest, and plan for the long-term.



What do Providers Need?

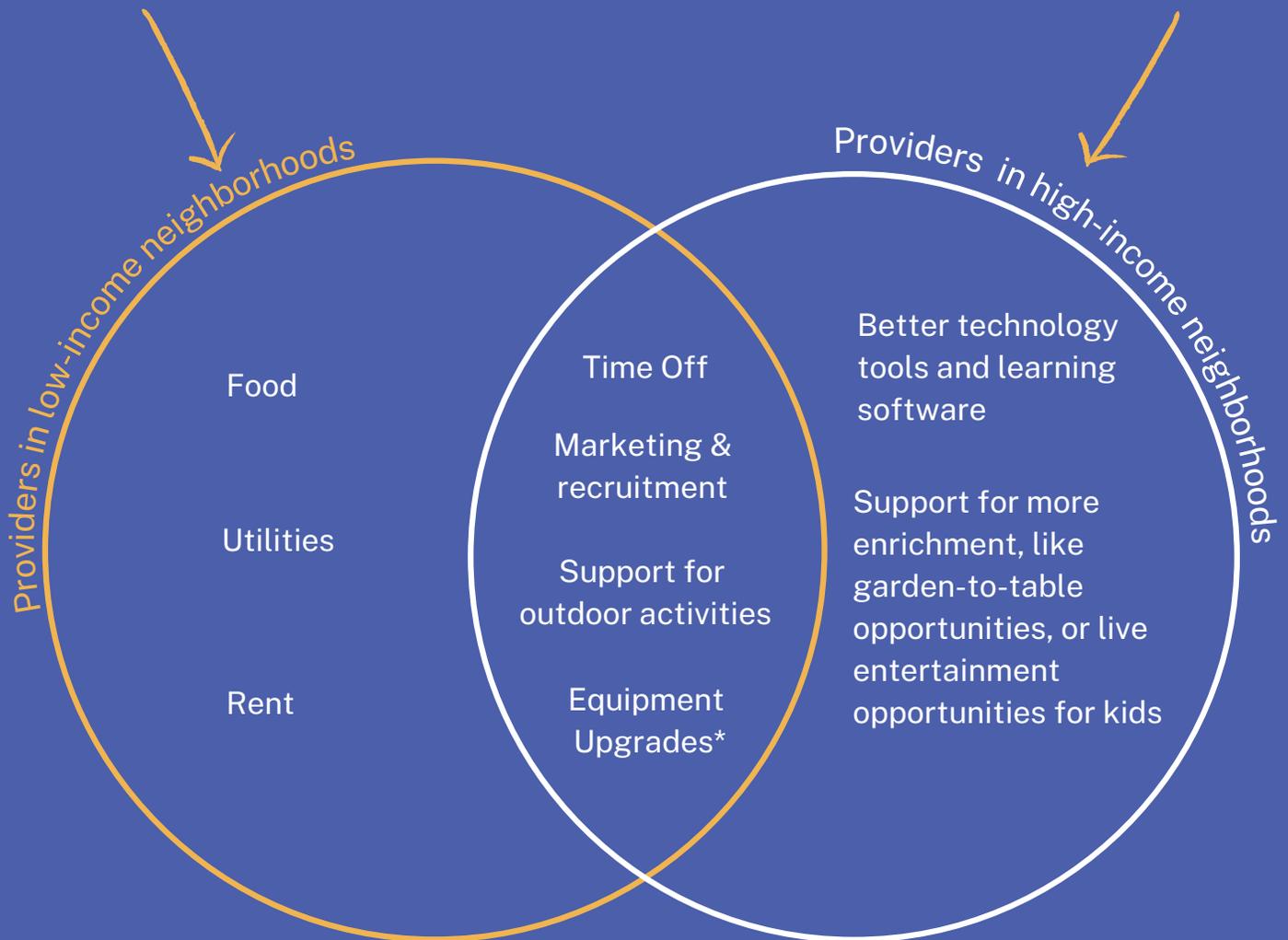
Key Requests

When asked to rank their needs and wishes, the topics below were high on the list.

1) Operational Support

In low-income neighborhoods, providers are focused on ensuring that they can continue to provide basic shelter and needs to those they are caring for.

In middle to high-income neighborhoods, providers are confident in meeting basic needs. Their needs are for better technology tools and enrichment programs.



**more on these mutual operational needs on the next page*

Mutual Operational Needs

Time Off

We heard this across the board. From not having time to go to the bathroom to extremely short trips to see newly born grandchildren; from being unable to enjoy weekends to skipping doctor's appointments. However, providers saw it as a compromise they've made as opposed to a problem they can solve.

Marketing & Recruitment

Tasha has six placements, but can take up to 12. She's been struggling to find new clients. Dolores is also not at capacity, and has had to take a second job to keep her center running. Stacy is at capacity, but would still like help with marketing for consistency. Irene said the biggest help would be to be able to recruit more kids. If she was able to, she would be able to afford an assistant.

Outdoor Activity Support

Many providers asked for help surrounding mandatory outdoor time, like yard play equipment, better yards, and additional chaperones who can keep an eye on children.

Equipment Upgrades

High-cost items like strollers, high chairs, carpets, and furniture.

2) Language Support

English speakers	Vietnamese speakers
Little interest in curriculum support	High interest in curriculum support
Easy to communicate with licensing representatives	Language barriers create an insecure relationship with non-Vietnamese speaking licensing representatives. These providers rely on family translators.

Irene, a Spanish speaker, appreciates that her rep speaks Spanish!



IDEA: Use funding and other resources to build capacity of existing neighborhood and local organizations that can support Vietnamese and non-English speaker home-based care providers.

Other Requests

Providers also mentioned other requests such as administrative support. However, when asked to rank their needs, these were ranked lower than the key requests.

“A tax or accounting professional would be super helpful.”

1) Administrative Support

Every provider felt the burden of paperwork, payments, invoices, and required documentation. Joan is an older provider who recently lost her husband, the person who helped her with navigating technology and paperwork, and she’s now overwhelmed.

2) Licensing Management Support

The administrative commitment for home-based providers is so large that almost everyone we spoke to requested some form of help in managing paperwork deadlines so they don’t inadvertently get dinged for being out of compliance.

“I appreciate it when someone can remind me to have things in order. We are busy. We don’t always remember. If someone gives me a reminder to do something in advance, that’s really helpful. I don’t want a ding against my name.”

“It’s hard to find quality child care workers. Before COVID, I had 1 fulltime and 1 part-time employee. That allowed me to free up time, so I could do paperwork, prepare meals and things like that. Now, I have one part-time employee and I have a hard time retaining them.”

3) Staffing Support

Some providers directly expressed a need for staffing support allows them to delegate work on a consistent basis (e.g., a full or part-time employee), offer more to their clients (e.g., a temp worker who is a dance or aerobics instructor), or to take a few hours off to tend to a personal emergency (e.g., a trusted temp worker ready to jump in).



IDEA: Many providers don’t want to hire full-time employees but need some support. What if there was a pool of trusted, quality, certified temps that can drop in on an hourly rate, providing an extra set of hands, music lessons, dance lessons, or meal prep support?

4) Training Support

There was mixed feedback about mandatory training, providers found them helpful but boring, especially in virtual environments. One provider shared that some trainings are held during the workday, making them feel inadequate or that they are missing out.

Types of trainings requested:

- Keeping up with regulations
- Best practices for childcare centers
- Working more effectively with kids
- Building a more engaging curriculum



Use multiple communication methods (text, phone, email) to get in touch with providers. While some check their emails often, others appreciate texts, and some focus on the mail they receive.

Make training interactive and engaging, and have a mix of virtual and in-person options.



5) Health Insurance

We know that health care emergencies oftentimes catalyze a lot of issues for individuals and families. These emergencies could even put a home based care provider out of business.



How do Providers run their businesses?

Why Providers Choose Childcare



"It's My Calling"

These providers have heartfelt connections with the kids they care for, and want to be a part of their growth and development.

"I have a one-on-one connection with my parents and my kids. They can trust me."

"I don't have a bad day where I am overwhelmed because I do this for the kids. I want to see them happy and see them succeed."



"I Want To Be My Own Boss"

These providers like a hands-on approach and want more flexibility around their day-to-day schedules and approaches to care giving.

"I want to do what I want. If [the kids] show interest in something, I invest time in it and go deeper into it. One day, we went outside and the kids were excited to see a frog. So I created activities around frog habitats."



"I Need Income"

These providers started their businesses out of necessity. The job chooses them.

Irene is a stay home mom and never took her own children to daycare. Because her husband is the main financial provider, she decided to start a home-based care provider business to make extra income while staying at home with her kids.

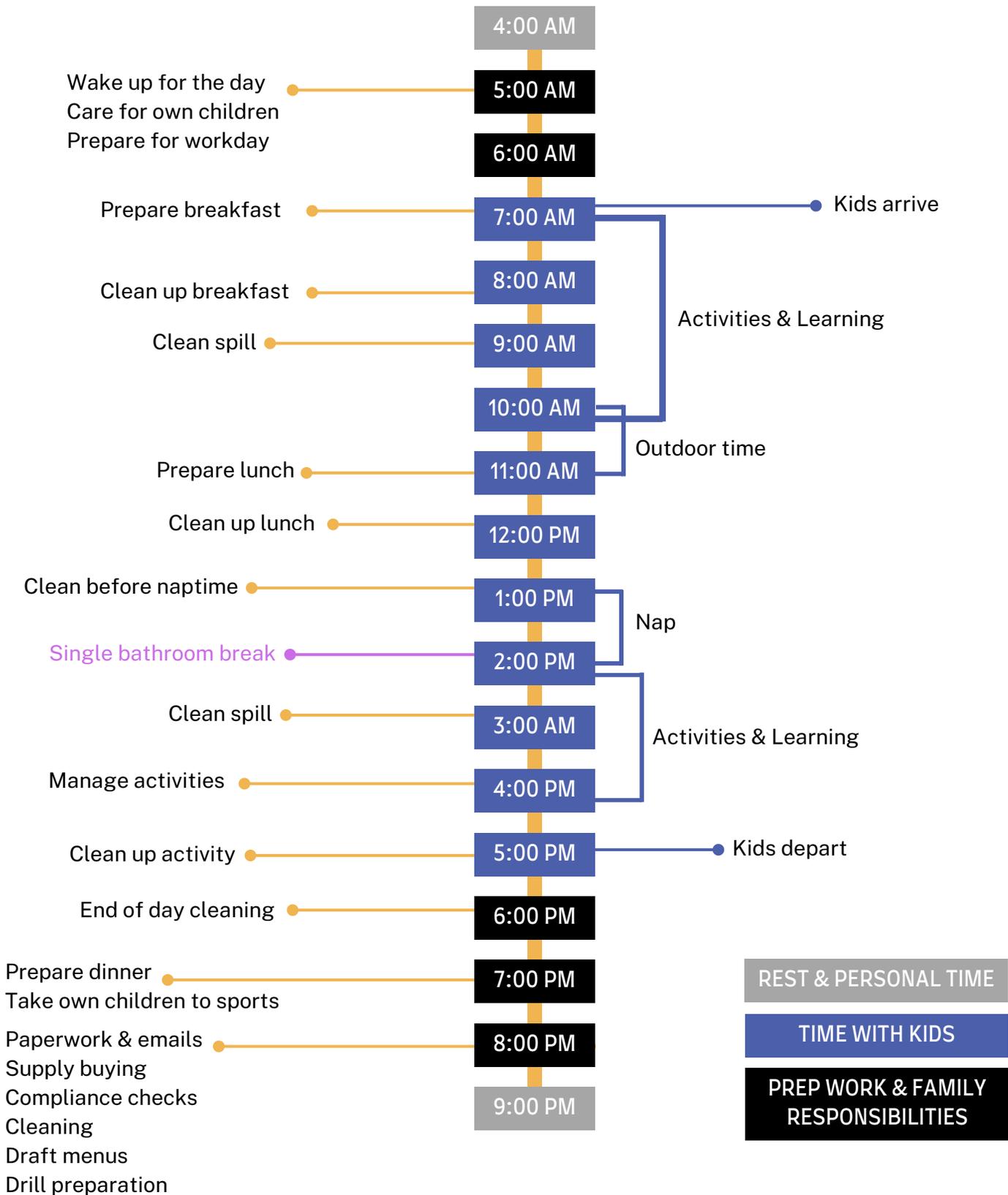
Wearing Multiple Hats



Most providers we spoke to were handling every aspect of the business themselves -- from marketing and curriculum planning to cooking and cleaning, from invoicing to tax filing. If one hat drops, they risk being perceived as unreliable by clients.

"I feel I have to be dependable. It is huge for the parents and for me too. [I struggle with taking] time off, or needing time off when I have a crisis or emergency. If [you're sick,] you can't cancel the kids. Or if you have to go to the bathroom, they are alone, and I don't take that lightly."

An Average Day: Early Mornings, Late Nights



Who's Helping Them?

Most providers controlled all aspects of their businesses, while few had support from partners and employees.

While we expected to hear stories of emotional support from partners, family, and friends, the relationship that surprised us the most during the interviews was the one providers have with their Licensing Representatives.



Licensing Representatives

Providers find the Licensing Representatives very helpful and trusted points of contact.

“The process to get registered was easy. I encountered a lady that helped me step by step. She wasn't even my rep. She was with the Texas Department of Human Services. She supported me with licensing.”

“I have a case manager who comes out once a year. I can call her anytime. I haven't run into a whole lot of issues or needed information.”

However, communication can be a barrier - Judy appreciates her representative, but the lack of Vietnamese-speaking staff makes her afraid to interact more frequently.

“If they can speak Vietnamese, that would be great.”



Invest in empowering existing Licensing Representatives! They can serve as the face of state and local programs. They can communicate information about new programs, collect necessary feedback, help enroll providers in programs, etc.



Friends and Family

Providers also relied on friends and neighborhood organizations. Irene found support from friends who were in the business and got connected to other care providers through WhatsApp groups.

“My friend from New York with the WhatsApp group has helped 10 providers open daycares. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have known where to look because of the lack of knowledge, of where to go, and what to do.”

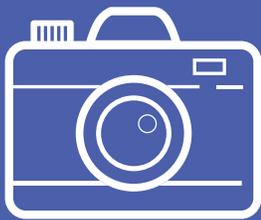
Judy also relied on friends, and May mentioned a local organization, Hiep Luc, that helps low-income Vietnamese Americans set up childcare centers and at-home services.

“A friend from Dallas taught and trained me how to run childcare at home. And then I learned online through online training and kept updating my skills online every year.”

Vy doesn't speak English well, but her daughter does. With her daughter's help, she was able to apply for relief during COVID.

IDEA: Get inspiration from organic networks on WhatsApp and Facebook where peers help each other start and run their business. One idea is to facilitate in-person gatherings where providers get to know and learn from each other. If this is a part of the 30-hr training requirement, it will increase participation.





SNAPSHOT:

Top Expenses and Time-Consuming Responsibilities

Expenses	Responsibilities
Rent	Managing state food program regulations
Utilities	Buying supplies
Food	Cooking
Home maintenance, like air conditioning or plumbing	Cleaning and organizing
Activity supplies	
Cleaning supplies	

“She [my Licensing Rep] was asking for so much stuff. Receipts. It was just so much I had to do. At the end of the day, I do menus for a week. Making sure the house is clean — all day long, staying on my feet. Five drills one time a month for the license. It is a lot I do during the day.”

“I clean their hands a lot and we do crafts. Before, I wouldn't ask parents [to bring] things, but now I ask them to bring tissues, because it is an expense that keeps growing.”



FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Running Businesses on Extremely Tight Cash Flow

Most providers we spoke with were operating on a paycheck-to-paycheck system, relying on parent payments, government support, and even taking second jobs to cover their overhead costs.

“I have to take a second job during weekends to keep the lights on and ensure everything is running.”

“I collect fees only after delivering the service. Sometimes the parents are so poor that I end up not collecting any money from some poor parents.”

Many run their business on a per-hour-of-service-provided basis. This means a loss of revenue when taking time off or when children don't show up.

When Joan's husband passed away, she took two weeks off of work for bereavement. Not long after, she took a week off to recover from COVID. She didn't get paid at all during that time.

Vy feels financially unstable, especially during long weekends, as she doesn't get paid when kids take time off or go away with their parents.

When a business owner is running a cash-flow-strapped operation, she may not be able to strategically plan for and invest in long-term business goals. Interestingly, COVID support and PPP Loans created stability some weren't used to. Betty and Tasha were incredibly grateful for all of the COVID support they have received thus far. It has kept them afloat during the pandemic, providing them a consistent source of income.

The Stakes Are High

Deeply Relational: Parents' Trust

Kids feel more comfortable in a home environment, and deeper relationships are built with parents.



“Home daycare is a personal thing; we love each other. When my husband died, they all came to his funeral and they even brought me food.”

“Once I have a parent's trust, sometimes I let them pay late.”

Tight Regulations: State Requirements

Childcare is a highly regulated business. The providers understand why. But regulations can shape the childcare experience for both provider and child. Furthermore, missing a small regulatory step can lead to significant consequences for these providers.



“I have a library of books upstairs – basically shelves and shelves of books. I bring those books one at a time downstairs. But I am not allowed to let kids upstairs to explore the books that appeal to them, like in a library.”

“[The rules and guidelines] are very strenuous for us. It's more strenuous than for commercial centers. I'm the only employee and I do more paperwork than commercial centers.”

Providers are so focused on maintaining regulations that they might be missing opportunities to become business savvy. Most care providers we talked to spoke of running their business as a checklist of regulations to follow. Many talked about needing support in ensuring they don't get dinged.



High Risk: Caring for Children



Childcare is a huge responsibility, and taking care of someone else’s child can be daunting. Some have faced the consequences of parents reporting them out of spite.

“Dealing with the kind of work we do can be very scary. Dealing with kids is a handful – you are taking responsibility for someone else’s child – but I can deal with that. I always pray to the Lord for good parents and good kids.”

“Safety comes first.”



IDEA: Marketing legal assistance and resources to childcare providers in case they need it





Why Aren't Providers Enrolling in Childcare Subsidies?

Insights on Childcare Subsidies



Any efforts to increase participation of home-based care providers in state and federal programs will have two audiences: subsidy providers and parents.



Providers

Most Vietnamese-speaking providers were not aware of the availability of a subsidy. Most English-speaking providers are made aware when completing paperwork.

CLIENTS NOT USING SUBSIDIES

Most providers are not on subsidies because parents aren't on subsidies.

“I don't have any low income kids, if I did I would adjust my payment so they could work with me.”

SUBSIDY CAN BE UNRELIABLE

For financially vulnerable businesses, the timing of payments is essential to operations.

“We tried to plan around the subsidy payment schedule, but it wasn't reliably issued. The subsidy comes in monthly, and it may be delayed. If you expect it at the beginning of the month (when you have bills) it may be delayed. When you don't have as many kids, it can really affect you. You would need to plan around the setback so don't become delinquent.”

There is an opportunity to improve communication between the government and non-English speaking licensed home child care providers so that they are more aware of available subsidies.





Parents

DON'T KNOW ABOUT IT:

Tasha and Betty have spoken to several parents who didn't know about the subsidy. They helped them enroll in it by sharing information on it.

“When I find a parent who doesn't know about the subsidy, I tell them about it.”

“I'm in a low-income area. And I always hear of people who don't have childcare. I'm a part of the subsidy program but I don't have any subsidy kids.”

TOO HARD TO GET OR STAY ON IT:

Parents find the enrollment process too hard. Some find the requirements too overwhelming. Some aren't eligible when they need it the most, e.g., when looking for a job. Others can fall off subsidies easily due to missed paperwork or unclear eligibility requirements.

“I have talked to parents who can't afford childcare about the subsidies. And they say it's too hard, or that they haven't heard back. And I have talked to parents who were on subsidy, but couldn't keep up because they still had to pay a portion of the childcare and that was too straining on them.”

IDEA: A subsidy calculator: “Does a child care subsidy make sense for you?” subsidy calculator vs. average area home based provider cost.



SUBSIDY NOT ALWAYS THE CHEAPEST OPTION

We hypothesize that, based on household income and size, using subsidies may be more expensive for parents than what the provider is charging. Some parents find cash deals with providers that are cheaper than the subsidy option.

“I always tell a parent, if you have a good-paying job, and you have one child, I don't think you need to get on it. A parent is paying me \$45-50/week for a 10-year-old. If they get on NCI, their parent fee might be \$300, if they have a good job. I try to help people, so I advise them not to do it. If you have four kids, that's a different situation. The more children you have, the less your parent fee will be.”

PREFER TO USE COMMERCIAL CENTERS WHEN USING A SUBSIDY

This could be because the Collaborative for Children website or Licensing Representative showcases commercial centers over home-based care providers.

“They went to commercial centers. I asked them why and they said ‘Because that's where they sent me’. When these people are hustling and bustling, they will go with the first option. I wish the state would send them to me instead. Even when they go to centers, it's a strain on them. It's \$300 per week and that's still \$150 with the subsidy.”



The subsidy designation on the Collaborative for Children website doesn't differentiate between the willingness to accept subsidies and being currently enrolled in subsidies. **This may mislead parents into thinking that the provider doesn't accept them, when they do if only they were asked.**



IDEA: Change Collaborative for Children website to show “open to subsidy” and “enrolled in subsidy” as filter features.



Thoughts on Another Government Program: CACFP

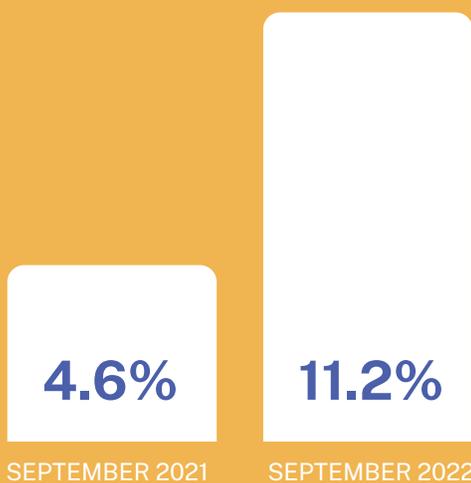
CACFP is extremely cumbersome, but providers in low-income areas have little alternate options.

In 2018 I got a food subsidy from some childcare agencies but then I stopped because of the long, tedious process of handwritten documents.

I am new. I submitted all the paperwork but I don't know how much they will end up reimbursing from my expenses.

You have to log each meal, for each child. They also have regulations for portion sizes, and what foods are allowed. They give you resources for meal ideas and things like that. This is part of the paperwork I log after each meal. But I have to be on top of it because they can show up for a surprise visit.

Inflating food costs are not reflected in nutrition program subsidies



YEAR OVER YEAR FOOD INFLATION

Food costs have increased by over 10% in the last twelve months*, but subsidy programs have not kept up with the rate increase. This causes providers, already struggling to make ends meet, to struggle to maintain the quality of food they serve. All providers agree that the food subsidy should rise to match inflation.

*Data Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Food and beverages in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted. CPI-All Urban Consumers.



Design Toolkit

Guidelines to keep in mind when designing new programs and services for home-based providers

Design Toolkit Checklist

- Design new programs and services for specific personas** (see pages 4-5.) Ask: What might enable and prevent each persona from participating? How will the new idea enable each person's goals?
- Use a Licensing Representative** or agent to market available services and assistance.
- Mix your modes of communication.** To ensure the widest coverage of your message, meet providers on their preferred platform, like email, text, phone or mail.
- Go to them** (at their door) instead of making them come to a central area.
- Take away or **decrease administrative burden** - they already have a lot of paperwork on their plate. You can read more Connective's insights on designing human-centered applications [here](#).
- Offer **technical assistance hotlines** for any new technology.
- Include ancillary services** in the program such as business operations and marketing best practices, and including reminders for any regulations and trainings
- Build in **multiple native languages** (e.g., in Vietnamese.) You can read Connective's insights on designing tools for non-English speakers [here](#).
- Build with **local support organizations** that immigrant populations trust.



Questions to Solve For

HOW MIGHT WE...

Help stay-at-home providers (parents or grandparents) enroll in and take advantage of the subsidy program?

Make providing home-based childcare less scary and risky for care providers?

Build on the lessons learned from the expedited childcare assistance for essential workers during COVID-19 to expedite assistance to high-risk groups in need of child care?

Support parents and providers in the subsidy waiting period in a way that doesn't put the burden of delayed payments on the providers?

Champion the loosening of regulations so providers can nurture more of a home atmosphere?

Help new providers learn the ins and outs of different systems, how to enroll, and how to sustain them, such as the Texas Rising Star System?

Build mentorship opportunities when experienced providers are stretched thin?

Connect experienced providers with new providers?

Help the Fresh Start get in the rhythm of regulatory paperwork?

Help the Dreamer run her business more efficiently so she has time for long-term, strategic planning?

Leverage existing technology tools for care providers (HiMama, LineLeader, Brightwheel, etc.) to help providers increase their operational efficiency?

Use tech tools to make repetitive food logging easier for providers? How might tech tools help with other pain points related to CACFP?

Support providers access peer knowledge and assistance while accounting for how busy most providers are?



Insight Summary and Idea Bank



INSIGHT SUMMARY



- In low-income neighborhoods, providers are focused on ensuring that they can continue to provide basic shelter and needs to those they were caring for.
- In middle to high-income neighborhoods, providers are confident in meeting basic needs. Their needs were for better technology tools and enrichment programs.
- Providers also mentioned licensing management, health insurance, and administrative, training and staffing support. However, when asked to rank their needs, these were ranked lower than the key requests.
- Language barriers create an insecure relationship with non-Vietnamese-speaking Licensing Reps. These providers rely on family translators.
- Types of trainings requested:
 - Best practices for home-based childcare operations
 - Working more effectively with kids
 - Building a more engaging curriculum
 - Keeping up with regulations
- Use multiple communication methods (text, phone, email) to get in touch with providers. While some check their emails often, others appreciate texts, and some focus on the mail they receive.
- Most providers we spoke to were handling every aspect of the business themselves: from marketing and curriculum planning to cooking and cleaning, from invoicing to tax filing. If one hat drops, they risk being perceived as unreliable by clients.
- Most providers controlled all aspects of their businesses. Few had support from partners and employees. While we expected to hear stories of emotional support from partners, family, and friends, the relationship that surprised us the most during the interviews was the one providers have with their Licensing Representatives.
- Invest in empowering existing Licensing Representatives! They can serve as the face of state and local programs. They can communicate information about new programs, collect necessary feedback, help enroll providers in programs, etc.

- Most providers we spoke with were operating on a paycheck-to-paycheck system, relying on parent payments, government support, and even taking second jobs to cover their overhead costs. Many run their business on a per-hour-of-service-provided basis. This means a loss of revenue when taking time off or when children don't show up. When a business owner is running a cash-flow-strapped operation, she may not be able to strategically plan for and invest in long-term business goals.
- Providers are so focused on maintaining regulations that they might be missing opportunities to become business savvy. Most care providers we talked to spoke of running their business as a checklist of regulations to follow. Many talked about needing support in ensuring they don't get dinged.
- Any efforts to increase participation of home-based care providers in state and federal programs will have two audiences: subsidy providers and parents.
- There is an opportunity to improve communication between the government and non-English speaking licensed home child care providers so that they are more aware of available subsidies.
- Providers often don't know about subsidies and/or don't find clients who are on subsidy. A few who have experience with subsidy note that the timing of subsidy payments are unreliable, making them financially vulnerable.
- Providers notes that many parents don't know about subsidies or find it hard to stay on subsidy.
- We hypothesize that, based on household income and size, using subsidies may be more expensive for parents than what the provider is charging.
- Some parents on subsidy go to commercial centers before home-based providers. This could be because the state website or representative showcase commercial centers over home-based care providers.
- CACFP is extremely cumbersome, but providers in low-income areas have little alternate options.
- Inflating food costs are not reflected in nutrition program subsidies. This causes providers, already struggling to make ends meet, to struggle to maintain the quality of food in their centers. All providers agree that the food subsidy rates should rise to match inflation rates.



IDEA BANK



- Use funding and other resources to build the capacity of the existing neighborhood and local organizations that can support Vietnamese and non-English speaker home-based care providers.
- Change the Collaborative for Children website to show “open to subsidy” and “enrolled in subsidy” as filter features.
- Many providers don’t want to hire full-time employees but need some support. What if there was a pool of trusted, quality, certified temps that can drop in on an hourly rate, providing an extra set of hands, music lessons, dance lessons, or meal prep support?
- Get inspiration from organic networks on WhatsApp and Facebook where peers help each other start and run their businesses. One idea is to facilitate in-person gatherings where providers get to know and learn from each other. If this is a part of the 30-hour training requirement, it will increase participation.
- A subsidy calculator: "Does a child care subsidy make sense for you?" subsidy calculator vs. average area home-based provider cost.
- Establish a group purchasing organization for insurance, legal services, and/or health insurance which improves affordability and reduces risk for providers.



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Connected, empathetic and accessible social services.

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