

Child Care: Nurturing Growth



Centralina
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

Strategic Recommendations for Economic Development and Local Government

Child care plays a crucial role in our economy, enabling parents to work, businesses to recruit and retain talent and the workforce to develop skills for success. It is an essential component to building an equitable and better future for our residents.

Child Care in Our Region

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CENTRALINA REGIONAL COUNCIL (NC): CHILDCARE FORUM & TOOLKIT

Meeting the Childcare Challenge: Opportunities for Economic Development Districts

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Childcare is increasingly recognized as a regional economic development issue. Its accessibility and affordability are essential to the economic well-being of individuals, businesses, and communities. Economic developers should prioritize childcare in their strategies and collaborate with local partners to address the sector's key challenges.

The [Centralina Regional Council](#), an Economic Development District (EDD) serving a nine-county region of central North Carolina, is working to improve childcare access and affordability for the region's families. While leading its most recent [CEDS](#) planning process, which for the first time featured childcare as a key regional economic development issue, Centralina staff discovered a grim picture. 41% of families in the region were paying more for childcare than they did for rent, and the sector wasn't expanding fast enough to meet demand from the region's fast-growing population. Those affordability and accessibility challenges were key drivers of the region's biggest employer challenge: workforce availability. Without a way to care for their kids, parents weren't participating in the labor force at the rate that they otherwise would.

Armed with these findings and a clear understanding of the region's gaps in childcare, Centralina began looking for strategies to improve access for families. However, it faced a challenge common to economic developers in this space: there was not a clear role for the organization to play. Unlike issues such as workforce, infrastructure, and business development, there is not an established role for EDDs in the childcare sector.



The Centralina region. *Photo via Wikimedia.*

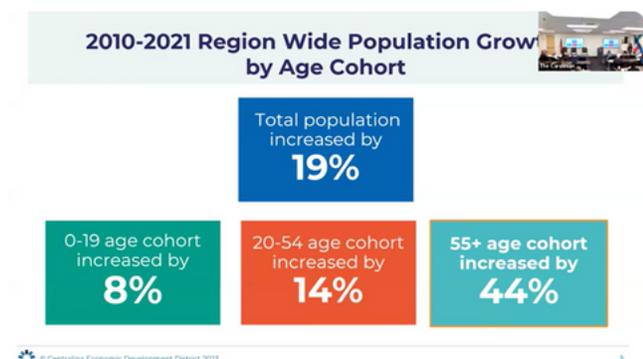
Instead of branching out in an unfamiliar direction, Centralina leaned on a core EDD strength: convening. EDDs are well-suited to bring together stakeholders that might not otherwise connect in order to work on shared challenges. Centralina staff gathered local governments officials, business leaders, workforce and business development organizations, and childcare experts at an [in-person forum in February 2024](#).

The Forum opened with comments from three organizations: the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation](#), which provided data to contextualize the conversation, [Child Care Resources Inc](#), a local childcare referral service, and [Novant Health System](#), which operates a daycare service in the region. From there, attendees participated in informal discussions about various aspects of childcare issues, drawing links between their specific challenges—for example, manufacturers who struggle with parent call-outs—and identifying potential collaborations and fixes.

One outcome of the Forum was the creation of Child Care: Nurturing Growth, a toolkit offering data, resources, and county-specific recommendations for all nine Centralina counties. The Forum also raised Centralina's profile on the issue, leading to invitations for staff to speak at other events and to join Mecklenburg County's childcare working group.

The Forum also became the impetus for two further convenings led by Centralina: a November webinar focused on collaboration opportunities between governments and businesses, and a January webinar focused on practical childcare benefit options employers can implement to support their workforce. The webinars featured expert speakers from the region and state and reached an audience of more than 70 business and community leaders.

Asked about the key outcomes from these engagements, Centralina Community Economic Development Coordinator Anna Lu Wilson comments, "It ended up being a bigger awareness campaign than we first imagined. Local officials told us, 'I wasn't aware that childcare was such a crisis,' and we had more employers than we imagined, because they can be hard to reach, but so many were engaged on the webinar." Moving forward, Wilson plans to release a survey to stakeholders to gauge the region's needs and to continue to encourage collaboration and information sharing on the issue.



The Role of Childcare in the North Carolina Economy Forum



The virtual childcare forum.



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Child Care in Our Region

In Centralina's nine-county region, a significant 69% of households with children under the age of six are characterized by the presence of working parents. There are nearly 70,000 employed mothers with children under six years old. Additionally, there are 1,103 licensed child care programs with more than 87,000 spaces available. Of these programs, 80% have received four or five-star high quality ratings. Similarly, 86% of the total spaces available in these programs meet high-quality standards.

The Burden of Cost

Child care expenses can be a financial challenge for many young families, with annual costs ranging from \$5,051 for a school-age child in Stanly County to \$15,538 for an infant in Mecklenburg County. This is a significant barrier to employment, especially in North Carolina, which faces a severe worker shortage with 55 available workers for every 100 open jobs. In response to this issue, local government, economic development organizations, and workforce development agencies are increasingly acknowledging the critical role of child care in fostering vibrant and resilient communities. Recognizing child care as a key component of the community infrastructure is essential for sustainable growth.



Key Takeaways:

The economic development lens can be powerful.

Simply reframing childcare as an economic development issue can shift who pays attention and gets involved. Centralina found that business leaders and elected officials who hadn't previously engaged with the topic became interested once they saw clear connections to workforce availability and accommodating regional growth. Applying the economic development lens helps position childcare as shared infrastructure worthy of investment and collaboration across sectors. It also allows EDDs to align their efforts with existing strategies like the CEDS, making it easier to integrate childcare into long-term planning and to attract new partners and resources.

Don't know where to start? Lean on your core competencies.

Childcare is a relatively new issue for economic developers, and though many EDDs are hearing from stakeholders about the challenges posed by childcare gaps, many are unsure of how to get involved. Unlike workforce or aging services, there is not an existing regional infrastructure for childcare programs and it can be difficult to envision a clear programmatic or funding role.

EDDs looking to impact the childcare space should start by considering their core competencies. For Centralina, that meant organizing convenings and bringing stakeholders together to learn from each other and discuss shared challenges and opportunities. "Look for easy ways you can make an impact: write a white paper, host a webinar, get with resource partners and talk about what else we can do," recommends Wilson. "We weren't able to make a whole program out of this, and there's already so many people doing good work in the space, so we decided to impact it the way we were best positioned to." Anchoring early efforts in what your organization already does well builds credibility and momentum, laying a foundation for larger childcare initiatives when new resources or partners emerge.

Leverage regional networks.

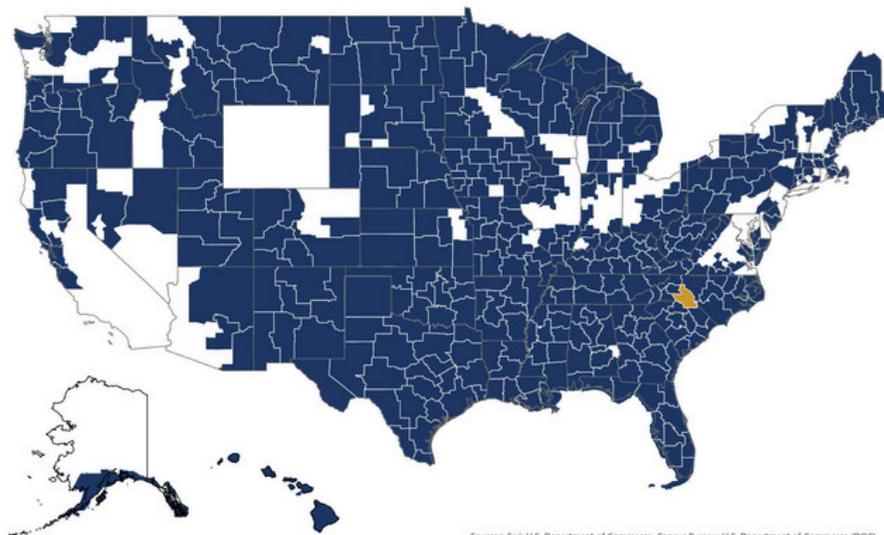
Relatedly, EDDs are naturally part of many different regional networks and can draw from each of them to get seemingly disparate groups into the room together. Wilson notes, "We sent invitations to our board members, local governments, elected officials, businesses, economic developers, community colleges, workforce boards, and career centers – pretty

much everyone that touches economic development.” This broad outreach helped surface connections between sectors that don’t often collaborate directly, like childcare providers and manufacturing firms. By pulling from multiple networks, EDDs can create the kind of shared regional conversations that make long-term partnerships possible.

Awareness matters.

Even though no hard policy changes came out of the Centralina childcare series immediately, Wilson is confident that Centralina’s role in raising awareness about the issue will pay dividends down the line. She highlights in particular the positive feedback from local elected officials: “We heard from a commissioner that attended that said he really wasn’t aware of the issue previously but was convinced by the presentations about how much of an issue it is. A lot of times in government you are so busy that it’s hard to stay in touch with these issues and how they change over time. So the awareness itself is really valuable.”

Centralina Regional Council Service Area:



Sources: Esri; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau; U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Ocean Service (NOS), National Geodetic Survey (NGS)

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