

*Child Care Deserts in the
North Country:
A Region in Crisis*



OVERVIEW



The North Country region of New York State is comprised of predominantly rural communities covering seven counties—Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence. 86% of census tracts in the region are identified as child care deserts, defined as areas in which the potential need for child care based on population far exceed the capacity of the regulated child care provider system. It is no coincidence that the locations not designated as child care deserts are almost exclusively the small cities and most populous villages that dot the region: Plattsburgh, Watertown, Canton, Potsdam, Massena, and Malone. It is clear the demand for child care is great, given the region-wide rate of 5.8 children per regulated child care slot (or full-time opening for enrollment within a child care center or day care home licensed by or registered with the NYS Office of Children and Family Services).

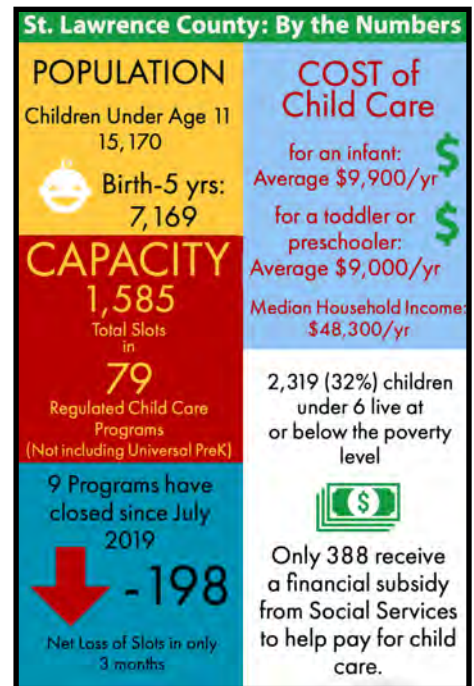
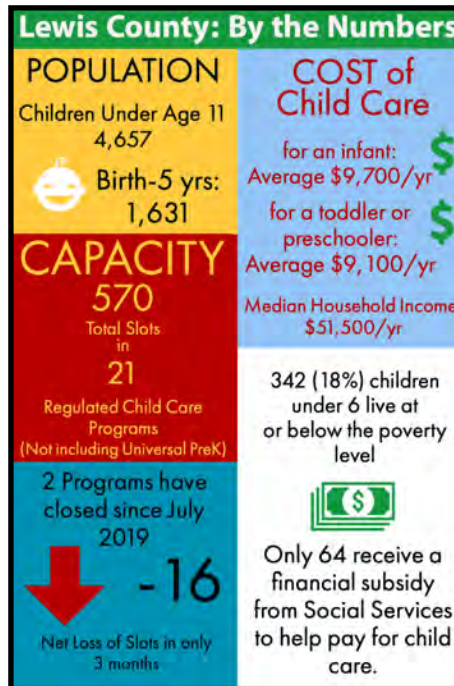
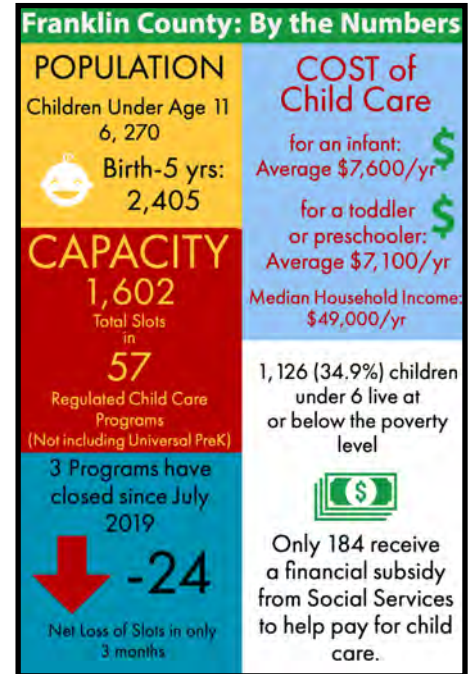
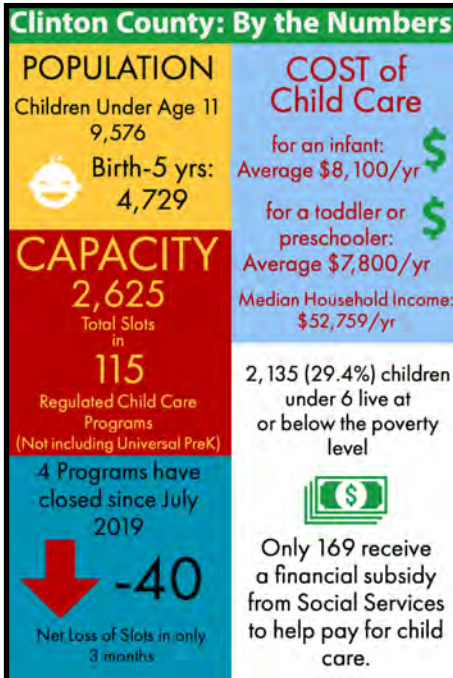
Like many rural landscapes, the North Country is also a region with a high level of poverty, with 32.5% of children from birth to age 6 living at or below poverty level (9,079). This makes affording the cost of child care extremely difficult for many families, especially given that, across the region, only 1,237 children are provided with child care subsidies through the local Department of Social Services.

Child Care Deserts in the North Country Counties and Region								
Data	Clinton	Essex	Franklin	Hamilton	Jefferson	Lewis	St. Lawrence	Region
Children under age 6 (estimates)	4,729	1,907	3,066	115	10,264	1,640	6,165	27,866
Children age 6 through 11 (estimates)	4,847	2,121	3,204	332	10,269	2,063	7,564	30,400
Regulated Child Care Slots	2,566	929	1,571	48	3,051	472	1,422	10,058
Ratio of Children to Slots	3.7	4.3	3.9	9.3	6.7	7.8	9.6	5.8
Number/Percent of Census Tracts that equate to Child Care Deserts (3 or more resident children per slot)	11/66%	15/83%	14/74%	8/89%	23/100%	17/94%	17/89%	105/86%

*Data extracted from a mapping tool developed by the Center for American Progress <https://childcaredeserts.org/index.html?state=NY&split=true&urbanicity=Rural> and from **Child Care Demographics**, NYS Office of Children and Family Services <https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/2017-NY-Child-Care-Demographics-Report.pdf>

The infographics below display the state of child care in each North Country county, at a particular recent moment in time (Nov 2019).

Hamilton County is not shown due to low population and lack of accurate census estimate.



NEEDS ASSESSMENT

North Country Business & Education Forum

The Child Care Coordinating Council of the North Country (CCCCNC) partnered with the Workforce Development Board and other agencies to sponsor the October 2019 North Country Business and Education Forum, focused on child care needs and the workforce. About 90 people, primarily from Clinton, Essex, and Franklin Counties, representing business leaders, child care and early education professionals, and community organizations were in attendance. Renowned keynote speaker Bill Millett of Scope View Strategic Advantage presented on the economic imperative for high-quality early care and education, specifically related to current impact, and approaching crisis, in the North Country region.

Millett discussed the importance of high-quality early learning and the multiple returns that investment in quality childcare and early education deliver to families, companies and communities in the region and around the world. Millett also urged his listeners to recognize and act upon the overwhelming need for funding and enhancement to child care availability across the North Country, with 86% of all census tracts being identified as child care deserts.

Throughout the day, forum attendees also heard perspectives from a set of panelists reflecting both the interests of employers and the needs of employed parents related to the challenging reality of working around child care, and finding common ground when addressing issues of child care needs. A second panel, consisting of child care business professionals (both center directors, and home-based day care), as well as other early childhood and education experts, explained to the audience barriers affecting the recruitment, education, professional development and retention of a high-quality early care and learning workforce.

Sherry Cleary, of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at CUNY, shared a state-level overview of initiatives to support the early childhood field, including QualityStars New York. The day's program concluded with an opportunity for those present to consider "next steps" in advancing the state of quality child care and early learning in our region. Over 30 individuals expressed interest in joining a business leaders' advocacy group, agreed to contact elected officials, or committed to becoming 'champions' and sharing information within their workplace or network.

North Country Child Care Advocacy Work Session

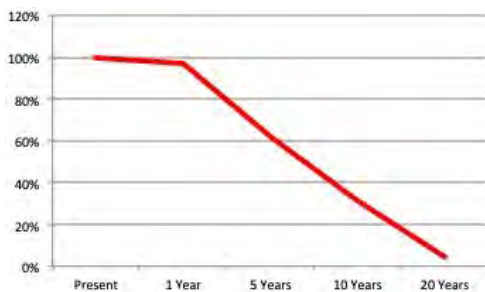
A separate work-group was held the same evening, facilitated by Bill Millett, with a concentration on developing strategies for early care and learning advocacy. This smaller session was attended by the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) agency directors and staff from the entire seven-county North Country region, as well as other key stakeholders. Discussion revolved around creating targeted messages to 'market' child care as a product with multi-generational impact, promoting the importance of child care and early education as both an essential factor in the development of a globally competitive workforce, and an immediate necessity to support the expansion of the regional economy. Several recommendations emerged as outcomes of this effort, which are included later in this report.

North Country Child Care Surveys

To conduct a thorough assessment of the landscape of child care in the North Country, particularly related to availability, barriers to access, and economic impact, CCCNC created and conducted a set of coordinated surveys to gather information from three major sources: regulated child care sites (licensed or registered day care home providers and child care center directors), parents of young children, and employers. These surveys were distributed throughout the region with the assistance of the five CCRR agencies, and resulted in significant data collection that demonstrated a high level of agreement between respondents from the various sectors of the community regarding needs related to child care. Selected highlights of the responses are presented below, with details of the apparent strengths and weaknesses of the local child care system discussed in the next pages.

The North Country is losing child care capacity at an alarming rate.

Projected Duration of Operation for Current Day Care Home Businesses

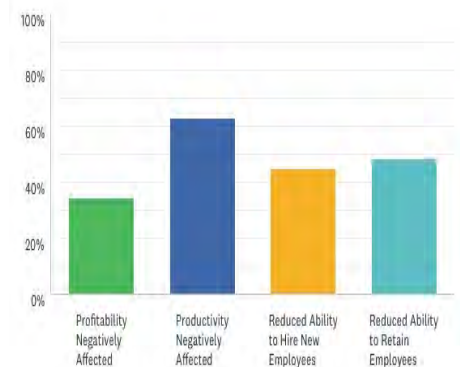


65% of Households Report Concerns About Their Current Child Care

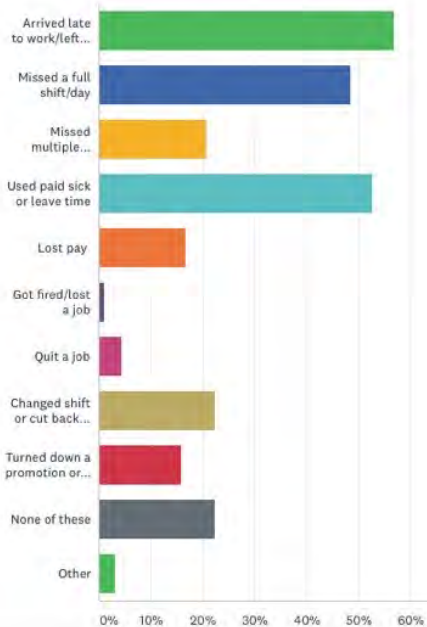
- Not having any available care
- Care not reliable
- Unable to pay for care
- Made late payments or subject to additional fees
- Not enough options/want different care
- Worried child is not receiving best quality of care
- Worried about child's safety



Businesses Suffer When Employee Child Care Needs Are Not Met



78% of Households Experience Work Issues Due to Child Care Needs

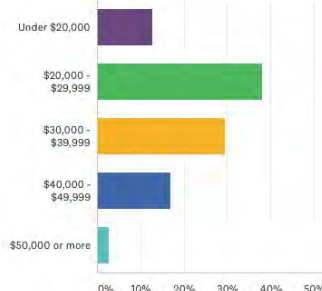


Average Annual Child Care Cost Paid by a Household with 2 Children Under Age 5:

\$15,080

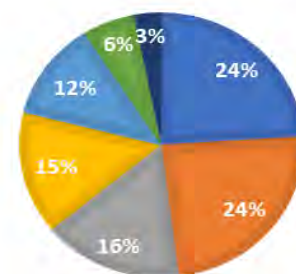
...yet the vast majority of child care center staff and family day care home providers make less than \$30,000 a year.

Annual Income from Child Care Reported by Family Day Care Home Providers



45% of Families With Young Children Have Had to Change Child Care Arrangements

- Daycare Closed/Provider Stopped Providing Care
- Unhappy with provider
- Expense
- Changed Modalities
- Relocation
- Unsafe (provider was negligent, abusive, etc.)
- Behaviors of Child



STRENGTHS

When asked about the quality of their current child care arrangement, families in the North Country region give programs and/or caregivers an average rating of 7.5 out of 10, universally across all modalities. Quality is identified as the most important consideration in arranging care for their children by over 80% of parents/caregivers, with cost being a distant second. Furthermore, 55% of respondents state they are “very happy” with the child care arrangement they currently use. While the phrase “high quality” carries varied meaning for parents, the majority identify the priority of a loving, caring relationship from the provider toward the children as the most important indicator of quality, followed closely by safety of the environment.

Clinton, Essex, and Franklin Counties were included in the 2010 QualityStars New York pilot program, a voluntary quality improvement and rating system for regulated early childhood programs. 22 programs, representing a combined total of about 20% of available child care slot capacity in the tri-county area, receive support through QualityStars New York to meet standards of best practices in four categories: Learning Environment, Family Engagement, Qualifications and Experience, and Management and Leadership.

50% of all day care home providers state they started their business as a means to stay home with their own children. 35% of providers currently care for their own children within the operation of their established program. These entrepreneurs are not only able to remain the primary caregiver for their own children, they also provide a nurturing and responsive care environment in which community children receive the benefit of a strong and consistent early relationship, while the provider may achieve a high degree of professional satisfaction in the work they have chosen to do.

In the words of home-based child care providers...

“I love what I do and the families I work with! I enjoy nurturing children and watching them grow as young individuals.”

“I enjoy children and I love watching how they change and prosper with everything that they learn to do. It is rewarding to me to teach children... they feel safe with me and they are proud of what they are learning and getting the feeling of independence.”

“It’s a needed job in my small town. People depend on me, and I love ‘my’ kids.”

“I feel I am needed in my community. I made the decision to be a day care provider until I retire.”

“I enjoy making a difference in the little people’s lives watching them grow and knowing that parents can have a safe and dependable place to bring children without worries.”

“I treasure offering a safe, enriching environment for children to be when their parents are at work.”

AREAS OF CONCERN

Over 85% of all census tracts in the North Country region are identified as child care deserts, with 3 or more children residing per regulated child care slot. When adjusting child population numbers to identify a standard for how many children are 'likely to need care' – or have all available parents participating in the workforce – 70% of all children in the North Country still comprise this group. Even within this expectation, the region's capacity is overburdened with an average of 4 children likely to need care for each slot in a regulated child care program.

The existing regulated child care field currently operates very near capacity, with infant slots in particularly high demand. 30% of parent households with young children (birth to age 5) state they are limited in their availability to work due to child care needs, with 15% of families in need of child care reporting they are unable to find any regulated or informal availability of care.



Approximately 20% of parents, and employers, report a need for child care to accommodate shift work during overnight hours or on the weekends. However, fewer than 5% of licensed/registered home providers, and zero centers in the region, offer non-traditional hours of care to cover these – blocking access for this population to even consider regulated providers for their child care arrangements.

36% of total households report that they do not have enough appropriate options for child care or would prefer a different type of child care arrangement than they are currently using. 27% worry that their children are not receiving the best quality of care, and 15% are afraid for their children's safety. 78% of households experience issues related to their child care needs that have affected their work or employment status, including lost income (17%), changing shift or cutting back hours (22%), or turning down a promotion or other job opportunity (16%).



The majority of employers in the region report regular absences or interruption due to employee child care needs, with 38% stating the profitability of the business/organization is decreased. About 50% state the ability to hire and/or retain employees is negatively affected, yet very few provide any direct benefit or assistance to employees in addressing these issues despite the economic impact. Almost 30% of employers report instances where they have terminated employment for reasons associated with the employee's child care needs, choosing the higher costs of hiring and training a replacement rather than attempt to absorb the loss in productivity identified by 63% of businesses.

Another primary concern is the shortage of infant slots, compounded by the fact that over 25% of home-based providers will not fill infant slots in their program, or prefer not to provide any infant care if they can avoid the necessity to do so. This imbalance means many other regulated programs maintain long wait-lists, leaving families to find alternate care until an opening becomes available. This creates a higher burden on families who must juggle multiple arrangements for siblings.



Meanwhile, preschool-age slots in regulated home-based and center programs sometimes sit unfilled as children move into less expensive Universal Pre-K or HeadStart programs. For families working full time, this can still create difficulty as the child often needs to be transported to a secondary care arrangement for the remainder of the work shift. However, half of all home-based programs and a third of the child care centers report they do not offer discounted enrollment for part-time attendance, as this leads to scheduling challenges or potential loss of income. This places families in an untenable situation where they must continue to pay the higher cost, or be pushed into unregulated and possibly unreliable or otherwise lower quality alternatives.

Child care centers report that the major issue facing their survival as a business is the inability to pay a fair, living wage to staff and also maintain affordability for families with children enrolled in the program. The vast majority of all center staff, even at the “highest paid” level, make less than \$31,000/year. Yet, 75% of center sites report families have left their program due to inability to afford fees, especially as minor increases in minimum wage contribute to rising cost. Center directors report they are finding it increasingly more difficult to hire and retain quality staff at low pay. This, combined with the loss of preschool enrollment to “free” programs (such as UPK, Headstart) which decreases center profitability further, means programs may be at risk of closure.

The average weekly fee for a full-time slot in a regulated program ranges from \$150 for a 3-year-old in a day care home, to \$220 for an infant enrolled in a child care center. The average cost paid by households currently using child care in the North Country region is \$8,320 annually for one child, and \$15,080 for 2 children. Less than 10% report receiving any type of financial assistance to cover these costs, while the typical household may pay 35% of their income to child care expenses alone.



The current child care workforce is aging, and shrinking. 25% of families who have already had to change their primary child care arrangement did so because of provider retirement or other program closures. 56% of today’s day care home business owners are over age 45. 38% of current day care home providers state they plan to close their business within the next 5 years; 70% within 10 years. Additionally, 65% of day care home providers currently report concerns that potentially threaten their program continuation for even this length of time. The crisis in loss of slots is deepening quickly and is likely worse than reflected in current capacity numbers since many providers stop filling slots in advance of when they anticipate they will cease to operate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout this assessment, the top issue that came to light again and again was one of cost. Everyone – parents, child care providers, employers, the community at large – feels the overwhelming burden of cost to maintain an effective system that meets families’ child care needs and provides quality early education. Funding is desperately needed to improve access and create affordable options that allow parents of young children to join and remain in the workforce.

To address this issue, the assessment team recommends investigating the feasibility of expansion of government-funded child care subsidy in the North Country region, such as through the facilitated enrollment program administered elsewhere in New York State by the Workforce Development Institute, providing subsidies for working families with incomes at up to 275% of the federal poverty level. This would require legislative support and a request for the amount of at least \$1,000,000 to pilot the program in one county, with anticipation of future expansion.

To encourage legislative action, local child care advocates must partner with leaders from the business community to lobby for support by our elected officials at the state and federal level. A taskforce must be developed to guide a group of influential voices from varied sectors in demanding concrete expressions of and investment in the value of quality child care and early education to a multi-generational workforce, and the strength of our communities and economy.

Child care advocates must also maximize these partnerships, working closely with area businesses in taking a hands-on approach to resolving the child care needs of employees. Employers must become proactive in linking to a network of child care providers, providing child care benefits or offering employer-sponsored care options, or innovating other avenues to ensure employees who are parents are able to continue to work, reducing turnover and loss of productivity and profits. CCRR agencies should utilize their local chamber of commerce to create points of contact within the business community, as well as develop strong relationships with civic organizations, increasing the number of referrals and distribution of information about the importance of high quality care.

A mixed media public campaign providing education on the unique necessity of high quality, consistent early care as leading to child development, later school readiness and life-long success should be conducted to reach young families, employers, and the general community. This campaign will also highlight the opportunity for entrepreneurship in opening home-based day care businesses, and attract new talent to the field.

To prevent further attrition of the availability of child care in the region, a pipeline must be developed to recruit, train, and support new child care provider businesses with marketing and technical assistance, as well as promote the continuation or smooth transition of existing programs. Given the lack of population density to fill viable child care centers in most locations, resolving the shortage of regulated child care will be most successful if focused on increasing the supply of family and group family day care homes. Proposals should be submitted to the North Country Regional Economic Development Council which include plans for subsidies to start or expand child care businesses and financial incentives to continue provider education, achieve early childhood certification, and increase the quality of care. Existing providers nearing retirement could be utilized as a source of mentorship to developing businesses, sharing a wealth of experience and optimizing continuity.

In summary, these recommendations can be condensed to a framework of 3 main strategies to resolve the crisis of child care need in the North Country:

- Campaign widely to increase awareness in the community of the importance of high-quality early care and learning, and foster a groundswell of advocacy for an expanded and improved child care system to support current and future generations.
- Streamline and solidify a pipeline for the development of day care home businesses, beginning with recruitment of new providers through the stabilization of a vibrant field of professional caregivers with expert skills in early education, and consistent application of best practices for the highest level of quality and sustainability system-wide.
- Subsidize the child care system from both ends—parent payments and provider expenses—to achieve affordability. On-going failure by the community to commit to funding a functioning child care system is undermining not only the advancement of today’s struggling families, but our entire economy and future.