

# A Minnesota community wants to fix its child-care crisis. It's harder than it imagined. <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** The Washington Post

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 24 Dec 2019

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

As a new city council member in this small Midwestern city last year, Arik Forsman gave himself a mission. He was going to solve the region's child-care crisis.

It seemed the perfect project for the 31-year-old father of two. The local business community was already pushing for more child-care slots for its burgeoning workforce, giving the matter some momentum. The issue was bubbling up nationally — even gaining the attention of first daughter Ivanka Trump.

"It was affecting everyone I know," said Forsman, who had experienced his share of child-care drama.

But a year later, the situation has not improved much. A local nonprofit group found in October that the area needed 4,505 new child-care slots — 10 more than it did the year before. Zoning changes and grant offers that Forsman and others began to push were not enough to prevent burnout among existing providers, or persuade enough new ones to navigate a system that was highly regulated and hardly profitable.

Forsman's experiences show the uphill battle politicians and others face as they try to address the child-care deficit in the United States, even at a moment of unprecedented political will.

Studies have shown that more than half of the country lives in a child-care desert — places where there is a yawning gap between the number of slots needed for children and the number of existing spaces at child-care centers. The result is years-long wait lists for infants and rising costs for parents.

In at least 28 states, parents pay more for child care than they do on their mortgages or for in-state college tuition. A January report from the nonprofit Council for a Strong America estimated the country is losing \$57 billion in revenue, earnings and productivity each year as a result of the child-care crisis.

In northeastern Minnesota, where the unemployment rate is below the national average, the shortage is a byproduct of the prosperous economy. Employers, from the tech hub downtown to the taconite mines up north, say qualified workers are turning down jobs because they cannot find affordable child care.

"It's come to the point where it is affecting our growth and our productivity," said Marty Weintraub, a founder of a Duluth digital marketing agency, Aimclear, that has lost potential employees because of child-care woes.

Forsman, who works in economic development at a power company, was appointed to fill an empty spot on the Duluth City Council in August 2018. When he was sworn in, Forsman said he wanted to "find a signature issue" that could show his pluck. He settled on child care.

"I wanted to take on something big," Forsman said. "What motivates me is taking on something that's hard and challenging."

He and his wife, Jessica, had found their own child-care solution. Because there were so few spots in Duluth, they drove their 4-year-old, Amelia, and their 1-year-old, Arlo, to a home-based day care in another town.

Just as Forsman embarked on his political crusade, something happened that would upend his own child-care plans. He got a phone call from his day-care provider, who said she was retiring. Forsman was unexpectedly thrust back into navigating the very industry that he was trying to fix.

Forsman's new child-care challenge was happening to parents all over Minnesota. In the past four years, the state had lost 23 percent of its home-based child-care centers, according to state licensing data.

In northeast Minnesota, just in the previous year and a half, the region had gained 1,530 new child-care slots and lost 1,795. New places were opening, but older places were closing.

"It's like we're trying to fill a bucket and there's a hole in the bucket," said Tony Sertich, president of the Northland Foundation, a community development nonprofit that issued a report on the region's child-care needs in 2018. "It's a really tough model. Child care is so expensive, and yet a child-care provider makes no money."

It was also tougher to keep a license. At the state level, lawmakers were trying to balance the need for more child-care providers with the desire to make them as safe as possible. A Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation by the Star Tribune in 2012 revealed that child-care facilities — in homes and at centers — were routinely overcrowded and unsafe, with children dying at a rate of one per month. In the aftermath, the state vowed to have stiffer enforcement.

But the regulations have had an unintended consequence: pushing out longtime providers such as Erica Hanson.

Hanson, 35, opened her in-home day care after having children in 2011 and 2012. Like many mothers in the area, she concluded that staying home with her children was more budget-friendly than continuing her job at a call center.

A friend suggested she could make some extra money watching other children, so she paid for training and a license. Within weeks, she was at capacity.

She and her husband, a 911 dispatcher, bought a bigger house with a huge backyard so children could play. She stocked their shelves with children's books and filled her closets with princess and superhero costumes. Her drawers were filled with diapers and topped with baby-changing stations.

Hanson knew the state rules were to ensure the enrichment and safety of children, but she found the regulations onerous and the penalties unnecessarily harsh.

Hanson understood when she could not hang the ceremonial shotgun her parents brought their first grandson, Carl, on his wall. But then came a regulation that she needed to retrofit the windows in her house so that a fire hose could comfortably fit in. She grew tired of cleaning bathrooms every night and keeping her hot water set at a child-safe 120 degrees.

Then came the final straw.

Her son wanted to get a new pet for his eighth birthday. But that, too, was against regulations. The code did not allow for other children to be in the same vicinity as a pet tarantula.

Her annual four-figure profit each year just wasn't worth it.

"I stayed in this so long because I love my families and I knew how hard it would be if I stopped," said Hanson, now a mother of three. "But I got to that point where I was caring more about that, those regulations, than trying to spend time with my children. And I just couldn't anymore."

Because maintaining an in-home operation could be so burdensome, Forsman tried to get businesses to take advantage of the changes in the zoning law that allowed them to open day-care facilities in their offices.

But interested employers said they were struggling to make the numbers work.

"You almost have to be a philanthropist to do this," said Laura Weintraub, who runs Aimclear with her husband, Marty. "We just aren't sure how we can deal with all the regulations, all the staffing, and still pay the child-care workers a living wage."

Last week, the city of Duluth opened up a \$500,000 fund to help providers start or grow their child-care business.

With a state unemployment rate that was about a half a percentage point below the national average, the signs of a strong economy were everywhere.

In the northern mining area known as the Iron Range, where strip malls and Victorian houses give way to parking lots for forklifts and warehouses with "Welders needed" signs, local officials kept hearing companies say they would not invest in their community unless they figured out this fundamental piece of the economic puzzle.

"Child care, workforce and housing — they are the three big issues we need to address to make sure we grow," said Chris Ismil, an official with a state agency tasked with diversifying the mining communities' economy. "And they are all intertwined, and they are all symbiotic."

For example, he said, parents worried when a high school science teacher had twins. The teacher considered quitting because she did not have child care — and STEM teachers are hard to replace in rural Minnesota. No child care meant no teacher. Ismil cajoled a local center to put her at the top of its wait list.

So when child-care worker Shawntel Gruba, 36, wanted to open a facility, Ismil helped her draft a business plan and prepped her to visit banks for loans. A mining company sponsored her playground. She received more than \$1 million in grants and donations.

In the summer of 2018, Gruba, making \$11.50 an hour, became one of the Iron Range's most talked-about business prospects. The state flattened a hill to make space for her 8,500-square-foot facility — with space for 90 children at a time.

When she receives calls to Iron Range Tykes about spots, the inquiries don't come from new parents. They are most often from couples who are trying to conceive. And they know it is usually fruitless to ask about openings.

"How long is your wait list?" most ask.

“February 2021” is Gruba’s unfortunate answer.

After her first year, the state agency let Gruba know it would flatten another hill if she wanted to expand.

But the question made clear another problem in the child-care ecosystem. The crisis was not prompted simply by a shortage of spots; it was deepened by the shortage of adults willing to do the arduous, tiring work for such a low wage. She noted that a person could make more money at a fast-food restaurant or as a teacher’s assistant.

“All my girls here, including myself, we are here because it fulfills our heart,” Gruba said.

Democrats and Republicans at the federal level have acknowledged that the child-care system needs to be overhauled, but they struggle with the same question politicians and business owners face in Duluth: How?

President Trump’s daughter and senior adviser Ivanka Trump has taken the lead in the administration on parental issues, touting the doubling of the child tax credit as its biggest victory. The administration also wants to find ways to rid child-care facilities of burdensome regulations.

For the Democrats trying to unseat the president, their solutions center on increasing funding.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), who notes on the campaign trail that child care was “one boulder that nearly crushed me” as a young mother in law school, has said her wealth tax would be able to fund universal child care — a goal that Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) also said he supports. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) has thrown her support behind a bill that calls for increasing the minimum wage for child-care providers and making more families eligible for child-care subsidies.

South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg is interested in tax credits, while former vice president Joe Biden and former Housing and Urban Development secretary Julián Castro have called for universal prekindergarten. Entrepreneur Andrew Yang has cited child-care costs as one expense that could be lessened through his pitch for a universal basic income.

Forsman saw some hope in the heightened political will to address child care, but it did little to help his personal challenge. They had called more than a dozen places and filled out applications — but the spots were all taken.

He felt lucky that his children’s provider retired in June; his wife, who works as a high school guidance counselor, was able to stay home with their children during the summer. But they worried more each day about what they would be able to do.

“I’m not sure how we’re going to fix this,” he recalled thinking.

Then, in September, Forsman drove to an old church. A former artist had converted the house of worship into a child-care facility, and Forsman figured it would be a good place to shoot a video for his ultimately successful election campaign. When Forsman got there, he noticed a rare sight — a sign hanging outside the facility, asking for applications.

The day-care center had openings. A political photo opportunity had led to a personal opportunity.

“When she said she had spots, I signed my children up immediately,” he said. “I didn’t even ask what the cost was.”

Its cost came out to be \$1,400 a month, the same cost of his monthly mortgage. It was the best deal, the only deal, that his family could get.

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**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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