

There is no essential work without child care ^[1]

Home-based day-care providers struggle to stay afloat while keeping other essential workers going.

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EXCERPTS

For the people who have been working outside their homes throughout the pandemic—nurses, janitors, grocery store workers, bus drivers—having a safe, healthy place to leave their kids during the workday is as essential as the jobs they do. Often, the day care they rely on is someone else’s home.

Brenda Bell’s day care in Durham, North Carolina, is in a room of her house she set up as a miniature school, usually serving several children at a time, ranging in age from infants up to twelve-year-olds. Home-based child-care providers like her are a crucial anchor for working-class communities, where working parents rely on licensed day cares run by their neighbors. The public health crisis has dramatically changed the way she works; she is meticulous about sanitizing her home and workspace. But her kids are still kids. She has face masks, but “my kids are terrified if I put it on. And they don’t like them,” she laughed.

Under the state Department of Health and Human Services’ guidelines for child-care providers, children aged two and up are supposed to wear masks—and all adults and children over eleven must wear them—while at a child-care program. But when she is caring for up to eight children at a time, including several preschoolers, she said, “there’s no way that we can get those kids to keep their masks on.” As an alternative, she added, “we spend a lot of our time outside on the playground, or under the tree on blankets, just because they can’t keep those masks on.” Yet given that the kids are still largely confined to the area around her house, “We have a hard time trying to find things for the kids to do, because they get bored, really easy.”

While she provides recreation and an educational curriculum, Bell’s tiny enterprise struggles to secure adequate supplies, especially since local retail stores limit purchases on items like toilet paper. The funds for supplies provided by the state have been wholly inadequate, she said, so she collaborates with another day-care provider nearby to bulk order items like cleaning supplies, which she needs to sanitize every toy, plate, and table touched each day.

Bell implemented the state’s strict safety guidelines for parents dropping off their kids. When they arrive, the parent applies hand sanitizer, signs in outside without entering, and the child’s temperature is taken; kids with symptoms are sent home.

Other childcare providers around the state have shut down, but Bell never closed during the state’s economic lockdown. She primarily cares for the children of essential workers, including many nurses and nursing assistants.

Typically, low-income parents receive federal subsidies for childcare costs, but when some parents cannot make the \$200 weekly fee she usually charges, she lets it slide. “I found it more heartening to the parent” to let them pay what they can, she said, rather than make up the deficit. “I just take whatever. And try to make it work. Because the child obviously needs to be here and the mother needs to work. Because most of my kids have just their mothers.” According to a recent survey of North Carolina child-care providers during the pandemic, “30 percent have lost income based on families’ own inability to pay.”

Though her day-to-day work is exhausting, she feels even more deflated by how the state government treats her work. Listening to the public conversation around essential workers and the risks they brave on the job, she said:

I felt like I was not being considered as an essential worker, [but] the people that they did consider as essential workers couldn’t work if we did not stay open. We put ourselves in danger, taking on the kids [of] these workers. But yet, instead, you never hear [officials] talk about the day-care providers or home day-care providers. They treat us like we’re just babysitters, when. . . most of us do teach.

Still, Bell finds it frustrating to deal with the state’s bureaucratic directives, especially since licensed day-care centers like hers are evaluated and rated based on how well they adhere to regulations. When state regulators scrutinize her business, she said, “They’re treating us like we’re nothing, but still, they’re in and out, telling us what to do.”

Bell hopes state lawmakers will pass a proposed bill to invest more than \$121 million in child-care services, including money for COVID-19 testing and health consultants to help child-care providers curb the spread of the virus.

But even before the pandemic, child-care workers struggled with poverty wages. The median yearly income for the early childhood workforce in North Carolina was \$16.71, and as low as \$9.86 for child-care workers, according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. The state's home-based workers are also generally not compensated for professional development, program planning, or preparation.

As the pandemic continues to make Bell's job both more essential and more complex, she thinks politicians are ignoring the fact that just because she works at home doesn't mean she isn't on the frontline.

I bet you have not heard anyone say anything about the day-care providers. They talk about [the] sanitation workers, the restaurant workers. I feel like we should come right behind the nurses and the doctors, because without us, they would not be able to be there. And they don't have to worry about their kids, because their kids are in a safe environment.

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