



CASE STUDY: MISSOULA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE'S STRATEGY TO ADDRESS CHILD CARE

The [Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce](#) began the [Childcare Initiative](#) in spring 2018 to gather information about local demand for child care and coordinate partnerships aimed at increasing the amount of available child care.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A chamber of commerce or similar business member organization can catalyze community interest in child care by coordinating efforts to increase the availability of child care and by leveraging connections with local media.
- Chamber members bring novel skill and knowledge sets to child care expansion efforts. For example, they have expertise in business development, finance, and local real estate markets. Chamber leadership can help connect this expertise to child care operators or others looking to expand child care.
- A chamber can use its network of business leaders to solicit their interest in providing child care options for parent employees, whether by starting an on-site, in-house child care center; a co-op center financed with other employers; direct subsidies to existing centers for capacity expansion; or other models.

- Chamber leadership can gather and publicize information about local child care demand and issues facing the child care sector from industry experts via informal and formal surveys. Such work informs community decision makers about the need for child care investments and assists partners who are working to expand the availability of child care.

HOW THE CHILDCARE INITIATIVE STARTED

In early 2018, a standing workforce committee of the Missoula Chamber identified child care as an issue that was potentially limiting the local labor supply and restraining economic development. The committee organized a community forum on child care in April 2018 that featured a panel representing businesses and child care providers. Panel speakers and forum participants noted there was high demand for child care relative to supply, especially for young children, during after-school hours, and in the summer.

Business leaders noted that their parent employees had challenges finding child care and reported that workers often don't return to their jobs after having a baby. The business leaders theorize that the high cost of child care leads many families to decide for one parent to stay at home for economic reasons.

Child care providers at the forum noted they were not able to meet the strong demand for their services. As many as 1,000 children were estimated to be on child care waiting lists in 2018. For perspective, there are almost 6,000 children under age 5 in the Missoula metro area, according to the American Community Survey.

After the forum, Missoula Chamber president Kim Latrielle asked additional questions of Chamber members, child care providers, and child care licensing staff. Through these contacts, Latrielle and other Chamber staff and board members recognized that the lack of affordable child care was impacting area businesses.

“Child care was obviously impacting the workforce, and as the largest business organization in Missoula, we needed to see if we could connect community partners to help address it.”—Kim Latrielle, President, Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce

In response, leadership at the Chamber reached out to potential community and state partners to help address the issue, including:

- Small and large companies interested in helping their parent employees find child care
- [Child Care Resources](#), a local organization that provides child care referral services to parents and professional development, marketing, and other services to providers
- [Missoula Early Learning Center](#) Director Mark Roberts
- Todd Schaper, architect with [CTA Architects Engineers](#)
- [Montana Department of Labor & Industry](#)
- Montana state child care licensing
- [Missoula County Public Schools](#)

CHILD CARE DEMAND SURVEY

In November 2018, the Chamber launched a survey of families to better understand the demand for child care in the city. The survey asked families about the ages of their children, the

time of day they need child care, and the parts of town where they need it. Local television stations, the local newspaper, and web-based media promoted the survey to help increase the response rate. In addition, operators of the local mall offered to hand-deliver surveys to every tenant and many Chamber members distributed the survey through their contact lists.

The Chamber received more than 550 responses. [Child care survey results](#) confirmed what they were hearing in the community: parents reported challenges finding affordable, quality child care. In response to a question about the cost of child care, child care was the fourth-largest family expense across all respondents, and for families with an infant, child care was the second-largest expense, only behind housing. In regards to the impact of child care on employment, 47 percent of respondents indicated they had scaled back or abandoned their career or expect to do so in response to child care issues. The survey also reported “significant demand for options that covered nontraditional hours as well as days when schools are not in session.”

MODELS TO EXPAND CHILD CARE

With community and state partners, the Chamber is exploring seven different models to expand child care. Discussions about each of these models are underway with partners; therefore, this case study provides high-level information about the concepts, not specific details.

Each of the models is informed by technical assistance from Mark Roberts, who operates Missoula Early Learning Center, and Todd Schaper with CTA Architects Engineers. Roberts

provides critical insights on the business needs of child care center operators; Schaper provides information about the costs of adapting or creating a physical space to meet child care licensing standards.

Business on-site child care. While providing on-site child care is likely not an option for small businesses, mid- to large-size businesses may find benefits in attracting and retaining employees by providing on-site child care. Some Montana businesses provide on-site child care, including [Zoot Enterprises](#) in Bozeman and [Printing for Less](#) in Livingston. In some on-site child care models, businesses provide capacity beyond what is needed by their parent employees so other members of the community can purchase child care. The Chamber noted that at least one local business is investigating the feasibility of including a child care center on its campus, which could open about 35 spaces for children.

Major expansion of one child care program. A major expansion of more than 200 spaces at one location could put a substantial dent in child care waiting lists. The Chamber helped connect child care operators with a land owner and architect to investigate feasibility. To date, this approach is not moving forward.

Multiple businesses in a co-op model. Businesses operating in the same area of Missoula are discussing the possibility of collaborating to help start a new child care center for their part of the city.

Remodel and occupy existing space. Like other cities, Missoula has unused space in buildings that may be suitable for child care. The Chamber has looked at a number of options through its members and partners, including closed school buildings, open school buildings that have extra

space, space within a shopping mall, and empty commercial real estate. Some of these could be converted to a child care center in a way that meets the statutory requirements for child care spaces.

Include in real estate development plans. Commercial and residential real estate developers could investigate the feasibility of including child care in new development plans.

Increase the availability of family child care. Home-based family child care programs provide a substantial portion of child care in Missoula. Strategies to increase the number of licensed family child care providers would expand overall child care availability. The Chamber is currently in discussions with [MyVillage](#), a business that cultivates and supports success in home-based child care and preschool businesses, about how to bring these strategies to Missoula.

MOVING FORWARD

Chamber leadership doesn't expect all of these options to move forward, but even success with one or two would help reduce child care waiting lists. After more child care becomes available, the Chamber recognizes there are other ongoing issues regarding child care that need addressing.

Low compensation levels for child care staff make it challenging for child care programs to attract and retain well-trained teachers. Higher wages and more benefits would help attract and retain employees and elevate the importance of these jobs to the community. The Chamber is working to ensure that providers operating within the models listed above offer

competitive wages. The Chamber is also in contact with the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, which is interested in addressing the issue of child care staff compensation.

In partnership with a number of other organizations, the Chamber is identifying hurdles in licensing, rules, and regulations that keep people from starting child care businesses. The Chamber is working with state child care licensing staff to see if there are ways to address some of those hurdles.

In addition to investigating models to expand child care, the Chamber also recognizes the importance of existing child care businesses and encourages providers to contact the Chamber about assistance to maintain and grow their businesses.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

The Childcare Initiative increased both the public's and community leaders' awareness of challenges in the child care market in Missoula. The Chamber's intentional efforts to build cross-sector collaborations resulted in an ongoing conversation about actionable models for improvement at a community level. Approaches included:

- Direct dissemination of information and recruitment of new leaders through its business members.
- Elevating the profile of the issue by leveraging media connections to share information with the public.
- Disseminating data about child care in the city and county, including the number of children on child care waiting lists and survey results of demand for child care.

- Connecting the technical assistance of a child care operator and an architect to organizations with potential child care expansion locations. This has helped inform which models are feasible in particular situations.
- Connecting with local and state agencies to address licensing and regulation barriers to expanding child care.