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Expanding Childcare Access in Strafford County, New Hampshire

**Prepared by: NYU
Wagner Consulting
Capstone on behalf of
Strafford Regional
Planning Commission**

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STRAFFORD

Regional Planning Commission

Executive Summary

Access to affordable, high-quality childcare in New Hampshire remains a critical challenge for families, providers, and employers. Workforce shortages, high operating costs, and regulatory barriers continue to strain the system, leading to limited availability of care, reduced labor force participation, and economic losses for local businesses. These systemic issues have wide-reaching implications for family well-being, provider sustainability, and regional economic development.

Recognizing the urgent need to address these issues, the Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) collaborated with a Capstone team from the New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (NYU Wagner) to conduct an in-depth assessment of the region's childcare landscape. This partnership aims to inform and strengthen SRPC's economic development efforts, particularly within the framework of its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The NYU Wagner team engaged in extensive stakeholder interviews, policy and literature reviews, zoning analysis, and case study research to better understand the barriers to expanding childcare access and to identify community-informed strategies for improvement.

The recommendations of this report include actionable strategies at the federal, state, and local levels, addressing issues such as sustainable funding, regulatory reform, workforce development, provider startup support, and public-private partnerships. At the federal and state level, recommendations focus on stabilizing funding streams, expanding eligibility and participation in subsidy programs, and reforming quality improvement systems to better serve providers. At the regional and municipal level, the report outlines zoning and permitting reforms, local grant mechanisms, and employer engagement strategies to expand childcare capacity and support economic development.

The team's findings have been synthesized into a comprehensive set of policy recommendations, as well as an interactive resource guide and regional mapping dataset. These tools are designed to support municipalities, providers, families, employers, and advocates in navigating the childcare system and advancing coordinated, equity-driven solutions throughout the Strafford Region and New Hampshire.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

2 Background & Literature Review

- 2.1 Defining and Understanding Childcare Deserts
 - 2.2 Childcare Challenges in New Hampshire
 - 2.3 Case Studies: Best Practices in Addressing Childcare Gaps
 - 2.3.1 Minnesota: Community-Led Childcare Solutions
 - 2.3.2 Washington, D.C.: Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund
 - 2.3.3 Vermont: Payroll Tax for Childcare Investments
-

3 Stakeholder Engagement and Key Themes

- 3.1 Regulatory Barriers and Licensure
 - 3.2 Zoning and Site Plan Review Challenges
 - 3.3 Financial Barriers for Childcare Providers
 - 3.4 Financial Burden on Families and Underutilization of Subsidies
 - 3.5 Workforce Challenges and Professionalization of Care
 - 3.6 Business and Employer Engagement in Childcare Solutions
-

4 Policy Recommendations

- 4.1 Federal and State-Level Policy Recommendations
 - 4.1.1 Leveraging Federal Funding
 - 4.1.2 State Budget Allocations
 - 4.1.3 Expanding State Subsidy Programs
 - 4.1.4 Granite Steps for Quality
 - 4.2 Local-Level Recommendations for the Strafford Region
 - 4.2.1 Zoning and Regulatory Reforms to Expand Childcare Access
 - 4.2.2 Public-Private Partnerships and Employer Engagement
 - 4.2.3 Workforce Development: Apprenticeships and Licensing Support
 - 4.2.4 Startup Funding for New Childcare Providers
-

5 Interactive Resource Tool & Stakeholder Guide

- 5.1 Resource Pamphlet
 - 5.2 ArcGIS StoryMap
-

Table of Contents

6 Appendices and References

Appendix 1: Literature Review Process

Appendix 2: Data Analytics Approach

Appendix 3: Policy Analysis Approach

Appendix 4: Interviewees

Appendix 5: Municipal Zoning Review of HB 1567

Appendix 6: Sample of ArcGIS StoryMap

Appendix 7: Whiteboard Activity from CEDS Call

Appendix 8: Glossary of Acronyms

Appendix 9: Glossary of Key Terms and Legal Definitions

References and Acknowledgements

1

Introduction

The [Strafford Regional Planning Commission \(SRPC\)](#) provides broad-based policy and planning assistance to 18 municipalities in southeastern New Hampshire. One of nine regional planning commissions in the state, SRPC coordinates with state and federal agencies to support development goals, economic vitality, and general quality-of-life. SRPC operates in part as an Economic Development District (EDD), a designation conferred by the United States Economic Development Administration in 2015. As part of this designation, SRPC maintains a [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy \(CEDS\)](#), the blueprint for economic planning and development for the region.

In an effort to support the goals of the CEDS, SRPC recruited our Capstone team to provide a detailed look at the state of childcare accessibility in Strafford, a multifaceted issue with direct economic impacts. Childcare facilities are stretched thin by rising costs and administrative burdens; families struggle with availability and affordability of care, and members of the childcare workforce are discouraged by low-wages. The crisis also generates significant economic losses as parents in the region opt to exit the labor force. A study conducted by the New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute in 2025 found that childcare shortages around the state cost businesses up to \$56 million in losses in 2023 due to reduced productivity and workforce disruptions.¹

This Capstone project seeks to lay the groundwork to address some of these challenges and form the basis for a concrete strategy to support the childcare situation in the region. Through stakeholder engagement, literature and policy analysis, and case studies, we hope to provide SRPC with recommendations that are grounded in community input to improve childcare accessibility in the region.

Our Team

**Hannah
Leverenz**



Hannah works in Community Outreach and Engagement at a NYC budget office. She previously worked as a middle school Humanities teacher and then a school administrator. Hannah also has experience from the New York State Education Department, where she supported work on proposed revisions to New York’s graduation measures and created state education resources for the public.

**Kevin
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Kevin is a Graduate Junior Researcher at NYU Wagner. His studies focus on the history and social effects of urban renewal on New York City. He is also a Dwight D. Eisenhower Transportation Fellow through the Federal Highway Administration. Although student of public administration, he considers himself an urban planner at heart. He has a keen interest in transportation planning, policy-making, and community engagement.

**Danya
Rubenstein-
Markiewicz**



Danya is a Policy and Communications Research Assistant at the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. Previously, she worked as an analyst for the NYC Department of Homeless Services’ capital budget and on environmental policy implementation at the City’s Department of Buildings. She is passionate about expanding access to essential services, like childcare, through improved policy, creative zoning, and community engagement.

**Hanyan
Su**



Hanyan is currently a graduate student at NYU Wagner School studying public policy. She was involved in a research project in China focused on intergenerational gaps, particularly examining the challenges faced by left-behind children in rural areas. She was an active member of the university’s volunteer association, where she participated in a wide range of initiatives. These experiences deepened her commitment to equity and inspired her to continue exploring how policy can be used to create impact.

2

Background and Literature Review

2.1 Defining and Understanding Childcare Deserts

Childcare deserts are areas where the demand for childcare far exceeds supply, defined by the [Center for American Progress \(CAP\)](#) as regions with at least three times as many children as licensed childcare slots.² While childcare shortages exist across urban, suburban, and rural areas, **rural communities** face some of the most severe childcare shortages due to lower population density, fewer providers, and infrastructure limitations.

Research indicates that up to 54% of rural areas in the United States qualify as childcare deserts. This issue is especially pronounced in states like New Hampshire, where 42% of the population resides in rural ZIP codes.³ Families in these areas often struggle to find accessible childcare services, which leads to **difficulties in workforce participation and broader economic disruptions**. Studies show that in rural regions, approximately 30% of parents have had to reduce their working hours due to a lack of childcare, while another 14% have left their jobs altogether. The scarcity of childcare services exacerbates existing economic challenges, particularly in rural communities already dealing with **higher unemployment rates and slower economic growth**.

2.2 Childcare Challenges in New Hampshire

According to a [recent report by the New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute \(NHFPI\)](#), the Granite State has experienced a significant decline in licensed childcare capacity. Between July 2017 and October 2024, the capacity among providers serving children under five decreased by nearly 13%. This reduction outpaced the approximately 1.6% decline in the number of children under five during the same period, indicating that **the supply of childcare has diminished much more rapidly than potential demand**.⁴

The shortage of accessible childcare in New Hampshire has significantly impacted workforce participation. In 2024, an average of 17,300 residents across the state were out of the labor force each month were out of the labor force due to childcare responsibilities. Additionally, between August 2023 and August 2024, 13% of employed parents in New Hampshire left a job for childcare related reasons; 12% of parents did not seek employment; and 47% reduced their work hours to provide care. These figures underscore the essential role of childcare in supporting labor force participation and economic stability.⁵

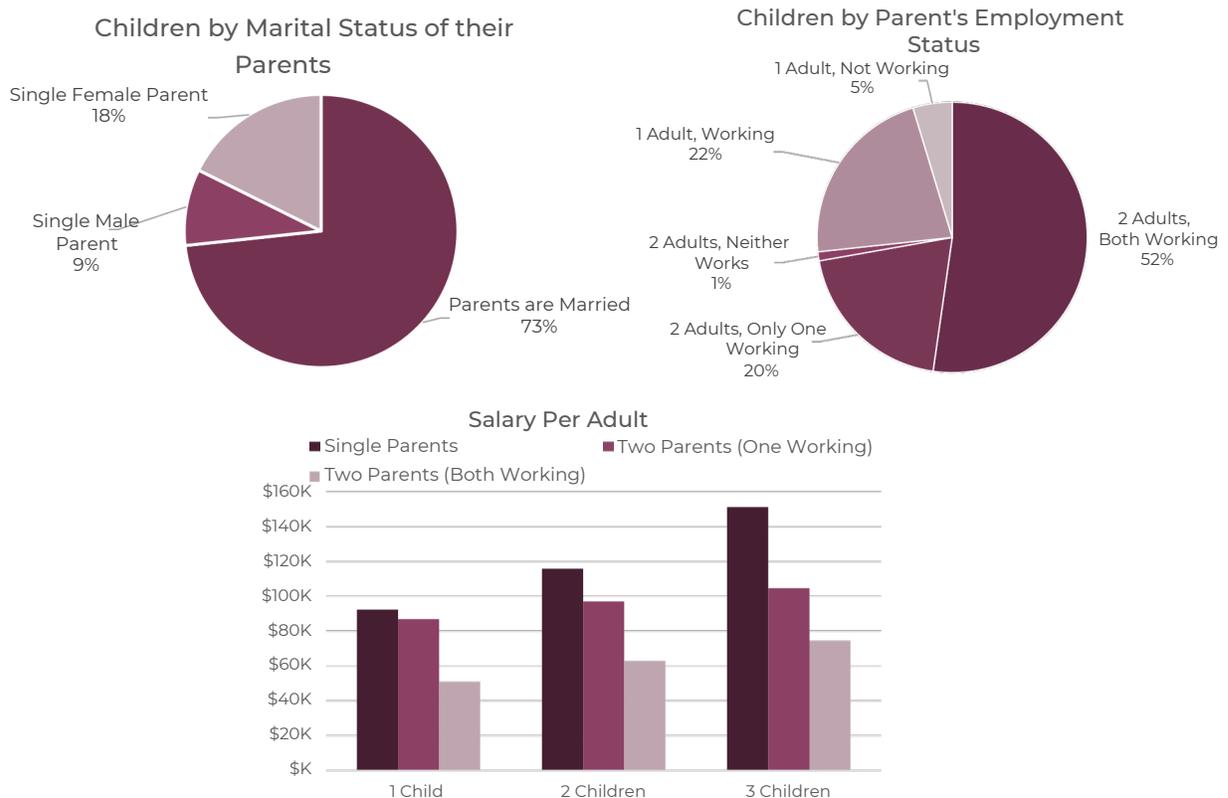
The economic consequences extend beyond individual households, affecting businesses and state revenue. In 2023, New Hampshire families lost an estimated \$114 million to \$178 million in earnings due to childcare shortages, with household incomes reduced by \$16,000 to \$25,000 annually. This decline in earnings translated to **a loss of \$9 million to \$14 million in state and local tax revenue**. Businesses also faced up to \$56 million in losses due to reduced productivity, absenteeism, and turnover, costing employers between \$5,000 and \$7,850 per missing childcare slot.⁶ These disruptions strain businesses, reduce employment stability, and dampen consumer spending, particularly in sectors like retail and hospitality.

Childcare access in New Hampshire is limited by **high costs, workforce shortages, and regulatory challenges**. The state **faces a shortfall of 10,000 childcare slots** for children under six, and expenses often exceed the federal affordability benchmark set by the Department of Human and Health Services of 7% of household income.⁷ For families with two children, childcare can consume 20% to 61% of income, making it especially difficult for single parents to stay in the workforce.

Workforce instability is another major factor exacerbating the childcare crisis. Childcare workers earn significantly lower wages than those in other industries, with a median annual salary of \$32,490, nearly \$17,000 below the state's median salary. These **low wages contribute to high turnover rates and persistent staffing shortages**, making it difficult for providers to maintain operations and expand capacity. Additionally, startup costs and prohibitive zoning laws can further hinder the establishment of new childcare centers, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure investment is limited.

Regionally, the median salary for childcare workers in the Strafford Region in 2024 was \$32,048, or \$15.40 an hour.⁸ This low wage, combined with the demands of the job, contributes to high turnover and limits childcare centers from operating at full capacity. This leaves families with limited access to care, often forcing parents to reduce work hours, decline career opportunities, or leave the labor force entirely. Labor force participation in the Strafford Region continued to increase (2.4 percent from January to November 2024, from 72,250 people to 73,960 people), but still lags pre-pandemic levels (74,991 in 2019). As the region continues to struggle with the lack of available and affordable childcare, this remains a likely constraint on caregivers’ ability to re-enter the workforce.

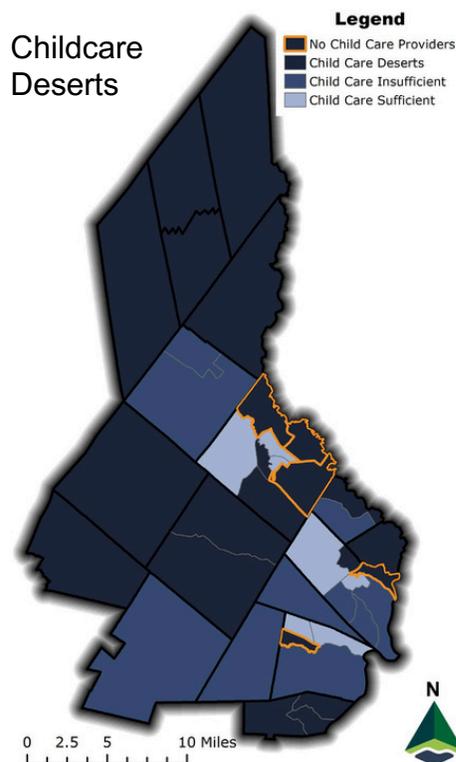
Meanwhile, parents are not making enough to afford childcare. The average salary a single parent needs to make to receive a living wage is between \$90,000 to \$150,000 per year, depending on the number of children, as shown below in [data from SRPC](#). A single parent with a child under 6 must make 81% more than a two-parent household. However, the median salary in Strafford County is about \$86,600. Compared to childcare costs of on average of \$15,346 for toddler care, if the 7% federal standard applies, a two-parent household must make about \$450,000 annually. That being said, only about half of children in Strafford County have both parents working.



Data courtesy of SRPC

Households - Source: US Census Bureau ACS, 2012-2022. Granularity: Municipalities. Salaries per Adult - Source: MIT. Year: 2023. Granularity: Strafford County.

Additionally, SRPC released data on childcare deserts in the region. The most accessible areas are in the southeast corners of the region, meaning the capacity is greater than or equal to the amount of children residing in the area. However, this does not mean there are open slots available for children, and this only accounts for three municipalities. Within that part of the Strafford Region, five municipalities do not have any licensed childcare providers. In the north and west of the region, there are childcare deserts.



Data courtesy of SRPC

2.3 Case Studies: Best Practices in Addressing Childcare Gaps

To explore potential solutions to the childcare crisis, it is helpful to examine initiatives from other states that have successfully expanded childcare access. These case studies highlight innovative approaches involving community-driven solutions, employer-supported childcare, and policy interventions.

2.3.1 Minnesota: Community-Led Childcare Solutions

Minnesota has implemented several initiatives to address its childcare shortages, particularly in rural areas. One example is the Battle Lake Area Child Care Center, which was established through a **community-driven crowdfunding effort** and support from **local economic development organizations and corporate sponsors**.⁹ This project is managed by Battle Lake Youth Center Inc. and operated by a licensed childcare provider, Tiny Tykes LLC. The model relies on community donations, support from local economic development organizations, and corporate funding, helping to alleviate the childcare shortage in the area. However, the success of this project was largely dependent on an experienced team of volunteers and close collaboration with banks, foundations, and other institutions, demonstrating the critical role of **community mobilization and partnerships** in childcare development.

Minnesota has also introduced cooperative childcare models such as the childcare pod system in New York Mills. The pod model is a new approach to childcare in Minnesota that allows up to four licensed in-home providers to operate independently within the same shared building. Instead of a traditional center, this cooperative family care model increases the number of childcare slots while avoiding many of the regulatory and financial burdens that come with center-based licensing.¹⁰ Each provider has their own self-contained space, which reduces costs associated with in-home care, like home remodeling and privacy concerns, and helps alleviate the isolation that many family providers experience. Shared resources and centralized services, such as training and support networks, also make the model attractive for both providers and families.

In New York Mills, local organizations and city officials are working together to implement the pod model by repurposing a county office building located in the town's old high school. Renovations are funded primarily through city bonding and include upgrades like a secure entrance, an outdoor playground, and an indoor playroom. Challenges remain, particularly around food service regulations that currently require pod providers to navigate a more complex subsidy system meant for centers. Minnesota's initiatives illustrate that addressing childcare shortages requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, as market mechanisms alone are insufficient to solve the problem effectively.

2.3.2 Washington, D.C.: Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund

Washington, D.C. faces a significant challenge in ensuring fair compensation for early childhood educators. In 2023, the average hourly wage for ECE educators in non-school settings was \$14.60, which was more than 50% lower than preschool teachers in schools and 37% lower than the average wage across all occupations. These low wages have contributed to high turnover rates, ranging from 25% to 40% annually, more than twice the turnover rate of K–12 teachers.

To address these challenges, Washington, DC has tackled childcare workforce shortages in 2022 through the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund (PEF), an initiative that supplements wages for early childhood educators using a tax increase on those earning over \$250,000 annually.¹¹ The PEF provided direct financial supplements to ECE educators instead of increasing wages through employer payrolls. This structure ensured that educators immediately benefited from the policy. The fund is distributed by \$14,000 per year for full-time lead teachers, \$10,000 per year for full-time assistant teachers and prorated amounts for part-time staff. As of December 2023, more than 4,000 educators had received payments through the PEF, with total disbursements reaching \$41.8 million.

This policy led to a **7% increase in the number of ECE educators** in D.C. by the third quarter of 2023, adding 219 educators compared to estimates without PEF implementation. Additionally, surveys of educators further confirmed the program's success: 70% of CCEE educators reported that the PEF made them feel fairly compensated for their qualifications; 61% of center directors stated that the payments made it easier to retain their best educators; and 59% of directors believed that the PEF played a crucial role in attracting new educators to their programs.

The PEF serves as a valuable model for addressing wage disparities and workforce shortages in the childcare sector. For New Hampshire, adopting similar strategies, such as **publicly funded wage supplements** and **educator retention incentives** could help address the state's childcare shortages. However, any adaptation of this policy would need to account for a state's fiscal constraints and political landscape.¹²

2.3.3 Vermont's Payroll Tax for Childcare Investments

Neighboring Vermont has long faced a severe childcare shortage, affecting both families and the workforce. With three out of five of Vermont's youngest children lacking access to quality childcare and many families spending up to 30% of their income on services, the need for a systemic solution was critical. Additionally, early childhood educators are historically underpaid, with a median annual wage of \$39,315 and limited benefits, leading to staffing shortages and high turnover.¹³ Recognizing these challenges, Vermont passed Act 76 in June 2023, which **commits \$120 million annually** to Vermont's childcare sector through a combination of **state general fund revenue** and **a new payroll tax**. Act 76 aims to increase state reimbursements to childcare programs, expand family childcare subsidies, review and create minimum pay standards for early childcare providers, and stabilize childcare operations through strategic investments.¹⁴

In order to fund these investments, Vermont has contributed \$50 million from the state's general fund, and raised \$80 million from a 0.44% payroll tax, which took effect in July 2024. Up to one-quarter of the payroll tax is paid by employees, and at least three-quarters of the payroll tax is paid by employers. Self-employed individuals pay the employee share of 0.11%.

Since its implementation, Act 76 has demonstrated significant improvements in the childcare landscape for families, providers, and Vermont's workforce:¹⁵

- **Higher Provider Reimbursement Rates:** As of January 2024, state reimbursements to providers increased by 34%, enabling them to raise staff wages, improve quality, and expand services.¹⁶ Over \$21 million was distributed to about 800 programs to stabilize operations, expand capacity, and enhance program quality. A 2024 state survey found that only 5% of providers expect to go out of business in the next two years, a dramatic decline from 20% before Act 76.¹⁷
- **Increased Childcare Availability:** In the first three months following the law's passage, more childcare centers and home-based businesses opened than closed – the first time this has happened since tracking began in 2012.¹⁸ In its first year, the legislation created 1,000 new childcare slots, nearly 50 new family childcare programs, over 40 childcare centers and 220 new ECE jobs.¹⁹
- **Greater Financial Support for Families:** The Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) was expanded, making childcare more affordable for over 7,450 additional families.²⁰ Eligibility now extends to families earning up to 575% of the federal poverty level (FPL), covering about 80-90% of Vermont families.

3

Stakeholder Engagement and Key Themes

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the childcare landscape in the Strafford Region, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders, including **childcare providers and business owners, economic development stakeholders, and research and policy experts**. Each group provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding early childhood education (ECE), workforce retention, financial constraints, and policy solutions.

Childcare providers shared their experiences navigating regulatory barriers, financial instability, and workforce shortages. **Economic development stakeholders** highlighted the role of zoning laws, permitting requirements, and funding mechanisms in shaping childcare access. **Research and policy experts** provided a broader perspective on state and federal initiatives and the systemic barriers that prevent effective childcare expansion. This section synthesizes the key insights from these conversations, with a detailed list of stakeholder background information available in the Appendix.

3.1 Regulatory Barriers and Licensure

Stakeholders across all sectors emphasized that **regulatory barriers and licensure requirements** pose significant challenges for expanding childcare services, particularly for home-based providers. Many providers struggle with high compliance costs and a lack of technical assistance in navigating the licensing process.

Some stakeholders described the **complexity and cost** of state licensing requirements, highlighting that fire safety reviews, site inspections, and approvals often create financial burdens that prevent providers from opening or expanding. For instance, the requirement for commercial-grade sprinkler systems, costing upwards of tens of thousands of dollars, is prohibitive for many small providers. Overall, the lack of a streamlined, affordable licensure process discourages new providers from entering the field.

Our analysis of childcare license monitoring in the Strafford Region further revealed several common trends. The Child Care Licensing Unit (CCLU) rates providers on a numeric scale based on the number of regulations that may apply to their specific practice. This scale varies based on type of facility, number of children served, number of classrooms, staff qualifications, and the like. Of the 86 facilities in the Strafford Region, 39 had no violations or were new establishments without a comprehensive licensing review. For the remaining 47 facilities, the CCLU issued 152 total citations. 46% of the total citations were issued for administrative and record-keeping deficiencies. These often cover singular offenses, an employee missing a recent health exam, a child missing a permission slip, or other administrative lapses.

3.2 Zoning and Site Plan Review Challenges

Zoning regulations were widely cited as a barrier to expanding home-based and center-based childcare programs. **Inconsistent rules across municipalities** create confusion and obstacles for providers seeking approval. Some communities also classify childcare facilities as commercial businesses, subjecting them to stricter requirements. In some cases, local opposition—often referred to as Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) resistance—further delays approval processes.

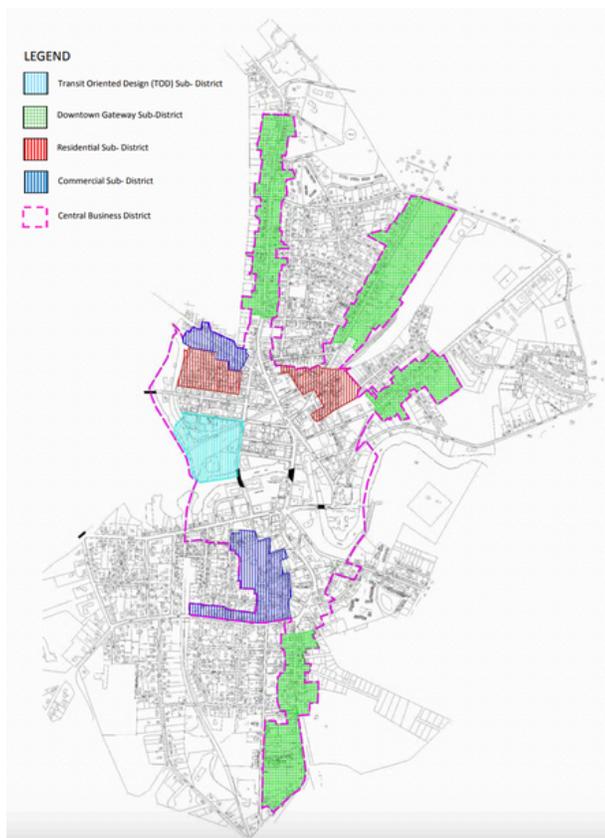


Photo courtesy of City of Dover

Zoning ordinances and site plan reviews are also **complex and difficult to navigate**. Site plan regulations can impose additional financial and administrative burdens on providers. Many small childcare businesses struggle to meet fire safety and emergency access requirements, which can be costly and complex to implement without technical assistance. Only two towns in the Strafford Region (Dover and Rochester) have the **specific economic development** staff tasked with assisting businesses navigating these processes. Other towns have zoning and planning officials, but there is little special focus on helping childcare providers with these rules.

3.3 Financial Barriers for Childcare Providers

Many providers face high upfront costs and ongoing financial challenges, limiting their ability to offer competitive wages or expand services. Childcare businesses operate on tight margins, relying heavily on subsidies and grants that may fluctuate year to year. In particular, **providers often struggle to pay competitive salaries, obtain health insurance for their employees, build or retrofit both home- and center-based facilities, and manage fixed costs.**

Grants like the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Opportunities to Succeed Grant, and Child Care Workforce Grant help fund program improvements and workforce support in New Hampshire. Much of this funding is distributed through Granite Steps for Quality (GSQ), the state's Quality Recognition Program, which offers financial incentives and professional development to licensed providers. However, stakeholders report that **GSQ is underutilized** due to strict eligibility, limited financial support, and burdensome reporting, with many providers feeling the incentives don't justify the investment.

Funding for many of these initiatives come from federal sources, with **72% of the state's early childhood funding dependent on federal allocations.**²¹ However, many of these funds, especially COVID-era relief funding (ARPA) have expired, leaving providers financially vulnerable. While philanthropic grants and government funding exist, providers struggle with complex application processes and extensive reporting requirements.

3.4 Financial Burden on Families and Underutilization of Subsidies

Despite subsidy programs aimed at increasing affordability, childcare remains prohibitively expensive for many families. Stakeholders highlighted that the New Hampshire Child Care Scholarship Program (NHCCSP) is underutilized, largely due to **delayed reimbursements, complicated paperwork, and rigid eligibility timelines**.²² For example, families must secure childcare with an enrolled provider within 30 calendar days from the official application date.²³ Given long waitlists and limited provider capacity, this requirement is often unrealistic.

Despite available subsidies, many New Hampshire families still find childcare unaffordable. High co-pays often exceed the federal affordability guideline of 7% of household income, and out-of-pocket costs remain burdensome even with assistance from programs like NH Connections.²⁴ Stakeholders emphasized the need for better promotion of these scholarships by state agencies and employers. Some providers also decline to accept subsidies due to delayed state reimbursements and administrative burdens.

Childcare costs continued to rise in 2023. According to Child Care Aware of America, New Hampshire center-based care averaged \$17,250 annually for infants and \$14,618 for preschoolers, totaling \$31,868 for a family with both.²⁵ Family-based providers were slightly more affordable, with a combined annual cost of \$22,366. In the Strafford Region, where the median household income is \$86,564, these costs still represent a significant financial strain.²⁶

3.5 Workforce Challenge and Professionalization of Childcare

New Hampshire's childcare workforce struggles with **low wages, high turnover, and limited career advancement opportunities**, making it difficult to retain skilled educators. In 2023, the median hourly wage for a New Hampshire childcare worker was \$15.62, equating to an annual salary of \$32,490. This is only \$2,500 more than the 2023 federal poverty guideline for a family of four and approximately half of the median salary for New Hampshire's kindergarten teachers (\$60,210).²⁷

Stakeholders highlighted that many childcare providers leave the field to work in K-12 settings, where salaries and benefits are more competitive. Some pointed to the UNH Child Study and Development Center model, which requires lead teachers to hold bachelor's degrees and provides structured career pathways, as an example of how professional development incentives can support retention. However, smaller childcare facilities, which do not benefit from economies of scale, often cannot afford to increase wages or require additional credentials from staff. Without competitive compensation, many experienced providers continue to leave the field, exacerbating staffing shortages and making it harder for families to find reliable, high-quality care.

3.6 Business and Employer Engagement in Childcare Solutions

Stakeholders emphasized that businesses play a critical role in supporting childcare solutions and must do more to accommodate working parents. While some employers have adopted family-friendly policies such as paid leave, flexible schedules, and remote work, **many still do not provide even basic paid parental leave.** Several of the interview participants stressed that beyond improving workplace policies, businesses should take an active role in financially supporting childcare solutions, whether through direct subsidies, sponsoring childcare programs, or partnering with providers to expand access. Without employer investment, many working families will continue to struggle to find and afford quality childcare, ultimately impacting workforce stability and economic growth.

4

Policy Recommendations

Based on stakeholder engagement and research, this section outlines federal, state, and local-level policy recommendations to **expand access to childcare, improve workforce retention, and address financial and regulatory barriers**. These recommendations prioritize long-term sustainability, accessibility, and workforce development, ensuring that childcare solutions meet the needs of families, providers, and businesses across the Strafford Region and New Hampshire.

4.1 Federal and State-Level Policy Recommendations

4.1.1 Leveraging Federal Funding

Many childcare providers lack the capacity to navigate complex federal grant applications, making it difficult for them to secure funding. Small providers, particularly home-based businesses, struggle to access financing due to limited technical assistance and administrative burdens.

To expand federal funding opportunities for childcare facilities, providers need streamlined access to resources from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA). The USDA's Rural Development Grants can help fund center- and home-based facilities, covering costs like equipment and infrastructure. These programs include:

- **Community Facilities Loans and Grants** to support developing new, essential facilities like childcare centers. The funding is used for buying, constructing, and/or improving facilities, and equipment.
- **Rural Business Development Grants** to help small childcare businesses purchase land or equipment.
- **Business and Industry Loan Guarantees** to increase financial backing for lenders supporting childcare providers.

To improve access, the state should consider establishing **regional technical assistance teams**, or expanding existing programs like the **business advising program** through the Small Business Development Center, to help providers navigate federal grant applications. **Combining childcare funding with community and workforce development programs** can also diversify financing sources, such as co-locating childcare centers with community kitchens, senior centers, or affordable housing initiatives.

4.1.2 State Budget Allocations for Long-Term Childcare Funding

Reliance on temporary federal funding has created financial instability for providers. Without permanent state-backed funding mechanisms, the childcare sector remains also vulnerable to federal budget cuts. A Child Care Workforce Grants fund for \$15 million was introduced in Fiscal Year 2025 for statewide recruitment and retention efforts. Funds were aimed to provide applicants with sign-on and retention bonuses, wage increases, student loan repayment, health insurance contributions, professional training, and more. However, distribution delays for the funds and bureaucratic inefficiencies caused frustration among providers.²⁸ While the funding source was again reinstated in Fiscal Year 2026, the funding has not yet been baselined for future years.²⁹

To prevent future funding bottlenecks, this **\$15 million investment should be baselined** in future state budgets **with inflation adjusted increases year over year**. This would ensure that childcare workforce stabilization remains a recurring, rather than emergency, initiative. While lawmakers and the Department of Human and Health Services (DHHS) have pointed to over \$150 million in childcare investments since 2020, much of that funding was tied to temporary federal COVID relief. Establishing a **permanent workforce stabilization fund** would provide predictable, sustained funding for childcare providers, reduce turnover, strengthen early education, and improve long-term affordability. Additionally, public support for the investment remains strong. A recent Save the Children Action Network (SCAN) poll found that over **80% of New Hampshire voters support continued state funding for childcare**, with strong bipartisan backing - 94% of Democrats, 72% of Undeclared voters, and 52% of Republicans.³⁰

Lastly, New Hampshire could explore alternative revenue streams such as a **payroll tax system** similar to that of Vermont to support the childcare sector. Vermont's Act 76, passed in June 2023, commits \$120 million annually to childcare through a mix of general fund revenue and a 0.44% payroll tax, with employers covering at least three-quarters of the tax and employees contributing up to one-quarter. Since its implementation, Act 76 has demonstrated significant improvements in the childcare landscape for families, providers, and Vermont's workforce. Although this recommendation could face political barriers, without reliable annual investment, New Hampshire risks continued instability in its childcare system.

4.1.3 Expanding State Subsidy Programs and Addressing Affordability

Despite subsidy programs aimed at increasing affordability, childcare remains financially out of reach for many families. The NHCCSP helps eligible families cover childcare costs through direct payments to approved providers for children under 13. However, it remains underutilized due to delayed reimbursements, complex paperwork, and strict eligibility timelines. To increase effectiveness, the state should employ these:

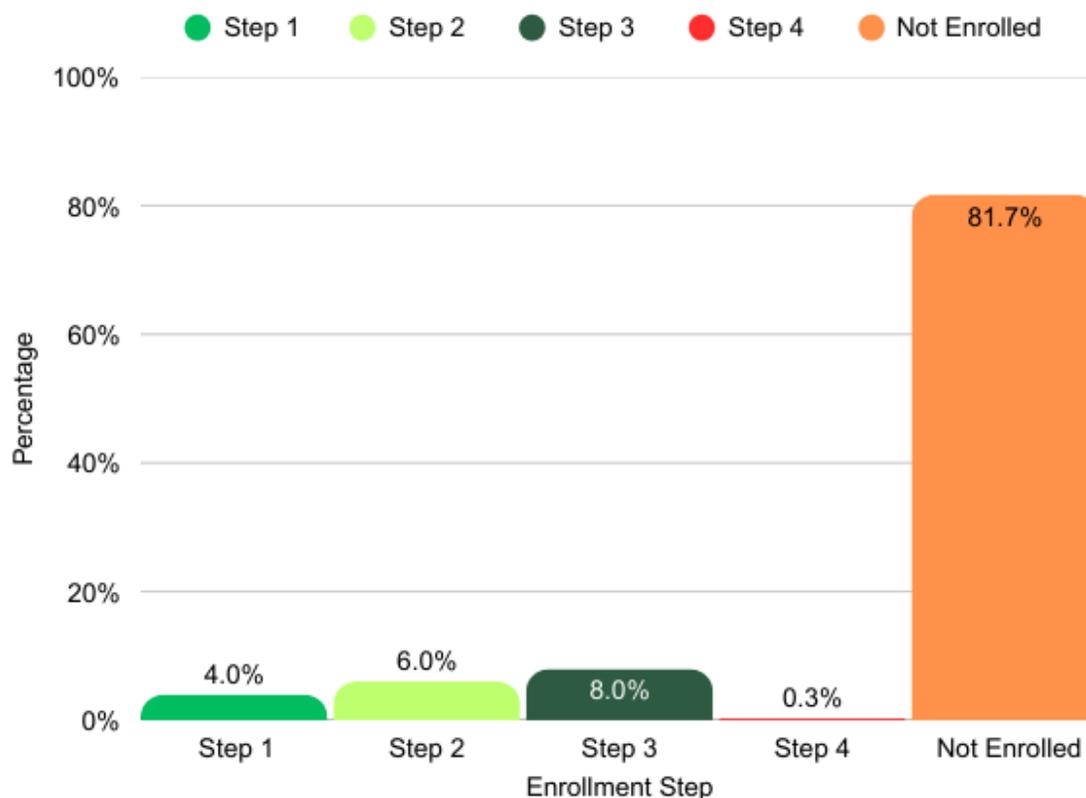
KEY ACTIONS:

- **Ease administrative burdens for providers accepting NHCCSP by ensuring timely reimbursements and simplifying enrollment.**
- **Increase eligibility timeframes so families have sufficient time to find a childcare provider.**
- **Reduce family co-pays to ensure affordability, aligning with the federal standard that childcare costs should not exceed 7% of household income.**

4.1.4 Granite Steps for Quality - Direct Financial Support and Provider Incentives

GSQ is New Hampshire’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System, offering financial incentives and professional development for licensed childcare providers. GSQ is one of the primary mechanisms that New Hampshire uses to support childcare providers, yet in its current form, it is **not structured to effectively incentivize participation or improve quality equitably** across different types of providers.³¹

GSQ is largely funded through the federal Child Care Development Block grant (CCDGB) and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) dollars, which requires states to invest in at least one of ten federally approved quality improvement activities. These include but are not limited to:



Data courtesy of NHDHHS

- **Supporting the training and professional development of the childcare workforce**
- **Improving on the development or implementation of early learning and development guidelines**
- **Providing financial incentives and supports for providers to improve the quality of childcare services and enhancing a tiered quality rating and improvement system (QRIS)**
- **Ensuring quality assurance, monitoring and, and supporting compliance with state/territory requirements for licensing, monitoring, training, and health and safety standards**

While GSQ attempts to fulfill these mandates, the way it is currently implemented is costly, rigid, and does not provide adequate financial compensation to providers for participation. Instead of increasing childcare quality, GSQ creates significant financial and bureaucratic barriers for small and independent providers. Currently, 4% of providers are enrolled in step 1 of the program, 6% are in step 2, 8% are in step 3, and only 0.3% (1 provider) is enrolled in step 4.

Providers at higher GSQ steps are being asked to invest significantly in training, coaching, and administrative work, with little return on investment. Furthermore, GSQ mandates Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) training from the 1980s and does not recognize alternative accreditation models like Montessori or nature-based programs, limiting provider flexibility.³² Providers must cover all training, credentialing, and administrative costs upfront, often totaling tens of thousands of dollars, with no financial assistance until after compliance. Lastly, GSQ imposes unnecessary compliance hurdles beyond what federal CCDF guidelines require, restricting how providers can meet quality improvement standards.

The goal of GSQ should be to improve childcare quality and ensure safety, but providers and families are not seeing the benefits because the current structure makes participation too expensive and difficult. Instead of requiring providers to pay out-of-pocket for training, credentialing, and compliance costs and waiting for delayed reimbursements, GSQ could use these

KEY ACTIONS:

- Offer upfront grant-based funding instead of reimbursement-based support to cover required training, credentialing, and coaching, allowing providers to meet quality standards without financial burden.
- Subsidize professional development by having GSQ directly pay for staff to attend approved training sessions, rather than requiring providers to front the cost.
- Waive or cover administrative fees for licensing and credentialing to reduce the costs of meeting GSQ requirements.
- Align GSQ's monitoring processes with federal CCDF flexibility options, rather than imposing additional state-level mandates that exceed federal requirements.
- Recognize multiple accreditation and training models, allowing providers to demonstrate quality through existing certifications rather than redundant state requirements.
- Provide flexible stipends for quality improvement efforts, allowing providers to invest in resources that enhance their programs without rigid state mandates. Providing upfront financial assistance, rather than delayed reimbursements, would encourage more providers to participate in GSQ and help improve ECE quality across the state. While maintaining safety and quality is essential, GSQ's limited list of approved trainings and outdated ERS requirements don't reflect the diverse early childhood models in New Hampshire. Instead of enforcing a rigid pathway, GSQ should offer more flexible, inclusive standards.
- Recognize multiple accreditation and training models, allowing providers to demonstrate quality through existing certifications rather than redundant state requirements.
- Update training options to include modern, research-based best practices rather than relying solely on ERS training, which has not been significantly updated since 1980.

4.1 Local-Level Recommendations for the Strafford Region

4.2.2 Zoning and Regulatory Reforms to Expand Childcare Access

Childcare expansion is hindered by **barriers to childcare in nontraditional zones, lack of technical assistance, and inconsistent zoning regulations across municipalities**. Local-level definitions should be standardized and disseminated to municipalities to ensure clear, aligned zoning policies that support childcare facility development. By adjusting zoning and regulatory policies at the municipal level, more flexible types of childcare—such as home-based—can be expanded. Building more types of facilities will allow more families to access childcare at flexible hours and locations.

Currently, two towns in the Strafford Region have coordinators focused on navigating businesses through the complex zoning and site plan process. Dover’s Business Development team, under the Deputy City Manager, includes a Business Development Coordinator and Business Specialist who assist new and expanding businesses with permitting, land use, and connections to local organizations. In Rochester, the Economic Development department has a four-person team offering support with financing, marketing, site selection, permitting, incentives, licensing, and renovation approvals. The department provides assistance in financing and marketing, as well as site selection, permitting road maps, incentive tracking, licensing services, and renovation and land use approval.

In 2024, the New Hampshire Legislature passed HB 1567, which allowed for family care and group family care as home-based businesses in accessory units. This law is important to move forward flexible types of care for families, especially in rural areas. As part of this report, we analyzed existing zoning ordinances, land use maps, and site review regulations for the eighteen towns part of the Strafford Region. The full analysis is in Appendix 5. Only half of the municipalities were fully compliant with HB 1567. Six municipalities should remove special exceptions or conditional use requirements for HB 1567-permitted facilities to be easily built. Three towns should add family and group family care as accessory uses to residential zones by right, without special review. Here are steps that municipalities can take to build on the vision of HB 1567:

KEY ACTIONS:

- **Conduct a countywide zoning audit to identify municipalities needing updates to align with HB 1567, which permits home-based childcare in residential zones.**
- **Develop a model zoning ordinance that municipalities can adopt to streamline site plan review processes and align regulations across the Strafford Region.**
- **Encourage municipalities to allow childcare by right in commercial and industrial zones, particularly near large employers, to expand workplace-based childcare options.**
- **Incorporate childcare considerations into municipal planning processes, including site plan reviews for new residential developments, commercial parks, and industrial sites.**
- **Increase economic development technical assistance to new and expanding businesses based on the Dover and Rochester models. This would include supplying towns with access to economic development staff, training and support in state life safety codes, site plan review, land use regulation, and zoning specifically for commercial and industrial areas.**
 - **For towns lacking capacity, a shared economic development planner could serve multiple communities. A successful example is SRPC's Housing Navigator, funded by the state to assist Farmington and New Durham with zoning updates, community engagement, and grant applications.**

4.2.2 Public-Private Partnerships and Employer Engagement

Employer-supported childcare can expand access and ease financial burdens for families while boosting employee retention, satisfaction, and productivity. While on-site care is effective, it's often cost-prohibitive—especially for smaller businesses. Alternative strategies, such as partnerships with providers and community stakeholders, offer more scalable solutions. A successful example is Harmony Homes in Durham, which partnered with A Place to Grow to launch a nature-based early learning center for employees.³³ In 2023, the center expanded to serve the wider community, demonstrating how business-provider collaboration can address both workforce and community needs.

To support a more accessible and scalable approach to employer-supported childcare, local governments and regional organizations convene stakeholders to raise awareness and promote the adoption of family-friendly practices such as these:

KEY ACTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS:

- **Offering childcare stipends or partnering with local providers to subsidize slots.³⁴**
- **Adopting family-friendly workplace policies to earn recognition such as the Best Place for Working Parents designation.³⁵**
- **Supporting paid maternity and paternity leave policies through the Granite State Paid Family Leave Plan.³⁶ Employers that participate receive a 50% tax credit on premiums and employees may receive up to 6 weeks of paid leave at 60% of wages for birth, adoption, or foster care.**
- **Providing predictable and flexible work schedules, including hybrid options and flexible hours, to support working parents' childcare responsibilities.**

Additionally, local governments have an important role to play in supporting childcare as a cornerstone of workforce and economic development. As labor force challenges continue across the region, improving access to childcare is essential to helping parents re-enter or remain in the workforce. SRPC can serve as a regional facilitator by connecting employers, providers, and community leaders to foster collaboration, support innovation, and advance scalable childcare solutions by these:

KEY ACTIONS FOR SRPC:

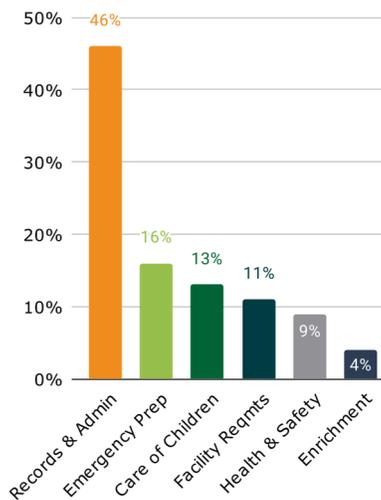
- **Facilitating partnerships between businesses and childcare providers**
- **Raising awareness of tax incentives for businesses that offer childcare stipends or sponsor employee slots. While previous legislative efforts have not passed, they offer useful models for discussion and future action.**
- **House Bill 1193 (2024) sought to provide employers with a childcare tax credit against the business profits and business enterprise taxes.³⁷**
- **House Bill 1681 (2018) sought to establish a tax credit against business taxes in exchange for contributions to the construction or renovation of childcare facilities.³⁸**
- **House Bill 252 (2021) would have created a committee to study tax credits for businesses that provide childcare stipends to employees.³⁹**

By convening stakeholders around these ideas, SRPC can help align regional economic development strategies with family-friendly workplace policies.

4.2.3 Workforce Development: Apprenticeships and Licensing Support

Workforce shortages remain a critical challenge in the childcare sector. To address recruitment and retention issues, municipalities can work with regional planning and workforce development agencies to employ these:

Frequency of Common Licensing Citations



Data courtesy of NH Connections

KEY ACTIONS:

- **Expand ECE apprenticeships in collaboration with ApprenticeshipNH, local Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs, and childcare providers.**
- **Reduce barriers for home-based providers to obtain licensure by offering local grant funding or stipends to cover startup costs, including costs associated with fire and health inspections and land use approvals. (See He-C 4002.2)**
- **Reduce administrative burdens by offering consolidated application forms and boilerplate documents for required business rulesets and regulations (e.g, emergency and continuity plans). (See He-C 4002.16).**
- **Review current licensure requirements that restrict family childcare, including square footage minimums (both in- and outdoors) and child-to-caretaker ratios. (See He-C 4002.22; 4002.34).**

SRPC can partner with regional workforce boards to identify funding for wage subsidies and professional development initiatives for childcare workers.

4.2.4 Startup Funding for New Childcare Providers

New Hampshire currently lacks funding mechanisms for new childcare businesses. While subsidies to support tuition for families exist, there are limited resources to help providers cover startup costs.

KEY ACTIONS:

- **Develop a regional childcare startup fund that pools resources from municipalities, economic development agencies, and philanthropic partners.**
- **Offer low-interest microloans for new childcare providers to cover licensing, facility improvements, and startup expenses.**
- **Encourage municipalities to set aside funding in local economic development budgets for new childcare businesses.**
- **Expand GSQ incentive payments to include new providers, allowing them to access funding for facility improvements and workforce development.**
- **Reduce financial burdens associated with increasing steps. For instance, eliminate or significantly reduce fees associated with childcare credentialing, a key component for scoring higher on GSQ Staffing Qualifications.⁴⁰**

The SRPC can support municipalities in structuring local funding mechanisms and identifying sustainable financing models for childcare expansion.

5

***Interactive
Resource Tool &
Stakeholder
Guide***



5.1 Resource Pamphlet

This document was developed to be a comprehensive resource to support municipalities, families, childcare providers, businesses, and policy advocates navigating the childcare landscape in New Hampshire. It centralizes key information on financial assistance, business development, and advocacy tools to support informed decision-making.

For **families**, the guide offers help in finding affordable, quality care and understanding programs like the NH Child Care Scholarship, NH Connections, and services for children with disabilities through the Parent Information Center NH and Waypoint.

For **providers and businesses**, it covers operational support, including shared services through State Learning Alliance New Hampshire (SELANH), resources on ApprenticeshipNH, guidance on enrolling in the NH Child Care Scholarship program, and directions for participating in the Granite State Paid Family Leave Plan and accessing tax incentives.

For **policy advocates and municipal leaders**, it connects users to organizations like NH Child Care Advisory Council and the Chamber of Mothers, and points users to data and research from the NH Fiscal Policy Institute and Carsey School to inform efforts to expand access and affordability.

Childcare in New Hampshire: A Resource Guide for Families, Providers, Businesses & Advocates

Contact SRPC

150 Wakefield St, Suite 12
Rochester, New Hampshire
03867

Tel. (603) 994-3500
Fax. (603) 994-3504
srpc@strafford.org



STRAFFORD
Regional Planning Commission

Parents and Families:

Find quality, affordable childcare and explore financial help through programs like the [NH Child Care Scholarship](#).

Learn about resources like [NH Connections](#), [Waypoint](#), and [the Parent Information Center](#).

Childcare Providers & Economic Stakeholders:

Get tools to run or support a childcare program from groups like [SELA](#), [SBDC](#) and [ApprenticeshipNH](#). Learn how to accept Child Care Scholarships and join the [Granite State Paid Family Leave Plan](#) for supporting employees.

Policy Advocates & Community Planners:

Support childcare access with advocacy groups like the [NH Child Care Advisory Council](#) and [Chamber of Mothers](#). Tap into research from the [NH Fiscal Policy Institute](#) and [Carsey School](#) to understand workforce needs and economic impacts.



For Families: Accessing Resources and Financial Assistance

How can I find quality, affordable child care?

Managed by Child Care Aware of NH, [NH Connections](#) provides consumer education on what makes a quality child care program, how to assess options, and virtual sessions on child care selection.

Need help with registering for or determining eligibility for the NH Child Care Scholarship?

The New Hampshire Child Care Scholarship is managed by the NH Department of Health and Human Services. A user friendly guide to the program and eligibility [can be found here](#).

Income Eligibility Levels

To qualify for help paying for child care, your household income needs to fall within one of three steps based on family size:

Step 1: Very Low Income (<100% of Federal Poverty Guidelines)

Step 2: Low Income (100% to 138% of Federal Poverty Guidelines)

Step 3: Moderate Income (Above 138% of Federal Poverty Guidelines but Below 85% of the State Median Income)

How can I apply for child care financial assistance?

NH Child Care Scholarship Program:

Offers financial aid to eligible families for licensed or approved child care. To apply, visit NH Easy Gateway to Services, call 1-844-ASK-DHHS, or visit a local DHHS office.

New Hampshire Freedom Accounts:

Funding of up to \$3,700 for New Hampshire families with children from 5-20 years old and earning up to 350% of the poverty line. Money can be used for tuition, tutoring, online learning, educational supplies, and more.

Temporary Assistance for Needy

Families: TANF can be used for childcare assistance for dependents under the age of 6 through payments to providers. Eligible families are under 250% of the federal poverty line.



What support is available for families with children with disabilities?

Parent Information Center NH: Provides guidance and resources.

Waypoint: Offers community-based family services and resource centers.

For Child Care Providers and Businesses: Enhancing Operations and Cost Savings

How can I start my childcare business?

Small Business Development Center:

SBDC provides business services for small businesses in New Hampshire.

Find their website [here](#).

Government Services: Cities and towns within the Strafford Region have a variety of economic development and business service departments within their governments. Two prominent agencies are within the Cities of Dover and Rochester, which provide business services for new or existing organizations. Contact [Dover offices here](#) and [Rochester offices here](#).



How can I receive specialized training and assistance?

NH Preschool Technical Assistance

Network: Provides training in special education for early childhood educators.

NH Connections Provider Support:

Offers professional development, technical assistance, licensing info, and best practice guidance.

Early Care and Education Association

(ECEA): A resource network for early childhood professionals in the Upper Valley region of Vermont and New Hampshire. ECEA provides professional development, networking opportunities, and business support for childcare providers.

How can I accept child care scholarships?

Enroll through **NH Connections Information System (NHCIS)** by submitting required forms and completing staff background checks.

How Can I Offer an Apprenticeship Program?

If you are a childcare provider interested in offering an apprenticeship, *ApprenticeshipNH* provides support in developing and implementing programs tailored to your workforce needs.

Connect with ApprenticeshipNH: Visit the ApprenticeshipNH website and contact a regional program specialist to discuss how an apprenticeship program can fit your organization's needs.

Develop a Training Plan: Work with ApprenticeshipNH to outline a structured training program that includes:

- On-the-job learning
- Classroom instruction (often provided through local colleges or training programs).
- Wage increases at key milestones

Apprenticeships can be funded through grants, employer contributions, or state programs. Employers may receive financial incentives or tax credits for participating.

Recruit & Register Apprentices

Employers can hire new employees as apprentices or enroll existing staff looking to upskill. ApprenticeshipNH will assist in recruiting, onboarding, and ensuring compliance with state and federal apprenticeship guidelines.

How can I join a Childcare apprenticeship?

Visit the **ApprenticeshipNH website** to see current apprenticeship openings and contact a regional specialist to learn about upcoming opportunities.

Apply for an Apprenticeship: Interested individuals can apply directly through participating childcare centers, preschools, or organizations offering ECE apprenticeships.

Begin Paid On-the-Job Training: Apprentices work full-time or part-time while receiving structured training from experienced childcare professionals. Wages increase as apprentices complete key milestones in their training.

Complete the Apprenticeship & Earn Credentials: Upon completion, apprentices receive a nationally recognized credential and may qualify for lead teacher or director positions in early childhood education. Some apprenticeship programs count toward state licensing requirements, making it easier to advance in the field.

How do I participate in the Granite State Paid Family Leave Plan to support my employees?

Decide to Opt-In: Employers choose whether to enroll in the program and offer paid family leave insurance.

Benefits: Employees can take up to 6 weeks of paid leave at 60% of their wages for:

- Birth, adoption, or fostering of a child
- Caring for a seriously ill family member
- Military caregiving responsibilities
- Personal serious health condition

Enroll Through MetLife: New Hampshire has contracted MetLife to administer the plan. Employers can sign up through MetLife to select coverage options. Employers can:

- Fully cover the insurance premiums for employees
- Split the cost with employees
- Offer the insurance as an employee-paid option

Claim the Tax Credit: Employers who contribute to employee premiums receive a 50% tax credit on their Business Profits Tax (BPT) or Business Enterprise Tax (BET).

Communicate the Benefit to Employees: Employers must inform employees about the program, eligibility, and how to access paid leave when needed.



Are there any shared cost-saving networks I can join?

State Early Learning Alliance of NH (SELA):

A shared services network offering significant cost and time savings. Benefits include discounts for pooled purchasing, partnerships with local businesses, and business management and licensing support.

***For Policy Advocates and Community Planners:
Tools for Advocacy and Planning***

How can I influence child care policies?

NH Child Care Advisory Council (NHCCAC):

Advises the DHHS commissioner on child care policies and laws.

Want to attend meetings? Meetings happen bi-monthly in Concord, NH. Contact Early Learning NH at (603) 226-7900 for details or to share concerns.

What is the Chamber of Mothers?

The Chamber of Mothers is a national advocacy organization dedicated to improving policies that support mothers and families. Their work includes advocating for paid family leave, affordable childcare, maternal healthcare, and workplace protections.

They mobilize parents, collaborate with lawmakers, and run public awareness campaigns to push for meaningful policy changes.

Is there a local chapter in New Hampshire?

Yes! The Chamber of Mothers has a New Hampshire chapter based in Portsmouth.

This chapter focuses on advocacy efforts at the state and national levels, providing a space for local parents to connect, organize, and take action on issues affecting families in the region.

How can I get involved?

There are several ways to get involved with the Chamber of Mothers:

- Join the Portsmouth chapter to connect with other local advocates.
- Participate in advocacy campaigns by signing petitions, writing to lawmakers, or attending events.
- Support fundraising efforts to help sustain their work.
- Spread awareness by sharing their initiatives on social media and within your community.

To learn more, visit [the Chamber of Mothers website](#), where you can find details on membership, upcoming events, and current advocacy priorities.



Where can I find data and advocacy resources?

- **New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute:** NHFPI has a wide array of resources on childcare. Read about the economic impact of the childcare shortage, the fragile economics of this sector, the state of childcare in the state, and more.
- **Carsey School of Public Policy:** UNH's policy school published the Granite Guide to Early Childhood series. Read about families' needs, a childcare landscape analysis, the childcare workforce, and more.
- **Zoning Atlas:** Saint Anselm College produced a comprehensive zoning atlas, which includes a section on the zoning of home-based childcare. This is a good representation of where home-based businesses are allowed to operate, relevant after the passage of HB1567.



5.2 ArcGIS StoryMap

To illustrate a potential way SRPC might demonstrate challenges with child care coverage in the future, the team created an interactive ArcGIS StoryMap. This piece of the project consolidates publicly available child care provider metrics, captured in March 2025, from two sites: the [New Hampshire Connections Child Care Search portal](#) and the [Maine Child Care Search portal](#). The maps provide a snapshot of active child care providers across and around the Strafford Region. Providers were geocoded by address and organized both by facility type and by state. Additional layers were created to indicate whether a provider marked themselves as accepting new children in each age bracket: infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age care. Using a network analysis, the team also created layers to measure driving time to available providers in three standard increments: 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and 15 minutes.

Due to limitations with the data displayed on both the NH and ME Child Care Search portals, the StoryMap has limited practical use in its current iteration. Providers self-report their seat availability and may input incorrect values, if they are to update availability at all. Accordingly, the maps are not estimates of actual child care availability in *real-time*; rather, they are a depiction of publicly available data at a specific *moment in time*. In the future, SRPC can use these maps as a baseline to provide more accurate depictions of the child care landscape in the region. This will hinge upon fine-tuning of the portal data to ensure that metrics of provider availability are properly vetted and verified. Static screenshots of a subset of these maps can be found in Appendix 6 of this report.

6

Appendices and References

Appendix 1: Literature Review Process

The literature review was one of the first stages of this Capstone project. After initial meetings in October 2025, the team began to research the key questions presented by SRPC. The goal of the review was twofold:

- To inform the Capstone team of background research and bring each member up to speed with the landscape of childcare within the Strafford Region, throughout New Hampshire, and across the country.
- To provide SRPC with a descriptive baseline of information and ideas that would inform the direction of later research and resource creation.

The 16-page review highlighted recent state legislative developments, national studies from think tanks and agencies on the status of childcare, regional cost analyses from New Hampshire-based organizations, and case studies of childcare models nationwide. The Capstone team submitted the report to SRPC in late November 2025 and presented the initial findings at the December 10, 2025 SEDS meeting.

Appendix 2: Data Analytics Approach

This report incorporates economic and statistical analyses from a variety of sources. Secondary data cited originates from publications and studies by the federal DHHS, New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, the New Hampshire DHHS, SRP, and others. The team also compiled NHDHHS administrative data on childcare providers to create simple statistical charts and graphics, which included:

- Comparisons of QRIS participation among Strafford Region childcare providers.
- Tabulations of common licensing citations within the previous year.
- ArcGIS maps of child care providers and seat availability listed on the NH Connections site.

Provider data from NHDHHS was collected and compiled into CSV files in early March 2025; references in this report to total provider counts and other metrics are structured around this date.

Qualitative data was collected via interviews from December 2024 to March 2025 with providers, business development experts, and advocates, as listed in Appendix 4. These interviews were done over Zoom and the notes taken were used to inform policy recommendations and the framing of the report.

Additionally, the SEDS meeting in December provided an opportunity to get stakeholder feedback. We used whiteboards on Zoom to get real time information on childcare solutions and challenges, as shown in Appendix 7. The stakeholders' knowledge of the childcare issue in New Hampshire guided our initial framing of interview questions and policy recommendations.

Appendix 3: Policy Analysis Approach

The policy recommendations provided in this report were informed by an array of resources, with particular recognition and deference given to local expertise and interviews. The general course of policy research and analysis went as follows:

- Background academic and economic research to create the literature review.
- Participation in a virtual group discussion with SEDS (see Appendix 7).
- Individual engagement with Strafford Region stakeholders (see Appendix 4).
- Subject-matter investigations into common topics of concern, including: statehouse legislative initiatives, town-level zoning regulations, and provider licensing and administrative rules.
- Consolidation of findings into workable recommendations for SRPC and other interested parties.

Appendix 4: Interviewees

As part of our final project, we conducted approximately 20 interviews with stakeholders identified by the SPRC, spanning a wide range of expertise and perspectives. Our interviewees included direct childcare providers, policy advocates, researchers, business development professionals, and others engaged in supporting early childhood care in the region.

Our primary goal was to approach the issue of childcare in the Strafford Region from multiple angles—policy, economic development, workforce, regulatory, and community engagement—to gain a well-rounded understanding of the current landscape. Through these interviews, we sought to:

- Understand each stakeholder’s experience and position on childcare
- Identify key needs and barriers facing the sector
- Explore how childcare needs are currently assessed and addressed
- Gather ideas for potential solutions from diverse sectors,
- Learn more about financial and regulatory challenges and legislative supports
- Identify opportunities to strengthen local and state partnerships and resources

Prior to each interview, we conducted background research on the individual or organization to tailor our questions and better understand their work. Our conversations were grounded in open-ended, experience-based questions that helped us identify both challenges and innovative practices.

Example questions included:

- What are the biggest challenges facing early childhood education and care in the region?
- What are the primary obstacles to developing and retaining a skilled early childhood workforce in New Hampshire?
- What funding models or forms of support are most effective for sustaining high-quality ECE programs?
- How do recent changes in zoning or in-home childcare regulations affect opportunities to expand childcare locally?
- What state or local level resources need to be created or expanded to support the sector?
- Beyond financial assistance, what supports, like mentorship, professional development, or mental health resources, are most important for ECE professionals?

These stakeholder insights not only shaped our understanding of the childcare landscape in the Strafford Region, but also highlighted cross-cutting solutions—some focused on policy and legislation, others on workforce development, business sustainability, or reframing and improving the use of existing local resources.

Advocates

Chuck Grassie: *Former State Representative, State of New Hampshire*

Chuck served as a member of the NH House of Representatives from 2016 to 2024. Chuck has been focused on supporting working families through practical, community-driven policy. He sponsored HB 1567 to expand access to affordable childcare by streamlining the approval process for family-based providers. His priorities include increasing housing availability and affordability, and expanding childcare access.

Joelyn Drennan: *Assistant Vice President of Impact, Granite United Way*

Joelyn brings decades of experience in program development, strategic planning, and grants management. She works closely with statewide partners to identify and address systemic barriers to childcare access and to advance family-friendly workplaces around the state.

Liz Scruton: *Director of Early Childhood Initiatives, Granite United Way* – Liz is an ECE advocate and has experience in program development and cross-sector collaboration through her roles at the New Hampshire Children's Trust, Southern New Hampshire Services, and others.

Jackie Cowell: *Executive Director, Early Learning NH*

Jackie leads statewide efforts to strengthen early childhood systems and workforce development. She has experience managing early education programs, teaching in the Peace Corps, and working internationally. Jackie also directs SELA, a platform supporting early childhood providers with tools, resources, and cost-saving services.

Katie Brissette: *Deputy Director, Early Learning NH* – Katie leads public awareness and early childhood systems-building initiatives. With experience spanning Spark NH, the NH Women's Policy Institute, and the State Early Learning Alliance, Katie has worked at the intersection of policy and practice to advance outcomes for young children and families.

Providers

Jennifer Legere: *Owner and Director, A Place to Grow*

Jennifer has over two decades of experience, working in the childcare sector. Her business showcases her expertise in natural science, early literacy, and business development. She also consults with providers on cost-effective solutions and championed HB1567 to expand support for home-based childcare in New Hampshire.

Anne Grassie: *Family Services Coordinator, Rochester Child Care Center*

For over 30 years, Anne has been a leading advocate for children and families in New Hampshire, working to expand access to affordable, high-quality childcare. As a state representative from 1994 to 2014, Anne has championed the needs of childcare workers and supported policies that strengthen family services at both the local and state level.

Lisa Ranfos, Ed.D.: *Executive Director and Clinical Associate Professor, University of New Hampshire Child Study and Development Center*

Lisa has over 25 years of experience in ECE. She is especially interested in how leadership shapes program quality and culture, and she brings her expertise to both families and future educators through her work in lab schools and college classrooms.

Jessica Carver, M.Ed.: *Assistant Director, University of New Hampshire Child Study and Development Center*

Jessica has experience teaching in lab school classrooms and working in state government on early childhood quality initiatives. She has also trained early childhood professionals across New Hampshire and is passionate about cultivating leadership in the field.

Jennifer Ganim-Smith: *Early Childhood Education Coordinator and Professor, Great Bay Community College*

Prior to joining Great Bay, Jennifer served as the training and marketing coordinator for Child Care Aware of New Hampshire. She is passionate about expanding access to affordable, high-quality early education and values the strong sense of community at Great Bay.

Christopher Lalmond: *Northern Hub Developer, Community College System of New Hampshire's Apprenticeship NH*

Christopher collaborates closely with ECE professionals to create apprenticeship programs aimed at developing managerial and director-level talent.

Evan England: *Research Assistant Professor and Assistant Director for the Center for Social Policy in Practice, UNH Carsey*

Evan focuses his research on social inequality and health equity and collaborates with local and regional partners to evaluate and improve access to care and community well-being across New Hampshire.

Business Development

Jean Nelson: *Business Advisor, Small Business Development Center*

Jean specializes in supporting microbusinesses and entrepreneurs in the Pathway to Work program. She has experience in banking, marketing, and small business development, and has advised clients across a wide range of industries. Jean also brings firsthand knowledge as a small business owner and holds a Childcare Coaching certification.

James Burdin: *Business Development Coordinator, City of Dover's Office of Business Development*

James supports industrial and commercial development, guides permitting and land use processes, and provides strategic assistance to the Dover Business and Industrial Development Authority (DBIDA).

Dennis McCann: *Executive Director, Strafford Economic Development Corporation*
Dennis leads SBDC, a non-profit corporation focusing on providing and locating financial assistance for businesses. He brings connections, technical assistance, and financial acumen to childcare services.

Blair Haney: *Senior Planner, Strafford Regional Planning Commission* – Blair focuses on land use, housing, and community engagement in his work at SRPC. He has experience leading master planning efforts, regulatory audits, and public outreach initiatives across multiple New Hampshire communities.

Appendix 5: Municipal Zoning Review of HB 1567

A review of zoning ordinances and site plan review regulations was conducted through analyzing the most recent documents for each town. This was inspired by Saint Anselm College’s high level zoning analysis, but looked into specific childcare definitions beyond just home-based businesses.

Compliant Jurisdictions

These jurisdictions already allow family and family group childcare by right in primarily residential zones under HB 1567:

Municipality	Language	Further Notes	Resources
Barrington	Permits family and group family daycare in several residential zones with minimal restrictions.	Family day care homes (up to six children) and family group day care homes (7–12 children) are explicitly defined and permitted in residential zones (only in commercial areas)In the General Residential, Neighborhood Residential, and Village zones, childcare is permitted by right as an accessory use to a residence or on the conditional approval of the planning board.Ordinances allow mixed residential and non-residential uses	Zoning Ordinance as of 3/12/24, Map, Master Plan (2024 Update), site plan regulations
Brookfield	Childcare not explicitly mentioned. Home businesses and home occupations are allowed in Residential Zones	A commercial or business activity conducted on a lot being used for residential purposes that exceeds the standards for Home Occupation must obtain an Operating Permit and must meet a series of requirements	Zoning Ordinance as of 8/22/18, Map, site review regulations
Dover	Permits childcare group and family homes in all residential districts	Child Care Home means an occupied single family dwelling in which child day care is provided for less than twenty four (24) hours per day, except in emergencies. A child care home is subject to the customary home occupation requirements and requires a customary home occupation Certificate of Use.	Zoning Ordinance as of 8/22/18, Map, site review regulation
Durham	Allows childcare homes as accessory uses in residential zones, with conditions for traffic and setbacks.	Family childcare homes are permitted in all residential zones (e.g., RA, RB, RC) without requiring site plan review.Childcare centers and nurseries are allowed by conditional use permits in certain non-residential zones, but this does not affect family or group family childcare.Drop-off and pick-up requirements are specified for traffic safety though..Section on "Childcare Home" explicitly allows accessory uses by right.	Zoning Ordinance as of 12/16/24, Map, Link to All Maps, Site Regulations
Farmington	Permits family and group family daycare in residential zones as accessory uses.	Family day care and family group day care homes are explicitly permitted in all residential zones as accessory uses.No site plan review or conditional use permits are required for these uses.Zoning table explicitly lists family day care and family group day care as "P" (Permitted) in all residential zones, without additional restrictions.Larger daycare centers (12+ children) are subject to special exceptions, but these are not covered by HB 1567-FN.	Zoning Ordinance as of 3/12/24, Master Plan 2021, Map, Site Plan Review Regulations
Northwood	Compliant		Zoning Ordinances as of 3/12/2024, January 2023 Master Plan, Map
Nottingham	Compliant	Permitted as a home occupation, major and minor.	Zoning Ordinance as of 6/8/2021, Map, Site Plan Review Regulations
Rollinsford	Childcare as a home occupation and business permitted in all residential zones	Day nursery, nursery school only by special exception or not permitted in residential areas.	Zoning Ordinances as of June 2021, Map, Amendments as of March 2024
Strafford	Compliant	Permitted as a home business. Childcare not explicitly mentioned.	Zoning Ordinances as of 3/12/2024, Map

Municipalities Needing Amendments

Municipality	Issue	Language to Amend	Action Required	Resources
Lee	Family and group family childcare are allowed in primarily residential zones only by special exception.	Update zoning ordinances to allow family and group family childcare as accessory uses in all primarily residential zones by right.	Remove the special exception requirement.	Zoning Ordinance as of 3/2023, Map, Site Review Regulations
Madbury	Family and group family childcare are not explicitly listed as allowable uses in General Residential. Home occupations are not permitted in residential areas.	Add family and group family childcare to the permitted uses in all primarily residential zones either on their own, or under home occupations.	Remove conditional use permit requirement.	Planning Board Website, Zoning Ordinances as of 3/2017, Map
Middleton	Family and group family childcare require special exceptions or are not permitted in primarily residential zones as explicitly mentioned as home businesses and occupations.	Revise zoning ordinances to permit family and group family childcare as accessory uses in all primarily residential zones by right.	Remove the special exception requirement in rural residential zones and permit in Residential-Commercial/Industrial zones	Zoning Ordinances as of 3/11/2017, Map, Master Plan, Site Review Regulations
Milton	Child day care facilities are allowed only by special exception in high-density and low-density residential zones. Permitted in commercial/ and industrial/residential areas. Home occupations permitted in all zones. Family and group family daycare not explicitly mentioned.	Amend high-density and low-density residential zoning regulations to allow family and group family childcare as accessory uses by right. Alternatively, list as explicitly part of home occupations.	Remove the special exception requirement in HDR and LDR zones	Map, Zoning Ordinances as of 3/12/2024, Site Review Regulations
New Durham	Childcare facilities are allowed by right in mixed use zones, but not explicitly in primarily residential zones. Home occupations are permitted in residential areas.	Permitted by right in Town Center Mixed Use District. Home Occupations are permitted following the approval of a Home Occupation Application submitted to the Planning Board or its Designee.	Allow childcare facilities as home occupations explicitly by right in primarily residential zones	Zoning Ordinances as of 3/14/2023, Map, Site Plan Regulations
Newmarket	Family child day care is only permitted in one out of four residential zones. Group family in two. Home occupations and businesses allowed in all residential zones, but child care not explicitly a part of that	Revise the Table of Uses to include family and group family childcare as permitted uses in all residential zones.	Update zoning ordinances to explicitly permit family and group family childcare as accessory uses by right in all residential zones	Zoning Ordinances as of 6/21/2017, Map, Site Review Regulations
Rochester	Small residential daytime care allowed in all residential zones. Family-based day care not permitted in one residential zone; by special exception in one residential and one agricultural; permitted in mixed-use.	Update zoning ordinances to allow family and group family childcare as accessory uses in all primarily residential zones by right. Streamline language to align with state definitions.	Remove the special exception requirement and prohibition in residential and agricultural zones.	Zoning Ordinance as of 4/22/2014, Map, Site Plan Regulations
Somersworth	Permits child care homes by right in all residential zones. Group child care homes permitted in agricultural zone, one residential zone, and all mixed use zones ; by special exception in four primarily residential zones; and not permitted in manufactured housing.	Allow group child care homes in all zones that child care homes are permitted in.	Remove special exceptions for family group child care.	Zoning Ordinances as of 4/15/2024, Map, Site Review Regulations
Wakefield	Home daycare facilities are listed as home occupations. These are permitted under Conditional Use in all zoning districts where Single Family Residences are a permitted use, except the Residential II – Shorefront district	Remove conditional use permit requirements and prohibitions for these uses. Align language with state-level definitions	Remove special exceptions for home-based child care.	Zoning Ordinances as of 3/12/2024, Map, Site Plan Review

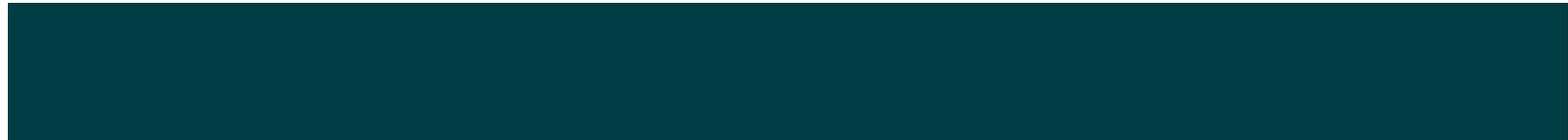
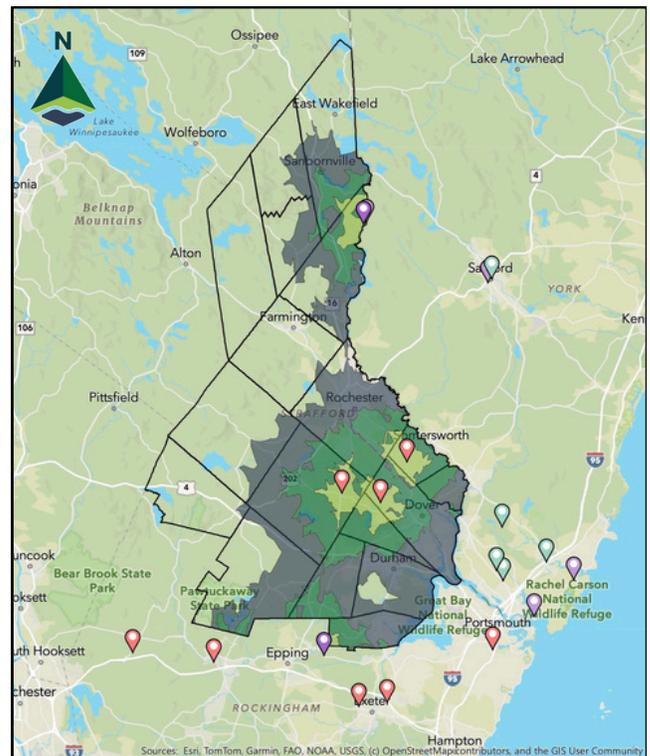
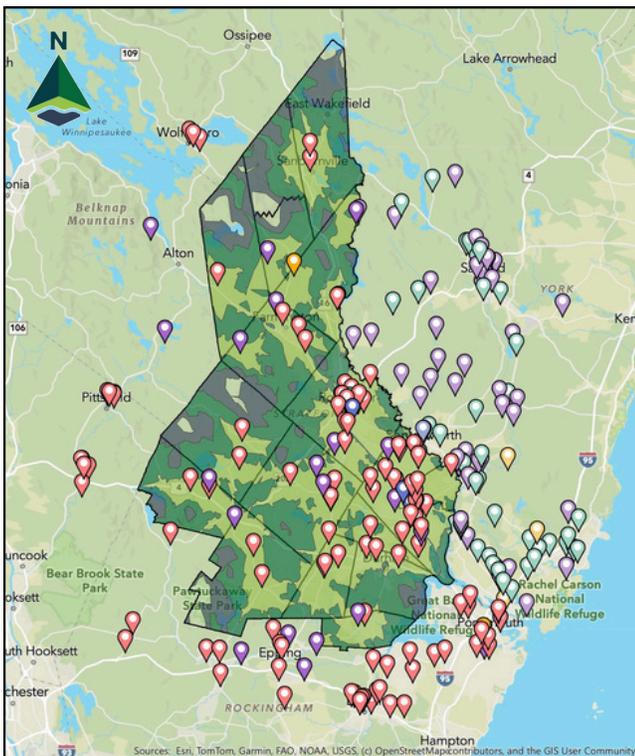
Appendix 6: Sample of ArcGIS StoryMap

Below are two example map frames from the ArcGIS StoryMap, which incorporate publicly-available provider metrics from the NH and ME Child Care Search sites. The map on the left displays all providers as of March 2025; the map of the right displays only providers that indicated some availability for infant care.

Given the limitations of the child care search databases, the infant care availability metrics are not guaranteed to be accurate. Additional tuning of these metrics by SRPC and other data professionals will be necessary to ensure the integrity of the information presented.



Map A: All Providers in the Strafford Region **Map B: Only Providers Listing Infant Availability**



Appendix 7: Whiteboard Activity from SEDS Call

Are there additional stakeholders or partnerships we should engage?

Stakeholders and Partnerships:

- Child Care Advisory Council, Wages sub committee
- Lenders (Left a note re The Merrimack in the chat)
- Kids Culture
- Little Lambs (in-home center in Dover)
- Early Childhood Coalitions (i.e. Somersworth Ready Together)
- Transition from daycare to Kindergarten was rough - talk to camp programs about intermittent care in summers/breaks
- Family Resource Centers
- Seacoast Community School, Growing Places, Rochester Child Care Center and the NH Child Care Advisory Council
- Check out the stakeholder maps from UNH Carsey School
- Families
- New Futures
- Rochester Childcare Center
- Community Action Partnerships Head Start
- Family Educators
- Church based child care
- NH Fiscal Policy Institute

Reminder who we've already reached out to:

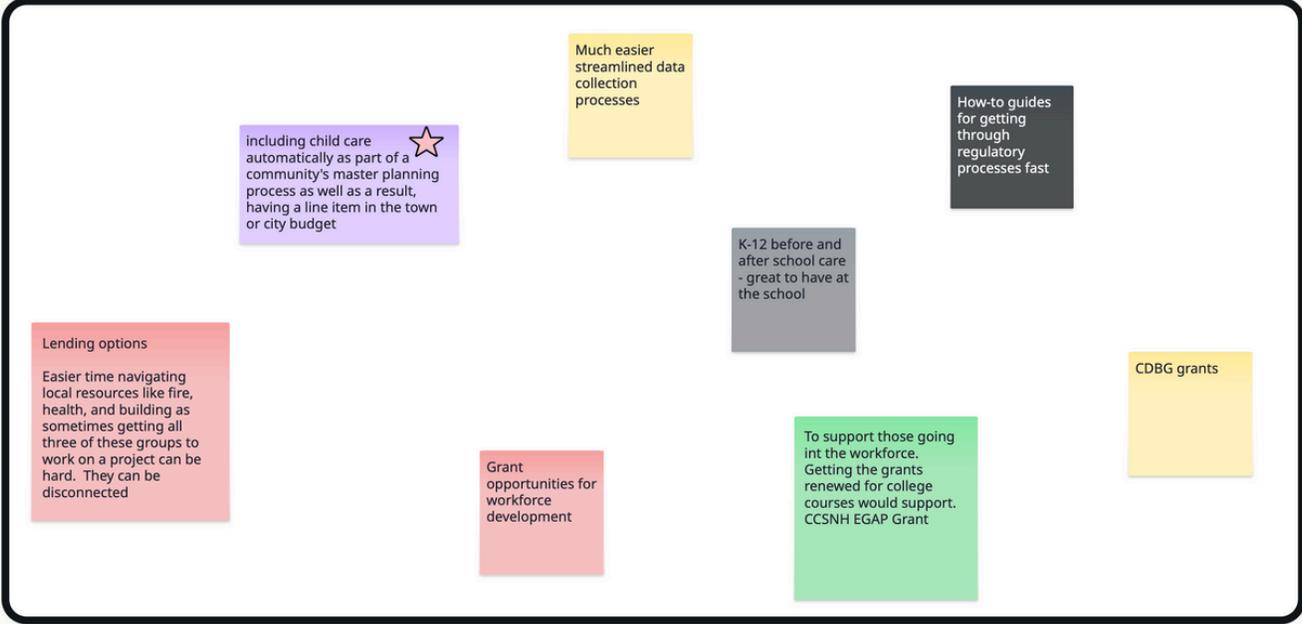
- SPRC
- UNH Child Study and Development Center
- UNH School of Public Policy
- Community College System of NH
- Apprenticeship NH
- A Place to Grow Learning Center
- Small Business Development Center
- NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs
- Granite United Way
- CCA for Social Good / SELA

What are the main challenges you have seen or experienced with childcare?

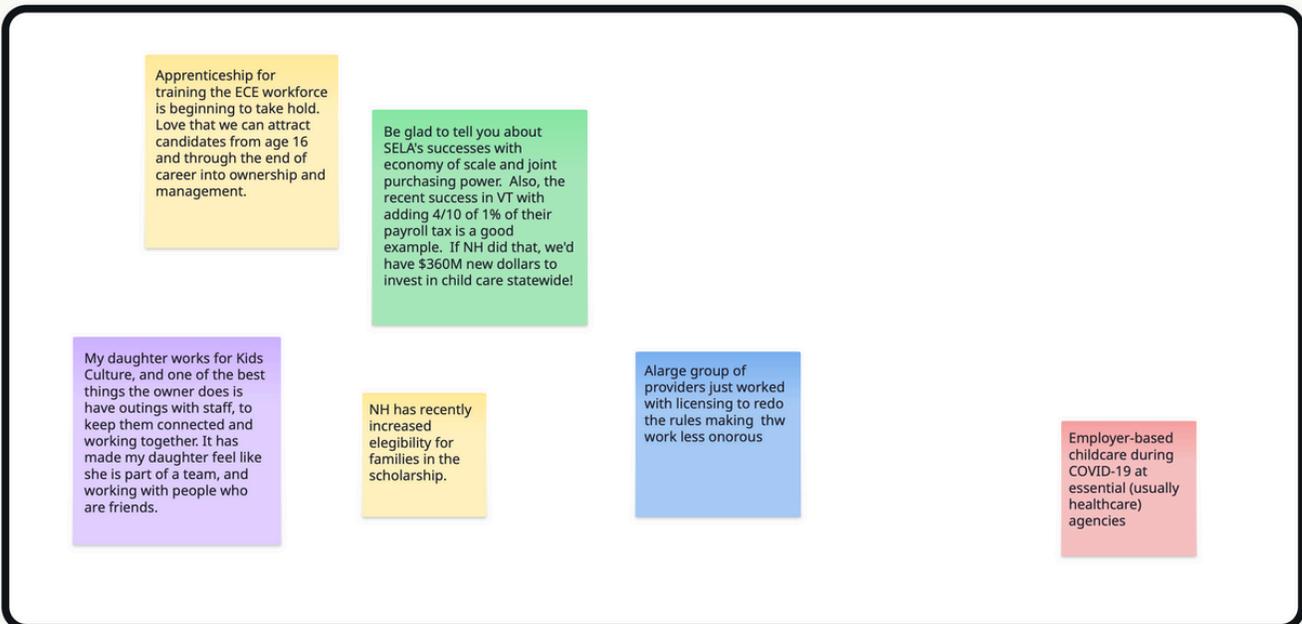
Challenges:

- Culture of devaluing ECE workforce compared to other professions
- Driving in the wrong direction and/or need a car when I could otherwise commute on transit/walk
- Affordability, accessibility, quality and finding care that children with special needs - behavioral/mental health
- The staffing crisis must get solved for any of these terrific ideas to work. Before focusing on expansion, it will be important to fill the empty classrooms that were up and running for decades before the pandemic.
- I have been saying for years that these problems would better be addressed at a national level. Many states and especially NH don't have the ability to provide the financial support to solve this. Subsidization much like public school is needed.
- Not enough teachers, or staff to cover breaks/vacations/time off. Teacher burnout
- Pickup/drop-off times are rigid and not always good for work schedule
- Provider shortage has resulted in having to place infants on waitlists before they are even born to have any chance of a placement 1.5 years later.
- Consolidation of providers - further distances and less options for families
- Wages for childcare workers with incentive to grow in their field
- Affordability for families who do not qualify for assistance

What resources can state and local government offer to support childcare in the region?



What are some "success stories" you have seen in the child care sector?



Appendix 8: Glossary of Acronyms

- ARPA:** American Rescue Plan Act
CAP: Center for American Progress
CCDF: Child Care and Development Fund
CCDGB: Child Care Development Block Grant
CCFAP: Child Care Financial Assistance Program
CDBG: Community Development Block Grants
CEDS: Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
CTE: Career and Technical Education
DHHS: Department of Human and Health Services
ECE: Early Childhood Education
EDD: Economic Development District
ERS: Environmental Rating Scales
FPL: Federal Poverty Level
GSQ: Granite Steps for Quality
NH: New Hampshire
NHCCAC: New Hampshire Child Care Advisory Council
NHCCSP: New Hampshire Child Care Scholarship Program
NHFPI: New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute
NIMBY: Not-In-My-Backyard
PEF: Pay Equity Fund
QRIS: Quality Rating and Improvement System
SBDC: Small Business Development Center
SCAN: Save the Children Action Network
SELA: State Early Learning Alliance of New Hampshire
SRPC: Strafford Regional Planning Commission
TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UNH: University of New Hampshire
USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

Appendix 9: Glossary of Key Terms and Legal Definitions

Child Care Agency

Any person, corporation, partnership, voluntary association, or other organization, whether for-profit or otherwise, that regularly receives for care one or more children unrelated to the operator of the agency. Care is provided in a facility as defined in the relevant statutes and maintained for the care of children. (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Center-Based Program

A childcare program owned and operated by one applicant, licensed to provide any of the following types of care:

- Group child care center
- Infant and toddler program
- Night care program
- Preschool program
- School-age program
- Any combination of the above (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Family Day Care Home

An occupied residence where child day care is provided for less than 24 hours per day, except in emergencies, for up to six children from one or more unrelated families. The six children include any foster children residing in the home and all children related to the caregiver, except children 10 years of age or older. In addition, up to three children attending a full-day school program may also be cared for up to five hours per day on school days and all day during school holidays, provided that the increase in capacity is permitted by the state fire code and complies with local ordinances. (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Family Group Day Care Home

An occupied residence where child day care is provided for less than 24 hours per day, except in emergencies, for 7 to 12 children from one or more unrelated families. The 12 children include all children related to the caregiver and any foster children residing in the home, except children 10 years of age or older. Additionally, up to five children attending a full-day school program may also be cared for up to five hours per day on school days and all day during school holidays, provided that the increase in capacity is permitted by the state fire code and complies with local ordinances. (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Group Child Day Care Center

A child day care agency where care is provided for preschool children and up to five school-age children. This category includes facilities known as day nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, cooperatives, child development centers, day care centers, centers for the developmentally disabled, progressive schools, Montessori schools, or other similar names. (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Small Group Child Day Care Center

A child day-care agency where care is provided for no more than 12 preschool children. This category includes facilities known as day nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, cooperatives, child development centers, day-care centers, centers for the developmentally disabled, progressive schools, Montessori schools, or other similar names. (NH Rev Stat § 170-E:2 (2024))

Home-Based Business

A business, including a childcare business, that operates out of the provider's home. This category includes both family day care homes and family group day care homes.

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