Lack of child care leaves parents with few options

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Elizabeth Gonzalez, community organizer and director of the Informal Caregivers Cohort Program at Congress of Communities in Detroit, helps bridge the gap between unlicensed childcare providers and vital state resources for families in the community. DAVID RODRIGUEZ MUÑOZ/DETROIT FREE PRESS

DETROIT – Chances are, if you ask pretty much any family looking for quality childcare, they'll tell you it can be hard to find.

But when families live in neighborhoods where licensed providers are scarce, an already challenging situation can become even worse.

That's what Lydia Chouinard felt when trying to find care for her young daughter in southwest Detroit.

"There are a ton of kiddos, and a lot of moms," said Chouinard, who has lived in southwest Detroit for 20 years and found herself on a waiting list for months before finding a spot for her child. "They are working nights and taking care of babies during the day. They're running on empty."

There are around 2,500 more kids between birth and 5 years old in two of southwest Detroit's four ZIP codes than there are licensed childcare seats available, according to an analysis by IFF, a community-centered lender, developer and real estate consultancy.

Parents say that long wait lists in their neighborhood for publicly funded programs like Head Start are common and that those centers may not have the schedules or curricula that meet their needs. And if they opt for licensed private care, an option that often provides more flexibility, they may only find spots requiring long drives and charging hefty prices.

Some end up turning to unlicensed childcare, known as informal providers.

They operate across southwest Detroit, an area that has a foreign-born population of nearly 18%, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Elizabeth Gonzalez, a community organizer at the local nonprofit Congress of Communities, has seen informal providers blocked from getting licensed because they don't have a Social Security number.

Gonzalez has spent the last three years working with informal providers, both documented and undocumented immigrants, to connect them to resources – like basic health and safety certifications and early childhood education skill-building and professional development – to better equip them to provide safe care to kids.

She and other advocates say Michigan needs a clear path to get providers without Social Security numbers licensed, as other states have done, to ensure parents have access to more childcare options that meet baseline standards – an acute need that is felt across the state, experts say.

"Some of these ladies, they amaze me. They're just all for it," said Gonzalez, who currently works with around 130 informal providers. "Their hearts and minds are in it, but unfortunately the state isn't in it."

A great need for care

Families have a wide variety of needs when it comes to childcare. Parents have a diversity of jobs, schedules, income levels and cultural considerations like language. Not to mention the diversity of their kids: differing developmental, educational or specialized needs.

But in southwest Detroit, diversity of childcare options don't exist.

Michigan's public child care database shows the neighborhood has only four licensed home-based providers, in addition to one private center, totaling 59 seats. Thirty-four of those seats are limited to 3- and 4-year-olds, Empowered Community Learning Center director Najwa Dahdah said.

Around 32% of the neighborhood's population lives in poverty, and the area has a median household income of around $38,000.

Some parents say their only options seem to be federally funded Head Start programs, which provide free childcare and early education to kids between birth and 5 years in low-income families, and/or state-funded free pre-K for 4-year-olds through the Great Start Readiness Program.

For other parents in southwest Detroit, a bigger variety of licensed home and center-based childcare options would fill a much needed gap, they say.

Though Chouinard qualifies for Head Start, there was around a five-month waiting list for her infant daughter to enroll in 2024. While waiting, she looked for other child care and quickly realized Head Start would be her only option: Private-pay childcare where she could find availability was either half-hour drive away without traffic or cost one-third of her salary.

As soon as her daughter got into Head Start, Chouinard started a slew of part-time, contract-based work. She can't find a full-time job that works with her childcare schedule, which requires pickup before 4 p.m. and is closed on Fridays.

"I make little tiny amounts of money here and there," she said.

She currently relies on her partner to pay the mortgage and lives paycheck to paycheck.

Chouinard also worries that if she found a job with a salary even just a bit above the Head Start income eligibility limit, she'd be without the free program and facing a lack of options again.

Beatriz Chavez, 38, has lived in southwest Detroit for 10 years and said she also can't find anything beyond Head Start for her 2-year-old son, which has stopped her from getting back to work part-time.

She too faced long wait lists, and ultimately decided not to enroll her son because at his age, she doesn't want him in care for as long as the program typically requires each day. She also wants him to be eating home-cooked meals, but isn't allowed to bring his food. And she felt judged at one location for continuing to breastfeed her son.

"I would like a lot more options," Chavez said. "Now I try to figure out how to get income without leaving my kid with someone."

With no family members in the United States, Chavez isn't able to lean on many other people for help with child care. "The people I trust who respect kids – they're working," she said of the friends she'd entrust her son with.

While she knows unlicensed childcare would give her the kind of flexibility she's looking for, Chavez worries her son wouldn't be taught by professionals with a background in early childhood education, but rather placed in front of the television all day.

"I want a place where they're prepared, above all," Chavez continued in Spanish. Where "there's a level of quality, not just 'Oh, I can keep him safe in that spot all day' – that's really bad for kids, especially at this age when they need to move around."

Chouinard said she too worries about placing her child in unlicensed care, unsure of things like whether the provider would be aware of basic safety protocols like safe sleep practices, which are important for reducing sleep-related risks and death in infants.

The workforce issue

According to a recent analysis of census data by UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, immigrants make up a sizable portion of the childcare workforce nationally – at least 21%.

Some states, including Illinois, Nevada and California, have amended state laws to allow people without legal status to apply for professional or occupational licenses.

The California and Illinois laws explicitly bar the denial of licensure based on immigration status. All three states allow using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, or ITIN – a number issued by the Internal Revenue Service for tax reporting purposes for people who aren't eligible for a Social Security number – as an acceptable replacement when applying for most licenses.

In 2023 and 2024, Maryland amended its regulations to allow people to get licensed using an ITIN in the health care and childcare industries. The superintendent of its Department of Education, which handles childcare licensing in the state, wrote in support of the change that the department "is committed to ensuring that all early care and education programs in the State have clear, rigorous, and multiple pathways toward becoming licensed or registered" to ensure children's safety and health.

Martin Klein, legislative attorney at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said these policy moves make sense given that a state's main concern is not work authorization – which is federal jurisdiction – but rather making sure those working in their state, in any given field, are competent.

"Ensuring that the state knows who is engaging in that work and ensuring they're doing it at the highest level to protect public safety is the reasonable thing to do," he said.

While it appears there is no official regulation in Michigan's books that bars childcare licensure on the basis of legal immigration status, informal caregivers get excluded in practice when they need a Social Security number to verify their identity during the background check, said Steve Gay, deputy director at Leaps and Bounds Family Services, which provides free professional development to child care providers.

Gay said he spoke with at least two Michigan childcare licensing representatives who told him they believed a Social Security number was required to become a licensed childcare provider in the state, but neither could cite the regulation requiring it and therefore refused to give a definitive answer.

"The 'no answer' tells me a lot," he said.

While Gay said he believes Michigan wants to get more licensed child care providers open, the vagueness in the guidance creates confusion.

When asked about Michigan's policy for allowing childcare licensure without a Social Security number, the state early childhood agency pointed to Michigan's licensing statutes and administrative rules – none of which mentions legal status or the need for a Social Security number. Spokesperson Aundreana Jones-Poole did not respond to follow-up questions.

Another childcare category known as license-exempt was created by the state to allow relatives and family friends to care for kids and get paid through the state childcare subsidy, while maintaining basic safety standards, Gay said.

Non-relative providers can also be license-exempt if they care for a child at the family's home, but informal caregivers are barred from this option because the state requires a Social Security number from these providers so they can bill the state, he said.

Even if Michigan were to follow other states, changing its regulations to make getting licensed with an ITIN possible, Veronica Thronson, director of the Immigration Law Clinic at Michigan State University College of Law, said she's unsure the policy shift would work to get more people licensed given the current immigration landscape in the United States.

People might not want to get an ITIN out of fear that "there may be consequences," she said, "the concern that ICE is going to have that information."

This concern is not unfounded: As of May 2025, the IRS, which issues ITINs, is able to share information with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Thronson said.

Filling the gap

Gonzalez believes it's a problem that informal caregivers can't get any kind of licensure without a Social Security number in Michigan, one that hurts parents and caregivers alike.

"Single moms working at the MGM casino, working long hours and needing that extended child care to 7 or 8 p.m.," she said, "we don't have that here. That's your informal [provider] that is going to step in and say 'I can do that.' "

The question is whether the children are safe in those situations, she said.

Unlicensed childcare sites can be a hazard to kids and allow poor practices to persist out of sight of state inspectors, such as insufficient staff or a lack of baby gates and smoke detectors, Gay said. While there are good-quality unlicensed providers, he said, the burden is entirely on a parent to vet them whereas licensing provides families with "a base level of care they know they are going to get, a process to report issues and access to the childcare scholarship."

Licensed providers are also able to opt in to the state's subsidized childcare program, allowing low-income parents to pay a discounted rate.

The informal caregivers Gonzalez works with want resources to be better equipped to provide high-quality care to kids in the absence of state support, she said. Many have a wealth of experience and education in early childhood care that they're not legally permitted to use in Michigan, she said.

For those with less experience, not being able to get licensed means less oversight and support.

Across the board, Gonzalez believes that Michigan doesn't set up informal caregivers for success.

"No one's supporting that caregiver for that baby to not get hurt," Gonzalez said. "That's where my job jumps in and says, 'Hey, I want you to be the best caregiver you can be.' "

Much of Gonzalez's job entails finding informal caregivers to connect them with resources they'd get through the licensure process. Often, too, caregivers approach her. They "are looking for a career" in the field, she said.

Through monthly online meetings, Gonzalez sets up her Informal Caregivers Cohort with opportunities from free CPR certification to skill-building classes. At a recent meeting, Gonzalez brought in an educator from Michigan State University to teach about the impacts of stress on children's brains and the mindfulness tools staff can use to regulate themselves and kids who are experiencing behavioral challenges, an issue for which there is little support even in licensed childcare.

Gonzalez live-translated the two-hour session to make it accessible for the majority Spanish-speaking audience.

She knows there's a need for support from informal providers beyond her neighborhood. She said she often gets calls from across the metro area asking to join her program. Though she'd love to take them, her organization's funding is restricted to southwest Detroit.

For the informal caregivers she works with, Gonzalez said she hopes to "beef up their training," so they can be prepared for what she hopes to be a not-so-distant future where they're able to get licensed.

"That's where we need help with the state," she said. "If the state would just budge a little, we would have real childcare."

Beki San Martin is a fellow at the Detroit Free Press who covers child care, early childhood education and other issues that affect the lives of children ages 5 and under and their families in metro Detroit and across Michigan. This fellowship is supported by the Bainum Family Foundation. The Free Press retains editorial control of this work.