Child Care as a Pathway for Workforce Stability

Insights and Policy Directions from the Chattahoochee Valley

UNITED WAY Chattahoochee Valley

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Acknowledgements

This project is the result of a collaborative effort involving contributions from many individuals and organizations. The Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF), a national Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) that supports thriving communities through investments in affordable housing and child care facilities, partnered with United Way of Chattahoochee Valley (UWCV), a non-profit that creates pathways to better health, education, and financial opportunities for everyone in the Chattahoochee Valley to coordinate, administer and analyze the results presented here.

Funding for this project was provided through the Recompete Strategy Development Pilot Program Grant, awarded to UWCV in 2023. Access to affordable, high-quality child care is a critical—and often overlooked—barrier to workforce participation and financial security. When examining the local causes of the Prime-Age Employment Gap, child care emerged as one of the most significant barriers to employment.

We also recognize the ongoing efforts of numerous partners whose support strengthened this work. We gratefully acknowledge the organizations in the Chattahoochee Valley that helped disseminate the survey to parents and families, enabling the collection of data and insights that formed the foundation of this study and ensured that their voices were central to the research. We thank the employers who gave their time to participate in focus group sessions and share their perspectives. Additionally, we are grateful to the Columbus Consolidated Government for its leadership and participation in state and national cohorts to advance child care, spurring the collaboration of LIIF and UWCV.

The commitment of these stakeholders enhanced the quality, relevance, and impact of the findings and underscored the power of collective action in shaping recommendations.

Together, we are advancing meaningful change—and this work would not have been possible without this support.

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Introduction

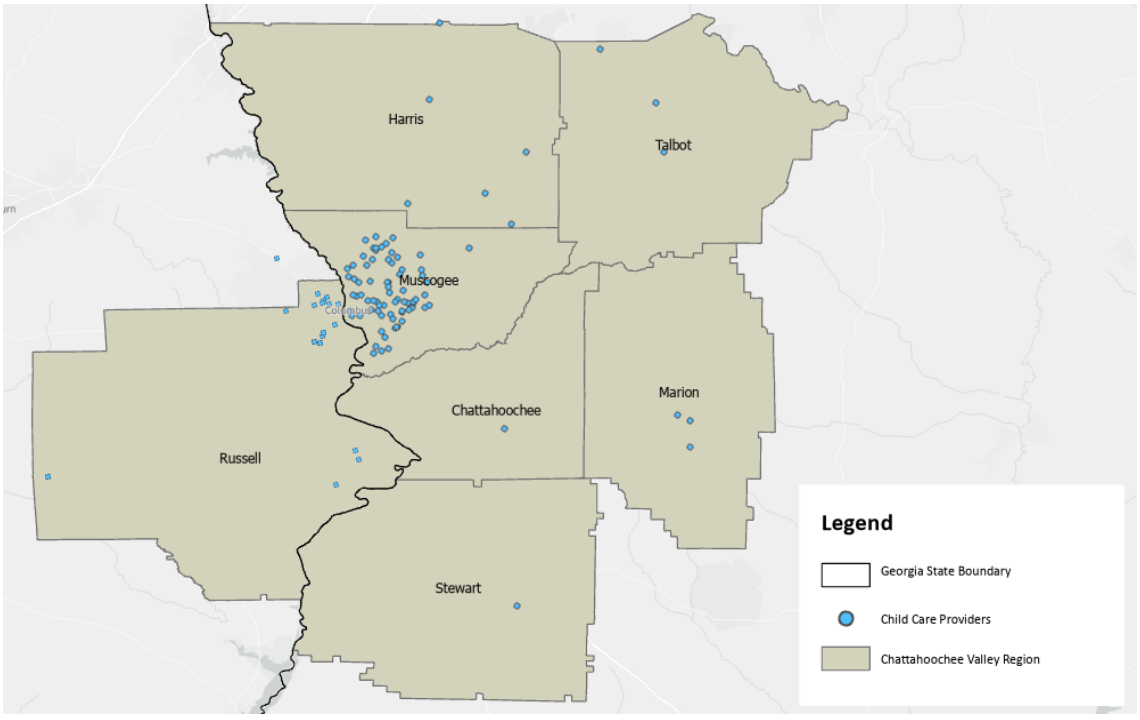
Background and Purpose of the Study

From June – September 2025, LIIF partnered with UWCV to identify child care challenges and explore employer-driven solutions across the Chattahoochee Valley, especially for parents and caregivers experiencing workforce instability. Building on efforts initiated through the Georgia Child Care Accelerator and Recompete Strategy Development work, this project assessed parental needs and engaged cross-sector employers to develop a set of strategies to improve the supply of early care and education (ECE). This report aims to guide impactful investments that support working families and drive economic growth, helping UWCV to advance its goal of reducing poverty by 50% over the next decade.

Overview of Child Care in the Chattahoochee Valley

The ECE ecosystem in the Chattahoochee Valley is complex, particularly in Muscogee County. Despite hosting the region's highest concentration of child care providers, more than 60% of children ages 3 to 4 were not attending early education in 2023, potentially indicating a gap in the availability of care.[1] Figure 1 below illustrates the locations of child care providers, with more in the densely populated counties (Muscogee, Russell, and Harris), and far fewer in the less densely populated areas (Chattahoochee, Marion, Talbot, and Stewart).[2] Mapped provider types include centers, family homes, Early Head Start and Head Start; Russell County also includes group homes.

Figure 1: Supply of Child Care in the Chattahoochee Valley by County



[1] *Kids Count Data Center*. (2023). Retrieved from The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
[2] *Provider Data Export*. (2025). Retrieved from Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.

Methodology

Parent Survey

The parent survey was adapted from LIIF's previously developed questionnaire used in multiple statewide and neighborhood-level studies, and tailored to the Chattahoochee Valley context. The goal was to capture a broad and representative cross-section of communities and families that provides insights into parents' current child care arrangements and preferences.

To publicize the survey, UWCV and LIIF convened an informational session with partner organizations who then shared the survey with their parent contacts. UWCV also promoted the study on their social media platforms to reach as wide a pool of respondents as possible. To encourage participation, a random drawing for 20 gift cards valued at $100 each was offered to respondents. Everyone who completed the survey and provided contact information was entered into the drawing. In total, the survey generated 352 responses representing parents across the Chattahoochee Valley, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

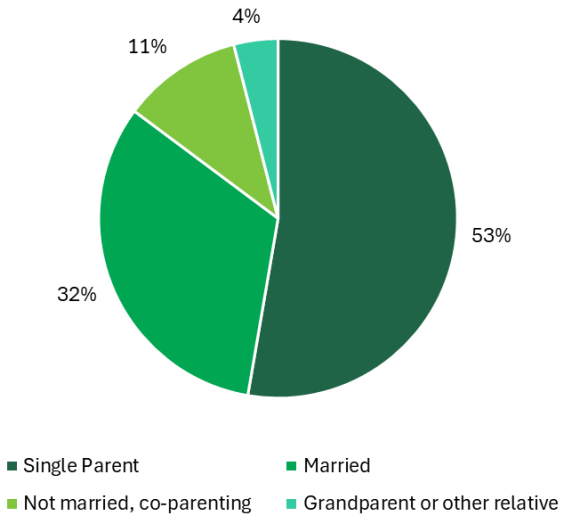
Table 1: Survey Responses by Region and County

Region and County	Number	Percent
Densely/More Densely Populated	**312**	**89%**
Muscogee County, GA	224	64%
Russell County, AL	69	20%
Harris County, GA	19	5%
Less Densely Populated	**40**	**11%**
Chattahoochee County, GA	18	5%
Marion County, GA	17	5%
Stewart County, GA	3	1%
Talbot County, GA	2	1%
Total	**352**	**100%**

Survey respondents represented a diversity of demographic characteristics. Among the 352 responses, 91% of the respondents were female and 9% were male. With respect to marital/caregiver status, Figure 2 below reveals that 53% of respondents were single, 32% were married, and 11% were not married but co-parenting – indicating that more than half of the surveyed parents were supporting their children on a single income.

Alabama Department of Human Resources. (2023). Retrieved from ArcGIS.

Figure 2: Respondents by Marital/Caregiver Status



Ninety-two percent of all responses came from parents within the Prime Working Age group (25-54), with 67% employed and 33% unemployed. Additionally, 13% of all respondents indicated they attend school at some level. Sixty-seven percent reported an annual income between $0-25,000 (43%) or $25,001-50,000 (24%), with the majority of all surveyed parents (63%) living in densely populated counties (see Table A-1). Among those who reported their race and ethnic demographics, 63% identified as Black or African American, 28% as White, 4% as Multiracial, and 3% as Hispanic or Latino/a. A small number of respondents identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and "other" (two each).

Employer Focus Groups

LIIF and UWCV convened focus groups and one-on-one interviews of major regional employers to learn about their employees' child care situations and needs, and to better understand their interest in and capacity to help advance child care supply in the region. UWCV conducted outreach to businesses and organizations, resulting in a pool of 27 employer participants, including two key informants. The key informants held high-level, broad, and strategic perspectives on child care, while the employers provided on-the-ground insights based on their direct experience with their staff. In July and August 2025, five virtual 60-minute focus group sessions and two one-on-one interviews were held with employers, along with two key informant interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts of each session to systemically analyze the narratives.

The interviewees were concentrated in Muscogee County (22) with smaller numbers were in Harris County (2), Stewart County (1), and Russell County (2). They represented a mix of sectors – public (35%), private (42%), and nonprofit (19%) – and one public-private partnership. Participants came from a diversity of business types, including manufacturing, social services, and hospitals. Also represented were a range of workforce sizes: one from a very small organization (2 employees), 13 from small to midsized businesses (12-500 employees), and 10 from large companies (800-5000 employees). Taken together, the narratives reflected the breadth of the Chattahoochee Valley's employer landscape.

Key Findings

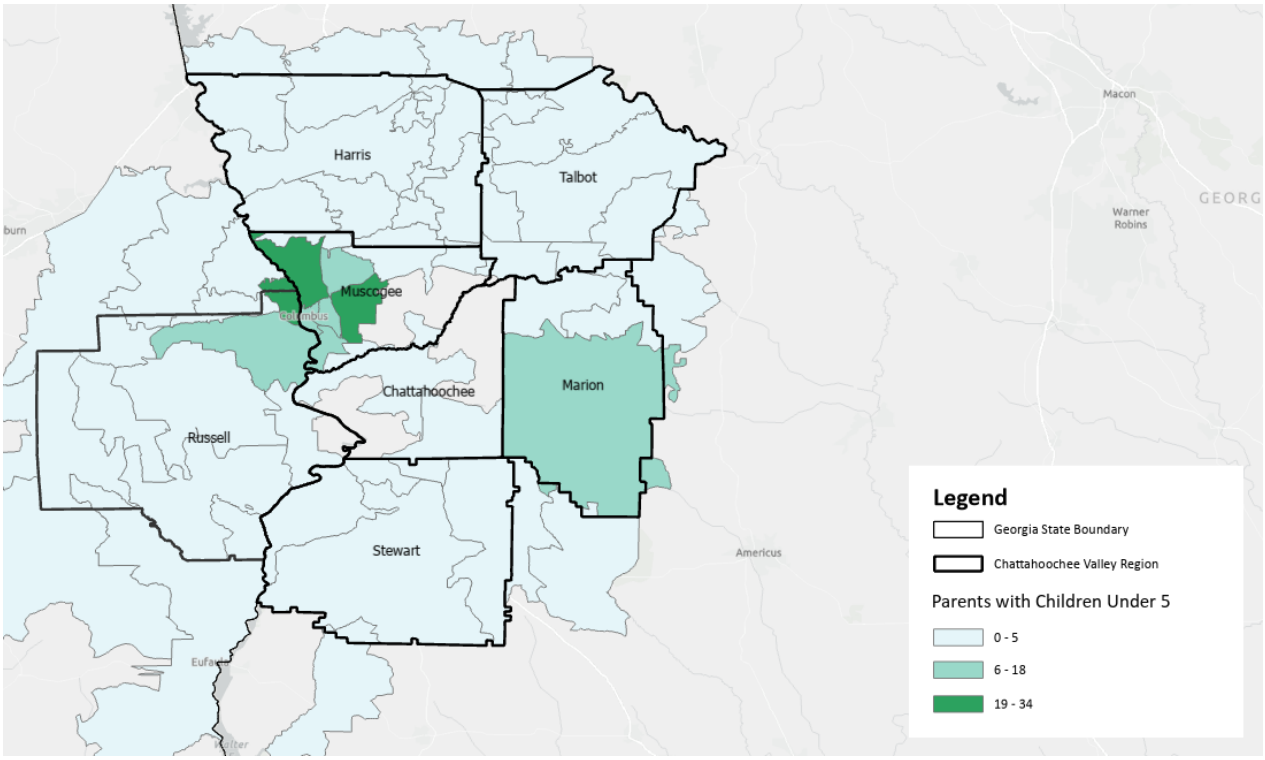
Parents' Perspectives

The subsections below provide insight into child care situations and needs in the Chattahoochee Valley. Note that Table 2 and Figures 4 – 6 and 9 present data from questions that allowed selection of more than one answer; as a result, response counts may exceed the total number of respondents (352).

Mapping the Child Care Landscape and Pathways to Workforce Stability

Of the 352 parent respondents, 192 (55%) reported having children age 5 and under. Figure 3 below illustrates the demand for ECE services based on where these families reside. This includes 130 employed parents who may require licensed care to maintain their workforce participation and 62 unemployed parents for whom access to licensed care may be a prerequisite to a job search. The darker shade of green indicates a greater number of parents with children age 5 and under, while lighter shades reflect fewer survey responses and fewer parents reporting children in that age group.

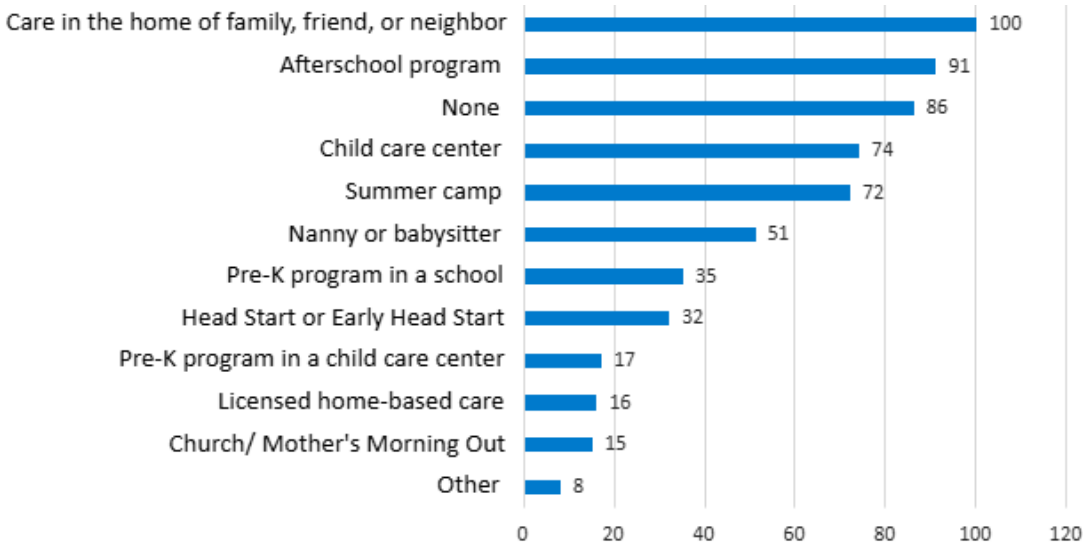
Figure 3: Counts of Surveyed Parents with Children Ages 0-5 by ZIP code



When asked to select the child care types used in the past six months, Figure 4 below shows that parents most commonly turn to a member of their community (e.g., family, friend or neighbor). The second most utilized type was afterschool programs; however, this option was selected primarily by parents of school-age children (6-18). The third most common response of "None" was selected more frequently than formal options such as "Child care center" and "Summer camp." Notably, parents who selected "None" did not choose any other care type, indicating they are not using child care at all. Those who selected

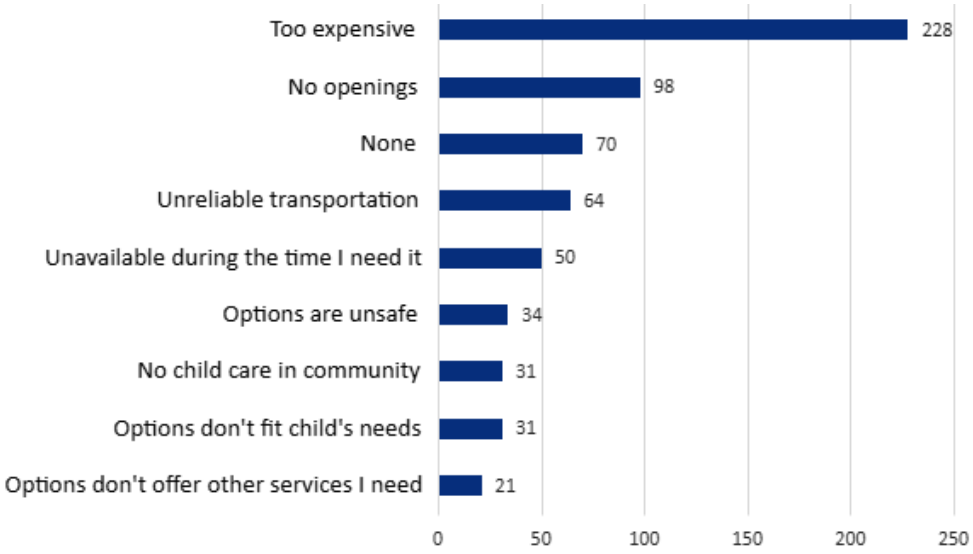
"Other" noted specialized enrichment activities such as therapeutic services, sports, and a class at a museum. Overall, the prevalence of informal and no care arrangements suggests that many Chattahoochee Valley parents may be challenged to secure formal care.

Figure 4: Types of Child Care Used in the Past 6 Months



Cost is the most pressing challenge when seeking care, identified by 65% of all parents (Figure 5 below). This trend holds true across employment status, income, and county. The only exceptions were within the $125,001-$150,000 income band (N=27) and in Talbot County (N=5), where "availability of spots" marginally surpassed cost. The survey identified cost as the most significant barrier overall.

Figure 5: Child Care Challenges



On average, more parents need care during the week rather than the weekend (Figure 6 below). The need for care was relatively consistent throughout the weekdays, while more parents needed care on Saturdays (62) as opposed to Sundays (34). In terms of the time slots when parents most need care, 7:30am-12pm and 12-6pm emerged as the top responses, with the afternoon time slot being the most common response (Table 2 below). Significantly, the third most common response indicated a need for flexible care options with 25% of parents reporting their time needs are subject to change.

Figure 6: Average Number of Respondents Needing Care on Weekdays and Weekends

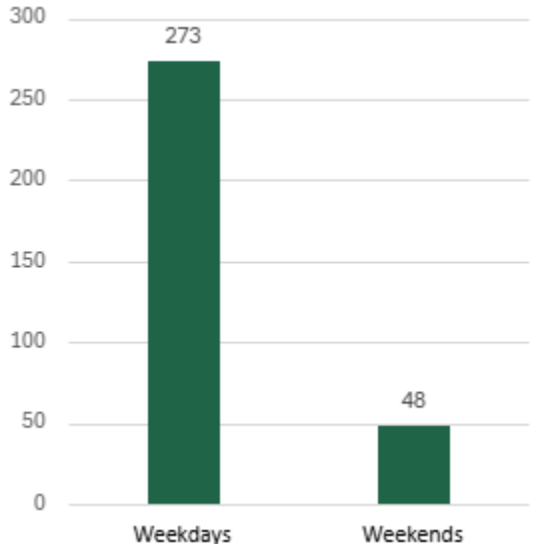
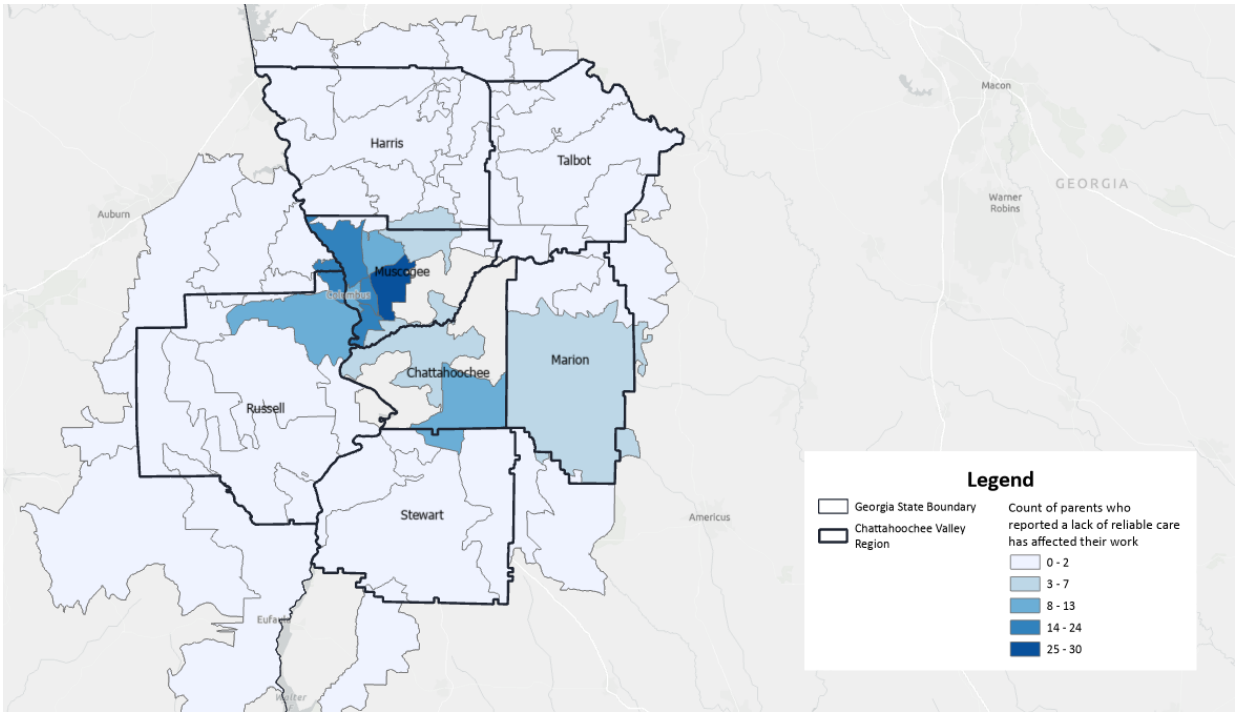


Table 2: Child Care Needs by Time of Day and Number of Respondents

Child Care Time Slots	Respondent Count
Before 7:30 AM	61
7:30 AM - 12:00 PM	139
12:00 - 6:00 PM	177
6:00 PM - 10:00 PM	66
After 10:00 PM	13
Flexible (my time needs are subject to change)	89

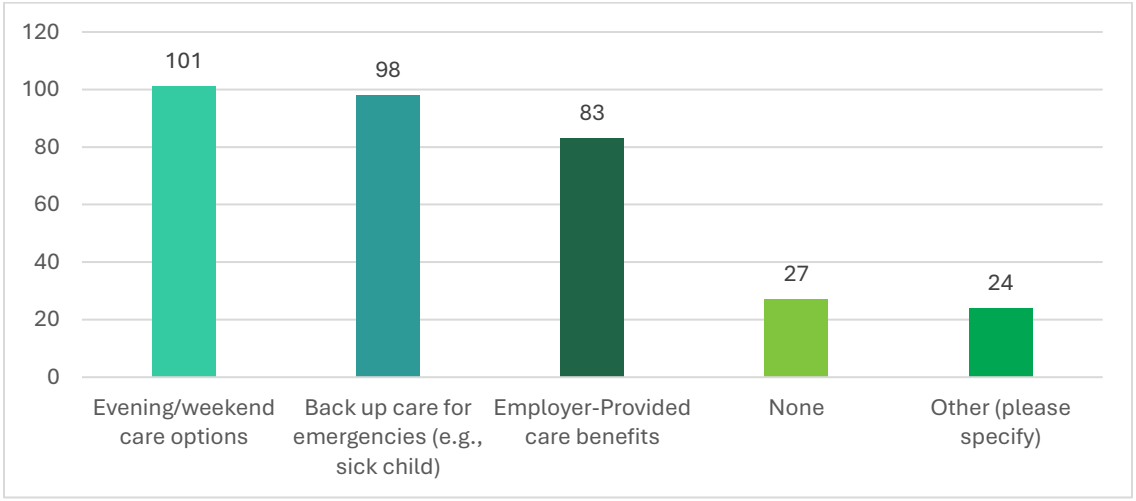
The survey captured responses from parents (N=343) about how a lack of reliable child care has affected their ability to work, with 63% of the respondents reporting a negative impact (Figure 7 below). Dark blue areas in Figure 7 reveal where more respondents have either turned down a job, left a job, or missed work/shifts because there was a lack of reliable child care. The lighter shade shows that less densely populated areas had fewer parent respondents who reported being affected by a lack of child care. Although only 24 responses came from Chattahoochee County, 21 of the parents (88%) in this county indicated that they struggle to find the care they need to maintain stable employment, indicating this may be a county with an especially high need for more care options.

Figure 7: Count of Parents by ZIP Code Reporting That Unreliable Child Care Has Impacted Their Work



In addition to asking parents about how a lack of care has affected their ability to work, the survey also identified the type of care needed specifically to maintain stable employment. Figure 9 below shows that parents most frequently need “Evening/Weekend Care” and “Back up care for emergencies.” One parent who chose “Other” noted "[I need] concierge child care/coverage for […] specific work assignments," reiterating the need for flexible options seen above in Figure 6.

Figure 8: Care Type Needed for Stable Employment



Employers' Insights

The subsections below set out the key themes that emerged from focus groups and interviews with employers and key informants. Note that themes were identified based on recurring sentiments and distinctive insights that addressed the project's goals. While some responses were quantified, the analysis prioritized capturing the salient views of 'most' and 'some' employers.

Employers' Perspectives on Workforce Child Care Situations and Needs

Employers consistently described child care as critical to workforce development. Key themes that resonated across the narratives centered on the affordability, availability, accessibility, and adequacy of care – factors that employers agreed are tied to the recruitment and retention of employees.

Affordability

Many employers explained that the cost of care was an issue often raised by their employees, especially among low-wage workers, with some explaining that child care expenses can rival take-home pay. As one employer specified, "*our support workers spend their entire paycheck on care*." This employer also observed that parents, "*can spend most of their earnings on child care so they [must] decide between continuing employment and staying home with their children.*" Employers across all sectors echoed this sentiment, with some suggesting that the cost of care can cause workforce attrition.

"Parents can spend most of their earnings on child care so they [must] decide between continuing employment and staying home with their children"

Availability

Resounding across most of the focus groups, was the observation that many employees struggle to find available child care. Further, some employers stated that their employees have delayed their start date or turned down an offer due to a lack of care. Exemplifying this point, one employer noted, "*if they don't have reliable child care, it becomes an issue for them to even be in the marketplace for the positions we're hiring for,"* drawing attention to how essential available care is to enable some parents to gain entry into the workforce. Many employers across sectors and business-types echoed similar sentiments, with those in health care, hospitals, and manufacturing placing a particular emphasis on the need for care during late hours. One employer specified that "*long shifts have led to resignation and staffing challenges for employee parents,*" indicating a need for care outside of traditional work hours. Across many of the focus groups, there was a call for greater availability of child care both near where parents work and closer to home, particularly for those with lengthy commutes from the less densely populated areas into the more densely populated regions of the Chattahoochee Valley. While a few employers noted that their staff primarily have a need for emergency care (e.g., ill child or inclement weather), nearly all spoke about the broader challenges faced by their parent employees.

Accessibility

Many employers recognized that parents face barriers accessing care, even in the more densely populated areas. For example, a Muscogee County-based employer expressed the belief that more licensed and higher quality rated care is "*located on the northside of town, making both access and transportation complicating factors.*" Lack of accessible care along with lengthy commutes were discussed by many of the employers, especially for staff living outside of the Columbus metro area and those with non-traditional work schedules (e.g., second and third shifts). However, two employers located in Muscogee County specified that staff living in the 31903 and 31906 ZIP codes were in areas with very scant child care. One explained that staff in these ZIP codes often can't afford cars and rely solely on public transportation and bicycles. Another employer elaborated on the transportation barriers that affect both employment and child care access, stating, "*public transportation can take 2 hours to get somewhere it takes 15 minutes to drive to*." Additionally, a key informant stated that they see a need to add more public bus stops and routes to encourage workforce participation. This aligns with work the City of Columbus has indicated they are already undertaking to understand the location of public transportation in relation to child care.

> *"Public transportation can take 2 hours to get somewhere that takes 15 minutes to drive to"*

Adequacy

It is notable that some employers, especially those in manufacturing and education, brought to the fore that child care of adequate quality is required to best serve the workforce. While a one-size-fits-all definition of quality did not emerge in the focus groups, responses indicated a range of factors are tied to workforce participation. For example, an employer noted that when the quality of care isn't sufficient, parents "*have issues with [..] being productive 'cause maybe they're thinking about their kids*." A few stressed that "*safe and secure child care*" are critical factors, especially for employees with children who have special needs. Considering the social, emotional, and cognitive developmental benefits of care – several employers agreed that early learning in a "structured" environment is crucial. One employer noted that inadequate early childhood education can have long-term negative societal impacts and specified their concern about the high number of incarcerated individuals with low reading levels. Following this same line of thinking, another employer maintained that quality care is tied to increased academic performance and school readiness, underscoring the longer-term value of quality care for workforce development. Overall, participants held a shared sentiment that quality child care is essential, not just for individual families, but for the workforce and the Chattahoochee Valley's broader economy.

Building Bridges to Access: Employer-Driven Opportunities for Collaboration and Investment

While the section above described the key issues that employers felt their parent employees face, the themes below point toward solutions.

During the focus groups, most of the employers were introduced to the available federal and Georgia state tax credits for providing or sponsoring child care for the first time. Notably, twenty-two of the employers indicated that they wanted to learn more, including those who had some awareness of the incentives. One employer, who had connections with several local manufacturers, shared that they heard anecdotal interest in the tax credits during earlier conversations but was unsure whether the companies were actively planning to build or sponsor child care. A few employers stated that they were unable to use or not interested in the tax credits, citing logistical or site-specific reasons, for instance proximity to existing child care centers or safety restrictions that would prohibit co-locating on-site care. Another employer maintained that as a public sector organization, they are unable to utilize tax credits. Sharing a unique perspective, one employer who indicated interest in the credits, explained that since their company operates across multiple states and internationally, they expressed hesitancy about the possibility of using the Georgia-specific tax credits, as doing so would be inequitable to employees outside of the State. This suggests that increasing awareness of the federal and Georgia state tax credits is important across all sectors, with education about the federal credits emphasized for multi-state employers to ensure they understand the full range of available financial incentives.

Figure 9: Employer interest in tax credits

Providing another viewpoint, a key informant stated that executive-level stakeholders (e.g., CEO's who set company strategies and visions) in Georgia are aware and enthusiastic about the tax incentives, including for collaborative models like shared child care centers in industrial parks, which allow multiple employers to utilize the tax credits. However, this individual expressed the belief that those positioned below the executive level (e.g., directors, managers, specialists) tend to view child care initiatives as an administrative burden rather than a critical driver of workforce stability. One employer's experience exemplified this perspective: they had established a child care center in the past but closed it down because it wasn't their area of expertise, suggesting they did not have the administrative bandwidth to sustain operations. This finding illuminates the wide range of priorities across organizational levels and points to a need for tailored communication that helps individual stakeholders understand how child care expansion can benefit their workforce goals and the different ways the tax credits can be applied. Further, it indicates that communication should publicize available technical assistance and best practice models to enable employers to contribute to region-wide child care expansion.

Most of the employers expressed interest in resource pooling as a potential solution to child care challenges. One indicated a strong willingness to explore collaborative opportunities but felt that concerns around liability and administrative complexity could pose barriers. This individual saw potential in leveraging their foundation's financial support and navigating "different pots of money." Another proposed a grassroots approach, stating that staff could "donate money from each paycheck" to help fund child care, which others supported. While the responses related to resource pooling were limited, the overall sentiment, much like the tax credits, was that employers want to learn more. This indicates that fostering collaboration will require clear communication and targeted outreach, including examples of best practices that take into account perceptions around financial and administrative challenges.

Recommendations for Employer-Driven Strategies

Expanding Child Care Access and Workforce Stability

Create a child care expansion hub that connects employers with resources: Insights gleaned from this study shed light on what some employers are already doing, expansion efforts and partnerships underway, and the interest most employers expressed in exploring solutions. Building on these findings, a broader data-driven approach could assess and identify the resources employers need to contribute to the expansion of child care and foster linkages among individual businesses. Creating a child care expansion hub that connects employers (e.g., those exploring options who may benefit from partnering with nearby businesses) with resources (e.g., guidance on tax credits or any underutilized funding streams, and technical assistance) could strengthen regional child care expansion strategy.

Expand outreach and education on child care tax incentives to employers at all levels: While a key informant described the strong interest in tax incentives among employers at the executive-level, the findings suggest a need to shift a wide range of perceptions of employer-supported care from an operational burden to a strategic workforce and economic investment. Taking these findings into account, targeted communication campaigns should highlight best practice models and outline clear pathways to utilize credits. Fostering organizational buy-in across all levels of businesses and organizations by emphasizing the role of care in workforce development and regional economic growth will also support expansion of the care sector by making it a shared priority.

Establish a shared child care solutions fund to increase affordability and access: Employers and parents emphasized that cost is the most common challenge families face when seeking child care. Establishing a shared child care solutions fund – housed and administered by a trusted local nonprofit entity – would ensure transparency and access to tax benefits for donors. The fund could be allocated to an array of child care expenses, such as supporting higher wages and better benefits for child care workers, investing in care facility upgrades, and financial assistance for families who exceed the income level allowed for state subsidies. As an additional supportive measure related to the cost of care, employers can incorporate information about available child care subsidies into onboarding processes, particularly for their lower-wage employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Align investments with child care needs, especially non-traditional hours and backup care, to build workforce resiliency: The findings of the parent survey and the focus groups with employers demonstrated a clear need: parents who are struggling to enter the workforce or maintain stable employment need evening and weekend care options. They also need reliable backup care for emergencies and unexpected situations to avoid missing work. This finding was especially pronounced by employers in the manufacturing and healthcare sectors, where late and long shifts are common. Employers who are contributing to the expansion of child care should take parental needs into account by directing funding to expand available care on nights, weekends, and flexible backup options. This approach could help recruit new staff and support the productivity of current employees.

Partner with early care workforce development programs: At the core of the expansion of the care sector, is the need to strengthen and grow the child care workforce. First, the proposed child care expansion hub can serve as a connector, linking employers who are building care centers with local training programs to create pathways into the ECE workforce. In addition, the proposed shared fund may be allocated in the form of tuition assistance alongside existing scholarships (e.g., Goodwill Scholarship), reducing financial barriers and encouraging enrollment in ECE training programs. A key informant and ECE expert emphasized the importance of targeted outreach to unemployed parents about training opportunities to enter the care sector, noting this population is a valuable part of the ECE workforce pipeline. A multi-pronged approach will foster a trained ECE workforce, which, in turn will contribute to increasing the quality of care in the Chattahoochee Valley, essential for regional economic development.

Engage with local governments to encourage policy changes that build supply of child care: Employers can get involved with local governments to advance policies that support child care supply, such as zoning reforms, reducing licensing fees, and streamlining application processes. Based on this study's finding that unreliable transportation is a significant child care barrier, this engagement could build on the work of Columbus Consolidated Government to understand the connections between bus routes and child care. These efforts include the River Valley Commission's existing recommendations to improve on-demand transit in less densely populated counties to better connect homes, workplaces, and child care providers to provide greater stability to the workforce.[3]

[3] Regional Transit Development Plan. (2025). Retrieved from Georgia Department of Transportation.

Appendix A: Supplemental Data Tables

Table A-1: Parent Survey Responses by Income and Region

	Percent of Respondents	Count of Income
$0-25,000 per year	**43.1%**	**147**
Densely/More Densely Populated	41.6%	142
Less Densely Populated	1.5%	5
$25,001-50,000 per year	**24.0%**	**82**
Densely/More Densely Populated	21.1%	72
Less Densely Populated	2.9%	10
$50,001-75,000 per year	**14.1%**	**48**
Densely/More Densely Populated	10.9%	37
Less Densely Populated	3.2%	11
$75,001-$100,000 per year	**7.9%**	**27**
Densely/More Densely Populated	5.9%	20
Less Densely Populated	2.1%	7
$100,001-125,000 per year	**3.8%**	**13**
Densely/More Densely Populated	3.2%	11
Less Densely Populated	0.6%	2
$125,001-$150,000 per year	**3.8%**	**13**
Densely/More Densely Populated	3.2%	11
Less Densely Populated	0.6%	2
More than $150,000 per year	**3.2%**	**11**
Densely/More Densely Populated	2.9%	10
Less Densely Populated	0.3%	1
Grand Total	**100.0%**	**341**

Excludes responses that indicated “Prefer not to answer”

Table A-2: Focus Group Participants by Sector and Organization or Business Type

Participants and Sector	Business or Organization Type
Nonprofit	
3	Community and Social Services
1	Healthcare and Hospitals
1	Workforce Development
Private	
1	Automotive Services
2	Early Care and Education
1	Electrical Services
1	Financial Services
2	Healthcare and Hospitals
4	Manufacturing
1	Property Management
Public	
1	Early Care and Education
3	Higher Education
1	Housing Authority
2	Local Government
1	School District
1	Utility
Public-Private Partnership	
1	Economic Development Organization
Total = 27	