Rural Realities

A Report on the State of Child Care in Western New York

February 2026

lift off Western New York

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The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY extend our thanks to child care providers and early childhood leaders throughout Western New York who shared their time and expertise in helping inform this report.

The Children's Agenda is grateful to Liftoff WNY for their financial support of this report, and for their commitment to ensuring all children across the region are meeting critical milestones, ready to learn, succeed, and reach their full potential by the time they begin school.

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Executive Summary

Accessible, affordable child care is the backbone of a healthy economy. Trusted child care settings allow parents and caregivers to work or pursue an education needed for economic mobility and allow businesses to recruit and maintain a reliable workforce. And while the economic impacts of child care access are important, the developmental support that quality early education provides for young children may be even more critical for the state's future.

Like their peers living in urban and suburban areas, young children in rural communities deserve high-quality early education, and their families deserve reliable child care that allows them to work or pursue an education.

Unfortunately, while many rural child care providers offer safe and nurturing care to families in their communities despite having fewer resources and supports, the availability of child care in rural communities is also more limited than in suburban and urban communities, especially for children with developmental delays and disabilities. Structural issues with the way New York State funds child care assistance also reduce the ability of low- and moderate-income families to access care in these communities.

This joint report issued by The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY is intended to take a comprehensive look at the strengths and challenges facing families and child care providers in rural parts of Western New York and make recommendations for how local and state-level policymakers can strengthen that system to better meet the needs of these communities.

Key Findings

Child Care Assistance Program Funding Shortfalls

- Families in seven rural counties in Western New York (Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming) have benefited greatly from recent expansions in eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program, with the number of children served by the program each month tripling from approximately 1,000 in 2022 to over 3,000 in 2025.
- Demand for this program exceeded available funding in 2025, and six of the seven counties in rural Western New York closed enrollment to the program at some point during 2025.
- Structural issues with New York State's Child Care Assistance Program funding formula results in rural counties receiving less funding per eligible child than other parts of the state, leading to inequitable access to this critical support. For example, Orleans County receives just $373 from New York State per estimated eligible child, while Nassau County receives $2,915.

Child Care Capacity Is Level, but Insufficient

- Every rural county in Western New York can be characterized as a child care desert, where there are more than three children under 5 per licensed child care slot for children in that age group.

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- More than half of child care providers in the region who responded to a survey in fall of 2025 reported having a wait list for their program.
- Overall child care system capacity remained relatively steady in seven rural counties in Western New York between 2020 and 2025.
- However, the number of providers offering care shrank during that time, driven by the decline of home-based child care.

Child Care Workforce

- Labor data, stakeholder interviews, and provider surveys all identify low child care educator pay as a critical issue limiting the availability of reliable and nurturing care.
- Child care educators in Western New York are among the lowest paid workers in any field, with 97% of jobs in the region paying more than child care.
- More than a third of child care providers responding to a survey reported having staffing shortages.

State Level Recommendations

Make Structural Reforms to the Administration of the Child Care Assistance Program

New York State should shift full responsibility for managing child care funds from social service districts to the Office of Children and Family Services, at least outside of New York City. Under this structure, counties would remain responsible for eligibility determinations and other administrative functions, but New York State would ultimately be responsible for funding the child care system, monitoring spending levels, ensuring equal access throughout the state and determining how best to manage total spending on the program in all corners of the state.

Invest in Child Care Worker Wages

Establishing a child care compensation fund, modeled after programs in place in other states like Maine and North Carolina, would boost educator pay, help programs recruit and retain workers, and protect middle-class families from rate increases.

Expand Proposed Universal Child Care Pilots to Include a Rural County

Adding a rural county to the current proposed pilot counties for universal child care will help inform future expansions of this model in other, less-populated regions of the state.

Better Support for Children with Disabilities and Delays

The Office of Children and Family Services should convene providers, experts in early childhood development disabilities, parents, and other key stakeholders to better understand barriers to care for this population and to develop a comprehensive plan that ensures disability status is not a barrier to receiving high-quality child care throughout New York, including rural areas. This plan should include increasing Child Care Assistance Program rates for children with disabilities and delays.

Community Level Recommendations

Ease Access to the Child Care Assistance Program

Interviews with early childhood stakeholders and child care providers throughout rural Western New York highlighted difficulties families and providers face when navigating the Child Care Assistance Program.

With the likely increase in state investment in child care and additional funds for rural communities, county leaders should develop strategies that aim to reduce paperwork and administer the program in a customer-friendly manner to maximize enrollment.

Prioritize Continuity of Care

State regulations require counties to approach new applicants for assistance the same as recertifying families. Therefore, both recertifying and new applicants must be denied care or placed on a waiting list if they apply during a period when enrollment is closed.

However, counties can apply for a waiver from OCFS from this requirement and continue to recertify most families during periods when enrollment is closed. We recommend that all counties seek this waiver, as it helps limit the disruptions that families and providers face when Child Care Assistance Program resources run short in a community.

Support Local Systems-Building

County and local governments are more attuned to the needs of their communities and are often better at targeting financial supports to address particular issues than the state or federal government. The philanthropic community also has this capacity. Discussions with early childhood leaders in rural Western New York identified community assets and enthusiasm to find ways to better support families with young children. Some of those initiatives receive public and private funding but could do more with additional resources. Public and private funders should also identify ways they can increase support for child care system infrastructure, like community action agencies, child care resource centers, and organizations that train and coach child care educators.

Introduction

Child care has generated considerable attention in New York state over the past few years. The new Mayor of New York City, Zohran Mamdani, ran on a platform of achieving Universal Child Care in New York City. Governor Kathy Hochul has, on numerous occasions, stated her desire to achieve that same goal throughout New York State and recently announced historic new investments in the child care system in her 2026-27 executive budget proposal.

Amidst that optimism for transformative investments throughout New York, the state's existing child care system continues to struggle to meet the needs of families, child care providers, and the broader economy.

And while much has been made of the challenges facing families and child care providers in the most populous areas of New York, less attention has been paid to the condition of the child care system in the state's rural communities. By several measures, families in those communities have the hardest time finding and affording care, while providers face great challenges maintaining operations.

This report aims to assess the state of child care in rural counties in Western New York, highlight the strengths of and challenges facing child care providers in those communities, and make recommendations for how policymakers and community leaders can ensure that children and families in their communities can access high-quality care.

Overview

The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY have, for several years, discussed analyzing the circumstances facing families and child care providers in rural parts of Western New York. We identified this particular project after speaking to stakeholders who observed that **rural counties and communities did not receive the same attention from state policymakers as more urban and suburban parts of New York State**.

Readers should review footnotes throughout the report, but in general terms, all information in this report was derived from:

- Interviews with key community stakeholders
- Surveys of child care providers
- A review of national analyses on child care in rural communities
- US Census Bureau data
- New York State Office of Children and Family Services administrative data

Why Child Care Matters

Accessible, affordable child care is the backbone of a healthy economy. **Trusted child care settings allow parents and caregivers to work or pursue an education needed for economic mobility and allow businesses to**

recruit and maintain a reliable workforce. As New York continues to grapple with a significant labor shortage in critical industries like health care and construction, the importance of child care has become even clearer.

Inadequate access to care causes parents, most often mothers, to leave or lose their jobs, harming both the short- and long-term financial stability of their family. A survey of parents of young children who left the workforce found that 45% of women cited child care availability or expense as a reason they left, compared to 14% of men.[1] The first half of 2025 marked the steepest decline in labor force participation for mothers of young children in more than 40 years.[2] Women being pushed out of the workforce due to inadequate child care has very real impacts on the country, with an estimated $840 billion of lost economic output annually.[3] In New York, improving women's labor force participation could increase GDP by 10% and begin to address the workforce shortage that is threatening the financial future of the state.

While the economic impacts of child care access are important, the developmental support that quality early education provides for young children may be even more critical for the state's future. From birth to three years old, a child's brain is developing a million new neural connections per second. During these early years, children are highly influenced by their environment. **Safe, enriching settings strengthen early brain development and help children build a solid foundation for their future educational and economic success.**

High-quality child care has both short- and long-term benefits for New York's earliest learners. Children receiving quality early education demonstrate improved cognitive and social-emotional skills, including stronger self-regulation and fewer behavioral problems.[4] Participation in quality child care is correlated with improved kindergarten readiness, as well as higher high school graduation and college matriculation rates.[5]

Young children living in poverty see outsized benefits from participating in high-quality early learning programs. Children from low-income families show greater gains in academic skills, including sustained improvements in 3rd grade reading ability and middle school math and reading scores, compared to children from families with higher incomes.[6]

For young children with developmental delays and disabilities, a child care program is often where their needs are first identified, and where they can access the Early Intervention services they need to thrive. Studies have shown that one-third of infants and toddlers who receive this early developmental support do not require special education services once they enter the formal school system.[7]

The benefits of child care for New York's children, families, and economy are clear. Child care programs, and the early educators who run them, are essential supports for both today's workforce and the workforce of tomorrow.

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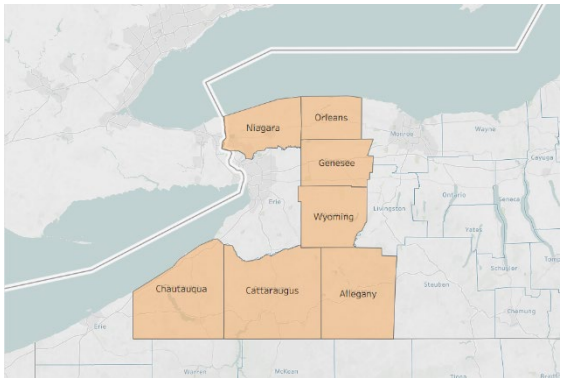
[1] See The Business Case for Child Care
[2] See Labor Force Participation Tracker: Parents with Children Under 5 | The University of Kansas
[3] See The Business Case for Child Care
[4] See Children's Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education: A Summary of the Evidence
[5] See The-Business-Case-for-Child-Care-Fact-Sheet.pdf
[6] See Children's Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education: A Summary of the Evidence
[7] See Early Intervention Services Under IDEA Part C

Rural Western New York Communities

As noted above, this report is intended to highlight the strengths and needs of the child care system in rural counties in Western New York. However, it is difficult to fully isolate "rural" child care within the context of how and where families access care, and how state and county governments fund and manage the Child Care Assistance Program.

For example, parts of southern Erie County are quite rural despite sharing a county with Buffalo, the second largest city in New York state. Conversely, counties in Western New York like Niagara and Chautauqua have significant urban and/or suburban areas. The eastern border of Western New York is also inconsistently defined and sometimes includes parts of Greater Rochester and the Genesee Valley.

For the purposes of this analysis, "Rural Western New York" is defined as the counties partially or fully west of Monroe and Livingston counties that do not contain a city with a population greater than 50,000 residents and have at least 25% of residents living in a non-urban area (as defined by the US Census Bureau[8]). This definition includes 7 of the 8 westernmost counties in New York State, with Erie County being the sole county in Western New York excluded from this analysis.



The exclusion of Erie County is not intended to minimize the challenges facing the child care sector there but instead aims to elevate the issues facing the child care system in areas that are often overlooked by state-level policymakers, advocates, and the media.

Below is a table detailing some key characteristics of the seven counties included in this report's review.

County	Total Population	Children Under 5	Children Under 13	% Population Residing in Rural Area	Median Household Income
Allegany	47,027	2,396	6,503	88.5%	$80,013
Cattaraugus	76,479	4,235	11,971	61.8%	$75,127
Chautauqua	126,329	6,686	18,532	44.1%	$76,149
Genesee	57,943	3,002	8,247	62.1%	$89,729
Niagara	211,341	10,743	29,974	30.0%	$88,304
Orleans	39,686	1,852	5,185	66.5%	$83,039
Wyoming	39,980	1,890	5,248	90.0%	$84,930
WNY Rural Regional Total	**598,785**	**30,804**	**85,659**	**48.9%**	**N/A**
New York State	**19,867,248**	**1,039,067**	**2,805,593**	**12.6%**	**$105,060**

[8] The Census Bureau identifies urban areas by applying specified criteria on housing unit and/or population density within a census tract. For more information on this definition, visit the census bureau's website.

Background Information on Child Care in Rural Areas

Like their peers living in urban and suburban areas, young children in rural communities deserve high-quality early education, and their families deserve reliable child care that allows them to work or pursue an education. **However, nearly 60% of rural families in the United States live in a child care desert, defined as three or more children under age five per each available child care slot.**[9] This shortage particularly impacts rural families with very young children, as there are nine children under age three for every infant and toddler slot in rural counties.[10]

National trends in child care supply are exacerbating the long-standing rural care shortage. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of small home-based child care programs, also known as family child care, fell by 48%.[11] At the same time, the total number of child care slots increased by over 7%, roughly 700,000 openings, with the largest increase in center-based care. A higher proportion of rural families use home-based child care than families living in urban areas, and only about 16% of rural children receive center-based care. Private equity firms, which are driving much of the shift to child care centers, are less likely to invest in rural areas where smaller, less dense populations make it difficult to run a profitable child care program.[12] This lack of access makes rural families much more reliant on informal care from family, friends, or neighbors.

Rural families who can access formal child care, whether home- or center-based, must often travel long distances to reach it, creating additional stress and costs for parents. A 2021 survey conducted on behalf of the Bipartisan Policy Center found that 55% of rural families with children under age five lived more than five miles from a child care program, and 9% lived more than 30 miles from a program.[13] Difficulty accessing reliable child care drives parents, most often mothers, out of the workforce, negatively impacting both family financial security and the wider economy.

> **Estimates indicate the economic impact of the child care gap in rural America ranges from $33-$50 billion in lost economic productivity and tax revenues.[14]**

The vast majority of rural parents (86%) who themselves (or their partner) are not currently working say that child care responsibilities contributed to their decision not to work.[15] A study from the Rural Health Advisory Committee found that when center-based care is available in a community, the percentage of mothers who use that type of care and are employed doubles from 11% to 22%.[16]

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[9] See Childcare Need and Availability in Rural Areas January 2023
[10] See Understanding Infant and Toddler Child Care Deserts - Center for American Progress
[11] See Childcare Need and Availability in Rural Areas January 2023
[12] See Rural Child Care Policy Framework
[13] See slide 17 Understanding Rural Parents' Child Care Needs
[14] See Families in Rural Communities Face Acute Child Care Challenges
[15] See Rural Child Care Policy Framework
[16] See Child Care Gaps in Rural America Threaten to Undercut Small Communities - KFF Health News

More than two million New Yorkers live in rural communities. State and local leaders should strive to ensure all children and families, regardless of where they live, have access to the high-quality child care they need and deserve.

Child Care in New York State

New York State's child care system is primarily governed by federal and state law and is administered by the state's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). Through a license and registration process, OCFS determines whether a provider meets state standards on health, safety, and various training requirements and is able to appropriately care for children in their program. Regulated care providers are also subject to extensive and ongoing health and safety reviews from state licensing officers. Approved providers are legally certified to care for children outside the child's home for more than three hours per day.

Types of Child Care Settings

There are four major types of licensed or registered child care settings in the state. These settings are subject to inspections prior to the issuance of licenses or registrations, and every two years thereafter.[17]

A brief description of each type of licensed or registered child care setting is below:

- **Child Care Centers (CCC)** – Facilities located in non-residential settings that can serve children 6 weeks to 12 years old, where children are grouped into rooms based on their age. Staff to child ratios depend on the age of the children, and the number of children who can be served depends on the square footage of the classroom or facility.
- **Family Child Care (FCC)** – One adult caring for a maximum of 6 to 8 children (depending on the ages of the children) in a residence. There must be at least one caregiver for every two children under the age of two.
- **Group Family Child Care (GFCC)** – Two adults caring for a maximum of 12-16 children (depending on the age of the children) in a residence. As with Family Child Care, there must be one caregiver for every two children under the age of two.
- **School Age Child Care (SACC)** – Facilities located in non-residential settings that serve school age children (ages 5 to 12). Staff to child ratios depend on the age of the children, and the number of children who can be served depends on the square footage of the classroom or facility. These programs may be closed when school is not in session.

It is also important to recognize that many children receive informal and unlicensed care from a variety of caretakers. Grandparents, other extended family members, neighbors, and older children may care for young children while parents work, pursue an education, or meet other family needs. These arrangements are crucial and often highly flexible supports for families with young children. Some of these caretakers register as "Legally

[17] A fifth type of program, called a "Small Day Care Center" also exists in regulation. However, only two programs of this type currently exist in New York State and none are in Western New York. See Office of Children and Family Services regulations for more detail about requirements for each type of child care setting.

Exempt" providers and can receive payments through the Child Care Assistance Program (described at length below) for caring for up to two unrelated children and/or eight related children.

Other publicly funded programs also help (though often with limited days and hours) to meet child care needs for families with children of certain ages in these communities. Those programs include Head Start, Pre-K, summer camps, and afterschool programs offered by school districts throughout the region.

Child Care Ratios by Age

Because adult-to-child ratios vary based on the setting and the age of children, care for young children is more expensive than older children. This is largely driven by the need for younger children to require more intensive supervision, care, and attention. New York State's child care regulations reflect this reality and ensure that teacher/child ratios are low enough to ensure children are safely supervised and can receive the care and attention appropriate for their age and development.

Child Care Worker Pay

Any analysis of child care system dynamics must be grounded in the realities facing the child care workforce. Operating a child care program in New York and elsewhere in the United States is challenging. Providers are forced to balance the limited capacity of families to pay for care with the wages they can afford to pay educators. Given the necessarily low adult-to-child ratios that ensure child safety and promote well-being, child care educators end up receiving far lower pay than their critically important role in our economy would otherwise reflect.

The seven counties included in this analysis span two different Department of Labor regions but share the same basic reality.

> **Child care workers are among the lowest paid categories of workers in both regions, with more than 97% of other professions offering higher pay.[18]**

Labor Market Region	Counties	Average Hourly Wage	Median Annual Income	% of jobs in the region that pay more than median child care income
Finger Lakes	Genesee Orleans Wyoming	$16.94	$34,503	97.4%
Western New York	Allegany Cattaraugus Chautauqua Niagara	$17.36	$34,737	97.2%

[18] Workforce compensation data by region derived from the New York State Department of Labor website.

This low pay has consequences for the availability of care for families (explored in further detail below) and impacts on the quality of care received by children. Specifically, the inability of a child care educator to make a sustaining wage in this field often leads to high teacher turnover, which can disrupt child-teacher relationships and limit positive child development outcomes.[19]

Considerable work has been done over the past several decades to increase the training and professional capacities of the child care workforce. New York State has adopted a career ladder that recognizes the important role that training, education, certification, and experience play in helping early childhood educators provide high-quality care to young children. However, the structural forces which keep pay low throughout the state limit the ability of many early childhood educators to grow in this field over the course of a career.

The Child Care Assistance Program

New York State's Child Care Assistance Program is designed to help low- and moderate-income families afford the cost of child care. The program is governed by the state Office of Children and Family Services and is primarily funded by federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds, a portion of the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) allocation, and, increasingly, State funds. Counties are also required by New York State to provide matching local funds, referred to as "Maintenance of Effort." Except for New York City, the amount of each county's Maintenance of Effort is based on that county's local child care spending in the mid-1990s.

Counties can contribute additional local tax dollars to expand child care assistance in their community, and some districts have historically chosen to do so.

The federal government sets policy parameters for the use of federal Child Care and Development Block Grant funds but gives New York and other states significant latitude in determining how to use their allocations. Similarly, New York State distributes the funds in the form of a block grant to the state's 58 social services districts and has traditionally given them broad discretion to determine how best to use these resources within federal guidelines. Over the past several years, the state has reduced that discretion and has taken steps to standardize eligibility, co-payments, and other key program parameters.

Block Grants and Eligibility-Based Programs

Block grants are a fixed amount of money that one level of government issues to another. For example, the Child Care and Development Fund is a federal program that issues grants to states, territories, and tribal organizations each year. In theory, a block grant is designed to allow the grantee to have more control over how a limited amount of funds are used. However, block grants also have significant disadvantages. Most notably, the level of funding is not directly tied to eligibility or demand for the service. This means that an otherwise eligible family

[19] See Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis's 2022 analysis - Examining teacher turnover in early care and education

may not receive a service because funding ran out. The government recipient of a block grant may limit promoting enrollment in the program or may reduce benefit levels to ensure funds are sufficient.

Eligibility-based programs, by contrast, are funded by government to the level of need. Funding for these programs is based on enrollment and receipt of benefits among qualifying recipients. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an example of this: the government will aid any eligible family who applies, regardless of funding constraints. Spending levels typically rise during recessions and fall during times of economic expansion.

The Child Care Assistance Program in New York is structured as a block grant at two levels. The federal government grants funds to New York State, and the state, in turn, grants funds to localities. New York's approach is unusual among states. According to research done by the Center for Law and Social Policy and the National Women's Law Center, only eight states re-grant federal child care funds to local governments, and nearly all other states determine eligibility and other programmatic components at the state level.[20]

New York State Block Grant Allocation Methodology

New York State's Child Care Block Grant funding formula is determined by state statute. Social Services Law 410.v states that -

> The part of the block that is determined to be available to social services districts for child care assistance shall be apportioned among the social services districts by the department according to an allocation plan developed by the department and approved by the director of the budget. The allocation plan shall be based, **at least in part, on historical costs and on the availability and cost of, and the need for, child care assistance in each social services district.** Annual allocations shall be made on a federal fiscal year basis.[21]

However, despite the statute's references to "the availability and cost of, and the need for, child care assistance in each social services district," in practice, the state's funding methodology has been based entirely on each social service district's child care spending over a relatively recent period.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Children and Family Services determined the size of each county's child care block grant by measuring that county's share of statewide total spending on child care over the prior five years. Counties that spent less than their allocated total would lose funding in future years, while counties that spent more than they received from New York State would receive an increase proportionate to their share of the total increase across the state.[22]

This approach tried to create incentives for counties to invest local funds in the Child Care Assistance Program and to ensure that state and federal child care assistance funds were fully spent by localities.

In practice, this allocation structure resulted in declining funding for many rural counties across New York state and increased State funding for a relatively few, largely urban communities. From 2010-11 to 2020-21, total

[20] Shared with The Children's Agenda via email on July 23rd, 2024. Those states are New York, Colorado, Wisconsin, Virginia, Ohio, North Dakota, North Carolina, and Minnesota.
[21] Among other places, the text of this statute is available on the New York State Senate website
[22] This 2019 Local Commissioner Memorandum from the Office of Children and Family Services more fully details the Child Care Block Grant allocation methodology employed by the state prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

state and federal funding for the Child Care Assistance Program grew by $96 million. Over that same period, 10 of 58 social service districts received nearly $95.8 million in increased funding.

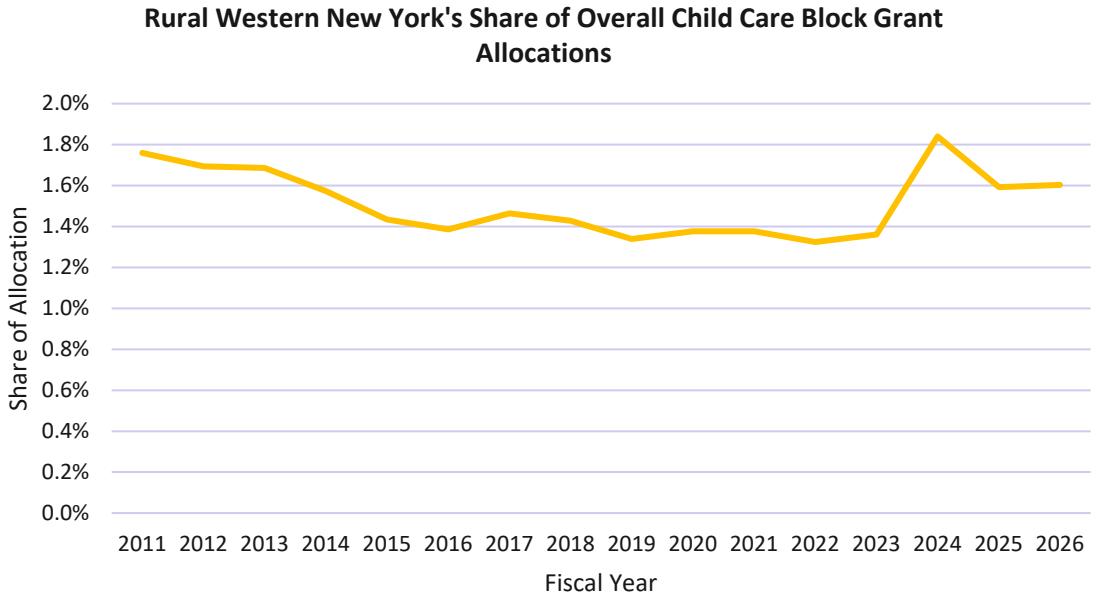
> **Despite increased total funding for the program, 25 mostly rural counties received less state funding in 2020-21 than in 2010-11.[23]**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused enrollment in the Child Care Assistance Program and spending on the program to decline significantly statewide, thus disrupting this funding model. Substantial new investments of federal and state funds in child care also prompted policymakers to adjust New York's block grant methodology.

The Office of Children and Family Services has modified the allocation methodology annually since 2021 and has strived to encourage local districts to maximize spending of all available resources (which have increased dramatically in recent years, as explored below). For example, in 2024-25, increased funding for the Child Care Assistance Program was distributed throughout the year to counties that demonstrated that they would exceed their initial allocations.

In the 2025-26 funding period, as demand for Child Care Assistance Program funds began to exceed available funds, OCFS's methodology prioritized maintaining prior year allocation levels as much as possible, with exceptions for counties that had significant unspent funds from prior allocation periods.[24]

New York State's approach to Child Care Block Grant allocations resulted in Rural Western New York receiving a declining share of the overall block grant during the 2010s before increasing slightly over the past several years.



[23] Annual child care block grant allocations were compiled by reviewing Office of Children and Family Services Local Commissioner Memorandums from 2010 to present. Those materials are available on the OCFS website.
[24] See the 2025-26 Office of Children and Family Services Child Care Block Grant Methodology

Child Care Capacity in Rural Western New York

When the COVID-19 pandemic descended upon the United States, many advocates and policymakers feared that the child care sector would be permanently devastated. Enrollment in child care programs nationwide and in New York State plummeted in 2020 and 2021. This was likely driven by both public health considerations that limited the number of children who could be served in a setting and the apprehensions of many families to enroll their young children in a group care environment.

And while New York's child care system capacity contracted in the wake of the pandemic, temporary federal COVID relief measures, sensible policies, targeted investments from state policymakers, and a sustained commitment to expanding child care assistance (explored in greater detail below) limited the long-term consequences of the pandemic in Rural Western New York.[25]

Number of Licensed and Registered Child Care Programs, by County			
County	**January 2020**	**December 2025**	**# Change**
Allegany	32	32	0
Cattaraugus	46	41	-5
Chautauqua	82	77	-5
Genesee	34	27	-7
Niagara	129	109	-20
Orleans	24	16	-8
Wyoming	25	24	-1
Total	**372**	**326**	**-46**

While the total number of providers in Rural Western New York counties shrank from January 2020 to December 2025, the overall capacity of the child care system in those communities remained level. However, there were significant internal differences within the region.

Licensed and Registered Child Care Program Capacity, by County				
County	**January 2020**	**December 2025**	**# Change**	**% Change**
Allegany	1,066	1,603	537	50%
Cattaraugus	1,768	2,238	470	27%
Chautauqua	3,954	2,888	-1,066	-27%
Genesee	1,247	1,244	-3	0%
Niagara	4,967	5,238	271	5%
Orleans	744	626	-118	-16%
Wyoming	619	639	20	3%
Total	**14,365**	**14,476**	**111**	**1%**

[25] 2025 child care system capacity data is available on the OCFS website. 2020 data was downloaded from the state's Open Data platform on January 20th, 2020.

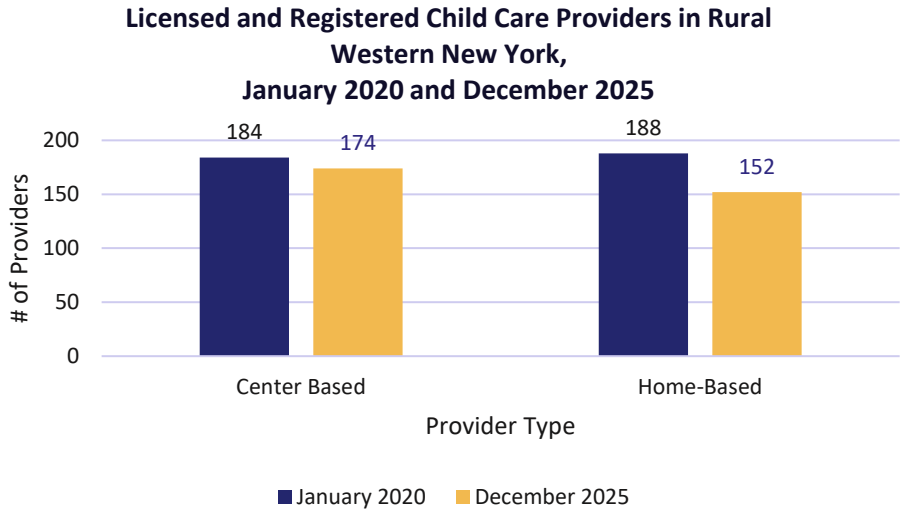
Allegany County's child care capacity growth and Chautauqua County's losses can primarily be explained by changes in the availability of school age care. In Chautauqua County, several large afterschool programs closed, reduced hours, or reduced their operating capacity significantly. In Allegany, the number of registered school age child care programs doubled from 5 to 10.

Viewed separately at the county level, child care system capacity for children who have not yet reached school age declined slightly in 4 of 7 counties, while it grew for school age children in 5 of 7 counties. Orleans was the only county to experience capacity declines in both categories.

Licensed and Registered Child Care Program Capacity Change, by Age Grouping

County	Change in Non-School Age Capacity	Change in School Age Capacity	Total Capacity Change
Allegany	94	443	537
Cattaraugus	-38	508	470
Chautauqua	50	-1,116	-1,066
Genesee	-155	152	-3
Niagara	102	169	271
Orleans	-107	-11	-118
Wyoming	-26	46	20
Total	**-80**	**191**	**111**

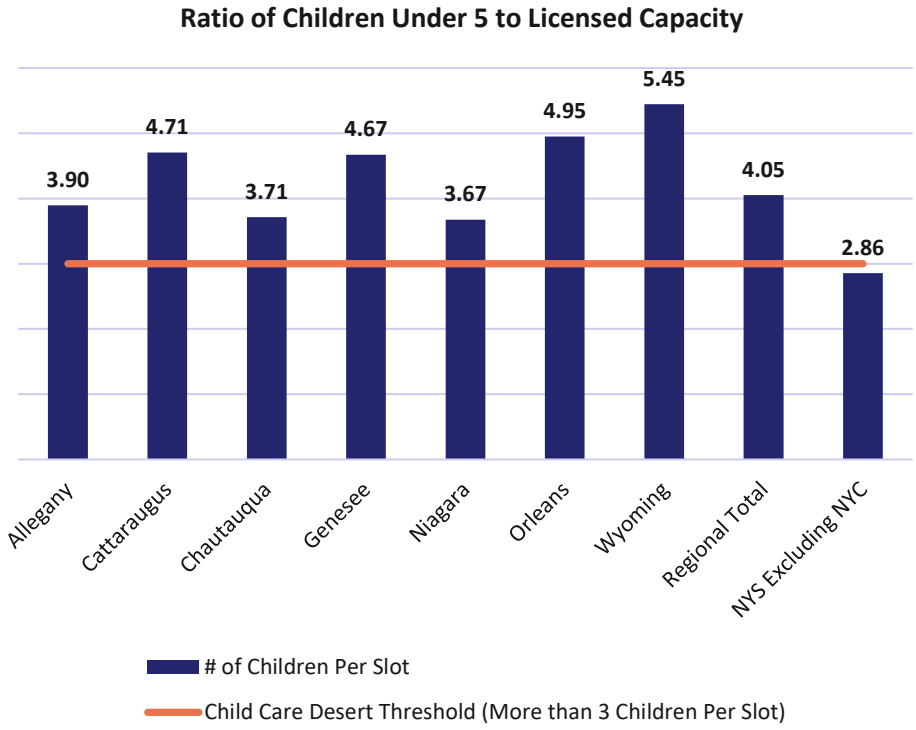
While overall formal child care capacity remained relatively stable, the types of child care available to families in rural parts of Western New York shifted between 2020 and 2025. Specifically, the number of home-based child care providers declined by 19% over those 5 years.[26]



[26] Anecdotally, several early childhood stakeholders we interviewed as part of this project observed that more families now rely upon publicly-funded legally exempt care (also known family, friend, and neighbor care) than in the past. Legally exempt care data is not publicly available, and the use of this type of care can be difficult to measure. And while examining trends in that type of care are outside the scope and timeline of this analysis, The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY both intend to study the topic more in the future.

The decline in home-based child care limits options for families, especially in rural areas where they may only have a handful of care options within a manageable distance of their home.

And despite overall child care capacity remaining mostly consistent with pre-pandemic levels, it is important to note that every rural county in Western New York meets the definition of a child care desert identified earlier in this report (3 or more children under age 5 per each licensed slot).



Patterns in Child Care Assistance Program Enrollment and Funding

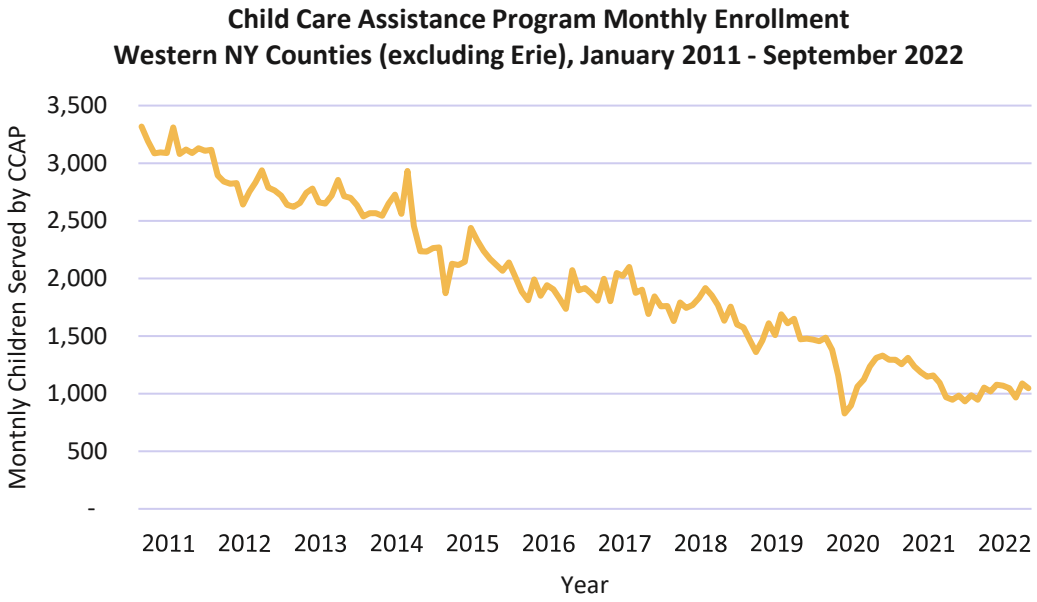
Like much of New York state, enrollment in the Child Care Assistance Program declined in Western New York throughout the 2010s. In January 2011, 3,318 children in the seven counties highlighted by this report received support from the Child Care Assistance Program. In January 2020, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 1,487 children were enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program in those same counties.[27]

Many factors, including insufficient funding for the program, restrictive income eligibility levels paired with rising minimum wages, and falling birth rates, likely caused this decline.

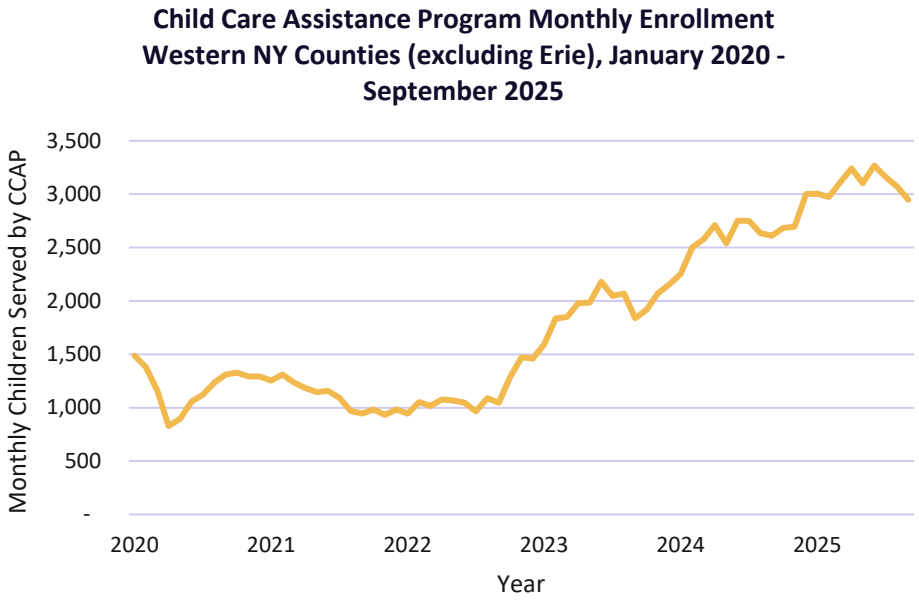
The pandemic caused further enrollment declines, with monthly participation in the program across seven counties falling to just 828 children in April 2020.

[27] Enrollment data by county is available on the Office of Children and Family services website.

For the next two years, regional enrollment in the Child Care Assistance Program hovered around 1,000 children each month.



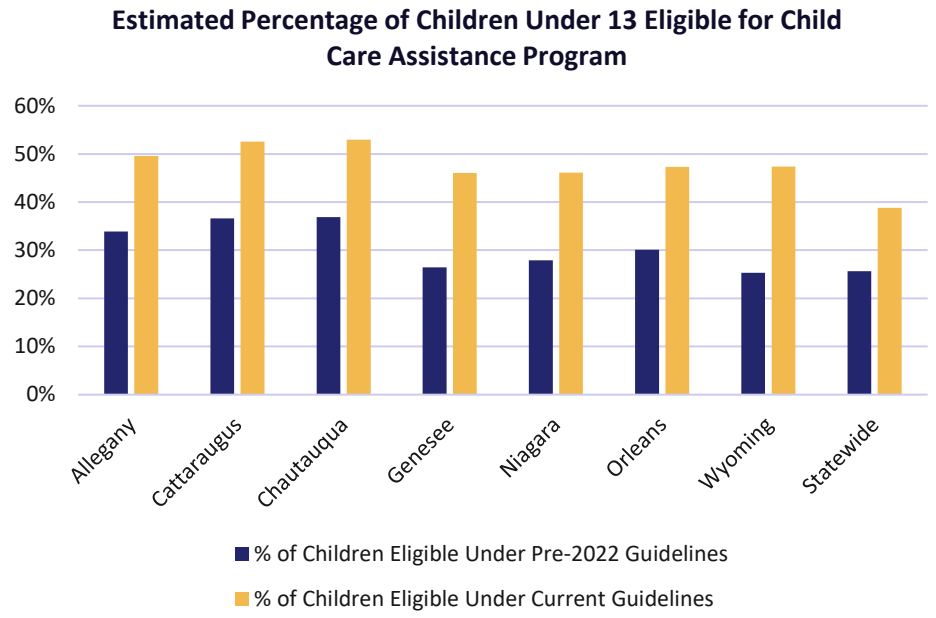
Beginning in October 2022, enrollment in the program began to rapidly increase. **By the summer of 2025, program participation in rural Western New York counties was higher than any period during the prior 15 years.**



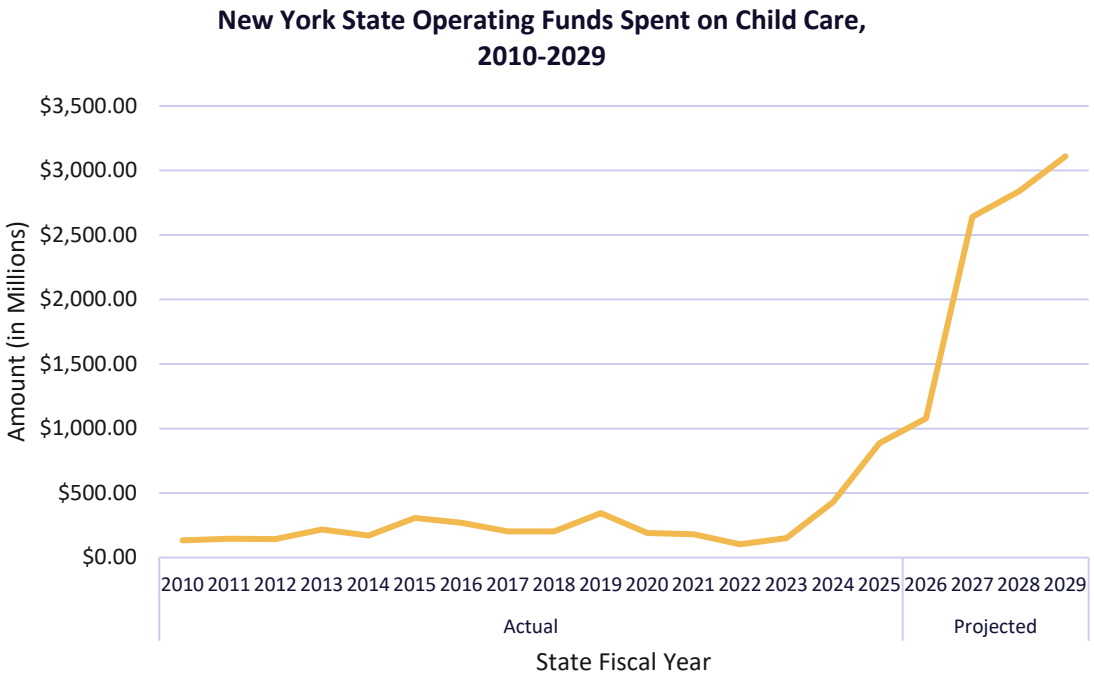
The growth of participation in this program from 2022 to 2025 was the result of substantial state-level reforms enacted by Governor Hochul and the state legislature. Those reforms included:

- Expanding eligibility from 200% of the Federal Poverty Level ($55,500 for a family of 4) to 85% of State Median Income ($113,568 for a family of 4).
- Reducing the family share of child care costs from 35% of income over the Federal Poverty Level to just 1% of income over the Federal Poverty Level.
- Raising reimbursement rates to the 80th percentile of the market rate survey.
- Reimbursing providers for 80 child absences, ensuring that providers are compensated regardless of attendance on a particular day.

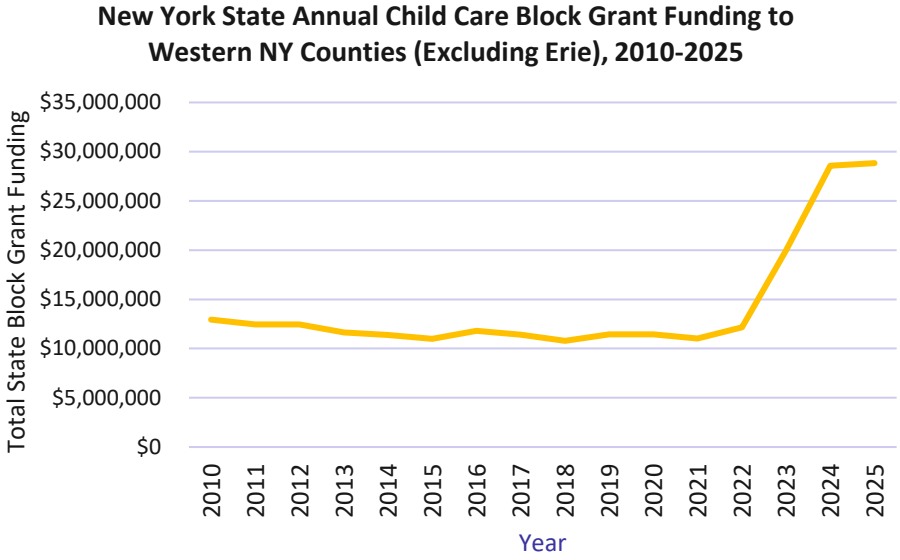
These expansions made approximately 14,600 children in the seven counties newly eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program.



Additionally, substantial increases in Child Care Assistance Program funding allowed more families to benefit from the program and (through the reforms mentioned above) increased per-child spending, which encouraged more providers to participate in the Child Care Assistance Program. This funding increase was initially supported through higher COVID-era federal child care spending and was sustained by state funding as the federal investment receded. Beginning in the 2024-25 state budget, New York State began spending significant state resources on the Child Care Assistance Program. **Governor Hochul's 2026-27 executive budget proposes a historic and unprecedented increase in funding for the Child Care Assistance Program over the next few years.**



New York's Child Care Block Grant funding for Rural Western New York increased from approximately $11 million to $28 million.



These policy changes and funding increases caused a surge in participation in the Child Care Assistance Program across New York, including counties in Western New York.

Demand for child care assistance began to exceed available funding in Western New York counties during 2025, and all counties in the region except Chautauqua[28] closed enrollment at some point during the year.[29] These program closures should, in one sense, be viewed as a reflection of the success of expansions in eligibility for the program over the past several years. On the other hand, many Western New York counties closed enrollment for the Child Care Assistance Program despite having far lower uptake rates for the program than other parts of the state because many of those counties receive far less state funding per eligible child than other communities in New York State.[30]

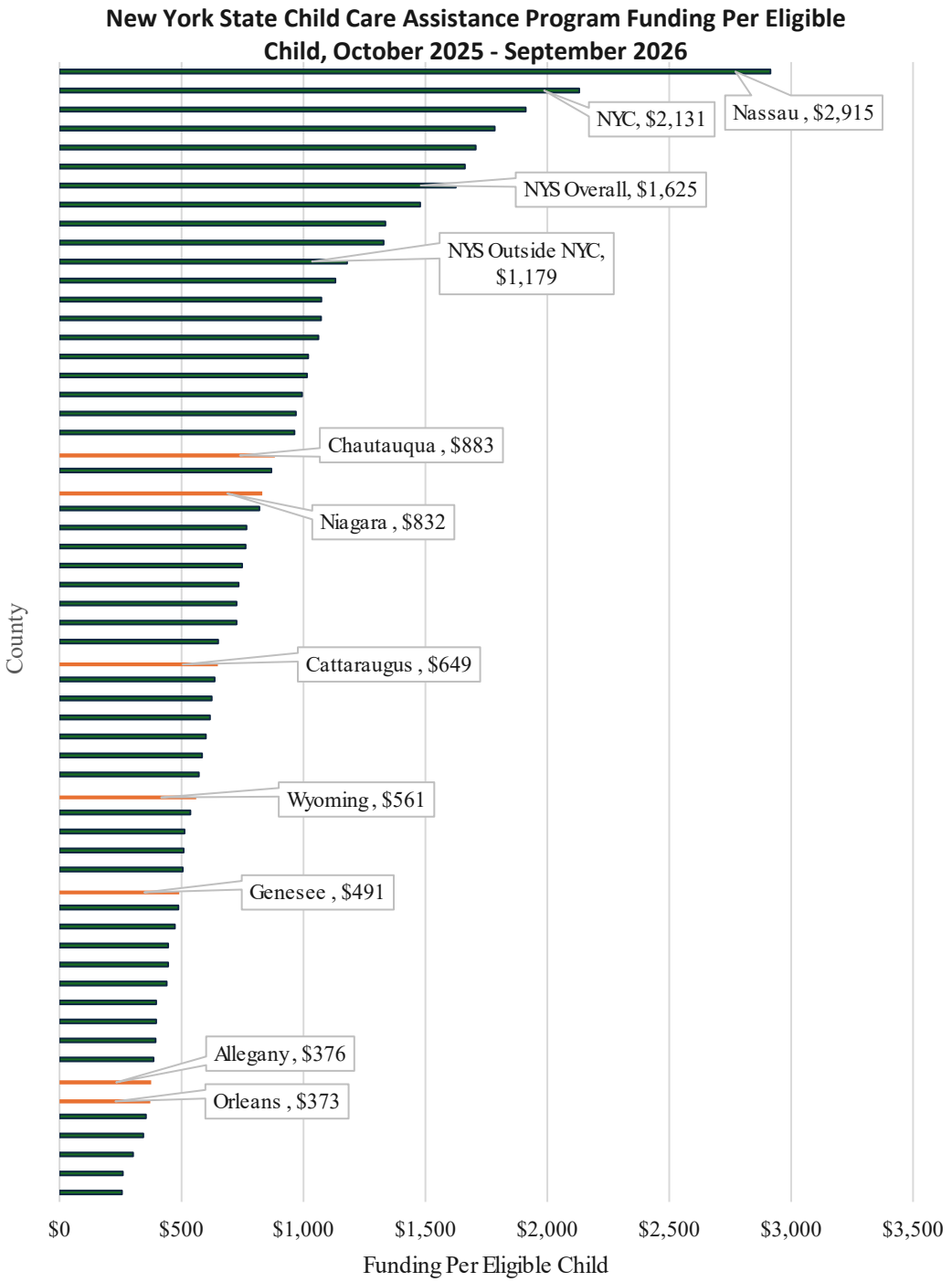
As of January 2026, rural Western New York counties had the following CCAP enrollment statuses:

- Allegany: Recently Re-Opened
- Cattaraugus: Closed, No Waitlist
- Chautauqua: Open
- Erie: Closed, Operating Waitlist since October 2025
- Genesee: Closed, Operating Waitlist since June 2025
- Niagara: Closed, Operating Waitlist since December 2025
- Orleans: Closed, Operating Waitlist since June 2025
- Wyoming: Closed, Operating Waitlist since June 2025

As noted above, New York's Child Care Assistance Program is structured as a block grant from the State to 58 different social service districts. The amount granted to districts is based on historic spending on the Child Care Assistance Program in those communities. That methodology has, over time, led to highly inequitable distributions across the various counties of the state.

> **Less wealthy and rural counties generally receive far less funding per eligible child from the state than wealthier, more densely populated communities.**

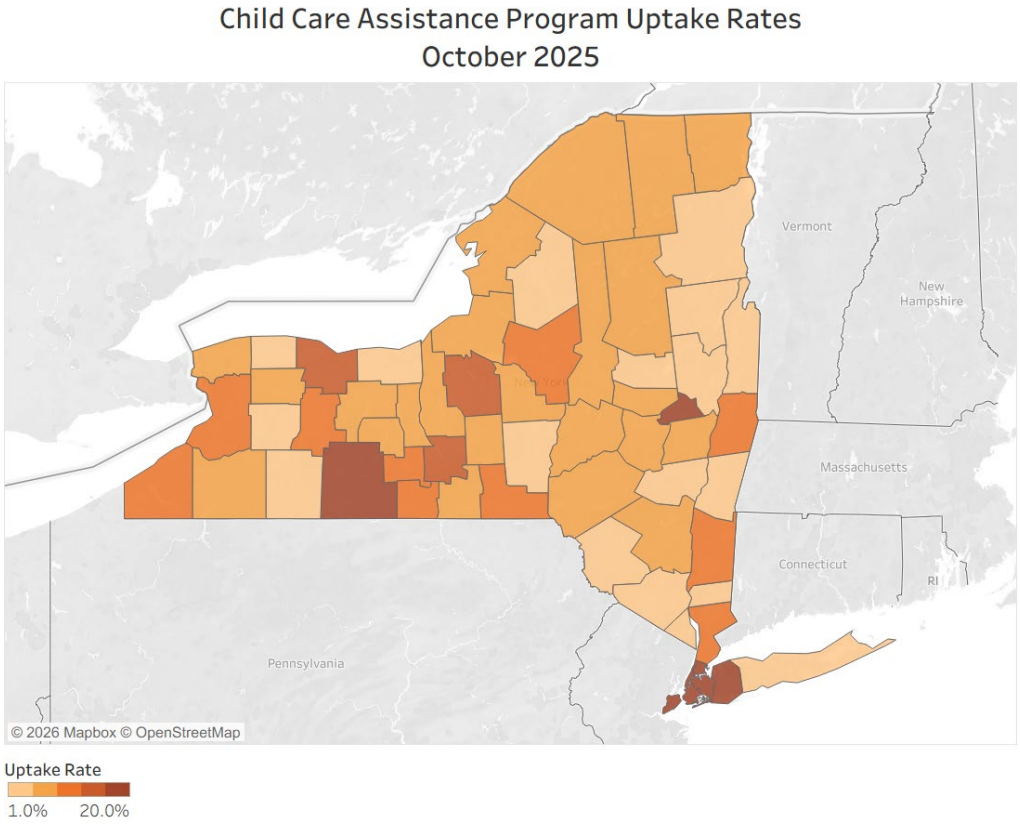
[28] Chautauqua County, as outlined below, receives more funding on a per-eligible child basis than other rural Western New York counties.
[29] The Children's Agenda website maintains a tool to track county level enrollment in the Child Care Assistance Program and whether a county is currently enrolling families in the program.
[30] Appendix B details the methodology used to develop county-level Child Care Assistance Program eligibility estimates.



This per-child funding imbalance, coupled with significant eligibility increases and other reforms listed above, forced some counties to close enrollment much sooner than others.

For example, Orleans County, which receives $373 per estimated eligible child in the county, closed enrollment and established a wait list in June 2025, when 156 children were receiving support from the Child Care Assistance Program. Enrollment remained closed throughout the rest of 2025, and the number of children

receiving assistance each month fell to 82 in October 2025. These 82 children represent approximately 3.5% of children who are eligible for assistance in the county. By contrast, Nassau County, which receives the most per-eligible child funding of any social district in the state, serves more than 16% of estimated eligible children each month and was never forced to close enrollment due to lack of funds during 2025.



Governor Kathy Hochul's 2026-27 executive budget proposes a historic funding increase for the Child Care Assistance Program, with annual spending on the program growing from $1.8 billion to $3 billion. This funding should allow counties to begin enrolling new families in the Child Care Assistance Program again. **However, the proposed budget does not include any mention of reworking the funding formula to ensure more equitable access across the state.**

Survey Findings

The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY surveyed 60 child care providers[31] from seven counties[32] in Western New York to learn more about the challenges they, and the families they serve, face when navigating the child care system and the state's Child Care Assistance Program.

The challenges shared by respondents, including staffing shortages, waitlists, and issues with the Child Care Assistance Program, were relatively consistent across counties and geographies, highlighting the need for systemic reforms.

Challenges with New York's Child Care Assistance Program

Parents cannot afford to pay more for child care, but providers cannot afford to charge less.

New York's Child Care Assistance Program is a valuable tool that provides income-eligible families with free or low-cost child care while they work or pursue an education. Unfortunately, surges in enrollment and insufficient government funding have forced the Child Care Assistance Program to close in nearly half of counties, leaving families without care and providers without stability.

Nearly all survey respondents (53 programs, 88%) indicated that their programs accept families enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program. The programs that reported not accepting child care assistance indicated the families they serve do not need financial support, or the program has other sources of funding (grants, community scholarships, HeadStart). Of the programs that do accept child care assistance, 16 (30%) reported that they have had families leave their program because Child Care Assistance Program enrollment in their county was closed. Half of these programs (49%) also said that families seeking care at their program had experienced other challenges navigating the Child Care Assistance Program application process.

When providers were asked if they thought the current reimbursement rates from the Child Care Assistance Program cover the cost of care, a majority of providers said no.

> ***"I feel the current reimbursement rates have improved and helped tremendously but are still lower than what it costs to run my center. My staff should be earning more money for how much work they do."***
>
> ***-WNY child care provider***

[31] See Appendix A for additional information on respondent characteristics. The majority of child care providers (54%) were located in a rural part of Western New York, followed by suburban (33%), and urban (13%).

[32] Counties: Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Wyoming. We did not get any responses from child care providers in Orleans County.

"No, I do not believe the current reimbursement rates from the Child Care Assistance Program adequately cover the true expense of providing quality child care. The cost of care continues to rise due to factors such as inflation, staffing shortages, higher wages, and the increased cost of supplies and utilities. However, reimbursement rates have not kept pace with these expenses, leaving providers struggling to cover basic operational costs while still maintaining a safe and nurturing environment for children. Additionally, I would prefer that the program pay providers at the beginning of the month instead of after services are rendered. Receiving payment upfront would help with budgeting and ensure that providers can meet payroll, pay rent, and purchase necessary materials without financial strain. Early payments would also demonstrate greater respect for providers' time and resources, allowing them to focus more on the quality of care rather than financial stress."

-WNY child care provider

Stakeholder interviews also revealed significant concerns about Child Care Assistance Program enrollment closures and the impact it has on child care providers, families, and the overall business environment and economy in these communities. These stakeholders elevated both workforce compensation and increased funding for the Child Care Assistance Program as top priorities for state lawmakers in 2026.

Staffing Shortages & Waitlists

There is not enough child care to meet the needs of New York families. Low pay and few benefits have forced many child care educators to leave the field to support their own families. Child care programs across Western New York, and the state as a whole, are struggling with workforce shortages, leading to decreased capacity and long waitlists for families.

One-third (21 programs, 34%) of survey respondents reported that their child care program was experiencing a staffing shortage, defined as one or more staff roles in their program being currently unfilled. Understandably, center-based and afterschool programs represented the majority of staffing challenges: 57% of afterschool programs and 58% of centers reported a shortage, compared to 22% of group family programs (and 0% of family

child care programs[33]). Excluding family child care programs, 43% of suburban providers, 48% of rural providers, and 80% of urban providers indicated that they were currently experiencing staffing challenges.

> **Of the 21 programs that reported a staffing shortage, one (5%) had to close their entire program due to staff absences, six (29%) closed classrooms, five (24%) reduced capacity, and three (14%) reduced hours of operation.**

Over half of programs (34 programs, 57%) also reported that they currently have a waitlist for families. Responses vary by modality, with 69% of centers keeping a waitlist, 56% of group family child care programs, 47% of family child care programs, and 33% of afterschool programs. Rural and suburban programs were more likely to have waitlists, 56% and 65% respectively, compared to 38% of urban programs.

Modality	# of Programs with a Waitlist	% of Programs with a Waitlist	Range of Families on Waitlists
FCC	9	47%	2 - 42
GFCC	5	56%	5 - 10
Center	18	69%	2 - 100
SACC	2	33%	3 - 50

Conversations with child care stakeholders in Western New York reinforced the findings of this survey. The Children's Agenda and/or Liftoff WNY interviewed more than a dozen Western New York early childhood professionals, Child Care Resource Center leaders, and union leaders to supplement the findings of this survey and provide additional context to the data gathered from this provider survey.

These conversations revealed **near-universal concern about low compensation in the field**, a lack of available care due to workforce shortages, and a general sense that it is challenging to recruit and retain skilled early childhood educators in a field with limited advancement options and the long-term prospect of low-pay with limited benefits.

> ***"Our biggest challenges include finding and keeping qualified staff. Being able to pay staff what they deserve for the difficult work they provide. I wish we were able to provide health insurance to our staff."***
>
> ***- WNY child care provider***

[33] Family child care programs typically have just one employee (the owner/operator), which explains the lack of staffing challenges.

> ***"Staffing - finding highly qualified staff. We want to be able to pay our highly qualified staff wages that they deserve. We are making moves towards that, but it is slow. Our staff deserve so much more for the important work that they do."***
>
> ***- WNY child care provider, on the biggest challenge of operating a child care program in their community***

Other Key Findings from Stakeholder Interviews

As noted above, The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY conducted one-on-one and small group interviews with key early childhood stakeholders who work with families and child care providers in rural communities in Western New York. These interviews revealed tremendous pride in the work being done by child care providers, early childhood professionals, and community partners. The discussions also identified concerns that are likely consistent across urban, suburban, and rural communities in New York state, such as:

- Inconsistent application of licensing standards and implementation of regulations by OCFS regional office staff
- Need for more consistent communication with local departments of social services
- Low wages and high turnover among child care workers
- Difficulty navigating the Child Care Assistance Program application process
- The destabilizing effect of Child Care Assistance Program enrollment closures

These stakeholder conversations highlighted issues that are more acutely felt in rural communities.

Lack of Transportation

Several stakeholders identified the lack of reliable transportation as a barrier limiting the ability of families to access and retain child care. Public transportation is far more limited in rural communities than more densely populated areas. Low-income families living in rural areas must provide their own transportation, which can be costly, thus limiting the ability of families to participate in many aspects of life, including traveling for work, to child care, and to make other appointments like applying for and recertifying child care assistance.

A lack of reliable transportation can also prevent child care educators, many of whom are earning around the state minimum wage, from getting to work, thus threatening the ability of a child care provider to serve children enrolled in their care.

Lack of Access to Supports

Most early childhood leaders we spoke with also identified a general lack of access to key supports that would allow child care providers to better serve families in their community. This includes fewer in-person trainings

and professional development opportunities for child care educators, lower funding and training capacity among Child Care Resource Centers operating in rural areas, and more feelings of isolation among child care providers operating in areas without many other providers. This isolation can limit types of informal mentorship and mutual support among providers that help programs sustain themselves despite a difficult business model and economic circumstances.

Families living in rural areas also struggle from a lack of access to various supports. Several individuals identified specific challenges that children with developmental delays and disabilities face. This includes a lack of specialized care that can meet their needs, which is often grounded in insufficient training, support, and funding for providers in their community. Some families and providers in rural areas also continue to struggle with reliable cell phone and internet access, which limits their ability to find care and navigate the Child Care Assistance Program.

Recommendations

We must take significant action at both a statewide and local level to transform child care in communities across New York state. Therefore, we are organizing recommendations for both state policymakers as well as local leaders.

State Level Recommendations

Make Structural Reforms to the Child Care Assistance Program Funding Formula

As noted above, the current approach to funding child care assistance across the state relies upon an unwieldy block grant process from the Office of Children and Family Services to 58 different social service districts. Over time, decisions made at the state and local levels have led to wildly different allocations in various parts of the state, with rural communities typically receiving far less funding per eligible child than more densely populated parts of the state.

Along with the historic increases to child care assistance proposed by Governor Hochul, state policymakers should make structural changes to the state's structurally flawed block grant system.

Ideally, New York State would shift full responsibility for managing child care funds from social service districts to the Office of Children and Family Services, at least outside of New York City. Under this structure, counties would remain responsible for eligibility determinations and other administrative functions, but New York State would ultimately be responsible for funding the child care system, monitoring spending levels, ensuring equal access throughout the state, and determining how best to manage total spending on the program in all corners of the state.

Short of that ambitious reform, state leaders should find ways to make Child Care Block Grant allocations more equitable across different communities. Specifically, as the state determines how to allocate increased block grant funds, it should modify the funding formula to incorporate an estimate of the number of children eligible for assistance in a social service district as a factor (along with historical spending levels) to determine the social

service district's allocation. Doing so would begin to restore some funding parity between different communities while still maintaining an incentive for counties to spend their block grant allocation.

Invest in Child Care Worker Wages

State labor data, provider surveys, and conversations with regional early childhood leaders all highlight the importance of raising child care educator pay as a way to expand access to care and ensure that children can receive high-quality and nurturing care.[34] Raising Child Care Assistance Program rates alone will not lead to higher rates, as many programs serve both private-pay families and those covered through the Child Care Assistance Program. And raising rates in the publicly funded program creates pressure on providers to raise rates for private-pay families, thus rendering child care less affordable for middle-class families not yet covered by the growing assistance program.

Establishing a child care compensation fund, modeled after programs in place in other states like Maine and North Carolina,[35] would boost educator pay, help programs recruit and retain workers, and protect middle-class families from rate increases. The Empire State Campaign for Child Care has proposed a $1.2 billion compensation fund for providers across the state. A program of that magnitude would lift salaries considerably and make child care a viable career for people seeking to enter that sector.

Expand Proposed Universal Child Care Pilots to Include a Rural County

As noted throughout this report, rural communities face distinct child care challenges compared to more densely populated areas. As New York State builds towards universal child care, policymakers must ensure that any plan for universal care can work in rural regions. In her 2026-27 executive budget, Governor Hochul proposed universal child care pilot programs for children under age three in three counties: Broome, Dutchess, and Monroe.[36] These models could, if successfully implemented and sustained, help New York develop a universal child care system statewide.

However, while Broome, Dutchess, and Monroe counties are geographically apart from one another, they also have common elements. Each county has a relatively large population and has a significant urban center.

Policymakers should add an additional pilot site in a truly rural county. Implementing a universal child care pilot in a rural county will help inform future expansions of this model in other, less-populated regions of the state.

Better Support for Children with Disabilities and Delays

Children with developmental delays and disabilities reside in every community of New York State. However, interviews with regional early childhood experts who work in Western New York suggest that particular challenges exist in less densely populated parts of the region. Specifically, providers in those areas lack the level of support available to their peers in more resource-rich regions, and geographic distance from major population centers limits their access to trainings that would better allow them to support children with special

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[34] See the Empire State Campaign for Child Care's 2025 provider survey for more information about the statewide educator shortage.
[35] North Carolina's Child Care WAGES$ program is an innovative, long-standing compensation model. More information is available on the Early Years NC website.
Maine's state-funded program emerged after state policymakers observed how helpful federal funding was in stabilizing and strengthening the state's early childhood educator workforce. More information on the program is available on the state's child care website.
[36] See Governor Hochul's universal child care pilot announcement

needs. This, in turn, limits care options for children with developmental delays and disabilities in those communities.

Anecdotally, providers in the region also report that the enhanced rate available to providers caring for children with diagnosed disabilities is difficult to access and often insufficient to meet the heightened care needed by some children. The Office of Children and Family Services should convene providers, experts in early childhood development disabilities, parents, and other key stakeholders to better understand barriers to care for this population and should develop a comprehensive plan to ensure that disability status is not a barrier to receiving high-quality child care throughout New York State, including rural areas. This plan should include increasing Child Care Assistance Program rates for children with disabilities and delays. This plan should also consider how to better include children with special needs in the proposed community care pilot programs and future expansions of that model into rural parts of the state.

Community Level Recommendations

Ease Access to the Child Care Assistance Program

New York State's Child Care Assistance Program is, for many families with modest incomes, the only way they can afford care for their children. Unfortunately, the paperwork requirements associated with that program are quite cumbersome. Applicants need to complete a lengthy application, submit materials from both their employer and child care provider, and include between 4 and 12 weeks of paystubs (depending on local social service district policies). They are also legally obliged to report changes in income throughout an authorization period.

Interviews with early childhood stakeholders and child care providers throughout rural Western New York highlighted difficulties families and providers face when navigating the Child Care Assistance Program. Funding shortfalls also create unfortunate incentives for finding ways to disqualify applicants rather than work with them to help gain access to the Child Care Assistance Program.

With the likely increase in state investment in child care and additional funds for rural communities, county leaders should develop strategies that aim to reduce paperwork and administer the program in a customer-friendly manner to maximize enrollment. One such strategy is to extend the length of time a family can receive assistance before re-applying from 12 to 24 months. Doing so would reduce paperwork burdens on both families and county staff.

An approach that aims to better support families navigating the enrollment process would address feedback The Children's Agenda and Liftoff WNY received about the difficulties applicants face when seeking help afford the cost of care.

Prioritize Continuity of Care

When Child Care Assistance Program block funds become scarce in a community, counties are forced to close enrollment and may, under current law, choose to operate waiting lists. As noted earlier, six counties in rural Western New York closed enrollment during 2025. Four of those counties (Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming) chose to operate waiting lists, while Allegany and Cattaraugus did not.

State regulations require counties to approach new applicants for assistance the same as recertifying families. Therefore, both recertifying and new applicants must be denied care or placed on a waiting list if they apply during a period when enrollment is closed.

However, counties can apply for a waiver from OCFS from this requirement and continue to recertify most families during periods when enrollment is closed. Specifically, they can recertify families experiencing homelessness, families with children who have special needs, and families earning less than 300% of the federal poverty level. Functionally, this allows them to recertify most existing Child Care Assistance Program recipients.

Among rural Western New York counties, Cattaraugus, Genesee, and Wyoming counties have applied for and received this waiver, while Orleans, Allegany, and Niagara have not. Chautauqua also has not received this waiver, but as it has not yet closed enrollment, it has not had any need to seek it.[37]

We recommend that all counties seek this waiver, as it helps limit the disruptions that families and providers face when Child Care Assistance Program resources run short in a community.

Support Local Systems-Building

While county and local governments lack the financial resources of the state and federal governments, they are more attuned to the needs of their communities and are often better at targeting financial supports to address particular issues. The philanthropic and business communities also have this capacity. Discussions with early childhood leaders in rural Western New York identified community assets such as early childhood collaboratives that are dedicated to improving services and coordination between different systems like child care, Pre-K, developmental screenings and services, and home visitation. These discussions also revealed enthusiasm to find more ways to better support families with young children. Some of those initiatives receive public and private funding but could do more with additional resources. Public and private funders should also identify ways they can increase support for child care system infrastructure like community action agencies, child care resource centers, and organizations that train and coach child care educators.

[37] This information was obtained by reviewing county child care plans on the OCFS website - https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/childcare/plans/

Appendix A: Survey Results – Provider Characteristics

Sixty child care providers, representing seven counties in Western New York, responded to the survey.

The majority of respondents (54%) are located in a rural area, followed by suburban (33%) and urban (13%). Most providers serve multiple age groups: 41 programs (67%) serve infants, 45 (74%) serve toddlers, 53 (87%) serve preschoolers, and 40 (67%) serve school-aged children.

County	Total Responses	Family Child Care	Group Family Child Care	Center	School Age Child Care
Allegany	7	4	1	2	
Cattaraugus	5		2	1	2
Chautauqua	10	5		5	
Erie	16	1	1	14	
Genesee	1				1
Niagara	14	7	3	2	2
Orleans	0				
Wyoming	7	2	2	2	1
Total	**60**	**19 (31%)**	**9 (15%)**	**26 (43%)**	**6 (11%)**

Geography	Total Responses	FCC	GFCC	Center	SACC
Rural	32	10	6	11	5
Suburban	20	6	2	12	0
Urban	8	3	1	3	1
Total	**60**	**19**	**9**	**26**	**6**

Appendix B: Estimating the Number of Child Care Assistance Program-Eligible Children by County in New York State

The following approach estimates the approximate number of children in each NYS county who are eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). It incorporates (1) income thresholds and (2) workforce participation requirements. Data is compiled from two Census tables: B17024 and B23008.

(1) Estimating Income Eligibility (Table B17024)

Census table B17024 provides counts of individuals by age group and household income levels relative to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Here, we are estimating the number of children under age 13 who fall below the income threshold for CCAP.

- **Under 5 Years Old**
  - Sum the number of children living in households with incomes under 300% of the FPL (includes nine specific income brackets in the table)
  - Add 35% of the children in the next income bracket (e.g., those in households with incomes between 300% and 399% of the FPL)
    - The 35% adjustment approximates the proportion of children within this bracket who fall below 85% of State Median Income (SMI) (this is the CCAP income eligibility cutoff)
    - Although the equivalence of 85% of SMI and 335% of FPL varies slightly by household size, the 335% FPL threshold aligns closely with the average 85% SMI for families with 2 to 5 members and matches the modal family size of three individuals
  - **Children under 5 who are income-eligible = (Children under 5 in families below 300% poverty) + (35% of children under 5 in families between 300–399%)**

- **Ages 6 to 11:**
  - Apply the same method as for children under 5, summing those under 300% FPL and adding 35% of those between 300% and 399% FPL
  - **Children 6 to 11 who are income-eligible = (Children 6–11 in families below 300% poverty) + (35% of children 6–11 in families between 300–399%)**

- **Ages 12 to 17:**
  - Follow the same income threshold calculations but include only one-sixth of the resulting number. This adjustment limits the estimate to 12-year-olds, as CCAP eligibility only extends to children up to age 12
  - **12-year-olds who are income-eligible = ((Children 12–17 in families below 300%) + 35% of children 12–17 in families between 300–399%) ÷ 6**

Income-Eligible Total

- The sum of the adjusted counts for children under 5, ages 6 to 11, and one-sixth of the count for children ages 12 to 17 yields the total number of income-eligible children
- **Total income-eligible children = Children under 5 + Children 6–11 + 1/6 of Children 12–17**

(2) Adjusting for Parental Workforce Participation (Table B23008)

CCAP also requires that parents be engaged in the labor force or enrolled in qualifying education or training programs. Since enrollment in educational programs is difficult to measure from census data and represents a small portion of CCAP cases, this analysis focuses on labor force participation only, using table B23008.

- **Under 6 Years Old:**
  - Include all children living in households with both parents, where both parents are in the labor force
  - Include children living with only one parent (either mother or father) if that parent is in the labor force
  - **Children under 6 with working parents = Both parents working + Single mother working + Single father working**
- **Ages 6 to 17:**
  - Apply the same logic as above, but multiply the total by 7/12 to isolate the children aged 6 to 12
  - **Children 6-12 with working parents = (Both parents working + Single mother + Single father) × (7 ÷ 12)**
- **Labor Force Eligible Total (Numerator):**
  - Sum the number of children under 6 meeting the labor force condition with 7/12 of the number of qualifying children aged 6 to 17
  - **Total children with working parents = Children under 6 + Children 6–12**
- **Labor Force (Denominator):**
  - Combine all children under 6 with 7/12 of the total children aged 6 to 17 to estimate the total population eligible for CCAP based on age
  - **Total children in this age range = All children under 6 + (7 ÷ 12) × All children age 6–17**
- **Labor Force Participation Rate:**
  - Divide the labor force eligible total by the denominator to get a percentage. Across counties, this percentage typically falls between 60% and 70%
  - **Workforce participation rate = (Total children with working parents) ÷ (Total children in eligible age range)**

Final Estimate of CCAP-Eligible Children

The final step multiplies the number of income-eligible children (from Step 1) by the labor force participation rate (from Step 2)

- This yields the estimated number of children who meet both income and parental work criteria for CCAP eligibility in each county
- This method accounts for income thresholds and household structure
- **CCAP-eligible estimate = Income-eligible children × Workforce participation rate**

Appendix C: County Level Fact Sheets

[insert County-level fact sheets]

Child Care Challenges

Allegany County

January 2026

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Median Annual Child Care Costs in Allegany County

	Center-Based	*Home-Based*
Infant	**$14,244**	**$10,957**
Toddler	**$13,264**	**$10,380**
School Aged	**$11,188**	**$10,092**

⚠ Challenge 2: Child Care Capacity Gap

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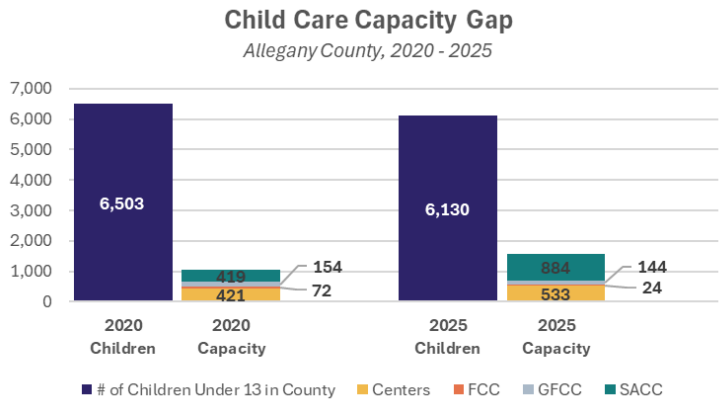
In Allegany County

Children under age 6	**2,611**
Children under age 13	**6,130**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**68%**
Child care slots	**1,585**



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Challenge 3: Child Care Workforce Shortage

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Average child care worker earnings in Western New York

$17.36
hourly

$34,737
annually

97.2%
of jobs in this region pay more than median child care wages

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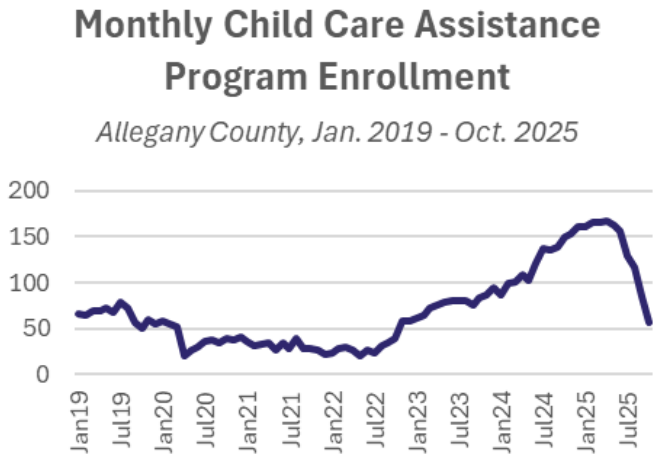
In Allegany County

Children eligible for CCAP	**50%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**2%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**57**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Open**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**N/A**



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Child Care Challenges

Cattaraugus County

January 2026

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Median Annual Child Care Costs in Cattaraugus County

	Center-Based	*Home-Based*
Infant	**$14,244**	**$10,957**
Toddler	**$13,264**	**$10,380**
School Aged	**$11,188**	**$10,092**

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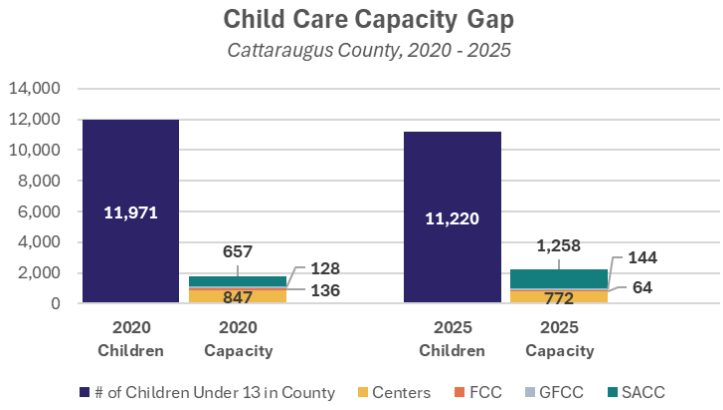
In Cattaraugus County

Children under age 6	**5,109**
Children under age 13	**11,220**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**67%**
Child care slots	**2,238**



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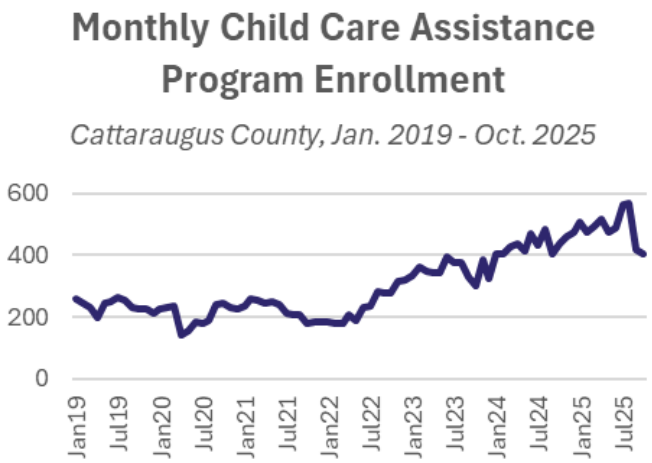
In Cattaraugus County

Children eligible for CCAP	**53%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**6%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**402**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Closed, No Wait List**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**N/A**



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Child Care Challenges

Chautauqua County

January 2026

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Median Annual Child Care Costs in Chautauqua County

	Center-Based	*Home-Based*
Infant	**$14,244**	**$10,957**
Toddler	**$13,264**	**$10,380**
School Aged	**$11,188**	**$10,092**

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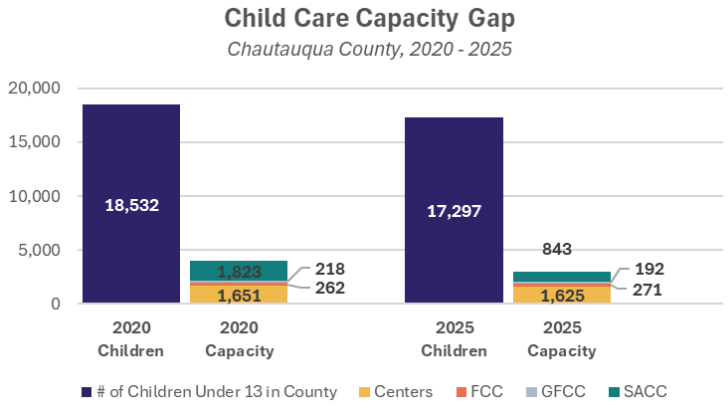
In Chautauqua County

Children under age 6	**7,549**
Children under age 13	**17,297**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**72%**
Child care slots	**2,931**



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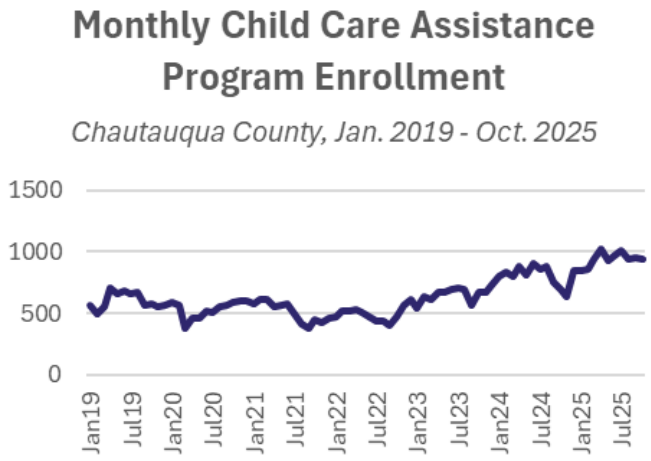
In Chautauqua County

Children eligible for CCAP	**53%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**10%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**947**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Open**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**N/A**



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Child Care Challenges

Genesee County

January 2026

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Median Annual Child Care Costs in Genesee County

	Center-Based	*Home-Based*
Infant	**$14,244**	**$10,957**
Toddler	**$13,264**	**$10,380**
School Aged	**$11,188**	**$10,092**

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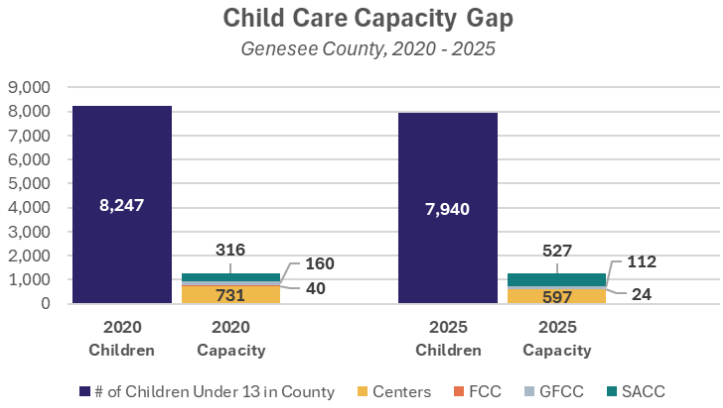
In Genesee County

Children under age 6	**3,461**
Children under age 13	**7,940**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**76%**
Child care slots	**1,260**



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Average child care worker earnings in the Finger Lakes

$16.94
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annually

97.4%
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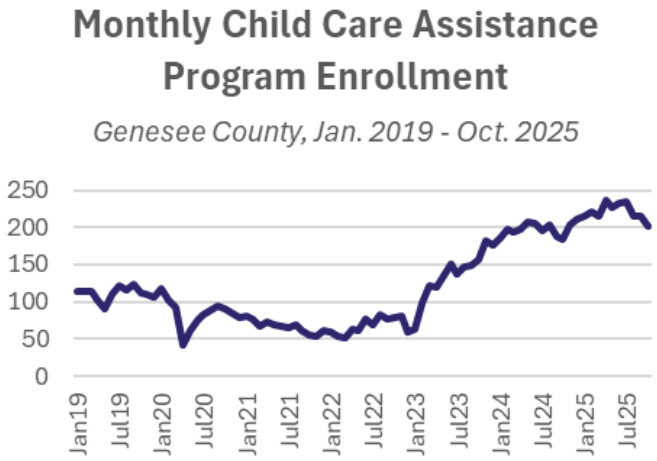
In Genesee County

Children eligible for CCAP	**46%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**5%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**201**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Closed, Operating Wait List**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**20-29**



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Child Care Challenges

Niagara County

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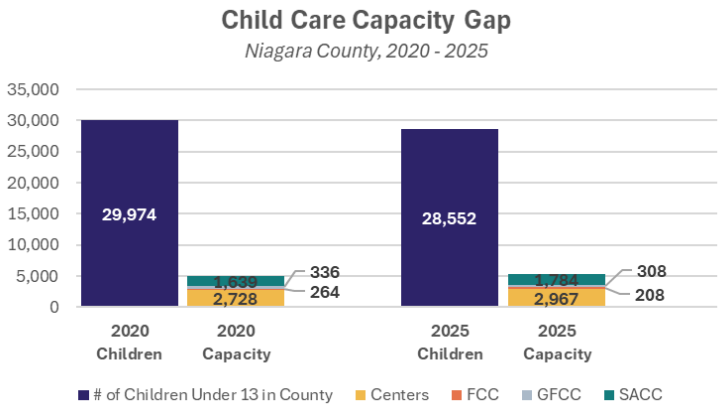
In Niagara County

Children under age 6	**12,343**
Children under age 13	**28,552**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**76%**
Child care slots	**5,267**



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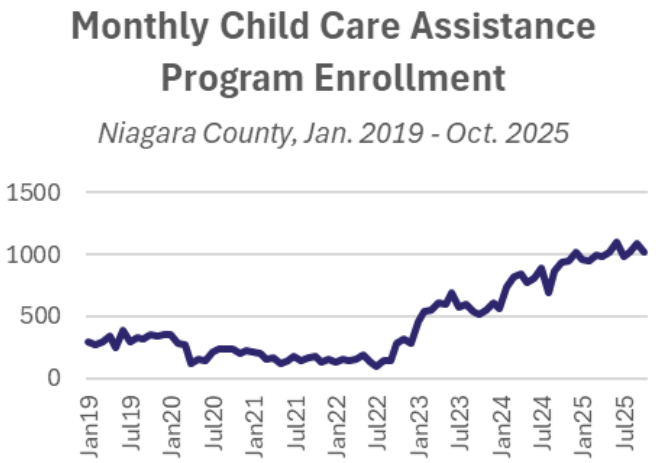
In Niagara County

Children eligible for CCAP	**46%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**8%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**1,023**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Open**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**N/A**



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Orleans County

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Median Annual Child Care Costs in Orleans County

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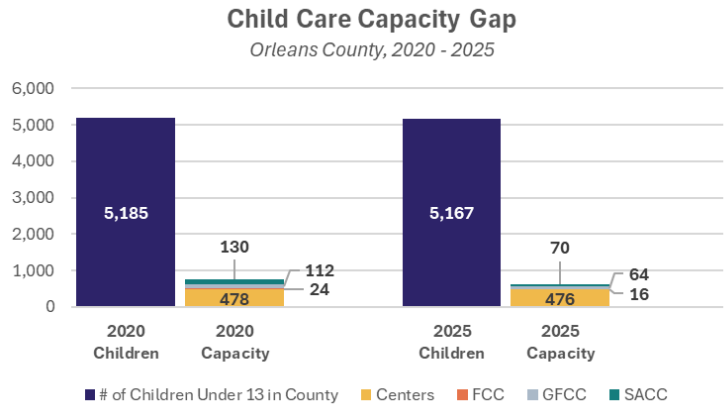
In Orleans County

Children under age 6	**2,230**
Children under age 13	**5,167**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**67%**
Child care slots	**626**



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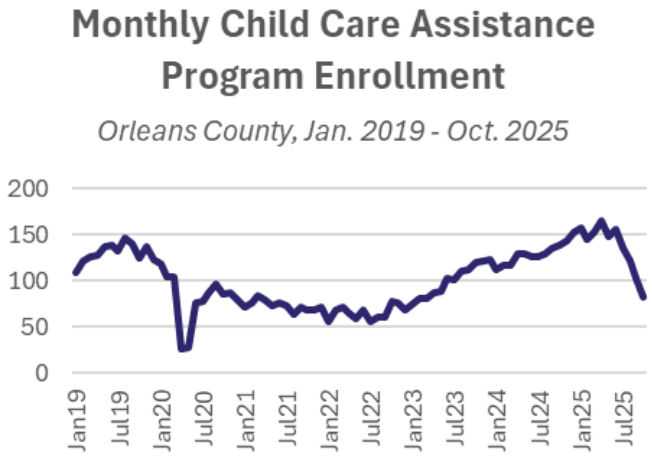
In Orleans County

Children eligible for CCAP	**47%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**3%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**82**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Closed, Operating Wait List**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**40-49**



What New York Voters Are Saying

A December 2025 statewide voter poll conducted on behalf of The Children's Agenda found that **three in five parents (61%) struggled with the cost** of child care, and **72% of voters believe New York should spend more** to make child care affordable.

For additional county fact sheets, please visit: thechildrensagenda.org/county-level-research/

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Learn more at thechildrensagenda.org

Child Care Challenges

Wyoming County

January 2026

Child care is a critical support for families with young children, employers, and New York State's economy. The State made substantial investments in the child care system in the past few years, but this **progress is threatened by significant issues related to cost and capacity.** To address these challenges and ensure families have access to the care they need, **policymakers must make critical investments in the 26-27 NYS Budget** to bolster the child care workforce and stabilize the Child Care Assistance Program.

⚠ Challenge 1: High Costs for Families

Parents can't afford to pay more for child care, but providers can't afford to charge less. For families paying out-of-pocket for care, the statewide average annual cost for center-based **infant care ($14,388) is more than double the cost of SUNY college tuition ($7,070).**

Median Annual Child Care Costs in Wyoming County

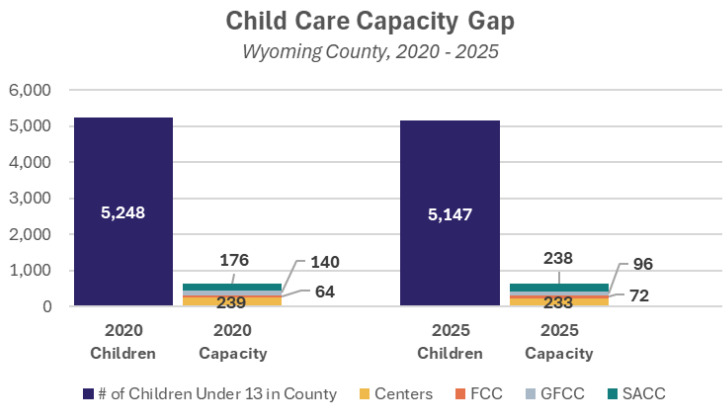
	Center-Based	*Home-Based*
Infant	**$14,244**	**$10,957**
Toddler	**$13,264**	**$10,380**
School Aged	**$11,188**	**$10,092**

⚠ Challenge 2: Child Care Capacity Gap

There is **not enough child care to meet New York families' needs.** Child care programs across the state are struggling with workforce shortages, **leading to decreased capacity and long waitlists for families**, which leads to parents missing out on valuable employment or educational opportunities.

In Wyoming County

Children under age 6	**2,190**
Children under age 13	**5,147**
Families with children under age 13 and all parents working	**74%**
Child care slots	**639**



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Challenge 3: Child Care Workforce Shortage

Low pay and limited benefits have forced many child care educators to leave the field in order to support their own families. High turnover in the child care workforce increases the cost of care for providers and limits the quality of care for families.

Average child care worker earnings in the Finger Lakes

$16.94
hourly

$34,503
annually

97.4%
of jobs in this region pay more than median child care wages

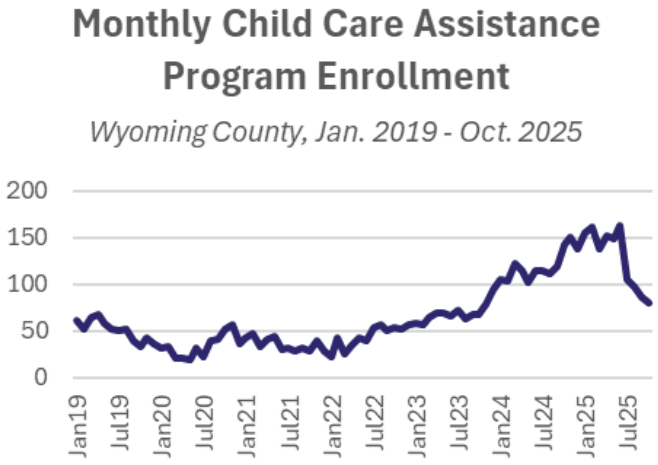
Challenge 4: Insufficient Government Funding

Enrollment in the Child Care Assistance Program steadily declined in the 2010's and fell rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic. **New York has taken important steps to expand enrollment and eliminate barriers in response**, including increasing income eligibility to 85% of SMI (2023) and developing an online CCAP application (2024).

With these changes, counties saw significant increases in enrollment in 2025; **however, nearly half of counties were forced to close enrollment and/or establish waitlists** for eligible families between April and December 2025 due to insufficient funding. To ensure every New York family has access to the high-quality care they need to thrive, policymakers must make significant investments in the 26-27 NYS Budget to support the child care workforce and fully fund the Child Care Assistance Program.

In Wyoming County

Children eligible for CCAP	**47%**
Eligible children enrolled in CCAP	**3%**
Oct. 2025 CCAP enrollment	**81**
CCAP enrollment status as of Dec. 2025	**Closed, Operating Wait List**
Children on CCAP waitlist	**50-99**



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