

# Will there be enough child care centers when the coronavirus pandemic is over? | COMMENTARY

By **CHRISTINA PEUSCH** FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN | APR 07, 2020 | 1:14 PM

In normal times, child care is the backbone of our nation's economy; without it, millions of parents cannot go to work or attend school, and our economy would suffer. But these are not normal times and the spread of COVID-19 threatens our child care system on multiple fronts. Unfortunately, this crisis will very likely cause thousands of child care providers across Maryland to close forever, leaving scores of parents without child care when the economic recovery begins.

Thousands of licensed and regulated child care providers in Maryland have stepped up to care for the children of health care workers, first responders and other essential personnel — allowing those brave individuals to help serve the rest of us during this critical time. These child care providers are trying to effectively and safely care for and educate children of essential personnel, while at the same time protect their staff and cover operating expenses to keep their doors open.

Screening procedures are in place, but asymptomatic COVID-19 transmission reports cause legitimate concern that a child care facility serving the children of essential workers could be the epicenter of an outbreak among children. Providers need cleaning supplies and protective equipment for daily operations, not just in a pandemic. Yet, following the Maryland State Department of Education's direction, child care centers have made requests to the Maryland Emergency Management Agency for supplies which have gone unanswered.

The financial realities for these very small businesses and nonprofits are stark, even for those open serving children of essential workers. Bills for food suppliers, insurance, landlords and most importantly, the wages of working staff do not stop. A weeks-long lag in the state payment for care of children of essential workers is untenable and unreasonable. Providers are essentially fronting the cost of the state's pledge to provide child care to essential workers. The state needs to speed up payment or allow essential workers to pay directly and reimburse them later. By the time payments are processed, it may be too late.

Some parents and officials have also raised concerns about child care payments, contracts and "guaranteed placement," or holding their children's spots for once the crisis abates. Providers — many of them very small women-owned businesses — are doing their best to stay afloat, but they are not immune from layoffs and other financial strains in their own families that make it harder. While they vary, the majority of contracts allow families to terminate. Providers are being flexible and reasonable; many have already worked with families to reduce tuition for those that can't attend and released families that have been furloughed from their contract obligations.

The issue of "guaranteed placement" is harder. Adding children of essential personnel complicates this issue further because it throws off strict state-mandated ratios of staff to children. Above all, unless they continue to receive income from contracted families or other

public support, no provider can offer any post-crisis guarantees of placements because none of them can guarantee their businesses will be open after the crisis. The Maryland State Department of Education is apparently considering a solution to provide “financial relief to families” that seems to guarantee placement. But this policy, without financial support for providers, could force child care in Maryland to cease to exist as we know it.

Last year there were approximately 7,200 child care providers serving more than 152,000 children in the state. The early data show [one third of Maryland child care providers](#) and almost 50 percent across the country say they will not survive even a two week disruption without significant public support.

Thus far, federal and state government attempts to help child care providers specifically, and small businesses generally, seem to be insufficient to meet their unique needs. And while providers would like to do more for their employees — they simply can’t afford it. [Numerous other states have instituted fiscal supports, recognizing the child care need during the crisis and the long-term recovery.](#) Some like [Vermont](#) have instituted plans to reimburse providers for lost tuition. Maryland must consider something similar. Without more support, thousands of parents will not have child care when they need it most. Even some of the thousands of providers who have stepped up to care for essential workers’ children may be forced to close entirely.

Child care is not an economic accessory, it is essential. Our state’s leaders need to understand that without child care, our economic recovery will suffer huge setbacks. These child care providers need help now so they can be there for families when everyone goes back to work. *Christina Peusch ([info@mscca.org](mailto:info@mscca.org)) is the executive director of the Maryland State Child Care Association which represents 4,400 infant, toddler, and pre-kindergarten community-based providers.*