Jacksonville • Onslow
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Child Care & Early Education

TASK FORCE

Interim Report

MAY 2026

One Place &
Jacksonville Onslow
Chamber of Commerce

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Executive SUMMARY

Responding to a Growing Child Care Challenge

In October 2025, the Community Child Care & Early Education Task Force was formed through a strategic partnership between One Place and the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce to address Onslow County's growing child care crisis.

The Task Force was established to examine the local child care landscape, identify the most pressing challenges affecting families, child care businesses, and employers, and explore opportunities to strengthen the early childhood system.

This report summarizes the Task Force's work to date, highlighting the current state of care and early education in Onslow County, its impact on children, families, businesses, and the local economy, while presenting potential solutions to improve access to affordable, high-quality child care.

> *Child care is infrastructure.*

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

16,703
Children under age 5

4,930
Licensed child care supply

9,338
Estimated child care gap

5 : 1
Families competing for one available child care slot

$197.7M–$301.3M
Estimated annual economic impact

Why CHILD CARE MATTERS

Onslow County's child care challenge is a high-impact priority for families, employers, and the broader community. With 217,175 residents, a median age of 27.7, and 16,703 children under age 5, our county has a growing need for reliable early care and education. As home to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and New River Air Station, dependable child care is especially critical for military families navigating frequent moves, deployments, and unpredictable schedules.

The need is significant. In Onslow County, 43.3% of children live in low- and moderate-income households, while infant child care can exceed $12,000 per year. For many families, this creates an impossible choice between work, financial stability, and the care their children need.

When child care is inaccessible or unaffordable, the impact extends beyond daily logistics. It becomes an economic, developmental, and equity issue—affecting parents' ability to work, children's readiness for school, and the long-term strength of our community.

The TASK FORCE PROCESS

To bridge the gap between abstract data and the daily reality of local families, the Task Force embarked on a multi-step discovery process featuring four targeted community surveys and a series of frontline round table discussions with administrators, educators, and parents. A critical component was the Child Care Economic Summit on February 3, 2026, held in collaboration with ExCEL NC, which specifically analyzed how child care shortages act as a significant drag on business productivity and talent retention. After meeting three times to synthesize these community insights, the Task Force officially presented its findings and recommendations at the 2026 State of the Child Breakfast.

By bringing together leaders from multiple sectors, the initiative created a shared commitment to strengthening the local early childhood system.

Building Solutions Through Collaboration

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Representatives from education, business, local government, military, nonprofit organizations, and child care providers worked together to examine the current child care landscape and identify shared priorities.

RESEARCH & COMMUNITY INPUT

Community data, stakeholder discussions, and existing research helped identify the barriers affecting families and child care businesses while highlighting opportunities for meaningful improvement.

ACTION-ORIENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings were translated into practical recommendations designed to strengthen the early childhood system, expand access to quality child care, and support long-term community success.

Child Care LANDSCAPE & GAP ANALYSIS

Onslow County faces a widening gap between the demand for child care and the limited availability of licensed providers due to child care closures. As population growth and enrollment trends strain the local system, the most significant bottleneck is a critical shortage of early educators. This workforce crisis has left many child care centers with 'ghost classrooms' - physical classrooms that remain unutilized simply because there isn't enough staff to operate them.

COUNTY SNAPSHOT

19,905
CHILDREN
Under Age 6

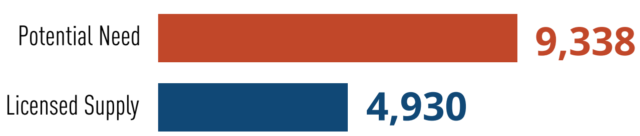
9,340
CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6
With All Available Parents Working

4,930
LICENSED CHILD CARE CAPACITY
Ghost Classrooms Reduce the Number

43%
CHILDREN LIVING IN POOR OR LOW-INCOME HOMES

CHILD CARE GAP

Potential Need vs. Licensed Supply



At the launch of the Task Force Onslow County had 60 licensed child care facilities. At the presentation to the community 3 family child care homes had closed and 1 center had closed for a total of 56 facilities.

LOCAL TRENDS: CHANGE SINCE 2018

CHILD CARE SITES

Fewer licensed child care sites are operating compared with 2018.

CHILD ENROLLMENT

Licensed child care enrollment has declined since 2018.

EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Onslow County workforce declined while statewide levels remained stable.

Understanding THE CHILD CARE CRISIS

The child care crisis stems from an unsustainable business model pushed off a "financial cliff" by the pandemic and the ending of federal stabilization funds. To survive rising operational costs, child care businesses report they are forced to increase tuition, leading to a staggering reality where families face child care costs that now surpass in-state public university tuition.

The Crisis

FAMILIES

Many families are forced to make child care decisions based on what they can afford rather than what best supports their children.

EMPLOYERS

Child care challenges affect workforce stability and employee retention across the community.

PROVIDERS

Rising operating costs have forced child care programs to increase tuition while continuing to face significant financial pressure and still operating on thin margins and low educator wages.

COST

Child care is one of the largest household expenses for families, often occurring when parents are at their lowest earning potential. The average annual cost of infant care is over $12,000 annually.

CHILDREN

Limited access to affordable, high-quality care reduces opportunities for healthy early childhood development.

COMMUNITY

No single solution will resolve the crisis. Long-term progress requires coordinated action across families, providers, employers, and government.

The ECONOMIC IMPACT

Limited access to affordable child care affects more than families. It reduces workforce participation, impacts business productivity, and limits long-term economic growth across the community. Shedding light on the economic impact has strengthened momentum and helped to advance a shared vision that will require cross-sector collaboration and innovation for solutions to the crisis.

$197M–$301M

Child Care Trust

ESTIMATED ANNUAL Economic Impact on Onslow County

HOUSEHOLD IMPACTS

Parents may reduce work hours or leave the workforce when reliable child care is unavailable, reducing household income and financial stability.

BUSINESS IMPACTS

Employers face productivity losses, absenteeism, recruitment challenges, and higher turnover when employees lack dependable child care.

TAX REVENUE IMPACTS

Lower workforce participation and business activity reduce tax revenue that supports essential public services and future community investment.

LOST WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

100,000

fewer parents of young children in North Carolina's labor force in **2024 than in 2019**

Investing in child care strengthens families, supports employers, and contributes to a more resilient local economy.

The EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE CRISIS

Low wages, limited resources, and workforce shortages continue to make it difficult for programs to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators.

EARLY EDUCATOR WAGES

Early childhood educators earn significantly less than workers in other entry-level occupations.

HOURLY WAGE COMPARISON

EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE SNAPSHOT

RECEIVED PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Nearly half of surveyed educators reported receiving public assistance.

NO HEALTH INSURANCE

A portion of the workforce lacks employer-sponsored health insurance.

PLAN TO LEAVE THE PROFESSION

Nearly one-third of educators plan to leave the profession.

FINANCIAL REALITY FOR CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

70%

REVENUE ALLOCATED TO STAFF COMPENSATION

Approximately 70% of revenue is allocated to staff compensation.

UP TO

$5,000

ESTIMATED COST TO REPLACE ONE EMPLOYEE

Replacing one educator can cost providers up to $5,000.

5.8%

AVERAGE GROSS PROFIT MARGIN

Programs operate with an average 5.8% gross profit margin, limiting their ability to increase wages.

Why THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN

Understanding the Barriers Behind the Child Care Crisis

HIGH COSTS

The rising cost of providing quality child care places financial pressure on providers while making child care increasingly unaffordable for many families.

LIMITED ACCESS

Child care closures and a large population of children under five means that demand for care exceeds available child care spaces.

WORKFORCE SHORTAGES

Low wages and staffing shortages make it difficult for providers to recruit and retain qualified educators.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Many programs face ongoing financial challenges that limit their ability to expand services or maintain long-term operations. The business model is not sustainable.

1 : 5

Only **one** licensed child care slot is available for every **five** families who need one.

These challenges are interconnected. Addressing one barrier alone will not solve the child care crisis. Long-term progress requires coordinated investment, workforce support, and community collaboration.

The CURRENT CHILD CARE SYSTEM

Understanding the Early Childhood Landscape

A strong child care system is essential to the well being of children, the stability of working families, and the strength of the local economy. The system relies on programs working together to support children's development and help families access safe, reliable, and affordable quality care. Each component plays a unique role in meeting the diverse needs of the community.

LICENSED CHILD CARE

NC DCDEE regulates Child Care Centers & Family Child Care Homes. Faith-based programs can operate under a GS110 Notice of Compliance or participate in Star Rated QRIS.

PUBLIC EARLY EDUCATION

Programs such as Early Head Start, Head Start, NC Pre-K, & Three School expand access to early learning programs and remove cost barriers for eligible children.

ONSLOW COUNTY CHILD CARE & EARLY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Our community offers a mixed delivery system of early education across a diverse network of public, private, non-profit, and military-connected settings for children ages birth to age five.

PARENT NAVIGATION

Parents choose programs that fit their location, schedule, and financial situation based on the needs of their families and what is available in the community.

MILITARY CHILD CARE

The Child Development Centers aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and New River MCAS are employer-supported, DoD Certified, and accredited by the NAEYC,

LICENSE-EXEMPT CARE

Community programs include drop-in child care, part-day preschool programs, family, friend, and neighbor care, nannies, and private babysitters.

Understanding how these programs work within the system provides important context for the challenges and opportunities presented throughout this report. They each work to support our earliest learners, but funding and program requirements vastly differ in the fees charged to families, the salaries paid to early educators, and the presence of early learning standards.

WHY IT MATTERS

The strength of the child care system directly influences children's healthy development and school readiness, family stability, workforce participation, and long-term economic growth. Building a coordinated system that expands access to quality care benefits not only young children but the entire community.

What WE LEARNED

Key Insights from the Community

Throughout the Task Force process, a clear message emerged: the child care challenges facing Onslow County are complex, interconnected, and cannot be solved by a single organization. Through community surveys and round table discussions, families, providers, employers, educators, and community partners consistently identified common barriers that affect access to quality child care and limit opportunities for long-term success.

Families Need Greater Access

Families continue to struggle to find affordable, reliable, quality child care that meets their daily needs. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is considered affordable when it consumes no more than 7% of a family's household income.

Child Care Businesses Need Sustainable Support

Child care providers face ongoing workforce shortages, rising operating costs, and limited resources that affect their ability to expand services to meet the demand for care.

Employers Are Directly Affected

Limited child care availability impacts employee recruitment, retention, attendance, and overall workforce participation across the community.

Collaboration Is Essential

Long-term solutions will require continued collaboration among public agencies, businesses, community organizations, educators, and child care providers.

Parent SURVEY INSIGHTS

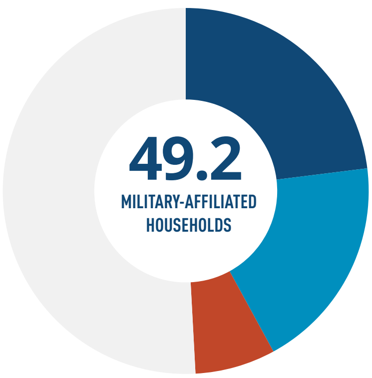
SURVEY OVERVIEW

127
SURVEYS COMPLETED

Four Priority Areas from Surveys:
1. Increase Capacity
2. Improve Affordability
3. Strengthen the Workforce
4. Improve Systems & Access

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPATING HOUSEHOLDS

MILITARY AFFILIATION



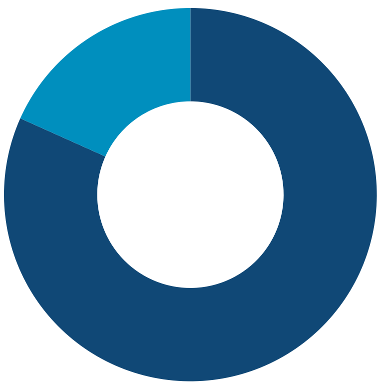
23% Active-Duty Military

19% Military Veteran

7.1% Military Retiree

50.8% No Affiliation

HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION



82% Two-parent / guardian households

18% Single-parent / guardian households

EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR MARKET STATUS

85%
Working / Schooling Households: All available parents are working or attending school.

15%
Stay-at-Home Parents

19%
At least one parent opted out of the labor market to remain at home with their children.

The child care shortage is severely impacting local families and their economic stability. Families overwhelmingly support investment in the child care workforce to increase access to care.

KEY FINDINGS FROM PARENTS

110 RESPONDENTS

The overwhelming majority of respondents (110) classified Onslow County's child care desert as either a **"major crisis" or a "significant problem".**

SEVERE IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT

LEAVING THE WORKFORCE

Parents forced to leave their jobs to stay home with children.

STALLED CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Turning down job offers or switching from full-time to part-time work.

DECREASED PRODUCTIVITY

Difficulty concentrating at work due to child care stress and instability.

One respondent paid **$2,000/month** for private child care while waiting for child care subsidy assistance.

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE CARE

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE

6+ MONTHS

Waitlists often exceed 6 months and longer for:

- Infants & toddlers
- Special needs
- Evening & weekend care

COST OF CHILD CARE

64% Cost is Too High

Of the 49 parents in licensed care:

- 9 participate in Early Head Start, Head Start, 3 School, or NC Pre-K
- 9 receive Child Care Subsidy Assistance or Military Child Care In Your Neighborhood Plus

EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE SUPPORT

VERY IMPORTANT

Parents identified workforce support as a top priority.

- Overworked staff
- Safety
- High turnover
- Poor interactions

Parents report that child care challenges have caused them to change jobs for flexibility, turn down a job offer, switch to part-time employment, or leave the workforce.

Key CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY EMPLOYERS

25

EMPLOYERS SHARED FEEDBACK

"Business leaders across multiple industries shared how child care challenges affect workforce stability."

KEY FINDINGS

Child care has become a workforce issue rather than solely a family issue. Employers consistently reported that limited access to affordable, reliable child care affects hiring, retention, attendance, and day-to-day operations. Demonstrating that child care is a significant drive of economic activity, directly and indirectly.

Recruitment Challenges

Prospective employees often decline job offers because they cannot secure child care.

Workplace Productivity

Child care instability contributes to absenteeism, tardiness, and workplace distraction.

Business Profitability

Many employers identified child care among the top issues affecting business operations.

Limited Employer Support

Businesses are willing to help but face financial and structural barriers to providing child care benefits.

Key SURVEY INSIGHTS FROM EMPLOYERS

The data reveals that we have a critical intersection between child care availability and business viability. Employers across diverse sectors report that child care issues are a primary driver of workforce instability.

76%+

EMPLOYEES WITH CHILDREN UNDER 13

Several organizations reported that 76% or more of their workforce have children under the age of 13, highlighting the importance of reliable child care to workforce stability.

EMPLOYER & CHILD CARE PROVIDER INSIGHTS

Cost

Nearly all employers identified the financial cost of providing child care benefits as the greatest barrier to offering additional support to employees.

Re-Frame Child Care

Employers support child care solutions and see the need for child care to be considered infrastructure in workforce and economic development.

Staffing Shortages

Limited access to child care results in fewer participants in the labor force for employers.

Operational Disruption

Child care challenges were cited as a top issue that impacts business operations.

Employers recognize the importance of supporting working families but cannot solve the child care crisis alone. Long-term progress depends on coordinated investment, public-private partnerships, and sustainable community solutions.

Key CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY CHILD CARE BUSINESSES

75%

OF RESPONDENTS CITED LOW WAGES AS A BARRIER

Child care businesses identified several systemic barriers making it difficult to sustain operations and maintain a stable workforce.

OVERVIEW

Onslow County child care providers face a range of ongoing challenges that impact their ability to hire, retain, and adequately support qualified staff. These workforce difficulties place additional pressure on program operations and make it harder for providers to maintain stable, fully staffed classrooms.

Together, these barriers threaten long-term program stability and limit the availability of consistent, high-quality affordable care for children and families throughout the community.

TOP CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

Low Wages (75% of respondents): The most cited barrier, as programs struggle to offer competitive pay while operating on thin margins.

Difficulty Finding Qualified Candidates (70%): A lack of applicants with the necessary certifications or experience impacts enrollment forcing programs to close classrooms.

Burnout (66%): The demanding nature of the work is leading to high turnover and dificulty in retention.

Financial Pressures: High operating costs and a lack of public investment were also cited as major hurdles. 75% of administrators report a decline in child care subsidy vouchers.

Recruitment: Responses indicate a low applicant pool, and candidates often lack the necessary qualifications.

Key FINDINGS FROM CHILD CARE BUSINESSES

77%

DESPITE FINANCIAL PRESSURES, 77% OF CHILD CARE CENTERS OFFER TUITION DISCOUNTS TO RETAIN AND ATTRACT STAFF

- Community-based child care centers are struggling to afford living wages, and many are losing staff to higher-paying positions in local school systems or military child care programs or outside the education workforce.
- Child Care Administrators describe a deep sense of strain and uncertainty. Trying to balance tuition for families and child care subsidies that do not cover the true cost of care.

CHILD CARE BUSINESS FINDINGS

Investment in Staff

Educators explicitly noted that adequate funding for higher teacher compensation are the most critical missing supports.

Workforce Realities

High turnover and staffing instability are the primary reasons that classrooms are empty.

Pressures Remain High

Fragile budgets where tuition and subsidies fail to cover escalating costs leave programs unable to meet the growing need for care.

Interconnected Challenges

Child care access, staff wages, benefits, and workforce sustainability; the results of an unsustainable business model.

SUMMARY OF TOP BARRIERS TO HIRING

Barrier	Frequency
Low Wages	33
Qualified Candidates	31
Demanding Work / Burnout	29
Insufficient Benefits	20
High Operating Costs	17

Child care is a powerful economic engine and an essential public good, however these persistent challenges are restricting its potential.

"No single organization can solve the child care crisis alone. Lasting progress depends on coordinated community action."

Community NEEDS

EXPAND CHILD CARE CAPACITY

Increase the availability of licensed child care through new facilities, expanded programs, and provider support.

STRENGTHEN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Improve recruitment, retention, compensation, and professional development for educators.

IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY & FAMILY ACCESS

Reduce financial barriers and improve access to affordable, high-quality child care and child care subsidy assistance.

SUPPORT CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Increase operational resources, technical assistance, and sustainable funding opportunities.

BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Strengthen collaboration among businesses, government agencies, schools, nonprofits, and community organizations.

Recommendations FOR ACTION

A Shared Path Forward

These recommendations provide a strategic roadmap to strengthen the local child care system through collaboration, investment, and shared leadership. Together, they aim to expand access to quality child care while supporting families, providers, employers, and the community.

CREATING LASTING CHANGE TOGETHER

Expand Child Care Capacity

A community cannot function without child care. We must invest in solutions to expand access to care. Short and long term solutions are made by an immediate investment in an On-Demand Child Care Substitute Pool to keep classrooms open when teachers are out.

Strengthen the Workforce

Solving the Wage and Talent Gap requires efforts to build the pipeline through Youth Apprenticeships, Career & College Promise, Child Care Academies, and ECE Apprenticeships. To retain early educators, we must provide worthy wages. Each departure fragments quality and increases costs.

Improve Family Access

Reduce barriers to access affordable high-quality child care for families. Navigating shared funding pathways through Duo-Share, Tri-Share, and Quad-Share are effective models that require multi-sector collaboration to incorporate state, local, and employee funding for sustainable infrastructure.

Strengthen Partnerships

Foster collaboration among businesses, providers, government, and community organizations to show how they can offer child care benefits to employees through presentations to businesses, organizations, civic groups, and local government,

Implementing these priorities will require collaboration, sustained investments, and a shared commitment across the community.

Together, these actions can create greater opportunities for children, families, providers, employers, and future generations while building a stronger, more resilient early childhood system.

A Shared COMMITMENT

A strong child care system relies on a network of programs working together to support children's development and help families access safe, reliable, and high-quality care. Each component plays a unique role in meeting the diverse needs of the community. Together, these services strengthen family well-being, support workforce participation, and create the foundation for a coordinated early childhood system that benefits children, families, employers, and the local economy.

The child care challenges facing our community cannot be solved by one organization. Lasting progress will require continued collaboration, shared leadership, and sustained investment from businesses, providers, educators, government agencies, and community partners.

By working together, we can create meaningful change through practical, community-driven actions.

- Expand access to quality child care.
- Invest in the early childhood workforce.
- Support families and child care providers.
- Build lasting community partnerships.

Together, we can build a child care system that gives every child the opportunity to thrive and every family the support they need.

The time to act is now.

Building A STRONGER FUTURE TOGETHER

This report represents the collective efforts of families, child care providers, employers, educators, community organizations, public agencies, and local leaders who generously shared their time, experiences, and expertise throughout this process. The Child Care and Early Education Task Force is made possible through the leadership and collaboration of One Place and the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce, whose commitment to strengthening the early childhood system helped bring community partners together to identify challenges, explore solutions, and establish a shared vision for the future.

In the months ahead, the Task Force will explore ways to implement recommended solutions and explore other innovative solutions that are working in North Carolina. The conversation will continue as we build a strong system of care for our community.

Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient child care system that supports every child, every family, and the future of Onslow County.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS	ORGANIZATION
Laurette Leagon	Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce
Terrell Blackmon	City of Jacksonville
Jeb Brown	Brown Properties
Mark Bulris	Onslow County Schools, Superintendent Representative
Dr. Rev. Joel Churchwell	Sandy Run Missionary Baptist Church
Zac Everhart	Entrepreneur
David Heatherly	Coastal Carolina Community College
Ron Massey	City of Jacksonville
Lora Morse	Carobell
Charlie Myers	New River YMCA
Rachel Nelson	Camp Lejeune – New River Marine & Family Programs

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Joshua Ray	City of Jacksonville
Joseph Speranza	NC Military Affairs Committee
Reva Sullivan	HomeSmart Connections
Susan Thigpen	Onslow County Social Services
Phil Work	Retired Naval Aviator
Fay Yaniero	Retired Educator
Mike Yaniero	City of Jacksonville, Councilman
Dawn Rochelle	Chief Executive Officer, One Place
Autumn Bishop	Chief Early Education Program Officer, One Place
Stacey Knox	Chief Growth Officer, One Place

Together for Every Child

Strengthening child care.
Supporting families. Building community.

May 2026

www.oneplaceonslow.org

ONE PLACE
CREATING HOPE FOR FAMILIES