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Indigenous Families in Monterey County

October 8, 2024

Centro Bilingual, Greenfield, Monterey

About the Focus Group

- **Number of Attendees:** Five parents participated in this focus group.
- **Communities Represented:** All parents lived in Greenfield and spoke Spanish. Additionally, two parents shared that they are originally from Oaxaca, Mexico.
- **Number of Children:** Parents in this focus group had different numbers of children. Specifically:
 - Two parents had one child;
 - One parent had two children;
 - One parent had three children; and
 - One parent had four children.
- **Ages of Children:** Parents' children were between the ages of 2 and 24. The majority of parents had school-age children.

Types of Care

Parents in this focus group mainly provide care for their own children and do not work. Additionally, many have school-age children and utilize school-based programs for care.

Context for the Unmet Need in Monterey County

As noted above, most of the parents in this focus group have school-age children. Therefore, they have been through the process of trying to find child care during their child's first five years and have several experiences to draw on when thinking about the availability of affordable child care in Greenfield. This section provides context on child care access from the perspectives of these families.

Availability of Affordable Child Care

Overall, there is a low supply of affordable child care options in Greenfield. Parents shared the following details regarding the lack of affordable child care in their community.

Many families find licensed family child care providers in Greenfield to be too expensive. Parents shared that licensed providers in Greenfield typically charge between \$32 and \$35 per day. Moreover, they charge by the week, so if a child only attends for three out of the five days, parents are required to pay for the whole week. This system presents challenges for families when they have work schedules that do not require them to work five days a week.

Many families feel that unlicensed providers are too expensive as well. Parents shared that unlicensed providers typically charge between \$20 and \$25 per day. Similar to licensed providers, families must pay for the whole week. In particular, given the seasonal nature of agricultural work, during the fall when work is more minimal, parents have a hard time affording child care. It is a burden to have to pay for the whole week when parents do not work the full week. This point is further outlined in the quotation below, in which a parent explains how they lose out on money when they do not take their child five days a week.

“But if the parent doesn’t take the child [for the whole week], that’s a loss for them. Imagine how difficult it is now since work has decreased. Sometimes they work only five or six hours, which takes away half their paycheck. Plus, they have to send lunch money for the kids, so it becomes difficult.”

Parent Preferences for Child Care

Overall, parents shared that they prefer family, friend, and neighbor care over an unlicensed provider. Some parents faced health and safety challenges when leaving their child with an unlicensed provider. These experiences have made them wary of leaving their child in such a setting. One parent shared that her children would cry through the night when they sent them to an unlicensed provider. They attributed this to the care the child received while with the unlicensed provider, and therefore prefer not to put their children in similar situations. When family, friend, and neighbor care is not an option, parents prefer to stop working so they can care for their child. Some families do not have a relative to help provide care during working hours.

"I used to work in the fields with my husband. But then the kids were born, and it didn't make sense to pay for their care plus my own [expenses], and I was almost left with nothing. Yes. When my twins were born, I stopped working."

State Subsidized Child Care

Throughout the focus group, parents shared several comments about the availability of and preference for state-subsidized child care, as detailed below.

In Greenfield, parents believe that the migrant child care program is the main source of state subsidized care. Parents were only aware of the migrant child care program sponsored by the state. Specifically, they shared that they were aware of subsidized centers that take children ages 0-3 that focus on parents who work in agriculture.

Some families have also been able to access transitional kindergarten. While not specifically part of the state subsidized child care programs, universal transitional kindergarten has opened up access to care for four-year-olds. However, as explained further on in this summary, school-based programs are not always the ideal option for families.

Parents were not aware that they could use a child care voucher for family, friend, and neighbor care. Given that so many families in Greenfield prefer to leave their child in the care of a relative, it was asked if families had tried to access a child care voucher to help pay for family, friend, and neighbor care. Parents shared that they were not aware that this was a potential option for them.

While parents were aware of the migrant child care program, many of them faced barriers with accessing the program. Primarily, parents shared that the requirements to enroll in subsidized child care are onerous. Specifically, the migrant child care requirement to move counties every two years is unrealistic for many families. And, it is burdensome to have to provide proof of rent having lived somewhere else. As a result, many families have been unable to apply for state subsidized child care because they do not meet the migrant family qualifications of moving counties.

"I tried to apply once, but like my companions mentioned, they asked for proof that I had worked outside the area, that I needed to work in the field. But my husband doesn't work in the field, and that's why I didn't qualify."

“Sometimes they ask for too many requirements to enroll a child in a daycare, for instance. They often want you to have moved from the county to find work or simply relocate, and they ask for that documentation. Sometimes we can’t move because, well, where would we go? For this program, you have to leave the county to work for a certain number of months and then return. Only then do they accept your children. This is a barrier for many people because relocating, paying rent here and there, would be a double expense.”

Income eligibility prevents many families from accessing subsidized care. Parents shared that they think the income eligibility ceiling is too low. As a result, many families in Greenfield are ineligible even though they struggle to make ends meet. Parents feel that using gross income is misleading since it does not take into account household expenses that deduct from their take-home pay.

Other Options

Parents reflected on child care options aside from state subsidized child care and family, friend, and neighbor care.

While still costly for families, unlicensed child care is a popular option in Greenfield.

As stated, unlicensed care is more affordable. However, the provider-to-child ratios are higher in unlicensed settings. As noted previously, parents also have concerns about the health and safety of their children in unlicensed settings. For example, one parent shared that when she took her child to an unlicensed provider, they would stay in their car seat all day. As a result this child started to walk later than normal because she was used to lying down all day as an infant.

“Yes, and with these unlicensed places, there are no limits. The more kids they have, the more they earn. But poor little ones... Parents have to go to work, and they have no choice but to leave them there.”

Headstart is another option for some families. A few parents were aware of Headstart programs in Monterey. However, parents shared that Headstart preferred to take 3-4-year-olds. The limited age range was restrictive for some parents and inconvenient for others who had children across age ranges.

Community Assets

Given the lack of affordable child care that meets families' needs, parents shared that the community supports one another to care for its children. Key themes related to this topic are highlighted below.

Families share their opinions of child care providers with one another to ensure that all families can receive the care that they would like. Parents in the focus group shared that they mainly hear about child care options and availability via their community network. Moreover, the community will recommend and/or share concerns about some providers to help families make decisions about their care options.

When available, family members will help provide care for children due to the lack of child care in Greenfield. As mentioned previously, family, friend, and neighbor care is a very popular option for Greenfield families. One parent described how she takes care of her nieces, and they consider her to be a "second mom." Her sister has still been unable to find care, but the sister's children are able to be loved and cared for through having her as a caregiver option.

"She had her first girl when [this child] was three months old, she wanted to put her in daycare, but she couldn't. She couldn't find any space. So she asked me if I could watch her, and she never found anyone else, which is why I'm taking care of them."

Child Care Priorities

Given the child care context for families in this focus group, several priorities emerged regarding the characteristics and qualities parents would like to see in their child care options.

Parents prefer a provider that respects their indigenous background. For parents who identify as indigenous, some have encountered providers who mistreat their children due to the color of their skin. These parents shared that some providers are biased against the indigenous community and show favoritism toward lighter-skinned children.

"Yes, or sometimes because some of the workers don't treat the darker-skinned kids well. There's a girl who works there who says that she gets frustrated because sometimes the kids who are very dark get treated poorly, and it continues without being reported. That's where the violence and racism towards children continues. Especially towards Indigenous people like those of us from Oaxaca."

Parents would like child care options with flexible hours given the early start times for families working in agriculture and other professions. Right now, parents noted that child care options with nontraditional hours are limited. Moreover, the need for nontraditional hours isn't exclusive to families working in agriculture. For example, one parent takes care of her niece and nephew due to the hours her sister works as a nurse. Thus, care during nontraditional hours is a significant priority for families.

"It's complicated for me because sometimes my husband leaves at 3 a.m.. I have to wake up at 2 to get everything ready. Do you think a babysitter is going to wake up at 1 a.m.? Sometimes he goes in at 3, or 4, or 5 a.m.. He doesn't have a set time to return."

Information for Policymakers

During the focus group, families shared important information to help policymakers develop a deeper understanding of the policy decisions that create challenges for their lives. These policy challenges are outlined below.

Because many child care options do not align with families' schedules, for school-age children, there is a gap in the morning before school in which they need care.

Because care is often not available early in the morning, some children are dropped off outside of school as early as 6 a.m. (often in cold weather) and have to wait for school to open at 7:30 a.m. School staff know that young children are waiting for school to open, but these school staff do not intervene. At one point, schools would send out letters to families saying that the school was not liable for the student prior to 7:30 a.m. Many parents cannot pay for those two hours before school starts due to cost. For example, providers will often charge for the whole day, even if it is only for 1 or 2 hours in the morning. As a result, many children are left alone or in the care of siblings or grandparents during these morning hours.

"Sometimes many parents look for someone to take their kids to school just for those two hours, but I think they leave them alone, or if they live with siblings or grandparents. I've seen kids as young as five or even four going to school alone. I've noticed a little girl around seven, and another younger one, walking alone."

"Yes, they would send notes when my kids were in school saying, 'Your kids can't be here before seven-thirty. The doors open at seven-thirty.' Because a lot of people, as you said, would drop them off early, so they'd wait here. And back then, they said, 'No, kids should come early; it's not

until seven-thirty.' There's no one to watch them. If something happens, the school isn't responsible."

Despite the lack of before-school care, schools do offer after-school programs where the children can be picked up at six in the evening. Parents appreciated the extended day option after school ends. However, this left them wondering why the same extension cannot be applied to the before-school hours.

Parents believe there is some corruption with state subsidized child care waiting lists. Specifically, some families think that due to favoritism, select parents will get lower-priced care even though they have relatively higher incomes. Parents feel that this type of corruption exists for other social services programs as well.

Parents appreciated the accessible and informative first-aid training provided by a local organization. The course was accessible because transportation was provided to and from the class, and the class was designed for family, friend, and neighbor providers. The content was helpful and needed for family, friend, and neighbor providers. The first-aid certificate is only valid for two years, so local nonprofits may consider offering this training again in future years.

There is a lack of services in Greenfield for children with special needs. Parents shared that there are a number of children with special needs in the community, but there are minimal resources for them to access to support their development. Some parents must send their children outside of Greenfield to receive resources, which places additional strain on families.

Parents feel that schools are not prioritizing the needs of families. Parents shared that they think the school district chooses to spend their money on infrastructure and district vehicles, as opposed to more extended day programs for children. Parents perceive that the district does not do enough to understand their needs and improve schools in a way that centers families and students.

Current outreach efforts to inform parents about child care options are not very successful. For example, parents shared that the information that goes out via email or text often does not reach parents because of language and literacy barriers. As a result, there is a gap in understanding of available resources for many families in Greenfield.

While many parents who live in Greenfield work in agriculture, many do not and require affordable child care options outside of the migrant child care program.

Given that the migrant child care program is the most well-known state subsidized program in Greenfield, the lack of awareness around programs for families outside of agriculture puts additional strain on these families.

Recommendations

Given the themes presented throughout this summary, parents shared the following recommendations for improving child care in their community.

1. **Expand income eligibility and use net income instead of gross income for the eligibility calculation.** Even for families that do move with the crops, they still are overqualified on the income scale but remain challenged with meeting basic needs.

"They count everything as gross income. In reality, if both parents work, they may not qualify because they take everything into account. If they considered what we actually spend, we wouldn't have anything left, and that's where we no longer qualify...I think it would help to not consider how much each parent makes. For example, my husband earns \$50,000, and after paying rent, we don't have much left. He also has to find work to cover expenses."

2. **For migrant child care, remove the requirement to move elsewhere for work.** Parents feel that the state should not require families to have to leave the county in order to access a subsidy.
3. **Increase the capacity of child care centers.** Given parents' preference for licensed care, they suggested expanding the capacity of child care centers in Greenfield to expand options for parents.
4. **Support stronger parent and provider relationships.** Given the negative experiences some families have had with providers, parents suggested ways to increase the trust between parents and providers. For example, parents suggested installing cameras so parents can check in on their children while they are being cared for.
5. **Support licensed providers with ongoing professional development so they can focus on child development and updated health and safety practices.** Parents shared that they would like to send their child to a provider that is

up-to-date on both child development and health and safety regulations. Thus, providing this ongoing professional development to providers would support this preference.

"Like that time I took my child, and the teacher started singing and dancing. She read a story, and it was really nice. The kids were so happy that even the parents got up to dance. The kids sang about three songs, and for me, it was something beautiful because it keeps the kids entertained and motivated. They want to come back because they have more energy. They finished, got their snacks, and then we left, but the kids were really happy because the teacher had motivated them. Everyone participated."

6. **Support providers with upgrades to their infrastructure so they have better equipment and supplies for the children.** Some parents noted that the physical space where children receive care is not up-to-date and is in need of upgrades.
7. **Ensure that providers have access to child development coursework before becoming a provider.** Parents noted that being a provider requires a specific skillset and background. Therefore, access to relevant coursework for aspiring providers should be readily available in order to support growing the supply of child care in Greenfield that meets families' needs.
8. **Increase local resources for children with special needs and specific training for providers to support children with special needs.** Parents noted a significant gap in opportunities for children with special needs in Greenfield. This issue is exacerbated by transportation challenges as families often must go outside of the community to access resources for children with special needs.

"They should have specific training for working with special needs kids because here in Greenfield, there aren't many resources for child care for them. It's tough. One of my children has special needs, and he had to go to school [far away] since he was three years old because there weren't services available here for him. He started going at three years old. They picked him up at six in the morning because there weren't services available close by. He was taken to school until he was six, completing all of elementary school...and finally to Salinas High School. For his entire life, he was picked up early because there were no local resources for his needs."

9. **Create "before-school" programs similar to "after-school" programs to support parents who must go to work early.** As noted, there is a gap in the morning

between when many families go to work and when school opens. The school can address this issue by providing care before school starts.

- 10. Improve access to information about child care.** For example, parents suggested having information booths outside of schools, community events, the food bank, and shopping centers. Additionally, the state can support videos in indigenous languages such as Triqui and Mixteco to help reach more parents.

"I think it would be better if they set up an information table near the school. Because even though they send messages, sometimes there are people who can't read, or who can't open the message. Even if they can hear the message, they still may not understand it. But I think having an information table would help because someone could explain it to them directly."

- 11. Support providers by offering diapers and wipes as part of their care.** Given that many families struggle to make ends meet, it would be helpful for providers to provide necessities such as diapers and wipes so that it doesn't add an additional cost to families.

- 12. Fund more subsidized child care slots.** Overall, families feel that there is not enough access to affordable child care, and opening more slots would help address this issue.

- 13. Incentivize more people to get into the child care provider profession.** Parents also acknowledged that there aren't enough child care providers in Greenfield, and something must be done to attract more providers into the profession.

- 14. Improve parent engagement in schools so they can advocate for their children and the services they need.** Current modes of parent engagement do not always reach everyone in the community. Parents feel that more opportunities to share their needs with school officials may help address some of the challenges faced in the community.

"I think that most importantly, parents need to be more present in school meetings. Sometimes we aren't very present because, for example, here they have a parents' cafe. But they usually hold it in the morning. Most people are working, and only a few can go. Sometimes they have it in the afternoon, but even then, many people are tired after work and can't make it. But I think

that for our children, we have to make an effort. The lack of involvement from parents is a problem."