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## Opinion: Ripple effect of failed child care system is far-reaching: Now, things must change

BY MATT GILLARD Oct 14, 2021



Gillard

The Record-Eagle covered the 40 percent loss in the region's licensed child care capacity. The pandemic highlighted the state's unsupported child care system.

When community-based small businesses — whether in-home or center-based — close because a business model doesn't support them, child care professionals lose work and parents cannot return to work, accept a promotion or advance careers through schooling or training. Roughly 136,000 Michigan women left the workforce from February to December 2020, largely because they couldn't find or pay for child care. For many families with two children, child care costs exceed rent or mortgage payments. This negatively impacts a family's financial health and puts women's earning potential and retirement incomes at a disadvantage. Businesses cannot maintain a steady workforce because of the exodus of seasoned employees with children. They cannot take advantage of new economic opportunities, expand or meet customer demand.

The Michigan League for Public Policy cites that more than 4 of every 10 people in Michigan live in a child care desert, where the

ratio of children (ages 0-5) to the number of licensed child care spots is greater than three. Supply is more limited for infants and toddlers, with 10 Michigan counties lacking licensed slots at child care centers for infants and toddlers.

While the Record-Eagle's reporting emphasized easing licensing requirements — allowing providers to care for more children with fewer workers to improve profits — fixing the child care crisis and rebuilding the system's business model requires an approach that's best for everyone. We must consider profitability and survival of providers, the earning potential of the child care workforce, parents' ability to afford child care and children who grow and learn best with dedicated, evidence-based care.

Child care leaves many stressed and underpaid. Child care workers make an average of \$12 an hour. Providers would pay their workers more if they could pass on the costs. The current business model is unfeasible for all but the wealthiest. We must prioritize and build public investment in creating a stronger child care system for all, as we do for many American industries.

The \$1.49 billion in federal pandemic relief funds, adopted with bipartisan support in the state's FY22 budget, addresses child care needs. It will pay for economic eligibility for parents who qualify for child care subsidies, offer stabilization grants for child care providers and increase reimbursement rates to providers to help them achieve profitability. It aims to expand care for infants and toddlers (the biggest child care need in Michigan, especially in rural areas) through start-up grants, facility improvements and technical assistance for child care providers and bonuses for child care workers.

We need to rethink our child care business model. New public investment will bolster child care businesses, the families using them and local economies like Traverse City. Our commitment must remain on building continuous support for a new child care

business model and the changes local, state and federal leaders must make. Join Think Babies Michigan as we work for policy changes that strengthen the child care system and benefit all children, starting with infants and toddlers.

**About the author:** Matt Gillard is the president and CEO of Michigan's Children, an independent, multi-issue public policy firm focused on equity and dedicated to improving the odds for all children and families in the state.

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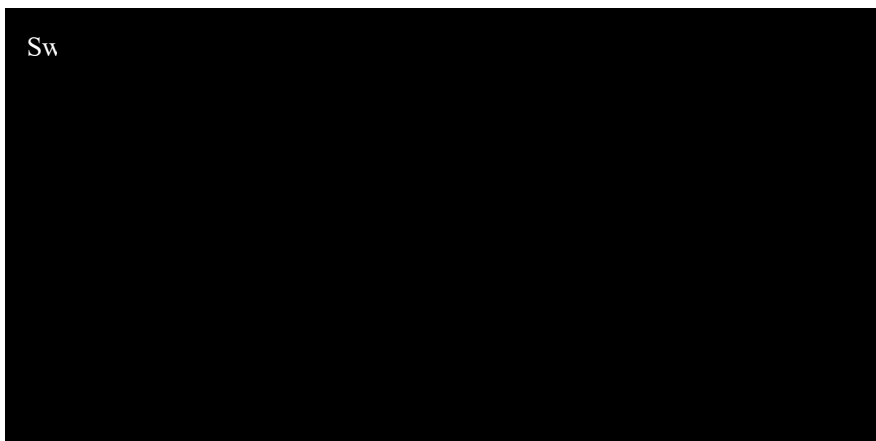
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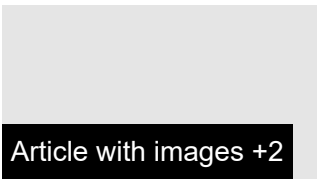
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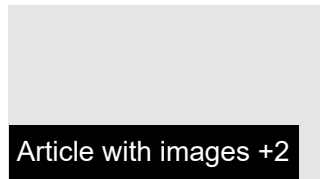
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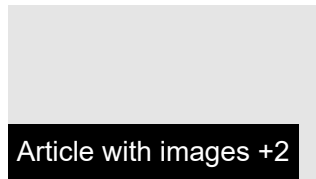
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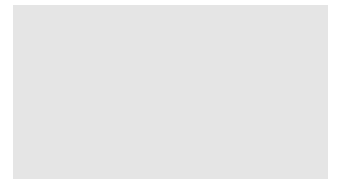
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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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**record-eagle.com**

120 W. Front St.

Traverse City, MI 49684

**Phone:** 231-946-2000

**Email:** [webmaster@record-eagle.com](mailto:webmaster@record-eagle.com)

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