

Family, Friend and Neighbor Care

Over 20 percent of Michigan Children Receiving the State's Child Care Subsidy are Cared for by License-Exempt Providers. How Much Do We Really Know about What They Need to Improve their Quality of Care? A Flint Project is Finding Out.

July 7, 2020 - When Tina Hunter's daughter gave birth to her first child, Hunter offered to care for the infant so that the younger woman could return to work as the manager of a Flint retail store. On top of raising six children, Hunter had experience working as a paraprofessional with schoolchildren with special needs – a 25-year career she decided to forgo in order to care for the new baby.

"It's just a normal thing for me. She needs my help – I'm here," Tina Hunter said.

But Hunter was able to be there for her family because organizations including the [Child Care Network](#) and the [Flint-based Provider Empowerment Program \(PEP\)](#) were there for her. Through them, she was able to connect with vital community resources for her granddaughter's care and receive support to overcome a slew of technical and technological challenges that helped her fill out government forms and apply for a modest stipend - \$250 twice a month - from the Michigan Department of Education's [Child Development and Care \(CDC\) program](#). The federally funded CDC program offers financial assistance to income-eligible families who are working, going to school, or participating in other programs like parenting education, family reunification, counseling or treatment.



To become eligible to bill for the subsidy, Hunter passed a required child care provider orientation class, background check and CPR/first aid training. The stipend helped her cover the cost of caring for her granddaughter including buying diapers, special formula, and transportation costs to doctor's appointments. To stay home with the child, Hunter gave up a significantly better-paying job at a suburban Grand Blanc school – a decision she doesn't regret.

Provider Empowerment Program Improves Service Access in Flint and Creates Recommendations for Michigan

PEP is a model program based at the University of Michigan – Flint and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that has evolved to uniquely serve Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) child care providers. FFN are home-based providers taking care of one or two families of children that can access the state's child care subsidy program as licensed-exempt, but often fail to access that assistance.

Launched in 2016 to reach early child care providers serving vulnerable children impacted by the [Flint Water Crisis](#), the project refocused itself two years ago to the largely underserved group of FFN providers in the community. The shift came when the PEP team discovered that licensed facilities were already getting enough help through organizations like the Child Care Network (CCN) while a large number of children in Flint were being cared for by

family, friends or neighbors, said Toko Oshio, an assistant professor of education at the University of Michigan – Flint, and the project’s principal investigator. Why families prefer FFN care over licensed care may simply be due to lack of access, and unfamiliarity with formal center-based care, or with programs such as Early Head Start and Head Start. Yet another reason why parents turn to FFN care is because they may need care in the evening, overnight, or weekends. And some families just prefer a closer bond between caregiver and child.

“Michigan relies heavily on license-exempt providers, but there really hasn’t been a lot of work around understanding their challenges and perspectives,” PEP Project Manager Jeff Kupperman said. “We want to make sure those perspectives are uncovered, and that solutions come from the bottom up – from the real needs providers have.”

Michigan's child care system has relied heavily on FFN care for decades. When PEP reviewed other states' systems, they confirmed that this is still true. Kupperman added, “FFN are a large category of child care providers in Flint, and they have the largest, unmet need.”

“While much of our work involves providing information, resources, and other help directly to providers in order to increase the quality of their care, we are also working on helping to shape policy in ways that address identified needs of the providers we serve,” Kupperman said.

The PEP project discovered certain obstacles common to all child care providers, but they also found obstacles particular to license-exempt FFN child care providers, Oshio said.

- In the case of FFN providers, and unlike licensed providers, the subsidy is sent to the parent not the provider. It takes an additional step for the provider to receive the payment from the parent. Sometimes this scenario creates complications between the parties.
- License-exempt providers often don’t have the technology at home, such as computers, printers, and reliable internet access, to access online training.
- Computer-based timesheet systems, websites without mobile-friendly interfaces and systems that rely on printing place additional burdens on license-exempt care providers.

While Kupperman and Oshio admit solving the direct-payment problem does not offer an easy answer for now, they have made some recommendations to streamline the process in other areas. One is making the state’s billing website mobile friendly so that providers can complete administrative tasks using their cell phones – technology they already have. Another is allowing providers to “call in” their timesheets instead of submitting online. A third is providing free mail-based training options as well as online and in-person options.

Oshio said an overarching issue is the need to create awareness among FFN providers that what they view as a family obligation is work for which they can be paid and have access to professional resources. “Awareness is an issue. Some don’t consider themselves child care providers necessarily. They think, ‘I’m a grandma taking care of my grandchild’,” she said.

“It’s not even on their radar to apply for a child care subsidy,” Kupperman added. “A barrier is that the parent of the child has to apply for assistance. It’s a complicated system. You apply. I bill. You get the check. Then you pay me. And it’s only a few hundred dollars at most. The system is discouraging for a lot of families. But why it matters is that there’s money left on the table to support the health, welfare and learning of children in Michigan that’s not being accessed.”

For providers like Tina Hunter, working with PEP as an FFN provider has given her connections to supports and services that she may not have located on her own. PEP regularly helps Hunter bill for the state subsidy, and they helped her apply for the state's COVID-19 Child Care Relief Fund. And because Hunter prefers not to take heavy prescriptions she would otherwise use for ongoing health issues, PEP provided her with an infant carrier to strap the baby to her body. That helped evenly distribute the active baby's weight, making it possible for Hunter to maintain her footing and balance while moving around the house. "The whole time during COVID, every day, I got a text messaging from PEP seeing if everything was going fine. Just checking on me to make sure I had everything," she said. "If they can't help you, they'll give you a referral."

Hunter said her daughter, though hard-working, isn't paid a lot and couldn't afford the extensive care Hunter provides if she was forced to look elsewhere. As an essential worker serving the public, Hunter's daughter was sequestered from her baby beginning in March in the event she contracted COVID-19. The baby stayed with Tina Hunter day and night.

Hunter eagerly participated in a variety of online training if it meant improving the quality of care she offered her grandchild. Individual needs of children are paramount.

"I don't know about other people, but it's important for me to work on her development. I watch a lot of videos, participate in webinars to become better informed to work with her. This is what I tell young mothers," Hunter said. "You have to figure out what works for that child."

Providers Work to Increase Cultural Competency in the Child Care Subsidy Program

Juani Olivares' sister, an essential worker, asked her to care for two nephews, ages 9 months old and six years old. Olivares says caring for the children of family members is a natural part of life among Hispanic and Latino people in her community, and many caregivers do so without a formalized plan for reimbursement for their time, or simply accept pocket money when it's offered.

It is no surprise then, that the Flint area has a low percentage of Hispanic child care providers who are either licensed child care providers or license-exempt Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) providers who can bill the state for child care subsidies.

To bring valuable cultural understanding and competency needed to make resources for FFN providers more accessible to her community, and because of her first-hand knowledge providing care for her sisters' children, Olivares was invited to be part of PEP and look into the process of applying to become a license-exempt provider. She has been an especially valuable contributor to PEP because of her service with the Genesee County Hispanic Latino Collaborative and her ability to communicate in Spanish and English.

"There's a lot of misinformation. Most families don't want to go through the child care subsidy process because there's a perception you have to pay a lot of money to get training and to get a license. Some may not have money out of pocket. In Mexico, if you have a license you're viewed as having a degree, like a doctor or an attorney. Having a business license that isn't tied to a costly degree is not well understood there. The costs are minimal (for a license-exempt application) but people don't understand the difference."

Olivares went about filling out the paperwork to become a license-exempt provider, and in doing so gained specific insights to share with the PEP team. "I had to pay like \$10."

A qualified interpreter, she reviewed documents from the perspective of a Spanish-speaker, and considered whether certain technical terms could be translated in a meaningful way for people with a basic level of education.

Olivares also looked for required orientation and health and safety training sessions offered in Spanish. Before attending, the pandemic struck, requiring training be held in a virtual, online format. She asked questions about training sessions, including, “Who provides the interpreter? Is it the agency or the person who needs the training? I didn’t get an answer,” she said.

Olivares shared her feedback with the PEP team, and recommended making the material more accessible in Spanish, simplifying particular technical language, and offering interpreters where needed. She advocated for greater cultural understanding. For many individuals who are caring for children without the benefit of a stipend or child care subsidy, the addition of even a few hundred dollars a month would go a long way to paying bills and putting food on the table, she said. Ultimately, this and other supports result in better care for children.

As a result of her experience, she’s created a new vision for her future. “I started with one goal and ended up with a whole different one. I want to open a child care center and teach in Spanish and English.”