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A group of children walk with their caregivers on Vine Street.

Emma Lee / WHYY

THE STATE WE'RE IN

JUNE 11, 2019 | 12:29 PM

# For parents who work nights and weekends, study finds child care is especially difficult

Despite the apparent gap between supply and need, child care providers aren't rushing to fill the void.

Avi Wolfman-Arent, Keystone Crossroads 

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Avi Wolfman-Arent joined WHYY in December 2014. Prior to that he covered nonprofits for the Chronicle of Philanthropy and education technology for the Chronicle of Higher Education. Avi first took a shine to radio at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. He earned his undergraduate degree at Haverford College and grew up in the D.C. area. Despite the latter he's a lifelong Philadelphia sports fan, devoting an unhealthy portion of his conscious thought to the Sixers, Phillies, and Eagles. He lives in South Philadelphia.

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Ninah Santos is in a child care crunch.

She's a single mom who works unpredictable hours at a Pittsburgh hospital and attends nursing school at night.

Her extended family members live in New Jersey, which means they can't help out when she needs someone to watch her five-year-old daughter. Santos hoped to find a 24-hour child care center near her home in Port Vue when she moved to Allegheny County four years ago.

"I've searched high and low for daycares to do that," she said.

Few do, and so Santos treks to [Dottie's Place < https://www.yelp.com/biz/dotties-place-24-hour-christian-child-care-service-pittsburgh>](https://www.yelp.com/biz/dotties-place-24-hour-christian-child-care-service-pittsburgh) in Wilkinsburg, Pa. before heading to her job downtown.

"I drive 30 minutes to get to her specifically because nobody else is open 24 hours," Santos said.

Dottie's Place provides "non-traditional" child care, defined as at least three hours of care outside the window of 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. New research suggests the service is widely needed, but rarely offered.

Though there's no definitive tally of regulated, "non-traditional" child care slots in Pennsylvania, the organization Research for Action (RFA) estimates there are fewer than 50,000 available seats.

In that same analysis, RFA found 150,000 families that likely need child care outside traditional hours — an estimate derived from cross-referencing census data.

Despite the apparent gap between supply and need, child care providers aren't rushing to fill the void.

"Staying open 24 hours a day is an expensive enterprise," said Kelly Sloane, a research associate with RFA.

Of the 7,330 regulated child care providers in Pennsylvania, only a quarter say they're open outside traditional hours, according to RFA. And those that do provide "non-traditional" coverage say they struggle to offer their services at prices parents can afford.

"The parents are only looking at how much they have to pay," said Dominique Lewis, who runs a 24-hour child care facility in Pittsburgh called [A Place Like Home](https://www.facebook.com/pghaplacelikehome/). [< https://www.facebook.com/pghaplacelikehome/>](https://www.facebook.com/pghaplacelikehome/) "They're not looking at how much it costs to run the facility."

"Non-traditional" providers also told RFA they're in an employment bind.

Child care workers make considerably less than teachers, which [makes it tough < https://why.org/articles/14awprek/>](https://why.org/articles/14awprek/) to retain highly qualified workers. That challenge gets even harder when you're asking employees to work nights.

"It's very hard to find people that want to work for 10 dollars [an hour]," Lewis said.

Parents had their qualms, too, with some telling RFA they have to settle for sketchy, low-quality providers. One Philadelphia mother claimed workers at one facility used foul language around her child. Another said children had to sleep on "dirty mats."

The study found some young parents instead rely on relatives and friends for child care needs, which prevents them from moving and seeking better jobs elsewhere.

About half of employed Pennsylvania families have someone who works in a field that "typically demand[s] a non-standard work schedule," RFA estimated. Those fields include health care, retail, accommodation and food service, and manufacturing.

The RFA study describes itself as an early, exploratory dive into Pennsylvania's non-traditional child care field. Some of the recommendations in the report ask for further study and better data reporting.

RFA also calls on the state to expand its traditional child-care subsidy (known as Child Care Works), and to create new incentives to entice child care providers to expand their hours. In 2018-19, the Child Care Works program was supported by more than \$800 million in state and federal funds.

Ninah Santos says she's happy with Dottie's Place, even if she isn't happy with the distance she has to travel. The center's director has become like a grandmother to her daughter.

"She gets to have education, but she also gets to have a nana who sets her straight and teaches her morals," Santos said.

That's a good thing for Santos, who will still need non-traditional care when she finishes her night-time nursing classes.

"Nurses have crazy hours," she said.

*Keystone Crossroads is a statewide reporting collaborative of WITF, WPSU and WESA, led by WHYI. This story originally appeared at <https://whyi.org/programs/keystone-crossroads> <  
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