For Immediate Release
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First State Pre-K
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“Unlivable”: Delaware Families and Businesses Sound Alarm Over Child Care Crisis
New statewide surveys reveal families leaving jobs—and even Delaware—as employers struggle to keep staff

Wilmington, Del. (November 13, 2025) — Delaware families and employers are united in a stark message: the state’s child care crisis is spiraling out of control, driving families into debt and stress, pushing workers out of the labor force, and costing businesses valuable staff.

That’s according to a pair of new surveys conducted this summer by the First State Pre-K coalition and dozens of partners. More than 500 Delaware parents and caregivers and over 200 diverse employers from across the state representing over 25,000 workers shared their experiences with child care. Their responses paint a sobering picture of a state, where the rising cost and scarcity of child care are making it harder to live, work, and do business.

“Child care costs more than my mortgage. All my earnings go to child care—it doesn’t pay to work,” said one parent respondent from Sussex County.

“These results affirm what we’ve been seeing in the hospitality industry for years: a lack of child care is directly impacting our ability to run successful businesses and contribute to the Delaware’s economy and our local communities,” said Carrie Leishman, CEO of the Delaware Restaurant Association and a lead partner on the surveys. “We know this is an incredibly difficult time to be running a small business like a restaurant where profit margins are very slim. We cannot continue to make it even harder for entrepreneurs; the health of our state depends on it.”

Families: “Delaware Is Becoming Unlivable”

For families, the burden is acute. More than 90 percent of parents reported challenges finding care, from long waitlists to unaffordable tuition. Nearly half (44 percent) said

Delaware is becoming “unlivable” due to child care costs. One in four caregivers have considered leaving the state entirely.

Families described draining savings, skipping meals, and going into debt just to afford care. Nearly half (49 percent) reported taking on debt or dipping into savings. One in five parents (20 percent) admitted skipping meals or basic needs. (These results were captured before the federal government shutdown this fall that resulted in the freezing of benefits like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.)

“All our income goes to child care and paying down debt,” said a New Castle County parent. “We can’t move to a larger home or even support local businesses.”

Employers: Daily Disruptions, Shrinking Workforce, Business Losses

Employers, representing Delaware’s most prominent industries, from finance to construction to law, echoed the same frustrations. About 95 percent said child care challenges are hurting their employees—and three in four (75 percent) said those problems are hurting their business.

Two-thirds of employers (69 percent) said workers regularly miss shifts due to child care. More than half (53 percent) said employees have reduced hours, and 63 percent said absences occur at least monthly—with many describing disruptions as weekly or even daily.

"Child care access has been a significant obstacle to workforce participation for years,” said Yvonne Deadwyler, president and CEO of the New Castle County Chamber of Commerce. “Addressing it is essential to strengthening our state’s long-term economic health.”

The economic fallout is clear: 31 percent of employers cited productivity declines, 30 percent said they had to cut operating hours or services, and 31 percent reported unusually high staff turnover.

“Employees are coming in late or leaving early because of child care. It’s a constant disruption,” said one employer in New Castle County. Another from Sussex County added: “It doesn’t make sense for them to work full-time when their paychecks are going to child care, so they opt to resign their position.”

Locked Out of Help, Stuck in Neutral

Middle-class families reported feeling “locked out” of state support. Benefits like the Purchase of Care subsidy are not available to families earning more than about $64,000 per year, but a family of four needs closer to $100,000 annually to survive while paying child care costs.

“Middle-class families are locked out of the child care system because we don’t qualify for any state subsidies, but the price of child care is the same as a mortgage,” said a New Castle County parent.

Employers are hearing about the struggles loud and clear. 66 percent said they hear frequently from staff about child care struggles, from the expense to incompatible hours.

“Having affordable, reliable, and flexible child care options is critical for working families. Our employees will be at their best when their families are taken care of and thriving,” said a New Castle County employer.

National data underscore the urgency. Delaware ranks near the bottom nationally in access to child care subsidy (43rd) and access to state-sponsored pre-K (42nd) Families of four earning just above the $64,000 threshold lose benefits, yet would need nearly $100,000 annually to cover child care costs without going into debt. Delaware’s statewide supply of child care options is far eclipsed by the demand from parents, with two children for every available seat—and in some cases, as stark as six children for every seat.

“We have a moral obligation to ensure that every Delaware family can access high-quality early learning and out-of-school time programs,” said Jarrett Royster, president and CEO of YMCA of Delaware, a partner on the family survey. “That starts by equipping our teachers with the support they deserve, investing the resources required for excellence, and removing policy barriers that stand in the way of our children’s potential.”

Facing a Multitude of Issues Statewide, Delawareans Demand Action

Despite the bleak findings, Delawareans are signaling their willingness to act. Nearly 70 percent (67 percent) of survey respondents said they would support a modest tax increase to fund child care for all families.

Respondents from Kent and Sussex counties expressed some of the most acute concerns, reporting years-long waitlists, child care deserts, and limited access.

“I worry about the cost of child care but also recognize teachers are not paid anywhere near what they should be paid,” said one Kent County parent.

"Child care has become one of the biggest barriers to economic growth in Sussex County," said Lauren Weaver, executive director of the Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber of Commerce. "Our members are telling us loud and clear: until child care improves, we're leaving economic opportunity on the table. We've had people turn down jobs—or even choose not to relocate here—because they can't find child care. This is more than a family issue; it's a workforce and community issue."

Advocates, including the First State Pre-K coalition, which comprises 40+ Delaware organizations, are urging Governor Matt Meyer's administration and legislators to invest more state dollars in care and education. Today, the state serves only one in five children in public child care options, including the state's pre-K program known as ECAP (Early Childhood Assistance Program), and the Purchase of Care subsidy, which covers tuition for low-income families.

Compared to other states, Delaware sets restrictive guidelines for who can access state programming like child care. A family of four would have to earn under $65,000 annually to qualify for care. Thanks to recent policy change, that same family can stay eligible until they reach 300% of the federal poverty level, or roughly $96,000.

Alongside the survey release, the First State Pre-K coalition developed a new employer resource to help Delaware businesses take action—both within their workplaces and in the policy arena. The guide offers practical tools to support employees' child care needs and outlines ways employers can advocate for broader, long-term improvements to the state's child care system.

The First State Pre-K coalition will traverse the state this fall and winter sharing the survey results and advocacy messages with Delaware communities.

- Thursday, November 13 | 6:30–8:00 p.m.: Seaford Community Of Hope Dollar Dinner, Seaford Boys and Girls Club
- Thursday, December 4 | 6:00–7:30 p.m.: Wilmington Early Care & Education Council (WECEC), Stubbs Dual Generation Center. To register, visit bit.ly/WECECFSPK.
- Tuesday, December 16 | 6:00–7:30 p.m.: Dover Christian Church. To register, visit bit.ly/DCCFSPK.

Family Survey Partners:

- Children & Families First
- Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children (deaeyc)
- Delaware Head Start Association
- Delaware Readiness Teams

- Rodel
- YMCA of Delaware

Employer Survey Partners:

- Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber of Commerce
- Central Delaware Chamber of Commerce
- deaeyc
- Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement
- Delaware Association of School Personnel Administrators
- Delaware Black Chamber of Commerce
- Delaware Business Roundtable
- Delaware Business Roundtable Education Committee
- Delaware Charter Schools Network
- Delaware Contractors Association
- Delaware Healthcare Association
- Delaware Restaurant Association
- Delaware State Chamber of Commerce
- Delmarva SHRM
- Georgetown Chamber of Commerce
- Kent Sussex Leadership Alliance
- New Castle County Chamber of Commerce
- Rodel
- Rotary Club of Wilmington

About First State Pre-K

The First State Pre-K coalition is a partnership of Delaware families, businesses, and community leaders working to expand access to high-quality early learning. Learn more and get involved at www.firststateprek.com.