



**Latavia Howard**, Licensed Family Child Care Provider and Owner/  
Operator of The Early Learning Experience in Bourbonnais, Illinois

## Illinois Can't Work without Her

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*"Recently, I had a child who I noticed was coming in hungry, hungry, hungry. At first, I thought he was just having a growth spurt. But after a few days, I spoke with his mom about it, and she told me she had just moved to Illinois and she was having a hard time. I connected her to the food pantries and other resources. She was able to qualify for food assistance from the state, which she didn't know about because she wasn't eligible in the state she came from. She was so thankful. I told her, 'I'm not here to judge you. I'm here to help you.' That's what quality child care is to me. It goes beyond the minimum standard to developing real relationships with parents and supporting them in the hard work of raising kids." – Latavia Howard*

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I worked in child care centers early in my career, but when my daughter was in preschool, I decided to venture off on my own. I've been licensed for 10 years now and I've gotten my associate degree in early childhood education. In fact, I'm just a few courses shy of my bachelor's degree. I'm licensed to care for 10 children, 6 weeks to 12 years old, and I have an assistant.

All of the families I serve use the state's subsidy. In Illinois, our minimum wage is still low and people really need the subsidy in order to be able to go to work. Among my parents, I have teachers, firefighters, folks who work in factories. Some of them don't get off work until 10 p.m. Some have to work very early. So I'm licensed for 6 a.m. to midnight because that's what parents need and a lot of centers aren't open for non-traditional work hours.

I think the most important thing is getting to know the kids and their families. I'm not going to wave you off in the morning or chew you out in the afternoon when you come to pick up your child. I'm going to engage you in conversation and make you feel comfortable and share the resources you need. I'm doing the same thing with kids, giving them the individualized attention they need.

Recently, I had a child who I noticed was coming in hungry, hungry, hungry. At first, I thought he was just having a growth spurt. But after a few days, I spoke with his mom about it, and she told me she had just moved to Illinois and she was having a hard time. I connected her to the food pantries and other resources. She was able to qualify for food assistance from the state, which she didn't know about because she wasn't eligible in the state she came from. She was so thankful. I told her, "I'm not here to judge you. I'm here to help you." That's what quality child care is to me. It goes beyond the minimum standard to developing real relationships with parents and supporting them in the hard work of raising kids.

I have another parent who's a nurse, and she picks up her children at 11 p.m. I feed her kids

dinner, I give them a bath, I put them down to sleep for a while before she picks up. And I have my own three school-age kids at that time, too. So that is a challenge for child care providers. We sacrifice a lot of our personal time and our own family time for this work.

It's also very hard financially. The cost of food is super high right now and the reimbursement I receive from the food program doesn't cover it. I have a mortgage, property taxes and payroll. One problem is that the state subsidy of \$36 per child per day is calculated on five hours of child care per day, but most of my kids come for eight to 10 hours. If kids come fewer than five hours, we get half the daily rate, but if they come for twice as many hours, I still only get \$36.

I am hopeful for change, though. I belong to the [SEIU union](#) and they have recently negotiated a [rate increase in the subsidy](#) that will be retroactive to the beginning of this year, as well as three days of paid leave each year. They are also working on a pathway to retirement for licensed providers, with a contribution to a retirement fund.

Another thing I'm hopeful about is the upcoming [Smart Start Workforce Grant](#), which will create a wage floor for child care workers and allow me to bring my assistant up to \$18/hour. It's specifically designed to bridge the pay gap, which will be such a relief because it will make it possible for me to have an assistant more of the time without passing that cost on to families.

I love children and, obviously, home-based providers aren't doing this work for the pay alone. But I've learned that I have to speak up and voice my opinion. I have to get parents engaged in these policy debates. When the decision-makers are hearing our stories and seeing the families and the kids, then they realize what we need to support all families no matter where they live. Funding for child care is really basic infrastructure to support families.