



Chrissie Davis

Owner/operator of Five-Star Bouncing Bubbles Child Care in Skowhegan, Maine

Maine Can't Work Without Her

"I advocate for policy changes because family child care providers are greatly underpaid, and we want to stay in the field because we love our jobs. I'm nearing retirement age and this is my only household income. After paying for food (less than half of that cost is reimbursed by the federal food program) and utilities and homeowner's insurance, I have no retirement fund. I'm still paying off my student loans, and often I don't have health insurance. I've had it for some years through the Marketplace, but when I went to sign up last year, it was \$700 a month, so I went without. This year it's less [expensive], so I have it again. Health insurance is just hit or miss, depending on the price tag to be honest, not really on how good the insurance plan is."

I started my business in Skowhegan almost 24 years ago. At that time, I had an administrative job in the manufacturing sector and I got downsized. Coincidentally, I needed to be home after school for my son, so it made sense to take in other children. It was important to me to get licensed right away. I didn't have any experience except being a mom, but I started taking classes and learning as I went. [Maine Roads to Quality](#) was very helpful in providing information and professional development. I followed one of the pathways they suggested, which started with earning my associate degree and led eventually to national accreditation. Since then, I've also earned an [Inclusion Credential, an Infant-Toddler Credential, and a Youth Development Credential](#).

I currently serve seven families—three single moms and four couples. Seven of the eight kids I care for—infant to age 9— are on subsidy. Most families here are poor, working at Walmart or in manufacturing at the New Balance plant. One mom is a physician's assistant and one works at a dental office. I am an [Early Head Start partner](#), and I also have a couple of kids whose parents are Pre-K teachers. Their children are 2 now, and they are impressed by what the children are learning here to get them ready for Pre-K.

What really works for all of these children and for me is that I am very organized and structured around routines. I get up at 3:30 every morning to prepare for the day before children arrive at 6 a.m. I get them breakfast, and I get the school-aged kids on the bus by 7. By 7:30 everyone has arrived and we begin our activities—lots of free play and choice among a diverse array of materials. Parents pick up between 3 and 4 p.m., and then I start the cleanup and preparation for the next day.

The routines of mealtimes, playtimes, outside times, and just how we help each other transition are really a safety net for children that makes them feel comfortable in their second family. For example, last year I had a little 2-year-old girl, Natalie, who was very, very shy and she hadn't been in child care before. When she arrived, she would cry and cry and there was no consoling her. But then, a little boy who's been in my program for a while and

who has a speech impediment started being her buddy. He's very kind and calm—a good steady kid even though no one can understand what he's saying. Natalie just started following him around and they would talk to each other. Somehow they really connected and could understand each other. She started to feel safe and stopped crying when her mom wasn't here. That's what I mean by "we become a family." We take care of each other.

Maine is a very rural state. There are lots of places that don't even have internet service and you have to drive a long way to get to a child care center or a school. So family child care is really the backbone of the child care system in Maine.

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From a provider perspective, one problem is that 4-year-olds are currently counted as toddlers in the ratio of infants/toddlers/school-age kids that home-based providers can serve. So, if your child goes to preschool part-time under the state's subsidized Pre-K program, then I can't fill that slot with another child. And if preschool is closed for a snow day or some other reason and that child is at my home and I have filled those hours with a part-time child, then I could be over my ratio. Counting preschoolers as "school-age" children would fix this problem, benefiting both the families and family child care providers.

Right now, I make enough to pay my bills and keep my house, which is more than I could earn on another job in my small town. I haven't raised my rates in three years. During the pandemic, I calculated my hourly rate to be \$10.93/hour. The thing is I really do love caring for children. I guess I'll just have to keep going forever. I'll probably be late to my own funeral because I'll be changing a diaper.