



Sheryl Hutzenbiler is Owner/operator of Munchkin Land in Billings, Montana.

Montana Can't Work Without Her

What's it like to be a home-based child care provider? In my toddler room, we have been reading *The Gruffalo*. Last week, I emptied our sandbox and hid all the sand. The children were very worried about the empty sandbox, so we wrote a letter to the Gruffalo asking for our sand back. And today it came back. The children are so excited and they're learning their words can be persuasive. It's beautiful! Seeing what kids can do and how they grow and learn is what I love most and why I keep doing this even when the government doesn't support child care like they should.

I've been doing this work for 29 years, starting when my sister needed someone to watch her children. Before long, I was caring for the

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children of a number of single parents in the neighborhood. As a family, friend, and neighbor provider (FFN), I participated in the state's [Best Beginnings Scholarship](#) program, a subsidy for low-income folks, which paid me about \$18 a day for each child – not a lot of money, just enough to cover food and rent. And then in 2007, I purchased a second home in a trailer park, hired my neighbor to work with me, and opened up Munchkin Land – a licensed family group home for 15 kids.

The house had been a child care facility previously, so it already had a wheelchair ramp and a fence. What I needed to do was fill out my paperwork, get insurance, do my state background check, and install a door instead of a window in the infant room. Because I had staff, I also had to learn how to do payroll. I enrolled in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), so I had to learn how to use the computer to keep my books and keep track of everything. Because of the household earnings of my area according to the census, I have always been a tier one provider, which means I get a higher reimbursement rate for the \$250 a week I spend on food for the children.

It took me 11 years to pay off the mortgage on the house. During that time I also joined the Quality Ratings and Improvement System (QRIS) and became a forever student, taking one class at a time, to earn my associate degree. Now I'm working on a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. My program is open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., so working on classes and all the administrative

work of running the program happens during naptime or on Sunday, when I set aside some office hours for myself.

I now have a five-star program and I'm proud that I've been able to pass along the state's incentive to invest in education to my staff as well. Since 2010, Montana has used part of its Federal Block Grant money to give participating child care facilities a quarterly stipend to use for quality improvements and staff retention, as well as a small percentage increase on subsidy payments. I used that money to pay myself and my staff a \$1,250 quarterly bonus to use toward education or their living expenses. A year ago, our new governor changed that formula, so some of that incentive money might be going away, and I know it will have a negative impact on retention. My staff makes \$15.50 an hour in base pay, so if I lose the quarterly incentives, I may not be able to offer a bonus, which makes it difficult to retain staff.

The majority of the children I serve have single parents who are working as nurses, as manual laborers or in retail – essential jobs. The children range in age from infants to preschool, and I have two children who come after school. Most of the little ones have special needs of some kind. I have a couple of foster children and twins who were diagnosed with failure to thrive, but we partnered with development specialists to learn what would help them, and we use those strategies five days a week, not just the one day they go to the specialist. I have a speech therapist who comes in to work with another child. And we take those strategies and individualize our care for each child to meet them where they are so they become confident learners and are able to

transition to Head Start or elementary school successfully.

The stabilization funds we got in 2021 made such a difference. The subsidy for my families went up to \$35 a day, and I charged \$36 for my services. I have staff. I pay \$500 a month for insurance. I have to replace materials. I pay for my own supplemental health insurance and put a little aside in a retirement plan (which most providers don't have). I raised my wages and my staff's wages significantly as a result of those funds, and we are still the lowest-paid profession there is.

Now that money is going away, and in Montana, we actually received our last payment in January. There won't be any more. Those cuts trickle all the way down through the economy to kids and families. Plus, my neighborhood is developing into a new demographic and that may bump me to tier two in the CACFP program. If that happens, I would probably lose about \$1,000 a month in food reimbursements.

That makes for a lot of impossible choices. Do I replace the toy truck that got broken or upgrade the playground equipment, or just let things go? I can't lower my staff's wages. Instead, my own take-home pay will decrease so that I can maintain someone else's and keep a good employee. I've let my families know that I will have to raise tuition, and now some are asking for part-time spots so that they can cut back on their own employment or work from home and take care of their kids at the same time. Decision-makers need to understand that child care is the backbone of the economy. If they don't put money into this industry, which supports every other industry, the whole economy of the nation is going to fail.

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