Regina-Sanna Wilhite is owner and operator of Honey Land Child Care and Learning Center in Houston, Texas.

Texas Can't Work Without Her

"Here in Texas, home-based providers have to participate in TRS in order to accept children with a subsidy or to receive referrals and technical assistance from the state. For providers who have been serving families for years, who have lots of experience but not the required education credits for TRS, this seems a little unfair. Now those families will either lose their subsidy or they have to find another provider, and there just aren't that many of us out there."

Being a child care provider wasn't part of my life plan.

When COVID-19 hit, I was working in the medical field as a home health care administrator. Because of the pandemic, my office closed, and I had to figure out my next step. At the same time, my daughter needed someone to take care of her kids because her day care shut down. So, first I started taking care of my grandkids, and then the children of one of my daughter's friends.

What I've learned in these two and a half years is that I really love being a teacher. I'm a mother and a grandmother and now being with little ones again is like a never-ending surprise. Every day I get the smiles, I get the hugs, I get the high fives, and the children love to come to me. We sing songs and learn and this feels like an extension of family to them. I know this is really my calling and it's a fulfilling one.

At the same time, taking care of children is my profession. I am working on my teacher certification and my CDA (Child Development Associate Credential) so I can be more and bring more to the children I care for. I went through the time-consuming process to get licensed during the pandemic, when everything had to be done by email and Zoom. That was something because I had to learn a lot of technology and how to use the various systems.

I participate in both the Texas Rising Star (TRS) program and the federal food program (CACFP). I do breakfast, lunch and dinner for the kids who are here because my program is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. The CACFP reimbursements help, even though the price of everything has just skyrocketed. After the last pickup, I try to put in an hour or two a night for homework, and I'm no longer open on Saturdays, so I can take my required classes to increase my stars. I have a long way to go for my CDA, but I'm three credits away from my teaching certificate, so I can see the gold at the end of the rainbow.

Here in Texas, home-based providers have to participate in TRS in order to accept children with a subsidy or to receive referrals and technical assistance from the state. For providers who have been serving families for years, who have lots of experience but not the required education credits for TRS, this seems a little unfair. Now those families will either lose their subsidy or they have to find another provider, and there just aren't that many of us out there. I hear in my network that some of those programs are planning to close because for those with a lot more experience than I have, going back to school might just be jumping through a hoop too far.

I am licensed for up to 12 kids, but due to the size of my apartment and the quality of care I want to provide, I only take care of five—ages 8 months to 3 years—during the day, and two more who come after school. Their parents are mostly shift workers and one's a single mom, so their hours are different. One works at Target, one's a mechanic, one works in a hospital. I'm also serving different cultures: The single mom's Nigerian mother picks up her kids and she doesn't speak a lot of English.

One of my afterschool moms recently asked me if I could also take care of a 2-year-old and 10-month old. When I told her my rate for that, she said was shocked that it would be almost $2000 a month. I gave her a discount, but it still seemed like a lot of money to her. I explained that if I charge less, I may as well do it for free. I know that's sad because she does need child care. What can she do? Will she have to quit her job because she's not able to pay?

I think about that a lot: how to balance what I charge with what parents are able to pay. I've only been in business for a couple of years and there are things I need to buy to make my program better. I pay for insurance for the business and insurance for my own health care, and I'm starting to think about needing an IRA for when I retire. It's scary—all the costs. I'd like to be able to take more kids, but then I'd need an assistant and I'd like to compensate them fairly for their time, and I'd have to pay them first before everything else. So it's a struggle to keep my business afloat and know that I can keep doing this thing I love and am good at.