



**Kathy Baker**

Owner/operator of Ms. Kathy's Daycare in Huntington, West Virginia

# West Virginia Can't Work Without Her

Child care is truly essential work. I have a B.A. in business, 34 years of experience, and I've been nationally accredited for 18 years. I take every class that comes along, and I go to conferences when I can. My view is that if I can get one new idea out of a training, then that's worth it. I'm all about learning better ways to keep kids safe and learning.

Every single one of the kids I care for is on subsidy and getting high-quality care in my home. The youngest is 6 months old; the oldest, who comes with seven other school-age kids for a little while after school, is 11. I never have to advertise because I have a great reputation by word of mouth. Most of my families bring their kids here as babies and the kids stay with me before or after school until they go to middle school.

The parents are working just as hard as I am at low-wage jobs—at Walmart, McDonald's, or the school cafeteria. I open up at 4 a.m. to accommodate their schedules. I have three kids who arrive at 4 and one who comes at 5. Some of the older kids come early too, and I take them to school. I actually bought a bus so that I can do the transportation to and from school! What families like about my program is the consistency, the continuity of care. I'm like another mom to these kids. We are all one big family, and that trusting relationship makes a big difference in the quality of care.

I took care of one little boy since he was a baby. When he was 2, I noticed he was walking a little differently, wobbling a little. I encouraged his mom to take him to the doctor and get that checked. She took him in twice over the next two months, but the doctor didn't see anything wrong with him or take my concern seriously. Still, I noticed it was getting worse and I insisted she get him seen by the doctor again. It took three visits to the doctor, but finally, after nine months, they did an MRI and it turns out, he had a brain tumor! I'd watched him for eight hours a day for almost three years and I knew something was wrong. Thankfully, after surgery he was able to recover and now, at 10, he's doing great. But it might have turned out differently if he were being taken care of by lots of different people for short amounts of time. Even in a center where kids move up from the infant room to the toddler room and have lots of different teachers, they might not have noticed that subtle change in his development.

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I believe the reason I've been in business for so long is because of my business degree. I'm able to organize all the business tasks to stay afloat—taxes, payroll, business loans. Without that knowledge, it's really hard to balance your budget and make this work. Recently, my state offered some training on this for child care providers, which is good. But it is still hard to balance the income with the expenses. After my food expenses, cleaning supplies, liability insurance, insurance for the bus, workers' comp. and payroll, I don't make enough to afford health insurance. When I checked on the Marketplace, it would cost me over \$1,000/month, with a \$10,000 deductible. That's just not possible on my income. So last year, for example, when my husband had to go to the ER, we paid more than \$4,000 out of pocket. That's a painful financial hit on our income.

I'm glad the federal government is directing states to pay subsidies based on enrollment, not attendance, and to pay us on time. That won't kick in immediately and it's predicted to cost West Virginia \$14 million, but it's only fair. If you have a streaming service or a gym membership, you pay the full amount each month even if you don't use it. That's what we need in child care. The subsidy should pay

for the spot that child is taking, whether they come 20 hours a week or 40. Otherwise, I'm losing money to care for children who come part time or their families have to find another caregiver. Family child care homes and families are not going to survive without this change.

I'm part of the West Virginia Association for Young Children and I'm coordinating town hall meetings in my county where we invite legislators and policymakers to come hear child care providers, parents and businesses talk about how they are impacted by the lack of child care. What I hope those leaders hear and take away from those meetings is that child care is really important. It's the backbone of our community. And if they don't support this industry and the families and caregivers in their own towns, then everything is going to start folding.

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