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Pennsylvania Can't Work Without Her

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Running a family child care business is complex work. I've been working in early childhood education for 13 years and as a family child care provider for four. I care for six children, ages 1 to 4 years old, who come to me from families with diverse backgrounds. Some work corporate jobs and others are receiving subsidies for child care. I'm licensed for 24 hours so that I can serve families who work non-traditional hours. One child arrives at 6 a.m., but others arrive around 8 a.m. They go home at different times too, but

my day goes from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. I also have my own three children here: a preschooler, a kindergartener and a fifth grader. So, I'm homeschooling and caring for little ones. In addition, I have a part-time assistant, so I'm also paying and supervising her. I am both an educator and an owner/operator of a business.

I used to be a Head Start teacher with a classroom of 20 3- to 5-year-olds in a partnership program site with hundreds of

kids. While I was working with Head Start, I completed my bachelor's degree in early childhood education. One thing I learned is that science tells us how important it is for caregivers to build relationships with families and how important it is for children to build trusting relationships with their teachers. But it was very hard to connect with so many families in that large environment or have time to get to know them. I really wanted to connect with families on a deeper level and build a small, caring community. So that's why I started my own family child care at home.

I have invested a lot of time and effort into making my program the best it can be. I'm part of the Family Child Care Advisory Council in Philadelphia, which provides good information about grants and other opportunities for family child care providers. The coaching I've received from the QRIS program has been awesome and helpful. I now have four stars and am working toward NAFCC accreditation. However, the state regulators and the QRIS coaches are not always aligned. For example, I have a mud kitchen in my outdoor play space, which the kids love. When the state licensor came out, she cited me for it and said it was unsanitary because the regulation says, "Equipment should be free from debris and dirt." But then the QRIS evaluator came out, and she was so excited about the mud kitchen. She said, "Children should be outdoors and exploring nature and being creative." Of course the soil in the mud kitchen was store-bought, clean soil. The kids loved to put little farm animals in there and pour water on it. Later on, a different state regulator came, but she didn't mention the mud kitchen at all, so I haven't removed it, but the inconsistency is nerve wracking. That citation is on record and potentially a parent could see it and think there is something wrong with my program.

My program is Montessori-inspired, and part of the Montessori philosophy is that children of different ages really teach and learn from each other. My daughter who is homeschooled develops patience and empathy and compassion for those who are younger than her. And the

younger children watch and participate in activities that are a little advanced for their age range. They all benefit from that exposure.

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They also benefit from an extended family environment that affirms the values and cultural practices of their own home. Many of the families I serve appreciate that I serve halal meals (prepared as prescribed by the Muslim faith) and others who are vegetarian or vegan like those, too. I was raised in my mom's family child care program, and still call some of the other kids' parents from that program "Uncle" and "Aunt." Their children are my "cousins." Similarly, the kids in my program call my mom Jaddah, which is Arabic for grandma. My mother-in-law also lives with us here. She had one leg amputated, so she has a disability, and the kids here learn from that exposure to someone who is different from them.

The expenses of running a quality child program are continually challenging. Montessori materials are a huge expense. I have payroll and insurance. I'd actually like to have a more comprehensive business insurance, but because I'm licensed for 24 hours, insurers just won't provide that. I have a business liability policy, but it's not as much as I'd like. If I get hurt or if I have to close because of illness, that's not covered by my policy.

One thing that would help family child care providers stay in business is pay equity, like [the program they have in D.C.](#) I'd like to see something like that here in Pennsylvania. As a member of the Family Child Care Advisory Council, I hear from so many other providers who also have degrees and experience. You know, we could go into a classroom tomorrow as certified teachers, but as family child care providers we can barely cover our expenses or student loans or health insurance. We don't have retirement or sick days or other benefits.

Yet even without that financial support, we offer something unique in the child care space. For example, I started my program so that I could foster more family engagement. My families meet once a month, alternating between online and in person. We call it the Lotus Family Parent Committee. Usually 90% of families show up. We do fun things like visit animals on a farm or have a family game night. We have book-themed activities and a big cookout on Labor Day weekend. It's expensive to feed people and do activities, but it's an essential part of my program. Everyone is a part of it. Parents get to know each other and each other's kids. They become a real community of care. It gives parents a way to learn and teach each other and contribute to the community their kids live in every day. In other words, it puts the FAMILY back into child care, and all kinds of kids and parents find strength in those bonds.