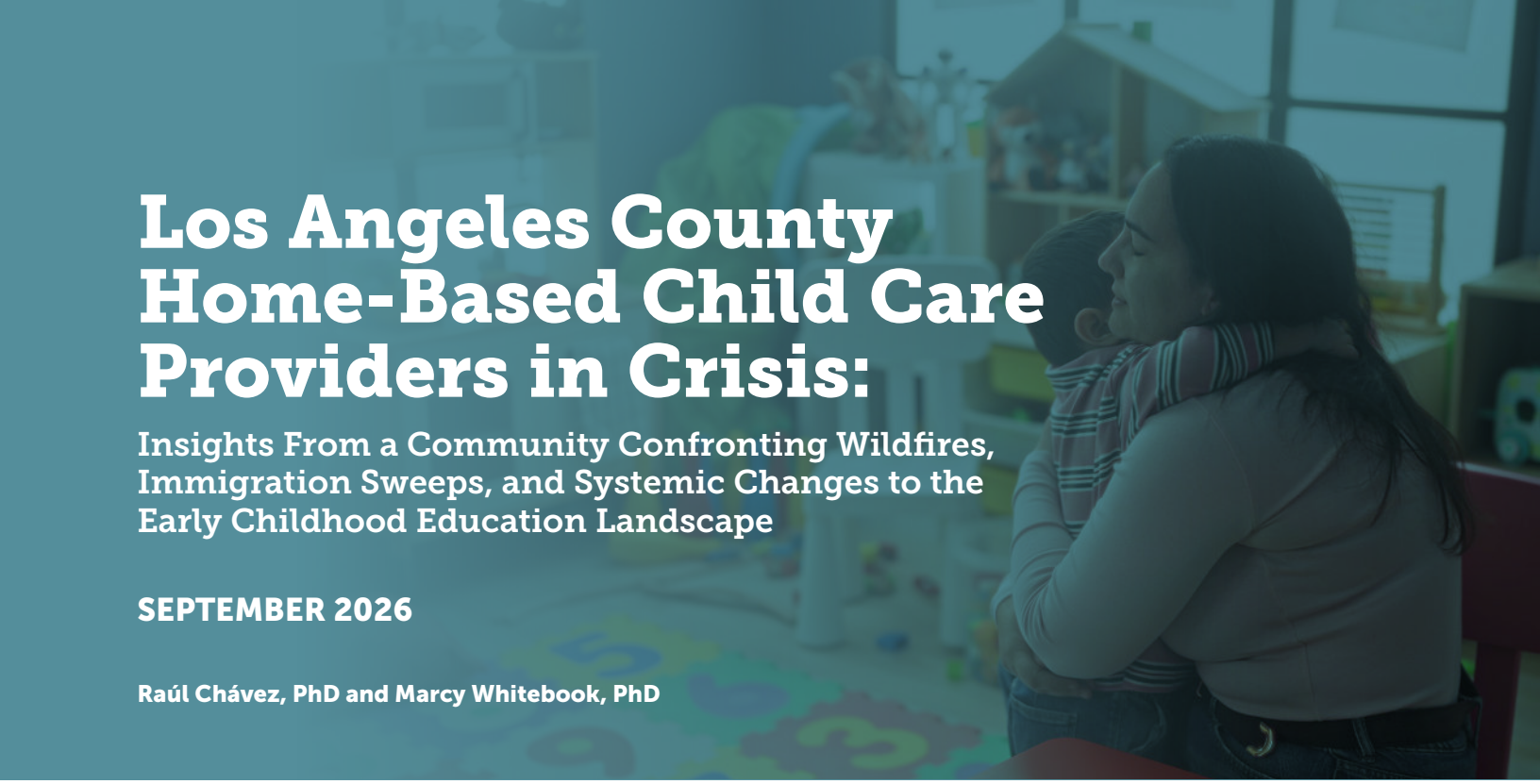


Los Angeles County Home-Based Child Care Providers in Crisis:

Insights From a Community Confronting Wildfires, Immigration Sweeps, and Systemic Changes to the Early Childhood Education Landscape

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Los Angeles County's licensed and license-exempt home-based child care (HBCC) sector faced severe disruptions from natural disasters, a surge in immigration enforcement, and major state-level shifts to the early childhood education (ECE) landscape in 2025. This report examines the experiences of 10 licensed and 13 license-exempt HBCC providers (N=23) as they navigated the overlapping crises. Drawing on focus group discussions, the report documents the providers' perceptions of the impacts of these events on themselves and their businesses, as well as the parents and children they serve, while highlighting their assessments of the events' lasting effects and the vulnerabilities of the HBCC sector.

Background

In 2025, Los Angeles County faced successive and overlapping disruptions to child care, beginning with the wildfires that began just after the new year and that lasted the entire month of January.[1] The fires heavily affected several communities, particularly Altadena, Malibu, Pasadena, and Pacific Palisades. More than 40,000 acres and 12,300 structures were destroyed, while evacuation orders and warnings affected as many as 200,000 residents.[2] The wildfires disrupted schools, community-based services, and family routines as evacuations and housing loss reshaped daily life for thousands of families and businesses. These disruptions affected child care availability through temporary closures, displacement, and enrollment instability linked to relocation and sudden financial hardship.[3] Home-based child care was affected in several ways, including business interruption, property damage, and challenges accessing recovery resources.[4]

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As affected communities began the long-term recovery from the wildfires, just five months later in June, the county became the setting for intensified federal immigration enforcement activity. Federal immigration authorities initiated coordinated raids and sweeps across workplaces, neighborhoods, and public gathering spaces. News reports documented family separations, detentions involving parents and children, and fear surrounding routine life, such as attending schools, shopping, and outdoor activities.[5] These conditions affected child care participation and attendance as families limited movement and avoided public settings. The HBCC sector was particularly affected because immigrant workers comprise a substantial portion of the sector—approximately half of HBCC providers in Los Angeles are immigrants.[6]

As these events unraveled, HBCC was already reeling from ongoing statewide changes to the ECE landscape. Such changes have been shaped largely by California's 2021 expansion of universal prekindergarten (UPK) and transitional kindergarten (TK). The state in 2022 began rolling out this phased expansion, which is expected to culminate in 2026 with all school districts in the state making TK available to all children who turn 4 years old by September 1.[7] As TK has been expanded across the state, it has reshaped the ECE landscape by increasing public school participation among 4-year-olds and altering enrollment patterns across mixed-delivery systems. Research and policy analyses have identified continuing questions about how TK expansion affects HBCC, particularly with respect to enrollment, workforce stability, and the long-term role of such care within California's ECE system.[8]

Study Methodology



The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California, Berkeley provided approval to conduct focus groups and interviews with 23 licensed and license-exempt HBCC providers. Partners shared invitations via email to providers that included a scheduling form asking them to share their preferred contact email and their availability. The research team shared focus group discussion Zoom links via email. The focus group discussions were made available in English and in Spanish from April 18 to May 1, 2025. Five online focus group discussions were conducted using Zoom. The findings represent the experiences of a sample (N=23) of HBCC providers from Los Angeles County who consented to take part in the research. Providers received a $100 e-gift card for their participation.

Data were analyzed following a two-level technique designed to winnow down providers' categorical statements into cross-cutting themes. The first round of analysis consisted of culling providers' words into broad topics that served as a useful manner for summarizing the data. The second round of analysis consisted of organizing the summarized data into categories. The findings represent the weaving together of the impactful issues and stories that capture the experiences of the providers who participated in the research.

Findings

Findings are summarized across three categories: impact on providers, impact on parents and children, and the lasting impact on home-based child care.

Impact on Providers



The confluence of wildfires, immigration sweeps, and statewide changes to ECE in 2025 created a compounding set of lasting enrollment and operational challenges for providers in Los Angeles County. Additionally, providers continue to experience a toll on their mental and emotional well-being.

Impact on Enrollment

Many providers experienced drops in their enrollment during and in the aftermath of the January 2025 Southern California wildfires, which had severe impacts on their financial well-being. Parents removed children from HBCC settings either because they lost their employment or because their homes were affected by the wildfires. In some cases, families lost their entire homes and had to move out of the area. Many providers reported losing at least one and up to seven children from their programs, representing up to 80 percent of total enrollment for some. Enrollment drops placed many providers under financial strain and uncertainty. Some were forced to take an additional job, others nearly lost their homes or their cars because they struggled to make their payments, while others depleted their savings accounts to make up for lost income. Some providers were still struggling to rebuild their enrollment to pre-wildfire levels more than one year after the wildfires.

> *"I had parents who lost their house. I lost seven kids because the parents lost everything, and they moved away. I was not able to replace them. I had to get another job. Those things teach you how vulnerable you are in this industry."*

Just as providers attempted to recover from the aftermath of the wildfires, nearly as many of them reported that the June 2025 federal immigration sweeps in Los Angeles County led to additional drops in enrollment. Children stopped attending HBCC settings as their parents became afraid to leave their homes, or decided to: stop working because of the risk of being detained; move out of the county to lower their risk of detention; or auto-deport to their home countries. One HBCC provider had little choice but to accept less pay as parents had their employment hours reduced and were unable to pay the full per-child amount. Another provider who provided care for the children of agriculture workers lost between eight and 10 children from her program. For some providers, the enrollment losses because of the surge of the immigration sweeps continue to prove unrecoverable, as the perceived detention risk persists, especially amongst the Spanish-speaking community.

> *"I had a couple of parents that did not come back. They were afraid they would be deported. They were scared. I lost three children."*

To further compound the enrollment crisis, statewide changes to ECE, particularly TK expansion, have also recently contributed to drops in enrollment for licensed providers. All licensed providers reported losing many, if not all, of their 4-year-old children to TK. They also reported seeing drops in their enrollment thanks to new after-school programs public schools have created to accommodate working parents after TK dismissal, which only operates a half day in many districts. Additionally, they reported having no waitlist for the first time in their careers, as well as being at a point where they only receive calls to care for babies and infants. License-exempt providers did not report similar effects, likely because parents deliberately opt for this care model based on personal trust and relationship alignment over more institutional or formal programming.

> *"Parents think that the best thing for their children is to take them to TK. It has affected not only me, but all the providers as well. It has been a constant struggle because one thing happens and then another. Everything has changed. I had never had only three to four children in my daycare. I have a large license and always had a waiting list."*

Impact on Property and Operations

Alongside enrollment drops, some providers experienced property damage and operational disruptions during and in the aftermath of the wildfires. One HBCC provider lost her home to the wildfires and struggled to find a new home she could afford. In losing her home, she also lost her child care space and income source. Another provider faced power outages during the wildfires. She lost all of her fresh food, and had to consider either shortening her hours or working with candles. Ash on cars, homes, and outdoor playgrounds was a commonly cited cause of operational disruptions, which lasted long after the wildfires ended. One provider had to close her child care program for weeks because her property, including her outdoor playground, was covered in ash. Another provider continued to struggle with the long-term effects of the wildfires on home insurance affordability, as her neighborhood was rezoned as a high-risk wildfire area. Her home insurance payment increased to nearly unaffordable levels, and she continued to struggle to find insurance for her home as a child care program.



A Family Child Care provider's home before and after the Altadena fires.

> *"I have been reclassified as a high fire zone. Where my insurance might have been $1,800, now it's $3,000. I have to get funder liability insurance as a daycare. I called around to get a fire policy, but no one is going to get me fire insurance as a provider."*

Additionally, the immigration sweeps have had spillover effects on some providers' operations. Two licensed providers reported losing an assistant. The assistant of one provider was detained and subsequently deported from the country. The HBCC provider emotionally shared that she still has the sweater her assistant left before leaving the child care program and being detained, never to return. The assistant of a second provider who worked with her for over 10 years, decided to relocate to lower her risk of being detained. The assistant helped immensely with the child care's day-to-day operations, including preparing food early in the mornings. A license-exempt provider reluctantly agreed to take on the risk of being detained by agreeing to travel by public transport to collect the children she cares for after school so their mother can lower the amount of time she spends in public spaces.

> *"My assistant doesn't have legal documents. She was scared all the time. She suddenly stopped coming into work. She moved to another city. Losing an assistant means losing someone you trust. She had been with me for 10 years. She was everything to me. She helped me cook, and she was happy with me, too. We were a team for 10 years."*

Changes to the ECE landscape have further forced some licensed providers to shift operations in ways that created greater expense for themselves. One provider hired an assistant to try to compete with after-school programs. The assistant is responsible for collecting children from school so their parents do not have to. Other providers have tried to adapt to TK expansion by filling in the care gaps that TK programs produce between the end of school and parent pickup times. One provider reported being forced to work longer hours to make up for lost enrollment. Yet another provider shared that the core of her operational hours had shifted to the afternoon and to as late as 10 p.m.

> *"We're being forced to work longer hours. I have to fill gaps with infants and toddlers, and I don't want to do that. If the subsidies aren't there for us, we're on our own."*

Impact on Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Many of the providers reported experiencing mental, emotional, and physical distress during the wildfires. They reported feeling stressed, nervous, depressed, and overwhelmed. One provider suffered such psycho-emotional stress, that she would dream of fires reaching her home. Another provider could see the wildfires from her roof, which caused her to experience anxiety at the thought of the flames reaching her home. Yet another provider reported a high level of psycho-emotional stress that affected her marriage, as her partner questioned why she insisted on taking on the financial and emotional toll of being a child care provider. Additionally, some providers experienced physical health problems, from becoming sick because of the smoke and having a lot of wheezing, to developing pneumonia. One provider shared that her daughter became so sick from the smoke that she ended up in the emergency room for several days, which left her unable to work during that time.

> *"The person whose children I cared for lost their job, [and I lost that source of income]. It affected me financially and emotionally, with the uncertainty of what will happen next. My son was also out of work for two weeks and wasn't getting paid. Everything piled up: the fires, immigration, people not wanting to go out."*

The levels of mental and emotional distress reached new heights for an even greater number of providers because of the federal immigration deportation sweeps. Two providers described the last year as the biggest challenge of their lives, and many of them shared witnessing mass sweeps and people being detained on the streets or taken from their homes or vehicles, including their friends and neighbors. These providers expressed an inordinate amount of fear, to the point that some of them made the difficult decision to not leave their homes. One provider who witnessed friends and colleagues being detained was unwilling to leave her house, and would order all of her basic goods online. For one provider, the stress of the situation led to her developing physical health problems, including high blood pressure, which she had never had at any point prior. When not fearing for their safety, the providers feared for the safety of their loved ones, especially those who were the primary breadwinners and had little choice but to take daily risks to go to work.

> *"It has been the biggest impact we have had as a family. My husband lost many hours of work. It has been very difficult financially. The immigration issue has affected me the most because it has been an economic and physical impact, causing stress and anxiety."*

Impact on Parents and Children

Parents and children have been impacted by the wildfires and the immigration sweeps in ways and to degrees providers had never seen before. The impact has had ripple effects on the care some children received from providers.

Impact on Parents

Providers reported that the parents of the children they cared for confronted great fear and uncertainty surrounding both the wildfires and the immigration sweeps. Parents directly affected by the wildfires experienced daily uncertainty about their future and what their next steps should be. The immigration sweeps compounded these feelings. Some providers bore the difficult responsibility of supporting parents through the immigration sweeps. This ranged from serving as advisers to parents regarding making plans for their children in the event that they would be detained, to reluctantly accepting to take charge of the children as guardians. One provider reported that the father of one of her children was deported, and that the mother would quickly drop off the child and run off to work or home to avoid being detained. Another provider did the food shopping for one of her families so the parents could limit their public exposure. The immigration sweeps have also stifled parents' access to public benefits, as people have become afraid to seek public assistance regardless of their documentation status and of their need for assistance. Some providers reported that parents lost their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or CalFresh benefits.

> *"A child I cared for had undocumented parents. His father was taken away. His mother … would beg me to pick up her child, and for me, it was a risk. She would pick him up and run off. It was a stress that was passed on to us. There was a moment when she said, 'I'm going to sign a paper, and if they take me away, you can keep the child.'"*

Impact on Children

The psycho-emotional distress parents experienced because of the wildfires and the immigration sweeps trickled down to children in their care. Regarding the wildfires, providers reported a series of ways in which the children they cared for were impacted physically, mentally, and emotionally. Providers reported several cases of children suffering from

asthma because of the wildfire smoke, as well as pneumonia. A provider shared that schools were ill-prepared to respond to the wildfires, and that the chaos that resulted from their mismanagement contributed to children's negative psycho-emotional experiences. One child would constantly ask their caregiver if the wildfires were going to reach them, while another would regularly ask if they were going to have to move again, suggesting a high level of anxiety in both children. Other providers reported seeing trauma-levels of fear in their children, which has likely had long-term effects. Some shared observing children being triggered more than a year after the wildfires, including when an alarm goes off, as well as seeing behavioral issues that began during that time.

> *"The children were emotionally impacted. Once, we received a false alarm. We were told to be ready to evacuate, and my granddaughter overheard it, and ran to see what the phone was saying, and she was scared. They could sense that California isn't prepared for many emergencies, and they never forget it. Even when an alarm sounds now, a car crashes, they ask what it is. It is a lasting impact on the children."*

The psycho-emotional distress in children providers reported was more prevalent in relation to the immigration sweeps. Many providers observed worry, fear, anxiety, stress, hypervigilance, crying, and feelings of not being safe in the children they cared for. Children would urge the adults in their lives not to go outside out of fear that they would not return. One provider reported that a child remained hypervigilant of the front door and would persistently ask when their father would return. The child would look desperately at the door and wait all day for their father to return. In seeking to have contingency plans, children absorbed the anxiety of their parents and caregivers. Some children wrote their phone numbers on the inside of their shoes to ensure that they could be reconnected to their families. Others were advised not to say where they were from if questioned by someone they did not know, or to never open the front door if someone knocked. Many providers noted that the impact has been long-lasting, as people remain on alert.

> *"Emotionally, the children were always worried. They don't understand the whole status or documentation thing. 'Grandma, what time is dad coming home?' they ask. They're afraid that someone in their family won't come home. They desperately keep looking at the door waiting for their relatives to arrive."*

Impact on Children's Home-Based Child Care Experiences



Providers' reports on the impacts of the wildfires and immigration sweeps on parents and children suggest that the care the children received also suffered. Such comments were often in the context of the growing cost of living and its effects on themselves and families. During the wildfires, children at sites directly affected by the smoke and ash were unable to play outside for health reasons. Some providers reported having to make similar constraints to their care because of the immigration sweeps. The constant helicopter activity led one provider to not allow her children to be on

the outdoor playground. License-exempt providers who took their children to public parks curtailed such activities to limit their public exposure. One provider reported that doing so led the children she cared for to become bored as they were permanently indoors, while another reported that their children would continuously ask if they could go outside. At the same time, some providers shared that their children in recent months began to arrive with fewer snacks or with less food, as parents faced financial constraints because of the immigration sweeps' impact on their employment and income. One provider reported that, combined with the increasing cost of living, she had to make cuts to the snacks and food she offered to her children.

> *"There was so much helicopter activity that I couldn't let the children play outside anymore. Being locked up, the children just want to run around, and their faces are distressed. It's been terrifying. A colleague notified me that immigration was two blocks away, and it was stressful for everyone."*

The Lasting Impact on Home-Based Child Care

Providers' reflections on the lasting impact of recent disruptions extended beyond immediate challenges to broader concerns about the long-term sustainability of home-based child care. They identified needed supports and system-level changes they believed would strengthen provider stability and the home-based care sector.

Exposed Vulnerabilities in Home-Based Child Care



The convergence of wildfires, immigration sweeps, and statewide changes to the ECE landscape exposed the underlying vulnerability of home-based child care and raised broader questions about its long-term sustainability. Some providers described these challenges as interconnected rather than separate crises. They likened the uncertainty to the instability experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many spoke of facing everything in a back-to-back succession, from the COVID-19 pandemic, to the wildfires, to the immigration sweeps, to the shifting ECE system, to the rising cost of living, all while trying to sustain their businesses, and provide quality care to their children and support their parents. Together, these overlapping disruptions revealed how dependent home-based care is on broader environmental, political, social, and economic conditions. Providers' comments demonstrate that because home-based child care is ultimately community-based care, events that put a strain on the community will inevitably lead to pressures on home-based child care.

> *"It was very shocking because I think my work decreased by 80%. I had to fall behind on a rent payment. I had to ask churches or NGOs for help. They donated food. Post COVID was difficult, and now yet another thing. And for me, it was chaos. What could I do? What else was coming? I didn't know what to do."*

> *"Everything started to pile up: the fires, immigration, people not wanting to leave. The situation hasn't improved."*

The lack of substantial support during and in the aftermath of the wildfires, along with the enduring impact of the immigration sweeps, further exposed the vulnerabilities of home-based child care. Few providers reported receiving aid to support them in managing the impact of the wildfires. The most common type of support providers reported was the provision of air purifiers by Child Care Providers United (CCPU) or by the California Community Foundation (CCF). Providers found the support far from sufficient, and they had to seek assistance for more urgent needs, such as food, from community-based organizations (CBOs) and local churches. One provider lamented not being eligible for aid because she did not serve any children with a subsidy. At the same time, some providers were still facing the long-term impact of the immigration sweeps. Providers reported that, while federal government activities had decreased since June 2025, they and the community remained on high alert. Children were still afraid to go outside, and people were still in fear and continued to limit their public exposure. One provider reported recently witnessing an immigration raid two blocks away from her home. Another provider believed that the community would remain in fear as long as the current presidential administration remained in office.

> *"Child care was my Saturday income, and I lost it because the family lost most of their house. They were in shelters. They suffered losses and lost their income. It was very painful. For over a year. I had a specific weekend income, and I didn't receive that. I stopped saving, and I had to cut back on food. I had to limit what I ate during the week. I get food from places that distribute free food, and that's how we made ends meet."*

> *"The fear continues. I still have it. I'm going out to classes, courses, and training sessions, but it's very stressful—the uncertainty of how long I'll be on pause, waiting for things to be resolved."*

Long-Term Challenges to Home-Based Child Care Enrollment

Providers, in particular licensed ones, expressed a series of concerns surrounding their long-term ability to attract families to their programs. At a broad level, these providers continued to struggle to convince parents that they can provide equal or higher-level quality care and education as TK programs. They reported that parents were not aware that providers could provide preschool instruction, and that parents still perceived them as babysitters or domestics. Compounding this, some providers reported that resource and referral agencies were no longer referring children to their programs. One provider believed that these agencies were actively keeping children away from their programs, either by not listing their programs as options to parents, or by pointing parents toward TK or non-home-based programs. Another provider agreed, reporting that such agencies were leaving out home-based care from their referrals unless the parents expressly requested such options. Furthermore, some parents believed that without additional funding for subsidies, their programs would never be able to compete with free TK programs. Yet, the waitlist for subsidies can be yearslong, leaving some families unable to access home-based programs. One provider reported having lost children because their parents lost access to Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) financial assistance. The problem of attracting families to home-based care in light of TK is likely to worsen, as non-home-based programs expand their own programs to be able to enroll children from families with subsidies. In light of these developments, some providers feared that home-based care, particularly license-exempt care, was slowly becoming a dumping ground for children with behavioral issues that public schools were happy to leave out of their programs.

> *"It's not just TK. Where are all these programs coming from for the school districts to run these after school programs? Nobody knows what the true cost of care is. Inflation. Money is tight … If parents have to pay us, they will go to free programs. But if we're funded, we can convince them to stay, show them they are learning more in our programs. I have families that can't get funding; have been waiting for three years. There is no mixed-delivery [system]."*

Supports and System Changes Needed to Sustain Home-Based Child Care

To help sustain home-based child care during periods of disruption and recovery, providers reported a need for more responsive and accessible support. Several providers emphasized the need for relief that could be accessed more quickly than insurance assistance following emergencies. Others identified a need for mental health services, supermarket gift card programs, hotlines to find shelter and refuge supports during crises. In the long term, providers requested additional training and clearer information, including guidance on public assistance, taxes, and business operations, noting that misinformation created barriers to accessing available resources. Some providers expressed interest in training to expand their capacity to support children with additional needs, while others highlighted the importance of grants and funding opportunities. Providers additionally emphasized the importance of representation and advocacy, with one participant noting the need for Black women to have a stronger voice in decision-making spaces affecting home-based child care.



Nonetheless, lasting positive change to home-based child care will require changes to the structure itself. Providers identified a range of policy and system-level changes they believed would better support the home-based child care workforce. Some participants advocated for changing licensing requirements that would allow them to enroll 18-month-olds into their programs. Others expressed concern that home-based providers continue to be viewed as caregivers rather than educators and reported that license-exempt providers, in particular, needed higher compensation and stronger economic support. Participants described challenges associated with uncompensated absences when parents could not pay for care or when children were chronically absent, and some emphasized the need for paid coverage during long periods of closure or emergency-related disruptions. Providers also identified broader structural supports they believed would strengthen the field, including access to retirement, medical and mental health benefits, opportunities to expand these, and compensation tied to quality standards. One participant highlighted the importance of student loan forgiveness. Another noted the need to change the percentage of the time providers are allowed to spend outside their licensed home-based programs so they can attend doctor's appointments or in case they have a family emergency.

Closing Takeaways and Recommendations

Los Angeles County HBCC providers since 2025 have navigated not one isolated crisis, but a succession of overlapping disruptions that exposed the vulnerabilities of the sector. Providers continued supporting children and families through wildfires, immigration sweeps, and major ECE system changes, while also managing business instability, enrollment loss, and personal hardship. Findings from this study suggest several opportunities to strengthen the resilience and long-term sustainability of HBCC.



Recognize HBCC as essential community infrastructure. Providers' experiences demonstrate that HBCC is deeply interconnected with community wellbeing. Emergency planning, disaster response, and community recovery efforts should formally recognize HBCC providers as essential infrastructure and include them in preparedness and response systems.



Improve visibility and recognition of HBCC within the ECE mixed-delivery system. Providers reported continued challenges being recognized as educators and concerns that families and referral systems undervalue HBCC. Public agencies and ECE partners should strengthen outreach, family education, and referral practices to ensure HBCC is represented as a quality and developmentally appropriate option.



Invest in trusted partnerships and provider-led solutions. Throughout periods of crisis, providers often relied on trusted community organizations and peer networks for information and support. Future efforts should invest in partnerships with CBOs and include providers directly in policy and program design to ensure support reflects on-the-ground realities and community needs.



Develop rapid and accessible emergency support for providers. Many providers reported difficulty accessing timely relief following the wildfires and relied instead on CBOs to meet basic needs. Emergency assistance for HBCC providers should prioritize speed, low administrative burden, multilingual access, and direct support for immediate needs such as food, housing, business interruption, and recovery expenses.



Address the ongoing impacts of immigration enforcement on children and care systems. The effects of immigration sweeps continue to shape HBCC provider activities and community life. Policymakers, local agencies, and community organizations should develop coordinated responses that support children and caregivers experiencing immigration-related fear and disruption, including accessible information, legal resources, and community-based protection.



Strengthen mental health and social-emotional supports. Providers described themselves, children, and families feeling persistent stress following both the wildfires and the surge in immigration enforcement activity. Investments in mental health services, trauma-informed supports, and crisis-response resources for providers, children, and parents are essential components of community recovery.



Monitor and mitigate the unintended consequences of ECE system changes. Participants raised concerns that TK expansion and broader ECE shifts may be reshaping enrollment patterns and creating new challenges for HBCC providers, particularly for programs serving preschool-aged children. Ongoing monitoring of enrollment, family access, and provider stability is needed to better understand how policy changes affect mixed-delivery systems and HBCC participation.



Expand economic and workforce support for HBCC providers. Providers identified broader workforce supports as critical to sustaining HBCC, including retirement benefits, medical and mental health coverage, paid leave protections, and compensation structures that reflect the complexity of their work. Strengthening economic supports may improve provider stability and long-term retention within the HBCC workforce.

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About

HOME GROWN

Home Grown is a national collaborative of funders, caregivers, and providers working together to advance an inclusive child care system where home-based child care is visible, valued, and well-resourced. We work in partnership with the diverse array of family child care providers and family, friend and neighbor caregivers who comprise the home-based child care sector. Learn more on our website.

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