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Bay Area Write-Up

Fall 2018



SPR

**PARENT
VOICES**



Bay Area Focus Group Write Up

Name of Location: California Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Name of Supporting Organization: Parent Voices San Francisco

City: San Francisco

Focus Group Facilitators: Mary Ignatius and Laura Pryor

Date of Visit: October 1, 2018

Focus Group Participants: Nine mothers and one daughter from the San Francisco Bay Area with a range of 1-4 children each. Three mothers live in San Francisco, three mothers live in Oakland, two mothers (and daughter) live in Hayward, and one mother (joined by phone) lives in Pittsburg. All mothers were recipients of subsidized child care.

Ideal Child Care Scenario

Parents at the focus group had a very clear vision of their ideal child care scenario. This scenario followed the child care process since before their child was born all the way until 18. The points below outline parents' hopes and wishes for the child care system.

How Parents Would Like to Learn about Child Care Options

- **Parent access to child care begins before their child is born.** For example, hospitals, pre-natal appointments, and birthing centers all provide information about child care options to parents.

In the dream world it is like, 'You have a baby. Here's a voucher.'

- Outreach to parents about child care mirrors other public efforts to disseminate information. For example, similar to a job fair, **the city or the county hosts a "child care fair"** in which parents learn about various child care options and how to navigate the system.

"I think that the [city/county] should have some kind of child care fair. Like how they have these wedding events and you can meet all the vendors. And you can go to all these different events where you meet all these different companies and that kind of stuff. I think they should do the same thing for child care. Maybe twice a year or something so people who are pregnant or planning on getting pregnant can go in and get information about that kind of stuff."

- Furthermore, parents are exposed to and reminded of child care options through **easily accessible advertisements** such as buses, internet ads, and television commercials.

“So kind of like, right now they're promoting normalize breastfeeding. So it's all on the buses. So the same thing like childcare, all this stuff, just promoting childcare. So people just start getting used to it.”

- These advertisements for child care are provided in multiple languages. Furthermore, **Cultural navigators help immigrant parents** understand and use the child care subsidy system.

“I think some of the bilingual people can help with translation. But there should be a cultural connection to help us to understand. Maybe if somebody who came from our country can work with us and explain the systems, that would help. It's different from somebody that lives here or born here, even if they speak Spanish.”

How Parents Want to Navigate the Child Care System

- Parents applying for child care subsidies do not get put on a waitlist. Instead, child care subsidies are approved at the time CalWORKS is approved.; all social service programs start at the same time for the parent. Once a parent signs up for child care, **there is no delay in service provision**. Navigating the child care system is not confusing.
- The process for obtaining child care should be the **same for children with special needs**. Parents do not have to jump through any additional hoops to receive a child care subsidy for a child that may have special needs.
- When a parent obtains child care, **there are no gaps in the system and services are seamless**. The system follows the child to determine eligibility, as opposed to following the parent. At the same time, parents' child care choices should be honored and respected.

“Where the system is broken because the system follows the parent to determine eligibility for childcare. When the system should be following the child to determine their eligibility for childcare. So we need a system that follows the child to determine eligibility. Regardless of what the parent situation is. The reason why I say this is because we have parents who are working. We have parents that are trying to attend college. We have parents that are domestic violence survivors who need therapy. We have parents that are also incapacitated because they have a situation where they have a medical diagnosis. We have ADA disabled parents as well as children with special needs. Or you have a CPS case parent, family. A homeless family. Or family that's been reunited after being in foster care. I think we need to look at those type of layers. And I feel like if we had a system that actually followed the child, it would just take those gaps away. No child should have to wait.”

- **Child care policies are consistent across the state**. For example, a parent from Alameda should be able to receive the same services as a parent from San Francisco.

- Parents experience **case workers that are judgement free and treat them with respect and dignity**. The case workers exude a culture of positivity and are fair to all family structures.

“I would love to see a culture of positivity happen within childcare or just be ‘hey, congratulations that you’re even thinking about childcare. We know it’s going to be a bumpy ride and we’re here to help you blast off.’ Do a little life coaching with us.”

- **Social services offices are welcoming spaces for parents of all backgrounds.** Offices have INS-Free Zones signs as well as gender neutral bathrooms, especially for transgender and non-binary parents. All forms include non-binary gender options. For example, instead of “Name of Mother and Name of Father” it would state, “Parent 1 and Parent 2 with an option to mark a box that states Parent 2 is not in the picture. Additionally, social service offices have an outside playground or onsite child care for children.

How Parents Want to Choose the Right Provider

- When selecting a potential provider, **parents have the option to meet the provider one-on-one** to discuss the facility’s curriculum and the provider’s approach. The provider also offers tours. Alternatively, parents can go to an online source to learn more details about the facility.
- **Child care subsidy vouchers are accepted at all child care facilities.** Therefore, parents can choose their provider from a range of high-quality options. Parents do not have to settle based on where their vouchers are or are not accepted. The amount of the subsidy should also be increased to meet the true cost of the market, otherwise the most child care options may be out of reach to a low income parent who cannot afford high co-payments.
- Additionally, **child care facilities are co-located at high schools** so parents with older children or teen parents can easily access child care.

Definition of Quality Child Care

- For many parents, quality child care not only means a safe and enriching environment, but also **flexible hours, including nights and weekends**. Many parents have alternative works schedules and require child care options with non-traditional hours.

“We can access child care by following the child’s eligibility, the child is eligible regardless of what the activities are of the parent, the child is eligible and then they honor the parents’ choices.”

“In my dream world of childcare, we have flexible childcare centers that work on the weekends, that work in the evenings, because some of us have weekend jobs. Some of us work at night, past pm, and it puts children in dangerous situations because you’re having to try and figure out ‘What am I

going to do with my child?' And you may not make the best decision to where to have your child because you're so desperate."

- **Child care facilities practice inclusion.** Providers are open to and skilled at caring for children with special needs.
- **Quality child care is available in parents' neighborhoods.** Parents do not have to travel out of their way to pick up and drop off their children at a child care facility.

"The other thing is, you shouldn't have to feel like you have to go outside of your neighborhood to find quality, and that's another thing, if you don't have transportation, even if a slot opens up on the R&R, the wait list, some parents turn it down, like are you kidding me? My job is over here, I have to go all the way on the other side of town to drop my child off and go all the way to the other side of town for work, and you don't have a car to do that? That's crazy."

Reality/Challenges

Parents' vision for their ideal child care scenario was informed by the reality of their child care situation and the challenges they faced navigating the system. The points below outline those key challenges that reflect parents' realities.

Accessing Quality Child Care

- **Parents that have immigrated to California are often not willing to sign up** to receive a child care subsidy because they are intimidated by new immigration laws.
- **Outreach about childcare subsidies is poor.** Many parents did not know that resources existed.
- **Several providers do not offer a safe environment,** and the county/state does not provide adequate oversight to ensure safety in every provider's facility. As a result, there are several child care providers with persistently unsafe environments.

"One of the challenges for me was, I had a provider who, when we first met I did my tour and I did my visit, and everything was all shiny and cute, and then I found out later that this person was drinking while they had the kids and they were in possession of other stuff. And so, the reality is the state/county is not following up with these providers, the oversight is not there."

- Furthermore, parents feel that **existing child care options do not offer adequate mental health services** for youth.
- Parents often need to wait on an **extensive waiting list to obtain a child care subsidy.** One parent reported that she had to wait ten years to get off of the waitlist. As a result, her older children often cared for the younger children, or the children would be cared for by their elderly grandmother.

“Yeah, I was on a wait list for ten whole years, maybe eleven, and just waiting updating, updating, I went bananas. Updating, updating, updating, so it was a long process and it was really hard because I had my ailing grandmother caring for my kids and she has dementia, and I have to check on grandma so I'm at work and I'm nervous, calling all the time.”

- **The subsidy amount is very small in relation to the cost of child care.** Often, the subsidy combined with private scholarships is still not enough to pay the full cost of child care. Child care options become limited when parents can only afford a select number of providers. Parents feel like they are “working for the child care.”

“And a lot of parents do that because I think they're at their end. And they're like, ‘I thought I could figure out childcare without the subsidy with all this.’ Because I was gonna go back to work. But then they realized it cost so much money. That they would actually go into debt with their job. And that's where I was at.”

“I feel like you have the parent who's on CalWorks trying to get off CalWorks and needs childcare to get off. Then you have the parent who has a job and has to leave their job and get on CalWorks just to get childcare. That is ridiculous. We're creating recidivism. We're creating recidivism of poverty.”

“I was working for the childcare. I worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and I still couldn't afford childcare because I had to pay my mom.”

- Because providers know that many parents are desperate for affordable child care, **parents stated that they have been taken advantage of by providers.** For example, one mother shared how her provider that cared for her children in the evenings would not open her door until midnight, even if the parent arrived earlier, thus forcing the parent to pay more money.

“What happened was I would get off at 11 o'clock at night. The provider lived near that BART station and I would get her from the childcare and the lady wouldn't open the door until 12 o'clock midnight. And I had to call the police, which routes you to the highway patrol and when 12 o'clock midnight came and the police came and she opened the door. So it's like when you talk about quality, she wanted her money.”

Navigating the Child Care System's Policies and Procedures

- Parents want to be able to look for and start a job as soon as possible. The availability of child care directly impacts the speed of that process. **Parents experience a significant time gap between the time a parent applied for a child care subsidy and when the subsidy was actually received.** Parents commented that this delay was very problematic for their employment situation and overall stability.

“I can work or go to school, you have to have already started those things. But then you have to have a series of appointments that are like a month apart. First you meet with the worker. Then you go to whatever the SSA office [county welfare department] is and then you go to Child Care

Links [child care subsidy administration agency]. And then you know, all these things. So after 45, 60 days, you could have been working. But you're still chasing your tail."

"So when I was actually approved, from that day like, okay you approved, it was like two to three months! And then I kept saying, 'What can I do to fast forward and move this?' I told them, I said, 'I have a job waiting for me in three weeks, four weeks.' And they were like, 'No, you just have to wait.' And I'm like, 'Wait, but I thought the whole point of this service was get me employed.' And it's just so funny because the system, in a way, it makes you believe it's a lie."

- Furthermore, **case workers encourage parents to sign up for CalWORKS just to get child care**; however, they may not need the additional benefits. As a result, parents must complete an extensive amount of paperwork and in many cases, must complete the Welfare to Work program when it may not be necessary.

"I had to wait that 40, 50 days and I lost the ability to go back to my job. And I was even telling while I was applying for CalWorks, 'I'm only applying to get your childcare. I need childcare.' I have a possible job waiting for me. I don't need to go through all this workforce thing."

- Parents communicated that they already feel self-conscious and vulnerable when seeking assistance. The social services caseworkers often exacerbate these feelings through rude, judgmental, and unhelpful behavior. As a result, **parents feel that they are treated like a statistic**.

"I remember on the birth certificate, it says only one parent, I was grilled by the person when I was applying for childcare, 'So, what about the father, what about the father, what about the father?' All these things, and what was sad to me about that is they were assuming so many different things about me: my sexuality, my gender, the society of this world. So, the childcare system, to me, that's very interesting that it can be very, very heteronormative, and that's very unfair to LGBTQ parents, it's very unfair to parents who are single parents or solo parents by choice."

"And so going to social services was just a terrible experience and it wasn't ... I didn't feel like ... You're already feeling like you're at the bottom of the barrel because you had to get to that point. And so for you to be treated like trash that rolled up inside the gutter, it's just not helpful."

"Parents get scrutinized, we get stressed out, it makes you almost want to give up. You get so stressed out, you get dehumanized, you're not talked to with dignity. "

- In addition to poor treatment, **parents feel that child care services are fear-based**. For example, if a parent is claiming domestic violence, they must show proof; however, it may be unsafe to retrieve this documentation. Parents report that there is a lot of pressure from social services agencies to disclose sensitive information that parents are often not comfortable sharing.

"When you apply for CalWORKS they ask you for the father's information and say, 'We're going to make him pay for the service we provided you on the tail end.' And then all throughout the CalWORKS time, I would get letters from Child Support saying, 'Do you know or have you seen? Have

you heard ...?' Blah, blah, blah. All these things and wanting me to go ... Have my put myself in jeopardy to go look at him for that. So it's very much ... Like I said, for me, I just felt like very fear based."

- One parent explained that she encountered **unfair legal practices associated with CalWORKs**, specifically around the policies and procedures for identifying as a single parent. She knew of a family in which the father, who was there without the mother's permission, was sent to jail for being present at the mother's home when she had claimed she was a single parent.
- Parents also feel like **the process and paperwork for obtaining and maintaining child care is very cumbersome**, which is an added stress for busy parents. Parents stated that going through all the paperwork and processes to keep the child care is like a full-time job in and of itself. Many parents get so frustrated that they ask themselves "Is it worth it?" to try to find quality and affordable child care.

"As much as I've done, and I've been with Parent Voices for over 10 years now doing childcare advocacy work, it still was so confusing for me to get it with my son, and then once I kind of got the system navigation down to get him childcare, it was a whole other ballgame because I had a daughter with special needs, so I had to learn how to navigate the system all over again with other layers and changes to my family, and it shouldn't be this confusing. Even the smartest of the smartest in this room have been confused by the child care system."

Recommendations

Specific policy recommendations emerged from the parents' discussion around their ideal child care scenario. These recommendations are as follows:

1. **Child care subsidy programs should be heavily advertised.** These advertisements should be accessible to all communities, languages, and communicated through cultural navigators when appropriate.
2. **Parents can sign up for child care subsidies when they are pregnant;** this is consistent with other programs such HUD-provided services.

"Even with the housing authority. You can put on a member, as long as you are over six months pregnant. So even HUD, federal HUD, will allow you to put an extra member as long as you are more than six months pregnant. So that's crazy to me that you can't do that with child care"

3. **The child care subsidy offers an incentive for parents to attend ECE courses.** This incentive would allow parents to have the resources to learn important information about child development.

"I also feel that not every parent comes from an early childhood education background, so those of us who have ECE knowledge are going to know what to look for. For parents who may not have that ECE knowledge, how come there isn't some kind of incentive for parents when they're either going through the birthing, prenatal process or they've already had their child, like 'you know what, you can be exempt from the time clock' or 'you can get that paid leave for a year off from work, but we ask that you at least attend every so often early childhood education workshop or a class,' because I think that as parents, every parent should have ECE backgrounds, because you're working with your child. It would help you so much and lessen the stress."

4. **Parents with children under the age of two should be able to apply for child care at the location of their choice.** In other words, the case worker should meet the parent at a location that is convenient for the parent; this may be the lobby in an apartment building or a public park.

"In San Francisco, the way that they run EBT. Is that a lot of the EBT people will come to you. Because we want to make sure we put food in your mouth and that's what federal government, I mean city government thinks. I think that should apply to anyone applying for CalWORKs under age two. So maybe you don't have to go to CalWORKs office."

5. **Paid family leave is offered for one to two years.** Two years is consistent with WHO policies for breastfeeding. Furthermore, at least the first year of family leave is paid at 100% of the parents' salary. Perhaps identify a way to combine CalWORKs and Paid Family Leave that could at least help a low-income parent get to 100% wage replacement.

"CalWORK says that if you have a child 2 and under, you're exempt, automatically click the box. I asked them one time, 'Well, why is that?,' and they said 'The World Health Organization says minimum 2 years breastfeeding.' So, they want to make that open and available, and so I think the same thing with paid family leave. So if CalWORKs has that two year mark, that should be across the board, and I would say that if the World Health Organization says it, CalWORK says it, just to follow that. So I would say two years paid family leave, period."

6. **Child care subsidies should be offered to parents who have a moderate income.**

Furthermore, the subsidy amount should be relative to the SMI in each county.

"I think we should have low to moderate income parents on the childcare subsidies, and I know that can be controversial with the state, but the thing is, I think it's sad when parents have to say no to a pay increase because they'll lose their childcare support. It should go up to moderate income, period, across the state, hands down, middle income families, there are a lot of them that are paycheck to paycheck as well, and if they lost their job, it doesn't mean they're not employable. So, I actually think it should go up to moderate income, and again it would be based on per county."

7. **Social services offices are welcoming and inclusive places.** This means that child care is provided on site, gender neutral bathrooms are provided, and forms reflect all family structures. Furthermore, breastfeeding is normalized and accommodated through breast feeding stations (such as [Mamava](#)) in CalWORKS offices.

"I remember when I was applying for CalWorks I was told to cover up, which is actually illegal. So I think they should have signs saying, 'You can breastfeed however you want. It's your legal California right.'"

"I had to feed, chest feed my baby every 15, 30 minutes, right? They're so little. And at the same time, the CalWorks person is like, 'Oh, sorry. I have to stop.' We literally stopped what we were doing and she had to leave."

- 8. The child care system should practice cultural sensitivity,** and practices should reflect an openness and acceptance of all family structures.

"I think that we need to look at cultural sensitivity. I think that even whether you're born here or not born here, families have all these different cultural dynamics. We look at LGBTQIA families. Where do they fit in this process and in the navigation in this system, so let's look at cultural sensitivity in the language, how people are being talked to, and also what resources for child care that are available."

- 9. All child care providers are paid at least minimum wage,** regardless of whether they are exempt or non-exempt.

- 10. Child care subsidies should be available until children are 17 years old.**

"My dream would be... you know, because I noticed 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, at that age group they're still children. So, I think that at that age group, it's really hard for them to stay focused and they can lose track or lose sight of dreams or whatever have you, and they may be left alone a lot, which helps them get in trouble, so my dream would be to have childcare maybe until 17. Because my daughter was left alone a lot, and it's kind of hard, but that's how I feel."

- 11. Child care should be universal,** regardless of a parents' background.

Concluding Thoughts: What do Policymakers Need to Know?

At the close of the focus group, parents reflected on the key points that legislatures need to know about the lives of parents when making policy decisions.

- **Legislatures do not understand parents' struggles** and do not know what is best for low-income parents. Legislatures need to engage meaningfully with the community to gain a deeper understanding of families' lives.

"I think because they live in such a different world than we do, I think if they are able to see a day in a life some kind of way into a life of different cultures, something like that, like a video of a day in a life, different cultures, for example, different demographics or genders, then they kind of get a peek into what are the challenges of one's day. They can ... Because they really can't relate or understand."

- **The child care system is broken, but it can be fixed.**

“So that's literally where the system failed me. And if it didn't, if I got into CalWORKS right away, I would've been off to CalWORKS in a month or two instead of ... How long I been on it now? Ever since the baby was four or five months. A few years.”

- **Child care is important for society;** legislators should look at it as an investment.
- **Child care needs to be equitable and inclusive.**
- **Legislators should work to correct the system, not the families.**
- **Parents are working hard to better themselves;** they are not lazy or asking for handouts.

“I just feel like they don't understand us because they're born into wealth. I don't know if all of them are like that, but a lot of them are born into wealth so they don't understand our struggles and they need to be more open to working parents that are just trying to make it. They're going on with their lives and totally different lives. Just be more open to us because we really just want to have a better life just like them. We were not born rich.”

- **Stop putting all families in one box;** respect all family structures.
- **It is not easy for parents to find quality child care.** Often, older children or elderly grandparents end up providing care.