



Networks Northwest Regional Child Care Coalition | 14 Impactful Solutions

# Regional Child Care Plan

*“If the region wants to be desirable to young families there has to be a change.”*—LEELANAU COUNTY PARENT

**Solution**  
**4**

[DOWNLOAD THE FULL PLAN HERE](#)

# Introduction to the 14 Solutions

The following 14 Solutions arise from more than 100 distinct ideas generated by the Regional Child Care Planning Coalition

The following Child Care Solution module is one of 14 Solutions that comprise the Regional Child Care Plan of the Networks Northwest Regional Child Care Planning Coalition. The 49-member Coalition represents regional and community partners in the northwest-lower Michigan counties of Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee and Wexford.

*The work of the Coalition is funded by a Regional Child Care Planning grant awarded and supported by Michigan's Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) Child Care Innovation Fund in order to understand and address the child care crisis and to expand equitable access to high-quality, affordable child care for working families. Grants were issued to 16 regional coalitions covering every part of Michigan.*

*Regional Child Care Planning grants were issued to ECIC by the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement and Potential (MiLEAP), utilizing American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

## Each Solution Module:


### Meets several criteria:

- **Impactful** – in the opinion of the Coalition, directly addresses one or more of the Root Causes impacting the regional child care system and will improve access, affordability and/or quality.
- **Vetted** – have proven to be successful regionally or elsewhere
- **Sponsored** – one or more regional entities or groups is presently committed to or leading implementation

### Consists of five components::

- **Primary Root Cause** addressed
- **An introductory paragraph** summarizing the solution, why it can be beneficial and how it can be implemented
- **Background and Context** – relates why the solution may be needed or beneficial, along with some historical context where applicable
- **Examples and Priorities** – showcases examples of comparable approaches implemented within the region or elsewhere and then highlights implied priorities for implementation
- **Potential Near-Term Actions** – calls out near term actions that different groups of stakeholders can take in order to move toward implementation

## The 14 Solutions are:

1. State Investment
2. Local Public Funding
3. Policy Changes
4. Local Planning & Zoning 
5. Provider Incubation
6. Community Facility Investments
7. Micro-Centers
8. Credential Pathways
9. Substitute Pools
10. Universal Preschool
11. Home-Based Universal Preschool Option
12. Employer Policies & Actions
13. Enhanced Family Navigation
14. Peer-to-peer & Community Collaboration

# Local Planning & Zoning

Update local master planning and zoning to support child care

SOLUTION

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In many communities within the region, local zoning ordinances create barriers for child care providers trying to establish or expand facilities. These barriers are often unintended but include requirements, fees and lengthy application processes that can stifle planned child care expansion. Local leaders seeking to create more child care options should 1) update master plans to call out child care as a vital sector; and 2) amend zoning ordinances and policies to eliminate barriers.

## Background & Context

**According to Family Survey results conducted as part of the Regional Child Care Plan, 43 percent of parents and other caregivers have had to leave a job because of access to child care. When families are consistently unable to access child care, they may need to leave northwest Michigan communities for other places that have available care.<sup>1</sup>**

Local officials who wish to encourage young families to live in their communities should therefore both prioritize child care in master plans and reduce unnecessary barriers created by local zoning ordinances and associated administrative rules.

Definitions: A master plan sets the policy for land use and community development in a municipality. A zoning ordinance is the regulating tool for implementing land use policies, enabled under the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (PA 110). Within northwest

lower Michigan, zoning ordinances are typically developed at the township level and occasionally at the county level.

Licensed home-based and center-based child care providers must comply with local zoning ordinances in order to operate.

In many communities within the region, local zoning ordinances create barriers for child care providers trying to establish or expand facilities.

### There are three fundamental issues:

**1. Local Zoning Ordinances may be redundant or inconsistent with state licensing rules.** Child care is a heavily regulated field. The [Michigan Licensing Rules and Statutes](https://www.michigan.gov/mileap/early-childhood-education/ccib/rules)<sup>2</sup> contain a wide array of rules designed to keep licensed child care properties safe and appropriate places for children to learn and play. Even home-based providers need to adhere to roughly 30 pages of single-spaced rules and regulations (as opposed to 130 pages for the Great Start Readiness Program and Head Start). Many local zoning ordinances contain fencing requirements, play space requirements, setback requirements,

PRIMARY ROOT CAUSE  
ADDRESSED:

**Too Many  
Barriers**

<sup>1</sup> Family interviews

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.michigan.gov/mileap/early-childhood-education/ccib/rules>

*“Eliminating redundancy, reducing costs and decreasing time delays are needed in order to increase child care capacity for parents.”*

site environmental requirements, signage requirements and other rules that layer onto state licensure rules that often cover such issues. Other local zoning ordinances specify limits of 6 children for Family Child Care Homes and 12 children for Group Child Care Homes, even though state licensure rules now allow 7 and 14 children respectively for experienced providers (see below).

**2. Application fees and requirements may dissuade applicants from beginning or completing the application process for zoning approval.** Because of the rules and requirements governing child care, these small businesses generally operate with very thin profit margins. Local administrative rules associated with zoning ordinances often require Group Child Care Homes and center-based programs to submit a Special Land Use Permit application or other application, accompanied by an application fee and potentially additional documentation. Fees and requirements that require cash outlays (e.g. needing to pay for a professionally rendered site plan) can exceed \$1,000. While this may not be a barrier for some businesses, it is a significant barrier for child care providers. For new providers who are not yet operating and are awaiting final licensure approval, it becomes a speculative and risky bet against potential future revenues. In interviews, several regional child care providers have indicated these fees and requirements prevented them from expanding their licenses.<sup>3</sup>

**3. Time delays associated with application review and approval may be costly.** Special Land Use Permit applications and other local zoning applications can take many months to process. These time delays stack on top of the time required for child care licensure application and review. Some providers report five months for local zoning application and five more months for licensure review.<sup>4</sup> This time delay before a provider can accept new families is too much for some providers and may cause them to withdraw interest. If providers do submit applications, the uncertainty associated with the review process can make it difficult for them and the families in their care to plan for the future.

## Examples & Priorities

**Some communities in rural northern Michigan and elsewhere have taken very simple and straightforward actions with master plans and zoning ordinances to better support formation and operation of licensed child care within their jurisdictions. These steps generally assume that state licensing rules should take precedence over local ordinances and that removing barriers for child care providers should be a priority.**

## General Principles

Local officials should always specify that both master plans and local zoning ordinances apply only to child care licensed through the Child Care Licensing Bureau. It is generally illegal in Michigan to provide child care services without being licensed by this bureau or having license-exempt status.<sup>5</sup>

Governor Whitmer signed into law a package of changes to Michigan’s child care system in June 2022 that included allowing experienced home-based providers to serve more children. Experienced providers in Family Child Care Homes can now serve up to 7 children, increased from the previous maximum of 6. Experienced providers in Group Child Care Homes can now serve up to 14 children, increased from the previous maximum of 12. In case of further changes, local ordinances should specify the terms “Family Child Care Home” and “Group Child Care Home” and the “maximum number of children allowed under current licensing rules,” rather than specifying a raw number that may not reflect current policy.

Referencing current licensing rules will help avoid future incompatibility with any additional changes implemented over the coming years.

To support the formation, expansion and continuation of licensed child care facilities in communities, local government officials should consider the following additional moves:

<sup>3</sup> Child care provider interviews

<sup>4</sup> Child care provider interviews

<sup>5</sup> Call CCLB at 1-517-284-9730 or visit <https://www.michigan.gov/mileap/early-childhood-education/cclb> for more information about licensed child care.



*“Identifying and eliminating common Master Plan barriers and amending restrictive zoning ordinances allow more providers to start and expand child care facilities.”*

## Update Master Plan and Other Planning Language

Local leaders should include language in master plans, strategic plans and other community documents that 1) specifies child care as an essential service with a critical role in quality of life, neighborhoods, and economic development; and 2) includes one or more strategies to support child care.

The City of Negaunee 2023 Master Plan includes this Objective: “Identify common barriers to community-oriented business opportunities, such as in-home child care operations, and work to amend or limit those barriers.”

## Update Local Zoning Ordinances

Local elected officials and staff should consider amending restrictive zoning ordinances to allow principal permitted use for Group Child Care Homes in as many zones as possible, including but not limited to: residential areas, mixed use areas, agricultural areas and commercial areas throughout their jurisdiction. Officials should also consider amending zoning ordinances to allow principal permitted use (preferred) or special land use for Child Care Centers in as many zones as possible, including all of the same areas as home-based providers (see above) as well as industrial areas such as industrial parks. These changes will allow more providers to start and expand child care facilities without paying fees or going through the time associated with a special land use permit application.



According to the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, Family Child Care Homes are considered a residential use of property for zoning purposes and are permitted in all residential zones.<sup>6</sup>

In 2024 the Planning Commission of East Bay Charter Township in Grand Traverse County updated its ordinance in just this way. The Planning Commission amended zoning districts and the approval process in its Land Use Table to convert many zones from special land use to administrative review and other

zones to allow child care with a special land use application. The goal of these changes was to respond to an action item in the 2023 East Bay Township Master Plan to “Support zoning and other policies that facilitate childcare facilities in the Township.”

In addition to these changes, local officials should amend or remove additional rules in zoning ordinances such as fencing requirements, fire safety rules, site-specific environmental rules, distances from other classes of business (including other child care facilities), requirements for outdoor play spaces, setbacks for play equipment or other restrictions.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter 125—MICHIGAN ZONING ENABLING ACT, Section 125.3206—Residential use of property; adult foster care facilities; family or group child care homes.

*“Updating Master Plans and Zoning ordinances will not, on their own, create more child care capacity in a community. However, these actions signal to potential child care operators that the community is serious about supporting child care.”*

It’s likely that such rules may be redundant or in conflict with the licensing rules governing licensed child care providers in Michigan.

Where applicable local officials should consider making exceptions for child care applicants in annual fee schedules to waive application fees, fence permit fees or other requirements likely to incur cost. One example may be to remove requirements for engineered site plans for child care applicants, instead allowing for administrative review of simple site plans at the zoning administrator’s discretion.

Finally, local zoning administrators may consider prioritizing or expediting any administrative review of applications from child care facilities to reduce time delays.

## Conclusion

Taking these actions will not, on their own, create more child care capacity in a community. However, they will signal to potential child care operators that the community is serious about supporting child care. They will also ensure that other efforts to establish, expand and maintain child care services are able to move forward with as few barriers as possible.

## Potential Near-Term Actions

**Advocates** should share information with local planning commission members about the child care crisis and how their actions can help.

**Local officials** should also make a note now to include language prioritizing child care as critical infrastructure the next time they update their community master plans.

**Local planning commission members** wishing to remove barriers should amend local zoning ordinances to eliminate child care requirements (fencing, signage, separation requirements), especially when redundant with licensing. They should also reduce or eliminate application fees and special land use requirements for child care.



**Networks Northwest Coalition**

**Regional Child Care Plan 2024**