

# New Research Highlights the Value of Unions to Child Care Providers

Dr. J. Ryan Lamare  
May 23, 2012



Washington Family Child Care Providers including Beverly Tyler, center, with button, won training opportunities through their SEIU Local 925 union contract.

**When child care providers have the right to form unions, it helps to stabilize conditions, improve job satisfaction, and raise wages to appropriate levels—all of which are vital to providing the best possible care for children.** In-home child care providers face very low pay and poor access to benefits and training opportunities, making it critical for these caregivers to have a collective voice to improve their working conditions. As the issue of child care provider unionization is considered in multiple states, a better understanding is needed regarding the effects of unionization on improvements in training, access to information, and ultimately the quality of care provided to children and communities.

Two new studies, conducted by the Economic Opportunity Institute (EOI)<sup>1</sup> and Rutgers University,<sup>2</sup> respectively, help to shed light on the value unions provide to this often neglected and voiceless group. Interviews conducted with child care providers in each state further elucidate the effects of unions on their day-to-day lives.

1 Burris, Gary, and Allyson Fredericksen. 2012. *The Impact of Training on License-Exempt Child Care Providers in Washington State*. Economic Opportunity Institute, February.

2 Houser, Linda, Elizabeth Nisbet, and Karen White. 2012. *Unionized Home-Based Child Care Providers in New Jersey*. Rutgers University, May.

## Providers Gaining Critical Skills and Access to Training Through Their Unions

EOI's report, "Training Makes a Difference," analyzes the impact of training initiatives on skills, opportunities, and satisfaction for "family, friend and neighbor" (FFN) child care providers in the state of Washington. These training initiatives were brought about by a collective bargaining agreement between the state and SEIU Local 925, the union that represents FFN child care providers.

- Respondents said that the training positively impacted their knowledge and skill levels, increased professional connections with other providers, and led to improved job satisfaction.
- In addition, over 90 percent of the providers surveyed felt that the union played a significant role in making training opportunities available and that fewer training opportunities would have been available without collective bargaining.

***"I'm more alert to my situation now and can bring what I learned into my day-to-day activities with my children. I think they'll see the benefits."***

**— Lynda Wilson, Washington State child care provider**

Researchers at Rutgers University studied the unionization experiences of FFN and registered family child care (FCC) providers represented by AFSCME Local 2779 in New Jersey. A collective bargaining agreement between the state and two child care provider unions, AFSCME and CWA, was ratified in 2007.

- When surveyed, fully 84 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the union is very important in making child care training opportunities available to providers.
- Further, a majority of respondents (63 percent) indicated that access to training and education opportunities were getting better following unionization.
- In the New Jersey case, training was particularly effective among the most economically vulnerable child care providers; those earning \$15,000 or less each year were statistically the most likely to view unions as important to improving training opportunities. Further, those without post-secondary degrees were the most likely to indicate that access to training had improved following unionization.

Interviews conducted with child care providers serve to illustrate these findings. Beverly Tyler, who has worked as a provider in Washington for two years and cares for four children, all under age five, sees the value of the union's training in her everyday interactions with her children.<sup>3</sup> She

maintains that following a union training she attended, "I understand what types of foods I should be giving to the children, depending on their different needs." More specifically, she notes the value unions provided regarding potential health and safety concerns for her children. "I've learned that there are certain products that have the potential to be carcinogenic, which I should keep out of the house to avoid exposing the children to illnesses." The tips and advice the union gave to Ms. Tyler continue to resonate in her household. "Thanks to

the training, children are happier with the meals they eat. Also, we engage in fun educational projects together, like learning how to make ice cream, which they really enjoy."

Ms. Tyler is not alone in her experience. Lynda Wilson, a 64-year-old provider who lives in Washington and looks after her daughter's two children, notes that the union "trained us on how to get our kids to listen to what we want them to do and to understand their level of development as well."<sup>4</sup> Ms. Wilson points out that the woman running the training session "reminded us to not do

anything in anger; anger is a punishment and you don't want to be mad when you say something to a child." In addition, union trainers "taught us about H-O-T (Hungry, Overwhelmed, Tired) and told us children can get this way as well as adults, and for us to avoid getting this way so that we don't take it out on our children." In all, the union training has had a tremendously meaningful effect on Ms. Wilson's experience as a care provider; "I'm more alert to my situation now and can bring what I learned into my day-to-day activities with my children. I think they'll see the benefits."

---

## Unions Offer Providers Improved Access to Information and Helpful Resources

Whereas the EOI report focused most extensively on the value unions bring to the child care industry through effective training, the Rutgers study analyzed the value of unions in other ways. Respondents were surveyed on the extent to which they felt the union had helped improve access to information about regulations, and also access to information about useful benefits and services.

- In both cases, respondents indicated that the union had improved their access to information.
- 71 percent of those surveyed said that access to information about child care regulations had improved following unionization, and 63 percent indicated that access to information regarding useful benefits and services had gotten better.

---

3 Personal interview conducted in April, 2012.

4 Personal interview conducted in April, 2012.

Those surveyed in both Washington and New Jersey were also asked about how they perceived their union, beyond the personal effects of training and access to information. The results indicate a clear recognition by respondents that unions provide a number of crucial improvements.

- EOI determined that fully 97 percent of respondents in Washington indicated that SEIU was important in fighting for improvements; similarly, 89 percent of those surveyed in New Jersey indicated the same about AFSCME.
- The Rutgers study also asked respondents whether they perceived the union as having broadly helped to solve problems for New Jersey’s family child care providers. Again, a vast majority (83 percent) of those surveyed agreed that the union was effective in this regard.
- Finally, over 90 percent of individuals surveyed in New Jersey agreed that labor unions were necessary to protect workers—indeed, over half of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement.

***“The union is key to helping us get training, improve our skills, learn teaching methods, and improve the quality of child care.”***

**— Migdalia Diaz, New Jersey child care provider**

Interview evidence supports these findings. “The union has given me an opportunity to get to know other child care providers, which has helped me to share ideas, enhance my curriculum and provide better activities for the children,” said Susan Fago, a child care provider in Camden County, New Jersey.

“The union is key to helping us get training, improve our skills, learn teaching methods, and improve the quality of child care,” said Migdalia Diaz, a child care provider in Middlesex, New Jersey. “I know that we are very important to the children we care for and to the community. If the parents don’t have someone to care for their children, how can they work?”

“I have been a child care provider for 18 years. Since the union was set up, we have received training more frequently and are working to improve the quality of trainings,” said Patricia Sinkler a child care provider in Hudson County. “As a registered child care provider we are key parts of our communities—we give parents security and prepare children with the basic education to prepare for preschool.”

---

## Unions Bring Value to Providers, Children and Communities

Research and interviews conducted in two different states, involving different types of child care providers and different unions representing these individuals, has served to shed substantive light on the value unions bring within this industry. Questions related to the value provided by unions with respect to training improvements, information availability, and ultimately job satisfaction, were asked to an array of FFN and FCC child care providers. Those who responded overwhelmingly indicated that unions bring improvements to each of these facets of child care work.

The better trained and more satisfied individuals are with their work, the more likely they are to perform to the best of their abilities. Well-trained and satisfied individuals tend to remain in their jobs longer as well, which would offer much needed stability to the child care sector. In the context of caring for children, it is crucial that providers have the requisite skills, and also the appropriate disposition, to give these children the very best and most stable levels of care. Links between training and care quality, in particular, have been substantiated by scholarly research.<sup>5</sup> The EOI and Rutgers reports indicate that unions can play a major role in ensuring that this is the case. As the issue of child care provider unionization is taken up in states around the country, these findings demonstrate that allowing these workers a voice on the job is valuable to not only the providers, but also communities on the whole and children in particular.

---

5 For a thorough review of research into the effects of training on caregiver quality, see Ruben G. Fukkink and Anna Lont (2007), “Does training matter? A meta-analysis and review of caregiver training studies,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 22, 294-311.