

PARENTS SPEAK UP!

CHILD CARE STORIES FROM ACROSS VIRGINIA



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Child Care Stories From Across Virginia

Parents and families across Virginia know all too well how difficult it is to find and afford quality child care. Faced with limited child care options, too many working parents across the Commonwealth are forced to choose between supporting their families and reducing their hours or leaving the workforce altogether. And without access to quality care, their young children are missing out on opportunities to develop fundamental skills necessary for long-term success.

The Virginia Promise Partnership is working hard to shine a light on the voices and experiences of those most directly impacted by child care challenges—especially parents. As both an engaged parent and Vice Chair of the Partnership’s Parent Advisory, I’m proud of our focus on centering parent voices in the Partnership’s efforts to strengthen Virginia’s early learning system.

In this storybook, we showcase the experiences of Virginia Promise Partnership Parent Advisory members from across the Commonwealth. Together, we hope these stories provide a glimpse into the child care challenges Virginia parents face every single day.

More must be done to support and invest in our early learning system. We look forward to working together toward our **bold goal of quality, affordable child care for all Virginia families**—for the benefit of Virginia’s parents, providers, communities, economy, and most importantly, our children.

TOMASHIA CORNITCHER
VICE CHAIR
VPP PARENT ADVISORY



AINUL HUDA

RR - SOUTHWEST

When Ainul found out she was pregnant with her daughter, one of the first things she did was to get on the waitlist for the child care provider affiliated with the university where both she and her husband work. Because her husband's department was expanding, their daughter was given priority for a spot at the center – but even so, there was not an available opening until her daughter was already six months old.

So, Ainul and her husband worked out a system that allowed them to balance caring for their newborn and maintaining their careers. Ainul went back to work part time just one month after her daughter was born, using her remaining accrued leave in half-day units. She would work from 8am to 12pm, then switch care duties with her husband, who would work from 12pm to 5pm. They got the call from the child care provider telling them that a spot had finally opened up just as Ainul was using up the last of her leave.

Ainul feels very fortunate. The woman who heads up the research lab where she works is a mother of two young children herself and was very accommodating, helping Ainul to build out a schedule that worked for her. She feels lucky that they got the call when they did. Ainul would have had to quit her job – but fortunately it did not come to that.



I used up all my vacation and maternity leave and we just made it work. If we didn't get that phone call to say that our daughter had a spot, I have no idea what we would do. We got lucky. Would I have to quit my job? Fortunately we didn't have to think about that.

- AINUL

AMBER BUTLER

RR - WEST

Amber lives in Stuart, Virginia with her husband and their four children aged eight, six, four and a half, and three.

In Amber's experience, the quality child care options in Patrick County are either astronomically priced or completely out of her way, adding hours to daily and weekly commutes – and even these few options have long waitlists. The only remaining option is to rely on child care that might not charge as much, but is unlicensed and unregulated.

Amber is a certified nursing assistant and her husband works in law enforcement. She returned to work briefly after her youngest was born, but it was the height of the pandemic and the breastfeeding mother of four was assigned to the COVID ward. In addition to the lack of access to quality, affordable child care, the risk of exposure as well as both parents' unpredictable work schedules contributed to the family's decision for Amber to leave the workforce.

Her two older children are now in school, and she has finally been able to get her two younger children into Patrick County Solutions That Empower People (STEP), Inc.'s Head Start and Early Head Start programs – but that is only 8am–2:30pm so it isn't conducive to her picking up 16-hour shifts at the local nursing home. Amber feels strongly that our legislators know lack of access to quality child care impacts all communities across Virginia—urban, suburban, and rural alike.



We have to put the children first in all aspects – and that starts with child care. As years go on, as ages fluctuate and demographics change here in southwest Virginia, we need to be able to provide child care.

- AMBER

CHARLOTTE BROOKS

RR - SOUTHEASTERN

Charlotte works for the United States Air Force as a civilian. Her husband is retired from the United States Army. Their twins, now five years old, were born at 24 weeks gestation and subsequently spent 120 days in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). They have some developmental delays but thankfully no medical issues. Because they were born so early, their immune systems were not fully developed. So, the pediatrician recommended that Charlotte and her husband avoid daycare if possible until the twins turned one. Charlotte's mother gladly stepped in.

What was originally intended as a three-month arrangement turned into a year, then two years, then three as the pandemic sent the world into lockdown. Periodically, Charlotte would look into other child care arrangements but was not satisfied with centers' abilities to meet her sons' needs.

When the boys were three, the developmental pediatrician recommended that they interact more with other children. Charlotte pulled together the application for her boys to attend the only local high quality program, only to learn that they did not qualify because the family's income was too high.

For families of young children with developmental delays, finding available child care that can support their children's needs is nearly impossible.



There's a huge gap in facilities being knowledgeable or individuals having experience working with children who may have disabilities, mild or severe. When I went through the whole process of applying for my sons to go to a development center, we were turned away because we make too much money. Children are being overlooked. I would have thought they would hold slots for families like ours but they didn't and there were no other options for us, even if we could afford to pay. The appropriate level of care simply does not exist in our area if a family doesn't qualify for the development center.

- CHARLOTTE

DANIELLE PEPE

RR - CHESAPEAKE BAY

Danielle has spent the last three years trying to secure quality, affordable care for her two children in Gloucester County. Her firstborn, who will be three in September, has a learning disability and requires regular speech therapy. Danielle's biggest challenge has been getting her daughter into the right program – one that is going to support and advocate for her and help navigate her learning journey.

Like many parents in more rural parts of the Commonwealth, Danielle has found her child care options to be extremely limited. The facility closest to where she lives had room for her almost-three-year-old, but there was a waitlist for the infant classroom. It didn't make sense to have one child in day care and the other at home.

A second option, a little further from their home, had a great curriculum and could accommodate both children – but it was unaffordable. She has only recently learned about the child care subsidy program and is frustrated that the information was so difficult to track down.

Danielle has held a series of work-from-home jobs to try to stay active professionally and to supplement her husband's income. But it has been difficult to work without child care. And the additional income that she brings in does not offset the high cost of child care.



We need a better system. Every parent, whether they need it or not, needs to be aware of the different assistance programs and resources that exist. And we definitely need to be pushing for more child care centers. The centers are struggling and they're seeing a lot of turnover. We need to get something in motion to make child care readily available to everyone. Every parent I've talked to has struggled with this.

- DANIELLE

KATIE MCCALL

RR - CENTRAL

Katie and her husband Matt live in Richmond with their four-year-old son, Wes. Wes has a physical disability with significant mobility challenges due to an extremely rare genetic condition, which has made it particularly challenging for Katie and Matt to secure quality, affordable child care.

Earlier in their search, Katie called at least fifteen or twenty different providers across central Virginia but every single one of them said that they could not accommodate Wes and his needs. Even though both parents work full time, they could not afford a nanny.

Katie continues to be dismayed at the lack of child care options for children with physical disabilities. A vast majority of child care and preschool facilities do not have adequate accessibility, staff, or training to accommodate and care for them at the level of quality that these children and their families deserve.

But Katie won't give up. An advocate at heart, she has fought for a solution for her son. She and her husband are very pleased with the care that Wes is getting now – but it is a private solution that only came together thanks to their personal network and is a workaround for the broader systemic failures that families like Katie's are facing. It is unconscionable that families seeking high quality care for their kids with disabilities have such limited options.



I am just appalled by the lack of childcare options for children with physical disabilities. The facilities are not built to accommodate them; the staff don't have training to work with them; there isn't adequate funding to provide one-on-one care for them. When they get to preschool age, some localities have a few slots available, but not enough and not always at the level of quality that families need. Child care as an industry is in crisis, but rarely do I hear people talking about where disabled kids fit into the conversation. If we're reimagining our child care system, let's do it in a way that accommodates everyone.

- KATIE

KELCEE JONES

RR - BLUE RIDGE

Kelcee lives in Albemarle County and commutes 30 minutes each way to her job at a housing advocacy nonprofit in Charlottesville. Finding quality, affordable care for her two children so that she can go to work has been incredibly challenging.

From navigating child care assistance to dealing with long wait lists and finding a provider that can accommodate both her children so she can do just one drop off and pick up rather than traveling to different facilities, she has faced a whole host of barriers.

When she was finally able to find a program that could take both of her little ones, it was extremely expensive. Even with a child care subsidy, she was paying \$600 or \$700 out of pocket for a program that didn't provide lunch or snacks. Finally, a program opened up that was just what her children needed. But the program is closing in August, so she is back at square one.

Kelcee's daughter will be eligible for Albemarle County Public Schools' pre-K program this fall. But even if she is able to find a new child care option for her son in Charlottesville, school lets out at 2:30pm in Albemarle, and Kelcee's work day doesn't wrap up until 5pm, a half an hour away.



For our working moms, it is difficult to choose a career that you're passionate about because you have to worry about fitting it around your children's schedule. The idea of early childhood education isn't what it was 20 years ago. It's setting a foundation for kindergarten. It's the foundation for their growth. It isn't babysitting.

- KELCEE

LIZ BENSON

RR - CAPITAL AREA

Liz is a single mom living in Falls Church with her eight-year-old son and four-year-old daughter. Her son attends public school and her daughter is in Head Start. She started in Early Head Start in April 2021 the first day that they went back after COVID. While it has been a really great experience, Liz has seen firsthand the significant challenges child care centers face with teacher shortages.

Liz's daughter, who has a learning disability, has had some truly great teachers. She had speech delays and some gross motor delays, but as soon as she started in Early Head Start, she learned to walk, started talking, and has achieved a number of important developmental milestones; however, because of high workforce turnover, her daughter has gone through three or four teachers in her two years of being in the program. She gets attached to her teachers and then they leave.

Liz knows that this is a major problem not just in Falls Church and across Virginia but around the country. The burnout rate is high – all too often licensed, qualified, passionate teachers get offers of better pay and less stressful work environments in the next county over, or in the public school system, so they leave. She knows that early childhood educators need more support, so that is why she is sharing her voice and her experience as a member of the Virginia Promise Partnership Parent Advisory.



I've had a really great experience with Head Start and Early Head Start. The big problem that I see is high teacher turnover. My daughter, who has a learning disability, has had some great teachers who she's really gotten attached to. But we've gone through three or four teachers since we started when she was two and now she's four. The teachers are great. But they are stressed out. They are worn out. I know this is a major problem across the country and I just wish there was something we could do.

- LIZ

MARY BETH BOLYARD

RR - SOUTHWEST

When Mary Beth's daughter was born, her mom enthusiastically agreed to step in and help watch her granddaughter. As is often the case with informal family care arrangements, this started out fine – but after a few months the tension began to grow.

By the time her daughter turned two, Mary Beth started to look around for a more formal care arrangement. She wanted her daughter to be around other children, and to have access to other activities and materials – things that are just too expensive when it's just for one child.

She went to the DSS website and started looking for licensed providers. The facility where she ultimately sent her daughter had just opened up two months prior. There were only four or five other children in the center and the owner was looking to grow her business. She was extremely knowledgeable about the early childhood space and was able to help Mary Beth navigate child care subsidy and Mixed Delivery programs.

When her son was born two years ago, Mary Beth's mom stepped in again to help out until he was about six months old, when her daughter's center opened up their infant room.

The family is very happy with their current care arrangement – but the cost is significant. Mary Beth and her husband both work, but the cost of care for their two children is like a second mortgage.



My children's child care center is fantastic. They do Pre-K and Kindergarten readiness, and the quality of care is great. It amazes me what my child comes home and tells me that she has learned. What is just so frustrating though is that my husband and I both work, and yet the cost of child care for our two kids is like a second mortgage. Middle class families like ours need relief.

- MARY BETH

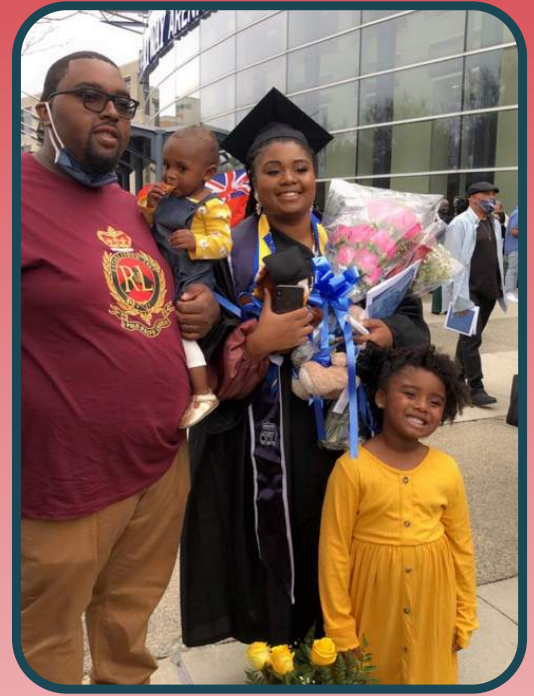
MAYA POOLE

RR - SOUTHSIDE

Maya was born and raised in Danville, Virginia, where she lives with her husband, her two little girls (aged 6 and 2) and her husband's two younger siblings (aged 13 and 6) for whom they just recently gained custody.

When Maya's first baby was two years old, she enrolled her in a child care facility so that she could go back to work. She quickly became frustrated with the center and felt that they were not adequately answering her questions or addressing her concerns. After a second incident, she felt that her daughter was not safe. So, she made the difficult decision to pull her out. Maya became a stay-at-home mom while she pursued a certification to become a qualified mental health professional through an online program offered by Old Dominion University.

Maya graduated about a year ago and she now works full time in a mental health agency. Her youngest daughter attends an in-home day care. She is much happier with this arrangement, but it is at the upper end of what she can afford, even though it is at the less expensive end of care options in Danville. The family's income is too high to qualify for the subsidy program, but not high enough to be able to comfortably afford care. So, rather than incur the unaffordable additional cost of after school care, Maya picks up her older daughter from school and brings her back to work with her. Her employer has allowed her to use an empty office on site to do homework while Maya wraps up her work day.



When my older daughter was two, I pulled her out of daycare because I didn't feel like she was in a safe environment. I decided to become a stay-at-home mama and go back to school because I couldn't prioritize making money over my child's safety. Now, she is six, my baby daughter is two and I am back at work. We can just about pay for my baby girl to attend care. But for my older daughter, when she gets off school, my job has allowed me to bring her back to the office with me. If I had to pay for her to go to after school care in addition to my baby's all week care, I wouldn't make it. I would be a stay-at-home mama again.

- MAYA

VALERIE IRIZARRY

RR - NORTH CENTRAL

Valerie and her husband did everything the way they were supposed to. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Business. He has a Master's Degree in Human Resources. And yet, they find themselves unable to afford child care – so Valerie stays home with their four children, aged nine, six, five, and three.

The family moved to Fredericksburg from Indiana in December 2019 to pursue better jobs and to buy a house. Unable to find anything suitable, her husband took up a job in retail. As Valerie interviewed for jobs herself, the salary levels offered didn't cover the cost of child care. So, they became a one-income family with no other choice than to lean on government assistance.

Now, Valerie is pursuing an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education because it's the only degree that will allow her to have a schedule similar to her kids. Her three older children are now in school, but her youngest attends Head Start. When she was offered a job with her son's Head Start program, however, she had to turn it down because the income boost would have disqualified her daughter from attending.

This is happening to too many families across Virginia. The cost of child care is so high and the spots are so limited that working parents have no choice but to drop out of the workforce – affecting their medium- and long-term career paths and earning potential as well as their entire family's financial stability.



They told us to go to college. They told us to get our degrees. So we did! But even so, we are stuck. If we had access to quality, affordable care for our children, I would be at work right now. I would be earning on behalf of my family. My husband and I would be contributing to college savings funds, to social security, to retirement. But we can't afford the care. So I am at home instead. Families like mine deserve a solution.

- VALERIE

About Virginia Promise Partnership

The Virginia Promise Partnership is a coalition of 30 leading organizations working together with a growing network of advocates and champions to achieve our bold goal of ensuring all Virginia families have access to affordable, quality child care by 2030.

Under the leadership of our Parent and Provider Advisories paired with our diverse array of member organizations, the Partnership grounds our advocacy work in the voices of parents, providers, and businesses from across Virginia.

About Family Friendly Virginia

Family Friendly Virginia is working to build a better future for working people and a more stable economy by fighting for smart policies that lift families and make our communities stronger.

