



EARLY CHILDHOOD COUNCIL MINUTES

**REGULAR MEETING
Wednesday, January 12, 2022**

The Early Childhood Council (ECC) convened on Wednesday, January 12, 2022.

Board Members in Attendance: Chair McHorse, Vice Chair Worthington, Council Members Alvarez, Demby, Hedrick, Huston, Paver, Schennum, and Wren

Staff in attendance: Rachel Farley, Michelle Rodriguez

CALL TO ORDER – Chair McHorse called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m. Introductions of all members.

CITIZEN COMMUNICATION: GENERAL

No citizen communication.

1. APPROVAL OF MINUTES from November 10, 2021, meeting – Member Huston moved to approve the minutes from the November 10, 2021, regular meeting. The minutes were approved by a vote of 9-0.

2. OLD BUSINESS

a. Review and discuss Workforce Solutions Capital Area’s response to the ECC memo approved at the November 10, 2021, meeting

Chair McHorse summarized the steps the ECC has taken to understand barriers to accessing the child care system. In May 2021, community members provided public comment on the challenges they have had with navigating the system. ECC then invited Workforce Solutions (WFS) Capital Area to present at an ECC meeting in 2021. In November 2021, the ECC responded to the WFS presentation with a memo with specific requests to WFS. WFS responded in December 2021 and the response was discussed at an ECC Policy Workgroup meeting in January 2022. Last week, the Policy Workgroup sent a letter to WFS with follow-up questions. The WFS response to the Policy Workgroup letter includes the following updates:

- Data spreadsheet of customer responses to survey- 2018 to present
- Launched their texting feature to communicate with families in 2021
- Training on trauma informed care, team culture, and communications are scheduled for staff
- Working on training videos in English and Spanish to help parents navigate system
- All flyers for special projects/funding are available in English and Spanish
- Online application form is available in at least 100 languages
- New workflow system launched in October 2021
- Provider payment portal being discussed to ensure there are not security vulnerabilities

- Tiger Team meetings are set to resume January/February 2022
- Created and convening a workgroup under a new contract with the City

Members discussed the information provided by WFS. Vice Chair Worthington would like to know more about the survey and the steps WFS takes to remedy application errors. Council Member Tovo's office told Chair McHorse that Austin Public Health has included expectations over the next year around community engagement in their negotiations of the WFS contract for the American Rescue Plan Act funding. ECC may share the context of the City discussions with the County Commissioners because they have similar contracts with WFS. Member Huston would like to see the plan to compose the stakeholder workgroup that is included in the City contract. ECC workgroups will discuss the WFS response and bring recommendations on next steps to the February ECC regular meeting. Chair McHorse will respond to WFS on behalf of the ECC, thanking them for their response.

3. NEW BUSINESS AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS

a. Policy Work Group proposed actions- Anna Lisa Conlin

- i. Resolution to ask the City to acknowledge the challenges and stress of child care service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic and to acknowledge the impactful contribution of the child care sector to the City's economy**

Member Wren summarized the November meeting Citizen Communication given by Amy Mok, child care director at the Magic Dragon Preschool in District 10 that inspired the draft resolution. Mok asked the ECC to consider two actions: 1) Draft a resolution to acknowledge the challenges and the stress of the service providers during the pandemic and to give thanks for child care providers' impactful contribution to the Austin economy; and 2) Set up a policy to offer property tax exemption to early childhood service providers. The property tax relief recommendation is a state-level request. This draft resolution is a response to the first recommendation, as it acknowledges some of the challenges that exist for child care providers. The resolution asks the City do what is within the City's power to alleviate some of the current burdens on the child care industry. Member Paver moved to approve the resolution. Motion seconded by Member Demby, and the resolution was opened for discussion.

Members discussed child care worker compensation and rising costs in Austin. Member Paver expressed support for the resolution as a good first step in raising awareness about the difficulties faced by child care providers to keep teachers and programs fully staffed, when there are higher paying positions at large companies moving into Austin. Member Wren noted that new companies coming to Austin also increases the demand for child care and contributes to rising rent. Housing is a key affordability issue for families and child care workers. Member Demby recalled her experience with the high cost to rent an apartment in Austin and asking about frontline worker discounts. Member Wren suggested a possible amendment to the resolution being to add that child care workers are underpaid as well as undervalued. Some essential workers who get discounts on rent make more than child care workers, but child care workers are often not included in rent discounts. Member Paver said she would like there to be a push to raise the public awareness and appreciation/value for working in the human development field. Member Huston said she believes part of the reason society does not value early childhood

education is because the workers in the field are compensated poorly. She expressed being open to adding the data about the low compensation of workers into the resolution.

Members also discussed the issues related to the COVID-19 surge caused by the omicron variant. Vice Chair Worthington pointed out that in recent weeks, child care in Texas has been breaking records daily for the number of new cases among children in care and staff. This also places a burden on parents and families that cannot work if child care programs are closed or children are out sick. Member Paver brought up the low morale among child care workers and the COVID-19 reporting requirements and mitigation measures that make the work of child care programs even more challenging.

An additional discussion took place around past and current City strategies. Member Hedrick recommended sharing with Council members the idea that the City put together a comprehensive strategy that deals with regulation, housing, facilities costs, and taxes that impact the child care sector and workforce. Chair McHorse said that this draft resolution is like a 2017 resolution that established a task force. The ECC crafted a lengthy list of recommendations and worked with the City to develop a plan that resulted in fee waivers for child care programs and an Economic Development report. A few years ago, Council Member Alter encouraged the ECC members to follow up with the council members about the resolution after it is passed.

Chair McHorse would also like to ask to hear from the Economic Development Department and the City Anti-Displacement officer about how to integrate child care with their work. Member Alvarez shared his experience as former chair of the City's Anti-Displacement Task Force. During the pandemic, questions about how to help people with affording child care, saving for a home, college, etc., have increased and is a challenge for the larger community, beyond child care workers. Chair McHorse is a board member representing the child care sector on the new Austin Economic Development Corporation which is focused on economic growth and equity. They have a long list of projects they are set to work on, and she is working to get child care to be part of re-development conversations.

There was discussion about adding the creation of a City task force to the resolution at a time when there is heightened public awareness and discussion about the current state of child care. Member Huston mentioned an op-ed in a local paper saying that the City is falling behind because of lower educational achievement in Austin. Vice Chair Worthington expressed support for forming a task force to leverage this moment when there is heightened awareness. He would like to see the task force take on creating a formal definition of essential worker that includes child care workers, for policy purposes.

Members discussed two friendly amendments to the resolution: 1) adding "assistance for child care" as one of the expenses listed in the last "Further be it resolved" and 2) adding another "Further be it resolved" that encourages the Council to "establish a task force to address workforce issues in the child care sector." Member Alvarez moved to approve adding the amendments to the draft resolution. Member Huston seconded. Amendments approved by a vote of 9-0. Members then voted to approve the resolution as amended by a unanimous vote of 9-0.

ii. Discuss draft proclamation and ECC letter honoring Leonor Vargas and her contribution to early childhood education, children, families, and the public school system

Leonor Vargas, administrative supervisor of Parent Programs at AISD, announced her retirement. The ECC would like to ask the City to honor her. ECC can work through a Council office to get a proclamation. Council Member Fuentes of District 2 is supportive.

b. Joint Inclusion Committee updates- Raul Alvarez

i. Appointment of 3 ECC members to attend the Joint Inclusion Committee budget meeting on January 29, 2022

The Joint Inclusion Committee (JIC) has requested that 3 people designated from each Board & Commission represent their commission at a budget workshop with the City department heads on January 29th. Members Alvarez and Hosking Pulido cannot attend because there cannot be a quorum of the JIC at the workshop. Chair McHorse and Member Hedrick volunteered to attend the workshop. Member Alvarez moved to appoint Chair McHorse and Member Hedrick to attend. Appointees were approved by a vote of 8-0 (Member Wren off the dais).

c. Community Engagement Work Group updates

i. ECC Budget Forum on February 19, 2022

At the November 2021 ECC meeting, members discussed having a budget forum to get community input on the budget, separate from the upcoming JIC public budget forums. The ECC staff liaison requested to have an ECC budget forum on Saturday, February 19th. The ECC has discussed holding it at a school or a city facility (recreation center or library) in District 4. Members discussed having an in-person meeting, given that Austin-Travis County is in Stage 5 of the COVID-19 risk-based guidelines. The ECC could organize for the JIC budget forums instead of having its own. At request of the ECC, affordable child care has been added to the topics for the JIC budget forums. Member Huston requested that child care be listed clearly as a topic for the JIC budget forum, if the ECC decides not to do its own forum. The main difficulty with getting public engagement through virtual meeting is that the person testifies over the phone, you cannot see them; and it is hard to interact with them. ECC members agreed to move forward with planning a budget forum separate from the JIC, as an opportunity for engagement with community members and as a morale booster. ECC to set a date, confirm a location, and encourage people to attend, unless the COVID-19 numbers warrant cancelling.

ii. Community Advancement Network (CAN) Expanding Opportunity Forum on “Building a Family-Friendly Workplace” on February 9, 2022

This is part of a series of conversations that CAN is facilitating, focused on ensuring equitable economic recovery post-pandemic. The focus will be on issues that affect people of color and women. It will highlight the Best Place for Working Parents initiative and highlight what can be done if employers are struggling with retention and recruitment. Member Alvarez will soon share invite with further details.

d. Discuss ways ECC members can promote the Best Place for Working Parents campaign (January 10 – February 11, 2022)- Cathy McHorse

Early Matters for Greater Austin, the early childhood business alliance, has launched the 2022 campaign to get more businesses to take the assessment and think about the needs of their families. It is a movement across multiple states, including Maine, Iowa, and Washington State.

Fort Worth is holding a national summit in May. The goal is to cultivate business leaders to become champions of family-friendly policies. Chair McHorse asked ECC members to share the initiative flyer with Council members and other people in their networks and to share it on social media and in organization newsletters.

4. STAFF UPDATES

a. COVID-19 updates

Austin-Travis County is in Stage 5 of the COVID-19 risk-based guidelines. This is a challenging time for the City/County and Austin Public Health. The City is still on an upward trajectory of the surge. The new hospital admissions average is 110 people per day. The community transmission rate is 1880 per 100,000 people. Right now, that is higher than the community transmission in the state and in the country. The community positivity rate is 32%. By age, the positivity rate in children under 1 is 41%; it is 31% for children ages 1-9; and 39% for children ages 10-19. The Austin Public Health nurse line has seen a sharp increase in calls and emails from child care programs and schools seeking COVID-19 guidance and reporting positive cases in the last couple weeks. It is important to continue to encourage people to get their children vaccinated and for people 12 and up to get boosted. Austin-Travis County continues to have vaccination rates among children 5 and up that are much lower than in the adult population. Uptake on boosters is low as well.

b. KinderCare at Bergstrom Tech updates

KinderCare at Bergstrom Tech is now open to the community. There was a ribbon cutting ceremony in November 2021, attended by City Council Member Fuentes of District 2 and former Mayor Pro Tem Garza. There are 47 children enrolled (7 infants, 10 toddlers, 2 pre-K 3 classrooms of 12 children each, and 6 children in pre-K 4) and 22 seats available. There is a longer waiting list for infants than for the other age groups. Of the roughly 72 students that can be enrolled in the program, 10 seats are reserved for children supported by child care scholarships (subsidies).

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Chair McHorse requested to hear updates from both Head Start contractors, AISD and Child Inc. Child Inc is converting seats from Head Start to Early Head Start. The ECC could learn what their needs are in that conversion process and hear Child Inc's plans for meeting the need of infant-toddler care. Vice Chair Worthington would like to hear from people and organizations on the receiving end of the American Rescue Plan Act early childhood funding, specifically on how it has helped them. Member Hedrick is interested in getting an update on the Shared Services Alliance from the Success by Six Coalition. Chair McHorse said UWATX is receiving a contract to lead the shared services alliance group and AVANCE will be a subcontractor.

ADJOURNMENT – Chair McHorse adjourned the meeting at 10:01 a.m.