

The Public Policy
and Civil Society

S E R I E S

ALL IN THE FAMILY: A CIVIL SOCIETY CASE STUDY OF ALL OUR KIN AND CHILDCARE

by Alice Lloyd



The R Street Institute's Public Policy and Civil Society Series is a collection of case studies that demonstrate how policy can be used to energize non-governmental bodies. Each report will spotlight how government leaders turned to a diverse array of individuals, community-based organizations, nonprofits and/or local businesses to solve a social challenge, which differs from the traditional approach of creating a new centralized initiative run by a government bureaucracy. In total, these studies show how a variety of policy tools—including reduced regulations, new enabling language, tax credits and competitive grant programs—can be used to activate non-governmental bodies, which create an array of solutions tailored to local conditions. We would like to thank the Walton Family Foundation for its support of this series.

FOREWORD

This case study, authored by Allice Lloyd, tells the story of a Connecticut nonprofit that has played a valuable role in expanding the supply of childcare providers. This series highlights how policy can activate non-governmental bodies to tackle social challenges, and All Our Kin—the focus of this report—is noteworthy for two important reasons along these lines. First, it has enabled low-income and working-class individuals to start home-based childcare businesses that serve local families. This makes use of and builds the trust and social connections among urban neighbors. Second, All Our Kin got its start, and has been changed and kept afloat, by a series of federal and state policy reforms. What results is a fascinating story about the role of government in mobilizing civil society. Along the way, Lloyd’s study uncovers important lessons related to the work requirements of welfare reform; how well-meaning accountability provisions can have unexpected effects on nonprofit providers; how rules on licensing, liability and zoning can thwart social entrepreneurialism; and how a new state-run pre-K program might undermine home-based private childcare. In total, this study offers reason to be both optimistic about using policy to engage civil society in social challenges and wary about how it can best be accomplished.

— Andy Smarick

INTRODUCTION

Childcare can be terribly expensive. And, although the price tag can be more manageable for a two-income, middle-class family, it can be staggering for lower-income parents. In fact, the standard cost of care—more than \$15,000 yearly for an infant in a daycare center in New York or Connecticut—can be more than a low-income family’s entire annual income.¹

1996 saw sweeping reform to federal welfare legislation. The major change to the law was a requirement for welfare recipients to work. This meant that women with young children at home had to find employment, but often did not have anyone to watch their children and could not afford the exorbitant expense of traditional daycare centers. Although public programs and subsidies at the state and federal levels attempt to lighten the burden of daycare costs, many families reduce expenses by making use of home-based care. Most children under the age of four are cared for in a home, either their own or someone else’s.² And given this, that same model—as opposed to an expansion of larger, corporate daycare centers—might serve as a better alternative for the foundation for future childcare reforms.

Accordingly, the present study looks at one such program—All Our Kin in New Haven, Connecticut—that seeks to help keep childcare in the home by training family providers to start their own home-based daycares. It then maintains a professional network for these providers (primarily low-income, minority women) to mentor other, prospective ones and to help those who have successfully started home-based daycares grow their businesses.

With All Our Kin’s support, providers find remunerative employment and professional pride in a field they already know and love, while offering neighborhood parents a much-needed affordable and nurturing childcare arrangement. The All Our Kin story is one that could, with training programs and policies to help pave the way, be replicated in virtually any American community. The great promise of its success comes from tapping into a richly valuable and too-often overlooked resource that exists everywhere.

¹“The cost of child care in Connecticut,” The Economic Policy Institute, July 2019.

²Toni Porter et al., “A Review of the Literature on Home-Based Child Care: Implications for Future Directions,” Mathematica Policy Research, January 2010.



ALL OUR KIN'S STORY

All Our Kin was founded in 1999 by Jessica Sager, who started law school at Yale a month after President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which effectively ended the previous cash welfare system.³ After working in New York City public schools, Sager had begun a career in children's advocacy, and she found herself especially drawn to the role early childhood development plays in children's subsequent trajectories. As an intern at a local policy organization in New Haven, she studied projections of welfare reform's impact on low-income families in the neighborhoods near her neo-Gothic campus. During these efforts, she noticed a problem.⁴

Cash assistance had been intended to help mothers stay home with their children. For generations, welfare advocates had used the value of stay-at-home motherhood as an argument for public assistance. But times had changed. Now, work was the priority and legislators wanted to reduce the amount of public assistance and thus mothers—

³ H.R. 3734, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 104th Congress.

⁴ Author interview with Jessica Sager (in person), June 2019.

even single ones without parenting and childcare assistance—would therefore have to work, and have their eligibility for benefits become contingent on that employment and workforce training. Sager realized that as a result, reform was going to create a tremendous need for childcare, particularly for infants and toddlers.⁵

And, while the reform bill did include provisions to subsidize out-of-home childcare, the existing system simply was not equipped for the increased demand. Not only were conventional daycares unprepared for the sheer number of new care seekers, but often they were also not equipped to serve parents who were dependent upon public transportation, those who worked odd shifts and those who were non-English speakers. “I was really, really worried about this,” Sager says, “I was kind of consumed by it.”⁶

In response, Sager spent her time in school honing her first iteration of All Our Kin: A lab school for parents on welfare, the vast majority of them mothers. “Some of those parents were passionately interested in child development and had the potential and ability to be wonderful early childhood educators,” Sager suspected.⁷ All Our Kin was never intended for all parents, in other words, but for those who felt called to work with young children. As an added benefit, it freed parents better suited to other jobs to pursue meaningful work elsewhere, while knowing their children were well cared for.

But Sager noticed that the field faced another challenge, one related to quality. She saw that some new job-training programs misguidedly promoted childcare as an employment field with low barriers to entry. This, unfortunately, suggested that just about anyone could be successful at early childhood education. This has been a persistent misconception that All Our Kin has had to combat, even among its own recruits.

In thirty years, All Our Kin established offices in cities throughout the region and shared advice, data and materials with state and municipal agencies seeking to include family childcare—as opposed to center-based daycare—in their childcare subsidy systems. Family childcare programs, as opposed to daycare centers, are small-scale businesses run out of licensed providers’ own homes. Capped at a six-to-one child-to-adult ratio, they can offer working parents more flexible hours and children more one-on-one time than a big corporate daycare center. Family childcare also tends to cost less.⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [Natalie Viera and Shannon Hill, “Creating the Conditions for Family Childcare to Thrive,” All Our Kin, October 2019.](#)



Family childcare typically serves discrete neighborhoods, meaning it builds on existing community networks.

Importantly, family childcare typically serves discrete neighborhoods, meaning it builds on existing community networks. In this way, it makes use of hyper-local interpersonal bonds and fosters the development of social capital. But All Our Kin also teaches us something fascinating about the role of government action in fostering civil-society activity. Although smart policies can mobilize non-governmental innovation by funneling money to community-based organizations, civil society can also jump to action when the government moves out of a particular domain. That is, All Our Kin's origin story—the activation of a non-governmental actor—begins with the termination of perpetual direct cash aid to welfare recipients.

The program's current form is, actually, rather far from its first version: All Our Kin's training programs and community network of mentors and partners grew from its graduates' perhaps understandable preference for founding family childcare programs. Sager and her co-founder Janna Wagner—a New Haven native with a Harvard PhD in education, who left a position in the Boston Public School system to kickstart All Our Kin—began with six women and six children in a public housing development in New Haven. The initial model was a kind of lab school—an education program for future educators. Through a nine-month training program, All Our Kin taught welfare recipients to be early-childhood educators, leading them through licensing and accreditation, and schooling them in early childhood pedagogy and practice.

Some graduates went on to work in conventional childcare centers—large, privately run daycares—but others founded their own home-based childcare businesses. “And we were really excited about that,” Sager says, recalling watching the trend unfold. “Because family child care exponentially expands the supply of care in a neighborhood or community, when someone sets up her apartment or house to be able to care for a small group of children at home.”⁹

These home-based care programs serve their neighbors’ needs in ways unavailable elsewhere in New Haven’s low-income communities: For parents who work odd hours, have no car or speak little-or-no English, the presence of professionally trained daycare providers in the home around the corner—another parent from the neighborhood, someone you know and trust—eases the process of rejoining the workforce.

But there can be complications. “We were very excited to see some of our graduates take this path, but we also saw that unlike those of our graduates who went to work at centers, those running family childcares were really on their own,” Sager recalls.¹⁰ Opening a childcare program in one’s home is an entrepreneurial enterprise: They were not just inspiring developmentally enriching play, overseeing playground games and serving healthy midday meals; they were also directing a business, buying materials and cooking those meals.

The lab school closed in 2008 and over the years, All Our Kin adapted its programs to serve these home-based providers. Now, evening and weekend trainings, offered in the neighborhoods where providers live, cover licensing, business management and early childhood development. They host a 30-hour business coaching curriculum and offer a zero-interest loan program to help providers get their businesses up and running. They also provide training in English and Spanish and host annual conferences in addition to more- frequent specialized sessions.

⁹ Sager interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.



A TALE OF TWO SUBSIDIES

In Connecticut, the state-level childcare funding that low-income working parents depend on lapsed in the midst of Connecticut's budget crisis.¹¹ This prompted All Our Kin to seek an alternative public partnership with the federal Early Head Start (EHS) program. However, Early Head Start mandates stricter standards and reaches fewer families.¹²

Millions of children not yet in kindergarten spend the majority of their waking hours in some manner of home-based care. Indeed, it is the most common form of childcare for infants and toddlers, even more so among low-income families.¹³ The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) found that an estimated 7.1 million children are cared for in home-based childcare settings, by more than 3.7 million caregivers.¹⁴ Paid childcare providers, like those in the All Our Kin network (formally licensed and accredited business owners who satisfy the criteria for public funding eligibility) comprise less than a third of those.¹⁵

¹¹ Daniel Long and Nicole Updegrave, "Care 4 Kids in Connecticut: The Impact of Program Closure on Children, Parents, and Providers," Connecticut Voices for Children, March 2017.

¹² Isabel Osgood-Roach and Kara Wevers, "Everybody Benefits: Family Child Care Providers' Perspectives on Partnering with Early Head Start," All Our Kin, 2018.

¹³ Juliet Bromer and Toni Porter, "Mapping the family child care network landscape: Findings from the National Study of Family Child Care Networks, Erikson Institute, 2019.

¹⁴ See, e.g., NSECE Research Team, "Characteristics of home-based early care and education providers: Initial findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education," U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2016.

¹⁵ Holli A. Tonyan et al., "Understanding and Incorporating Home-Based Child Care Into Early Education and Development Systems," *Early Education and Development* 28:6 (2017).

All Our Kin's services extend to more than 700 family childcare educators in total, with the capacity to reach nearly 4,000 children.¹⁶ They guide their providers through the process of meeting state licensing regulations and accreditation through the National Association of Family Child Care, a nonprofit professional organization that assesses family childcare providers and offers qualifying members its badge of approval as a mark of their program's quality.

Licensing runs through state agencies and, as such, varies from state to state. Typically, it involves a standard fee and some form of orientation that is considerably less comprehensive than All Our Kin's in-house trainings and classes. In Connecticut, licensing includes background checks and fingerprinting for providers and any other adults living in the home where they will be caring for children—a process that typically takes several months per household, however spotless their legal history.¹⁷

In 2014, a well-intentioned change in federal policy produced an unintended consequence that gravely affected families in Connecticut. The 2014 reauthorization of the federal Child Care Development Block Grant—the main source of childcare assistance on the federal level, which feeds Connecticut's childcare subsidy program, Care 4 Kids—included provisions that many early childhood advocates had fought for: namely, that the federal health, safety and quality standards and guidelines should more closely reflect the strict program requirements All Our Kin asks of its providers.¹⁸ But, these new federal provisions created a cost the state was not prepared to cover. As a result, money ordinarily set aside for cash subsidies to fund needy families' childcare went to implementing new federal standards instead.¹⁹ Deep in its own budget crisis, the state could not afford to fund the subsidy program Care 4 Kids, upon which an overwhelming majority of All Our Kin families depend.²⁰

"There were 5,000 families on the waitlist for Care 4 Kids, at one point," recalls Natalie Vieira, All Our Kin's policy associate. "Our providers were either not getting the same business that they normally do, or were making a lot of personal sacrifice to serve families at lower rates than they should ideally be paid."²¹

¹⁶ Sager interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

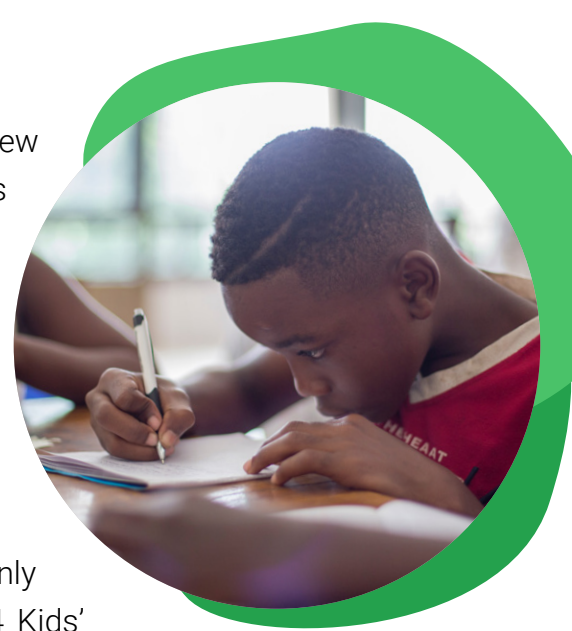
¹⁸ Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014, Pub. L. 113-186, 128 Stat. 1971 (2014).

¹⁹ Author interview with Natalie Vieira (in person), June 2019.

²⁰ Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, "Care4Kids resumes enrollment, but won't reach previous highs," CT Mirror, Nov. 10, 2017.

²¹ Vieira interview.

To combat this, All Our Kin’s business team honed a new marketing curriculum to help providers reach clients outside their suddenly winnowing word-of-mouth networks. Advertising online, for instance, and publicizing their flexibility to stay open on nights and weekends—something childcare centers generally do not do—helped home-based providers recruit new families.



With Care 4 Kids down for the count, “they suddenly needed to bring in private pay,” Vieira says. Care 4 Kids’ near closure inspired All Our Kin to pursue other partnerships.

“We worked with a couple of philanthropic organizations to provide scholarships to help families pay for childcare. Thankfully [Care 4 Kids] did eventually reopen.”²²

Providers who use All Our Kin’s trainings and its network of mentors to set up and sustain their businesses depend on state subsidies: 70 percent of the children in All Our Kin providers’ care receive Care 4 Kids.²³ About a third of All Our Kin providers receive public assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a \$16.5 million federal block grant set up by the same 1996 reform that inspired All Our Kin’s founding to help states provide cash welfare for needy families.²⁴ More than 25 percent of All Our Kin graduates report that all of the children in their care received Care 4 Kids.²⁵ And thus, when the Care 4 Kids program shrank by 91 percent in fiscal year 2016-2017, providers struggled to make ends meet.

In an effort to stabilize its funding somewhat, in 2014, All Our Kin joined forces with the far-more-stable federal Early Head Start program—the childcare subsidy program for children aged zero to three. Early Head Start was designed in 1994 by an Advisory Committee on Services for Families with Infants and Toddlers formed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services to provide low-income families with medical, mental health, nutrition and education.²⁶ As an All Our Kin partner in New Haven, Early Head Start augments existing offerings for a handful of care providers through its federal grants’ incumbent offerings and provisions for continuing education.²⁷

²² Ibid.

²³ Fred Carstensen et al., “The Economic Impact of the All Our Kin Family Child Care Tool Kit Licensing Program,” Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis at the University of Connecticut, 2011.

²⁴ Gene Falk, *The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant: A Primer on TANF Financing and Federal Requirements*, Congressional Research Service, Dec. 14, 2017.

²⁵ Carstensen et al.

²⁶ Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, “Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSRE), 1996-2010,” U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Sept. 27, 2011.

²⁷ Osgood-Roach and Wevers.

In a 2018 assessment of their partnership with Early Head Start, All Our Kin providers familiar with both Care 4 Kids and Early Head Start benefits compared the two.²⁸ Early Head Start funds All Our Kin providers through a partnership with United Way: Federal dollars go to the family childcare providers from five-year grants United Way awards All Our Kin. The state subsidy, which goes directly to needy families to use on whatever form of childcare they choose, does not dictate the structure of an All Our Kin provider's program whatsoever. On the other hand, there are strings attached to the funds provided by Early Head Start.²⁹

EHS requirements also include significant paperwork for providers. All Our Kin also found that EHS failed at times to offer classes or parental support services in a provider's language of choice (most All Our Kin providers, and most of the families they serve, are native Spanish speakers).³⁰ Care 4 Kids had fewer quality-related program requirements. But it let parents choose their children's care, while the stricter Early Head Start benefit limits recipient families to a narrow selection of approved programs. Even from the approved providers' perspectives, Early Head Start at times asked too much and listened too little.³¹

Based on providers' experience with the program, All Our Kin's study of its Early Head Start partnership recommends that state and municipal agencies model their programs and policies after Head Start's guidelines and offerings.³² But the study also recommended that Early Head Start learn all it can from providers like those in the All Our Kin network. Chief among their recommendations: More attention to each other's needs and goals.

As it stands, family childcare providers have to learn two sets of regulations. And this is in addition to the observations and other qualifying programs Early Head Start partners have to complete to prove the quality of their programs. As of last year, All Our Kin's Early Head Start program serves just 46 providers.³³ But those few dozen providers who do participate in the partnership reported that, despite the additional paperwork required, its structural support and influx of funds improved the services they were able to offer.³⁴

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ [Author interview with Kara Wevers \(in person\), June 2019.](#)

³¹ Ibid.

³² [Osgood-Roach and Wevers.](#)

³³ [Wevers interview.](#)

³⁴ Ibid.



A POLICY PLAYBOOK: A LOT OF SMALL THINGS

Natalie Vieira and her colleagues are currently at work on a guidebook for policymakers: a compilation of everything they have learned from watching state-level agency programs for family childcare providers. “State agencies develop these great trainings and family childcare providers don’t come, and they’ll call us up and say, ‘What’s going on here?’” Vieira recounts. “We’ll talk to them and come to find out [the state’s program is] from nine to five on a Tuesday.”³⁵ A family care provider would need to shut down their program, and leave as many as six families without childcare for an entire Tuesday, to attend. “A lot of it is small things,” she’s learned—the difference between policies that work and ones that fall short.³⁶

All Our Kin’s campuses and its hallmark family childcare-provider training, which includes a licensing curriculum, lessons, books and materials—and is known as the Tool Kit Licensing Program³⁷—predominantly serve southwestern Connecticut’s highly segregated post-industrial cities: New Haven, Bridgeport, Stamford and Norwalk. These are places where the average cost of childcare and median earnings for non-

³⁵ Vieira interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Tool Kit Licensing Program: Boxes 1-4,” All Our Kin, 2012.

white, low-income families create a nearly unsolvable equation.³⁸ Last year, All Our Kin opened a branch in the Bronx.³⁹ But its reach extends farther: It has been a model for states and districts across the country, most recently entering a technical assistance partnership with New York City’s Department of Education to ensure that the city’s Pre-K program adequately supports family childcare providers.⁴⁰

Policy can pose a number of unexpected challenges to family childcare. For example, landlords—particularly in those low-income communities, where family childcare stands to have the most positive influence—might forbid renters from operating family childcare for insurance reasons. And, it is often the case that a provider who is already running an unlicensed family childcare with her landlord’s permission will lose his blessing once she comes to All Our Kin to make her business official. A provider needs to be licensed to become a formal business, apply for loans and accept certain subsidies. But licensing begets state testing—for example, for lead and zoning compliance—and introduces liability. Providers have no choice in such cases but to risk their business to maintain their residence, or risk their residence to sustain their business. “We definitely promote liability insurance,” Natalie Vieira says. “Most of our providers have it because there are some affordable options available.”⁴¹ It’s not required at the state or federal level, but All Our Kin’s business team encourages providers to take out policies rather than risk losing their homes.

When I first met Vieira at All Our Kin’s New Haven home base, she was weighing whether to hurry up to Hartford to make a last-minute plea for the state Senate’s attention to a tenant reform bill that would prevent landlords from outright banning family childcare on their properties. Under the proposed legislation, landlords could require liability insurance, but they would not be able to ban licensed home childcare businesses. And the bill would prevent municipalities from imposing special zoning or regulatory processes on home-based childcare in addition to the state licensing standards.⁴²


³⁸ Keith M. Phaneuf, “Already deep in debt, Connecticut struggles with extremes of wealth and income,” *CT Mirror*, May 29, 2018.

³⁹ Natalie Vieira, “All Our Kin New York City Is Officially Open For Business!”, *All Our Kin Blog*, Jan. 31, 2018.

⁴⁰ For a description of the early stages of this collaboration, see: Kendra Hurley and Janie Ziyi Shen, “Bringing It All Home: Problems and Possibilities Facing New York City’s Family Child Care,” *Center for New York City Affairs at the New School*, July 2016.

⁴¹ Vieira interview.

⁴² State of Connecticut General Assembly, Proposed Bill No. 6291, January Session, 2019.



Every new family childcare
enables four to five parents to
enter the workforce

But this is not the only type of advocacy needed. When New York City's Pre-K to 4 program left out family childcare entirely, for instance, All Our Kin got involved.⁴³ They invited officials from the New York City Department of Education to their Stamford offices, showed them a couple of family childcare programs in the area, and argued that high-quality family childcare ought to be considered for inclusion in the city's preschool subsidy. The DOE invested in All Our Kin's technical assistance training, which instructs family childcare providers in early childhood education practices and teaches them to turn their homes into classrooms. City officials invited All Our Kin's coaches to guide their professional development curriculum for local family childcare providers.

The benefits of family childcare were not lost on these city officials. All Our Kin employees are currently training New York City Department of Education staff in their coaching program and training DOE's established network of family childcare providers to teach the business program All Our Kin piloted in New Haven more than a decade ago. In the meetings held so far, the All Our Kin team has handed over their internal data and research, imparting what they have learned about setting sustainable reimbursement rates. "The goal," Vieira says, "is that family childcare would be valued and recognized in such a way that families are given meaningful choice about where their child spends their day."⁴⁴ But first: It's key that these city officials understand and inform new providers about what it actually costs to keep a family childcare in business.

⁴³ City of New York, "New York City Launches Historic Expansion of Pre-K to More Than 51,000 Children," Press Release, Sept. 4, 2014.

⁴⁴ Vieira interview, in-person, June 2019.

The data do support their pitch to city governments. For example, a 2016 study found that All Our Kin’s trainings, supports and network improve the observable quality of the family childcares they help set up and support.⁴⁵ Their programs scored 50 percent higher than other family childcare programs, according to blind observers unaware of what type of training the provider had received.⁴⁶ The study also compared 28 All Our Kin network members with 20 family childcare providers who were not part of All Our Kin. By the numbers, All Our Kin won—they took home the spirit award too. Observable quality was linked to the providers’ personal, intrinsic motivation and the presence of social supports. (Providers reported these aspects of their inner and outer working conditions in a separate survey the trained observers did not see.) Moreover, the study also found that their reported plans to stay in the field of family childcare long-term were closely correlated to the quality of their practice, and their involvement in All Our Kin.⁴⁷

But, if data on program quality do not seal the deal, All Our Kin’s economic impact makes their approach an even easier sell. A 2011 study from the University of Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis quantified the Tool Kit Licensing Program’s contribution to the New Haven economy, finding that 60 percent of All Our Kin providers earned \$5,000 more the first year after they received their license, and 45 percent earned at least \$10,000 more the second year.⁴⁸ Plus, these family childcare programs allow low-income parents to work: Every new family childcare enables four to five parents to enter the workforce, the study estimated.⁴⁹ And, All Our Kin generated \$18.4 million in additional tax revenue and \$15.2 million in gross regional product between 2006 and 2009—just within the New Haven area.⁵⁰ And, while the 2011 analysis has not yet been repeated, today, there are five more All Our Kin service areas and hundreds more providers. In light of this, the economic impact might well have multiplied since then.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Toni Porter et al., “Examining Quality in Family Child Care: An Evaluation of All Our Kin,” All Our Kin, 2016.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Carstensen et al.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.



THE ALL OUR KIN STORY IN ACTION

Emily Mingia-Lewis, 39, has been running a family childcare out of her home in Bridgeport, Connecticut since 2015. She received her child development associate's degree and accreditation with the National Association for Family Child Care, through an All Our Kin program.

She calls her curriculum a “child-centered” program: “If the kids are interested in puzzles on a Tuesday morning? We’re going to be playing with puzzles.”⁵¹ During my visit “Big Aiden”—who is five and starting kindergarten in the fall at Mingia-Lewis’s recommendation even though his parents, she tells me, preferred that he stay with her—kneads Play-Doh and chats amiably with an All Our Kin-provided assistant, who is here to free-up Mingia-Lewis for our interview. Three-year-old “Little Aiden”—whose preferred nickname is “Maui,” after his favorite Moana character—makes progress on a numbers-and-colors puzzle he chose from the well-stocked games cupboard: Sensibly, the puzzle piece with thirteen oranges corresponds to the piece with the orange-colored number 13. ‘The Aidens’ are the only two kids in her care today, but on alternating days, they are joined by a ten-month-old baby and another who just turned one.

⁵¹ Interview with Emily Mingia-Lewis (in-person), June 2019.

When school lets out for the summer, Mingia-Lewis's six-year-old niece—who has been coming to her aunt's care since it opened four years ago—will spend her days here as well. Trekking in the nearby Beardsley and Glenwood Parks is a favorite afternoon activity this time of year, I learn, and the adventure is often followed by quiet time spent imagining and illustrating stories about the creatures they saw: Frogs, turtles and squirrels tend to interest these kids more than the exotic lure of the nearby Beardsley Zoo, but every cohort of kids is different.

According to Mingia-Lewis, this is actually the smallest her care group has ever been.⁵² Family childcare programs like hers have been struggling to maintain capacity in recent years. Care 4 Kids' depletion is partly to blame, but there is another factor on the horizon that has Mingia-Lewis worried about keeping her program afloat: Connecticut's public Pre-K program is small but growing. The state-funded program went live in Bridgeport in 2015, supporting public and private providers equally. But home-based daycare does not qualify.⁵³

Still too small to undermine businesses like Mingia-Lewis's, she suspects local publicity for the limited, classroom-centric program may have stoked a popular preference among local parents for putting kids under five in conventional school settings as opposed to private homes.⁵⁴ And then the Care 4 Kids subsidy that most of her clients depend on lost the majority of its budget the following year. All Our Kin's marketing classes might help, she hopes. "When I first started, my daughter ran up and down the block passing out my business cards," she says, "I didn't ask her to—she just did it!"⁵⁵ All Our Kin's word-of-mouth network and her own social circles kept her slots filled in the early years. Now, Mingia-Lewis is trying to change her marketing methods to see if she can find a new client base. She attended a business strategy workshop at All Our Kin's Bridgeport campus and also plans to boost her online presence.

Crucially, and instructively, All Our Kin's Tool Kit training program anticipates some of the pitfalls providers will meet. In an evening orientation session, Tool Kit Licensing Coordinator Sarah Derbala-Santiago tells a dozen prospective first-time family childcare providers what to expect: "Owning your own business is hard work, but that's not all you're going to be doing." She then underlines a point she has seen many women underestimate over the years: "You're an educator, but you're also a business owner. You're an entrepreneur, but you're the mommy. You're a therapist, you're a

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bill Cummings, "Bridgeport launches pre-K enrollment," Connecticut Post, July 12, 2015.

⁵⁴ Brian Zahn, "DeLauro talks universal pre-K, education funding with Connecticut superintendents," New Haven Register, Feb. 11, 2019.

⁵⁵ Mingia-Lewis interview.

counselor, you're a community resource. You're the caregiver, and you're also the assertive voice who has to lay down the law sometimes," Derbala-Santiago says. "And you're also the cook."⁵⁶

The women who've come to tonight's orientation are all African-American New Havenites and mothers or grandmothers in their thirties and forties. This is typical of the evening orientation classes Derbala-Santiago hosts, and typical of All Our Kin's community, Derbala-Santiago tells me.⁵⁷ The classes alternate biweekly between English and Spanish; the same evening class two weeks later will be exclusively Hispanic. Most are stay-at-home moms on public assistance who babysit part-time for friends and family, and all but one of the group say they found All Our Kin through word of mouth. The outlier is a retiring public school teacher who knew founding a family child care was an option but did not know where to begin, so she Googled "start my own daycare" and followed the digital bread crumbs to All Our Kin orientation.⁵⁸

One prospective provider tells the group that she started All Our Kin orientation once before, eight years ago, but the timing was wrong for her family. "Timing is everything," Derbala-Santiago nods.⁵⁹ The program starts at 6:30 pm and offers an overview of the licensing and accreditation processes, but mostly covers the personal rewards and sacrifices of starting a family childcare. The next week's session details the licensing process—which mostly entails paperwork and home inspections and is a basic prerequisite to operate a legally aboveboard, in-home daycare. Licensing also makes providers eligible for various benefits like food assistance, tax deductions and small business loans. And, as I learn while shadowing an orientation session, All Our Kin insists upon it.



“You’re the caregiver, and you’re also the assertive voice who has to lay down the law sometimes”

Derbala-Santiago

⁵⁶ Author observation of All Our Kin orientation session led by Sarah Derbala-Santiago, June 2019.

⁵⁷ Author interview with Sarah Derbala-Santiago (in-person), June 2019.

⁵⁸ Orientation observation.

⁵⁹ Derbala-Santiago interview.

Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood awards licenses after fingerprinting and references are clear. Agents inspect licensed provider's homes every six months for code violations: One of the code violations Derbala-Santiago prepares providers for is their hot-water level. "A lot of people don't even know that you can turn the heat down on your central water tank, let alone that you have to," she says.⁶⁰

One provider I shadowed—New Haven-based Sandra Dill, 60—has learned that there is a whole world of play to be found in ordinary household objects that have outworn their intended use: Couch cushions are the right size for little ones to sit on, and when the playroom floor is imagined as an open ocean, they make for great rafts. She is devising a curriculum on recycling for the family childcare provider and plans to present it at an upcoming annual conference. All Our Kin veterans become mentor teachers, who then go into family childcare homes to model best practices, observe providers at work and reflect back what they see.

Sandra Dill seems to know everything about the children in her care. One little girl, Tanya,⁶¹ who shakes my hand and introduces herself before inviting me to dress her baby doll, has been living with her grandmother while her mother completes a state-funded addiction recovery program. Dill tells me Tanya asks for her mother often during their days together. She and Tanya's aunts are working together to decide whether—and if so, how soon—to arrange supervised visitations between mother and daughter.⁶² While we round the corner during the children's daily constitutional—a walk through the neighborhood, where first a mother and child and then a group of high-school-aged kids on summer break stop to 'coochie-coo' at the cute group—Sandra gets a call from the Department of Children and Families about one of the boys in the four-seat stroller—a spiffy new model that Early Head Start subsidies covered. The boy's older brother has been referred to the agency, she learns. They tell her that if he shows any physical or behavioral signs of distress, she should notify them immediately. She says she will.⁶³ The Early Head Start program provides additional counseling for cases like these. Dill's program is one of the handful All Our Kin funds in New Haven through Early Head Start. Providers like her follow strict federal standards in exchange for additional services that All Our Kin supplements.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The child's name has been changed to protect her identity.

⁶² Author interview with Sandra Dill, 2019.

⁶³ Ibid.



All Our Kin is now uniquely positioned to teach policymakers—and future educators—about the benefits and challenges of running childcare out of one’s home.

In addition to training existing agencies to apply All Our Kin’s business series and coaching program to their internal oversight of subsidized family childcare providers, All Our Kin offers guidance to other nonprofit programs joining forces with Early Head Start. Thanks to its years of experience, All Our Kin is now uniquely positioned to teach policymakers—and future educators—about the benefits and challenges of running childcare out of one’s home.

Care 4 Kids is so predictably unreliable that All Our Kin’s Early Head Start administrator, Kara Wevers, has cut the subsidy from her yearly budget projections.⁶⁴ All Our Kin entered into its second grant period anticipating that the state would automatically support any child already enrolled, based on what Wevers describes as a “verbal agreement” with the Office of Early Childhood in Hartford, which administers Care 4 Kids.⁶⁵ With Care 4 Kids all but closed, families made other childcare arrangements and family childcare providers shuttered. With their pool of families and providers reduced, All Our Kin will cover 30 percent fewer Early Head Start slots in the coming year: “We have 48 children in the families that we serve right now,” Wevers says. Sandra Dill’s care group numbers among those few dozen, for now. “But we don’t want to commit to them and then not have any ability to fund it internally,” Wevers worries.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Wevers interview.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.



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The goal is that family childcare would be valued and recognized in such a way that families are given meaningful choice about where their child spends their day.



CONCLUSION

All Our Kin was born of a policy change. A mid-1990s political consensus emerged that cash welfare was disincentivizing work among poor Americans. So, the 1996 welfare reform act made government aid contingent on employment or training. And that created a vast new demand for childcare. All Our Kin's innovation was seeing home-based care as a big part of the solution. This enabled low-income individuals to move into the workforce while feeling comfortable that their kids were cared for by local, trusted adults. All Our Kin also enabled many low-income individuals to start new businesses. But, All Our Kin's experience also suggests that home-based care could be part of a solution to the larger problem of childcare's great costs. Through training and support, All Our Kin expands the universe of local, lower-cost, flexible childcare providers.

The day I visited Sandra Dill's care, a rising first-grader who had spent his toddler years with her was dropping by to visit the 'littles' taking his place. The close ties between the child, the child's family and the provider were touching—and were clearly built on care, community and trust. And this might be the heart of the story: How a series of policy changes activated and supported an invaluable neighborhood resource—primarily working-class, minority mothers and grandmothers—who had been there all along.

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