The overwhelming majority of children spend considerable time with non-parental caregivers while their parents work. Over three-fourths of children under the age of five with employed mothers are in child care, averaging 33 hours per week in care.¹ These children are cared for in a range of settings, from child care centers and preschools to license-exempt home-based providers, often referred to as family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers. High-quality, stable, and affordable child care supports parents in their goal of economic stability and provides the foundation for a lifetime of learning for children. This policy brief spotlights the child care needs of low-income families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules. Working evening, weekend, and variable hours has become almost standard in today’s economy, especially in retail, janitorial, health and food service sectors where many low-income parents find employment. Moreover, employers increasingly control labor costs through “just-in-time” scheduling practices. These scheduling practices can not only create logistical difficulties and stress for parents, but also for children and child care providers, whose care schedules mirror the instability of parental work schedules.

Illinois child care policy, like federal child care policy, recognizes that child care can advance not only families’ economic success by allowing parents to work, but also children’s wellbeing and healthy development, including younger children’s school readiness. A robust policy agenda reflects these different aims. It sustains a child care and early education infrastructure that serves children at different times of day and in different settings, and it supports standards of quality that are reflective of and appropriate to diverse arrangements. By exploring the challenges that nonstandard and unstable work schedules pose for parents seeking quality, stable, and affordable care for their children, this brief provides several policy recommendations to improve the care options for families struggling to make ends meet in today’s economy.²

Defining Work Schedules

Several dimensions of work schedules pose challenges for child care. (See box on Pg. 2.) Nonstandard work hours – or work outside of regular daytime, weekday hours – have received a great deal of attention because of the difficulty in finding child care programs during the evenings, overnights, and weekends. In addition, child care is difficult to arrange for parents who receive their work schedules with limited advance notice, whose schedules change at the last minute, or whose work hours fluctuate daily, weekly, or seasonally.
When working parents with variable schedules have little say in the number and timing of their work hours, it is especially difficult to accommodate caregiving demands and responsibilities. The employer who at the last minute assigns a parent to work extra hours in the evening may cause the parent to be late picking up their child from a child care center. The employer who tells a parent upon arrival for their scheduled shift to go home because business is slow may not realize that the parent still has to pay the child’s caregiver that day despite the lost earnings caused by the canceled shift. These examples of child care changes outside of a parent’s control can negatively impact parent-caregiver relationships and compromise the quality and stability of care that children receive in all types of care.

**Child Care Choice and Work Schedules**

Parents with nonstandard and unstable work schedules face limited child care options in the formal sector. These families disproportionately rely on family, friend, and neighbor providers and multiple arrangements to accommodate their variable care needs. As reported in a previous Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) research brief, Cook County Parents, Nonstandard Work and Child Care, almost half (46 percent) of all employed parents receiving assistance to help pay for child care in Cook County worked nonstandard hours, and these parents disproportionately used license-exempt home-based providers (64 percent compared to 22 percent of parents working standard hours).

Important licensing regulations, such as ratios of staff to children, make it especially hard for licensed child care centers to offer flexible enrollment schedules compared to licensed family child care homes and license-exempt FFN care. Staffing part-time and variable hour scheduling options may be prohibitively expensive for centers without additional government supports. This regulatory environment helps explain why center schedules are typically restricted to daytime, weekday hours and often require children to enroll in full-day, full-week sessions. Nationally only about 8 percent of centers offer any hours between 7:00 PM and 6:00 AM or on weekends. In Illinois, the percentage is about the same.

Part-time care options, and especially variable hours of care, are also uncommon among centers. Nationally, only about three in ten child care centers have part-time slots. In Cook County, Illinois, less than 17 percent of centers offer a part-time or variable hours option. The few centers that do accept families needing part-time care or variable hour care seldom have part-time or variable rate structures, making these options out of reach for most low-income families, especially parents whose work hours, and hence earnings, are variable and unpredictable. Overall, then, child care centers’ more rigid hours of operation do not reflect the needs of many working parents with nonstandard or unstable work schedules. This is especially concerning given that high quality classroom-based instruction teaches children self-regulation skills that are an important aspect of school readiness, especially for the highest risk children.
Licensed family child care homes (FCCs) are slightly more responsive than centers to the needs of workers with challenging schedules. A number of family child care homes offer part-time care and drop-off options for parents with nonstandard schedules. While many have licenses to provide evening, overnight, and even weekend care (e.g., 68 percent in Cook County, Illinois are licensed to operate in the evening\textsuperscript{12}), they do not necessarily serve families during nonstandard times. In 2012 the National Survey of Early Care and Education found that 34 percent of family child care homes offered child care during nonstandard hours.\textsuperscript{13}

Family, friend, and neighbor providers are by far the most likely to offer child care during nonstandard hours and they provide more flexible schedules and affordable rates as compared to other child care options. The majority of FFN providers offer child care between 7:00 PM and 6:00 AM or on weekends.\textsuperscript{14} Because FFN providers often have additional employment and caregiving responsibilities of their own, parents who rely on FFN care frequently must cobble together multiple arrangements to address their nonstandard and precarious work schedules.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, only parts of the child care market – some child care centers and licensed family child care homes, but mostly the FFN sector – are able to respond to the child care needs of parents with nonstandard, unpredictable or variable work schedules.

**Child Care Subsidies and Work Schedules**

Illinois’ Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) supports parental employment by providing financial assistance for child care during working hours.\textsuperscript{16} CCAP also aims to increase the care options available to low-income families by reducing financial barriers to accessing a preferred child care or early education program such as a center.\textsuperscript{17} Even with financial assistance, however, work schedules can significantly drive parental child care decisions.

Given today’s 24/7 economy, many CCAP families use family, friend, and neighbor caregivers to accommodate work hours that don’t conform to conventional center or licensed family child care schedules. As noted earlier, our study found that over 64 percent of parents with nonstandard work hours who received child care subsidies in Cook County chose license-exempt FFN care rather than licensed family home care or center care.

Historically Illinois has been a leader among states in providing a full range of child care options for families that use CCAP, including those who work nonstandard and unstable schedules. Nevertheless in Illinois, as in other states, it has been challenging for nonstandard workers and those with unstable work schedules to take advantage of licensed family child care homes and especially centers because of scheduling constraints. Because Illinois families are eligible to use subsidized care only during their working hours (plus some transportation time), it has been difficult for parents whose hours and shifts fluctuate to use a program that requires children to attend a regular schedule.

In 2014, the federal government reauthorized the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the federal program that funds CCAP. The reauthorized law re-affirms the dual purpose of CCAP as a work support and a critical policy lever to support child development, while adding several provisions that directly address the employment circumstances of CCAP families.

The key provisions of the law aim to increase the quality and continuity of children’s care arrangements by requiring states to:  (1) adopt “family-friendly” program eligibility and redetermination of eligibility policies that do not disrupt parental employment, (2) establish standards and monitoring of child care settings to ensure the health and safety of children while in care, and (3) implement strategies to increase the supply of high quality care, especially for underserved populations and communities including families with nonstandard work schedules. (See box on Pg. 4 for description of key CCDBG provisions.)

These changes in CCDBG law have the potential to increase CCAP stability and child care continuity and quality for families with complicated employment circumstances like nonstandard and unstable work schedules, while at the same time benefiting employment stability.\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, some of the new provisions designed to improve the safety and quality of child care, such as the addition of mandatory criminal background checks, increased health and safety standards, and additional monitoring requirements for license-exempt providers, could act as a disincentive for FFN providers, who disproportionately serve families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules, to participate in CCAP. Thus, it is critical that Illinois implement the CCDBG
changes with these potential unintended consequences in mind, and monitor the impacts of the changes on CCAP-eligible families, including those with nonstandard work hours and unstable schedules.

The reauthorized CCDBG law offers exciting opportunities to extend a wider range of child care options to low income families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules. The past few years, Illinois has seen a crippling budget deficit that has affected its ability to fully fund many programs that low-income working families rely on, including the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program. CCAP income eligibility guidelines have been lowered and child care providers have experienced payment delays. Despite this, Illinois Action for Children is optimistic about the future of the Child Care Assistance Program. CCAP continues to serve as a viable solution to expanding high quality and stable child care options for children whose parents work nonstandard and unstable work schedules.

Policy Recommendations to Increase Child Care Options for Families with Nonstandard and Unstable Work Schedules

Illinois needs an inclusive policy agenda that strives to serve all children in affordable, high quality, and stable settings, while simultaneously supporting parental employment. Lessons learned in Illinois can serve to inform a national policy agenda that recognizes the realities working families face in today’s precarious economy. We propose several recommendations to better align child care assistance policies with parental work schedules and increase the access parents have to the full range of care options, including licensed centers, licensed family child care homes and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. We also propose several recommendations targeted at the child care workforce to accommodate the children of nonstandard and variable hour workers.

Key Provisions of 2014 Child Care Development Block Grant Reauthorization Related to Work Schedules

I. Family-Friendly Provisions to Facilitate Access to Child Care Assistance that Supports Stable, Continuous Care

- Determination/Redetermination of eligibility must account for irregular fluctuations in earnings
- Redetermination processes cannot unduly disrupt parental employment
- Requires 12-month minimum eligibility period for child care assistance regardless of temporary changes in employment, education, training or income, up to federal maximum of 85% state median income
- Permits states to continue child care assistance for non-temporary job loss or termination of education and training; A minimum of 3 months of job search is required if states choose to end assistance in these circumstances

II. Health and Safety Requirements to Protect Children in Care

- Establishes minimum standards for health and safety in CCDBG child care settings, including pre-service and continuous provider trainings
- Requires criminal background checks for all CCDBG child care providers and inspections for all licensed child care and license-exempt non-relative CCDBG providers

III. Provisions to Improve the Quality of Child Care

- Supports child care providers by requiring states to establish Early Learning and Development Guidelines, ongoing professional development requirements, and strategies to strengthen provider business practices
- Requires states to implement strategies to increase supply and quality of child care for several priority populations, including children who need care during nontraditional hours.
- Directs states to target investments in high quality care to children living in areas with concentrations of poverty and unemployment and a scarcity of high quality care
Our recommendations include financial incentives, technical supports, and professional development opportunities that would enable providers to successfully expand hours and increase program flexibility without compromising program quality, child safety, or financial stability.

**Recommendation 1. Better align child care assistance policies with the work schedules and employment circumstances of low-income families.**

CCDBG reauthorization provides an opportunity for states to increase access to safe, affordable, quality child care for low-income families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules who are in need of child care assistance. As Illinois institutes child care reforms to come into compliance with the CCDBG law, it should:

- **Ensure that families eligible for child care assistance maintain access to FFN care.** It is critical that the license-exempt home-based sector remains fully part of Illinois’ Child Care Assistance Program and that parents who choose family, friend, and neighbor care remain eligible for CCAP. As CCAP providers, these caregivers have access to a range of services, such as food and nutrition supports and technical assistance to support quality improvements and licensure, that they may otherwise not be aware of or have access to. Moreover, without the CCAP option, many low-income families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules would be unable to access subsidized child care, which would deal a devastating blow to their child care options and their ability to remain employed.

- **Minimize compliance barriers to CCAP participation for license-exempt FFN providers.** The monitoring of FFN providers should be limited to nonrelative caregivers as is allowable by CCDBG law. Compliance with participation requirements such as background checks and health and safety trainings should be affordable and easy to access. These reforms will ensure FFN care remains available to subsidized families who depend on these providers to care for their children during working hours.

- **Simplify CCAP application, redetermination, and employment verification processes.** CCDBG law requires that states eliminate undue employment disruptions and unnecessary burdens on subsidized parents and their employers. Illinois should simplify the process of employment verification by accepting client self-report of work hours when pay-stubs are unavailable and eliminating reporting requirements for job, hour, and work schedule changes. Forms to determine and redetermine eligibility should be revised and shortened to clearly and succinctly communicate the required information; and any additional documentation requested for application and redetermination should be kept to a minimum. Such changes would reduce administrative burdens and processing delays that can lead to employment disruptions and ongoing hassles for all CCAP families; but especially for parents with variable schedules and fluctuating hours, who may face more arduous application and redetermination requirements and a more onerous employment verification process in the current system.

- **Relax CCAP rules requiring subsidized child care hours to match parents’ work schedules.** Current Illinois CCAP rules require a relatively strict match between parents’ work schedules and their eligible hours of subsidized child care. Consistent with CCDBG law, CCAP rules should allow flexibility in determining the hours and schedules of subsidized child care that working parents are authorized to use in order to increase the range of child care options families have and promote continuity of care. For example, a parent who works an unpredictable schedule of 20 to 40 hours per week, mostly during weekday hours, should be able to enroll her child in a center full time. By allowing a more flexible link between parents’ work schedules and eligible hours of subsidized child care, the CCAP program opens up more child care options for parents working nonstandard and unstable schedules, contributing to child care quality and stability. Moreover, such flexibility simplifies the process of documenting and monitoring work and child care hours, which reduces burden on providers, parents, and program employees.

**Recommendation 2. Encourage expanded hours and variable scheduling options in all types of care.**

Child care providers across all settings should be encouraged to expand their hours of operation and consider creative scheduling options to accommodate children needing variable hour care. These efforts are especially needed for centers because they have the least flexibility to offer nonstandard and variable hours of care. Expansions of child care options with variable starting and ending times and schedules that extend even one or two hours beyond the conventional 6 PM closing time of centers would fill a critical care gap for many...
working families with nonstandard and unstable schedules. To increase the supply of child care programs with expanded hours and variable scheduling options, Illinois should:

- **Provide technical supports and financial incentives to child care programs that extend closing times and permit variable drop-off and pickup times and part-time care.** Technical assistance should be offered to providers to facilitate program changes enabling extended hours and variable scheduling without compromising program quality or child safety. To incentivize participation and support financial stability of providers, tiered reimbursements for subsidized providers (e.g., CCAP add-ons) and other financial incentives to nonsubsidized providers (e.g., employer tax credits) should be tied to expanded hours of operation and variable scheduling options. All care types, whether center, licensed family child care home, or license-exempt home-based care, should be eligible for financial incentives and technical supports if they expand hours and adopt flexible scheduling while maintaining and building quality.

**Recommendation 3. Enhance child care quality for children whose parents work nonstandard and unstable schedules.**

Children whose parents have challenging schedules deserve high quality child care. When designing quality initiatives, policy makers should be mindful of the unique employment circumstances of these parents and the types of settings necessary to accommodate their complex care needs. Currently in Illinois, the state quality rating and improvement system, ExceleRate Illinois, is primarily targeted to centers and licensed family child care homes. We recommend that Illinois:

- **Establish a tracking and monitoring system to assess the reach of Illinois’ quality initiatives** and determine the degree to which families who need care outside of daytime, weekday hours, who need part time care, and whose care needs are variable from week to week are served by providers who participate in state quality initiatives such as ExceleRate Illinois.

- **Quality initiatives that use a social capital framework may be especially useful to raise the quality of FFN care.** (See text box below.) Specifically, FFN providers may benefit from efforts designed to connect them with peer networks and resources provided by social service agencies, community groups, licensed child care providers, and with government programs. Such increases in social capital, in turn, can result in child care quality improvements through gains in provider knowledge, access to resources, and opportunities for further development.

**What is social capital?** Social capital refers to the resources gained through ties with individuals and organizations. Through social connections with families, caregivers, social service providers, teachers, civic leaders, and community residents, child care providers gain valuable knowledge, access new resources, and establish trusting and supportive relationships that are vital to a healthy, caring, and productive society.

**A social capital service model** facilitates the creation of both **bridging capital** – linkages to new resources, community organizations, and professional opportunities, and **bonding capital** – the joining together of child care providers in peer networks to share information and support one another. Illinois Action for Children recognizes the power of bridging and bonding social capital to leverage opportunities, advance knowledge, and strengthen peer support for the benefit of caregivers and the children and families they serve.

- **FFN care initiatives should include a combination of informational, material, and financial supports to encourage quality improvements and reduce caregiver burnout and isolation.** For example, FFN providers may welcome information and materials that support developmentally appropriate practices for nontraditional hour care in informal home-based settings, like advice about caregiving routines, practices for mealtimes and bedtimes, and sample activities that are appropriate for evening and early morning hours. They may also benefit from gaining access to programs and grants that address the health, nutritional, and safety needs of children.

Recognizing that FFN care is a critical child care alternative for parents with nonstandard and unstable schedules, and for many families it is the only option available to them, quality initiatives should support the work of FFN providers.
• Programs should be available to all family, friend, and neighbor providers, regardless of their interest in becoming licensed. For providers who want to become licensed, resources and supports directed specifically at reducing barriers to licensure may be particularly useful. However, traditional pathways to professional development or formal training programs geared toward licensure and professionalization might be less effective for reaching many FFN providers than a “family support” approach that includes home visiting, coaching, and peer support, especially for those providers who view their work as an extension of family care and not a career.

• Encourage local collaborations between formal early care and education programs and licensed family child care homes as well as with family, friend, and neighbor providers. Collaborations, such as Illinois Action for Children’s Community Connections preschool program that link children in home-based settings with part-day, center-based preschools, provide an exciting opportunity to increase social capital and expand the formal learning opportunities of children in license-exempt home-based care. To work effectively, these programs require transportation assistance between programs, the coordination of program and family schedules, and financial incentives to support safe, stable, and quality care in both settings.

• Increase financial incentives to encourage participation in quality enhancements for FFN providers. Similar to the Quality Improvement grants available to some licensed family child care homes and centers through the ExceleRate Illinois program, the provision of small grants and material supports to FFN providers may directly support quality improvements by allowing providers to update or add to book collections, materials for activities, etc. For some FFN providers, tiered reimbursement rates that are tied to CCAP participation, similar to the CCAP add-on incentives for silver- and gold-rated licensed programs in Illinois’ ExceleRate system, may also be an effective incentive to encourage participation in quality initiatives.

As We Move Forward

For thousands of Illinois families, the challenges of raising children in today’s economy are exacerbated by unpredictable and variable work schedules that require parents to be away from their young children during evenings, weekends, and even overnight. Parents who work nonstandard and unstable schedules struggle to find safe, affordable, and high quality child care to accommodate these challenging work demands. It is time for a robust policy response to this precarious employment context that advances a system of child care and early education that truly serves the diverse caregiving needs of all working parents and their children. With its skilled, engaged, and committed community of early childhood professionals, Illinois is poised to be a leader among states to ensure our child care system is responsive to the realities of working families in the 21st century.

The Child Care Development Block Grant reauthorization offers opportunities for the Illinois CCAP program to increase access to safe, stable, and high quality child care for children regardless of their parents’ work schedules. This policy brief surveys the unique needs of families with nonstandard and unstable work schedules to recommend initiatives and directions to policy makers who hope to improve access to CCAP for both these families and their child care providers; increase the supply of formal child care available to parents with nonstandard or unstable work schedules; and raise the quality of FFN child care. The set of policy recommendations also reminds policymakers to understand that families with unstable work schedules and families who work outside of daytime, weekday hours might have different but complementary policy needs.

Public policy would benefit from our paying special attention to FFN providers because families with challenging schedules mostly use this type of care. Illinois has traditionally been a leader among states in its child care assistance policies. It respects families’ reliance upon FFN child care given the prevalence of nonstandard and unstable work schedules and the limited supply of formal child care that can accommodate these schedules. Given this history, Illinois policymakers should not shy away from taking up positive opportunities presented by provisions of the CCDBG reauthorization to ensure that parents with challenging work schedules may select child care that meets both their economic needs and the developmental hopes they have for their children.


