

**Who Cares for Children in a Global
Crisis: A Glimpse Inside Suburban
Pennsylvania Daycare Centers**

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Daycare centers are responsible for shaping future generations but do not always get the recognition they deserve. Teachers in daycare centers specifically do not receive enough credit for the tough job they endure. The Coronavirus pandemic has only made daycare centers more stressful for everyone involved. Many centers had to close due to the pandemic and a tremendous amount of daycare employees were put on unemployment. Over 57.4 million people had to file unemployment by August 2020 due to the pandemic.¹ Unemployment rates are mirroring the great depression when many people lost their jobs. To bring some jobs back, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

created the Federal Writers Program. This program was part of the New Deal that gave jobs to unemployed writers. These jobs consisted of writers conducting oral histories to document the reality of the great depression. In these oral histories, the interviewer would ask questions regarding everyday life, their career, and their past. The FWP interviewed a diverse group of people, such as working-class individuals and former slaves, so different perspectives could be heard. This paper draws on the Federal Writer Program's use of oral histories to document people's lives. Oral histories were conducted with daycare employees, inspired by the FWP, to capture the reality for people working in this industry during a pandemic.

The Coronavirus pandemic has taken a toll on almost every aspect of life, changing it in one way or another. The Daycare industry is just one aspect that has

¹Jack Kelly, "Jobless Claims: 57.4 Million Americans Have Sought Unemployment Benefits Since Mid-

March-Over 1 Million People Filed Last Week," *Forbes*, (August 20, 2020).

been forced to adapt quickly in these unprecedented times. Daycare centers are a huge part of many children's lives. This is the place where they learn their first social skills, basic academic skills, potty training, sharing, and so many other life skills. Before the pandemic, daycare centers were full of play time and creativity. Students would run through the doors with grins to go play with their friends, but now many students are shaken with anxiety and less motivated to play with their friends due to social distancing policies. Although daycare centers are responsible for teaching children their beginning social and academic skills, they are significantly overlooked, and the impacts of COVID-19 have only caused more financial and emotional distress for everyone involved.

The Coronavirus pandemic had been a culture shock to everyone around the

world. COVID-19 is a fatal respiratory virus with side effects similar to the flu, but with some odd symptoms such a loss of taste and smell. It is an antigenic shift mutation, which is similar to the Swine Flu outbreak in 2009. This means that the virus mutated so fast that no one was able to build up an immunity to it, unlike the flu which is an antigenic drift that gradually mutates. By April 10, 2021, over 31 million cases have been reported and over 550 million deaths in just the United States.² A vaccine has started to be distributed by manufacturers such as Modera, Pfizer, and Johnson and Johnson. Although the Johnson and Johnson vaccine was halted for some time due to unusual cases of blood clots, the CDC has cleared the vaccine as safe to keep being administered. As of April 10, 2021, over 65 million Americans have been vaccinated and this number is continuing to climb as more

²The New York Times, "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," The New York Times, (March 03, 2020).

people become eligible for the vaccine.³ The date of the first case in the United States is hard to pinpoint, but in March 2020, many government officials started to call for lockdowns as the anxiety around the virus grew. Pennsylvania's Governor, Tom Wolf, called for a lockdown on March 16, 2020 for all 67 counties in the commonwealth.⁴ This was only supposed to last 14 days at first, but was extended as the virus continued to spread and continued to pose a threat to hospitals. Under this mandated closure all non-essential businesses were shut down, such as retail shops, dining in restaurants, fitness centers, schools k-12, and daycare centers. During interviews with daycare employees, many recalled the exact moment they got the notification their job was going to close. Vanessa, a 21-year-old daycare employee from Delaware County, vividly

remembered when her boss notified her about the closure. Vanessa recalls,

When I first heard about the shutdown a kid actually was staying late, so had just closed the Center and I was sitting in my car. And then that's when my director texted my work group chat that we were going to have the initial two weeks shut down. And I hate to say it now, but when I first heard about the shutdown I kind of got a little excited, I was like well it's a break from reality. And I had spring break and it was great and then it slowly just turned into isolation, the worst part of my whole entire life. But I am ashamed to say I was excited for the break from all the chaos at the Center that comes with the job.⁵

This became a stressful time for many employees, frantically searching for other alternatives since their job was temporarily closing. Along with Vanessa, many other daycare employees across the state lost their major source of income.

Many industries were impacted financially by this decision to close down all non-essential businesses. Daycare centers in particular took a huge hit since they were mandated to be closed for months.

According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, more

³Anderson, Katie Adams and Maia. "States Ranked by Percentage of Population Vaccinated: April 10." Becker's Hospital Review.

⁴"Gov. Wolf Puts Statewide COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts in Effect, Stresses Need for Every

Pennsylvanian to Take Action to Stop the Spread," Governor Tom Wolf, (March 17, 2020).

⁵Sara Ott, Interview with Vanessa Vincollato, February 22, 2021.

than 260 licensed childcare providers in Pennsylvania have closed due to the pandemic since March 2020.⁶ The government did give out grants to centers to help combat these closures, but unfortunately not all could be saved. The loss of clients, difficulty finding reliable workers, paying for cleaning supplies, and the loss of profits while the center was closed were all reasons given by daycare owners that had had to close their doors due to COVID-19.⁷ Many clients had to find new alternatives while the mandated closure kept daycares temporarily shut down so when the center reopened, many clients were not signing back up. Unemployment incentives and the fear of working during a pandemic could have deterred people from applying to daycare centers, leaving owners with no choice but to close from lack of staff.

⁶Ed Mahon of Spotlight PA, "Hundreds of Pa. Child-care Centers Have Closed, and Some Fear It Will Get Worse," <https://www.inquirer.com>, (October 08, 2020).

The new cleaning practices also come with a financial burden that could cause some problems, especially due to price gouging on products such as hand sanitizer and Lysol wipes. Shannon, a 23-year-old Widener University graduate, explained the new precautions her daycare center is taking to help combat the spread of COVID-19.

We take temperatures three times a day, so once at the door, once like right before lunchtime, and then after they wake up from nap and if any kids have a high temperature. If it goes over 100.4, we immediately call their parents and we tell them to come pick them up. But they like tricked out day care for the precautions, so all of the toilets automatically flushed now, we have automatic sinks and in most of the classrooms we have plexiglass to separate the kids, but I mean beyond that it's kind of hard, especially with the younger kids, enforcing wearing the masks.⁸

These were all expenses that centers had to pay to follow CDC guidelines and please parents so they felt safe sending their child into the building during a pandemic. Vanessa, a daycare teacher from a different

⁷IBID.

⁸Sara Ott, Interview with Shannon Noelle via Zoom, February 28, 2021.

center shared some similarities to Shannon's experiences with the new safety precautions.

Vanessa said that,

We do what we call a three-point checkmark and it's a system where we get their temperature and make sure it's at an average set point. We do another one, the second one around lunchtime, make sure that you know the temperature is still the same, and then we do one around 3:30 right before pickup starts up. So that we're handing the child back you know the same temperature that they were. We cannot handout medications either anymore, that is a no-no. So, if your babies were teething with like a fever can't come in, if you have a fever, you're not allowed just really strict all kids above age of three have to wear a mask all day, which is a little hard for them, but it's just what we do there's so much more hands enticing stations now.⁹

Both employees walked back into centers that were drastically changed physically, but also had to adapt to a brand-new routine to keep all the children safe.

The words "essential" and "nonessential" were thrown around a lot during the beginning of the pandemic to differentiate which businesses would have to close and those that would be allowed to

remain open. This is where many believe the government did not handle the pandemic very professionally and this caused a lot of distress for many Americans that lost their major source of income. Unemployment became a catastrophe during the pandemic since millions of people were abruptly put out of work to weaken the spread of COVID-19. Governor Wolf mandated the closure of non-essential businesses on March 16 2020, and by March 28, 2020, 6.9 million people had already filed unemployment nationwide.¹⁰ People were scared and frustrated about what was going to happen since no one is familiar with how to handle a pandemic. This was a massive shock to many people who did not have savings to pay their rent, grocery bills, medical bills, and many more expenses. Since people were flocking to file unemployment, the Unemployment centers

⁹Sara Ott, Interview with Vanessa Vincollato viz Zoom, February 22, 2021.

¹⁰Christian Hetrick, "Another 2.4 Million Americans Filed for Unemployment, but Claims Dropped in Pa.

as Some Counties Reopened," <https://www.inquirer.com>, (May 22, 2020).

were overworked which resulted in delay of payments for millions of people without jobs. Vanessa, a daycare teacher, explained how she dealt with unemployment.

My experience was actually really stressful. It took close to 13 weeks for me to receive any type of payment and I wasn't getting paid for my job. A lot of stress came from that like if I was doing it right, because I know you can get in trouble if you fill it out wrong and that was going through my head and. Then it finally did come in, so that was good, but I still do know people who haven't received full payment yet from their financial aid or unemployment, and it was crazy but yeah it was just a stressful hard time but thankfully I got it on the end.¹¹

Even on unemployment, if approved, many people would still be making 40% less than their usual pay, which was devastating for working class Americans with no back up savings to pay monthly expenses. The government stepped in to help these people on unemployment and gave an extra \$600 a week aid to people filing due to COVID-19 shutdowns. This extra stimulus each week even had some people making more money than they did before the shutdown. Aliyah, a

21-year-old Pre-K teacher, recalls her positive experience with unemployment.

I actually did have a really good experience, one that I just didn't fully understand. I'm very happy with the income that I received from unemployment, I didn't necessarily understand it, because I didn't even make that much money working full time at the daycare. Not necessarily my personal experience, but my mom, for example, my mom makes double what I do which is still not enough to survive in this world today. She was working part time, she was working six hours a day, three days a week and then she went to work, two days a week for five hours so she went down to working 10 hours a week. They denied her partial unemployment because she made too much in an hour, a single mother of five kids. I went back to the daycare. I was working 25 hours a week, I was getting like 48 hours, maybe 50 hours on a paycheck and they were denying me too. They denied both of us so that was a little confusing for me.¹²

Aliyah was grateful for the stimulus added to her unemployment payments but was unsure as to why she was making so much money. The government passed the CARES Act which added an extra \$600 to each week's payment, called the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program. They did this to compensate unemployed workers since the usual unemployment payment is significantly

¹¹Sara Ott, Interview with Vanessa Vincollato via Zoom, February 22, 2021.

¹²Sara Ott, Interview with Aliyah Peterson via Zoom, April 6, 2021.

below a person's usual wages. Aliyah explains how this extra money from the CARES Act actually made her make more money than she did before the pandemic, which surprised her. There were other professions laid off during the pandemic that were also making more than on unemployment then than had before working full time. Other professions that worked through the whole pandemic did not receive the same compensation. Stimulus checks were issued for all qualifying citizens but many working Americans that risked their health to work during the pandemic did not even receive hazard pay. This is the inconsistency that many Americans felt was unfair. Unemployment was also selective and unfair, as Aliyah points out the example of her mother of five that was cut down to only working ten hours a week but still did not qualify for partial unemployment. As of April 17, 2021, the extra \$600 a week stimulus tied to unemployment benefit

payments has been revoked to \$300 a week even though many businesses have still not been reopened leaving millions to still rely on these benefits.

The reopening phases of daycare centers were slightly chaotic for everyone involved. Center owners had to wait for permission from the government to reopen their doors. Some centers were allowed to stay open during the pandemic to serve essential workers, but this went to many franchised daycare businesses since they had the resources to quickly adapt to CDC and social distancing guidelines. Those that had to shut down had to follow the rollout of phases. In Pennsylvania, daycare centers were closed during the red phase. In the beginning of the pandemic, this phase was only supposed to last two weeks but as hospitals began to fill and cases skyrocketed, Pennsylvania remained in the red phase for much longer. The move into the yellow phase was different for many

counties in Pennsylvania. On May 22, 2020, 49 counties were allowed to move into the yellow phase while 12 counties still had to remain in the red phase, this included Philadelphia.¹³ It took until June 5th for counties such as Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks, and Delaware county to finally transition into the yellow phase which allowed certain businesses to start reopening.¹⁴ There was a lot of confusion about opening due to the differences between daycare centers and public schools. Public schools had to remain closed and stay virtual, but daycare centers were allowed to reopen. Shannon, a toddler daycare teacher, explains her frustration surrounding this topic.

I cannot understand why a daycare Center that has small children who cannot keep a mask on and don't know how to wash their hands can be open, but a school couldn't be? I still don't understand that it was really frustrating, maybe that was also me just like not wanting to go back to work. But, no, I still to this day don't completely understand that part of how a daycare could open, but a

school cannot. You tell like seven-year-old whoever 'hey you gotta wear a mask and you're going to have to wash your hands a lot more often', he's going to understand a lot more than like a two-year-old in my class who is flinging his mask across the room. It never made sense to me and then, as we mentioned earlier, referring to Governor Wolf He keeps saying how he recognizes how important childcare workers are but he's not taking any action so that frustrates me. It's just scary because you know that we've had a couple of cases here. It makes you feel really on edge, so I just think there needs to be more recognition for what we're doing because we don't get hazard pay. Even, not even in a pandemic like outside of a pandemic like we do a lot and it's not really recognized. And there's people like me and Casey who were there full time but then there's people where this is their career and we don't even have benefits or retirement plans.¹⁵

This reopening phase was stressful and chaotic to everyone involved including students, teachers, and parents. As Shannon explained, it wasn't fair that daycare centers were reopening but public schools were still remaining completely online. Many employees felt that it was unsafe to reopen since children cannot properly wear masks and risk spreading the disease to teachers. Many daycare employees, along with many other workers, were forced to work during

¹³"Gov. Wolf: 12 More Counties to Move to Yellow Phase on May 22," Governor Tom Wolf, (May 21, 2020).

¹⁴"Governor Wolf Announces Delaware County's Move to Yellow Phase Proposed for June

5," Governor Wolf Announces Delaware County's Move to Yellow Phase Proposed for June 5 - Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

¹⁵Sara Ott, Interview with Shannon Noelle via Zoom, February 28, 2021.

this pandemic with no hazard pay while encouraging situations involving high chances of exposure.

Mental health is a crucial factor that the COVID-19 pandemic hit hard. Many people experienced rough patches with their mental health due to the isolation of the pandemic, fear, anxiety, and many other factors brought on by the pandemic. Almost everyone involved in daycare centers had their routine completely changed because of this disease. An abrupt change such as this pandemic that uprooted people from their social lives to quarantine had tremendous impacts on people's mental health. Daycare employees talked about their experiences with mental health as they tried to stay positive during the pandemic. Aliyah said,

I think that break was really good for my mental health because I was less stressed from work, but I definitely think at first it was like a really hard thing to process because I mean as human beings we're all often running all the time, so to go from that to literally doing everything to nothing. I got bored and went shopping at CVS 5 times a day in the beginning and I couldn't even tell you what for I just had to leave my house.¹⁶

¹⁶Sara Ott, Interview with Aliyah Peterson via Zoom, April 6, 2021.

Her insight paints a picture of how rough it was for some people to stay inside. Many people who suffered from mental disorders struggled harder during this pandemic than the average person. This teacher in particular suffers from ADHD and explained her struggles trying to stay inside her house for months. When centers opened back up, it did not mean all this stress, anxiety, and depression got swept away. It actually may have become more stressful for some people due to the chance of being exposed and having to adjust back into a schedule after months.

The mental health of children and their parents were also altered by the mandated closure. There are 11.8 million children that participated in daycare centers in 2019, and in 2020 most of these children were uprooted from their routine and had to adapt quickly to new care methods.¹⁷ This

¹⁷Marguerite Ward, "The Pandemic Is Set to Shutter 40% of US Childcare Centers - and It Could Prove

meant losing all their friends at the daycare they play with everyday and leaving a teacher who they spend more bonding time with than their own parents. Many daycare employees are worried about the mental health of their students since they are so young living through a traumatic event. Casey, an infant caregiver at a daycare center, explains how she feels this pandemic may hurt her student's development.

I think it's definitely going to impact their mental health and development. I mean it depends on age, obviously, like how it affects them more, but like babies right now are so stranger danger they do not like being held by other people who aren't their parents. It takes them a while to get used to us because they've been around their parents this entire time stuck in the house not being held by other family members, because they can't go around. when they get older, I feel like they're going to have germaphobia like they're definitely going to be washing their hands a lot more definitely using the hand sanitizer.¹⁸

As Casey points out, many of these children are being overwhelmed by stimulus since they did not have the exposure young. Normally, an infant is exposed to many

opportunities and people throughout their first year, but during a pandemic they did not experience any of that which could cause them to feel sensory overload to a scenario someone else may perceive as normal. Shannon, a toddler teacher, talks about how she thinks her students are handling this pandemic.

It makes me kind of sad I think they're getting a little too desensitized to it, some of the kids favorite game now is to play temperature so you'll walk into a classroom and --- walks around like this, and he has like a little like thing and he's pretending like he's taking everyone's temperatures and like it's cute but like it makes me kind of sad like he thinks that's a game. Also, it has been just under a year that they've been without their speech therapists. And --- who just started back, i've been talking to her mom about it and, like her speech, really is like you can see the difference she's doing so well. I feel so bad, like, I really do wonder how --- is since he couldn't see his speech therapist or his behavioral therapists.¹⁹

Shannon brings up the point that many of her students that need physical or occupational therapy missed out on almost a year of intervention. Many students are just starting back now and as Shannon points out many are improving drastically, but they

Catastrophic for the Careers of American Women," Business Insider, (July 30, 2020).

¹⁸ Sara Ott, Interview with Casey Orange via Zoom, March 15, 2021.

¹⁹Sara Ott, Interview with Shannon Noelle via Zoom, February 28, 2021.

still cannot make up that year that was lost. This ties into how many parents also suffered from the pandemic since they had to take on more roles than before while navigating their way through an unprecedented time. Many parents were moved to virtual work, but their children's centers were closed forcing them to simultaneously be a caregiver and an employee.

Daycare centers are just one of the many industries that has suffered from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Mandated closures forced centers to shut their doors leaving employees, students, and parents lost. This turn in routine was rough for everyone involved. Back in the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt started the Federal Writer Project to give writers jobs that were unemployed due to the Great Depression. The Federal Writers project allowed writers to jump back into their careers by having them interview normal Americans to

document their lives during the great depression and other historical occurrences that people live through. This project draws on the Federal Writers Project for inspiration by using the same method of documenting the voices of daycare employees working through the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has flipped so many lives around and these oral histories gathered allow the voices of this small, yet crucial industry be heard. This industry has been impacted through political, social, and economic factors. Mandated closures forced centers to close their doors causing many employees to rely on unemployment and centers having to spend a tremendous amount of money on new cleaning supplies and methods. Mental health is one of the hidden consequences of this pandemic since routines were drastically interrupted and quarantine forced people into isolation causing adults and children to feel more depression and anxiety. This pandemic may have not had many benefits,

but one positive note is that Governor Wolf has acknowledged how crucial daycare centers are to improving the economy of Pennsylvania. President Joe Biden has also made comments about tackling the daycare industry by expanding the tax credit and has even foreshadowed his stance on universal pre-kindergarten. This conversation will hopefully bring more funding to daycare centers to benefit students and employees that put their lives into this profession.

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