

CHILDCARE FOR CHILDCARE WORKERS

A Watauga County Initiative | Boone Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation | 2025

<p>\$75,000+ Total funds raised & distributed</p>	<p>18 Childcare workers assisted with tuition aid</p>	<p>22 Children covered by tuition assistance</p>	<p>100% of licensed centers & afterschool programs supported</p>
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The Problem: Watauga County’s Childcare Crisis

The 2024 Watauga County Childcare Study — produced by Dancy Research and Appalachian State University with input from 731+ stakeholders — confirmed a genuine crisis: too few seats, underpaid workers, and providers operating on razor-thin margins.

WATAUGA COUNTY BY THE NUMBERS — 2024 Childcare Study	
579	additional licensed childcare seats needed for children birth–5 years
1,672	additional after-school and out-of-school program seats needed
\$30,600	average annual pay for a childcare worker in Watauga County
64%	of parents said finding childcare in Watauga County was “Very Difficult”
76%	of employers reported observing childcare-related workforce challenges

Source: Watauga County Childcare Study, Dancy Research / Appalachian State University, April 2024

The median monthly childcare cost in Watauga County is \$900. For a worker earning \$30,600, one child in care consumes roughly 35% of gross income — a painful paradox the BACCF set out to address. The study explicitly recommended subsidized childcare for childcare workers, a recommendation the Foundation acted on just one year later.

The NC Context

In March 2025, Governor Stein’s NC Task Force on Child Care and Early Education identified childcare for childcare workers as a statewide legislative priority. The Task Force’s December 2025 Year-End Report specifically cited the BACCF’s Watauga County pilot as a proof-of-concept for all 100 NC counties. Meanwhile, NC’s Child Care Stabilization Grants ended in March 2025; by October, 280 licensed providers had closed statewide. The urgency in Watauga County was real.

Phase One: Childcare for Childcare Workers

In August 2025, the BACCF launched an October campaign to fund one month of childcare tuition for childcare workers who had their own children in licensed care. A kick-off event at Cobo Sushi and Bistro in Boone launched the effort publicly, anchored by a \$10,000 lead gift from James Milner of Appalachian Commercial Real Estate. Licensed centers applied on behalf of qualifying staff through a streamlined application; tuition assistance averaged \$684 per child. The pilot reached 18 childcare employees and covered 22 children. The NC Task Force called the response “overwhelmingly positive.” Three employees with multiple children in care were especially impacted — one received \$1,875 covering one month of care for her three children. The campaign also revealed that Watauga County has lost six in-home childcare centers over the prior 18 months, underscoring the vulnerability of family childcare homes.

Phase Two: Emergency Stabilization

On October 1, 2025, a 43-day federal shutdown — the longest in U.S. history — disrupted subsidy payments and DSS checks to Watauga County providers, threatening closures across the county. Missy Harrill, owner of Foscoe Companies, responded with a \$50,000 gift to the BACCF’s Early Childcare and Development Fund. Combined with existing foundation reserves, this enabled \$62,500 in direct stabilization grants distributed to every licensed childcare center, Pre-K program, and afterschool program in Watauga County. One center received their check on a Monday and was able to make payroll two days later. Family childcare homes received priority given their tightest margins.

“I was stunned to learn that childcare centers in our area serve the families of over 700 local businesses. Without this precious resource, our local economy takes a dramatic hit.”

— Missy Harrill, Owner, Foscoe Companies

Why This Matters

ExcelNC, a business-led initiative focusing on highlighting the economic importance of childcare in North Carolina, reported that Watauga County loses \$11.5 million in economic activity and \$1 million in local government revenue due to the current childcare crisis.

Childcare is economic infrastructure — not a social service issue. The BACCF’s 2025 initiative demonstrated three things at once: local private philanthropy can move faster than government; a childcare for childcare workers program is administratively feasible with strong participant response; and chambers of commerce are uniquely positioned to frame childcare as an economic development issue and mobilize business donors around it.

“Supporting the workforce behind our workforce has been a staple priority of the Foundation since its inception.”

— David Jackson, President/CEO, Boone Area Chamber of Commerce

A Replicable Model

A clear blueprint for chambers and community foundations across NC:

STEP 1	Identify a lead donor and host a public launch event to build momentum
STEP 2	Partner with licensed centers to administer a simple staff application process
STEP 3	Distribute tuition assistance averaging \$684/child to qualifying workers
STEP 4	Collect impact data and share outcomes with state legislators and advocates

A Look Ahead

- Sustain and expand the annual Childcare for Childcare Workers tuition campaign, extending reach to in-home childcare providers
- Build a rapid-response stabilization reserve within the Early Childcare and Development Fund for future crises
- Engage more local employers as donors by connecting childcare access to their own workforce pipeline
- Share Watauga County’s outcomes with the NC Task Force and General Assembly to advance statewide legislation

The BACCF staff and board are already planning a Fall 2026 initiative. The childcare workforce deserves to be supported the same way it supports everyone else: with consistency, respect, and genuine investment. That is what the BACCF committed to in 2025 — and what will carry this work forward.

Support This Work

To give to the Early Childhood and Education Fund or to learn more about these initiatives, please contact:

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