

NEWS RELEASE

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One Place and Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce Release Child Care & Early Education Task Force Interim Report

Report finds just one licensed child care slot for every five Onslow County families who need one, with an estimated annual economic impact of up to \$301 million

JACKSONVILLE, N.C. — [September 30, 2026] — One Place and the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce today released the Interim Report of their joint Child Care & Early Education Task Force. The report is a data-driven look at Onslow County's growing child care crisis and a roadmap for community action.

The Task Force launched in October 2025 through a deliberate, strategic partnership between One Place and the Chamber. From the outset, the two organizations recognized that child care is not only a family issue but a workforce and economic development issue. That shared conviction shaped the Task Force's cross-sector approach. It brought together leaders from education, business, local government, the military, faith and nonprofit organizations, and child care providers.

"We knew from day one that the Chamber was the right partner for this work," said Dawn Rochelle, Chief Executive Officer of One Place. "Child care is infrastructure. When families can't find care, parents can't work, employers can't hire, and our economy can't grow. Partnering with the business community was a strategic choice, because solving this crisis requires everyone at the table."

A WIDENING GAP

Onslow County is home to 16,703 children under age 5, but licensed child care capacity stands at just 4,930 slots. That leaves an estimated gap of 9,338 and means five families compete for every available slot. Since 2018, the number of licensed child care sites in Onslow County has fallen 27.3%, compared with 17.3% statewide. When the Task Force launched, the county had 60 licensed facilities. By the time findings were presented to the community, four more had closed.

The crisis is driven largely by a shortage of early educators. Onslow County's early education workforce has declined 10.3% since 2018, while statewide levels grew 1.9%. Local early educators earn an average of \$13.62 per hour, well below retail (\$17.37) and fast food (\$19.84) wages. The staffing shortage has left many centers with "ghost classrooms," which are physical classrooms that sit empty because there is not enough staff to operate them.

The cost to families is steep. Infant care in Onslow County can exceed \$12,000 per year, more than in-state public university tuition. The Task Force estimates the child care shortage has an economic impact of \$197.7 million to \$301.3 million annually on Onslow County.

"Employers told us plainly that child care affects hiring, retention, attendance, and day-to-day operations," said Laurette Leagon, President of the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce. "This is a business issue, and the Chamber is committed to working alongside One Place to find practical solutions that strengthen our workforce and our economy."

GROUNDING IN COMMUNITY VOICES

The Task Force's findings come from four community surveys, frontline roundtable discussions with administrators, educators, and parents, and a Child Care Economic Summit held February 3, 2026, in collaboration with ExCEL NC. Of 127 parents surveyed, 110 described the local child care shortage as a "major crisis" or "significant problem." Among child care providers, 75% cited low wages as the top barrier to maintaining a stable workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The report outlines four priority areas:

- **Expand Child Care Capacity.** This includes an immediate investment in an On-Demand Child Care Substitute Pool to keep classrooms open when teachers are out.
- **Strengthen the Workforce.** The report calls for building the educator pipeline through Apprenticeships, Child Care Academies, and for paying worthy wages to retain educators.
- **Improve Family Access.** The report recommends shared funding models such as Duo-Share, Tri-Share, and Quad-Share, which combine state, local, and employer investment.
- **Strengthen Partnerships.** The Task Force will work with businesses, providers, government, and civic groups to show how employers can offer child care benefits.

The work continues. In the months ahead, the Task Force will continue to meet and explore how to put these recommendations into practice, while studying other solutions that are working elsewhere in North Carolina. Community input and collaboration will remain at the center of this effort as partners across Onslow County bring new ideas and solutions to the table. The shared goal is to find what works for Onslow County to improve access to affordable child care while stabilizing and growing the early childhood workforce.

ABOUT ONE PLACE

Since June 1998, One Place has connected Onslow County children and families facing challenges to programs and resources that provide opportunity and hope. Guided by its mission to Strengthen Children, Connect Families, and End Child Abuse, One Place believes that when children feel safe, families feel supported, and educators feel valued, entire communities grow stronger. One Place is a partner in North Carolina's Smart Start network and co-leads the Child Care & Early Education Task Force with the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce. One Place is where care is connected, where families don't have to navigate systems alone, and where hope begins. Learn more at www.oneplaceonslow.org.

ABOUT THE JACKSONVILLE ONSLOW CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

For more than 80 years, the Jacksonville Onslow Chamber of Commerce has championed the business community of Jacksonville and Onslow County. Its mission is to be the voice of business in collaborative partnerships that work to build and enhance a healthy business climate and vibrant quality of life. Known as the Chamber of Collaboration, it connects business, military, and community. It is home to the oldest military affairs committee among Marine Corps host communities, and the Chamber advocates locally, in Raleigh, and Washington, D.C. for the benefit of its members. The Chamber's co-leadership of the Child Care & Early Education Task Force with One Place reflects its vision to be a model in building partnerships that encourage business growth and sustainable community development. Learn more at jacksonvilleonline.org.

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