

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Hearing: Supporting Working Families: State-Led Child Care Solutions
Tuesday, September 1, 2026
Room 2175, Rayburn House Office Building; 10:15 a.m.

Written Testimony of Jude White, Assistant Commissioner for Child Care & Community Services, Tennessee Department of Human Services

Good morning Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and talk about Tennessee's innovations in child care. I am Jude White, Assistant Commissioner for Child Care and Community Services for the Tennessee Department of Human Services.

At TDHS, we understand the vital importance of healthy, safe, and developmentally rich childcare and its impact on our communities. We know that access to quality child care is critical for parents to be able to fully participate in the workforce. I am incredibly proud to represent the coalition of Tennesseans who recognize the central role child care plays in our communities and who have contributed their time, expertise, creativity, and private investments toward growing sustainability and accessibility of child care in Tennessee. We recognize that government alone is not the answer and as responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars, we continuously work to collaborate and leverage resources to maximize impact.

In Tennessee, we have worked over the past decade to modernize our child care regulatory landscape. We modernized our technology, literally going from paper forms to a highly sophisticated system that brought this work into the 21st century. These system changes are decreasing the administrative burden for parents, providers, and the broader community. Alongside our technology improvements, we changed our program and staffing structure, completely redesigning our Quality Rating Improvement System to support our goals of continuous improvement for providers and transparency for parents to help them make informed decisions about where to send their child. We looked at rules and regulations, both at the federal and the state level, and worked with providers to rewrite our regulations to, first, protect children, but also to remove red-tape. For example, we have worked with our state fire marshal's office to streamline inspections, and we're working with a number of localities to address zoning and codes limitations.

One of the most substantial results of our program and staff restructuring was launch of our pre-licensure unit in 2021. This unit helps potential child care providers navigate the licensing process. We meet the provider where they are and help them build capacity to support their community. We know one size doesn't fit all. The pre-licensure

unit is a group of solution-oriented, problem solving individuals and I'm proud of their innovative ideas and the relationships they have built across the state. Opening a child care agency is a substantial commitment financially and emotionally. Newly licensed child care agencies consistently tell us how supported they have felt navigating the steps toward licensure and reaching their goal to provide quality care for children. Once the pre-licensure process is complete, our team then does a soft handoff to our licensing consultants, who support continued compliance. Over the last 5 years, the pre-licensure unit has opened over 44,000 child care slots across the state. And they're still going.

Another duty of our pre-licensure unit is to engage TN employers to invest in their workforce through innovative child care strategies. I was able to go back and review previous hearings and understand you've discussed employers' role in child care. In Tennessee, we have been actively partnering with businesses to grow child care capacity, since 2018. We are grateful to our state legislature for allocating \$45 million in a 3-year pilot to establish or make improvements to child care, including new construction. We've supported the banking industry, the hospital industry, local school districts, and even the Department of Energy by granting funds for private employers and child care agencies to partner to create sustainable child care facilities that meet their employee's needs.

We also recognize in Tennessee that child care workers are the backbone of this industry. We are lucky that Tennessee has been on the front lines, participating in the nationally-recognized WAGE\$ program since 2016. This program offers a salary supplement to child care workers who commit to professional development and stability of their employment. We are also proud that TDHS and the Lee administration led the charge to invest an additional \$7 million of state dollars to raise the eligibility of workers able to receive the salary supplement. With this program, we have proven lower turnover rates, cutting administrative burden for providers, and promoting continuity of care for kids.

Additionally, we are very proud that TDHS received an additional \$5 million state dollars invested in our Smart Steps program, or what you may know as our certificate subsidy program. This program is wonderful, but we did not want to see families penalized when something good happens: a promotion, a marriage, a pay increase! Without this investment, families would be required to lose their child care payment assistance when they cross the 85th percentile of state median income. Instead, now, we're not penalizing those families but are ACTUALLY encouraging people to grow their capacity and reduce dependency.

Government cannot do this alone, but government can help by promoting innovative strategies that allow public and private dollars to be spent in the most impactful way. We're using our data, our experience, and our partnerships to ensure that we are investing in policies that are promoting long-term, sustainable child care that meets the needs of Tennessee families and employers.