

## Tackling the Childcare Crisis in the Lehigh Valley: A Call to Action

On a crisp September morning, 135 community leaders, business executives, parents, and elected officials gathered at Homewood Suites in Center Valley, Pa, to tackle one of the most pressing issues facing the Lehigh Valley—early childhood education and childcare. The breakfast meeting, co-hosted by the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation (LVCF), and the Early Childhood Education Action Committee, featured a panel of distinguished speakers. After a welcome from **Linda Sheftel**, Chair of LVCF's Board of Associates and an update from LVCF's President and CEO **Erika Riddle Petrozelli, CPA, CAP®**. The panel, moderated by the Chamber's **Tony Iannelli**, explored the multifaceted childcare crisis that affects the lives of families, workforce participation, and the regional economy.

The childcare crisis, has reached a critical point. As **Megan Briggs**, Vice President of Community Investments at LVCF, explained, "This is not just



about childcare—it's about creating a sustainable system that ensures children receive high-quality early education while allowing parents, especially mothers, to participate fully in the workforce." The event underscored the need for collaborative, systemic solutions that bring together private sector leadership, government action, and community support to create sustainable change.

### The Current Crisis: More Than Just an Economic Issue

The economic repercussions of inadequate childcare were brought to the forefront early in the discussion. **Charles Dinofrio**, President and CEO of Lehigh Valley Children's Centers, provided a sobering overview of the childcare landscape. "There are seven main issues we face: affordability, availability, quality, accessibility, low wages, labor intensity, and fragmentation," he said. "Childcare providers are struggling to stay afloat, while parents are either paying exorbitant amounts or opting out of the workforce entirely," Dinofrio pointed

to the alarming statistic that 26% of parents in the region have quit their jobs due to childcare challenges, and over 1,000 families in the Lehigh Valley are in need of quality childcare to return to work.

The impact on businesses is equally staggering. Employers across the region report workforce shortages as one of their primary challenges. "When you're paying as much for childcare as your paycheck, or you can't find care at all, you're not going to work," said **Congresswoman Susan Wild**, U.S. Representative for Pennsylvania's 7th Congressional District. Wild emphasized the long-term impact of these issues, both on families and the economy. "This is about the future of our workforce," she said, "and it's a problem we should have solved decades ago."



## The Parent Perspective: Struggles and Hope

The panel also featured the critical voice of parents directly impacted by the childcare crisis. **Melinda Saunders-Wood**, a married mother of three and registered nurse, shared her personal journey of finding affordable, quality childcare. “I’ve experienced it all,” she said. “I went through seven childcare facilities before I found one that met both my financial needs and my standards for quality care.” Her story resonated with many in the room, serving as a reminder that behind every statistic, there are real families struggling to balance work and care.



“Being a working mom is hard, but I was determined,” Saunders-Wood said. “Every parent deserves access to a facility where their child is more than just babysat—they deserve quality education and care.” Her story highlighted the importance of persistence but also emphasized the need for systemic change so that other parents don’t have to face the same uphill battle.

## A Call for Legislative and Community Action

**State Representative Peter Schwyer**, Majority Chairman of the Pennsylvania House Education Committee, reiterated the importance of legislative solutions. “We need universal preschool, living wages for childcare workers, and sustainable funding for childcare centers. These are not luxuries—they are necessities for a thriving economy,”



he said. Schwyer has been a strong advocate for the Child Care for Working Families Act, which he believes would provide the systemic support that families and providers need.

While legislative action is essential, the panelists agreed that government alone cannot solve this crisis. **Reverend Dr. Gregory Edwards**, President of Resurrected Community Development Corporation, offered a powerful call to shorten the distance between families and the childcare services they need. “We have to shorten the distance with the levels of bureaucracy that parents have to navigate,” Edwards said. “We need to provide high-quality, culturally relevant childcare, with staff and leadership who look like the children they serve.” His remarks underscored the importance of community-driven solutions that focus on inclusivity and accessibility.



Briggs echoed these sentiments, highlighting LVCF’s commitment to driving innovative solutions through regional partnerships. “We are planning to launch an impact investing loan strategy in the coming years for local childcare providers to help sustain their operations,” she said. “This is about more than just grantmaking; we are dedicated to designing systems that allow families and childcare providers to thrive.”

Businesses in the Lehigh Valley are also playing an essential role in addressing the crisis. Meeting sponsor representative PNC’s Regional President **Peter Danchak**, spoke about PNC’s \$500 million commitment to early childhood education. “It’s part of our DNA,” Danchak said. “We’ve been invested in this issue for 20 years because we know that the children of today are our future workforce, business owners, and community leaders.” Danchak emphasized the importance of getting children ready for life by providing support from birth to age five, a sentiment echoed by other business leaders in the room.

**Mayor Matt Tuerk** of Allentown also addressed the economic importance of childcare in his city. “Childcare is essential for the well-being of our families and the prosperity of our businesses,” Tuerk said. “We recently received a [\\$20 million Recompete federal grant](#) to tackle this issue, and we’re committed to finding long-term solutions that work for everyone.”

## A Path Forward in the Lehigh Valley and beyond

The panel closed with a message of hope and action. The childcare crisis is complex and deeply rooted, but with collaborative efforts, it can be addressed. As Reverend Edwards said, “Regardless of a child’s demographic, zip code, or census tract, their well-being affects us all. These are all of our children, and we must wrap our hands around them.”

Through partnerships like those fostered at this event, and with the continued support of donors and fundholders at LVCF, there is a path forward. It is a path that requires sustained investment, legislative change, and, most importantly, a collective commitment to ensuring that every child in the Lehigh Valley has access to the quality care and education they deserve.