

MAY 2025

# THE CITY PLAYBOOK FOR CHILD CARE



HOW GEORGIA CITIES CAN LEAD  
EFFORTS TO INCREASE THE SUPPLY OF  
CHILD CARE



PREPARED BY THE  
LOW INCOME  
INVESTMENT FUND





# BUILDING A STRONG COMMUNITY BY BUILDING CHILD CARE

Cities play an incredibly important role in building supply of child care and a robust child care sector benefits cities in multiple ways. In addition to providing children with opportunities for learning and development, child care supports economic growth, promotes workforce participation, and strengthens communities. In short, childcare is essential not just for the well-being of families but also for the overall prosperity and vibrancy of cities. It creates a ripple effect that positively impacts economic, social, and educational systems in cities.

The affordability, supply, and quality of early care and education is a well understood determinant of poverty alleviation and social equity. However, recent estimates indicate that Georgia families pay an average of \$11,000 per year for an infant to attend a licensed child care program, and costs grow exponentially for the youngest children and for families with multiple children under age five. Additionally, even for parents that can afford child care, demand outpaces supply.

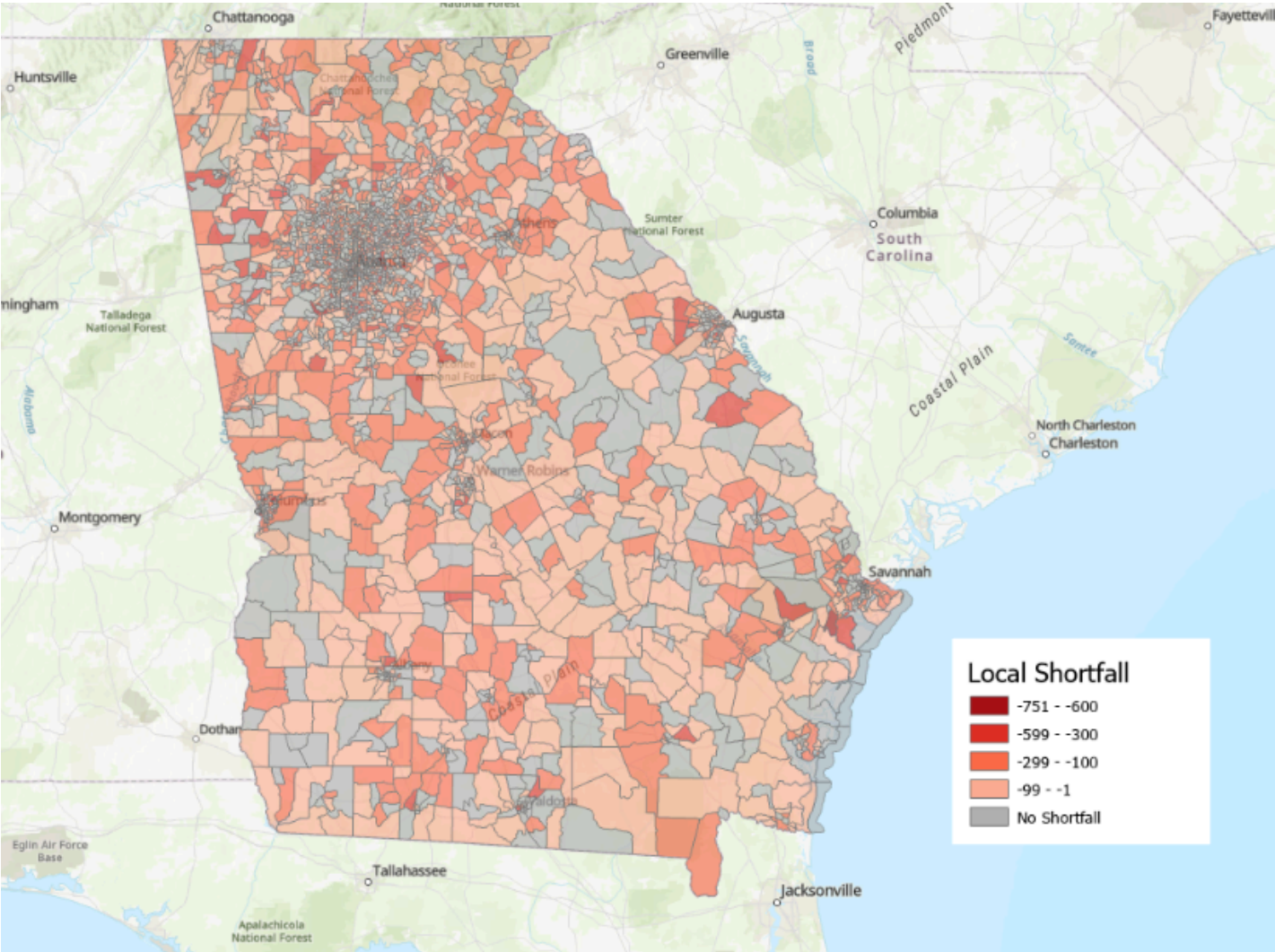
## WHAT DOES CHILD CARE LOOK LIKE IN GEORGIA?

Like in many states, the child care shortage in Georgia presents a significant challenge for families, the workforce, and the state's economy. Child care supply data from the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's (DECAL) child care licensing data portal, provides address-level information for all licensed child care facilities in the state, as well as the total amount of children programs are eligible to serve. Supply deficits are calculated as raw mismatches between the total number of children ages 0-5 and the total number of licensed child care seats in each zip code. This measurement is not a perfect descriptor of supply, actual parent need, or demand for licensed child care, but it can be helpful for assessing the overall availability and maximum potential need in a community.

2023 data showed that statewide there were around 5,344 licensed programs and a supply shortfall of over 4,000 child care spots, meaning demand heavily outweighs supply, leaving thousands of families without access to the early learning opportunities their children need to thrive. The maps shown in **Figures 1 to 5** demonstrate supply and demand for select MSAs in Georgia and show that supply and demand is highly regional with some MSAs showing a surplus with others showing significant shortfalls, contributing to the overall shortfall in the state.

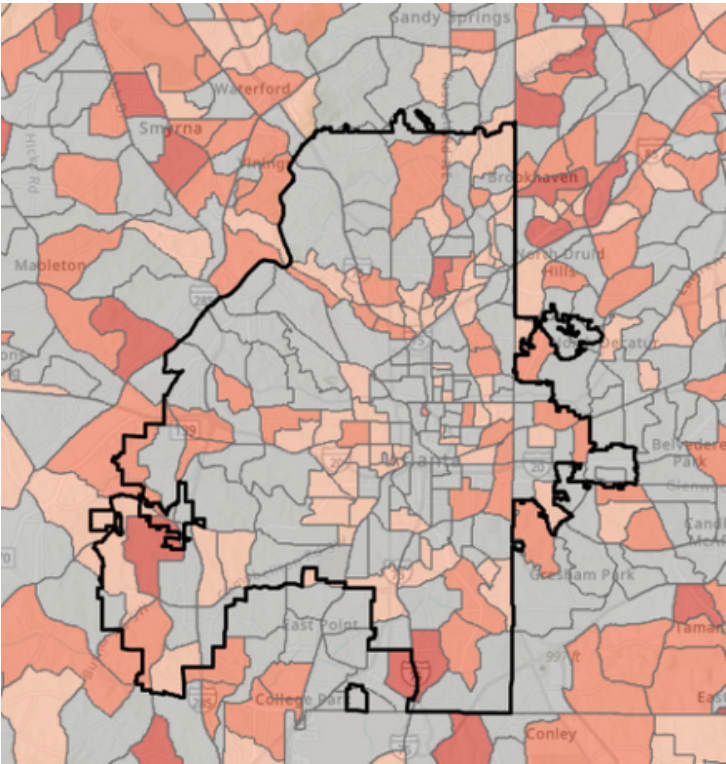


**Figure 1:** Local Shortfall of Child Care Spots in **Georgia** by Census Tract



*Local shortfall of over **4,000** child care spots*

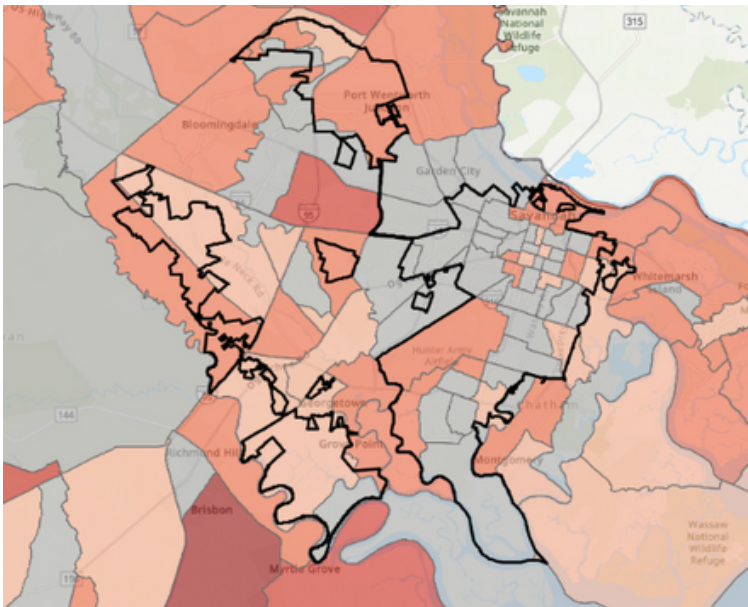
**Figure 2:** Local Shortfall of Child Care Spots in **Atlanta, GA** by Census Tract



*Local shortfall of over **10,000** child care spots*



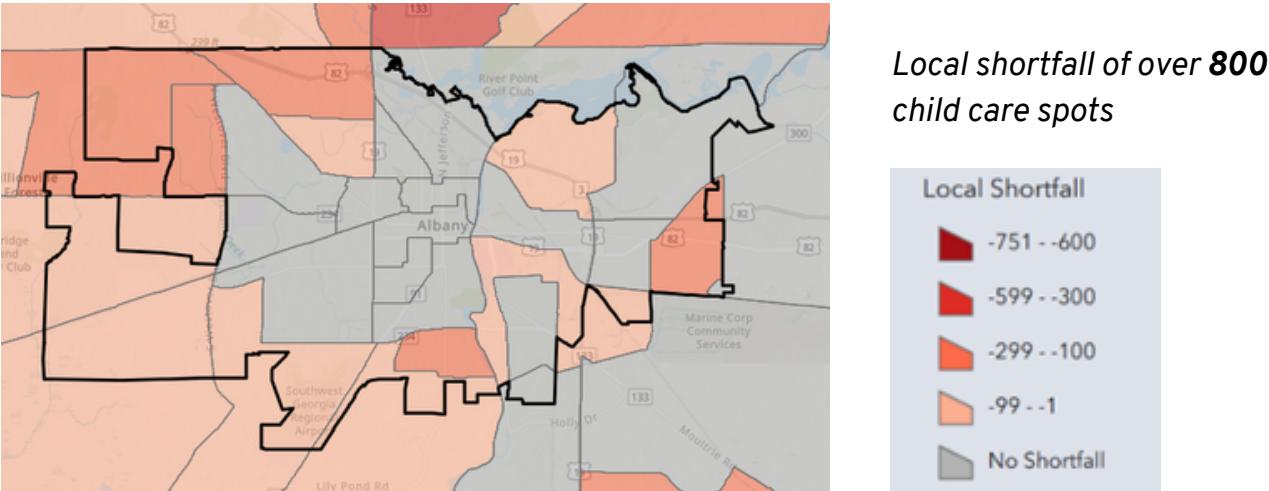
**Figure 3:** Local Shortfall for Child Care Spots in **Savannah, GA** by Census Tract



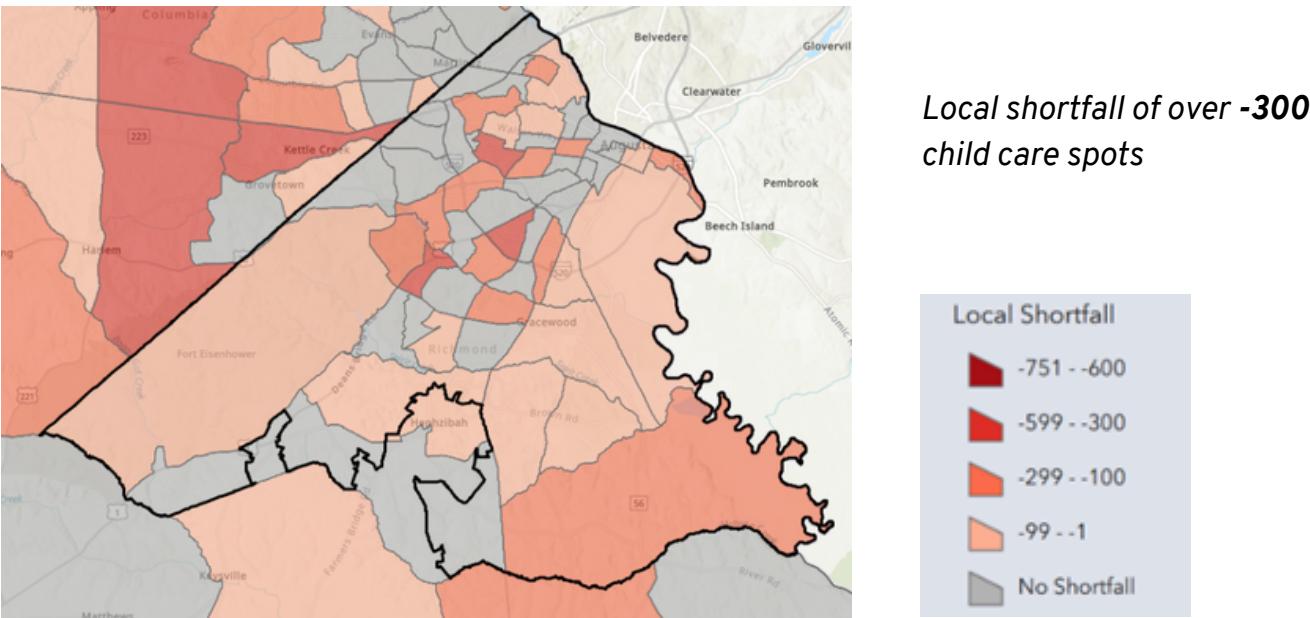
*Local shortfall of over **2,000** child care spots*



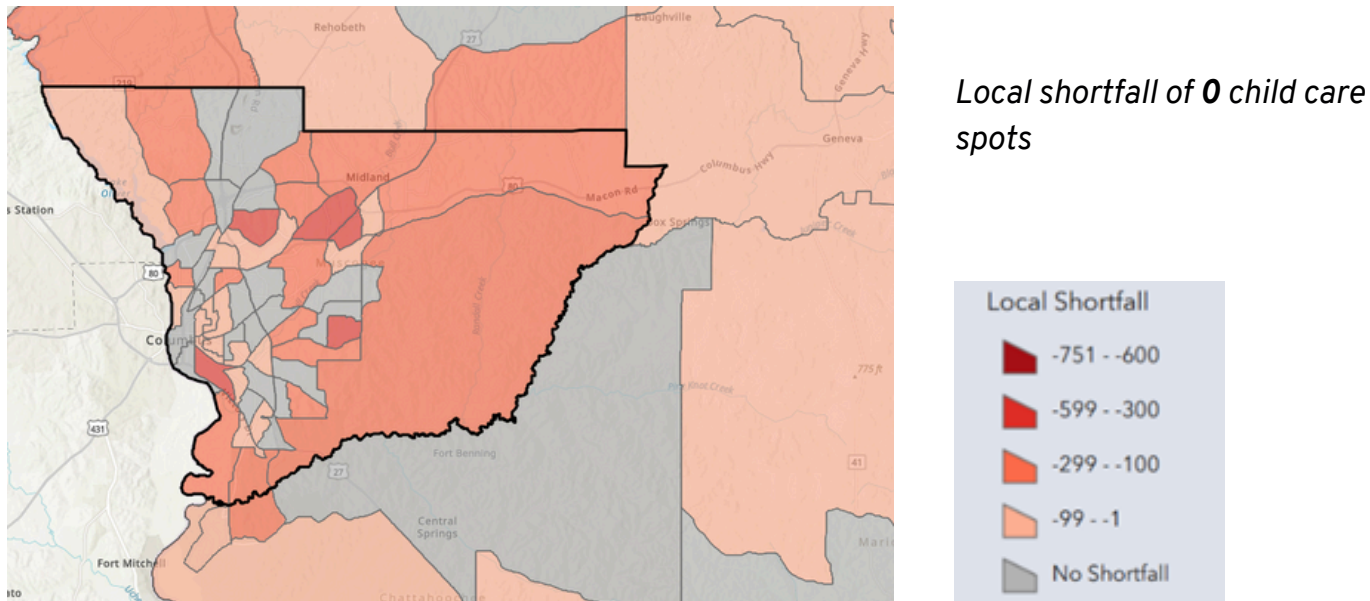
**Figure 4:** Local Shortfall of Child Care Spots in **Albany, GA** by Census Tract



**Figure 5:** Local Shortfall of Child Care Spots in **Augusta, GA** by Census Tract





**Figure 6:** Local Supply of Child Care Spots in **Columbus, GA** by Census Tract

These examples of local shortfalls can negatively impact the economic vitality of communities and look different in each.

While cities in Georgia don't directly fund child care, they play an important role in shaping the conditions that affect its affordability, availability, accessibility and quality. In Georgia, this role is especially critical as the state's population is among the youngest in the nation-- a trend driven in part by American demographic shifts toward Sun Belt cities that accelerated after 2020. While affordability and supply issues in the state reflect the well-documented challenges of operating and financing child care programs, they are also compounded by a lack of coordination across public agencies. The patchwork of distinct regulations and policies makes it difficult for child care providers to expand or improve quality, creating additional barriers to meeting the growing demand.

# EARLY CARE & EDUCATION BASICS

A healthy early care and education ecosystem requires a spectrum of program types and options for families, ranging from licensed centers and home-based providers to less formal family, friend, or neighbor care.

## *Types of care:*

### **Center-based**

- Programs that are licensed or otherwise authorized to provide child care services in a nonresidential setting. These could be community-based or school-based.
- Program capacities and ages served are mostly governed by physical space and staffing.

### **Licensed Family Child Care Learning Homes (FCCLH)**

- Takes place within the homes of individual providers and in Georgia, serves between 3 and 6 children under the age of 18 per home.
- These programs are regulated by the state child care licensing divisions

### **Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care**

- Typically refers to unlicensed child care provided by relatives, friends, etc. in the child's own home or in another home, often in unregulated settings





### *Child care operating programs and payments*

- **Head Start/Early Head Start** is federally funded. The money typically flows directly to programs with a child's eligibility based on federal poverty limits.
- **State child care assistance** (e.g., vouchers or "subsidy") uses federal funds, often with state matches. The subsidy typically follows families across programs that accept subsidy payments. Income eligibility is often based on state median income and defined by the state (e.g. up to 75% of state median income). Georgia's subsidy program is called Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) and provides subsidy vouchers for families earning up to 30% of the State Median Income (as of early 2025).
- **State or locally funded pre-K** can vary widely by jurisdiction, may be universal or targeted, and follows either families or programs. Georgia pre-K is an example of state-funded pre-K. Funded by the lottery, all 4-year-olds (by September 1) in Georgia are eligible to attend. Georgia pre-K programs can be operated by a school or a private provider.
- **Private pay** is the most common form of payment. It is made directly by parents to providers and is not governed or restricted by policy.

### *How cities typically engage with child care programs*

All licensed child care programs in Georgia are licensed and regulated by the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), but cities often have additional touchpoints through their local zoning, fees, and other local regulations that affect programs as they seek to open or expand.

**Cities can offer clear, step-by-step guidance** on how to open new child care centers so providers don't struggle to find the information they need. Lack of available information can result in unsuccessful child care expansion projects due to lack of understanding, red tape, and inconsistent bureaucratic processes. But when cities provide proactive guidance, it can be very helpful in reducing wait times and moving projects through the pipeline more quickly.

**For example, the city of Albany** created a document with information on the steps required to open a child care center. The document provides answers to frequently asked questions, such as “What type of day care operations are allowed in Albany and Dougherty County?” and “Are there any licenses or permits required and are there any applicable fees?” The document also provides the process and contact information for child care providers who are interested in opening a new child care center. The steps include:

1. Contact information for the Department of Planning and Development to assist with zoning information, the average zoning approval timeframe, fire safety pre-inspection, and contact information for the Albany Fire Department.
2. How to prepare and apply for an Occupational Tax Certificate (OTC) (business license).
3. Contact information for certificate of occupancy (CO) initial, re-inspection, and final inspection.
4. Steps required for issuing and obtaining an OTC and CO.

Each city can provide a guide like this that delineates its own processes, making it easier for child care providers to navigate the system.



### *Where can I find more information about child care supply in my city?*

#### **Support Organizations:**

Multiple state and regional support organizations are able to help you get more information on child care supply, connect with local providers, and find technical assistance.

- DECAL regional specialists
- CCR&Rs
- GEEARS

#### **Data:**

Relevant datasets and dashboards to help cities find more information on child care supply.

- DECAL data export
- GEEARS dashboard
- LIIF cities cohort

### *What can my city do to help build and enhance the supply of child care?*

Cities can take advantage of different functions to support building the supply of child care including land use and zoning, housing policy, and economic development.





## LAND USE & ZONING

Cities have the power to simplify the process of opening new child care centers and homes as well as making renovations easier through thoughtful land use and zoning policies. By easing planning processes – for example by streamlining application procedures, reducing or waiving fees, and dedicating city staff to support child care providers in understanding zoning regulations – cities can remove key barriers to opening and operating child care facilities, which can support building the supply of child care. Cities can encourage the development of child care centers and family child care learning homes in all zones where families live, work, and travel. Allowing child care in residential, mixed-use, and transit-accessible areas ensures that families can more easily access care close to home or along daily commutes.

For example, because planning and permitting processes can be lengthy and complicated as well as expensive, a way to reduce burdens on family child care providers is to recognize family child care learning homes (FCCLHs) as a residential use in all housing types not just in single-family homes. Cities can also ensure that any requirements placed on FCCLHs apply equally to all residences in the same zone.

Local jurisdictions can also exempt FCCLHs from unnecessary and duplicative permits, including business licenses, home occupation permits, and annual fire inspections (which are already addressed by state licensing for large FCCLHs). Further actions cities can take include:

1. **Allowing child care centers by right or with administrative approval** in locations that can reasonably support them such as school sites, community buildings, and places of worship. This includes allowing hours of operation that align with parents' needs, especially those working parents in the service or healthcare industries who work outside of traditional work hours.
2. **Adopting clear and reasonable development standards** that address real impacts, like parking or noise, without being overly burdensome. In areas where space is limited, transit is robust, or other mitigating factors exist, cities can allow flexibility in site standards.

**3. Ensuring local requirements align with state licensing rules or approved waivers.**

This includes aligning child care facility classifications with the state regulations described above. In doing this, cities can make the process of opening a new child care business much easier. For instance, state-approved waivers for outdoor space are often blocked by local ordinances, which could render otherwise viable sites unusable.

**4. Reducing impact fees and expediting permit processing** are also key strategies to improve the feasibility of opening and sustaining child care facilities.**5. Promoting child care as a community benefit in Planned Development or Planned Unit Development master plans.**

## HOUSING POLICY

Child care is a critical component of community infrastructure and should be integrated into housing in addition to land use planning. Families, especially those that are low-income and working-class, face daily challenges related to housing, employment, child care, and transportation. Cities can help address these challenges by including child care in both short- and long-range planning efforts, such as their Comprehensive Plan updates. These tools provide an opportunity for cities to evaluate and respond to the needs of working families, particularly those in special populations such as single-parent households and female-headed households.

To further support child care through housing policy, cities should consider the following strategies:

- 1. Supporting co-location of child care** in or near housing to help build sustainable, family-friendly communities. Actions cities can take include expedited review of co-located projects, streamlined processing, and other development incentives.
- 2. Encouraging the inclusion of child care in residential developments**, especially affordable housing, to improve access to care and reduce logistical burdens for families.
- 3. Using Comprehensive Plan or Consolidated Plan updates to examine and prioritize the combined needs of housing and child care**, ensuring that both are considered as essential community resources in future development plans.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Supporting the child care workforce is a critical investment in local economies, working families, and community well-being. The child care sector not only provides essential services that enable parents to participate in the workforce but also serves as a source of employment and entrepreneurship. Yet, despite its vital role, the child care sector remains under-resourced and disconnected from broader planning and economic development efforts. Strengthening this sector requires intentional policy choices that recognize child care as foundational and critical community infrastructure.

Access to affordable, high-quality child care allows more families to maintain stable employment, pursue educational and career opportunities, and contribute to their local economies. Further, new and existing businesses need child care so their employees can come to work ready to contribute.

Cities can amplify this impact by investing in the child care sector through the following key strategies:

1. **Including child care in economic development plans** as a critical element that recognizes new businesses bring new workers that will require child care. This can include offering incentives for businesses that invest in or partner with child care providers and leveraging Georgia state tax credits for businesses that support child care. Or cities can include child care projects in local recovery and investment initiatives.
2. **Leveraging federal funding opportunities, such as the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program**, to support public service activities like child care and workforce development. In smaller communities especially, CDBG may be one of the few consistent funding sources available to support both housing and child care infrastructure simultaneously.
3. **Using local tax districts to support child care facilities and businesses.** For example, Tax Allocation Districts can be used to provide financial support for child care facilities and operations.



# CONCLUSION

As Georgia's cities grow and evolve, the need for available, accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care will only become more urgent. A thriving child care sector is foundational to building strong local economies, thriving communities, and a resilient workforce. While cities may not directly fund child care, they hold powerful levers through land use, zoning, housing, and economic development policy that can significantly influence supply and access.

By recognizing child care as critical infrastructure, cities can help reduce longstanding barriers, support working families, and foster community well-being. From streamlining permitting processes to co-locating child care with affordable housing, integrating care into economic development strategies, and leveraging state and federal resources, cities have the tools to drive meaningful change.

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