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One Way to Help Teacher Salaries Go Further: Free Housing

With affordable housing scarce, one Connecticut child care center is providing its staff with rent-free homes designed by Yale architecture students.



By [Amelia Nierenberg](#)

Reporting from New Haven, Conn.

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Kristen Calderon was making about \$37,000 a year as an early childhood educator in New Haven, Conn. It was more than the state's average salary for the job but given the high cost of housing, it was barely enough.

“Every month, I had to decide on a rotating basis which bill I wasn't going to pay,” she said.

But recently, all that changed.

In 2021, she moved into free housing provided by her employer, the Friends Center for Children. And in October, she will move into a newly constructed house, just minutes away from her workplace. She will not be required to pay rent, only utilities.

The new home, which Ms. Calderon, 39, and her 9-year-old son will share with another family, is one of several in the works. Eventually, the Friends Center program aims to provide free housing to about 24 early childhood teachers and their families.

The homes are part of an unusual experiment: an effort to improve the quality of life for early childhood educators and increase their buying power, without raising tuition costs for parents.

“It's a sense of security,” Ms. Calderon said — the first that she and her son have had in a long time.

As the Covid-19 [pandemic lockdowns showed](#), early childhood educators are necessary for the rest of the economy to thrive. To work outside their homes, parents need someone reliable to watch and teach their young children. But teachers will not stay in jobs that do not allow them to pay the bills. And child care centers have trouble paying good wages without making the cost to parents unaffordable.



Photo Credit: Joe Buglewicz for The New York Times

Kristen Calderon and her son, Javi, outside their future home in New Haven, Conn. Ms. Calderon works at the nearby Friends Center for Children, which provides her with rent-free housing.

Cities and states across the country are wrestling with the same challenge — and coming up with a range of solutions. Last fall, for instance, New Mexico voters amended their state constitution to pump \$150 million a year into early childhood education. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul added \$500 million to the state budget for staff bonuses and recruitment, and New York City has used state funding to provide parents with vouchers.

But some families are [still leaving the city](#), and some longtime child care centers there are closing. [Pandemic-era federal funding](#) was set to expire on Sunday.

Early childhood educators are often seen as babysitters, she said. But they are essential parts of society: “It’s the work force that allows every other work force to stay stable, and stay moving forward,” Ms. Powell said.

The Connecticut housing program is probably not replicable on a large scale — at least not yet — because the funding to make it happen came largely through charitable donations.

First-year graduate students at the Yale School of Architecture designed and built the first home as [part of their required coursework](#). Many materials were donated.



Photo Credit: Joe Buglewicz for The New York Times

“Our society is so bad at valuing early care and education teachers,” said Allyx Schiavone, the executive director of Friends Center for Children.

But Allyx Schiavone, the executive director of the Friends Center, hopes the idea will spread, serving as a model for government officials looking for creative ways to address the state’s affordable housing crisis — and the nationwide failure to pay skilled early childhood teachers enough to survive, and to stay in the profession.

Such educators, who are almost always women, make far less than people who work with slightly older children. In May of last year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national median salary for child care workers was [\\$28,520](#).

By comparison, the median salary for teaching assistants was [\\$30,920](#); for preschool teachers, [\\$35,330](#); and for kindergarten and elementary schoolteachers, [\\$61,620](#).

They are also entitled to fewer benefits: In Connecticut, for example, prekindergarten through 12th-grade teachers are eligible for a [50 percent discount](#) on the price of certain homes through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Child care workers are not.

That gap shows a historical devaluation of the work, experts said.

“The field is incredibly undervalued because it is associated with women and, in particular, Black women,” said Chrishana M. Lloyd, a research scholar at [Child Trends](#), a social policy research organization that focuses on children and youth.

Child care experts said they had never seen a housing benefit like the one now offered in New Haven.

The project is especially notable in Connecticut, where affordable housing is in short supply and [proposals](#) to build new apartments that renters like Ms. Calderon could afford are often blocked by [local opposition](#).

The problem is especially acute around New Haven, said Luke Melonakos-Harrison, the vice president of the [Connecticut Tenants Union](#). He said that rents have increased by 25 percent in two years.

“Renters just don’t have options, so landlords have enormous power to raise rents and get away with it,” said Mr. Melonakos-Harrison, 28.

In the suburban neighborhood of Fair Haven Heights, just a few blocks from one of the Friends Center facilities, the new homes will eventually form a campus on a two-acre lot.

They will face inward and cluster around a sprawling evergreen bush — a natural jungle gym. Ms. Calderon’s new home is a modern, two-story gray building. Another educator, Paris Pierce, lives next door with her three children, in an existing house on the property.



Photo Credit: Joe Buglewicz for The New York Times
Paris Pierce, an educator at the Friends Center for Children, receives rent-free housing.

Each home will be built for two families, who will live on separate floors but share a kitchen. Many of the educators are single mothers, and Ms. Schiavone hopes to build a community that can share care-taking responsibilities.

To design the homes, the Yale architecture students spoke frequently with Ms. Calderon and her colleagues, adjusting the design around their needs.

For instance, the students initially made room for only a small entrance space in each home. But for families with young children, getting out of the house with strollers, snowsuits and other equipment can be a challenge.

So the students widened the foyers, adding large closets and room for strollers. They also made the living rooms smaller and made room for two refrigerators and two sets of cabinets, so that each family could have its own storage space.

“It did feel like: ‘Wow, this house is almost protesting the way that we have treated childhood educators in the past,’” said Alice Cochrane, 24, one of the Yale students. “It’s a celebration of them.”

For Ms. Pierce, who moved into her free home about a year ago, saving money on rent means being able to put her two older children into extracurricular activities. Her 11-year-old son loves soccer. Her 5-year-old daughter is into dancing.

Ms. Pierce, 34, had to revise her initial goal: saving 10 percent of her paycheck a month. It just wasn’t realistic. And buying her own home — building wealth that she could pass along to her children — is still years away.

For now, she is working on her credit. And for the first time, she said, she’s allowing herself to dream.

“I never had anything like this,” she said.

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