

Austin area parents working non-traditional hours are struggling to find childcare

Jewel Windham and her family moved to Leander a month ago, leaving behind their home in Midland-Odessa. Windham, an EMT, works long, late-night shifts, while her husband tackles 6 a.m. shifts inspecting road construction.

With scarce childcare options for their 1-year-old child during these hours, they are forced to live in Leander to be near Wanna Play, an extended-hours childcare service — one of the few of its kind in the Austin area. However, this stretches their daily commute to 40-minutes each way.

“If it weren’t for Wanna Play, I don’t know what we’d do,” Windham said.

At the Feb. 29 Austin City Council meeting, members approved a \$25,000 grant to assess the accessibility of home-based childcare. [City-funded research](#) by the Urban Institute revealed that approximately one-third of children with working parents in the Austin area need care during nontraditional work hours, yet only about 4% of childcare spaces accommodate these needs.

Despite the indispensability of Wanna Play, Windham said this option is barely feasible.

“It should be illegal how much (businesses in Austin) charge for childcare,” Windham said.

“Back home, our childcare was \$840 a month. Now, it’s \$1,400.”

Before securing her current position, she rejected two promising job offers, one even offering \$8 more per hour, due to their mismatch with her childcare needs.

“Austin needs to make it easier for families to get assistance and have childcare centers with more flexible hours,” Windham said. “Adjustments need to be made to fit the times. We are no longer in one-income households.”

Parents are not the only ones struggling with this issue. Magdalena MacLeod is the owner of Happy Bunnies Child Care School, a center that focuses on offering flexible drop-in care for parents with irregular shifts.

MacLeod started the center after turning down a journalism career because it didn’t line up with her childcare needs. She said she has found a high demand for these services.

“I had so many desperate parents contacting me and asking me for help ... So I decided to start a school that was going to offer childcare the way I really needed when I wanted to go to work,” MacLeod said.

However, MacLeod said that in recent years, the center has been losing income and struggling to support its teachers.

“Every coin has two sides, and while parents are struggling, so are schools,” MacLeod said.

“The rent is going up every single year, the property taxes are going up and we have to pay our teachers more in order to keep them and build a workforce that is well-trained and motivated.”

In unison with Macleod's concerns, Megan, who prefers to be identified by her first name, struggled with finding a daycare offering both accessible hours and quality care. She has a 2-year-old daughter and another on the way. Currently, she works remotely at a tech position, but a year ago, she quit her seven-year career in active surgery after struggling to balance her parenting needs due to unpredictable hours.

"My hours every day were completely unregulated and completely at the behest of the surgical schedule," Megan said. "It didn't take long to recognize that I needed to make a change."

Additionally, Megan's husband would travel out of town weekly for work. The couple decided to enroll their daughter in a daycare near the hospital that had the longest operating hours they could find — 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

"A lot of the decision was based off of the hours," Megan said. "[I felt] like I was sacrificing the level of care that I wanted for my baby."

Her daughter's previous daycare had issues with high ratios, a relatively unsafe area, incidents with homeless people nearby and inconsistent staff — with the daycare going through several directors in Megan's time with them.

"As a first-time mom, these were things that took me a long time to realize weren't normal," Megan said. "It felt like it was the only choice I had ... I think it was easier to look past things that felt like red flags."

Megan often struggled with pick-up times and resorted to hiring someone online to keep a car seat in her car and be available at any time to take her daughter home. But handing over the care of her infant to strangers for hours at a time crushed Megan.

"You're outsourcing the most intimate times for your child, you know, dinner time, bath time, going to sleep. Those times when a child is looking for comfort and safety," said Megan. "I would go pick up my daughter and see the fatigue on her face and it felt as though I was putting her in that situation."

She gave herself an ultimatum. She had a few months to find the right job, and if not she'd become a stay-at-home mom, despite her commitment to maintaining her career. That's when she found her current remote position and changed daycares to one closer to home with a higher level of care.

"Not everyone has the ability to just decide to leave their job or make a choice, make a change in school or pay extra money," Megan said. "To understand what it would be like to know that your child's not getting good care every day, and not feel like you have a better choice, that's just really heartbreaking."