



## Larch Early Childhood Care

MARCH 2025

# SETTING A NEW STANDARD FOR **CHILD CARE IN MONTANA**



## A Case Study in Building Culture

With a background in healthcare, Larch Early Childhood Care Owner & Director Christine Miller-Fitzpatrick was familiar with burnout. She knew the demands of the industry and was passionate about finding a “better way.” That’s why when it came to starting her own business, there was one foundational area that she set out to build the rest around: employee culture. Inspired by her own son and driven by the desire to meet the desperate demand for child care in her community, Christine opened Larch Early Childhood Care – a multi-location child care facility that provides a happy and enriching environment for the entire Larch family, including staff.

## BACKGROUND



**LOCATION:**  
Helena, Montana



**ORGANIZATION:**  
Larch Early  
Childhood Care



**POPULATION:**  
34,464 people



**WEBSITE**  
[larchhelena.com](http://larchhelena.com)

MONTANA CHILD CARE BUSINESS  
**CONNECT**

  
**ZEROTOFIVE**  
MONTANA

## THE CHALLENGE

Christine Miller-Fitzpatrick  
Owner & Director

### Building a thriving child care business.

As child care facilities continued to face closure around Helena, many new parents, like Christine, were left without high-quality and accessible care for their young children. Looking for guidance, Christine reached out to Montana Child Care Business Connect, a program of Zero to Five Montana, where she soon found herself on the journey of becoming a child care provider. For Christine, opening Larch was essential – there was no other path. And yet, even after overcoming the hurdles of breaking into the industry, finding a location, choosing a curriculum, and securing financing, there was still one small-business challenge left to tackle: consistent and reliable staffing.

While Larch initially opened as a single-location facility, both opportunity (and demand) allowed for a quick and wise expansion into a second building within the first year – a move that further highlighted the need for a passionate and reliable care team.

66.8%

OF ALL MONTANAN  
EMPLOYEES ARE  
small-business employees.

THE MEDIAN  
HOURLY WAGE

for a child care worker in Montana is

\$13.99

## THE SOLUTION

### Prioritizing employee culture.

From the very beginning, Christine knew she wanted to do things differently. She didn't want to just start a child care business, she wanted to create an entire support system – a village that was a true and long-term extension of a child's family. And to do so, one important detail needed to be at the foundation of her entire business plan: employee culture. A component that is often "saved for last" or even overlooked in the healthcare industry.

Working alongside MCCBC for both the initial launch and expansion, Christine created a business and financial model that didn't just include a positive work culture but prioritized it – allowing for higher employee salaries, a work schedule that encouraged an hour-long "self-care break," building locations that were centered around downtown, and even the use of an app that would promote greater connection between parents and providers. Though met with concern from other community providers, these small yet intentional changes have created an environment at Larch that is quickly setting a new and achievable standard for child care across Montana. One where balance is encouraged, teachers are refreshed, parents are invited in, and happiness is more than just a goal – it's an overflow.



*The work culture at Larch is our foundation. It's crucial that children have a consistent connection with their teachers. That's why we're committed to paying about 30% higher than the average in Helena.*

Christine Miller-Fitzpatrick  
Owner & Director, Larch Early Childhood Care

# STEPS TO SUCCESS

## 1. SEEKING OUTSIDE SUPPORT

With no previous experience in the child care industry, Christine participated in MCCBC's Mentorship-Accelerator program. This enabled her to quickly build her knowledge, skills, and connections in child care management.

## 2. CREATING A ROBUST SERVICE MODEL

Larch Early Childhood Care established a robust business model that centered around their unique goals and community. This acted as both a measuring stick and driving force behind each of their locations and relevant decisions.

## 3. LEVERAGING RESOURCES

From building leases and risk management to financial budgeting and planning software, Larch jumped at every chance to utilize MCCBC resources and connections – increasing their overall success and leading to quicker expansion opportunities.

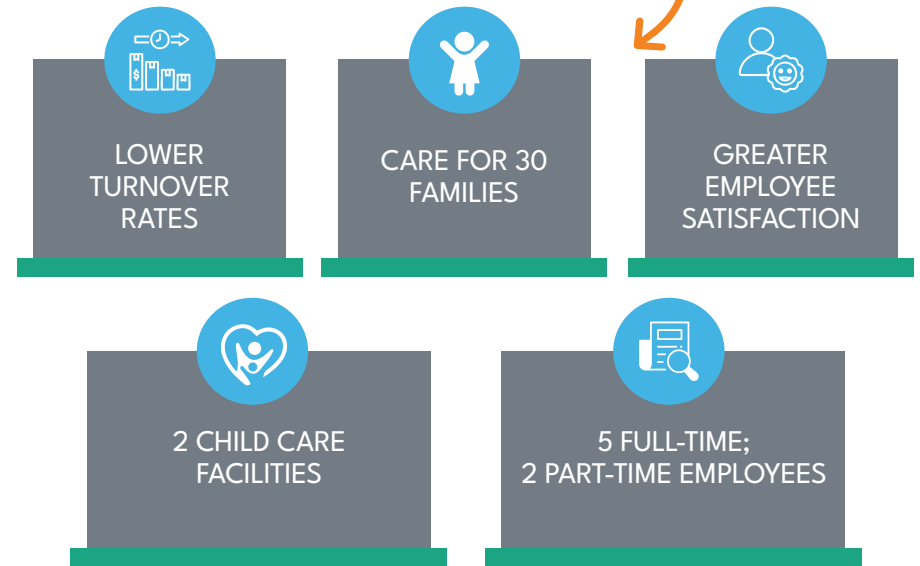
## 4. PRIORITIZING EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Recognizing the important role that teachers play, the Larch team established a goal early on to prioritize work culture in their planning – allowing their team to pay higher salaries and offer added benefits.

# PROGRESS

Making the best decision isn't always the easiest one. But with the right support and guidance, success is never far away.

TAKE A LOOK!



*Christine is one of the best bosses I've ever had. She understands that having happy teachers also relates to having happy kids. And she really makes that a priority – it's been amazing to be a part of.*

Mickenzi Purdom,  
Lead Teacher of Preschool Classroom

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the success of Larch Early Childhood Care, the following key takeaways can help guide other child care entrepreneurs in Montana:

- ✓ **Seek strategic guidance.** Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and seek advice. Programs like MCCBC are here to help you learn and navigate the complexities of establishing a child care business effectively. You're not alone!
- ✓ **Be steadfast in your goals.** Every child care facility is going to look slightly different and that's okay! Your goals, dreams, and personality are what makes your business unique. And they're also what will make it successful.
- ✓ **Maintain financial resilience.** Implementing sound financial practices and strategies upfront that align with your goals will go a long way in ensuring the sustainability of your child care operation.
- ✓ **Utilize available resources.** There's always another task. And with each task is likely a tool that can help along the way! Connect with supportive organizations to access essential tools, facilities, and software for efficient business planning.
- ✓ **Care about your employees.** Though often the last step in the process, your team can make or break your business. Don't overlook the need to prioritize policies and trainings that enhance employee satisfaction, recruitment, and retention rates.

## TAKE YOUR NEXT STEP

Whether you're a business owner, parent, current child care provider, or long-time resident, you have a role to play – because better child care systems mean thriving communities. And that matters for everyone.



### DOWNLOAD FREE RESOURCES

Planning tools, step-by-step guides, blog posts, and more!



### JOIN US AT OUR NEXT EVENT

From annual summits to training workshops, we'll save you a seat.



### GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

There's power in unity. Let's talk about the opportunities in your community.

## CONNECT WITH US!



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## LEARN MORE

about Montana Child Care Business  
Connect and take your next step.

