



GWVYA DBP
CHEROKEE NATION®

Human Services
Child Care & Development
Programmatic Report
August 31, 2026

The mission of Cherokee Nation Child Care & Development is to increase the availability, affordability, and quality of child care.



CHILD CARE & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMATIC UPDATE

Submitted to Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr.

by

Shella Bowlin, Secretary of State

Brittany Davis, Executive Director, Human Services

Bridget Tobey, Area Director, Child Care & Development

Jennifer Kirby, Deputy Executive Director, Human Services



August 31, 2026

Child Care & Development Report

Introduction	4
Child Care and Development Programs.....	5
Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers.....	9
Future of Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development Programs	12
Conclusion	19

The following report provides updates on the status of the Child Care and Development program in relation to the **Verna D. Thompson Early Childhood Education Act of 2021**, as amended by **Legislative Act 08-24 in 2024** (hereinafter referred to as **Verna D. Thompson Act**). While the update does not address every provision of the Act, it serves as a guiding document for evaluating current activities and informing future initiatives that support the program's continued positive impact. References to the Act are noted throughout the report.

In addition to the biennial reports in 2022 and 2024 required by the Verna D. Thompson Act, this report is being provided to ensure continued awareness of the ongoing updates, evaluations, and analyses being conducted to strengthen and enhance child development and learning, maintain health, safety, and regulatory compliance, and foster trust among families and communities.

Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development, housed within the Human Services Department, operates a comprehensive system of child care programs and tribally operated Child Development Centers that support children, families, providers, and communities throughout the reservation. With more than 250 employees, representing approximately 44 percent of the Human Services workforce, the program annually serves more than 400 children through its Child Development Centers, provides financial assistance to more than 2,000 families, and supports at least 360 community child care providers through early childhood resources, training, technical assistance, licensing, and monitoring services.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, Child Care and Development operated with total expenditures of approximately \$30 million and continued a major expansion effort supported by nearly \$70 million in investments designed to increase access to care services across additional reservation counties. Under the direction of the Hoskin-Warner Administration and in alignment with the Verna D. Thompson Act, Cherokee Nation has expanded from two long-standing Child Development Centers to a projected total of five centers by the end of 2026. This growth reflects Cherokee Nation's continued commitment to early childhood education, family stability, workforce participation, small business support, and the long-term well-being of Cherokee children and communities

Child Care and Development Programs – Current

The Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development Program administers several programs designed to strengthen the child care and early learning system throughout the reservation. Through investments in families, providers, educators, and communities, these programs support access to affordable, high-quality child care while promoting positive outcomes for children and economic stability for families.

Child Care Subsidy

The Cherokee Nation Child Care Subsidy Program supports economic self-sufficiency, educational advancement, and family stability across the reservation. In FY 25, the program approved child care assistance for 3,085 children from 2,003 families and paid more than \$14 million to child care providers to offset the cost of care.

By helping families meet child care expenses, the program enables parents and guardians to enter or remain in the workforce, pursue educational opportunities, and complete job training programs. The program's flexibility, including continued eligibility during periods of job search, helps ensure that families are not disproportionately impacted by temporary employment interruptions. According to the FY 2025 Cherokee Nation Subsidy Program Profile, 97 percent of participating families were actively employed.

Approximately 70 percent of families receiving Cherokee Nation child care assistance had household incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. However, due to the program's additional 35 percent work-expense deduction for non-self-employed households, a family of four may earn up to approximately \$107,000 annually and remain eligible for child care assistance. This expanded eligibility allows more working families to access affordable child care while maintaining financial stability.

To further support child care providers and improve access to quality care, Cherokee Nation will increase provider reimbursement rates by \$5 per child per day beginning October 1, 2026. This permanent rate increase will help keep Cherokee Nation reimbursement rates more closely aligned with private-pay rates and support provider sustainability while ensuring families continue to have access to high-quality child care services.

FY 26 Child Care Subsidy Comparison			
Child Care Subsidy Services	Oklahoma	Cherokee Nation	Difference (OK vs CN)
Monthly Copayment Based on household of 4 with 2 working adults and 2 children in child care	Approx. \$328/month	Approx. \$122/month	Approx. \$206/month
Ages Served	Birth through age 9	Birth through age 12	3 additional years of subsidy available
Income Guidelines Based on household of 4	55% State Median Income (SMI) \$51,665 annually	85% SMI + 35% work expense deduction \$107,792 annually	\$56,127 higher annual income eligibility
Provider Daily Rate Add-On	\$5 pandemic-era add-on ended April 6, 2026	Permanent \$5 per day increase effective October 1, 2026	CN is implementing a permanent provider rate increase, while the Oklahoma DHS add-on was temporary

The Cherokee Nation Child Care Subsidy Program continues to provide families with greater affordability, broader eligibility, and extended support when compared with the state's child care assistance program, helping ensure that working families have access to reliable, high-quality child care throughout the reservation.

[Child Care Licensing](#)

In FY 2025, Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development contracted with 619 community child care providers, including 469 licensed child care facilities, such as child care centers and family child care homes, as well as 150 relative child care providers. Relative providers include grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings age 18 or older who do not reside in the child's home. To qualify for this service option, parents or guardians must meet Child Care Subsidy Program eligibility requirements. This arrangement helps expand access to child care, particularly for families living in child care deserts or those working non-traditional schedules, by providing care options that may not otherwise be available.

Child Care and Development also administers the Child Care Licensing Program, which conducted 584 monitoring visits during FY 25 to ensure contracted providers remained in compliance with applicable health and safety requirements. Through ongoing monitoring and

technical support, the program helps maintain safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate environments for children across the reservation.

In addition to regulatory oversight, the program supports providers by supplying essential health and safety resources, including first aid kits, fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and other equipment designed to promote safe learning environments. These efforts help providers maintain compliance with licensing standards while strengthening the quality and safety of child care services available to Cherokee Nation families.

Key FY 2025 Highlights

- Contracted with **619 community child care providers**
 - **469 licensed facilities**
 - **150 relative child care providers**
- Conducted **584 monitoring visits** to verify compliance with health and safety standards
- Provided health and safety resources, including:
 - First aid kits
 - Fire extinguishers
 - Smoke detectors
 - Other safety-related equipment and supplies
- Expanded access to care for families in child care deserts and those working non-traditional schedules

This combination of licensing oversight, monitoring, technical assistance, and provider support helps ensure that children receiving care through Cherokee Nation programs have access to safe, reliable, and high-quality early learning environments.

[Child Care Resource and Referral](#)

In addition to licensing and monitoring services, Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development provides contracted community child care providers with training, technical assistance, and grant opportunities designed to strengthen program quality, enhance learning environments, and support workforce development throughout the reservation. These investments help providers improve services, maintain high standards of care, and expand opportunities for children and families.



[Child Care Quality Improvement Support](#)

FY 2025 - \$400,000

- Invested more than **\$400,000** in quality improvement grants for **212 child care providers**.
- Funding supported classroom and playground enhancements, educational and art materials, facility repairs, and the purchase of major appliances and equipment necessary for child care operations.

FY 2026 - \$660,500 (allocated)

- Allocated **\$660,500** for quality improvement initiatives.
- Awarded more than **\$260,500** in grants to **141 child care providers** to support program and facility enhancements.
- Designated an additional **\$400,000** for quality improvement grants focused specifically on strengthening **infant and toddler programming and activities**, helping providers expand and enhance services for the reservation's youngest children.

[Child Care Provider Training](#)

Professional development remains a critical component of Cherokee Nation's efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education and strengthen the child care workforce.

FY 2025

- Invested more than **\$180,000** to provide training for **1,055 child care teachers**

Training topics included challenging behaviors, lesson planning, child supervision, infant safe sleep practices, and health and safety requirements.

FY 2026

- Invested nearly **\$60,000** to deliver **trauma-informed care training** for more than **250 child care teachers and staff**,

Training focused on strengthening providers' ability to support children's social, emotional, and developmental well-being while creating responsive and supportive learning environments.

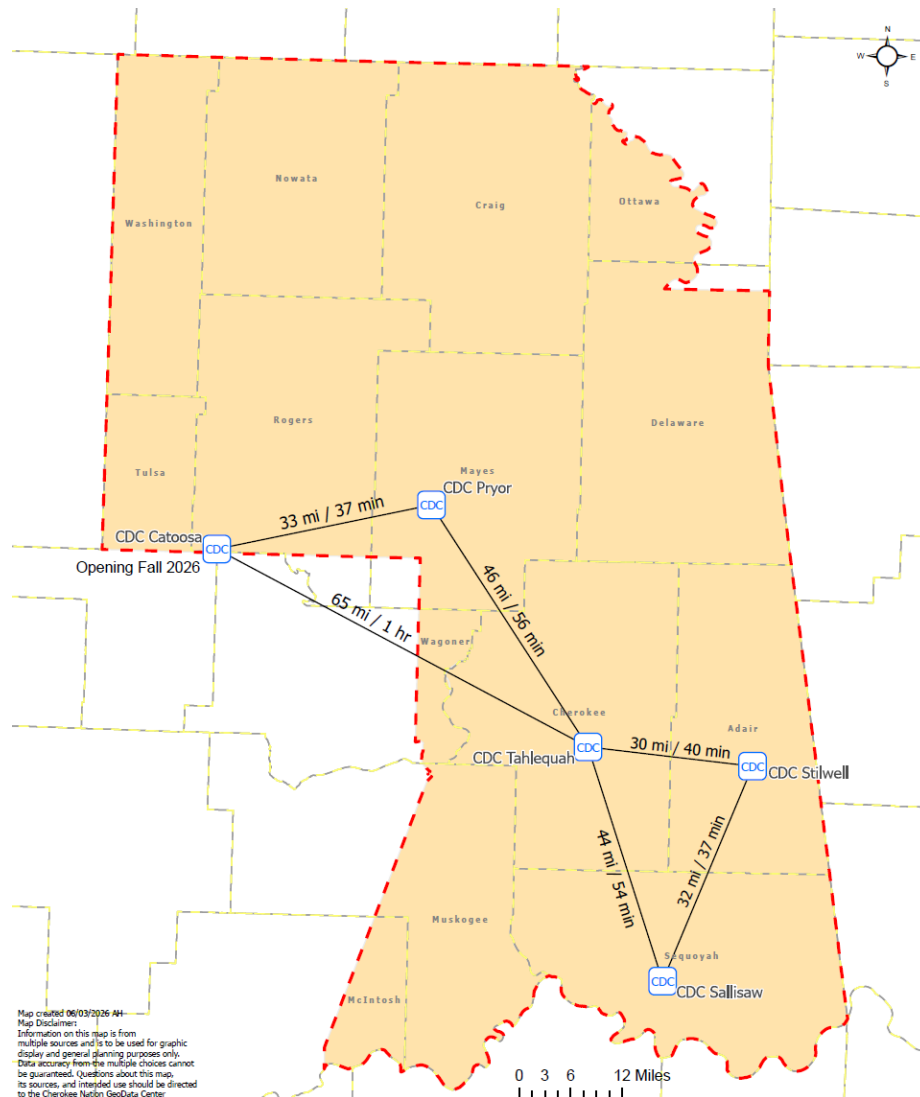
Through ongoing investments in quality improvement grants, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities, Cherokee Nation continues to strengthen the capacity of community child care providers, enhance the quality of early learning experiences, and improve outcomes for children and families across the reservation.

Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers

Consistent with the goals and objectives of the **Verna D. Thompson Early Childhood Education Act**, Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development conducts ongoing evaluations of services, community needs, and opportunities for expansion to increase access to high-quality early childhood education throughout the reservation. These assessments help guide strategic investments and ensure that child care services continue to meet the needs of Cherokee children, families, and communities.

Child Care and Development currently operates four Child Development Centers located in Tahlequah, Stilwell, Pryor, and Sallisaw. Together, these tribally operated centers provide approximately 469 child care slots and serve as a critical component of Cherokee Nation's comprehensive early childhood education system.

The Child Development Centers offer safe, developmentally appropriate learning environments that support children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and cultural development. In addition to providing high-quality early learning opportunities, the centers help strengthen family stability, support workforce participation, and ensure that working parents have access to reliable child care services.



As Cherokee Nation continues to evaluate child care needs across the reservation, the expansion of Child Development Center services remains a priority. Ongoing investments in facilities, staffing, and educational programming reflect Cherokee Nation's commitment to increasing access to early childhood education and creating opportunities for Cherokee children to learn, grow, and succeed.

Current Child Development Center Locations

- Tahlequah
- Stilwell
- Pryor
- Sallisaw

Current Capacity

- Approximately **469 child care slots** serving children and families throughout the Cherokee Nation Reservation.

This system of Child Development Centers, combined with community provider partnerships and child care assistance programs, helps ensure that Cherokee Nation families have access to a continuum of high-quality child care services that support both child development and family well-being.

[Expanding Care](#)

Cherokee Nation continues to make significant investments in expanding access to high-quality early childhood education throughout the reservation. A fifth Child Development Center is scheduled to open in Catoosa in Fall 2026, adding approximately 100 additional child care slots and further strengthening access to affordable, reliable child care services for Cherokee families.

Key accomplishments include:

- Over the past two years, Cherokee Nation has opened two new Child Development Centers, creating 110 jobs and investing a total of \$67 million in construction and startup operational costs.
 - **Pryor Child Development Center** opened in June 2025 with an investment of **\$35 million**.
 - **Sallisaw Child Development Center** opened in June 2026 with an investment of **\$32 million**.
- **Cherokee Nation Businesses** invested **\$20 million** to construct the Catoosa Child Development Center, which will provide approximately 100 additional child care slots. This investment responds to needs identified in previous Verna D. Thompson Act biennial reports and supports the workforce of Cherokee Nation and its entities. The Catoosa center will serve employees of Cherokee Nation Entertainment's largest casino, as well as families residing in Rogers County, Tulsa County, and surrounding communities. With this investment, total spending on new Child Development Centers over the past two years reaches **\$87 million**.
- The opening of the Pryor and Sallisaw facilities increased Cherokee Nation's child care capacity by **90 percent**. With the addition of the Catoosa center, total capacity will have increased by **135 percent** compared to pre-expansion levels.

In Summer 2025, the Stilwell and Tahlequah Child Development Centers each opened three additional classrooms to serve school-age children during the summer months, further expanding access to care and supporting the needs of working families.



Investing in Our Employees

Cherokee Nation recognizes that high-quality early childhood education begins with a well-supported and highly qualified workforce. As part of its continued commitment to excellence, Cherokee Nation invests in competitive compensation and professional development opportunities for Child Development Center staff.

- Starting pay for Cherokee Nation Child Development Center teachers is **\$17.45 per hour**, or approximately **\$36,296 annually**. Comparable positions in nearby Oklahoma communities typically pay between **\$12.41 and \$14.56 per hour**, equivalent to approximately **\$25,812 to \$30,284 annually**. As a result, Cherokee Nation teacher salaries are approximately **20 to 41 percent higher** than regional averages.
- Early childhood teachers employed by Cherokee Nation have opportunities to further their education through attainment of a **Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential** or a **Certificate of Mastery in Early Childhood Education**, with all related educational expenses covered by Cherokee Nation.

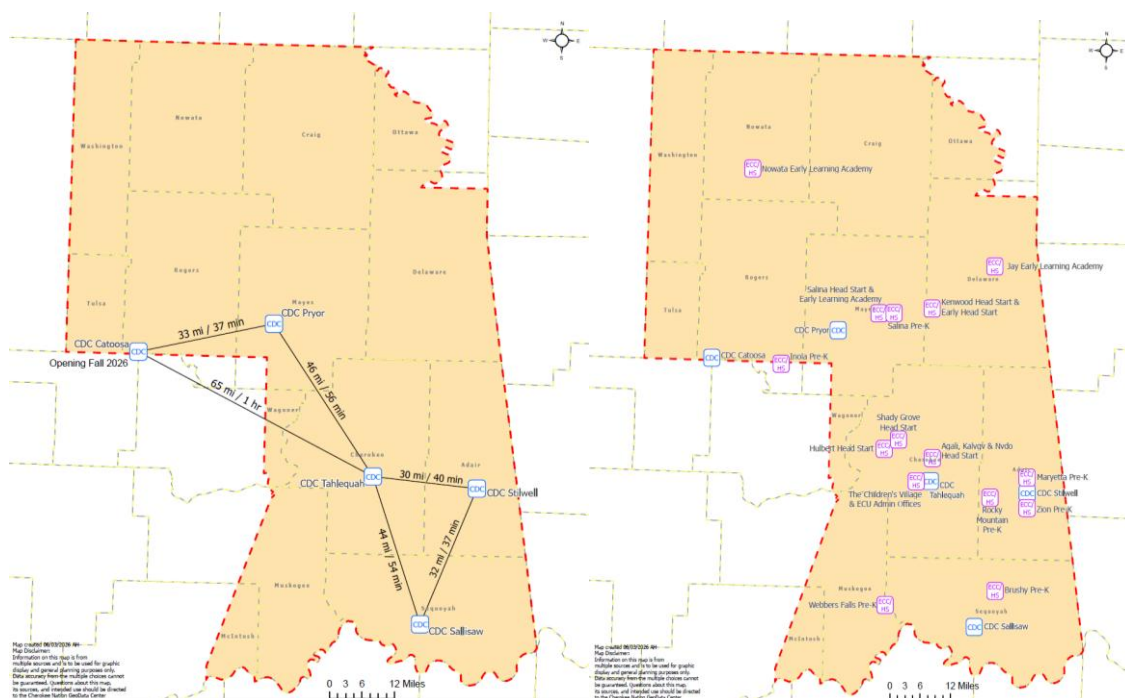
This investment in facilities, workforce development, and employee compensation strengthen Cherokee Nation's ability to provide safe, high-quality early childhood education while supporting the needs of children, families, and communities throughout the reservation.

Future of Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development Programs – New Initiatives

The 2024 amendments to the **Verna D. Thompson Early Childhood Education Act** direct Cherokee Nation and its entities to: seek opportunities for expansion or partnership based on the biennial analysis required by the Act and pursue opportunities to expand, repair, and replace Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers consistent with the Tribe's PL 102-477 Child Care Plan.

To identify future Child Development Center locations, Cherokee Nation analyzed child care availability across reservation counties, reviewed the locations of existing Head Start and Child Development Centers, examined Cherokee Nation employee population data, considered findings from the PlainChildcare 2022 study, and evaluated Cherokee Nation citizen population trends. Together, these data sources helped identify areas where additional child care services would have the greatest impact on children, families, and communities throughout the reservation.

Current Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers and Headstart Sites



As Cherokee Nation plans for future growth, it is important to evaluate the geographic distribution of existing early childhood education services across the reservation. A review of current Child Development Center and Head Start locations indicates that no Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers are in the predominantly northern counties of the reservation, while only one Head Start site currently operates in Nowata County.

Child Care Affordability and Access Analysis

To further assess community need, Cherokee Nation reviewed data from PlainChildcare, an independent public-data resource that compiles, verifies, and utilizes information from the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau National Database of Childcare Prices (NDCP). The NDCP is one of the most comprehensive government datasets on child care costs in the United States, providing county-level price estimates derived from state market rate surveys and other administrative data sources.

Using this information, Cherokee Nation evaluated child care affordability and child care desert classifications across Oklahoma to better understand where future investments could have the greatest impact. Combined with demographic trends, workforce data, and existing service locations, this analysis provides a framework for identifying future Child Development Center expansion opportunities and ensuring that resources are directed to areas of greatest need.

For more information regarding the PlainChildcare methodology and data sources, visit the [PlainChildcare About Page](#).

Child Care Affordability

	County	Infant Cost	Income	% of Income	Status
1	Latimer County	\$10,469	\$42,735	24.50%	Desert
2	Seminole County	\$10,347	\$43,239	23.90%	Desert
3	Pushmataha County	\$10,074	\$42,274	23.80%	Desert
4	McIntosh County	\$10,348	\$43,467	23.80%	Desert
5	Choctaw County	\$10,083	\$43,252	23.30%	Desert
6	Kiowa County	\$9,863	\$42,679	23.10%	Desert
7	Craig County	\$10,912	\$48,018	22.70%	Desert
8	LeFlore County	\$10,534	\$46,750	22.50%	Desert
9	Ottawa County	\$10,396	\$46,186	22.50%	Desert
10	Haskell County	\$10,377	\$46,239	22.40%	Desert

The other counties in the northern part of the reservation without a CDC's ranked as follows:

Ranking out of 77 Counties	County	Infant Cost	Income	% of Income	Status
7	Craig County	\$10,912	\$48,018	22.70%	Desert
26	Nowata County	\$10,412	\$50,960	20.40%	Desert
27	Delaware County	\$10,837	\$53,290	20.30%	Desert
51	Washington County	\$10,752	\$59,426	18.10%	High
66	Tulsa County	\$11,247	\$65,229	17.20%	High
72	Rogers County	\$11,394	\$75,312	15.10%	High

Assessment and Recommended Expansion of Child Development Center Locations

The recommendations for the next phase of Cherokee Nation Child Development Center (CDC) expansion are based on a comprehensive analysis of multiple factors, including:

- Child care availability across reservation counties
- Locations of existing Head Start sites, including partner sites, and Child Development Centers
- Cherokee Nation employee population data
- Findings from the PlainChildcare 2022 study
- Cherokee Nation citizen population trends

This assessment was conducted to identify areas where additional child care services would provide the greatest benefit to Cherokee Nation children, families, employees, and communities.

Following a review of existing Child Development Center locations, Cherokee Nation determined that no CDCs currently operate within the six northern counties of the reservation. This absence represents a significant gap in access to tribally operated child care services and supports the need for continued expansion. Based on the factors evaluated, Craig County emerged as the area demonstrating the most significant unmet child care need and was identified as the strongest candidate for the next Child Development Center location.

Craig County (Vinita) Expansion Recommendation

The analysis identified Craig County as a priority location based on the following considerations:

- **Child Care Affordability and Availability**
According to PlainChildcare data, Craig County ranks **7th out of 77 Oklahoma counties** for child care affordability burden. Families spend approximately **22.7 percent of household income** on child care, and the county is classified as a **child care desert**.
- **Limited Cherokee Nation Early Childhood Services**
Craig County currently has **no Cherokee Nation Child Development Center, Head Start site, or Partner Head Start location**, creating a significant service gap in the northern portion of the reservation.
- **Employee Needs**
Cherokee Nation maintains a substantial presence in Vinita through health care and other governmental services, with approximately **143 Cherokee Nation employees** residing in the area.
- **Development Readiness**
Cherokee Nation owns land in Vinita that is suitable for future development and construction of a Child Development Center.

While PlainChildcare data also identifies Delaware and Nowata Counties as child care deserts, both counties have access to at least one Cherokee Nation Head Start site. Additionally, Washington and Tulsa Counties are not classified as child care deserts under the PlainChildcare analysis.

Cherokee Nation's planned investments in Rogers County further address regional child care needs. The **Catoosa Child Development Center**, scheduled to open in Fall 2026, will support employees at the J.W. Sam Office Complex and the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, while also serving families residing in Rogers County, Tulsa County, and surrounding communities. Considering these existing and planned investments, Vinita remains the strongest candidate for the next phase of Child Development Center expansion.

Cherokee County (Tahlequah) Expansion Recommendation

The assessment also identified significant growth and increasing demand for child care services in Cherokee County, supporting future expansion efforts in Tahlequah.

Key considerations include:

- **Employee Needs**
Recent employee population data indicates that approximately **2,828 Cherokee Nation employees** reside in Cherokee County, representing roughly **41 percent of Cherokee Nation employees living in Oklahoma**.
- **Child Care Affordability and Access**
Based on PlainChildcare analysis, Cherokee County ranks **29th out of 77 Oklahoma counties** and is classified as a **child care desert**, with families spending approximately **20.1 percent of household income** on child care.

Ranking out of 77 Counties	County	Infant Cost	Income	% of Income	Status
29	Cherokee County	\$10,540	\$52,410	20.10%	Desert

- **Capital Improvement Needs**
The existing Tahlequah Child Development Center is **22 years old** and will require significant capital improvements to continue meeting future service demands.
- **Current Demand**
The Tahlequah Child Development Center currently maintains a waiting list of approximately **90 children**, demonstrating ongoing unmet demand for services.
- **Workforce Considerations**
Families often prefer child care services located near their place of employment, allowing parents to remain accessible throughout the workday. Currently, nearly **40 percent of children enrolled at the Tahlequah Child Development Center** have at least one parent employed by Cherokee Nation or one of its entities.

- **Citizen Population Trends**

Cherokee County has the highest concentration of Cherokee children ages 0-12 within the reservation, making it a critical location for future early childhood investments.

- **Future Growth**

Demand for child care services is expected to increase as Cherokee Nation continues to expand. Recent and planned developments, including the new W.W. Hastings Hospital, the Oklahoma State University Medical School, and the proposed University of Oklahoma nursing school, are anticipated to contribute to continued population and workforce growth in the area.

Recommended Next Steps

Based on the current assessment, the two most significant child care service gaps identified within the Cherokee Nation Reservation are located in **Craig County** and **Cherokee County**. Accordingly, the current recommendation is to begin planning for the development of two additional Child Development Centers:

1. **Vinita, Oklahoma (Craig County)**
2. **Tahlequah, Oklahoma (Cherokee County)**

Cherokee Nation has already identified tribally owned property suitable for development in Vinita. As planning efforts continue, additional data collection, stakeholder feedback, citizen and employee surveys, and updated market analyses will be conducted to ensure future expansion decisions remain aligned with the goals and intent of the **Verna D. Thompson Early Childhood Education Act**. These efforts will help ensure that future investments reflect community needs while supporting long-term access to high-quality early childhood education throughout the reservation.

Additional Program Initiatives

As Child Care and Development programs continue to expand, Cherokee Nation is also investing in provider support services, family accessibility, and culturally focused programming. Key initiatives for the coming year include:

- Extending operating hours at all Cherokee Nation Child Development Centers to **7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday** to better support working families.
- Aligning Child Care and Head Start service expectations and operating schedules to provide families with consistent, uninterrupted care and smoother transitions between programs. This alignment will reduce service gaps and better support families who rely on stable, full-day programming.
- Strengthening Cherokee cultural engagement by adding staff dedicated to developing culturally based activities and resources for children and families served through both tribally operated centers and contracted community providers.
- Building upon recent cultural programming efforts, including the first Cherokee Nation Child Development Center graduation celebration held in August 2026 for children



attending the Tahlequah, Stilwell, and Pryor centers. The event honored 30 graduates through cultural activities, a traditional hog fry, and the presentation of ribbon skirts and ribbon shirts. To support participation, families also received a \$50 travel stipend.

- Investing **\$1.25 million** in child care provider start-up grants to support the creation of new child care businesses and increase the availability of child care services throughout the reservation.
- Increasing Child Care Subsidy provider reimbursement rates, resulting in nearly **\$3.5 million in additional annual funding** distributed to Cherokee Nation communities and child care providers.
- Expanding Child Care Subsidy income eligibility guidelines beginning October 1, 2026, allowing more working families to qualify for and receive child care assistance.

These initiatives reflect Cherokee Nation's continued commitment to improving access, affordability, quality, and cultural relevance within its early childhood education system. Through strategic investments in families, providers, workforce development, and culturally responsive programming, Cherokee Nation is working to ensure that children and families have access to comprehensive support services that promote long-term success and well-being throughout the reservation.



Conclusion

In conclusion, Cherokee Nation remains steadfast in its commitment to expanding access to safe, affordable, and high-quality child care for Cherokee families. While the landscape of child care assistance and family support continues to evolve across Oklahoma and the nation, Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development remains committed to providing responsive, innovative, and reliable services that meet the changing needs of children, families, providers, and communities. Continued monitoring of child care trends, workforce needs, and early childhood education developments throughout the reservation will be essential to ensuring long-term success and sustainability. Strategic planning, data-driven decision-making, and ongoing evaluation will remain critical components of Cherokee Nation's future child care expansion efforts.

Every investment in Cherokee children strengthens the foundation for lifelong learning, healthy development, and future success. Through existing programs and nearly **\$92 million in recommended investments**, Cherokee Nation is expanding child care infrastructure, increasing access to services, and implementing initiatives designed to support long-term community growth. These efforts help ensure that families have access to affordable, high-quality care, communities are equipped to support their youngest citizens, and early childhood professionals have the resources needed to promote best practices and share knowledge across the reservation.

By continuing to invest in children, families, providers, and communities, Cherokee Nation is creating greater stability and opportunity today while building a stronger, more resilient future for generations to come. Through collaboration, innovation, and a continued commitment to the goals of the **Verna D. Thompson Early Childhood Education Act**, Cherokee Nation will remain focused on expanding access to high-quality early childhood services that support child development, strengthen families, and enhance the well-being of Cherokee communities throughout the reservation.