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Project Title: Exploring High Quality in Family Child Care: Does Alignment with Government Expectations have Implications for Engagement and Retention in the Field?

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Project Abstract:

Regulated family child care (FCC), or care provided to small groups of non-relative children in a provider's home, is an essential but undervalued aspect of the American early childhood education and care (ECEC) landscape. Despite a national emphasis on school- and center-based ECEC for preschoolers, FCC providers comprise nearly 20% of all providers receiving Child Care and Development Fund subsidies (National Center for Early Childhood Quality Assurance [NCECQA], 2020a). FCC is also often the only accessible, regulated, and/or subsidized child care option for children who are under three, are from low-income families, live in rural areas, have special needs, and/or whose parents work non-traditional or volatile schedules (Henly & Adams, 2018).

In response to research that FCC is lower quality than center-based care on average (Porter et al., 2010), state policies have endeavored to enhance the quality of FCC over the last few decades. One common approach is Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), which assess ECEC quality on a variety of indicators and report this information to families, programs, and government agencies. While FCC are eligible to participate in 95% of QRIS, their engagement tends to be low (NCECQA, 2019). Some scholars argue that this is because QRIS standards are largely based on “what works” in centers and do not incorporate the most distinctive and desirable aspects of FCC (Hallam et al., 2017; Tonyan et al., 2017). At the same time, the national supply of FCC has fallen by more than a third in the last decade (NCECQA, 2020a). One possible reason for this decline could be the emergence of quality standards and expectations that are misaligned with providers’ own priorities for their programs. Thus, it is essential to better understand:

- (1) What components of quality FCC providers think are most important in their programs?
- (2) How are these components mis/aligned with QRIS standards?
- (3) How does this mis/alignment relate to providers’ engagement and retention in the field?

The proposed study examines these questions using a mixed methods approach with data from a larger four-state study of FCC decline and supply (Erikson Institute, 2020).

These objectives are of great relevance to the Administration for Children and Families’ priorities of (a) *understanding the unique features of home-based child care, including FCC*; (b) *strategies for retaining the ECEC/FCC workforce and engaging them in early childhood systems*; with the ultimate goal of (c) *increasing the supply of high-quality subsidized child care for diverse groups of low-income families*. This work is particularly pressing in light of the Coronavirus pandemic, where more families may seek out FCC for its small groups of mixed-age children (Jacobson, 2020) only to find that many programs in their communities have closed or lowered their capacity (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Now more than ever, we must give FCC providers the respect they deserve—not by asking them to conform to the best-practices of centers, but by valuing their unique and powerful contributions to the lives of children and families. By better understanding these contributions, we can begin to better engage FCC providers in the ECEC field and reverse the declining supply.