One of the enduring lessons of the pandemic should be that childcare is an essential service and those who provide it have been undervalued for too long. This is a reality I have known firsthand, as owner and operator of a home-based childcare business in the Bronx for the past 18 years.

My business is licensed by New York State to serve 16 children and employ two staffers. Thanks to training, technical assistance, and other resources I receive from the nonprofit Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco), I have transformed my home daycare into a school-like setting where children learn and play through exploration.
Thousands of childcare providers like me across the city not only create nurturing environments for early learners; we give working parents the opportunity to pursue employment during daytime hours. As such, we have always been essential to our city’s economy, but that became even more clear during the pandemic. When New York shut down, we kept our doors open, caring for the children of essential workers. We even accommodated school-aged children to give them safe places to learn remotely when schools closed.

Yet, despite our critical work, childcare providers barely scrape by. Most children in home-based programs come from low-income families whose childcare is covered by state subsidies. Providers are paid based on enrollment and attendance, but the state-set rates do not reflect the true cost of providing quality full-day, full-year care and education. This reality, too, was laid bare during the pandemic when enrollments and revenues declined, overhead costs for things like PPE and cleaning supplies increased, and government aid was insufficient. Sadly, many of my fellow childcare providers were forced to close.

Enrollment in my program declined to just one child during the height of the pandemic. Fortunately, WHEDco stepped up with health and safety resources, as well as virtual trainings and connections to grant funding for providers in its network, allowing many of us to make it through the darkest days of the pandemic. Today, my enrollment is back up to 10. But nonprofits can only do so much, and the already vulnerable childcare sector was brought to the brink by COVID.

I am encouraged that the 2022 New York State budget includes a $5 billion investment in childcare through state and federally funded initiatives – with some directly supporting childcare providers. It’s a sign that our leaders have learned how essential childcare – and those who provide it – are. Hopefully, it’s a lesson they never forget.

*Mildred Augustin runs a home-based childcare business in the Wakefield section of the Bronx, as part of WHEDco’s network.*