Community-Based Innovation for Affordable Child Care

A CASE STUDY

AUGUST 2018
The more we learn about early care, the more crucial it turns out to be for a child’s entire life experience. Numerous recent studies have shown that the care we receive in our first five years of life has a huge impact on the education level we attain, the income we earn, and even how likely it is we’ll end up in jail.¹

But far too often, children raised in poverty don’t get the long-term opportunities they deserve because their caregivers are trying to survive on limited resources. Growing up in poverty often means missing out on key cognitive stimulation, and experiencing daily stress that impacts a variety of long-term economic and learning outcomes.² Despite the mounting evidence, child care remains an under-met need for low-income families.

It’s an obstacle for parents, too. Without affordable, quality child care options, parents face high barriers to pursuing a better life for themselves and their children. It impacts their ability to hold down jobs, advance their careers, and secure stable housing. Instead, many parents rely on an informal network of friends and family for child care—arrangements that are often unpredictable, unsustainable, and less than ideal for the children themselves.

There are solutions within the community. Since 2005, Tipping Point Community has worked to help Bay Area residents get on the path out of poverty. T Lab, Tipping Point’s R+D team, honed in on the crucial issue of child care to research, prototype, and test new ways to address the issue as a key challenge in breaking the cycle of poverty.

We were driven by two key questions:
1. How do we support low-income families who rely on informal care?
2. How do we help informal providers offer quality care at rates low-income families can afford?

Using human-centered design and community-led research methods, the T Lab team created GMA Village, a service concept that mobilizes grandmothers (GMA) as care providers.

Gma Village uses an online platform and community events to promote a safe, transparent child care community for parents, grandmother providers, and children.

I am proud to be a part of Gma Village. It makes me happy. I have so much to give. Gma Village works for me. I am at home and I am meeting some really nice people.

Gma Parker

Over a two year period:

OVER 300 PARENTS AND GRANDMOTHERS ENGAGED

MORE THAN 500 CHILD CARE EXCHANGES FACILITATED

OVER $20K OF INCOME GENERATED FOR GRANDMOTHERS

Gma Village creates an intergenerational care community where parents, children, and grandmothers connect through and beyond child care. After T Lab, Gma Village was run by founding T Lab Fellow, Catalina Garcia, and funded by T Lab, in hopes of launching the service throughout the Bay Area. In 2018, Gma Village closed its doors due to lack of funding opportunities, but not before amassing valuable learnings about informal child care that can shape how we think about providing child care for parents with limited options.

Thank you to the T Lab Fellows, the team who led the research phase of this project: Catalina Garcia, Johnna Flood, and Maggie Ollove. After conceiving of the idea in 2014 in T Lab, the Fellows worked with BANANAS, a child care resource and referral agency in Oakland, to prototype the service. Thank you also to BANANAS for providing Gma Village with guidance, office space, and partnership in the community. In 2016, Garcia continued on as the Gma Village founder to refine the service offering and grow its customer base.

Photo Credits: The Gma Village
Without child care, low-income parents miss opportunities for economic stability and mobility. High-quality, affordable child care is more than just an amenity. For low-income families, lack of child care is a primary obstacle on the path out of poverty. Many must trade off essentials like housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. This financial strain leaves little to spend on child care, impacting working mothers’ abilities to take on the jobs or hours needed to improve their family’s economic situation. It’s one of the main reason mothers fall out of the workforce, perpetuating downward economic mobility.

Child care costs are prohibitive for those who need it most. Most formal, licensed daycare options are out of reach for low-income families without subsidies.

2018 Annual Income vs. Child Care Costs in San Francisco

$31,200
INDIVIDUAL EARNING MINIMUM WAGE

$22,560-$29,508
LICENSED INFANT CHILD CARE

Low-income families need child care most when it is least available, and many are led by single mothers. Many of the jobs held by low-income working parents are in industries such as hospitality, child care, and retail,3 which often demand work outside the traditional 9-5 schedule, or have unpredictable hours week to week. Few traditional, licensed daycare facilities can accommodate schedules like this.

Child care costs are prohibitive for those who need it most. Most formal, licensed daycare options are out of reach for low-income families without subsidies.

36% OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOBS PAY LESS THAN $18 PER HOUR

<3% OF LICENSED CHILD CARE CENTERS OFFER EVENING, WEEKEND, OR OVERNIGHT CARE8

Of the 6 million working parents in the low-wage workforce, three-quarters are mothers, and often have little control over their work schedules.9

MORE THAN 1 IN 3 MOTHER-LED FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN LIVED BELOW THE POVERTY LINE IN 201610

Many parents rely on relatives, friends, or neighbors to fill the gap, but informal care arrangements can be unsustainable. Informal child care is now the most common form of non-parental care in the US, particularly amongst low-income families.11

As crucial as these informal care providers are, they don’t always offer a sustainable solution.

• Friends and family might not be very reliable, requiring multiple backup options.
• Child care exchanges rely on good will and favors.
• Parents cannot control or count on a specific environment for their child, including food, safety, and available activities.

Each of these issues can strain relationships with friends and family, putting additional strain on the parents themselves.
Empower the Informal Network

An informal child care network
With many low-income families shut out of formal care, T Lab explored ways to make informal care more reliable, desirable and accessible, through new solutions that optimize its strengths and eliminate its challenges.

To do this, we had to understand two things:

1. HOW TO SUPPORT LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WHO RELY ON INFORMAL CARE.
Instead of trying to eliminate parents’ reliance on informal networks for child care, we can look at how to make these networks stronger.

2. HOW TO HELP INFORMAL CARE PROVIDERS OFFER QUALITY CARE AT RATES LOW-INCOME FAMILIES CAN AFFORD.
A community-centered approach helps uncover opportunities to grow and strengthen informal child care options for low-income parents in ways that haven’t been tested yet.

Early insights
Our explorations revealed both positive and negative aspects of informal care:

ADVANTAGES

• Flexible hours that match many low-income parents’ job situations
• Often in the neighborhood, closer to home than formal options
• Care providers who share parent values, including language, cultural norms, and approach to education
• An inherent sense of trust

CHALLENGES

• Providers can be unreliable, leaving parents scrambling to find backup care
• Quality is difficult to assess: whether the provider has the experience and training to provide a safe and appropriate environment
• Inconsistent access, especially for parents who don’t already have a trusted Friends, Family, Neighbor (FFN) network

Grandmothers: An existing resource
T Lab learned from parents and informal providers that grandmothers are the most commonly relied on sources of informal care. The grandmothers we interviewed often spent time at local libraries and neighborhood meet-ups, seeking ways to give back. While most are able and willing to care for children, they are unsupported, under-resourced by the formal system, and not always recognized by their families.

• Senior citizens are the largest and fastest growing population in the world, predicted to double in the next 25 years.3
• The average age seniors retire is 62, which means they have another 20 years to stay active and work in flexible jobs that meet their lifestyle.3
• Research has shown that 35% of seniors report isolation and loneliness.3

Insight
This wealth of research and insight suggested a distinct opportunity:

DESIGN A
CHILD CARE SERVICE
THAT HARNESSES THE
EXPERIENCE AND SKILLS OF
GRANDMOTHERS
TO BUILD A TRUSTED SUPPLY OF CARE PROVIDERS FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES.
**How Gma Village works**
Gma Village takes a proven resource—grandmothers and other informal care providers—and makes them more effective and reliable by building in much-needed structures for communication, training, and relationship-building.

**It consists primarily of four elements:**

1. **AN ONLINE PLATFORM**
   that allows parents to search for grandmothers in the neighborhood, and learn more about their credentials and the type of care they provide. A customized matchmaking system and thoughtfully-designed user experience helps create a sense of trust and reliability for all parties.

2. **A TEXT MESSAGING SYSTEM**
   that connects grandmothers and parents to coordinate child care. Texting is much preferred over email or chat by grandmothers in the study for most communications.

3. **COMMUNITY EVENTS**
   that bring grandmothers and families together to meet, catch up, and have fun.

4. **A TRAINING AND SUPPORT PROGRAM**
   for grandmothers to enhance their professionalism, which earns them trust from parents. Held at community centers in the neighborhood, these sessions cover topics like home and public safety, infant and child CPR, nutrition, and developmentally appropriate activities such as games, songs, dancing, and crafts.

**What makes Gma Village unique?**
Gma Village is fundamentally different from other child care-improvement efforts:
- It mobilizes an existing resource (grandmothers) rather than introducing a new, unfamiliar element.
- Unlike most matching platforms, it’s not just transactional. It aligns with the values of the West Oakland families who co-designed it, through community events and an intergenerational focus.
- It creates more choice for low-income families who can’t afford services like Care.com and UrbanSitter.
- It taps into a growing population that’s aging out of the workforce, by providing a way to reconnect and contribute to the community.

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**Gma Village Members**

I am able to work thanks to Gma Village. I have been able to take on more shifts and my income has tripled.

Parent Lateena
Gma Village Member

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**Gma Village**

Gma Village is a service that connects low-income parents who need child support to loving grandmothers in their community. It provides affordable, flexible child care while positively impacting three generations: parents, children, and seniors.
The details of the Gma Village concept didn’t come just from T Lab, but through collaboration with the community itself. By engaging parents, grandmothers, and community organizations directly, we were able to uncover ideas that were far more likely to actually be adopted. Numerous in-depth conversations and co-creation sessions, followed by rounds of iterative prototyping, led us to a detailed, thought-out service concept that rolled out with significant community buy-in.

Specifically, T Lab’s approach consisted of three phases: research, prototyping, and a micro-pilot.

Understanding desires and needs
It’s not enough to simply create a service platform based on our own understanding of the problem. We needed to know who it was going to serve, whose lives it would impact or improve, and what challenges they faced.

Our research included:
• Nine interviews with agency representatives
• Nineteen participants in design-led activities
• Thirty-two interviews with parents and providers
• Twenty-two participants in three community workshops
• Fifty-four participants in five stakeholder workshops

Co-Design Sessions
Parents and grandmothers discuss challenges with finding or providing child care. Parents use a card-sorting activity to prioritize the qualities they search for in a care provider.
Based on this research, the team created a series of Personas: recurring types of people within the community who would most likely use the service concept being developed. Specifically, we identified three personas each among the Grandmother care providers, and Parents who needed to find child care.

All grandmothers we surveyed were motivated by a combination of Community, Purpose, and Income, in varying levels of priority.

**GRANDMOTHERS SEEKING FULL-TIME JOB OPPORTUNITIES**

- Primarily motivated by income, with purpose and community as secondary reasons.
- She has worked with children all her life, at a school, or child care center.
- She is hoping to fill her week with child care jobs, which may be her only income source.
- She is likely available to provide care at odd hours.
- She can provide care at her home and out in the community.

“I have more than 30 years experience caring for children of various ages. I have six children of my own and two grandchildren and used to work at a child care center. It’s something I’ve done my whole life. I love to work with kids, helping them learn and grow.”

_Gma Village Member_

**GRANDMOTHERS SEEKING PART-TIME JOB OPPORTUNITIES**

- Primarily motivated by purpose, with community and income as secondary reasons.
- She loves children and wants to spend free time with them.
- She understands how hard it is for parents, and wants to help.
- She often works during the day throughout the week, and is able to provide part-time, weekend, evening or overnight child care at her home.

“I have worked in daycare and child care for the past eight years. I currently work part-time at a preschool/daycare with infants and would love to support families during my free time.”

_Gma Village Member_

**GRANDMOTHERS SEEKING A CONNECTION TO THEIR COMMUNITY**

- Primarily motivated by community, with purpose and income as secondary reasons.
- She is likely retired, with a relatively open schedule.
- She is looking for ways to stay active and engaged.
- She wants to help families, loves children and is able to care for them in her home part-time.

“I used to work for AT&T but I’m retired now and want to help families. I have taken care of kids my whole life. I raised two sets of children (my sister’s and my brother’s). I raised my grandson and my nephews and I have taken care of kids from when they were babies until they are teenagers, and I am good at it.”

_Gma Village Member_
We learned that Parents are looking for community, flexibility, and affordability, in varying levels of priority. Most are single moms, looking for a safe, flexible, affordable child care alternative to help them maintain employment.

**PARENTS SEEKING AFFORDABLE CARE**

Primarily motivated by affordability, with community and flexibility as secondary reasons.
- She has limited income, making it hard to find child care she can afford.
- She works a fairly regular schedule, and is eligible for subsidized care but unlikely to get it.
- She is on many waitlists, and hoping to get into Head Start.
- Even with the help of a subsidized program, she will need additional support during school closures or late shifts.

“I’m a single mom currently living in a shelter and just graduated a culinary program and started a job, but I’m worried I won’t be able to keep it because I don’t have child care.”

Gma Village Parent

**PARENTS SEEKING FLEXIBLE CARE**

Primarily motivated by flexibility, with affordability and community as secondary reasons.
- She has a variable schedule, which is often known only a few days in advance.
- She finds it difficult to plan for child care and impossible to apply for subsidies that require filling in schedules ahead of time.
- Her unstable income makes paying for child care challenging.

“I’m a single mom and I use a service which connects me to temp jobs and the hours change depending on the job. I don’t have my mom to support me so I am looking for a grandma that can help us out.”

Gma Village Parent

**PARENTS SEEKING AFTER-HOURS CARE**

Primarily motivated by flexibility, with affordability and community as secondary reasons.
- She works closing, opening, overnight or weekend shifts.
- She struggles to find child care that works with her schedule.
- Few child care centers can accommodate her needs – those that can are unaffordable.

“I just got off maternity leave, and work opening and closing shifts. I have no child care and Head Start doesn’t work with my schedule. My funds are pretty low so I may have to stop working.”

Gma Village Parent
SERVICE MODEL
A service blueprint emerged over several weeks, illustrating each step a Gma goes through while engaging with the service. With this high-level structure established, the next task was to design each moment in collaboration with Gmas and parents, to ensure the experience truly met their needs.

After foundational research was completed in T Lab, the Fellows continued to work together as an independent team to prototype the service components, and T Lab would continue to fund the work for the next 2 years.

Co-creating new ideas to learn what the community values
With basic research insights and personas in place, the Gma Village team ran a series of planning and design workshops with parents and grandparents in the West Oakland community, collaboratively generating the ideas that would form the backbone of the Gma Village service concept.

To create a viable concept, the team first had to answer some basic questions:
• What qualities do parents need most from a care provider?
• How can a service platform help providers develop those qualities?
• How do parents prefer to search for and connect with providers?
• How are grandmothers most comfortable communicating with parents?

Building trust and community
One of the key challenges identified during co-creation was the need for trust: for parents to trust that they were leaving their children in good hands; for grandmothers to trust that they would be respected, paid, and valued as vital members of the community.

The team incorporated three trust-building elements into the prototype service model:
• Improved child care training for grandmothers to ensure quality
• Integration with TrustLine, an established state-wide database of nannies and babysitters who’ve cleared criminal background checks
• Social gatherings for parents and grandmothers to meet each other

Gma Community Training
Forty-five grandmothers have received a Health and Safety training and Trustline background check.
Scheduling Child Care
Gma Village also tested ways to introduce parents to grandmothers in order to schedule child care services, starting with printed pictures and caregiver biographies.

Insights from Prototyping
These early prototypes pointed to four crucial findings:

• When grandmothers didn’t respond quickly to care requests, parents lost trust and interest in the service.
• Social gatherings were valuable, allowing Gmas to connect with each other and with parents, build community in the neighborhood and share their caregiving experiences.
• These gatherings also validated the idea that trained Gmas play a necessary role in developing trust and confidence in their ability to provide quality care.
• While a third party background check was valued by parents, Trustline was a barrier to entry for Gmas. Trustline’s $130 background was cost prohibitive for Gmas. Additionally, the results took between six weeks to nine months, a delay that resulted in losing Gmas waiting to join the service. Public schools and licensed child care centers opt for a $10-30 background check with shorter turnaround time, which would likely to be a better option for Gma Village.
Create a proof-of-concept of the Gma Village service model to evaluate the design of each touchpoint, and validate demand for the service

The micro-pilot builds on earlier prototypes, and incorporates new touchpoints designed to bring the user experience into closer alignment with the expectations of parents and grandmothers and ultimately determine if it satisfied the project challenges. By 2016, Catalina Garcia remained as the Founder in hopes of launching a longer-term pilot as an independent organization.

Specifically, the micro-pilot needed refinement to address some key issues raised in Phase 2:

- **Trust**: Training and verification programs help, but child care is an emotional interaction. The service had to do more to build trust for parents when searching online.

- **Seamless matching**: During prototyping, the team matched providers using a printed photo/text album at the library and 1:1 conversations with T Lab team members, which isn’t scalable. The service needed a digital platform to enable parents and providers to facilitate matches themselves, but in a way that makes sense for a low-income community.

- **Ongoing support**: Beyond just matching, Gmas and parents both needed tools that facilitate continuous conversations about payment, care expectations, safety, and shared values.

Here’s how the team acted to address these needs:

**A new office, new events**

To build trust and increase membership of both parents and care providers, Gma Village moved their office to BANANAS, a recognized resource and referral agency in North Oakland, where parents are already going for events. The team also held Gma Appreciation Events to build community and trust, and attract new parents and Gmas to the program.

**Community Events**

Parents and children gather to celebrate grandmothers in their community, build relationships and potentially match grandmothers to families in need of child care.
An improved matching app
To streamline the process of searching, matching, and communicating with providers, the team developed a digital app for storing Gma profiles to allow parents to search and select caregivers in a user-friendly format.

Online text messaging
They also implemented a text messaging function directly into the Gma Village online platform, allowing parents to quickly communicate with Gmas through the mode they prefer.
Better workshops and support tools
Parents and Gmas were often uncomfortable negotiating payment terms. Through workshops with both groups, Gma Village reached a recommended rate of $5/hour and $2/hour for each additional child—a baseline to get conversations going between parents and providers. The conversational tools the team created also helped participants establish working norms, helping to professionalize the process while reducing ambiguity and discomfort.

Participation
By the end of the micro-pilot:

36 GMAS
COMPLETED ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND CHECKS AND WERE AVAILABLE TO PROVIDE CARE ON THE PLATFORM.

22 ADDITIONAL GMAS
WERE ON THE WAITING LIST TO ATTEND ORIENTATION.

85 PARENTS
ATTENDED ORIENTATION AND BECAME GMA VILLAGE MEMBERS.

55 ADDITIONAL PARENTS
WERE ON THE WAITLIST TO BECOME MEMBERS.

I’m so thankful for all that Gma Village has provided including a new positive support system and a community with fun events and meet up time. I’m even planning on going back to school this year because I no longer feel it’s out of my reach.

Parent Terez
Gma Village Parent

I love working with children. It gives me something constructive to do and a little additional income. It’s a great way to reach out to the community.

Gma Jean
Gma Village Member
Observations
Through this process of research, co-creation, prototyping and refinement, we were able to develop a viable micro-pilot for the Gma Village service platform, and draw out a few key insights as well:

1. THE GMA VILLAGE MODEL WORKS, WITH SOME LIMITATIONS.
Policy constraints added some complexity to the process, and establishing commonly agreed-upon rate took some effort, but the result is something that’s embraced throughout the community.

2. THE RIGHT BALANCE OF TECHNOLOGY AND PERSONAL INTERACTION IS CRUCIAL.
A digital platform dramatically simplifies the connection and scheduling process, but Gma participants still prefer a certain amount of real-life social engagement.

3. FLEXIBILITY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT MATTER JUST AS MUCH AS ECONOMICS.
Gmas are in it for more than just money, and parents need more than just affordability. Placing an emphasis on flexibility and inter-generational connection is key getting community buy-in.

Summary

OVER 300 PARENTS AND GRANDMOTHERS ENGAGED
MORE THAN 500 CHILD CARE EXCHANGES FACILITATED
OVER $20K OF INCOME GENERATED FOR GRANDMOTHERS

Through this effort, Gma Village has provided parents with a flexible and affordable child care option that allows them to pursue job and education opportunities. It also provides grandmothers with an opportunity to connect with meaningful work that aligns with their lifestyle and needs. Lastly, Gma Village provides participants with a community of support, with both parents and grandmothers showing a desire to connect with each other outside of care relationships.

By bringing a human-centered design process to the problem of flexible child care, the team was able to:
- Take a community-led approach to a problem
- Work with the existing strengths of this community
- Prototype safer, more sustainable systems for ongoing care

Call to Action
While Gma Village was a successful proof of concept, in 2018 they closed their doors due to limited long-term funding opportunities, but not before amassing valuable learnings that has already shaped how we think about providing child care for parents with limited options.

T Lab provided R+D investments that resulted in demonstrable impact as well as bridge support to develop the business model and roadmap necessary for a full scale launch. Unfortunately, however, Gma Village was unable to secure other sources of funding, particularly as a start-up nonprofit, not just a program within an existing, sustainable organization. The reality is that funding and investments in childcare is extremely limited.

Through T Lab, Tipping Point Community has taken the first step in seeding new ideas to address difficult challenges faced by our community and hope that others will join us in supporting them long-term. While these investments are higher risk, we also know that existing programs and policies, alone, are not enough to address some of the most pernicious problems low-income individuals and families face and ultimately, break the cycle of poverty. Investing in new concepts, like Gma Village, opens the door to desperately needed changes in our community and the system at large.

GMA VILLAGE CASE STUDY 14
REFERENCES


2. NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SEC CYD), 2012.


