

A child-care agenda is needed -- in good and bad times

Syracuse Post-Standard (May 07, 2009) Editorial Page

For years, one of the biggest issues parents faced was finding affordable child care -- especially for their infants and toddlers.

Just five months ago, for example, local child-care providers and advocates bemoaned the lack of child-care slots, pointing out that the wait for infant care could be as long as six months.

What a difference a troubled economy and few months make.

As Family Life Editor Gina Chen reported Wednesday, some child-care providers are watching their numbers decrease -- as parents struggle with pay cuts and job losses.

Peggy Liuzzi of Child Care Solutions says anecdotal evidence suggests parents are cutting back on child care or relying more on help from family members.

Some child-care providers have been affected by hard times:

- The Syracuse-area Salvation Army laid off six of its 55 employees because of dwindling enrollment -- from 250 to 190 kids -- in its child-care programs.
- Cazenovia Children's House, which typically enrolls 150 kids, has 10 openings, the most it's offered in two decades.
- The Brewerton Children Center, which take in kids from Onondaga and Oswego Counties, had 68 children in its before- and after-school program, but has only 42 now, which the director says is tied to parental layoffs.

It's a tenuous position for children, parents and child-care providers.

Children need safe, good-quality care, but those features might be neglected if parents must trim expenses and can't find responsible family members or friends to help out.

Parents must feel confident about the care their children receive; they also need the ability to be able to look for work or train for new jobs when needed.

Child-care providers need the ability to wait out the economic storm, which may grow worse, in order to keep providing services for children. Otherwise, the cycle of insufficient child care will be repeated once people return to work.

As this page has noted many times, addressing child-care needs and crises must be on the agendas of government, civic and business leaders. It cannot be the sole responsibility of advocates like Child Care Solutions to figure how to deal with an issue that affects so many families, yet still does not get the attention it deserves.

President Obama has approved \$2.3 billion of stimulus money to help states with child-care programs. But beyond taking stimulus money, states and local government need to recognize that child care is intertwined with economic development: Parents need a job, and they need good child care while they work. They must have better choices than remaining unemployed or placing their children in substandard child-care situations.

The people in charge of policy-making need to be stimulated to craft a comprehensive child-care agenda -- one that meets the needs of children, parents and providers, in good times and bad.