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Wisconsin's Looming Child Care Crisis and its Broad Ranging Impact

A guest editorial from DCF Secretary Emilie Amundson

Wisconsin's early care and education industry is nearing crisis point. To some of you, that statement is not a surprise to read. Sadly, we've been hurtling down this path long before the pandemic struck. We need a rapid course correction, or we stand to lose about a third of our child care providers, which could spell trouble for our entire economy.

Unlike our system of public education, child care operates on a private pay economy. Child care providers run small businesses and contract directly with families for services. Some families are eligible for a small subsidy based on their income level. But many who qualify for these subsidies cannot locate a provider that both meets their needs and accepts the subsidy program, called Wisconsin Shares.

Finding care, regardless of household income, is made more challenging by a lack of availability. Over half of Wisconsin children live in a child care desert - that figure shoots up to 80 percent across our rural areas.

As for the quality of our programs, in Wisconsin, our early educators are highly credentialed. The majority have advanced degrees, and all are required to continue their learning as part of their career. Our children are fortunate to learn from such a skilled workforce. Yet the average wage for a child care educator ranges from 10 to 13 dollars per hour. With those statistics, it should be no surprise that the early care and education workforce has a turnover rate of 40 percent.

The child care workforce is made up of primarily women. As women leave the child care industry, their actions will disproportionately impact working women (now over 50% of the workforce) who depend on that care to work. Despite making gains over the last decades, a recent study from Northwestern University showed that women still bear a [disproportionate child care burden in a household with a working father and mother](#). As more families make plans to support children learning virtually, these tough choices will hit business productivity and our economies.

Recently, I spent some time talking business with a family-based, in-home child care provider. She normally cares for eight kids, her licensed capacity. She sets her rates so that she can cover the cost of food, cleaning supplies, toys, rent, and utilities. She uses whatever is left to pay herself. The pandemic forced many families to reconsider sending their kids to care, and when that happened, her paycheck evaporated. She knows her families can't afford to pay more – child care is on average more costly than college. Instead, she's looking to do whatever she can to make sure the kids in her care get what they need – including cutting her wages. If this scenario keeps up much longer, she will close her business, leaving a small community without eight child care slots that were there just this week.

We were working on these issues before COVID-19. But this pandemic has the industry at a crisis point. The state set aside \$51 million to help stabilize the industry and DCF got funding to 2,712 providers, helping them pay their staff, care for children of essential workers, and soften the blow of temporary closings. While we are thankful for that support, it is not going to be enough to change the course we are on.

But here are a few ideas that deserve our attention. First, we need to supply our child care providers and educators with personal protective equipment (PPE). As we reopen schools and bolster safety across sectors, we cannot forget about our child care providers. We need to commit to additional investments at the state, local, and federal level – and they need to be targeted at child care educators and the child care sector. Finally, we need [the support of business](#), school districts, and community leaders to explore creative solutions that provide mutual benefits. Ideas like pre-paying for child care slots that individual employees can access, establishing start-up funds and loans for the child care industry, and finding ways to connect the unemployed with careers in child care. We need innovative, local solutions that we can quickly scale up.

Our early care educators are essential. They were there for us when we needed them most. We owe it to them to get this right, and the opportunity is still on the table.

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