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Lack of state money hurts rising number of families

If you're a working parent who doesn't make a lot of money, you may have a long wait for affordable child care.

In Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties, there are more than 7,600 parents on a waiting list for subsidized child care -- 6,400 of them in Orange County alone. They are working mothers and fathers whose low-paying jobs make it next to impossible to afford high-quality care, which can run \$175 per week and up for an infant.

"That puts a huge hole in my budget," says Talina Moore of Orlando, a 27-year-old single mother who is on the waiting list. "I make \$10.30 an hour, I live on my own, and I don't get any kind of assistance. I really want my daughter to have a better quality of day care than she's getting."

Moore already had to move her 3-year-old from a church-run program she liked to a less expensive for-profit center she doesn't because the bill was eating up 20 percent of her salary.

And the problem goes beyond economics. Colleen Gallagher, president and CEO of the nonprofit Community Coordinated Care for Children -- or 4C, as it's better known -- points out that the child-care programs her organization helps to subsidize focus on early-childhood development and preparing kids to start school.

"Choosing an early-learning program is one of the most important decisions a parent can ever make," Gallagher said. "But, unfortunately, it usually comes down to 'How much does it cost?'"

Her agency, opened in 1969, gets state money to pay for the subsidies. But there has been no increase in funding for nearly a decade, despite a fast-growing population and, more recently, an economy that is especially tough on the working poor.

With employers cutting workers' hours, many families still need child care but have less money to pay for it. Or they're cobbling together two and three part-time, minimum-wage jobs.

In Orange, Osceola and Seminole, nearly 1,100 children are being added to the wait list each month.

"I think people have no idea how bad it is," Gallagher said.

Florida falls behind

A recent study released by the National Women's Law Center found Florida is "far behind where it needs to be" to meet the needs of low-income families with young children. In the past year alone, the waiting list for the state as a whole has climbed from 45,000 to more than 47,500 kids. Worse, the state is expected to cut assistance to as many as 5,000 families in the coming year.

"As the fourth most populous state in the country, child-care and school-readiness funding is critical for low- to moderate-income families," said Phyllis Kalifeh, president and CEO of the statewide nonprofit Children's Forum. "A family earning 200 percent of the federal poverty level could pay as much as 30 to 40 percent of their wages for child care. That leaves little left over for

food, clothing and housing."

In 1999, state lawmakers passed a "school readiness act" after 20 percent of Florida's 5-year-olds were deemed unprepared to enter kindergarten. In part, the law established early-learning coalitions in every Florida county to work on the issue.

The move was also a recognition that child care had a purpose beyond warehousing kids while their parents worked.

"We are not baby sitters anymore," said Karen Willis, CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County. "We have a lot of information now about the way children learn, and we know that they start learning from the time they pop out of the womb."

In fact, research shows that the vast majority of brain development takes place before a child reaches his fifth birthday. Further, children raised in environments where they are not intellectually stimulated are more likely at age 3 to have IQ scores at or below the mentally retarded range. By age 12, they're much more likely to have failed at least one grade of school.

"Child care helps children, families and communities prosper," said Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the National Women's Law Center. "It helps children learn and develop skills they need to succeed in school and in life."

Influence of child care

There is new evidence that the more disadvantaged a child's family, the more he or she will benefit from child care.

In a recent study, children born to women who never graduated from high school were significantly less likely to become physically aggressive if they received at least 21 hours a week of child care outside the home. By contrast, children born to more well-educated women showed no difference in aggression when compared to their stay-at-home peers.

"What that waiting list means is a missed opportunity for those kids to be in an environment where they can get the kind of stimulation they need -- to be with somebody who can focus on that early-childhood development," Willis said. "The fact is, these are poorer families, and they may not have the same opportunities that children from middle- and upper-middle-income families do."

To an outsider, what goes on in child-care centers may seem like mere play. But working with kids on hand-eye coordination, movement, recognizing shapes and colors and even learning about personal space and sharing with others is all part of the curriculum.

"Before I had kids," Moore said, "I had no clue how important this was or how much it would cost. My daughter is only 3, but I want her to have those skills she'll need when it's time to start school."

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