

Peyton Tinjum, left, and Nonie Skalsky reach down for their toes during the morning activity at Benedictine Living Community. Photo by Jesse Trelstad/ Grand Forks Herald.

**Child care shortage, affordability remain as challenges in Minnesota**

By Brandi Jewett on Mar 1, 2016, Grand Forks Herald

ADA, Minn. — On any given day, dozens roam the spaces of Little Learners daycare — each unaware they hold a coveted spot.

They're spots that Minnesota parents spends weeks or months searching for, but their child care search often leads them to dead ends as open spaces are rare and waiting lists long.

"We turn down anywhere from six to 10 children a week," said Karen Devos, owner of Little Learners in Ada.

Devos has spent the last 18 years taking care of children, first out of her home and then at Little Learners for the past two years. She knows the challenges faced by her peers and the parents she serves. Those challenges swirl around topics such as affordability, supply and regulation.

Parents struggle with finding care that fits in with their budget or just finding care at all. Providers are unable to raise rates for fear of pricing people out of their services and cite regulations as reasons for not taking infants — a very high demand area — or as a barrier to hiring staff.

At a February listening session set up in Crookston to talk about child care challenges, Devos outlined working closely with the Benedictine Living Community, which houses Little Learners, to get the center up and running. The nursing home and assisted living facility helped her with startup costs, and Devos said the daycare wouldn't have happened without its support.

Little Learners is one of 300 centers and home daycares in the seven northwestern Minnesota counties of Kittson, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake and Roseau.

Statewide, an analysis by national advocacy group Child Care Aware shows there are 2,223 childcare centers and 9,790 daycares operated out of homes, also known as family child care.

The numbers sound large but parents and providers attest they're not enough.

These concerns have been shared again and again in listening sessions held across Minnesota by a recently formed state House committee. The Select Committee on Child Care Affordability has a goal of working with parents and providers to bring more affordable care to the state, and the listening sessions are part of its input gathering process.

The average annual cost in 2015 for full-time care in a child care center for a 4-year-old child was $11,119, the Child Care Aware analysis shows. The cost for care in a family daycare setting was less expensive at $7,163 annually.

The cost for an infant was much steeper at a center, with an average annual cost of $14,366, while the total cost of family care came in at $7,882.

**Cost concerns**

Money also becomes a sticking point for providers, who point out they can't raise their prices to keep up with rising business expenses without putting care out of reach for some parents.

Kim Feiro, who has done child care for the past 30 years in Crookston, knows what it's like to spend a majority of her earnings on daycare. She recalled a time when she brought her own children to the University of Minnesota, Crookston for child care, which consumed $740 of her $753 monthly earnings.

"I know the burden, and I don't want to do that to my parents," she said.

As a former child care provider, state Rep. Mary Franson, R-Alexandria, said she understands that concern. The mother of three operated a home daycare for about four years.

"Raising your costs, you don't want to drive those parents away, but at the same time, you have a business to run and you also have bills to pay, curriculum to pay for, activities to pay for your child care so your business can continue to thrive and operate," she said.

Franson is the chairwoman of the Select Committee on Child Care Affordability and has heard from Feiro and many others about struggles providers face.

Over the past few weeks, the committee has made stops around Minnesota seeking input from parents, providers and other community members.

The feedback at the Crookston hearing mirrored much of what its heard in other cities so far: providers turning down multiple parents a day because they have no open spaces, a lack of infant care available because regulations have providers wary of offering it and creativity is required for recruiting new providers to the industry.

"We are hearing over and over again that the provider shortage and high cost have affected everyone's daily lives and the economy of greater Minnesota," Franson said at last month's Crookston hearing. "People won't take jobs because they can't find child care, families' pocketbooks are stretched to their limit and providers' income stays the same even though costs are going up. We find this is a very serious issue."

**Recruitment required**

Recruitment is key to addressing a shortage of providers across the state, but Maureen Hams, community service director with Tri-Valley Opportunity Council, told state representatives it can be difficult.

While Tri-Valley, based in Crookston, runs advertisements encouraging individuals to become licensed child care providers, much of the recruitment happens through word of mouth.

"People ask a provider if they have an opening and they say 'Nope, you're going to have to get into the business,'" Hams said.

Increasing awareness of the problem is another tool that has proven effective in small communities. Hams pointed to public meeting in Newfolden, Minn., held to discuss a lack of daycare in the area.

"People didn't realize it was such a need," she said. "We got two providers out of that meeting."

Becoming a licensed child care provider does require paperwork and training, but Hams said her organization is more than happy to help interested individuals complete it. Grants are even available to cover some startup costs.

**Regulatory woes**

Those already in the business point to strict regulations as another challenge — one that especially affects parents seeking infant care.

While providers attending the Crookston hearing said the state licenser they work with now is helpful, that hasn't always been the case with past licensors.

Jerry Kerber, inspector general for the state Department of Human Services, traveled with the committee to Crookston, which gave providers a direct line to the department.

"The rules and regs have come down hard on infants," Feiro told Kerber and legislators. "We have been threatened with fees and fines and 'We're going to shut you down.' They haven't been working with us to tell us what we need to do, and a lot of providers say 'Forget this, I'm not going to touch an infant.'"

Much of the regulation, such as a statute stating only a fitted sheet can be in a crib with a sleeping infant, stems from a number of infant deaths reported in daycare, Kerber said.

Feiro and others said they understand the need for stringent regulations, as she knows news stories of children dying in home child care can leave parents wary.

"To hear of a child dying in family child care just makes us all look really yucky, and we're not all that way," she said. "We're just not all that way."

For providers, Kerber said DHS will soon have a website launched that will allow them to ask questions about laws and allow them to check their if licensor is interpreting the law correctly.

The Select Committee on Child Care Affordability also will continue to meet with providers and parents and use that input to prepare potential legislative changes.