

CAPITAL REGION

Groups work for more affordable child care

Many children begin their day at Head Start, a preschool program for low-income children between the ages of 3 and 5, then move to home-based day cares in the afternoon.

"It gives the children a chance to be in a school setting, but also saves money," said Ann Haywod, the assistant director of the Head Start program run by the Schenectady Community Action Program.

Head Start is an educational program. But unlike day care, it's free.

SCAP's Head Start program offers three "extended day classrooms" that run from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. to better accommodate working parents.

But the program shuts down for the summer, forcing many parents to pay for child care out of pocket, Haywod said.

Although many of these parents are poor enough to receive a state subsidy for child care, "The cost is an issue, even with the subsidy," she said. Many Head Start parents earn minimum wage.

Day care is expensive everywhere, but especially in New York.

Nationwide, parents pay between \$4,400 to \$14,650 for full-time infant care in a child care center; in New York, the average price for full-time infant care is \$11,887, according to the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, which earlier this month released a report titled "Parents and the High Price of Child Care." Full-time care for a 4-year-old costs between \$3,800 to \$10,900 each year; in New York it costs an average of \$9,391.

New York ranks second on the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies' list of the least affordable states for preschool-age child care.

For a single parent, child care for a preschooler costs 40 percent of median income; for a two-parent household, it is 12.1 percent. The state ranks fourth on the list of least affordable states for infant care. For a single parent, infant care is 50.6 percent of median income; for a two-parent household, it is 15.4 percent.

"Parents are paying between \$10,000 to \$11,000 for child care," said Jenn O'Connor, a senior policy associate at the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy in Albany. "That's more than you might pay for SUNY tuition. It's something working families can ill afford."

WINNING BEGINNING NY

The Schuyler Center belongs to a coalition of advocacy groups, called Winning Beginning NY, that wants the state to expand high quality child care programs. The

coalition has a number of proposals — which it refers to as its "birth to five agenda" — to make child care more affordable and accessible to parents, but also a better-paying profession that attracts and retains talented people with a desire to work with young children. Winning Beginning views child care as a key to lifting low-income parents out of poverty, because it allows them to work while preparing their children for kindergarten.

"We want to see people working, but we want them to feel that their children are in a safe, stable environment," O'Connor said. "People work harder if their children are in a safe, stable environment."

"The cost, especially if you have multiple children, is a real problem for families," said Patty Skinner, executive director of the Capital District Child Care Council, which helps parents identify child care providers and also serves as a resource for child care workers.

Finding care that fits the needs of the family is also difficult, she said. People who work non-traditional hours may struggle to find care.

Winning Beginning also wants the state to increase subsidized child care by \$140 million in its 2008-2009 budget; this funding would restore the 14,000 subsidized child care slots cut under the Pataki administration and add an additional 14,000 slots.

Child care subsidies hit a high of \$929 million in fiscal year 2004-2005, but dropped to \$858 million in 2006-2007 and are now about \$862 million.

New York is one of only five states that does not have a uniform fee scale for child care across the state; instead, the cost of child care may vary widely depending on where a person lives, with some parents paying as much as 35 percent of their marginal income for child care and some as little as 10 percent.

Winning Beginning supports cap-

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ping the co-payment that families pay for subsidized child care at 10 percent of household income.

COST VARIES BY REGION

According to the Empire Justice Center, parents in Albany and Rensselaer counties pay 25 percent of their income over the poverty level for subsidized child care, or \$4,292 each year, while parents in Schenectady, Schoharie and Fulton counties pay 17.5 percent of their income over the poverty level, or \$3,004 per year. In Montgomery County, parents pay 35 percent of their income over the poverty level, or \$6,010 each year.

"We find that even within zip codes someone will be paying X

amount and someone else will be paying Y amount," O'Connor said. "It's an issue of consistency and fairness in pricing."

"One of the things we're trying to get across to the state is that learning begins at birth," O'Connor said. "We don't believe in child-care settings that stick kids in front of a television. We're trying to change the culture or mindset. It's early care and education."

Four-year-olds who attend pre-k programs are much better prepared for kindergarten than children who don't, O'Connor said.

Winning Beginning also proposes allocating \$15 million to create a program that would provide sup-

port and assistance to early childhood workers. One idea is to fund a loan forgiveness program that would provide up to \$4,000 a year in loan forgiveness for education staff who have completed an associate, bachelor or master's degree in early childhood education or a related field.

"[Child care workers] are very poorly paid," O'Connor said. "If you're teaching pre-k in a child care center, you're making less than at a pre-school. Retention is a huge issue. You want kids in a quality setting, and you want people who are trained and know what they're doing."

As it is now, many child care workers are paid by the hour and lack benefits.

"There's the whole issue of not being able to pay staff a worthy wage," Skinner said. "Child care staff are paid poverty level wages.

If you've got turnover, how do you keep things up to standard?" Loan forgiveness, she said, would make a big difference for people.

According to The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, the price of child care is rising faster than inflation. Between 2005 and 2006, the price of full-time infant care in a center rose an average of 6.9 percent, while the price of full-time care in a center for a four-year-old went up 6.7 percent.

Child care is particularly unaffordable for single parents, with the annual price of care for two children, an infant and a preschooler, ranging from 47 percent to 113 percent of the state median income for single parents.

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