

## **Baby Talk: Leaders must tackle worsening child care crisis**

**Syracuse Post-Standard (December 05, 2008) By the Editorial Board**



*Jennifer Meyers/The Post-Standard TY'LIQUE WILLIAMS (left) plays with Ayden Sprague inside the infant room at the Children's Learning Center at Onondaga Community College.*

Parents and child care advocates have been screaming "help" for years, but government, business and economic development leaders seem unable to hear them.

Otherwise, they would have responded long ago to the fact that parents have been struggling to find and pay for quality child care.

As Family Life Editor Gina Chen noted in a story Monday, parents looking for infant care can wait as long as five or six months.

In Cayuga County, the two biggest child care centers will not have an opening for infants before March.

Madison County lost 26 infant slots after a center and some individual providers closed, and was only able to recoup 14 spaces through new providers.

More than a third of the referrals for 4,420 kids made by Child Care Solutions in Onondaga County were for children under 2. "We don't have enough high-quality infant care to meet that need," says Peggy Liuzzi, executive director.

Even when parents find infant care, the cost can be daunting. In Onondaga County, the average is \$8,300 per year, according to Liuzzi.

Studies co-authored by Cornell University's Mildred Warner, an expert on the relationship between child care and economic development, have shown that affordable and available child care is essential:

- \* Seventy percent of mothers with children under 6 work outside the home.

- \* Some families spend as much as 25 percent of their income on child care.

Even with such troubling statistics, local, state and federal leaders have not given child care issues the focus they deserve -- exemplified by the fact that there is no comprehensive child care plan in operation at any government level.

In fact, the state now offers 46,000 fewer child care subsidies than it did five years ago, according to child care advocates. Those subsidies are critical for low-income parents, who cannot afford to shoulder the full cost of child care.

Locally, Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney increased subsidy payments by 4 percent to 46 child care centers that provided services to low-income families. But subsidies alone won't solve child care problems.

If parents can't find care, they cannot work. If they can't work, they can't pay taxes. If they don't pay taxes, there are fewer dollars for essential services funded by the government.

With the economy in a shambles, every job counts.

Local and state government and business leaders must care about a child care crisis that is worsening. They should meet to aggressively confront the problem, seeking help from experts at Cornell University who have done extensive study on the subject.

Eighty percent of Upstate economic developers said in a 2006 study that child care must be incorporated into economic development planning. It's time to make that happen.

As Warner and her co-authors pointed out in a report about child care, "Just as transportation enables parents to go to work, so does child care."