

## **Child-care centers struggle to stay open in Syracuse's lower-income neighborhoods**

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Kelley Baker, who lives in Syracuse's Skunk City, looks for the same things in child care any parent would.

She wants a place close to home, where she feels the teachers care and her children are learning the socialization and emotional skills they'll need to attend school.

Baker, who makes \$12 an hour, lost that for her two middle children when DePaul Cooperative Day Care closed Dec. 31. The kids were to return there in January after she finished her disability time following the birth of her fifth child in November, but now she's unsure what she'll do.

I was, like, heartbroken," Baker said. "I'm so stuck."

Options for quality child-care centers for lower-income families such as Baker's are growing increasingly limited. DePaul was the fourth child-care center to close in the past two years that predominantly served the neediest Syracuse neighborhoods. Together, the centers had space for about 200 children.

Cayuga, Cortland, Madison and Oswego counties haven't experienced the same situation, according to child-care referral agencies in those counties.

The closures leave 62 child-care centers in Onondaga County. Sixteen of those serve 50 percent or more families whose income makes them eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, a commonly used measure of poverty, according to state records.

For parents who need these centers, the closures leave a gap. Lower-income families need centers close to home because they may not have reliable transportation. One closure can affect them more than it would more affluent families.

The centers didn't close because children don't need them. They closed because centers that serve the community's poorest families have trouble staying financially viable without as consistent an income stream from tuition as centers that serve wealthier communities, child-care advocates say. And these centers are serving a population that encounters economic pressures and frequent job changes that make stability difficult.

These centers have few so-called self-pay families, who pay the whole tuition bill of as much as \$179 a week for an infant. Instead, their families rely on government subsidies, and many of them must pay a weekly co-pay based on their salary. United Way of Central New York also offers scholarships, but there's a waiting list.

When financially strapped parents get behind on their co-pay, the centers run into financial troubles. And these families frequently lose their subsidies - if work hours

change, they don't follow job-training program rules or they get a slight raise that bumps them out of eligibility.

The victims are children, who research shows are most vulnerable from birth to age 3. They get pulled from one child-care setting to another, unable to make the attachments with adults vital during this period for their emotional, social and intellectual development.

And if the parents don't have someone they trust to care for their children, it makes it tougher for them to keep the jobs they need to get out of poverty.

When a child leaves a center, the center often doesn't immediately have a replacement for that spot. So it loses money until the spot is filled but still must pay staff, the heating bill and rent, getting deeper into debt.

"It is not just one program. It's really a pattern of programs that are under-resourced and under-supported," said Peggy Liuzzi, executive director of Child Care Solutions, the county's nonprofit child-care referral agency. "We're going to continue to see closings unless there is a focused effort to say we want to make sure that low-income families in the city have access to center-based care."

The county's Department of Social Services, which administers the child-care subsidies, is aware of the crunch facing centers that serve lower-income families. The county is considering giving centers that serve a large percentage of children who use subsidies a higher tuition reimbursement rate compared with centers that serve only a few subsidized children, said David Sutkowy, commissioner of social services.

"It truly is a critical issue," said Ann Rooney, County Executive Joanie Mahoney's new administrator for human services who previously worked as chief financial officer for the Salvation Army. "None of us can afford for all these centers to just be always at that point of: Should we stay open; should we close?"

### **The DePaul case**

DePaul, which would have celebrated its 40th anniversary this year, is a case study of what happens at centers that try to serve the community's most vulnerable children.

For years, it struggled month to month to make ends meet. At times Catholic Charities of Onondaga County, which owns the building where DePaul was located, would help the center make its \$21,000 a month payroll, said Joe Bernazzani, the center's director since May 2006.

The final blow came in the first two weeks of September, when 11 children were pulled out of the center by their parents, leaving a financial gap too deep to plug. Bernazzani said \$60,000 or \$70,000 could have kept the center open temporarily, but the center would have ended up in the same situation again soon. The center board vote to close DePaul in mid-December.

So many children leaving at once was an anomaly, but enrollment fluctuates weekly at child-care centers that serve the neediest families. The reasons the children left DePaul were typical of what happens at other centers, child-care advocates say.

One mom lost a subsidy because she didn't follow rules of a job-training program to be eligible for a subsidy; one child was put into foster care; four children left because their mom's job changed to a night shift; and one child moved out of state, according to DePaul records. The remaining four started kindergarten.

The enrollment fluctuations that all child-care centers face are multiplied at ones that serve poorer families. In 2006, for example, the Salvation Army had 350 child-care spots, but they were filled over the course of a year by more than 900 children, said Liddy Hintz, the agency's day care director.

"That's because in the subsidy system, children come and go," Hintz said. "They come and go a lot."

The financial hole DePaul was in isn't uncommon. The Salvation Army's Southwest Day Care Center was more than \$100,000 in debt when it closed two years ago, Hintz said.

Part of the obstacle to improving the situation for centers that serve lower-income families is money, child-care advocates say. Child-care center costs in New York state are among the least affordable in the nation, according to a study by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies released in October. The association also has ranked New York as having one of the best child-care systems in the United States.

The county provides child-care subsidies for about 3,000 children annually for about \$13.5 million, according to DSS. The county doles out the money in such a way that it serves the most children possible, though that means weekly co-pays, or parent fees, of \$70 or more for some families. Nearly half the families who pay a parent fee, pay \$10 or less a week.

We can increase our rates, and we can decrease our parent fee," Sutkowy said. "If we did that, it would raise the cost per child. . . . Then by raising the cost per child, you're allowing fewer kids into the system, and then you're creating waiting lists."

### **Tough choices for families**

For families in need, co-pays can mean tough choices: Buy winter boots for the kids or pay the co-pay, child-care advocates say.

At DePaul, 30 percent of the parents were at least a week late on co-pays, and 10 percent were in a hole so deep they couldn't get out, Bernazzani said. He'd let them slide because a late fee would compound the parents' financial problems, he said. Cutting a child from the program could backfire, as the center would lose money if it had to wait for another child to enroll.

"I think it's very few who have the money in their pocket and just don't want to pay," Bernazzani said. "Every parent's situation is different. . . . 'I can't pay you this Friday, Joe. I'll pay you next Friday because my rent is due this Friday.' "

When centers such as DePaul close and children bounce from one setting to another, it affects the children's development. They have to get used to a new teacher, friends and routine, adjustments particularly hard on children learning to trust adults and control their impulses. And they miss out on the education benefits of quality centers because they aren't there enough.

"Children who have been with us consistently do well," Hintz said. "The kids who pop in and pop out. They're not ready" for kindergarten.

Fewer child-care centers in lower-income neighborhoods means fewer options for parents.

Like any parent, Baker is reluctant to enroll her children, ages 4 and 2, in a new program with teachers the family doesn't know. Her oldest children, ages 10 and 7, attended DePaul before they entered kindergarten. She likes the oversight of a center, rather than home-based care.

She cobbled together some extra vacation and sick days, so she can stay home until February from her job as a nurse assistant while she recovers from her baby's birth. The extra days buy her time to figure out child care.

"It's scary leaving your kids with people you don't know," said Baker's mother, Theresa LaMontagne, of Syracuse. "(DePaul teachers) taught my grandchildren how to brush their teeth in the morning because that was part of the routine. . . . They pretty much potty trained the kids. . . . They were just good, good teachers to my grandkids."

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