

Prosperity hinges on child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

About a quarter of all Iowans live in child care deserts — locations in which access to child care is sparse — yet politicians rarely include such considerations in speeches about revitalization or economic prosperity.

The statistics come courtesy of a 2017 study of 22 states by the Center for American Progress. And, according to researchers, access to child care in Iowa's rural areas is far more difficult, with about 37 percent of those residents living in communities that lack child care services.

Reasons for this shortfall vary, according to Mary Janssen, a regional director of Iowa Child Care Resources and Referral of Northeast Iowa.

"We've seen a big group of providers in our area retire," she told the Associated Press. "We also see providers that need health care benefits. They need things to support their family. We see providers that don't want to deal with the regulations."

The bottom line for many Iowa families is finding child care — any child care, whether or not it fits their needs or budget — is a struggle. Toss in those Iowans who work non-traditional hours such as night and weekend shifts and the gap widens. Young parents in Iowa who might otherwise take advantage of state-emphasized skill training or higher education programming are being held back by child care barriers.

Iowa continues to have one of the lowest eligibility levels for child care assistance, holding back families and potential providers alike. Child care providers are woefully reimbursed, resulting in the existing infant and toddler child care crisis and expanding service deserts.

But what we know is that every local employer — from factories to hospitals, convenience stores to elementary schools — rely on workers who rely on affordable, quality child care.

Census bureau statistics show Iowa has one of the highest percentages of households with children under the age of 6 with all available parents in the workforce. As a result, in 2016, nearly 18,000 Iowa workers reported leaving, not accepting or changing jobs because of issues related to child care.

Nearly every candidate in Iowa has ideas about how to get more qualified people into the workforce, but few have made the connection between workforce woes and child care access. Why? While most politicians have children, few have young children who require supervision. Parents of young children typically aren't engaged in local politics in the same numbers as single young people and older adults. Families with young children who are engaged in policy discussions are more often than not more affluent, and benefiting from the luxury of having one adult who doesn't have to be a breadwinner.

Politicians views are shaped by their own experiences and the experiences of those around them. Except in times of crisis, when entire communities have lost child care providers, those struggling to access affordable, quality care aren't active stakeholders.

Changing the conversation to make child care a routine part of economic development requires focused effort, not only from parents of young children, but from grandparents and local business owners.

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