

# Tackling child care <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Any initiative that can be described as a "tourniquet to stop the bleeding" says a lot about the problem it's trying to fix.

Such is the case with Mesa County's Child Care 8,000 initiative which has attempted to tackle a greased pig in the community: a child care shortage that defies the law of supply and demand due to a complex array of factors.

The Sentinel's Erin McIntyre unpacked the conundrum on Sunday's front page. Margins are thin for operators of local child care facilities, which operate within a dense and expensive regulatory framework. They can't pay their employees much without putting costs out of reach for many parents. The median household pay in Mesa County is \$12,000 lower than the state average. Child-care costs are lower than the state average, too, but they're still too expensive for many families that don't qualify for subsidized care.

So even if parents are fortunate enough to find a slot for their child, they may not be able to afford placing them with a child-care provider. That's when families have to enlist the help of grandparents or a kindly neighbor or decide that one parent should just stay home to care for children.

Improving Mesa County's lagging wages would be a huge step toward solving the problem, but public health experts are chipping away at the factors they can control. Having a reliable child care in the community is an issue of health, says Mesa County Public Health Executive Director Jeff Kuhr. So the department is doing what it can to increase the number of child care slots from the current 4,426 to 8,000 by 2022.

It's not difficult to see why this shortage plays out in the shadows of Mesa County's other well-known socioeconomic challenges. It's like a rolling blackout affecting only a small portion of the population at any given time. If you're not scrambling to find child-care options for children too young to attend public school, you're probably not aware of the dynamics.

The point here is that the county needs someone looking at this from a 30,000-foot level. Thankfully, we have the Mesa County Health Department taking on the yeoman's work of identifying contributing factors and putting forth a workable solution. And the child-care problem affects everyone by how it impacts economic development and prepares children for academic success.

Kuhr said the initiative is intended to help operators of child care centers gain success by reducing administrative costs and increasing wages and education opportunities for early child care professionals. Interestingly, the announcement that the county wanted to jump-start the industry and create more slots was met with resistance from some operators who feared that more competition would make it harder to survive when their own businesses have space for more children but they struggle with retaining consistent, licensed employees.

But as the experience has shown, the local industry needs all help it can get.

"Overall, a net gain of 400 slots in the past year has shown the initiative has helped child care availability not only maintain its levels, but grow slightly, if not act as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding," McIntyre reported.

The county is incubating the industry so it can thrive on its own. It's important work that we're glad the health department has seen fit to take on. But this is a problem we all need to wrap our arms around for the way it hamstring our community.

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