

Documentary explores childcare crisis in America ^[1]

Early Childhood Council hosts movie screening, panel discussion

Author: Jones, Callie

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Film website ^[3]

EXCERPTS

A new documentary, “No Small Matter,” is shedding lights on the importance of early childcare and education. Tuesday evening early childhood providers and educators, legislators, mental health professionals and community members gathered at Sterling Public Library for a film viewing and discussion hosted by Early Childhood Council of Logan, Phillips and Sedgwick Counties.

Michelle Sharp, executive director of ECCLPS, started the event sharing some information about the organization. Founded in 1997, ECCLPS ‘ mission is a collaborative system that promotes and values high quality early care and education opportunities for children ages birth to five and their families. The organization offers a variety of parenting classes, as well as other resources to support families.

“Early childhood education is so very important; setting up our children with a strong foundation in their most formative years sets them up for success later in life,” Sharp said.

But doing that is a struggle, as Northeast Colorado is considered a “childcare desert.” In Logan County, there are 144 home provider childcare slots and 429 in preschools and centers, for a total of 573 slots. That’s not nearly enough for the 1,130 children ages zero to five living in this county.

Of the 573 slots, there are only 40 infant/toddler slots for ages zero to two. Because of this, families are actually planning pregnancies around childcare provider openings and for those that don’t, some are left with no other choice but to quit their job or move somewhere else where they can find childcare.

The movie “No Small Matter” lays out the overwhelming evidence for the importance of the first five years of life (the brain grows faster at this stage than at any other time) and highlights how the lack of quality, affordable childcare in recent years has emerged as a full-blown crisis for working and middle-class families.

At the end of World War II, just 12 percent of American mothers with children under age six worked outside the home; today, that number is closer to 70 percent. As more parents have to work in order to make ends meet, childcare options are limited, with just 10 percent of childcare in the U.S. considered high quality. Plus, costs are going up; in 28 states the cost of infant care is more expensive than the cost of college.

Following to movie, Sharp pointed out that across the country child care is one of the largest expenses for families with young children. In Logan County alone, the average home childcare rate is \$28 a day, \$560 a month and \$6,720 a year, for one child. The average center and preschool rate is \$38 a day, \$608 a month and \$7,296 a year.

There are many low income families here, approximately 47.2 percent of children in Logan County qualify for free and reduced lunches. But it’s not just those families struggling, childcare is also a challenge for middle-income as well, because their income is just slightly above the cutoff to qualify for programs such as the Colorado Preschool Program or childcare assistance.

Later, a panel discussion was held with Lisa Matter, infant family specialist with Colorado Department of Human Services – Office of Early Childhood; Brenda Gertge, a family home childcare provider; Terry Curtis, director of Little Folks Preschool in Merino; Vicki Folkerts, children and family services director for Eastern Colorado Services for the Developmentally Disabled; Georgia Sanders, director of Hagen Early Education Center; and Amy Nation, early childhood mental health specialist with Centennial Mental Health Center.

As the only childcare provider in her town and already full for next year, Curtis worries about what will happen when the time comes that she is no longer able to provide services. She credited the support system she has with helping her provide quality childcare; Little Folks is Qualistar program with a quality rating, the only reason it doesn’t have a top rating of five is because Curtis can’t afford to provide health insurance for her employees.

“I have wonderful staff, and not being able to pay them what they’re really worth is always heartbreaking, because they’re worth millions; the funding is just not there,” Curtis said.

Her preschool is attached to her home and she is fortunate not to have a mortgage to worry about and that that she is able to save money thanks to her husband taking care of repairs. Building and repair costs are something other centers and preschools have to deal with, leaving even less money for staff salaries and benefits.

Sanders said solving the childcare crisis is “going to take a lot of community toughing together and effort.” She pointed out that after housing, child care is one of the top worries of families when they move to a new area, and while there is housing, child care is very limited here.

“There’s no place to take our children,” Sanders said. “Our community has so many quality places, so many quality centers, so many quality homes, but we just don’t have enough.”

Nation pointed out that children who do not receive good, quality and supportive care don’t thrive and a lack of a healthy, caring relationship will lead to stunted social and emotional growth, attachment difficulties and a compromise of their self-regulation.

When asked what can be done to raise awareness around the importance of early childhood education and care, Gertge said awareness must begin with the whole community, whether you have children in childcare or not.

“I think quality early childhood education has the ability to affect all of us,” she commented, urging employers to be aware that their workforce is affected by childcare. “Parents who have quality childcare are much better employees, so you can get a lot more bang for your buck.”

Gertge also pointed out the impact early childhood education has on the school system, if children are better prepared to enter school “we can reduce costs when we’re trying to put a band-aid on things that should be fixed early on,” she said.

Folkerts shared some of the positives in this community, such as the many resources that support families with young children, including Colorado’s Early Intervention program, Baby Bear Hugs, the Family Resource Center, Centennial Mental Health Center, Northeast Colorado Health Department, and top notch providers, not just home providers and centers, but occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech therapists.

“In my world we struggle to find providers to serve our children (with disabilities), but we also as the movie shows, we struggle to find providers to provide quality childcare,” Folkers said. “One of the problems we have in the rural areas is attracting people with specialized degrees.”

She pointed out because of change over in positions, new individuals aren’t always aware of early intervention services or other services available here, so they refer families to the Denver Metro area when there are services here.

Matter was asked what can be done to draw more people into the profession of early childhood. She said it starts with looking at where good care is already happening and thanking those providers.

“Everything you do is an infinite investment, there’s no greater investment than those interactions,” she told providers.

Those doing the work who aren’t in the official roles also need to be thanked, “because when we are that person who just interacts in the grocery store we are investing,” Matter said. “There’s a way for each of us to sort of invest in the lives of children in our own individual way that matters to those children.”

Additionally, she said it’s important to recognize failures.

“If we can’t get healthcare, if we can’t pay the people we have, we’re not able to value them and tell them ‘you’re doing a really good job,’” she said.

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