

# COVID-19 pandemic adds further stress to an already overwhelmed local child care industry <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTED

The state governor's office didn't need to tell Tawnya Williams to close the family child care service she runs out of her home in Eaton.

In fact, no one from the state had any intention of telling Williams or other child care providers to close. Child care services were deemed a critical service — and were therefore allowed to stay open — at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the accompanying stay-at-home order that was issued March 25.

Yet, Williams closed the doors of her child care service anyway. It made no sense to keep them open.

In fact, keeping her business in operation during the worst of the pandemic — rather than receiving unemployment — may have been enough to close her business for good.

In mid-March, when local schools and businesses began closing because of the pandemic — and so many workers began staying home — Williams was left with only a couple kids to care for.

Making a live in an industry that relies on parents working, Williams made the same decision other child care providers — and businesses of all sorts — were faced to make.

She felt it wasn't really possible to remain open for business with just a couple children to watch after. Plus, it wasn't worth jeopardizing her own family's health, considering the minimal financial gain she could expect in return.

So, she closed her home child care business for seven weeks, just recently reopening it a couple weeks ago.

If it wasn't for her ability to apply and qualify for unemployment during this time, she may have been forced out of the child care business completely.

probably would have closed up my business altogether and found something different," Williams said. "It's one of those things where the parents were put in a situation where they couldn't afford child care, they weren't sure what was to come. ... And, I was very blessed that the pandemic unemployment was available to me."

As workers throughout Weld County return to work, the need for child care is intensifying. But an already stressed-out local child care industry that couldn't accommodate the need before the pandemic could be further overwhelmed as providers struggle to find the necessary supplies, or the space, to comply with much-needed safety measures, crowd restrictions and social distancing requirements within the environment COVID-19 has created.

## Struggling to make the numbers work

Child care centers have been told there can be no more than 10 children in any one classroom.

Scott Bright operates 19 licensed centers in Weld County, serving up to 2,000 children each day.

Shortly after the stay-at-home order was issued, Bright's centers — ABC Child Development and Bright School-Age Centers — dropped to about 20% its normal enrollment, Bright said. The centers also had to lay off about three-quarters of its employees in March, about 170 employees in all.

The situation has begun to improve slightly, he said.

Still, Bright said he feels a major problem has faced his business and the local child care industry in the form of the 10-children limit.

"We need to set our rates within each classroom and each age group based on the licensing ratios of teacher-to-children," Bright said.

"When the group size is 10, it makes it really difficult for us to survive financially. Every day that we're open with just 10 kids in a classroom

– when we could have 15 – we are essentially losing (money).

“Child care, as we know it, won’t last very much longer without having that group size lifted or relaxed.”

### **A problem compounded**

For decades, United Way has focused much of its efforts on aiding people’s development during early childhood – their first eight years.

According to data United Way of Weld County president/CEO Jeannine Truswell and her coworkers rely on in crafting the organization’s mission, 95% of the human brain is formed by the age of 5. And, if children fall behind in their mental development in elementary school, they may never fully catch up.

United Way of Weld County has a vested interest in assuring young children are receiving the care and nourishment they need – which has become a bit more of a challenge with this pandemic.

Even before the pandemic hit, availability and affordability of child care was an issue in Weld County and throughout Colorado, Truswell said.

Narrow profit margins make it difficult for providers to pay and keep qualified staff – also making it difficult for home child care providers to make a reasonable living.

The declining workforce and a lack of funds have in turn made quality child care more difficult to come by for families that need it.

There are 273 licensed childcare providers in Weld County, including 138 family child care home providers – set up for about six to eight children – and 50 child care centers that have varying capacities, depending on their building.

According to the most recent data gathered by United Way, in 2018, there were 15,667 children under 6 years old with all available parents in the workforce. However, there were only about 6,200 licensed child care slots in centers, homes and preschools.

“We’ve been addressing this high priority for our community, then along comes COVID,” Truswell said. “Now you have health restrictions – (requiring) health guidance for a system that is already taxed and also where the margins are tight in profitability. It’s one of the lowest paid professions.”

United Way of Weld County has provided nearly 100 child care providers with care packages that include personal protective equipment – including masks –and essential cleaning and sanitation supplies, as well as books and other items for kids.

Truswell said United Way has also been providing information through its newsletters to child care providers on how to navigate through these difficult times – including guidance on how to apply for governmental funding programs like the Paycheck Protection Program.

Also, using state funding, the Weld County Department of Human Services has stepped up the number of times it will pay child care providers during absences, when a child belonging to a low-income family that has child care subsidized must stay home because of illness or other unavoidable circumstances.

“Without that policy, we may not have survived,” Bright said.

### **A helping hand**

Families and child care providers have had another ally to combat these struggles during the COVID-19 pandemics.

Because children weren’t leaving their homes for school – and because of the crowd size limits – the local Boys & Girls Clubs haven’t been able to serve youth the way they normally do, via largely group-based after-school activities.

Therefore, Boys & Girls Club of Weld County CEO Terry Adams and company found another way to serve these children, their families and the struggling, overwhelmed local child care industry.

From early April until the end of May, Boys & Girls Club of Weld County – with a pair of locations in Greeley – used its staff and facilities to provide inexpensive child care services.

Initially, the services were available just for parents who are healthcare workers and first responders. Ultimately, the club partnered with the Colorado Emergency Child Care Collaborative, an emergency resource that was formed to provide backup child care for essential workers throughout the state, reimbursing parents for the costs of child care.

Through this partnership, Boys & Girl Club of Weld County extended its child care services to parents employed in other critical businesses.

The collaborative concluded May 24 with Colorado moving to a safer-at-home order. But, the local Boys & Girls Club locations continued offering child care services for another week to give families a little more time to make other child care arrangements.

“This was initiated because of the fact that schools were not in session, and kids needed a place to be during the day,” Adams said. “Schools were closed, several child care facilities were closed and families were in a tough spot. ... Our biggest concern was we absolutely did not want to see any kids at home alone.”

### **In need of more solutions**

Sheri Hannah-Ruh is the director of Promises for Children for United Way of Weld County. She oversees the early childhood programs.

One of the responsibilities she and her colleagues have been tasked with is collecting data that clearly shows how much of a need there is for quality child care in Weld County, how large of a gap there is between the child care options available and the need that exists, as well as working with various agencies to try to fill that gap and help strengthen a wounded local child care industry.

various steps state government, United Way and various other agencies are doing to help the local child care industry are no doubt meaningful.

But Hannah-Ruh said for an industry that was already struggling before the pandemic — and is struggling even more now because of the pandemic — creating awareness is key.

In conversations between city, county and state leaders about how to rebuild the economy in the wake of COVID-19, the child care industry needs to be an important part of those conversations, Hannah-Ruh said.

Furthermore, grants for child care providers could provide a saving grace. Many child care providers have been reluctant to apply for small business loan money during the pandemic, because they simply don't have a means for repaying a loan, Hannah-Ruh said.

Flexible work schedules and family-friendly policies in workplaces — perhaps ones that allow employees to bring their kids to work or ones in which employers help employees pay for child care — could also go a long way in relieving the overstressed child care industry, Hannah-Ruh said.

And, of course, regulating policies pertaining to group sizes in a way that still allows child care providers to be profitable could prove pivotal, Hannah-Ruh said.

“These are little tiny steps that will help, but it's not enough,” Hannah-Ruh said. “We need to do more. If we want to rebuild the economy and support our adults going back to work, we have got to take care of the child care providers who are watching our kids.”

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