

A looming child care crisis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

THE ISSUE:

Child care, already in short supply for years, is growing even scarcer now.

THE STAKES:

The post-COVID economy won't work if parents, especially mothers, can't rejoin it.

For working parents, finding child day care was already a challenge before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, as New York slowly opens up after a more than three-month pause, many will likely find the situation even worse.

That's going to need more than a "good luck with that" from government, not just in New York, but nationwide, if the U.S. economy is to get working again.

It may be an especially dire issue right here in the back yard of New York state government. Well before the pandemic, open day care slots were especially scarce in the Capital Region.

A survey last year by Raising NY, a coalition of advocacy organizations focused on early childhood services, found that 48 percent of the child care providers in the state had waiting lists. In the Capital Region, it was 58 percent.

The pandemic is likely making the situation even worse. Brightside Up, a child care coordinator serving the Capital Region, says more than 40 percent of child care facilities here closed because of the pandemic. The state estimated 35 percent closed outside New York City. How many will reopen is unclear.

Further complicating this is the uncertainty over what the fall will bring — whether schools will reopen, or remote learning will continue. How will single parents, or both parents in two-income households, go back to work if young children are home all day?

Again, this isn't a dilemma just for New York state. Overall, the national trajectory of new COVID cases is upward, with big surges in some Southern states. Along with all the other problems this entails, it's expected to create a nationwide crisis in the child day care industry, as programs close and are unable to reopen without help.

The resulting shortages of slots will likely affect both the working poor, who rely on subsidies that states may cut as they grapple with budget deficits, and middle-income people, who before the pandemic had an even harder time finding affordable day care since they didn't qualify for subsidies or didn't live in areas with enough subsidized programs.

Congress did make some money available to states, including \$65 million for New York, to help child care programs and expand capacity to allow more social distancing. But programs, and the parents who depend on them, are projected to need far more. A group of 100 of the nation's leading economists recently called on Congress to provide \$50 billion in additional funding for child care, warning that otherwise the industry would only destabilize further — to the point that the nation could lose nearly half of its child care capacity permanently. That's a blow to those businesses, which are often woman-owned, and to working mothers, 64 percent of whom are the primary or co-breadwinner in their household. The implications for the gross domestic product would be profound for years to come.

A bill to provide that money, the Child Care Is Essential Act, has only just been introduced in a Congress in which Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has signaled he isn't in a hurry to do any more coronavirus aid.

He and his colleagues had better think again. The U.S. economy isn't the stock market. It isn't some abstraction. It is Americans working to make things and provide services and collect paychecks, which they spend on things that other people create or do. If people can't work, the economy won't, either.

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