

Pandemic widened Boston's child care gap ^[1]

Out of 773 child care programs in Boston, only 578 have reopened so far.

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EXCERPTS

Boston may have lost up to 22 to 35 percent of its permanent child care capacity as a result of economic hardship brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the executive director of the city's Women's Advancement office said Wednesday.

Hundreds of small family day care providers across the city closed before the COVID-19 crisis, Councilor Liz Breadon said during a Boston City Council hearing, and with the onset of the pandemic, the crisis worsened and created an even more difficult landscape for these types of businesses and the customers they serve.

Before the pandemic, there were seats for half of Boston's children under five years old, according to data collected by the Women's Advancement office. The office also found that 32 percent of families with children zero to three and 27 percent of families with children three to five had difficulty finding child care.

"That's kind of where we were before COVID, now as a result of the pandemic, we are observing how severe economic hardship is resulting in the city losing a significant portion of our previous child care capacity, possibly permanently," Women's Advancement Executive Director Tania Del Rio said during the hearing.

Del Rio said 578 out of the 773 programs in Boston have reopened so far, representing 65 percent of the city's previous capacity. The permanent loss metric, she said, assumes that all of the reopened programs make it through the following months.

"And that's very unclear because we don't know whether families are planning on coming back to the programs," Del Rio said. "This is obviously understandable given all the health concerns."

Boston City Councilors Andrea Campbell, Michelle Wu, and Breadon sponsored a Committee on Strong Women, Families, and Communities hearing in an attempt to come up with solutions to what they say is a child care crisis in Boston. As the state went into lockdown in early March, most working parents were forced to work from home, oftentimes mixing professional responsibilities with child care.

"We're at a place where my belief is that we're not even having the right conversations about a recovery and a reopening, that we cannot even pursue that kind of thinking unless we are first safeguarding and supporting access to quality child care," Wu said. "It is so fundamental to our economy, to our families, and everything else."

Breadon said affordable, quality child care is a critical issue for parents struggling to juggle work and family life. The economics of child care, she said, often means that it is more financially prudent for one parent, often times women, to give up their job to stay at home and care for children.

"These are tough choices for families," she said. "The long-term costs for women are immense as they miss out on promotions and lose earning capacity, which has long-term lifelong consequences, especially when they reach retirement age."

Attorney General Maura Healey called on the U.S. Senate to include at least \$50 billion for child care providers in the next federal stimulus package. In a letter to U.S. Senate leaders, Healey and 21 other state attorney generals argued that the shutdowns as a result of the pandemic exacerbated longstanding issues in the child care system.

While child care providers are typically confident in their ability to educate young children, one concern the city of Boston noticed was a lack of confidence in business skills. Del Rio said her office began a workshop program, dubbed the Childcare Entrepreneur Fund, to teach skills in areas such as budgeting, cash flow, and separating personal and business finances.

"And the solution, I guess, as I said, it has to involve also a significant shift in our collective mindset. Because we have to understand that early education should be or is a public good, a critical part of the infrastructure for a modern workforce," Del Rio said. "And for me, the conversation is getting there, but it's not quite there yet."

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