

Child care not just about kids: Lacking services could hinder county's economic development [US]^[1]

Author: Larson, Jennifer

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EXCERPTS

Think the current child care shortage in the Coachella Valley - and all of Riverside County - is a matter that concerns only parents, kids and their caretakers? Think again.

According to an analysis conducted recently by the National Economic Development and Law Center, Riverside County's future economic success depends in part on the availability and affordability of child care for working families.

The child care industry in Riverside County is significant, according to the report; it annually grosses more than \$230 million and provides nearly 5,900 jobs.

More people are employed in child care locally than in real estate.

And employers benefit from having and being able to retain productive employees who aren't distracted by the problem of finding child care - or being absent from work because of gaps in their child care.

"The findings demonstrate that high quality child care is a wise investment for Riverside County," said Brent Brown, program specialist for the NEDLC, speaking to a group of local child care, business and government leaders Wednesday at the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort in Indian Wells.

But as County Supervisor Roy Wilson noted, "We have a real challenge ahead of us."

There is no denying the local severe shortage of licensed, affordable child care.

Riverside is at the bottom of the state's list of counties in its ability to provide child care. And more than 15,000 children in the county are on a waiting list for county subsidies because their parents can't afford the child care bill.

And that's just assuming a static population.

Dozens of people move to the Coachella Valley alone every day - and many are families with young children.

"That's a lot of need," said Pam Licalsi, dean of the Center for Training and Development at College of the Desert.

"The need is just going to grow at an alarming rate," Brown predicted.

For many, the need is immediate. Palm Desert resident Greg Ferguson is having trouble right now finding after-school care for his twin sons, who are second-graders at Carter Elementary. He searched and searched for an affordable option that also suited his family's needs. "It's really difficult," he said of the process. "It seems to be a real challenge to find an affordable type of child care."

Finally, Ferguson said, he found an in-home child care provider, but earlier this week, he found out that the woman is moving away.

"I'm kind of back to square one," he said.

No one needs to remind Gayle Clark, director of Bermuda Dunes Learning Center, of that issue, either.

Her center has slots for 180 children of various ages, and she always has an "extensive" waiting list. She is about to open space for 40 more, and she's already signing up families anxious to find a safe place for their children.

"I anticipate we'll be full before the doors open," she said.

But she noted that not every family can afford child care.

Her center has children who receive government subsidies, but some families don't qualify for them yet still can't afford high quality child care when it's available.

"The community needs to step in, and I think the government needs to step in," Clark said.

The study noted that businesses and government entities can help to address the problem or work with the child care industry to create solutions. Some organizations are already doing so.

For example, the Palm Desert City Council is trying to establish a child care facilities impact fee, which would charge commercial developers fees that would be used to fund capital projects that would expand the child care availability in that city.

"We feel that it is critical to take action to support child care in our communities," said Palm Desert Councilwoman Jean Benson.

Although the proposal has generated dissent among some builders, others applaud the idea as one step toward making a difference.

"I'd like to see other cities follow suit with what Palm Desert is doing," said Susan Shepardson, child care coordinator for the county's Department of Public Social Services.

COD is also working on ways to educate more early childhood specialists who can eventually boost the supply of providers. That includes a fast-track early childhood education program and more classes in Spanish.

It's crucial to address the problem now, Licalsi said, alluding to studies that show that children in quality early childhood education programs are less likely to wind up in the criminal justice system later.

"We're going to pay now, or we're going to pay later," she said.

- reprinted from the Desert Sun

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