

Study finds shortage in child care services [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Youngsters in some of Chicago's southeast suburbs may not be getting adequate child care.

A recent study by the Illinois Facilities Fund found what it called an alarming shortage in licensed child-care services throughout Illinois, but particularly in Chicago Heights and Calumet City.

According to the IFF, a nonprofit corporation that provides research assistance and below-market loans to other non-profit organizations, the cities are among the state's 10 most "underserved" communities.

The study, the first comprehensive look at supply and demand for child care in Illinois' 102 counties, focused on the availability of full-day, full-year child care for children up to age 5. It found an unequal distribution of services for working families of all income levels in Illinois communities.

The IFF estimates that there are nearly 384,000 children whose parents are likely to seek child care. However, there are only 201,000 state-funded program slots available, leaving almost half of those children without access to full-time child care.

The study considered all licensed day cares.

Only 27 percent of eligible children are being served in Chicago Heights, making it the fifth highest in need of more service, and 30 percent are served in Calumet City, the seventh neediest overall.

Along with Illinois' subsidized child care program, two additional government programs exist for low-income working families.

Head Start, a federal part-day program, is designed to help 3-to 5-year-old children from very low-income families prepare for school. Pre-kindergarten is state-funded and concentrates on assisting 3- to 5-year-old children who are considered to be at-risk for educational failure.

According to the study, these two programs are not reaching a satisfactory number of children.

In Illinois, only 43 percent of eligible Head Start children and 33 percent of eligible pre-K children are being served, according to the study.

The first step to resolving the child care shortage is to acknowledge that there is, in fact, a shortage, said Elizabeth Evans, director of government and community affairs for the IFF. She said she thinks the study does just that.

Families from all demographics are being forced to respond to this day care shortage.

"Some families decide to change their work schedules, some decide that they're not going to work. Some put their children in less than ideal care," Evans said. "The one thing that does happen all the time is parents are faced with making tough decisions about the safety, caring and health of their children."

- reprinted from Chicago Daily Southtown

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