

# Women who leave welfare find few day care options [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Since the nation's welfare system was overhauled in 1996, New York City has received hundreds of millions of additional state and federal dollars intended to help women leave welfare for work and to greatly expand the city's low-income child care system.

But the money has not significantly increased the number of licensed day care slots, for which the waiting list is now over 36,000. Instead, more than two-thirds of the 14,400 slots created in the last five years are in so-called informal care, the lowest-cost, unlicensed form of child care, which is not inspected or regulated by the state.

There are many reasons for the growth of informal care: it costs the government about one third less per child, it is flexible enough to meet the unconventional hours many poor parents work, and because it is usually provided by a relative or a friend who receives checks directly from the government, women coming off welfare often prefer it to other choices. But the explosion of informal care in New York and in other parts of the country has been met with concern by advocates for welfare recipients. They cite studies showing that informal care is less stable than licensed care based in centers and homes, and its safety and educational value are unknown. Worse, they argue, parents leaving welfare do not really have a choice in care, as federal law demands, because they are given a limited time to find child care, and because center-based day care is so oversubscribed.

Barbara Edinberg, director of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition in Connecticut, said poor women often really want centers but cannot get them. "We interviewed 140 low-income parents and found that the vast majority of parents we surveyed -- 70 percent -- preferred to put their children in licensed, center-based care, but there wasn't a space available for them or they couldn't afford the cost," she said. "These parents are forced to use informal child care, not because they want to, but because they have no choice."

One hot question in New York is why more child care slots have not been created with the additional federal and state money -- some \$284 million since 1999, according to the City Council. Part of the answer can be seen in the city budget, which shows that the city simply swapped some of the federal money to reduce its own share of child care spending.

For the fiscal year 2005, for example, New York City is slated to receive another \$65 million increase for child care from a federal block grant. But the city proposed using about \$40 million of that to reduce the city's share of the expenditures.

- reprinted from New York Times

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