

Parents' stories: 44 reasons to get serious about child care policy [US] ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Marla Campos, a single mother of two, is eligible for a childcare subsidy in California but can't use it because she is one of 234,000 on the waiting list.

Karen Tomasini, a Wyoming grandmother with legal guardianship over her 5-year-old granddaughter, couldn't find affordable quality childcare and had to quit her job to take care of her.

Leslie Dysinger of Virginia nearly left her teaching career because she and her husband were struggling to cover the cost of childcare for their 3-year-old son even with two incomes.

And then there's the disturbing and sad story of Steve and Shelley Blecha of Missouri, whose 3-month-old son died of suffocation at a childcare setting where, according to a Web site created by a relative, one caregiver was responsible for 10 children, including four infants. Their son was put to sleep on his stomach in a "pack-n-play" crib with loose bedding.

These are four of the 44 stories compiled and released today by the National Association of Child Care Referral & Resource Agencies in their report *Child Care in America: Parents' Perspectives*. Two of the stories are from fathers. Three are from grandparents. Several are good-news stories about mothers who were able to get professional training, jobs or college degrees once they found stable, affordable childcare. Five profiles tell of children who died in unregulated or poorly supervised childcare settings.

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A year ago, during its annual symposium to lobby for better childcare policies, NACCRRRA officials said they often heard from policy makers who asked: "Where are the parents?"

Linda K. Smith, the association's executive director, said she was determined to make those voices heard this year. The *Perspectives* report is part of that effort. In addition, several dozen parents traveled to Washington, D.C. last week to talk to Congressional representatives. The Blechas were among them. Last week, NACCRRRA also unveiled its ChildCareAware Parent Network, a free membership organization for parents and grandparents to connect, read each others stories, find childcare opportunities and keep up with the latest news.

It is a new part of the longstanding ChildCareAware site that features tools to ease the search for well-run, safe, affordable, and educationally appropriate settings. Parents can type in their zip code to locate their local referral agency and use financial calculators to determine whether they can afford to return to work or stay home with their children.

The site also provides a five-step guide to choosing a high-quality provider, links to licensing agencies by state, and checklists parents can use to rate their current providers. The checklists - which include questions such as: Does anyone present know CPR? Does the director have a degree or professional experience in caring for children? -- can help shine a spotlight on inadequate care. Working parents of young children are a harried lot, often barely able to find time to put a healthy meal on the table each night. It's not surprising that they aren't very visible in lobbying for affordable, safe childcare. Yet that doesn't lessen the urgency of their cause.

According to NACCRRRA's tuition survey, the average price of full-time care for an infant in a childcare center in 2007 ranged from \$4,542 in Mississippi to \$14,591 in Massachusetts. The annual cost for a 4-year-old ranged from \$3,380 to \$10,787, again with those two states at opposite ends of the spectrum.

The strain on parents was noted today by U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-Calif) during Congressional hearings on early childhood. In the past, we've highlighted how the cost of childcare has become a burden for the middle-class as well as the poor, and how the sinking economy is making things worse.

A Pre-K Now report in November showed that paying for early education takes up 29 percent of the budget for a typical middle-class family of four -- more than any other expense, including rent. High-quality childcare centers can be very difficult to find too - especially for

those in communities described in a 2006 NACCRRA report where a third of families are headed by single parents and nearly half of families with young children live below the poverty line.

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Getting parents to tell their stories puts human face on how hard it has become for so many families to raise children in the United States. The NACCRRA report is a significant resource. It is remarkable to see so many courageous parents open up their private lives to the public -- providing their full names and, often, their photographs -- for us to better understand what they are going through as they search for affordable, high-quality settings that keep their children safe from harm.

- reprinted from the Early Ed Watch Blog

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