

Shutdown in Minnesota ripples out to day care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Among the thousands of people struggling with the state government shutdown here, 14-year-old Skye might be among the most unlikely.

She is not a state worker, nor does she receive direct state aid. But because the shutdown has led Minnesota to cut her mother's child care subsidy, Skye has been drafted to be the family baby sitter. Afternoons formerly spent playing softball are now spent looking after two of her younger siblings.

"I mean, I went from seeing my friends every day and hanging out to being home every day to take care of my sisters - it's hard," she said. "It put a big down on the summer."

For more than a week, Minnesota has stopped performing all services not deemed critical because Gov. Mark Dayton, a Democrat, and the Republican-controlled Legislature have been unable to agree on a state budget for this fiscal year.

Though the shutdown meant that about 22,000 government employees became suddenly unemployed, the most significant impact so far for Minnesotans who do not work for the government appears to be in the sort of everyday thing, like child care for the poor, that had been easy to overlook for those not dependent on it.

About 21,000 families with a total of 37,500 children in Minnesota receive day care subsidies that pay about half of the cost of child care at centers or in private homes. An additional 4,000 families are on a waiting list.

"Of the things involved in the shutdown, this is the one that could grow into a crisis because of all the people who rely on it," said Senator John Marty, a Democrat who represents a suburban district north of St. Paul. "This program has done tremendous things for women who had been on welfare."

Mr. Dayton has also deemed the program to be critical enough to continue during the shutdown, and his request is being considered by Kathleen Blatz, a former Minnesota Supreme Court justice and the court-appointed monitor who has been deciding during the shutdown what services are essential.

The loss of the subsidy, even after only a few days, has had an outsize impact on some of the state's day care centers, parents and staff members say.

At Creative Kids Academy in Lexington, a Minneapolis suburb, the number of children in day care has dropped to around 30, from 70 before the shutdown.

"It's like a ghost town," Gretchen Raymer, 29, the center's director, said Friday in a room full of toys and buckets with children's names on them that far outnumbered the children present.

Though the center is privately operated, most of the parents who use it receive the state subsidy. Without that stipend, a parent with two children, for instance, would have to pay \$300 or \$400 a week, a significant amount for women who often work jobs that pay less than \$10 an hour.

"Most are single mothers; lots don't have a lot of family in the state, and they've been coming here a few years," said Ms. Raymer, who said she had twice gone to the Capitol in St. Paul to testify against proposed budget cuts. "They have a limited support system."

The center estimates it will lose \$4,000 a week without the stipends. Employees are being encouraged to take vacations, Ms. Raymer said, and she has already laid off a part-time worker.

But she said she was mostly concerned about the parents and the children, whom she considers her extended family.

"It's stressful," Ms. Raymer said. "We have a close relationship with families, and it's horrible to see what the families are going through. How long can they last?"

As for Skye, she is more interested in saving her summer than in budgets and politics.

Her mother, Keri Rosas, 35, a single mother of four, works the night shift at a group home and has depended on Creative Kids Academy to watch her younger children so she can sleep during the day. Ms. Rosas said Ms. Raymer had been very supportive, even providing updates on the shutdown for parents.

Ms. Rosas said that her younger children did not understand what was going on but were eager to be with their friends again, and that Skye, her oldest, was just ready to get back to being a teenager.

"She is extremely upset," Ms. Rosas said. "She doesn't understand why the government can shut down the way it is."

-reprinted from the New York Times

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