

Cost of child care: Much more than a family matter ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Working families face several challenges to make ends meet, and one of them is the increasingly steep cost of child care.

Some parents say they absolutely have to return to work to keep their families afloat.

For low-income parents, that often means turning to government for help in paying for child care.

"I couldn't have done this without the subsidies."

Tomeico Haynes is a single mom to 3-year-old daughter Montie. She works as a nurse and says she had to wait nearly two years for the subsidy to help her afford day care while she was at work.

Those were a tough two years.

"Those were my ramen noodles years. Like, I look back on that now and I'm like, 'Wow, I can't believe I got through that.'

"But yeah, I cried myself to sleep many nights."

Paying for child care is one of the biggest expenses facing working families. On average, parents across the state end up paying between \$7,000 to \$15,000 dollars a year for child care - it's much more in the New York City metropolitan region - and that cost is either paid out of pocket or absorbed when a parent drops out of the workforce to care for children.

For years, this has been seen as a family matter or even a women-only issue, but Lois Johnson of the Workforce Development Institute says this is actually an economic development issue.

"Giving people the ability to be employed and to be productive and to take raises and to take on more responsibility and get promotions is the only way that we are going to move families out of poverty. If we penalize them for that, then we're not only jeopardizing that individual family, but we're also jeopardizing that business that employs them."

Johnson says not being able to find safe, reputable or reliable child care can cost the economy as much as \$3 billion in lost productivity.

She says that's why the Workforce Development Institute works to help parents get the needed government subsidies to help them absorb the cost.

Unfortunately, those subsidies aren't always funded.

"To be honest, we've had difficulty getting child care and the whole issue of early learning on the page as much as we would like."

This year's state budget includes \$135 million earmarked for child care subsidies for low-income families with toddlers and infants, an increase of \$30 million. But as with many things in government, Binghamton Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo points out, the breakdown of exactly how that money gets allocated can get cloudy.

"Where do these monies go? How are they distributed, who determines what the market rate is?"

Lupardo chairs the committee of children and families and she says it's getting more difficult for child care providers as well. The federal Child Care Development Block Grant, which divvies up more than \$5 billion nationally, also increased its criteria for health and safety requirements on child care providers.

Johnson says it's an unfair burden on an already stressed industry.

"The business of caring for our young children is not a profitable business, generally," Johnson said. "You have many employees who have associate's or bachelor's degrees in early child care facilities making minimum wage, or a little bit higher, which is certainly not compensating them adequately."

"But raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, which we totally support here at WDI, no one is really talking, except for the early childhood folks, about the impact that's going to have on their ability to keep their doors open."

The concerns of the costs of child care are being heard across the state.

Bronx Assemblyman Marcos Crespo has been an advocate for affordable child care across the state. With roughly 25 percent of New York's children living in poverty, he says it's a crucial piece to addressing New York's economy, especially upstate.

"Parents who are working oftentimes two jobs need the flexibility to make sure that their children are provided for and taken care of while they go out and work."

He adds that while funding needs to be there for parents living in poverty, all New York parents need this support. It's an issue he understands firsthand.

"I work in Albany, I'm here six months out of the year, and my wife runs a small business and we had this challenge," Crespo says. "Like most traditional cultural families in the Latino community, I believe that maybe one of us maybe needed to stay home and be with our children. In reality, we couldn't make that choice economically. We both had to work."

"But also we realized over time that my daughters being able to attend a child care center early on gave them an opportunity to prepare academically and in so many social ways better than anything we could have hoped to do at home ourselves, and so it's something I think every family should have access to. No mother or father should have to choose between taking care of their children and being able to sustain their family and have a good job."

Tomeico Haynes says more legislators should look at child care as part of their larger economic plans. People like her are doing their part, she says, and a little support from the government makes for a better community.

"I feel like if I'm getting up and going to work every day and I'm not taking advantage of the system, then it would help everybody to help parents like me," Haynes says. "The more we have child care, the more we're able to work and actually contribute more to the economy. If I'm working, and part of that work is for the betterment of America, then it shouldn't be too much to ask for America to be for me."

Tomeico says she's not sure if she would have been able to continue to pay for child care without subsidies and she thinks more parents would rejoin the workforce if they knew that was guaranteed.

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