

Quiet Crisis in Minnesota

If you do a quick Google search on child care in Minnesota, you will be provided a long list of articles published throughout the state on the “quiet crisis”. Greater Minnesota is experiencing a huge shortage of child care, even in a really good economy. The licensing data shows that 23% of home based child care businesses in Minnesota have closed in the last four years. In a one-year period, June 2018 - June 2019, 411 family child care programs closed. The need is an increase in providers, to encourage people to fill the available jobs around Minnesota. This is not happening.

In 2014, the State of Minnesota imposed greater regulations on childcare facilities (homes and centers) to combat the increased number of deaths that were happening in child care settings. The number of deaths has decreased dramatically but the regulations could be part of the growing crisis throughout Minnesota. People are not opening child care in their homes due to the cumbersome regulations. Child care centers are an option but there are few that have a positive cash flow in rural areas.

Despite all the woes of trying to cash flow a center or operate a home license, child care is expensive for parents. The average tuition in Minnesota per child in a child care center is \$16,000/year. Infant care costs on average \$8,500 per year in a family child care program. There is a huge demand for infant care throughout the state, mostly because of the regulations on ratios to care. Many parents are looking at family planning based on child care availability. With 75% of the labor force in Minnesota being parents of children under the age of six, child care becomes a huge issue for household income and for employers to retain employees. There needs to be a 37% growth in licensed child care throughout the state to fill the spaces needed to accommodate children under the age of six, whose parents are in the work force.

State legislators have set up task forces and advisory groups but nothing earth shaking has been changed on the regulation front. Some regulations, such as teacher requirements at child care centers, have improved. There are still challenges in Greater Minnesota as centers are in direct competition with area school districts for qualified teachers. There is also still the statistics around infant deaths in the early part of the 2010s that scare legislators. Many factors makes legislators hesitant to provide additional funding to help lower-income families pay for child care.

Unfortunately, there is not a silver bullet to solve the “quiet crisis” in Minnesota. In Warren, we are seeing the same challenges as throughout the state. To try to develop solutions in Warren, the city applied and was chosen as one of five communities in the State to participate in the Rural Child Care Innovation Program (RCCIP) facilitated by First Children’s Finance. Public input is very important in this process. A Town Hall meeting will be held on Thursday, February 13 at 6 PM at the Warren American Legion. Dinner will be served. Please attend this meeting to help determine child care solutions in Warren. Please RSVP to Shannon at the Warren City Office 745-5343 by February 5.

Quiet Crisis in Warren

The State of Minnesota is experiencing a “quiet crisis” in child care, and the same crisis is happening in Warren. I looked at my “Daycare Info” manila file folder and it is about 2 inches thick with information gathered in the last four years on child care in Warren. Looking back at notes and meetings, in 2016 there were eight licensed home child care businesses in the city. Today there are four. One of the four providers is phasing into retirement and not taking new families. The remaining three providers are at full capacity. Little Sprouts Learning Center is also at full capacity. The infant spots at all facilities are filled thru 2020. WAO Elementary has record enrollment in the kindergarten this year with 70 children; the highest enrollment in kindergarten for a number of years. The projected enrollment for kindergarten for children birth to 4 years also hovers around 70 children for each of those coming years. There are many young families living and working in Warren. These families need child care. The Warren City Council and the Warren Economic Development Authority (WEDA) have identified child care as an urgent need to work on. If there is not child care in Warren, then increasing housing or commercial space will not solve the issues families and businesses face in relocating to Warren. Young families are going to live where there is available child care.

Today in Warren, there are 71 licensed slots, of which all are full. The expected number of children needing child care is 144. That means in Warren alone, there are potentially 73 slots needed for childcare. If you expand the circle to a 20-mile radius, the number of slots needed increases to 187. Looking at the census for the WAO School District for children under age 5, the total gap for slots is 85. Another statistic uses the county census for children under 5 and parents in the workforce to show a gap of 207 slots. Any way you look at the statistics, there is a shortage of child care in Warren. Many families are stressing over finding child care and working to pay the bills. Family planning decisions are now often made on the basis of when is there an open child care slot, not when couples are ready to expand their family.

There are challenges in Warren for home child care businesses and Little Sprouts Learning Center. In December, a Provider Appreciation Dinner was held. During conversations at the event, there was an update that homeowner’s insurance may increase if you have a home child care. In addition, there are a number of regulations that make it harder for people considering opening a home child care. Little Sprouts must comply with necessary teacher qualifications and child to teacher ratios that contribute to the strain on positive cash flow.

Finding quality staff for Little Sprouts Learning Center is an ongoing challenge that is mirrored around the state of Minnesota. Lack of benefits and low pay are often hallmarks of early childhood education jobs, and with a booming economy, many workers have a number of options for better pay in other types of jobs. It is hard to find backup staff for the center and home child care businesses. Background checks must be conducted on anyone who fills in for a home child care provider.

This column could take a full page describing all of the struggles with child care in Warren. To learn more about child care in Warren, the challenges and possible solutions, attend the Town Hall meeting on Thursday, February 13 at 6 PM at the Warren American Legion. Dinner will be served. Please RSVP to Shannon at the Warren City Office 745-5343 by February 5.

Child Care Solutions Across Minnesota

We have been talking about the quiet crisis reaching Greater Minnesota and Warren. People are starting to think outside of the box to provide this essential service in communities. Partnerships are being forged among different entities to create solutions and support for families and businesses.

One model for child care that is being seen frequently around the State is partnerships with the faith community. Churches are operating in every city and the buildings are able to operate a family licensed day care or a center license. The scenario is a win-win as expenses may be shared and the building is used during the week. In our region, Hallock is soon opening a child care center in a church building and Red Lake Falls has a family licensed day care operating in one of their churches. Often, the church operates the child care to fulfill a mission to serve. Whatever the motivation to open a child care business in a church, these models are working and providing the needed slots to serve children in our communities.

Another partnership that is gaining momentum is cities and school districts working together to open child care businesses. In Franklin, MN, the city built a new community center and the school district uses that space for child care. The school district provides the teachers and staff for the child care. This partnership developed after all the child care providers in the community retired or quit; all within a year. In Benson, MN, the school district expanded their after-school program to include summer and before school care. The expansion continued to add infants and toddlers and is now a full-fledged child care learning center.

The need for employee retention has created a partnership with nursing homes to provide child care. Some facilities are partnering with family child care businesses to provide on-site child care. In Bemidji, MN an assisted living facility is building a child care center as an addition to senior care facility. In Ada, MN the child care center is part of the assisted living facility. It provides child care as a service to employees and the community to create a win-win situation.

Businesses are also getting into the child care world to help retain employees. Businesses are hesitant to enter into this arrangement but some do so out of necessity. One interesting model in this realm is creating pods for family licensed child care business. In this situation, two or more family child care businesses are located in one building. There is usually low to moderate rent. Public and private partnerships help to make the facility cash flow. There are shared areas of kitchen and playground to keep start up costs affordable. A model to follow is operating in Detroit Lakes, MN, and a potential set of pods is being developed in New York Mills, MN.

Entities around Minnesota are partnering to provide quality child care. In today's world with both parents working, we all need to work together to find a solution that entices young families to move to our communities and grow our school districts.

If you would like to be part of solutions in Warren, attend the Town Hall meeting on Thursday, February 13 at 6 PM at the Warren American Legion. Dinner will be served. Please RSVP to Shannon at the Warren City Office 745-5343 by February 5 or send a text to 218-201-0008.

Be Part of the Child Care Solution in Warren

Hopefully, you have been reading each of the articles printed in the last three weeks. The articles should have painted a picture on child care and the changes that have occurred with that industry in the last decade. It is an entirely new challenge for young families and it is hard. It is a hard challenge for cities and the State of Minnesota to tackle. If there was an easy solution or it was a profit center for a private business, we would not be having these conversations. To allow young people to either move back to Warren after spreading their wings or entice new young families, Warren is going to have to tackle child care to grow the community.

Fortunately, Warren was chosen as one of five communities in the State to receive assistance and guidance from First Families Finance under their Rural Child Care Innovation Program (RCCIP). Through the program a Core Team was established. The Core Team has been learning why child care is important in developing children. They have been shown local and state statistics on child care needs. The Core Team has learned about solutions around the State and have engaged in some really great conversations. They have logged many volunteer hours working toward a solution for Warren. In December, a Provider Appreciation Dinner was done to recognize current providers in Warren and have a discussion on what they see as challenges. That was a really productive evening and some new partnerships were formed during that exchange.

The next step is where the public comes in, that is you!! On February 13, a Town Hall Meeting will be held for the public to learn the statistics for child care in a 20-mile radius of Warren and participate in the conversation to begin developing solutions. At this time there are ideas being discussed but it is crucial that residents become part of the process. Your input is valuable in charting a successful path.

The Warren city council has passed a resolution supporting a .05% local sales tax but that is just a tool to help the community find a solution. The sales tax option needs legislative approval and local voter approval so that is far from a done deal. The Warren Economic Development Authority supported the option which shows each boards commitment to alleviating the child care crisis in Warren.

The members of the Core Team are Lindsey Buegler, Ashley Fredrickson, Tyler Golden, Sara Kazmierczak, Chris Kujava, Phil Thompson, Chad Truemer, Kirk Thorstenson, Amanda Wimpfheimer and Shannon Mortenson. If you have any questions or thoughts on child care, reach out to one of the team members. Better yet, please attend the Town Hall Meeting and bring friends. You will be part of the solution in Warren.

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