



Child care costs in focus at State Capitol

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(Photo: KARE)

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers and public policy groups is focusing on making child care more accessible in Minnesota.

Some of the measures are aimed at expanding the state's subsidized child care program that features a sliding scale fee system. Other legislation would increase the tax credits working parents can use to cover part of the cost of child care.

Part of the pressure is driven by the fact that child care is relatively expensive in Minnesota, and a high percentage of the households feature two working parents.

"These are families that are trying to get to work, and to do their jobs and also raise their kids and give them a healthy start," said Tim Marx of Catholic Charities, which serves 85 families at its Northside Child Development Center in Minneapolis.

Rep. Mary Franson, an Alexandria Republican who worked as a daycare provider before entering the legislature, recalls how one of her client's livelihood depended on finding someone who could care for her children starting at 5:00 a.m.

"For her it was a blessing that her children had a warm, safe place to go to," Rep. Franson said.

She said the state's reimbursement rates were so low that she at times had to absorb part of the cost as a provider, but she felt a special bond with the children in the subsidized program.

"Those are the ones that needed love the most at times, needed that security, the safety, the stability that child care can bring to some families."

Making a difference

Peggy Flanagan of the Children's Defense Fund said child care not only helps parents return to the work force but it provides businesses with more reliable employees at a time when labor shortages are being felt in the economy.

And she said that quality child care pays dividends as those children become adults.

"My mom used the child care assistance program when I was growing up. I think I turned out okay!" Flanagan remarked.

Currently there are 5,500 families on the waiting list for subsidized child care in Minnesota. Among those on the list is Elizabeth Mitchell, a single mother in Minneapolis with a 12-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter. She brought her daughter Jhanaria to a press conference at the Capitol Tuesday.

"My daughter's in a daycare center in Brooklyn Park. I pay out of my pocket \$327 a week," Mitchell told KARE. "Today's a free day because she's here with me."

Mitchell, who works a full-time job in Maple Grove, has already earned an associate's degree in criminal justice. She said if she qualified for child care subsidies she would be able to return to school.

"My dream job is to be a public defender, but I can't take classes and work and pay full price for child care."

Tax credits

Rep. Jennifer Loon is carrying a bill that would raise tax credits for child care, which have been frozen at the same level for many years.

"And the result is that we've left a lot of families behind who are lower income to middle income, who are struggling with the cost of daycare and it's incredibly expensive," Rep. Loon told reporters.

Her bill would double the tax credit, taking it from \$720 per child to \$1440. People with two or more children in daycare would see their credit go up to \$2100 annually.

Loon says she's not sold yet on the proposed universal pre-K plan -- free optional preschool for all four-year-old children -- which is included in Gov. Mark Dayton's budget plan. The Eden Prairie Republican asserted that child subsidies and tax credits give parents more choice than a statewide Pre-K program may be capable of delivering.

The Governor's budget blueprint also includes funding for enhanced child care subsidies and tax credits.

A plan to expand the state's Early Learner Scholarship program, to help parents pay for preschool, also has bipartisan support at the Capitol this session. Currently the program budget only allows enough scholarships for ten percent of the families who meet the income guidelines.