

The Child Care Crisis is laid bare in Ulster County. According to the 2020 Census there are roughly 8,000 children under five years old. As of 01/15/2023, the total number of available child care slots in the county is roughly 330. Ulster county has seen a 47% decrease in child care availability in the last ten years. While the pandemic has certainly exacerbated the problem, it is not new.

Family and Group Family providers are only able to take two children under two with out hiring an assistant. A home-based provider makes roughly \$32/hour if fully enrolled and open 50 hours per week. This is not their take home however, as all of their costs must be paid from this. On top of this, providers who run Family or Group Family programs are ineligible for student loan forgiveness because they are considered business owners. I recently did a child care referral for one of our providers so she can work a second job to cover her cost of living. Most of our referral calls are for infant care, and there are 30 infant slots county wide.

The rise of a “gig” based economy in Ulster County has created many hardships for working parents. The Child Care Assistance Program creates many hurdles for parents who work “non-traditional” jobs/hours to qualify for assistance. The amount of discretion given to each county creates a situation where I am telling parents “It depends on your case worker” and that should never be the case. The lack of programs that provide care on evenings and weekends make it next to impossible for working parents who work in the burgeoning hospitality and service industries to find reliable child care. This leads parents to make the hard decision to rely on un-licensed care or lose their jobs. Many of the parents we work with use the other services within our agency to help with housing expenses, utilities, and access to food and transportation. As all of these costs skyrocket their wages stay stagnant. The same is true for our providers.

Providers are unable to hire staff at livable wages because they themselves are not making a livable wage. And so, they are limited in the number of children they can have in care. In Kingston our HeadStart program has been closed due to staffing, and in Ellenville there is only one HeadStart classroom. We know that continuity of care is incredibly important for children. We are seeing children who haven’t been socialized with their peers; first because of the pandemic, and now because there aren’t any openings, or the care is cost restrictive for the parents. When they are finally enrolled in care, they lack the social skills and are labeled “difficult” children. Our providers do not have the time or resources to properly work one on one with the child, or get them evaluation services, and in worst case scenarios the family is asked to leave the program. Curriculums like the “Ages and Stages Questionnaire” are available that could help providers identify ways to help children, but it is cost restrictive.

40% of families report they cannot find care because there are no openings. Followed by location (there are very rural parts of Ulster County with absolutely no care), Cost, and not available during hours needed. In communities like Phoenicia, Mt. Tremper, and Tannersville, whose economies run on tourism, there are no care options for parents who work those jobs to keep that economy going.

When working with parents I frequently find myself saying; “I’ll be fully honest with you, we don’t have any providers who will be able to meet your needs.” In these cases, I try to refer them to the Legally Exempt Child Care Program, but many people don’t have someone in their life they trust to provide care. We work with many foster parents, and the discouragement I feel and can hear when they realize there’s no child care for the child they just welcomed is heartbreaking.

It is currently more expensive to send your child to fulltime daycare than it is to send them to SUNY. How do we expect our families to thrive, our children to thrive, when the cost of safe and reliable care is so high? The state must invest in our youngest citizens. We must address this crisis, and address how tied to our housing and inflation crisis it is, or we will fail the most valuable members of our communities; our children.