



Aja and David Holland with their two children, Finn and Amelia. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Child care

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And while the issue is being felt across the nation, families living in childcare deserts like the Mid-Willamette Valley, which already had insufficient options before COVID-19, are particularly feeling the pinch.

A sizeable portion of the state is considered a “child care desert” — meaning there are more children younger than 5 needing care than spots available — and all of Oregon’s 36 counties qualify as child care deserts for infants and toddlers.

The state requirement that licensed daycare facilities have a low staff-to-child ratio for infants and toddlers means many childcare providers don’t serve younger children.

Marion County, as an “extreme desert,” has one child care slot for every 10 children younger than 2.

Experts predict the crisis will impact households for years to come through lost wages, financial instability and abandoned careers if more isn’t done to assist both families and providers.

Problem most impacts working moms

Experts said the problem existed before the pandemic and has only worsened.

Faced with low profit margins, a disappearing workforce and costs associated with COVID-19 closures and expanded health measures, many centers and in-home providers have closed for good.

A report from the Oregon State Legislature found a 20% loss in Oregon’s childcare capacity during the pandemic.

“We believe we lost 6,500 slots across the state,” Alyssa Chatterjee, director of Oregon’s Early Learning Division, said.

The loss was evenly spread across facilities but was slightly higher for smaller, home-based daycares, which were already seeing a nationwide decline before the pandemic. Those childcare facilities tend to be more affordable and help fill the overwhelming shortage of available slots.

“It’ll take some pretty significant investment in order to not only just recoup what we’ve lost but to continue to grow since it wasn’t sufficient before,” Chatterjee said.

The lack of affordable, high-quality childcare options disproportionately harms working mothers, especially low- and middle-income mothers and mothers of color, according to the Brookings Institution, a national public policy research nonprofit.

Average childcare costs in every state exceed the federal definition of affordability — 7% of household income.

A 2020 Oregon Child Care Market Price Study found the average monthly cost of infant and toddler care at a center was more than \$1,500 per child.

LeiLani Fidler, of Salem, said high childcare costs led her family to make the decision to take a new job so she could work from home.

“Just one child out of diapers was more than our mortgage,” she said.

Her 5-year-old started kindergarten but her 3-year-old is home with her all day.

Although the arrangement saves money, she said it’s extremely hard to work and be a mom at the same time.

“There is guilt both on the mom side and the employee side,” she said. “I often have to tell my daughter to wait or hold on because I’m working. And on the flip side, I sometimes don’t feel I can work to my fullest potential because of



Children play at the East Lancaster Community Center in Salem on March 30, 2020. The program, usually for pre-school aged children, has extended their age range up to 12 years old. MADELEINE COOK / STATESMAN JOURNAL

the interruptions.”

She often finds herself working all day and then again after her kids go to bed.

Even those with a coveted childcare spot over the past two years have faced unexpected closures due to a lack of staffing or COVID-19 outbreaks.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau survey conducted during one of the coronavirus surges, more than half of Oregon households with children younger than 5 were left without child care in that month.

Those left without care are forced to take time off work, scramble to find alternate care or juggle working from home with young children.

And the burden is falling mostly on women, both at home and in childcare facilities.

Sarah Shadrack, a single mother to a 1- and 3-year-old, grew up in the Mid-Valley and thought she would be able to find child care once she moved back. It didn’t turn out to be so easy.

“My daughter got accepted into a preschool in September and my son is on their waitlist which will likely take until he is 3,” she said.

The only daycares she found with immediate availability had various red flags, like dirty facilities or records of abuse allegations.

An online database of licensed childcare facilities and records of inspections and complaints are available online at oregonearlylearning.com/parents-vwfamilies/find-child-care-programs.

With few options, she resorted to working from home with both her children.

Before Nicole Zauner moved to Salem, she got on waitlists at a Montessori school for her 3- and 5-year-olds last October. They were only recently offered spots opening up next September.

“Luckily, we were able to push the move later than originally planned, in large part due to lack of child care,” she said.

They plan on hiring a nanny over the summer to tide them over until September.

“I am moving from somewhere where it is extremely difficult to find child care and was hoping it would be easier in Salem, but it seems to be a much more widespread problem than I had realized,” Zauner said.

Business owners and industry leaders are also feeling the impact as their employees scramble to find care.

Several business owners advocated for the state to pass legislation giving more assistance and funding to parents and providers.

“As businesses and work schedules start to get back to the new normal and

those parents are required to come onto worksites again, the need to find care will increase dramatically,” Sheila Murty said in testimony to the Legislature this February on behalf of the Tillamook County Creamery Association. “In order to satisfy our commitments to fulfilled employees and enriched communities, we need help finding both short and long-term solutions to the lack of child care supply.”

An industry in crisis

Parents aren’t the only ones struggling.

Child care providers struggle with low wages and burnout.

Daycare and preschool owners report high turnover, with some even closing — both temporarily and permanently — due to staffing issues.

“Pre-COVID, our workforce had about a 30% turnover rate,” Chatterjee said. “Our estimates are that is slightly higher with the pandemic. We saw folks leaving for jobs with Target and Starbucks, where they can make more money or get access to benefits and supports that the private childcare sector can’t offer.”

Typically, these workers are not likely to return to early care and education unless something significant shifts, she added.

A survey of caregivers by the RAPID-EC, a research project conducted by the University of Oregon on the pandemic’s impact on early childhood development, found that 59% of childcare employers nationwide were experiencing staffing shortages.

The vast majority reported feeling more stressed and burned out due to the shortages.

Christy O’Neill worked as a teacher and substitute childcare provider before the pandemic. The shutdown in 2020 led the daycare facility where she worked to close permanently.

“(The initial shutdown) affected providers all across the state,” she said. “Some of them rose to the occasion and made big sacrifices to make alterations to their homes and absorb the cost. Others just weren’t able to implement them ... maintaining those safety regulations is important but also very costly.”

Pandemic precautions meant many childcare providers had to reduce capacity, maintain completely separate classrooms and go through a litany of health, safety and sanitation checks.

O’Neill now works as a Head Start teacher in Medford and is an elected officer with Oregon AFSCME Council 75, the union that represents more than 33,000 workers, including many in the childcare industry.

She said staff turnover is a prominent issue in child care, which she attributed to low wages and a lack of respect for early childhood educators.

Pay can vary by location and type of facility, but many positions start near minimum wage.

“We’re in a place now where providers are not earning a living wage to cover even their own livelihood, let alone having staff that are also available to help enrich children’s experiences,” she said.

Employers are stuck with the dueling problems of losing staff to low wages or charging families more — a tough place when many already struggle to afford care.

O’Neill said there is a huge shortage in infant care, culturally responsive care — staff able to understand and accommodate those raised in other cultures and languages or with special needs — and accessible care in rural areas.

O’Neill also said she feels a lot of people do not respect the work that teachers and providers do and see them instead as low-skill babysitters.

“Folks in a provider-type position are unnoticed for their efforts and important work that they do,” she said. “If we start identifying childcare providers as professionals that are in this field and dedicated to their work, I think that we could see a lot of growth.”

Chatterjee echoed concerns about the lack of respect many in the industry receive.

“We have not treated this like a professional workforce, which is evident by the wages that these providers are paid,” she said.

And, she said, the low pay continues despite research repeatedly showing the critical impact of quality, consistent care in early childhood.

Working toward solutions

The burden of low wages and high turnover in the industry disproportionately impacts women and people of color.

To remedy this inequity, Chatterjee said, the Early Learning Division is expanding publically funded programs like Head Start using \$68 million from the Oregon State Legislature. They are also helping facilitate the distribution of hundreds of millions of dollars from the American Rescue Plan to providers.

And a nearly \$100 million childcare package passed by the Oregon Legislature this year will include issuing two \$500 recruitment and retention bonuses for all childcare employees through Portland State University’s Oregon Center for Career Development in Childhood Care and Education.

But Chatterjee said more local, federal and state investment is needed to solve the problem of unaffordability and scarcity.

“Child care is an industry built on the backs of parents and families and built on the backs of women,” she said. “Over 70% of the cost of child care is shouldered by families. We are well exceeding the best practice of 7% of a family’s income going to childcare.”

Educators are already reporting that kids are struggling emotionally and developmentally due to the disruptions in schooling and child care, she added.

Chatterjee said until these challenges are addressed, families and providers will continue to struggle.

“It’s a key economic and workforce support,” Chatterjee said. “We know families can’t get back to work if they don’t have a safe place to take their child.”

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at wmwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com, call 503-910-6616 or follow on Twitter @wmwoodworth