

Child care: ‘There needs to be sound government investment’

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to 15 more part-time staffers for such an expansion, a particularly challenging lift in a labor market where demand for workers is high and supply is at an all-time low.

Switching to a full-time labor model with the additional cost of providing benefits would require major city investment.

In the coming months, Astoria leaders plan to consider several options to reconfigure how Lil’ Sprouts functions. One possibility is to seek out a public-private partnership to free up Parks and Recreation Department resources for the Astoria Aquatic Center, another costly city program reliant on part-time workers.

The city may also examine grant packages to expand care offerings for lower-income families. City Councilor Roger Rocka has advocated for a co-op model, where parents volunteer for a set amount of hours in exchange for reduced rates.

City councilors are closely following child care discussions at the county level. The county, in turn, is paying close attention to the city.

Along with Tillamook and Columbia counties, Clatsop County formed a child care task force to investigate how to funnel resources and collaborate with providers to offer more child care, as well as fund training for child care workers. The Board of Commissioners set aside a portion of the county’s American Rescue Plan dollars to go to this work, but there are no concrete proposals yet, said Mark Kujala, the board’s chairman.

Child care is increasingly an issue in the county, Kujala said. He and his wife have two young children, though finding child care was not an issue for his family. His wife took time off from work to be home with their daughters.

“A lot of folks don’t have the luxury to do that,” he said. “They have to work — both parents have to work.”



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A child’s mask sits on the table during snack time at summer camp.

Kujala and other commissioners say they want to collaborate with Astoria and Seaside, where the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District is in the process of expanding child care offerings after purchasing the former Broadway Middle School.

At the local government level, however, there has been little urgency to take action since the county — like all counties in Oregon — was declared a child care desert in 2019. The problem came into even sharper focus in early 2020, when Shooting Stars Child Development Center in Astoria, one of the region’s larger providers, scaled back services.

‘It’s so hard’

New providers like Tiffany Wallin are experiencing the central dilemma of the child care industry: There is a limit to what she can charge families. There is also a limit to what she can pay in labor and operating costs and still make enough to turn any kind of profit.

Wallin opened New Bees

Early Childhood Development Center in Gearhart last year in part to ensure quality care for her own daughter. This week, she announced New Bees would close until mid-September following two virus cases at the facility.

When New Bees reopens, Wallin will no longer be offering care options for infants and toddlers. She simply can’t find enough staff.

Wallin provides what she considers a good wage — higher than minimum wage and higher than what some other centers offer. Still, people leave almost as quickly as they come, she said, turnover that caught her off guard.

“At this point, I’m analyzing whether or not I should put more money into my compensation packages,” she said.

Caring for children can be intense work, but it is also an essential service.

“There needs to be sound government investment because there is no marketplace solution,” U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici told The Astorian.

Earlier this year, the Ore-

gon Democrat relaunched the Oregon Child Care Advisory Board. At the time, the congresswoman was pushing for child care to be a top priority in the next federal pandemic relief package.

“There are a lot of people who weren’t talking about child care who are now,” noted Debby Reed, a professional development support specialist with Northwest Regional Child Care Resource and Referral.

Lack of child care has ripple effects through society. Early learning programs are critical to student success over time, while reliable, affordable and safe child care is crucial for working families, parents looking to reenter the workforce and businesses in need of employees.

Millions of women across the country have dropped out of the workforce since the start of the pandemic, many to shoulder the burden of child care for their families as schools and day cares closed or curtailed services. Surveys this summer show

many of these women have yet to return to work.

Kate Gohr, the principal at Astor Elementary School in Astoria, had three teachers — all women — resign because of child care issues earlier this year.

When Astoria’s youngest students returned to school buildings in February, it was only for several hours a day, a difficult pocket of time to plan work and child care around.

“It’s just so challenging,” Gohr said. “Even in non-COVID times child care is challenging in Astoria and then with COVID — it’s so hard.”

‘The most stressful thing’

Silqet Ra, who has worked as a server at Buoy Beer Co. and other restaurants in Astoria, knows firsthand how difficult it was to find child care on the North Coast even before the pandemic.

Like many longtime servers, Ra preferred to work the money shifts: nights and

weekends, when tips are best.

After her daughter was born, this strategy became complicated. Ra still needed the money, but she also needed child care.

She had moved back to the coast without any family in the region to help her out. She cobbled together a care situation that at times involved a home day care where she and the provider worked around each other’s schedules and then a more consistent situation with a child care center during the week and a sitter for weekend shifts.

Ra often felt caught in a cycle familiar to many working families: It seemed like she paid for child care so she could work, so she could pay for child care so she could work. And on and on.

When the pandemic hit, she lost child care and restaurant work in an instant.

Ra’s daughter returned to a child care center in Astoria for the first time in nearly a year earlier this week. Ra, who experimented with running her own business and has transitioned out of serving and into a bookkeeping and human resources role for Buoy Beer, anticipates bumping up her work hours when her daughter attends kindergarten in September.

Ra and other parents she knows have benefited from the advance child tax credit checks this year. The money helps with paying monthly child care bills, but hasn’t changed the long waitlists or the lack of options.

“Yes, the money has been helpful as something that’s tangible,” Ra said, “but also if you still don’t have the care, OK, I have another 250 bucks in my pocket, but I can’t pay anybody with that.”

Things feel stable for Ra and her family now — or as stable as they can be.

“To this day, child care has been the most stressful thing I’ve had to deal with,” she said.

Outbreaks: The governor has required health care workers to get vaccinated

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Health District, said there are three dozen cases — two dozen among residents and a dozen from staff.

He said residents who tested positive are reportedly experiencing minor symptoms, and all but one were vaccinated. As for the staff, all but two were vaccinated.

Larson said the memory community will test all residents and staff weekly until all tests are negative for two consecutive weeks. At that point, he said, they will return to appointment-only visitations in a controlled environment.

Columbia Memorial had 12 virus cases from late July to the most recent onset on Aug. 11, according to the health authority.

Nancee Long, the director of communications at the Astoria hospital, said caregivers who tested positive were sent home to quarantine.

Long said 11 of the 12 virus cases were not work exposures and did not occur in the hospital’s clinical areas. She said the hospital and other health care facilities remain safe.

“As one of the county’s largest employers and a health care organization, it is certainly not surprising that our employees would be exposed,” she said in a statement. “CMH follows rigorous precautions for PPE (personal protective equipment), masking, social distancing mandated by the OHA (Oregon Health Authority) and CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). We also have a robust contact investigation process.

“We are seeing between five and nine COVID-positive patients being hospitalized at our facility at any given time. Most of these

patients are unvaccinated, and they are a younger demographic than seen previously.

“The most serious of cases are 100% unvaccinated and are very sick.”

Gov. Kate Brown has required health care workers in Oregon to get vaccinated against the virus by Oct. 18, or six weeks after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves the vaccines, whichever is later. Long said 27% of Columbia Memorial caregivers are unvaccinated.

“We feel strongly that those who work in health care should vaccinate and provide that opportunity to all our caregivers,” she said. “Most of the positive cases we have seen within our organization are unvaccinated.”

During the winter, the health authority disclosed 14 virus cases at Columbia Memorial from late November to late December.

Under the health authority’s guidelines, workplace outbreaks at businesses with 30 or more workers are disclosed once five virus cases are reported.

The state’s threshold is lower for care homes — three virus cases or one death — in child care settings — two virus cases in facilities with capacity for more than 16 students — and at schools — any virus case involving students, staff or volunteers.

The state’s weekly outbreak report showed that an outbreak at Clatsop Care Health & Rehabilitation in Astoria grew to six virus cases. The state had reported four virus cases last week.

Both of the new virus cases involve staff. One of the employees is newly hired and has yet to start work at the facility, according to Clarissa Johnson, the center’s administrator.

The other case, she said, comes from a director who

was not a direct caregiver to residents. They have been sent to quarantine at home.

“Moving forward,” Johnson said, “we will be testing people twice weekly even if we don’t have any positive cases.”

Clatsop Care Health & Rehabilitation, like Clatsop Care Memory Community, is part of the Clatsop Care Health District.

The state also disclosed one virus case involving a student at Seaside High School reported on Aug. 7 and one virus case involving a student at Astoria High School on Aug. 8. The Astoria School District had disclosed the virus case earlier this month, but declined to say whether it involved a student or staff.

Last week, the Clatsop County Public Health Department reported more than a dozen local outbreaks. But the county has declined to provide any details about the outbreaks or how the virus is spreading locally other than pointing to the delta variant, which is pushing virus case counts higher across Oregon and the United States.

Health care leaders have warned about the strain virus patients are placing on hospitals and the ability to care for other patients.

Erik Thorsen, the CEO of Columbia Memorial, said Friday that several patients have died because they were unable to be transferred to other hospitals for specialized care.

“There are patients who need specialized care that we cannot offer, that in normal times would be transferred to a tertiary center, but the tertiary centers are full, and so we’re not able to get that specialized care for those individuals on an immediate basis,” Thorsen said.

The Clatsop County OSU Extension office is looking for a 4-H Educational Program Assistant

This is a full time position + benefits

Salary: \$17.90-27.06 DOE

Typically, the starting salary is at the lower end of the salary range.

This recruitment will be used to fill an Education Program Assistant 2 (EPA2) position with the Oregon State University Extension 4-H Youth Development program in Clatsop County. The EPA2 works with the managing 4-H faculty member in Clatsop County to coordinate and deliver 4-H educational programs.

The EPA2 position will work primarily with the development, implementation, and evaluation of the 4-H program in Clatsop County. This position works in conjunction with the 4-H Youth Development faculty member to support and enhance 4-H programs in Clatsop County. Program activities to include but not limited to: after-school programs, day camps, field days, and fairs. This position may supervise Extension volunteers engaged in various tasks central to program delivery.

Qualifications: Associate’s Degree and three years of work experience (paid or volunteer) supporting community programs that serve children, youth or adults OR Bachelor’s Degree and one year of work experience (paid or volunteer) one year of which must be working in youth development programs, adult education, teaching, program delivery or related functions OR Five years experience in a field related to the duties of the position AND a high school diploma or equivalent. AND Demonstrated oral and written communication skills. Demonstrated skill to work with diverse audiences. Demonstrated skill to use computers for word processing, data management, and communications.

Experience with handling livestock is preferred.

Must apply before August 30, 2021:

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For additional information please contact:
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