

Child care desert forces tough choices for parents

By ZACK DEMARS
The Bulletin

Darci Palmer was optimistic she'd return to work from maternity leave without too much trouble.

She was hopeful the three babysitters she and her partner, Mary Hearn, had lined up would give her enough time to let her keep her job (and the family's health insurance) and for Hearn to continue her self-employed work as a real estate developer.

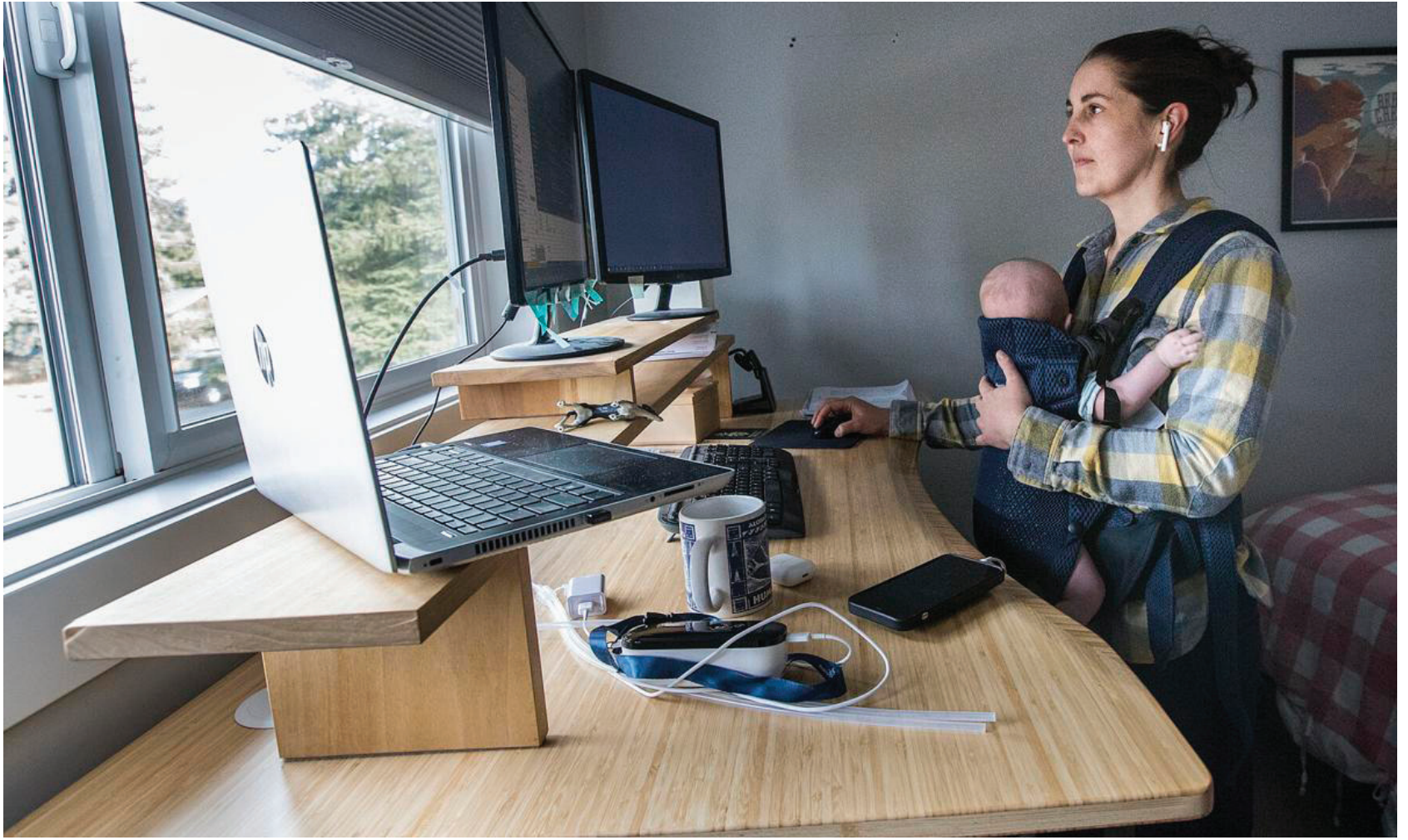
That was a month ago. Then, babysitters backed out, and the family was once again without a solid plan for how to care for their twins. The process made the couple realize the importance of finding high-quality child care they can trust.

"I took for granted before having kids — if there was child care out there and it had a license, that's good enough — that it was that simple," Palmer said. "But there's so much more to it. It's really like finding somebody to marry. There's so much to it when you're trusting someone with your most precious — I don't know. My precious babies. I didn't see that coming."

Hearn and Palmer's situation, with the support of Palmer's mom, flexible work hours and the financial resources to afford care in the first place, is better than what many parents face. Still, the family is caught in the middle of a broken system trying to balance working and parenting in a tri-county area that experts call a child care desert.

Like many regions nationwide, central Oregon faces an overwhelming lack of child care, where thin profit margins and high barriers to entry mean there aren't enough options to go around, leaving parents to scramble to find care they can afford.

Providers fund their businesses from two main sources: Parents and government subsidies. Overwhelmingly, parents take on the majority of that financial



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Darci Palmer soothes her infant son, Nico, while working in her home office in Bend.

burden — parents paid 71% of the \$1.2 billion spent on early care and education in 2017, for example, according to Oregon State University researchers.

Since state regulations require a certain number of employees per child, much of a provider's cost is wages, according to Karen Prow, the director of child care resources for NeighborImpact, which assists providers in the region.

"So when you're talking about mostly wages that need to be paid out with the income that comes in from families, there's that uncomfortable space of not wanting to charge families more than they can afford to pay," Prow said. "But you don't have enough money coming in to actually pay your bills, to hire high-quality staff, to give them a living wage — especially in an area like central Oregon."

That means the costs for

child care are high. While prices can vary by locale, hours and type of care, the median annual price of toddler care in an Oregon child care center was \$15,900 in 2020 — a figure that rose faster than the incomes of families with children in the state.

The average family in Deschutes County, for example, pays \$875 per child per month for full-time care, according to ChildCare Aware of America, a nationwide child care research and advocacy organization. That's \$70 more a month than the state average, 18% of the county's median household income for a family with a young child, and 51% of the median household income for families in poverty.

Hearn's and Palmer's ideal child care situation would be something in their own home, where a nanny or babysitter could care for

the two 3-month-olds while Hearn and Palmer worked from home, giving them a chance to stay focused on their work while being around their kids.

But their child care story has been a saga of forestalled options: The plans for a mishmash of babysitters came after Sprouts Montessori, a school in their neighborhood they'd enrolled the 3-month-olds in, decided it would no longer enroll babies.

And some of the options they have found didn't work: A nanny who wouldn't get vaccinated against COVID-19 and open slots at a day-care where a friend had negative experiences.

For now, Palmer's mother has offered to help, staying in Bend for a while.

"Having someone who's COVID-safe, part of our family, able to take care of them in the way that we want has been a total life-

saver," Palmer said. "She's gotten us through. Without her I don't think we'd have our sanity, I probably wouldn't still have my job."

But they're not sure they can keep asking her to help much longer.

Neither parent wants to sacrifice their career just because they can't find child care that works best for them. Just a few weeks ago, Palmer hadn't considered the possibility of putting her career on pause — but now, after months of searching for the right child care option that would get her back to work, and with just a few weeks left of her mom's support, she's more open to the idea.

Palmer and Hearn aren't alone in their struggle to find child care that works for them.

A 2020 study from Oregon State found that most counties in Oregon lacked enough child care spots.

Deschutes County had enough slots for one in three kids between 3 and 5, while Jefferson County had enough slots for 44% of that population and Crook County had just 25%, the study found.

The pandemic certainly hasn't helped. Experts say many child care providers have closed their doors after COVID-19 safety measures raised costs and declining parental income reduced enrollments and revenue, and data from Child Care Aware, a national child care advocacy nonprofit, suggest Oregon lost a quarter of its child care slots between December 2019 and July 2020.

Palmer said she feels like her mom's support is "giving us another two weeks to figure things out. And if we don't, I don't know. I give two weeks notice? Honestly, I don't know. This is so hard."

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