

# Child care: ‘One of us honestly might have to quit our job’

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Part of the drop can be attributed to a shift away from licensed care, according to Eva Manderson, the regional director of Northwest Regional Child Care Resource and Referral, which provided the data. The numbers are not exact given that some places, like school districts and churches, continue to operate without needing a license.

Manderson said the count still demonstrates a steep downward trend, though. The majority of the decline came before the coronavirus pandemic.

“COVID has shone a light on it for us and now everything feels really big. But it’s not that that’s new. It’s been happening,” Manderson said.

The lack of child care options can limit the potential for job growth, creating obstacles for parents across income ranges.

The Humphreys, for example, both work at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria, where Sarah is a physician and Parke is a physical therapist. Several other families with children at Sprouts also work in health care.

Humphrey said that in her clinic, child care issues have made it tough to hire and retain staff.

“It really trickles down to the entire community and then you think about: OK, well now we have this aging population but no one to provide them with medical care because you don’t have the younger workforce able to work,” she said.

Humphrey said she felt the City Council did not exhaust all options, such as raising prices on an income-based scale. She said she would have been willing to pay more.

“I feel really grateful that we have a lot more flexibility than a lot of other families,” she said. “So, we’re not in as dire straits. But I really feel for some other families that are going to be in a much worse space because of it.”

While the Sprouts closure will impact 21 families, Manderson said she thinks it was the right choice for the



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Madi Devine, a lead child care professional at Sprouts Learning Center, passes chalk out to a class.

city in the long term.

“We’re going to figure out how to help those families and help their staff,” she said, adding that she is working to see if Sprouts’ staff can be placed in other child care programs, which could allow the programs to add slots.

“It’s a huge loss to the community and a very difficult decision. And I think a decision made for the right reasons for the community,” Manderson said.

## ‘Highlights the urgency’

An Oregon State University report in 2019 described Clatsop County and others across the state as child care deserts.

The problem intensified in the months before the pandemic, when Shooting Stars Child Development Center, one of the county’s larger providers, downsized.

The county formed a task force to look at potential solutions, but little progress has been made as child care slots continued to dwindle over the past few years.

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, said the

county’s child care work group will discuss available options at a meeting on March 1.

“I think now, with Lil’ Sprouts closing, I think it just highlights the urgency to do something. And we’ve got a number of resources in the community,” Kujala said.

He said several child care services have the potential to expand, including Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District in Seaside, various school districts and Warrenton Prep Preschool. He said businesses, too, have expressed an interest in helping.

Kujala said the county hopes to identify cost-sharing methods. One option is the one-third model, with funding split three ways between government, businesses and families.

Another challenge is finding ways to improve the pay and training for child care workers.

“We knew that, Lil’ Sprouts, this was something they were considering for a long time. But it doesn’t take the sting out of it because it’s been a big support to so

many families in Astoria and beyond. And certainly that loss is going to be felt when they close,” Kujala said.

Colleen Larson, who has a 4-year-old son and 14-month-old daughter, was one of over 100 families on the waitlist for Sprouts. She said she already wasn’t hopeful about getting a spot, having watched the funding situation decline.

She recently found out that her daughter’s day care in Warrenton will be closing its infant room after determining it was not profitable.

“I know lots of people that are having kids coming up that had their kids at these places and they have nowhere to go and nothing to show for it,” she said. “So people are quitting jobs, obviously, and I don’t have that option. I need to work.”

Larson said that she and her husband spend around \$1,850 a month on child care for her two children.

“It’s like a Catch-22 for us because we’re straight middle class, but we don’t make enough on one income to stay home and support our family. So I have to pay

ungodly prices for day care to sustain what we’ve got,” she said.

Her daughter is on the waitlist at Peace Learning Center in Astoria, where she said it might take over a year to land an infant spot. Until then, three of Larson’s friends will be splitting time watching her baby.

“It’s a lot of stress. I mean, most of us don’t have another option,” she said.

Dan Gaffney, who is part of the county’s child care work group, said that Sprouts closing after more than a decade of operation will have a big impact in a county with little child care availability. The day care — formerly called Lil’ Sprouts Academy — opened in 2010 at the Gray School campus at a time when choices for parents were limited.

“The city of Astoria stepped up in a very big way for a long time and they have been, most recently, the most significant provider of infant and toddler care,” he said. “And so now with Sprouts closing, that’s going to put a real big hurt on the families and on the economy of Clat-

sop County.”

Gaffney, a retired Seaside educator and an advocate for early learning, said shared services are a potential option. The county is also trying to improve the local information network to let families know about openings.

“We’re trying to figure out the best way to move forward to help sustain and hopefully increase the number of child care providers,” he said. “It’s a slow process, but I think it’s a process that is necessary to be thorough and we’re hoping that we can move forward in a significant way.”

## ‘It’s a really big deal for us’

Brookley Henri enrolled her 2-year-old at Sprouts in September. She said she had felt assured by previous statements from the city that it would be staying open.

“One of us honestly might have to quit our job. It’s a really big deal for us because there’s just nowhere to send a child under age 3,” she said of the challenge for her and her husband. “We are on the waitlist at every place that we can think of all the way down to Gearhart.”

She had only started working again because the couple finally got a spot at Sprouts after spending over a year on the waitlist.

Henri, who works from home for an engineering firm and also serves on the Planning Commission, said she cannot concentrate on her work or attend meetings while watching her son.

She appreciates that they’ve been given until June to figure something out and hopes that by then there will be more support for summer programs for preschoolers.

Henri said she recognizes the complexity of the situation, especially during the pandemic.

“I definitely understand that. Although it does impact us — and it could be devastating to our professional lives and our personal lives — we are a very small percentage of the population. So I’m happy for whatever is best for the community,” she said. “I just really wish that child care wasn’t such a scarcity around here.”

# Sibony: Gulls can take anybody on a given night

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“I made it out of that game with two bruised ligaments in my left thumb, two stitches on my right forearm, and a cracked knee,” Sibony said. “It’s frustrating to lose a game in league, but Banks is a pretty good team.”

He added, “Their whole defensive plan was based around me, because of how much I scored the first time we played (29 points). I was trying to get other people involved, but we couldn’t penetrate their zone very well. They played a lot of man the first time, and switched it up.”

Seaside rebounded two nights later with a win at Astoria, after a little soul-searching.

“Our team was a little bit shaken after (the loss at Banks),” Sibony said. “A lot of people are taking a look at themselves, including myself. We were getting into too much of a winning, cocky attitude, and I think it will be a good learning point.”

The Gulls have lost just six games to Cowapa League opponents over the last four years — all to the Braves. The very same Braves who will drop to the 3A level next school year. In other words, Seaside is saying goodbye to its only competition in league play.

“As far as rivals go, Banks has been the main one,” Sibony says. “Their fans do not like us.”

Sibony and the Gulls scored a little revenge on Banks with a 52-49 win over the Braves in Saturday’s tiebreaker for the Cowapa League’s No. 1



Kelsey Betts

Ever Sibony sails in for another two points.

seed to the state playoffs.

The Gulls can take anybody on a given night.

“We’ve gotten pretty good looks at everybody,” he said. “We played both (No. 1) Junction City and (No. 3) Marshfield this year, and I know for a fact that we can beat any team in the state.”

The road to state is never easy. Especially so this season for Sibony.

In addition to the bumps and bruises and stitches he received at Banks, “I’ve been a bit injury-plagued this year. I had (foot) stress fracture and missed a few games.”

Sibony was told he would miss four to six weeks, but was back in three.

A lot of that has to do with Sibony’s competitiveness to be on the floor, injured or not.

Growing up as the youngest brother, he said, teaches you a little about being competitive. But also in keeping with the Seaside tradition, and being a Gull.

“We were always real competitive, but the thing that helped me most in basketball wasn’t as much the competitive thing, it was getting involved with my older brothers, going to their practices and working with coach Q (Gene Quilhaugh) and coach (Frank) Januik.

“Growing up, I would join in with all the older kids. That’s really where my love of basketball came from, playing up all the time. I always wanted to be better than the older kids.”

And watching the older kids play in four straight state championship games was, no doubt, an influence. Sibony had his idols, for sure.

“Jackson Januik (now an assistant coach to Bill Westerholm) of course. I always liked the way Hunter Thompson played defense — I kind of modeled myself after that. I liked the 2012 team, too, with Nick Nelson, Aaron Chesnut and those guys. Another one was Ryan Hague, who was a mentor for me when I was a freshman and sophomore.”

## ‘Mount Everest’

Januik went on to play at George Fox University, but very few Gulls have managed to play at the next level. Sibony is hoping there’s a spot for him, back East.

“My main plan after high school is to go to the University of Pennsylvania to study business,” he said. “I’m also in direct contact with their coach, and if I could play there, that would just be the cherry on top. I find out in March if I make it into the school, and

if I make it into the school, there’s basically a spot waiting for me.”

Finally, the name. Where does Everest come from?

“It’s a funny story,” he said. “Apparently when I was born and still in the hospital, I didn’t have a name for a day or two, and my parents were making a bunch of jokes, saying, ‘I love you forever and ever, ever.’ They really liked the nickname ‘Ever,’ but they couldn’t think of a full name that they liked.

“The only other option was Everett. But one day there was a documentary on Mount Everest, and they were like, ‘that’s it!’”



Gary Henley/The Astorian

Ever Sibony, left, has always looked up to and competed with older brothers Samson, middle, and Rafi.



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