

There's No "Re-Opening" Utah Without More Child Care

Published: Wednesday, 22 April 2020 07:28

Written by: Anna Thomas



Child care is arguably one of the biggest areas of economic weakness exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis. For Utah, a new and better approach is necessary and within reach.

Even before the pandemic forced statewide shutdowns in March, the child care system in Utah was too small to serve the needs of Utah workers. According to [a report released in early March by Utah's Office of Child Care \(OCC\)](#), there is a 65% gap between workers' need for child care (for children six and younger), and the system's ability to provide it.

Again, this was *before* the pandemic hit.

Now, less than six weeks into Utah's pandemic response, our child care capacity has shrunk even further. [In a recent state coronavirus news conference, OCC](#) stated

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that 38% of Utah's licensed child care centers, and 18% of home-based providers, have closed in response to the pandemic. Those providers that do remain open are serving even smaller groups of children, in compliance with strict new emergency public health protocols.

The state deserves credit for the Herculean effort put toward establishing [One Utah Child Care](#), which provides emergency child care for workers who meet the strict definition for "essential workers." But what about when gyms, restaurants, call centers, schools, movie theaters and event centers all reopen? There won't be enough of *any* kind of childcare for all those members of the workforce, much less free child care provided by the state.

If Utah truly intends to begin to relax restrictions and "re-activate" the economy in less than two weeks, we need a concrete plan for moving out of emergency child care mode. In fact, we need a bold plan for how we can build a more robust, sustainable child care sector. A system that is so critical to so much of the workforce, cannot be allowed to remain this susceptible to disruption.

The Governor's Economic Response Task Force – and the Legislature's new commission with the same mission - should be developing comprehensive plans for a phased re-opening of child care settings that have closed since March. This plan must contemplate the eventual easing of current emergency staff-to-child ratios and the needs of child care providers for cleaning and protective equipment. Even while child care centers and home-based programs are still closed, they should be receiving state government support to meet basic expenses. Clearly, small business loans from the federal government will not be sufficient.

In March, [providers who were unable or unwilling to quickly comply with strict new emergency licensing requirements, but continued to provide child care, risked having their licenses terminated by the state](#). That risk, in addition to anticipated financial stress, led some licensed providers to close. Any provider that was in good standing in February should be able to reopen with minimal administrative burden when pandemic restrictions ease, with substantial support from the state to comply with new licensing requirements. It is in our state's interest to provide any investment necessary to make sure previously licensed providers can quickly comply with public health restrictions.

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The Office of Child Care, in close partnership with Care About Child Care regional offices, must create a comprehensive recruitment plan to bring child care providers back into the field. Any child care provider or professional who has left the field in the past several years – especially home-based providers - should be courted aggressively to return, in order to ease the reengagement of Utah's workforce in the coming months. They should receive substantial support from the state to help them meet licensing and safety standards, as well as incentive pay to attract them back to this critical sector. Now is the time for the Office of Child Care's pre-pandemic focus on "quality" to expand, significantly, to address issues of *quantity*.

Most importantly, the Utah legislature needs to start building necessary child care funding into our state budget. For years, Utah has budgeted the bare minimum "Maintenance of Effort" funding required in order to draw down federal dollars for child care programs. That wasn't working for Utah families before the pandemic, and the low-commitment approach is absolutely dangerous for our economy now.

For FY21, the legislature should be prepared to replace, with state money, the [approximately \\$40 million in emergency CARES Act funding](#) that is currently barely keeping Utah's child care sector afloat. This would allow the Office of Child Care to maintain "emergency" adjustments to the state subsidy program, in order to start filling that 65% gap between what working families need and what our pre-COVID child care sector was able to offer.

Statewide, child care providers have shown that they are committed to the children and families they serve. Those centers and home-based programs that have stayed open, largely report that they are doing so – while operating at a financial loss and at some personal risk – because they are loyal to their families and want to support them at this difficult time.

State leaders need to honor that commitment and loyalty by doing whatever is necessary to: 1) keep open child care businesses healthy and strong, 2) help closed programs re-open safely and quickly, and 3) encourage more new child care settings to open in 2020.

People can't go back to work without knowing that their children will be cared for while they are on the job. If state leaders want Utah workers to be able to

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reengage in traditional economic activity by this summer, they need to get serious about child care.