

We Can't "Solve" Homelessness If We Don't "Fix" Child Care

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Written by: Anna Thomas

At a recent meeting between the Department of Workforce Services (DWS) and local advocates (including several members of your Voices for Utah Children team!), two women currently experiencing homelessness came to present their concerns regarding child care for their families.

These women, Jenny and Theresa (not their actual names) are both moms. They are, more precisely, Powerful Moms Who Care. That's the name they and other mothers at Palmer Court, permanent supportive housing facility in downtown Salt Lake City, have given to their small group of activists-by-necessity, advocates-despite-everything.

As DWS staff and administrators respectfully listened, Jenyn and Theresa outlined their dilemma. It is not dissimilar from that of so many working parents throughout Utah, but greatly exacerbated by their circumstances, beyond what most working parents will ever experience.

They want to work. But they can't work without a safe place to place their kids.

They love the on-site Head Start program, provided at Palmer Court by Community Action Program (CAP) of Utah. It's high quality child care with an emphasis on learning and healthy development, provided by educated and caring professionals, free of charge for children living at Palmer Court.

These Powerful Moms appreciate having a safe, educational setting for their young children while they work, attend class or seek employment. They acknowledge that it's a tough job that the Head Start educators do, working with groups of young children who have endured (and are currently enduring) a fair amount of disruption and trauma.

The real issue, they say, is that our child care system isn't structured in a way that supports them working, or educating themselves, out of homelessness and poverty, and into a better future for themselves and their families.

Specifically, the on-site Head Start program at Palmer Court is only offered for 6.5

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hours a day, five days a week.

For moms who need to work but have no car, two or more of those hours could be spent just *getting* to work via public transit.

For moms who are attending classes to finish a high school diploma, an associate's degree or a technical certification, evening classes are out, limiting options for course completion.

There are subsidies available to these families for childcare during hours when the Head Start classrooms are closed, but it is nearly impossible to figure out how to transport children from Palmer Court to alternative child care for the remaining hours of a work shift, without leaving work altogether or during a limited work break.

Their request was simple, but fulfilling it will not be: provide extended-hour child care at Palmer Court, so parents have a greater chance of actually succeeding at work, school and investing in their families.

If ever there was a moment to acknowledge how little difference there is between people experiencing homelessness and people who are fortunate enough to have homes, this was it. The desire for accessible, high-quality child care is shared by thousands of Utah families, from rural to urban communities and across all income levels.

Not all parents have the courage to put aside everything else they are dealing with and express their desire directly to the public servants who are best equipped to fulfill it.

Leaders from DWS and CAP Utah expressed no philosophical resistance to the Powerful Mom's request. Everyone wants these parents and their children to succeed and thrive, and that they need their community's help to do so, is unquestionable.

DWS and CAP staff shared concerns about budgetary constraints, and additional burdens on staff members, but also expressed a desire to work with the parents to find a solution that would meet the needs at Palmer Court effectively and efficiently. They discussed partnerships with local child care providers, and brainstormed about

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transportation options. The problem solving between Palmer Court parents, advocates and public administrators will continue throughout the summer.

The meeting highlighted excellent examples of many things: active and respectful listening, collaborative problem solving, grassroots organizing, and meaningful inclusion of impacted voices.

It also reminded many in the room of the fact that *there has been little if any substantive public discussion of childcare as part of state-level plans to address the needs of our fellow Utahns who are experiencing homelessness, particularly in Salt Lake County.*

Tens of millions of taxpayer dollars have been poured into Operation Rio Grande and attendant projects aimed at moving people off city streets and into more appropriate settings. There has been much talk about public safety, substance abuse treatment and the dignity of work.

But neither work, nor treatment, nor safety are possible for families trying to exit homelessness, if there are not convenient, safe, positive settings for children while parents strive toward self-sufficiency.

Ongoing investments in projects addressing homelessness must include earmarked funding for *high quality child care* if self-sufficiency is ever to be achieved by struggling families.

Homeless advocates in Utah report that one of the top barriers to exiting homelessness and achieving stability – often *the top barrier*, as expressed by homeless families themselves - is affordable, available, accessible child care.

As we plan for future sites to support people experiencing homelessness, we *must include plans and funding for high-quality on-site child care for any child who needs it*. This supports parents who are working, training for work or looking for work. This supports children who need and deserve stability, attention, safety and early educational opportunities.

High-quality child care is not cheap. But it's the best investment we can make in families - in Jenny and Theresa's families - that deserve to live peacefully

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next door, rather than outside in crisis.