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Fewer families get child-care subsidies in Monroe County

Report shows more families being denied aid

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When Nickol Lowry applied for a government subsidy to pay for her son's child care several months ago, she learned that her own pursuit of a college education while working would be held against her.

Lowry, who works part time at Wegmans while studying criminal justice at the Rochester Institute of Technology, was recently denied financial assistance, with Monroe County saying that RIT is "not an acceptable program of study" to qualify for a subsidy.

Being rejected for child-care subsidies has become more common in Monroe County. A new Center for Governmental Research study, *Access to Subsidized Child Care in Monroe County, NY*, shows that the rejection rate of applications jumped from 11 percent to 50 percent over the past six years. At the same time, the number of children in the county benefiting from child-care subsidies dropped 38 percent — from 13,575 to 8,400.

County Human Services Commissioner Kelly Reed said that it's in the county's best interest to make subsidies for child care available to low-income residents, since child care helps keep them employed and off public assistance. "We want to try to make people more self-sufficient," Reed said.

Various studies, as the center's report notes, have also shown that using quality child programs is an investment that brings big returns in better educational performance and fewer behavioral problems.

Still, with the county denying about half of about 5,400 applications for child-care subsidies last year, the report estimates that more than 12,000 children from working poor families in the county are in need of child care but aren't getting subsidies.

Monroe County has not taken steps that some other localities have taken to reduce the denials, such as seeking a waiver to the 2004 requirement that has made many applicants seek child support as a condition for a child-care subsidy.

Unlike 20 other counties and New York City, Monroe County officials have also decided that, though a working parent enrolled in a two-year community college can get government help for child care, she or he can't get a subsidy if attending a four-year college.

"I'm trying to better myself. You would think going to school would be acceptable," said Lowry, who ended up taking out a loan, thus going deeper in debt, to cover the \$216 a week to keep 2-year-old Emanuel Griffin at Rochester Childfirst Network.

Nor is the county willing to assign workers to child-care and community centers to help process subsidy applications, even though experts cite the applications process as a needlessly complicated obstacle.

"If you make the process more accessible, you will reduce the denial rate. You will change the climate — the expectations — and the goals," said Donald Pryor, the Center for Governmental Research staff member who wrote the report.

Demand grew

The need to make child-care subsidies available to the working poor became clear a decade ago, when federal welfare legislation forced many public assistance recipients into low-paying jobs and in need of child care. State allocations to counties are supposed to help the working poor pay for child care, which can run between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per child per year.

In 2002, then-County Executive Jack Doyle changed the eligibility criteria. A family could make no more than 140 percent of the poverty level to qualify for a child-care subsidy — \$21,360 for a family of three. Previously, a family could make as much as 200 percent more than the poverty level and qualify for a subsidy.

This change started a downward spiral in the subsidized child-care caseload that became all the more pronounced with the sharp rise in the number of subsidy applications rejected by the county.

The most common reason, cited in 55 percent of denials reviewed by Pryor, was the applicant's failure to comply with procedural requirements, a category that until this year included child support issues.

Beginning in 2005, County Executive Maggie Brooks has raised the eligibility ceiling to 165 percent of the poverty level. The number of county child-care subsidies is now at 8,700.

Special state grants totaling \$4 million to the local Children's Institute has made child-care subsidies available to families above the 165 percent cutoff. County officials, however, have the final say in eligibility determination in those cases, and have approved 255 subsidies for this program, called Childcare DOLLAR\$. Lowry's case was considered under this category.

The center's report shows that the 15 percent decline in the number of child-care-age children in the county between 2000 and 2005 cannot account for the 38 percent drop in child-care subsidies here. That drop is almost three times the decline in child-care subsidies statewide during a recent three-year span.

Failure by Monroe County officials to spend all the state money that it has received since 2002 was a factor in the state reducing its allocation to the county from \$38.3 million in 2004 to \$32.3 million for each of the past two years.

County officials say that the \$5 million that they now have in unspent state money will be used in about a year, with some of the money earmarked to pay child care providers the rate set by the state.

In 2008, the county is slated to spend \$45.8 million on child care, or about \$2.3 million more than this year. The county will pay about \$6.2 million of the total, much of it going for public assistance recipients in work-related activities.

Problems to overcome

One reason for denials of child-care subsidies is a 2004 state regulation that requires all working child-care applicants to seek child support if separated from the other parent.

In Westchester County, the requirement was a factor in the denial of 400 to 450 cases between 2004 and 2006, said John Befus, deputy commissioner of social services for Westchester County.

"It's an additional hurdle for individuals," Befus said. "It creates stress and tension for individuals who want child care so they can work."

Westchester officials recently obtained permission from the state to waive their requirement. Monroe County has not sought such a waiver, though the problems found in Westchester appear to be statewide.

Perinton resident Amy Mongeon, 32, who works in customer service in a print shop, said that she recently received a cutoff notice for a child-care subsidy to help pay the \$331-a-week cost of putting her two children in Generations Child Care in Fairport.

The \$300 in child support that she finally began receiving every other week put her over the eligibility limit, Mongeon said.

Mongeon has filed for a hearing to review her cutoff notice, saying her child support money should not count as money needed for child care. "Child support is so that I can put a roof over my head," she said.

The county's slowness in processing subsidy requests also deters applicants, child-care providers say.

Since July, for example, the Generations Child Care Center on Clinton Avenue in Rochester has seen 31 people fill out applications to enroll with subsidized care, but only six of them actually ended up enrolling, said center director Vicki Rounds. Calls from parents telling the center they have not received county approval are common.

In New York City, allowing enrollment at child-care centers, along with simplifying the forms and promoting enrollment, resulted in more than 1,000 additional children receiving child care, according to officials there.

Such enrollment is not in Monroe County's plans, but advocates here say that government officials need to keep in mind the long-term returns from spending on child care.

"They need to believe that this money is an investment in the future of the children and the future of the community," said Jacqueline Cady, chairwoman of the local Early Childhood Development Initiative.

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