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Piecing together care

Quality, cost at heart of child care decisions for parents, providers

By Kelly Kultys
kkultys@thebct.com
@kellykultys

EVESHAM — From requirements to licensing to state laws, it takes many steps to open and run licensed day care and child care programs in New Jersey.

Michelle Szatkowski, the owner of the Goddard School in Burlington Township, would know, as she's been operating that program for the last 11 years.

"It actually takes a lot," she said.

That's just one of the reasons a 2017 report from the Advocates for Children of New Jersey said there is a lack of child care across the state, including in Burlington County, especially for children under the age of 3.

"New Jersey, as a state, has a lack of licensed infant and toddler programs," said Diane Dellanno, a policy analyst for the nonprofit advocacy group, which helped author the report titled "No Room for Babies: Center-Based Infant-Toddler Childcare in Short Supply."

More than 9,000 children 3 and younger in Burlington County likely need child care based on the number of working parents, Dellanno said, but there are only about 70 centers that provide infant and toddler care throughout the county. At those centers, there were just about 2,575 available slots, or 28.4 percent, for infants and toddlers. As of 2016, the number of licensed centers in the entire state was 3,916, but just 1,722 were licensed to serve infants and toddlers, Dellanno said.

See **CHILD CARE**, A6



Aston Jones, 5, of Burlington Township, high fives his pre-kindergarten teacher Kristi Ficarro at the Goddard School in Burlington Township. [PHOTOS BY NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Michelle Szatkowski, owner of the Goddard School in Burlington Township, talks about the challenges of running a child care center.



Goddard School teachers Sam Leip, left, of Florence, and Chris Andrew, of Burlington Township, tend to children in the infant room in Burlington Township.

Hurricane Florence pours on the rain

Death toll rises to 11 as emergency workers in the Carolinas urge people to flee rising floodwaters

By Allen G. Breed
The Associated Press

NEW BERN, N.C. — The Marines, the Coast Guard, civilian crews and volunteers used helicopters, boats and heavy-duty vehicles Saturday to rescue hundreds of people trapped by Florence's shoreline onslaught, even as North Carolina braced for what could be the next stage of the disaster: widespread, catastrophic flooding inland.

The death toll from the

hurricane-turned-tropical storm climbed to 11.

A day after blowing ashore with 90 mph winds, Florence practically parked itself over land all day long and poured on the rain. With rivers rising toward record levels, thousands of people were ordered to evacuate for fear the next few days could bring the most destructive round of flooding in North Carolina history.

More than 2 feet of rain had fallen in places, and the drenching went on and on, with forecasters saying there could be an additional 1½ feet by the end of the weekend.

See **FLORENCE**, A2



A sailboat is shoved up against a house and a collapsed garage Saturday after Florence, now a tropical storm, blew through New Bern, N.C. [STEVE HELBER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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CHILD CARE

From Page A1

“Parents are struggling to piece together (care),” she said. “Different people watching the baby — there’s a lot of piecing together child care. You have no place to put your baby and it really adds to the stress a parent feels.”

Stephanie Deni, of Mount Laurel, knows that stress well from trying to find child care for her two children. Deni and her family recently moved from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, to Burlington County, which meant they had to search for new child care after previously having luck with a program near her work in Pennsylvania.

“It was a great little privately owned day care center in the heart in Bristol (Borough),” she said.

She ended up keeping her daughter at the Bristol center until this year, when she began kindergarten, and then started looking for options in her area that would take care of her younger son throughout the day, as well as for her daughter after the kindergarten day was over.

“I thought we were going to save money,” she said about having one child in kindergarten. But right now, she said, her salary covers health insurance for herself and her children and a bit of extra spending money, while her husband’s salary covers the rest of the family’s expenses with little left over.

Her story is similar to many other parents trying to find child care at licensed providers for their children, especially their young ones, Dellanno said.

Varying child care options

The report only addressed licensed child care providers, not family care providers, which can help fill some of the gaps, according to Susan Bresch, child care resource and referral director for the Burlington County Community Action Program.

“This is a unique type of care that’s a really important part of our system and infrastructure,” Bresch said.

Family child care takes place in the provider’s home, and they can care for no more than five children plus a maximum of three of their own children. Providers can choose to register with the state, which, if they do so, requires them to meet basic safety and program requirements, but also allows them to accept payments from families participating in government-subsidized child care assistance programs.

Bresch’s department administers the registration for family child care providers in the county, so they’re responsible for the “checks and balances” to make sure they’re following the rules.

“For us to be able to give out referrals and for them to be able to accept those children, they have to be in our database as licensed and in good standings,” Bresch said. “Family child care providers are not mandated to be registered in New Jersey, but we do encourage it.”

Family child care providers can register under the rules of the Family Care Provider Registration Act, which is a different set of requirements than the licensing procedure for centers with six or more children in them. If a provider is not registered, they are not allowed to accept state funding for the children.

“A family day care home which is unregistered and which provides care for 6 or more children under 6 years of age is considered, by law, to be a child care center,” a statement from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families reads. “Investigations of such child care centers are conducted by the Institutional Abuse Investigation Unit.”

There are 98 registered family child care providers in the county, according to the ACNJ report.

The other type of home-based care that Bresch’s department works with is a “family, friend,



LEFT: Goddard School pre-kindergarten students exert energy as they play outside in Burlington Township.

BELOW: Caleb Quinn, 8 months, of Hamilton Township, explores the board of objects inside the infant room at the Goddard School in Burlington Township.

[PHOTOS BY NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTO-JOURNALIST]



Goddard School preschool teachers Maureen Gallagher, left, of Burlington Township, and Patty Heyzer, of Mount Holly, recite days of the month with children in Burlington Township.

neighbor provider.” This type of provider has to be evaluated and approved by the New Jersey Division of Family Development and can only serve one child, or that child and his/her siblings, Bresch said.

“The parent will say, ‘I want my mother, an aunt, a relative ...’ to watch their child and they will get paid through the state subsidy for watching that child,” she said.

These types of care can help fill in the gaps left by the lack of child care centers, since many are concentrated in certain areas of the county, Dellanno said.

According to her analysis, there are 19 municipalities considered “child care deserts” for infant and toddler care in Burlington County, of which 14 had no access to a provider in town and five that had limited access. The analysis is limited to licensed child care providers and does not take into account any family care providers in those municipalities.

“If you look at the map of Burlington County — there is the left side of the county, (that) is where all the child care centers are,” Bresch said. “Go right and down the county, they are few and far between.”

Licensed care

Licensed child care centers, such as Szatkowski’s, are approved by the state through the Office of Licensing for “the care, development and supervision of six or more children under 13 years of age who are in care for less than 24 hours a day,” according to the Department of Human Services. The centers are required to meet basic health, safety, program and licensing requirements, according to state law.

Szatkowski said she’s lucky, however, since she’s a franchisee of the Goddard Systems, which has helped her navigate some of the requirements.

“We have Goddard Systems so they work very closely with us,” she said. “They help us with the New Jersey state laws, they help us with their programs as well.”

Some of those programs include literacy, physical education and STEAM, which focuses on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics, even from a young age, said Szatkowski, whose school is one of seven Goddard Schools in Burlington County and one of 63 in the state.

Programs run at schools or by schools, such as before or after care programs, can be

considered “license-exempt,” since they are governed by other sets of regulations related to children’s well-being, which provides similar services for children, usually of school-age, before and after the school day.

This licensing exemption is one reason the Evesham Township School District argued it should be allowed to operate its Teddy Bear Academy program, despite the fact that it included children from 6 weeks to 4 years old since its inception in 2014.

Shortly after its creation, Under the Sun, a licensed child care provider in town, filed a petition against the district alleging that it had exceeded its authority by opening the program.

The case traveled through the courts for years, before Administrative Law Judge Solomon Metzger ruled in July in favor of Under the Sun, since the Teddy Bear Academy operated during the school day and served students who were not school aged and not necessarily from the township.

Under the Sun drew on the statute that said school districts can provide child care services “by the board of education, or a board approved sponsor or a child care program licensed ... before or after school hours, for any school-aged child who attends school within the school district.”

In his ruling, Metzger said that a “plain reading would exclude an enterprise like (Teddy Bear Academy) that serves infants and toddlers, before, during and after school hours, and is open to non-residents.”

The school district argued that the entire law gave it the authority to offer child care and that particular section of the law was just an example of some of the permissions granted.

Commissioner of Education Lamont Repollet has the final say in the matter and can decide to uphold, change or reject the ruling from the judge. His office has asked for an extension until Oct. 19.

At the time of the Teddy Bear Academy’s creation, Danielle Magulick, director of curriculum and instruction, said that expanding the program made sense for the district and its parents.

“Evesham Child Care has been providing quality before- and after-school child care to the district’s elementary school students for over 23 years,” Magulick said in April 2014. “Expanding the program to provide full-day child care



to infants, toddlers and preschoolers is a logical extension of that program.”

Evesham is not the only district in the state that has a program like this. The Barnegat Township School District is discussing ending its Cubs day care program, which accepts infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children, according to a story by the Asbury Park Press. The superintendent said the district was considering ending the program because of both the judge’s ruling in the Teddy Bear Academy case and the fact the district applied for a grant to operate a free preschool program for 3 and 4 year olds.

If the Teddy Bear Academy is forced to close, that could force 80 or so children and their families to search for a child care alternative.

Raf Malik, of Evesham, just started his two children at the academy this year, despite the fact that it could close, because he said it’s the best one he’s found.

“They’re preparing your children for kindergarten,” he said of why he chose the program.

At the family’s previous provider, Malik said his son used to “run and grab me with a death grip” because he didn’t want to go inside. That’s what prompted the family to consult with friends, who recommended the Teddy Bear Academy.

“I hope they stay open,” he said. “A lot of parents are dependent on this service.”

Questions for parents

Bresch and Dellanno both advised parents to make sure they are well-versed in questions to ask potential providers. Usually parents have two: will their children be safe and how much will the program cost.

Bresch said her group works to give parents more information on what else to ask, including a checklist of important questions they should talk to their potential providers about when making their decision.

“Is it clean? What does their diapering policy look like? How many children are actually going to be in your child’s class?” Bresch said, listing some of the questions.

Cost is a major consideration. Many parents who receive state subsidy through BCCAP believe it will cover the entire cost of tuition, according to Bresch.

Families earning up to double the federal poverty level can qualify for a subsidy to pay for child care to help parents

work, according to ACNJ. The rate, however, only covers a little bit more than \$33 per day per infant or toddler, which rarely covers many center fees, according to the state.

On average, parents of infants pay about \$11,534 a year for full-time care in a licensed care center, the report said.

Deni, the Mount Laurel resident, said she and her husband have noticed similar cost issues when trying to find affordable, quality child care.

“For both children to go (to a child care center), we were looking at or around more than \$500 a week,” she said. “At that point it’s like, ‘why am I working?’”

Because of the high cost of child care, particularly for infant and toddlers, Dellanno and the ACNJ said they’d like to see the state incentivize providers to give infant and toddler care. Dellanno also recommended an expansion of the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs that help “promote school readiness of children ages birth to 5 from low-income families” since many child care deserts are in lower income communities.

“The first three years of life are when brain development is the most critical,” she said. “(Babies) form bonds and emotional relationships. It’s building those connections and that’s what’s so critical.”

But getting children into care is difficult due to the high cost of staffing requirements for child safety, according to Dellanno.

“For a baby under the age of 18 months, (the requirement) is one (staff member) to four (babies), and that’s expensive,” she said. “You need to have the space and the staffing and that’s what costs a lot of money. For the centers, it’s expensive and a lot of parents can’t afford the cost of care.”

Szatkowski said as a working mom herself, she knows how important it is for her and her staff to make sure they’re following the requirements and providing a safe, quality experience for parents.

“I always just want to make sure that my child is somewhere that they’re happy, that they’re safe, that they’re learning, and (doing) something that I myself would do at home,” she said. “All our staff members love these children unbelievably and every year at graduation I cry because now we’ve gotten to the point where they’ve started as infants and now they’ve wrapped around to the pre-k program and graduating.”