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Eliminating poverty starts with affordable child care

By: Audrea Butler

In 2007, Fort Collins saw the closure of seven child care centers, including five that provided infant care. Several of those centers had served families who are struggling to become or remain self-sufficient.

For such families, the search for quality child care they can afford - especially infant care - has become daunting.

In 2008, the poverty level for a single mother raising two children was set at \$17,600. According to the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute, this same three-person family needs more than \$48,600 in income to meet current **self-sufficiency standards** in Larimer County.

Fort Collins does not have enough infant-care slots available for people qualifying for child care assistance through sliding scale fees or the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. To remain viable, most childcare centers must severely limit the number of low-income families receiving reduced rates.

United Day Care Center, a nonprofit organization serving Larimer County since 1970, is the county's largest provider of quality child care for low-income families. More than 70 percent of the 360 families United Day Care serves are living in poverty.

In early 2008, the board responded to the city's infant care crisis by approving a \$35,000 remodel to United Day Care's center on Pine Street. In May, the new infant room was completed, opening up slots for seven babies and providing two qualified childcare teachers, higher than the 1:5 teacher-to-infant ratio Colorado requires.

Many families breathed a sigh of relief, knowing their babies would receive nurturing care in a quality environment while parents continued working toward self-sufficiency via jobs, job training and schooling.

While United Day Care's responsiveness to a significant community need is encouraging, our city still has a long way to go in providing affordable childcare for low-income families who face difficult choices each day: Should their scarce income go toward rent, health care, food, child care or utilities?

If Fort Collins is to succeed in its endeavor to eliminate poverty, families must have access to high quality child care they can afford - care that supports their children's development as well as parents' ability to be present and focused at work or school.

Addressing this critical need will reduce costly problems while simultaneously contributing to Larimer County's economic vibrancy.

Research has shown that every \$1 spent on early childhood programming returns \$8 to \$14 in benefits that include less school retention and special education referrals, greater high-school graduation rates, lowered crime and dependency on social services, greater economic productivity, and a future reduction in poverty rates. Further studies show that low-income children who participate in a quality early childhood program achieve better educational and social outcomes into adulthood.

Can our community afford not to tackle its affordable child care issues?

Audrea Butler is a Fort Collins resident who works in information technology and has recently adopted an infant. She is a member of the United Day Care Center Board of Directors.