

Seeking living wage, child-care workers head to state capital

Living Wage
By **HEATHER BOERNER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Local child-care workers hope that closing their centers' doors for one day will open the door for better pay.

SANTA CRUZ A Santa Cruz area woman will lead a group of child-care providers, teachers and parents statewide to Sacramento Tuesday for what they are

calling a Care-Out.

Nancy Brown, the organizer and a professor of early childhood education at Cabrillo College, organized the event after realizing cost of living is not just a problem for child-care providers in Santa Cruz, where local centers face closing when they can't find qualified teachers willing to work for \$8 an hour. It's a problem all over the state, she said.

They are seeking state and federal subsidies that would allow child-care centers to pay employees enough to live on without gouging parents for more than they can afford.

Assemblyman Fred Keeley, D-Boulder Creek, will meet with the contingent Tuesday. State Sen. Bruce McPherson, R-Santa Cruz, doesn't have plans to meet with the group, but his staff said they would be willing to talk to the group.

The Board of Supervisors passed a resolution Tuesday supporting the Care-Out. Supervisor Ellen Pirie said she proposed the resolution because she remembers what it was like to search for child care, but also because the area is so expensive.

"We just went to conferences and heard over and over again the same sad story of staff leaving the field, not because they want to but because they had to, economically," said Brown. "Because of the cost of living here specifically, it does feel like a double wammy: pay for child care is never much, but \$8 per hour in Santa Cruz doesn't work."

Interviews with parents and child-care providers confirm this.

Leslie Greathouse, who runs the accredited Banana Belt Buddies center from her home in Santa Cruz, said she considered

closing her center during the summer because she couldn't find a qualified teacher to assist her. In the last year, she's done two full searches for staff, each taking six weeks, and hasn't found qualified people.

The turnover rate nationally for child-care workers was 42 percent for for-profit companies in 1998 and 27 percent for non-profits. According to a recent study, residents would have to earn nearly \$22 per hour to afford the average one-bedroom apartment in Santa Cruz.

Erin Buchla, a single mother, works as a teacher at the Emeline Child Care Center in the morning and then as a bartender at the Corner Pocket at night to make ends meet and support her 11-year-old son. She jokes that there's not much difference between the two jobs, but Buchla, who has a degree in early childhood education from Cabrillo College, said she would much rather work only at the child-care center. She said she called for a walkout of child-care centers four years ago because she saw how dismally she and her co-workers



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Cecilia Sunden, Heide Bierman, Nancy Samsel and Erin Buchla are taking their concerns to Sacramento.

were getting paid.

So parents of children who attend the Emeline Child Care Center, Santa Cruz Toddler Care, Downtown Children's Center and most of the Cabrillo College Child Care Center will find other accommodations as their teachers trek to Sacramento.

"It was a hard decision because the cen-

ter is a big part of the fabric of care," said Jeanne LePage, whose daughter attends Emeline Child Care Center. "But no one can make it on \$8 per hour here, and we know how important this kind of care is. As a society, we need to support this."

Contact Heather Boerner at hboerner@santa-cruz.com.