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Rising demand outpaces child care programs

Despite the growth in child care programs in Santa Cruz County, the demand continues to exceed the supply, according to a study recently sent to the Board of Supervisors.

The reason for this, the study concludes, is the growing number of mothers are returning to school or work, and the number of single-parent households in the county is increasing.

The report further indicates that the financial costs of child care are placing families in a Catch-22 bind. In order to support their families, more people with young children are working, but getting a job creates an additional expense in the form of child care.

Called "Room to Grow: Child Care in Santa Cruz County," the report was compiled by the county's children's commission, and is available by sending \$2 to Pam Hogan, at the Child

Development Resource Center, 300-A State Park Drive, Aptos.

The report is chock full of facts on the status of child care in the county. Some of the findings include:

—The need for sick child care still has not been met, causing absenteeism and sometimes loss of jobs for parents.

—Most child care programs are unable to charge all parents the full cost of program operation because of the parents' inability to pay. Many programs must receive some kind of funding from federal, state or local sources in order to survive.

—The financial burden of child care, especially for those with more than one child or those with infants, is great. Infant care, for example, costs from \$1.25 to about \$2.50 per hour, depending on the type of program. This is sometimes nearly as much as the parents earns.

—Public assistance for working parents needing child care has been on the increase in recent years. In Santa Cruz County in 1978-79, \$1.1 million in such subsidies helped provide child care for over 1,300 children.

—Child care workers generally receive low salaries in relation to their experience and education, and are the lowest paid of all employees paid by the state. Some work for minimum wage or less and receive few, if any, health and welfare benefits.

—Most licensed care facilities in the county are operating at or near capacity. Of the 3,128 child care "slots" currently existing in these centers and day care homes, only 349 — about 11 per cent — are open to new children. This leaves a slim margin of choice for parents, since available openings may not fit an individual's particular needs: the facility may be too far away, too expensive, have

hours that don't fit the parent's work schedule, or not take children of a certain age.

—A follow-up phone survey of a sampling of 101 parents who had been seeking child care last November found that 76 children did find some kind of placement, while 25 did not — about one out of four. Not all of the 76 were placed in child care facilities, however: 27 (36 per cent) were accommodated by some kind of temporary arrangement — such as a relative or neighbor serving as babysitter.

—Approximately 46 per cent of child care requests were for children under the age of two — the most difficult age group to place. Of all those not finding placement, more than half were in this age group.

—The availability of infant care, drop-in and after-school care has grown in the past four years, but infant and after-school care continue to be critical needs.

—Night-time child care is

needed in the south county area for children of parents working at night.

—One of the gravest problems facing child care in the county in the past four years has been finding places to put it. It has proved difficult to locate suitable buildings that conform to the strict fire and safety regulations set for children's facilities, have reasonable rents, and for which use permits can be obtained.

—During the last three years, state and matching

local funds have been used to build one center in Watsonville and another in San Lorenzo Valley, and a third is scheduled for construction in the mid-county area. In addition, 10 programs were awarded grants to renovate existing buildings to bring them up to state standards. In the 1978-79 fiscal year, however, these funds were used to cover the cost of program operation, rather than provide new facilities, so the Commission is worried about an even more serious housing shortage for child care in the future.



CHOICES

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