

Thousands denied child care due to Pennsylvania budget cuts

Samuel Davidson
28 August 2009

Childcare centers throughout Pennsylvania are closing, laying-off staff and turning away children, because state lawmakers have not reached agreement on a comprehensive budget nearly two months after last year's budget ended June 30.

One hundred and thirty thousand children, aged 6-weeks to 12-years-old attend a variety of preschool, Head Start, daycare and after school programs that have been cut or are under the threat of being cut because the child care providers have not been paid since June 30.

Two-thirds of Head Start Supplemental, a state funded program that supplements the federal Head Start program, have had to cut services resulting in at least 443 layoffs and 2,656 children without services.

"This is really bad," said Brian Jenkins, whose son has been denied a spot in Head Start for this year. "We got a certified letter this week saying that our son couldn't go back to school this fall. He is five years old. He was really looking forward to it. He was in last year, and I really saw a big improvement in the way he was acting. He had made friends, he invited them all to his birthday party, he was really looking forward to going back.

"The school said that they had to cut half of their Head Start spaces and that he was one of them," Brian continued. "We are on a limited income, and now we have to start looking around trying to find some place that will take him."

Other early childhood and preschool programs are facing the axe as well. More than half, 60 percent, of PA Pre-K Counts providers, a program that provides preschool for young children in the state, report that they will not be opening classrooms on time, leaving 5,082 children without school and 581 staff facing layoffs.

A voluntary survey of Keystone STARS and Child Care Works providers, two programs that provide daycare for young children, found that they have already been forced to lay off 925 staff and cut services for nearly 4,000 children. The programs report that by August 31 they will have to lay off another 2,600 caregivers and cut services for another 8,500 children. Fully one third of respondents, more than 350 child care providers, said they would have to shut their doors by September 30 if the budget is not resolved.

Anica Jones is the director of A Developmental Journey Christian Child Care and Learning Centers in McKeesport. "We

have two daycare centers and one family site," she told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We serve 60 kids and 98 percent of them are receiving state support. We had the money to pay our staff this past Friday, but after that our funds are depleted. Our staff has committed to working without pay, but that is not fair to them. I am very grateful and thankful to them, but how long can they come in. As you know, child care does not pay a lot; our staff is going to be hurting.

"The state should have a budget, but we don't want to take cuts," Anica said. "We want quality childcare for people in this state.

"McKeesport is a low income area. People need to be able to go to school or work. It is important for them to feel that they are a productive part of society and that they have some impact. It is important for their children to see that they are going to work. But for that to happen, people need child care.

"We will keep caring for the children as long as we are able. It is not right that children are being made to suffer by the politicians."

Shanel Smith and Carolyn Baltimore both work at the daycare centers. Shanel explained, "Starting this week we will not be paid. I think this is awful. I am working so I can afford to go to school. I want to be a kindergarten teacher. I am paying all this money to go to school for programs that they want to cut out.

"I live on my own. I don't know how I am going to pay my rent, phone bill and food if we are not going to get paid," Shanel told the WSW. "I want to know how these politicians sleep at night, when they can drive around in these big expensive cars yet cut money from kids.

"I dream at night about what I am going to do with the kids the next day so that these kids have the best care that I can give them."

Carolyn added, "I will stay here and keep working for these kids as long as I have to. I am 51 years old and this place is great for the kids. I wish my kids could have come to a place like this when they were young. These children are learning how to speak Spanish at a year and a half. That is a great opportunity for them. I will not let these kids go backwards. That is why I will stay at the job even though I am not getting paid.

"Half of our parents would lose their jobs if they didn't have this daycare center. What is a parent going to do, pay for childcare or have their lights cut off? What is going to happen to these kids if we are forced to close down? Parents will have to leave them at

home. Then is the TV the babysitter? Ask a neighbor to look in on them from time to time? Have an older brother or sister who is supposed to be in school stay home to care for them?

"I am fired up about the president. He has praised the education achievements in Pennsylvania, but why is he not helping so we don't lose what we have achieved?"

Pennsylvania ended the 2008-09 fiscal year with a \$1.7 billion dollar deficit and is facing a multi-billion dollar budget deficit for the current year. Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell proposed a \$29.1 billion budget that cut many social services and included a 16 percent increase of the state income tax. Republicans, in control of the state senate, refused to vote on Rendell's budget and instead proposed a \$27.1 billion budget with deeper cuts to social programs and no tax increase.

Rendell has since withdrawn the proposal for the income tax increase and agreed to more cuts in social services, but still wants a budget of about \$28 billion, which Republicans have refused. In a political move in early August, the Democrats approved the Republican budget, so that Rendell could sign it, but then veto all the funds for education, transportation, healthcare and every other social service. This was done to allow the state to begin paying state workers who had not received any pay since June 30 and to provide funds for the Pennsylvania State Police and the prison system.

Even if passed, the budget will mean deep cuts in early childhood education and care. The Republican bill will mean the elimination of childcare and pre-school for more than 16,500 children and the layoff of 2,000 teachers, teachers' aides and nurses. The Democratic version will cut education services to about 1,000 children.

Neither the Democratic or Republican plan provides enough funds to ensure that all children receive quality childcare or preschool. In addition to those children being cut from childcare, there are more than 16,000 families on the waiting list to receive childcare compared to 6,000 last year.

This large increase in applications is due the economic crisis. More than one million people in Pennsylvania have lost their jobs since the start of the depression, and many of them now need assistance with childcare while they look for work, return to school or are forced into low paying jobs.

Kristin Dixon is the director of the daycare center run by the Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center in Pittsburgh. "We have 20 kids. There is me and Melissa and two aides. We are in a severe financial crisis. Next week we are going to have to lay off the two aides and start rolling parents over to paying status.

"This is going to have a very bad effect on the parents; 95 percent of our kids are supported through the state," Kristin explained. "We service the Mt. Oliver neighborhood, which is a very low income area. Parents are not working at jobs were they can afford childcare.

"This will not be good for the children. Good preschool programs are very important for young children, it develops their speech, they learn to socialize, and preschool helps children when they get to school. This is going to impact their future."

Melissa Preuss, who works at the center, added, "Today I was speaking with one of our parents. She is going to have to leave work and stay home. She said she doesn't make enough money for it to be worthwhile for her to go to work and have to pay for childcare. She asked me if we would provide her with a letter that she can give her employer so they understand why she can't come in. She is hoping that she will have a job when this is over, and we can take her kid again. But how is she going to buy food or pay her electric bill if she is not working? What is going to happen to her?"

"The parents need us to be there," Melissa told the WWS. "Two of our staff are being laid off. They are taking a double blow because they are losing their jobs and their daycare. The politicians can give billions to the banks and car companies but they don't have money for childcare? They think we are just babysitters, they don't realize the impact we have on the kids."

Deneen Joyner works for the Childcare Information Services. Their agency has been contracted by the state to determine if a person is eligible for childcare assistance and to help that person find a quality childcare provider. CIS then pays the childcare provider on behalf of the parent.

"Because we don't have funds, we can still help our clients find a provider, but the problem is we just can't pay the provider," Deneen said. "The effects have been horrible. Providers are having to temporarily close because they can't make payrolls, pay their utilities and everything that goes with running a business.

"Our clients are people who can't afford daycare and at the same time pay their rent, utilities and buy food. Most of them are either in school or low paying jobs. What is it going to mean for them to have to choose between having a safe and quality child care provider for their children or being able to buy food? Many will lose their jobs or have to quit school because they will have to stay home to care for their child.

"Good childcare is very important for both the parent and the child. Parents need to know their children are being cared for and looked after while they are at work or school, and children need a place where they can learn to interact and be social with other children."



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact