

State Child Care Cuts Force Hard Choice on Parents

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Sarah Comito rolls out of bed before dawn most days and slips quietly out of her house. Before her rambunctious toddler wakes up, she heads off to work as a waitress in an upscale weight-loss resort in Malibu.

The hour-long commute is exhausting, but the 33-year-old is thankful to make the trip when she remembers where she and her husband were four years ago: living in a tent in a nearby river bottom, strung out on methamphetamine.

Now Comito fears the progress they have made since then could be lost as California cuts her from a vital child care assistance program, more than doubling the cost of her son's day care to \$600 a month. On a \$10 hourly wage, she said she'd be better off quitting her job and staying home with her son while her husband works as a professional tree cutter. But if she stops working, they can't make rent.

"The only thing I can do is attempt to prepare for the worst," Comito said, while watching 3-year-old Matthew dart across the yard at the couple's working-class apartment complex in Oxnard.

For years, child care assistance programs offered low-income parents such as Comito a lifeline. But state legislatures dealing with multibillion dollar budget deficits during the recession have been targeting child care subsidies as one way to help balance their state budgets.

The cuts have come at just the time many parents need that help the most because full-time, well-paying jobs are in such short supply.

In the last fiscal year, combined state and federal funding for child care assistance fell by 2 percent to \$12 billion, according to a 46-state analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures. Federal stimulus money gave a temporary boost to the subsidies, but nearly all that money stopped in 2011.

At the same time, states reduced their general fund spending for child care programs by 7 percent during the current fiscal year, including a 25 percent decline in California, 30 percent in Hawaii and 10 percent in Michigan. In the fiscal year that ended June 30, 22 states reported declines in their budgets for child care subsidies, according to the state legislative group.

But providing child care assistance to low-income families, a central tenet of the country's 1996 welfare overhaul, is seen as critical to getting people back to work at a time when the country is struggling to reduce unemployment. The goal of the programs is to subsidize the cost of day care to help keep poor parents, many of them single mothers, working. Over time, the subsidy is scaled back as parents advance in the labor force and wean themselves off government assistance.

Some parents give up jobs and turn to the welfare system if they can't find affordable child care, but that isn't an option for those who have already used up their entitlements, said Danielle Ewen, a past director of child care and early education for the Center for Law and Social Policy.

"For those families, there is absolutely no safety net and we don't know what is happening to their kids, but it is absolutely scary to think," Ewen said. "It becomes a very desperate, horrible cycle for poor families who are doing everything they can possibly do to become self-sufficient."

The cuts have taken different forms. Some states have lowered the income ceiling to determine child care eligibility. Others have capped the number of families that receive assistance — and created endless waiting lists — or slashed the reimbursement rate paid to day care providers who accept poor children.

Parents are coping in different ways. Some have asked their bosses to cut their wages so they continue to qualify for subsidized care. Others have scaled back hours to reduce the time their children are in day care. Some say they are thinking about quitting and going onto welfare.

Grace Dixon, a service manager for affordable housing in the eastern San Francisco Bay area city of Alameda, said she has paid as much as she can to day care providers for her 1-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son since she was cut off from assistance in July and saw her child care charges nearly triple to \$1,500 a month.

"What do they want us to do — not to work and to get on welfare? Would that be better? And then their taxes are paying for me to sit at home and be on the couch?" the 29-year-old college graduate asked.

Advocates say some parents will leave their children in dangerous, unsupervised settings when they feel they have no other choice.

"What you see are very stressed and desperate moms," said Helen Blank, director of leadership and public policy at the National Women's Law Center. "Some of them pay huge amounts for child care, and they can't afford to pay enough for food or they lose their house."

The scenario plays out differently in different states. In Michigan, the state reduced its budget for subsidized child care this year by lowering the reimbursement rate paid to day care providers.

Advocates say the change has made it tough for low-income parents to find day-care providers willing to take them.

"Some providers have no incentive to participate — especially the high-quality providers," said Pat Sorensen, vice president for policy at Michigan's Children, an advocacy group.

In North Carolina, officials have extended a waiting list for subsidized child care. The state reduced its funding for child care subsidies by 15 percent this year and has seen the list grow to 50,000 children this year, up from 27,000 children four years ago, according to the state Division of Child Development and Early Education.

"With this year's budget cuts, those numbers have just gone crazy," said Sheila Hoyle, executive director of the Southwestern Child Development Commission, which manages a 600 child-waiting list for seven western North Carolina counties.

The cuts to child care subsidies come as cash-strapped states pare back spending in many areas, including education and health services.

"We've been going in the right direction to raise the quality of our day care centers and early childhood education, and I think those programs are important. But you have to balance in your budget the money you have," said Nelson Dollar, a Republican state representative in North Carolina who is co-chairman of an appropriations committee.

For children, the cuts can mean the difference between a stable, educational child care experience and being shuttled among different providers, family and friends with little consistency.

When parents cannot find affordable care, they often leave children with a neighbor or friend even if they don't trust them. Or they might leave them at home with an older sibling.

"There's an impact on that child's development," said Bruce Liggett, executive director of Arizona's Child Care Association, which represents the state's licensed providers. "They're not learning as they would in a child care center and they're not going to get to kindergarten ready to learn."

It's hard to know how many children have been affected by the recent cuts and in what ways.

In Arizona, more than 48,000 children were covered by child care subsidies at the beginning of this year. Now, fewer than 29,000 are, Liggett said.

Many in Arizona are on a waiting list. Ann Herron, 25, said she signed up as soon as her son was born 2½ years ago, but assistance is nowhere in sight.

A single mother, Herron said she can't afford to send her son to a day care center, so she has different friends watch him for minimal pay while she works as caregiver at a group home.

It's hard on her not knowing who will look after him a month from now. But the Phoenix woman said it's also hard on her son, who has little, if any, contact with other children.

"When he is around kids — because he hasn't been around kids — he acts crazy. He's hitting and stuff," Herron said. "It is just me and him."