

State stands to let \$20M in child care funding slip away

Matt Gilliard 3:26 p.m. EDT September 19, 2016



(Photo: KAZUHIRO NOGI, AFP/Getty Images)

We all know that families need affordable, high-quality child care. This is true for middle-class families and even more so for low-income families who spend a significantly higher percentage of their income on child care.

Two of three Michigan children have all parents in the workforce, but despite parental efforts to work, [child poverty rates are ever increasing \(http://www.mlpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/MI-2.pdf\)](http://www.mlpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/MI-2.pdf). So this is a major issue for our state. That's why scores of family and child care advocates in Michigan and nationally in recent months have been left incredulous – and you should be, too – that Gov. Rick Snyder's administration and the state Legislature are willing to leave \$20.5 million in child care assistance on the table.

Michigan policymakers have only until the end of the month to receive \$20.5 million from the federal Child Care and Development Fund. The federal program, as most do, requires a state match amounting to \$7.5 million, bringing the total to \$28 million available for child care assistance to Michigan families. While there were talks between the Snyder administration and lawmakers to make the matching funds available through 2016 state budget supplemental appropriations, a decision has yet to materialize.

Given that Michigan consistently ranks in the bottom of the states in financial support to both families and providers in our child care system, the inability to act on the federal funds is unacceptable. The system has one of the lowest income eligibility levels among states, limiting support to only the poorest of the poor. And Michigan's subsidy rates for providers are likewise among the lowest in the country. So \$28 million that's left unused is \$28 million that's not put to work in local economies.

This results in small businesses struggling to stay alive, hampering their ability to invest in their programs for kids. These are foundational weaknesses that leave Michigan's child care system built for failure, not success.

The consequences have long-ranging impacts. As the economy continues to improve, the ability of low-income workers to pay for child care – a cost rivaling rent for many low-wage earners – will continue to compromise their ability to work and fill the demands of a growing economy.

None of this is news to Michigan policymakers, though.

Community organizations across the state and policy groups have advocated for better investments in our child care system for decades. Recently, the sad state of childcare in Michigan has been discussed at national levels with the prospect of Michigan's decision to leave \$20.5 million in federal dollars on the table called counterproductive by Helen Blank, director of child care and early learning, for the National Women's Law Center. "Frankly, it's stunning. No other state has left such a large sum behind. It's unconscionable that families who could receive child care help won't because Michigan's leaders haven't figured out how to prioritize it."

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The State Board of Education recently received a [report it commissioned to study the state's woefully inadequate child care system \(http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Building_a_Better_Child_Care_System_534366_7.pdf\)](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Building_a_Better_Child_Care_System_534366_7.pdf) with an eye to rebuilding it. Through focus groups and forums with parents, child care providers and administrators it examined ways to improve Michigan's childcare subsidy program. The upshot: Our childcare system needs a lot of help. Among the report's recommendations, increasing financial assistance to families was at the top.

This call to action must start today, with our state leadership. It's not too late. Tell your elected leaders to invest in childcare for Michigan families before September ends by approving a state match today.

Matt Gillard is the president and CEO of Michigan's Children.

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