

MICHIGAN

As pandemic continues, so do child care woes for parents

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Published 6:01 a.m. ET Aug. 17, 2020 | Updated 9:06 a.m. ET Aug. 17, 2020

Like a lot of parents, Anisha Anderson had trouble finding day care for her son. And so when Anderson reopened her hair salon, she brought 3-year-old Deshaun with her.

"He's a very busy 3-year-old, so I had a hard time trying to cater to him as a mom and remain professional to my clients as a hair stylist," said Anderson, owner of Beyond Curls in Southfield. "It started to become overwhelming, very fast."

Anderson, 28 of Oak Park spent two and half months searching for a day care provider. She found that child care centers that were accepting new children often were too expensive or too far away. Daily posts directed at friends and family on Facebook finally worked and Anderson found a provider late last month.

A combination of health risks, work-from-home routines and the challenge of finding day care employees has created an unpredictable market for day cares across metro Detroit. The landscape for day care may become even more complicated as school districts decide whether they'll hold in-person instruction and as they adapt to flare-ups of the virus.

"Day care providers have a lot to consider before opening during this pandemic," said Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children. "Most of the day care providers in certain areas that have high COVID numbers are worried about the health and safety of their staff and children in care. Some providers have possibly lost their employees, or could be having trouble finding employees to help run the center during a pandemic."

The state has a website where parents can find open day cares in Michigan, said David Harns with the state's department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA). The United Way has launched a service called Connect4Care where parents can find open day care and early childhood education options in Detroit.

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Pippen Palace Child Care Academy on Detroit's west side reopened in mid-June when Gov. Gretchen Whitmer lifted the state's stay-at-home order. Children and teachers are screened for fevers daily and anyone with a temperature above 100 degrees is immediately sent home. Children and staff must wash their hands when they arrive. During drop-off, in a designated outdoor area, parents are asked every day about the health of their families, and children are sent home if anyone in their household falls ill, said Alethea Person, Pippen Palace's director.

Person installed touchless soap and hand sanitizer dispensers. She has also limited the number of children in her facility. Before the pandemic, her day care typically saw 70 children every day. Now they have about 40 children on an average day.

Person said the children in her day care are taking well to masks and the large bright stickers of crayons she has placed on the classroom floors that she uses as markers to keep children at least 3 feet apart.

"As you know, children learn by repetition. They will follow what they see. As time goes by, they will do so on their own without staff having to remind them," she said. "As far as social distancing, it's just a matter of training."

Person says that in order to keep everyone safe she has a strict rules. Parents are not allowed inside. Pickups and drop-offs take place in the back parking lot.

"I make sure that children are washing their hands and we sanitize toys. We wash blankets weekly, not allowing them to go home. We do not allow book bags or any extra items from home in the facility, and most importantly we have the children fold their arms when walking, so there is no touching," she said.

In May, the state released 14 pages of reopening guidelines that addressed new safety measures for child care centers. Providers that reopened were required to submit a safety plan to the state based on those rules, Harns said.

Cynthia Jalynski, child care licensing consultant in LARA's Bureau of Community and Health Systems (BCHS) says the state offers day care owners consultations on reopening protocol.

"We have tried to arm child care providers with strategies specific to child care, such as entry to the facility plans, distancing children during meal and nap times, ensuring staff follow provider's clean working guidelines, restricting visitors to the facility, etc.," Jalynski said in an email. She also encourages day cares to consult with local health departments for input on safely reopening their centers.

Anderson says parents like her need the services of child care centers but also understand the challenge of reopening.

"This pandemic has for sure changed the lives of parents, children and educators almost everywhere," she said.