

Moving the needle on childcare access in Arkansas

By Abayi Ibro Ayoubu

In its August 17, 2022, Household Pulse survey, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that in the previous four weeks, 2,055 Arkansas adults left a job in order to care for children. In that same period, nearly 34,000 working Arkansans used paid leave time to care for children, and nearly 35,000 took unpaid leave to provide childcare. Many parents, particularly women, are forced to leave the workforce to care for children, reducing their earning potential and limiting their ability to contribute to the economy. This in turn affects businesses that rely on a stable and reliable workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic shed a new light on the childcare crisis that has been brewing in many countries for years. While this crisis is not new, the pandemic exacerbated it, highlighting the need for affordable and accessible childcare options. As we continue to adjust to the “new normal,” most businesses and schools have reopened their doors, but parents are still struggling to find affordable, accessible options and are facing daunting waitlists.

The childcare crisis, especially in Arkansas, is a significant concern for parents and caregivers. The state has been grappling with a shortage of quality and affordable childcare options for years. This problem is especially acute in rural areas, where there are fewer childcare facilities.

Leaders must understand that childcare challenges have a negative impact on the state’s economy, and it is critical to ensure that solutions are developed so that parents can provide the highest quality of life possible for their children. To address the childcare shortage in Arkansas, policymakers and community leaders must work together to find solutions that support both providers and families.

The Newport Economic Development Commission understands this pressing reality and is taking a proactive approach to addressing the state’s childcare shortage by offering home-based childcare training to community members. “We have a desperate need for additional childcare slots in Jackson County,” said Jon Chadwell, the commission’s director of economic development. “And it is an economic development issue because if people don’t have a place to care for their children, it’s hard for them to go to work, and they might decide to work in a surrounding county where childcare is

available in the same place they’re working. Parents don’t typically like to leave their kids 30 or 40 miles away from where they’re working.”

The home-based childcare training program is a promising step toward addressing Newport’s childcare shortage. By supporting home-based providers, the program can increase access to quality childcare options for families while also promoting economic growth in the region.

To make this happen, Chadwell’s office teamed up with the White River Planning and Development District and ChildCare Aware of North Central Arkansas to provide tools and training to interested community members.

“There is a shortage of infant and toddler care, not only locally, but statewide and nationally,” said ChildCare Aware’s Debbie Mize. “Everyone at ChildCare Aware is here to help anyone that would be interested in opening family childcare in their home.”

Mize and her team are working with community leaders to provide the opportunity and tools for anyone who wants to open a family childcare center in their home. “There’s a whole team at every ChildCare Aware center across the state that works closely with state agencies and other partners to support caregivers in any way that we can,” she said. “Participants in our programming also receive guidance on how to become licensed childcare providers, which will allow them to access state funding and other resources to support their businesses.”

Home-based childcare providers offer a valuable service to their communities while also earning income and building their own businesses. The programming provided through ChildCare Aware is one step in the right direction to move the needle on childcare in a positive direction.

To learn more about home-based childcare and licensing or other resources, visit ChildCare Aware online at www.childcareaware.org/state/arkansas. 📍



Abayi Ibro Ayoubu is the assistant director for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.