

## Concerns voiced over shortfalls in CYFD's child care plan

By **Cynthia Miller**, *The New Mexican*

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Many parents, providers and advocates say the state's proposed new plan to expand and improve the quality of child care across New Mexico doesn't go far enough to ease the strain on low-income working families and that reimbursements to providers under the plan would be too low to stem the turnover rate of an underpaid child care workforce.

The state Children, Youth and Families Department is working to meet a March 1 deadline to have a new Child Care and Development Fund State Plan in place under a congressional measure signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2014. The plan aims to increase standards for providers and allow a child 12 full months of continuous care, in most cases, despite a parent's change in work status — such as a job loss or an increase in income. But it raised some concerns that low-income parents would have to cover too much of the costs for their children's care and that providers might be shortchanged.

CYFD spokesman Henry Varela said in a phone interview Monday evening that some of those fears stemmed from errors in the draft report. Parent co-pays won't increase under the plan, he said, and provider rates, which have risen over the past two years, will remain unchanged. He said a corrected draft of the plan would be distributed to providers.

A few dozen people gathered for Monday's hearing, many of them braving snowy roads to travel from Silver City, Truth or Consequences, Albuquerque and other communities across the state so they could voice their concerns.

“High-quality care depends on a strong workforce,” said Baji Rankin of the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children, one of about 15 people who testified Monday. She recommended the state increase its investment in programs that offer scholarships and stipends for low-paid child care workers to help keep them in the profession.

Carmella Salinas, a preschool provider in Espa-ola, couldn't leave her students behind to attend the hearing, but in a letter she submitted about the CYFD plan, she pointed to reports in November by several national news services that said dog walkers are paid better than early childhood educators.

The new plan fails to increase rates paid to child care centers, Salinas' letter said, and therefore won't allow for wage increases for child care workers. Early educators in the state earn an

average of just \$8.88 an hour, she said, and because of their low wages, “many early educators have to use government assistance themselves.”

Rebecca Dow of the New Mexico Child Care and Education Association asked that CYFD lower co-pays for some families so that poor, working parents have to spend no more than 7 percent of their income on child care. Under the draft plan, the lowest-earning parents in the aid program wouldn't be required to contribute a co-pay for child care. But a single mother with three children who earns the maximum amount allowed for aid eligibility — 150 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$3,030 per month — could be required to pay about 12 percent of her income to keep all of her children in day care or preschool.

Dow, like Salinas, also raised concerns about some of the proposed reimbursement rates to day care and early childhood education providers.

Even after factoring in differentials — or bonus pay — that the agency gives to child care centers that achieve certain benchmarks for quality of care, Dow said, the rates are still too low. The difference in what the state pays a provider and what it costs to care for a child in the state's assistance program, she said, will be passed on to parents who pay for child care out of their own pockets.

New restrictions on the number of children a center can serve also will cut into providers' bottom lines, several people testified. Rosemary Padilla, who serves 17 infants and toddlers in a child care center in Albuquerque and employs three to four staff members, said she will have to lay off workers and turn away children if the maximum number she is allowed to serve remains at just 12, as proposed.

Padilla and others argued that if a center has adequate space and maintains the required worker-to-child ratios, there is no reason for such limits.

Several providers expressed concerns about services for children with special needs.

“I strongly urge CYFD to invest much, much more in special-needs children,” said Joan Baker, a member of the People for the Kids coalition. Many providers aren't trained or equipped to serve children with behavioral issues, she said.

Barbara Tedrow, a private child care provider in Farmington, said that after 15 years of working with CYFD, she feels the agency's regulations have become overwhelming. “We are on the verge of becoming cookie-cutter facilities.”

Moms had their own requests to the agency to help ease barriers to child care aid: Allow parents to apply for assistance at early child care centers; ensure Spanish-speaking workers are available to help those who don't speak fluent English; and streamline the burdensome application process.

“I work a crappy, hourly, minimum-wage job,” one mother said, explaining that it's difficult for her to take time off from work to visit a CYFD office to complete an application for child care

assistance. She asked the department to remove some of the hurdles that “make it almost impossible to get assistance, to change your circumstances, to make a better life for the children who have no choice in this matter.”

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