

Ashland County Daycare Needs Summary Report June 2015

Background

Our office was asked by Dale Kupczyk, AADC, to help assess the need for daycare in the county (region). Concerns were raised by individuals and some employers that quality daycare in the region was very difficult to find and afford. This challenge may have a negative impact on people's ability/availability for full or part-time work.

Kathy Beeksma, Family Living Educator and Tom Wojciechowski, Community Development Educator with University of Wisconsin-Extension agreed to help assess the situation, both real and perceived. Our first step was to determine how many providers exist in the County. From the Ashland County Health and Human Services Department (ACHHS) we learned that there are 41 providers of daycare/childcare in Ashland County. Of these, 17 are certified providers and 24 are licensed providers. We later learned that a few providers were not included in the list which is dynamic with providers closing and opening regularly (particularly in-home providers).

Laura Harnish at ACHHS is in charge of certification and creates and maintains the list. She stated that there are only a few *childcare centers* available; most are in-home care centers. Additionally, most do not accept drop-ins. If you think of that from a business perspective it makes sense: day care businesses need to be able to anticipate income to ensure their viability. Only three of the "centers" accept newborns. Costs range from \$100 to \$150 per child per week for full-time daycare enrollment. Per state statutes, the youngest children require the highest staff to child ratio. Families cannot assume that cost is correlated to quality.

Information about Child Care Regulations

Child Care Licensing <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/licensed/index.htm> (Licensing is the higher standard and has more requirements than certification).

Information on statewide licensure of Wisconsin's child care facilities is available at the link above. The purpose of licensure is to promote the health, safety and welfare of children in licensed child care.

Child Care Certification <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/certification/default.htm>

State law requires counties and tribes to certify providers who receive public funding but are exempt from the licensing law. Most counties have made certification available for all family child care providers, whether or not public funding is involved. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) publicizes rules establishing standards for the certification of child care providers.

State guidelines set staff-to-child ratios and maximum group sizes for Childcare Centers. They also set maximums for small family child care homes. The ratios vary according to the age of the children and thus the age makeup of a provider's group would determine the maximum overall size. Therefore, we cannot determine the total number of children that could be accommodated by the existing providers.

Survey of Area Parents

The next step we undertook was to develop a survey that could be administered to area parents to assess their experiences with childcare. We were able to find a sample survey that was conducted in another region of the state. We revised that survey instrument and then uploaded it to a program called Qualtrics, which allows us to have respondents anonymously complete the survey on line, and it then tabulates the results. We initially worked through Dale to get a 'letter of invitation' to participate in the survey to be sent out via email to employees of major employers in Ashland. We were able to get two major employers to send out the invitation in June 2014 and we received 78 responses. In fall we identified several additional employers to engage in the project and we received 45 responses to those invitations. Finally, we created a slightly different survey and made it available via the internet to the general public. Parents were invited to complete the survey through several means including newspaper ads, our website posts and Facebook. We received 28 responses to this last invitation, for a total of 151 responses.

Survey Results

There were 151 responses to the survey representing 267 children. Of these, 209 were in some form of childcare outside their home.

- 82% of the respondents were full time employees.
- 87% percent of the respondents had two parents living in their household.
- 85% of the respondent's households had an annual income of \$50,000 or more.

Obviously this is not a representative sample of Ashland County residents. Our invitation to the general public did not result in many responses from low-income families. According to the 2010 census, Ashland County had 1001 children under the age of five and 1014 children ages five to nine. Our responses represent about 13% of these children, however not those in lower income families. The Ashland County median family income was \$38,550 in 2013. To obtain a more representative sample it may be necessary to invest in a mailing with incentives.

The survey consisted of 19 questions with numerical responses and one open ended question. Fifty respondents included written comments, some of which were lengthy and strongly worded.

Here are a few interesting pieces of data to report from the numerical items, followed by a summary/analysis of the comments.

- The average cost of childcare was between \$100 and \$150 per week per child.
- 69% of the respondents considered their cost for childcare affordable and 31% felt what they were spending was not affordable.
- The five most pressing challenges with childcare for the respondents were:
 - Finding childcare when their children were sick.
 - Affording the cost of childcare.
 - Finding childcare during school holidays or during the summer.
 - Finding part-time childcare.
 - Finding childcare for an infant.

- Most respondents were satisfied with their current childcare arrangements. Only 11% of the respondents disagreed with the following statement: “Overall, my childcare arrangement is a good one.” However, in the comments we learned that finding suitable childcare was a struggle for many.

An analysis of the comments to the open ended question provided a little more insight into the numbers, highlighted concerns of some parents, and provided some recommendations for addressing concerns raised.

While a majority indicated satisfaction with their childcare arrangements, some parents clearly found the search for a ‘quality’ childcare provider to be extremely challenging and frustrating. *“We began looking for childcare a full 6 months before we needed it, but still were only able to find one place that would take him for 2 days per week only. The family childcare situation we have him in may be able to take him for 3 days starting in March--which means we will be juggling him for a long time to come. Ideally, we would like to get to four days of high-quality care per week, but that just isn't available in Ashland right now. Very distressing and difficult for us, even though we can pay more for good care.”*

Among the 31% who found childcare difficult to afford, several provided comments expressing the challenges that this presented and its negative impact on their work lives and their lack of satisfaction with our community. *“I also have issues with being able to afford daycare. We make just a LITTLE too much to qualify for assistance according to our GROSS income and not nearly enough based off our NET income to be able to afford day care.”*

When parents didn’t have childcare that they found to be of quality or meeting their needs for flexibility, they expressed feeling of stress, worry, and frustration. Finding infant care was noted by many as the most challenging. *“Finding PAID CHILDCARE FOR INFANTS WAS ACTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE... Our youngest children were on wait lists for over a year (and we signed them up before they were born). At one point we were 27th on the waitlist at an infant daycare center. In my experience, the acutest need in Ashland is for infant day care.”*

The concern over ‘quality’ care was raised often, but was rarely defined. One respondent tied quality to early childhood education. *“I admit that until an opening came up at Tree Top, we regretted taking the job in Ashland, and would have chosen to stay where we were had we known that our son would miss out on a quality day care center with trained educators.”* Most other respondents left the definition of ‘quality’ to our imaginations. This might be a reason to follow up the survey with a focus group of parents.

For those who found it difficult to find ‘quality’ care for their children, they were adamant that our area needs more quality care and several mentioned the need for employers to assist in the provision of childcare. *“This area needs more young families, and one of the biggest drawbacks of raising my family here is limited access to childcare... Please add more daycare facilities--this is key in increasing the number of young families moving to northern Wisconsin, and ultimately growing our economy!”*

Childcare Providers

An online database maintained by the state provided key data on childcare providers in the County. Our intern collected the data into a spreadsheet for the 51 providers who were listed on the website. The data did not address a few of the main concerns we heard in the surveys, so the intern called all of the providers she could

reach. She asked about their capacity, cost, wait lists and whether they'd be willing to attend a meeting. Eighteen of the providers indicated that they had openings, however, all but one of them were family providers with a capacity of 8. Taking an infant would reduce their capacity and their income potential unless they could charge double for an infant. We invited those who were interested in attending a meeting to an evening discussion in April, 2015.

Five providers attended our meeting representing a childcare center, in-home providers and Head Start. Our discussion was focused around a series of questions developed from our previous research. All of the providers agreed that more childcare is needed in the community. The most startling comment was one from a childcare center owner who indicated that she had 21 infants on her waitlist and that she thought she would only be able to accommodate 3 or 4 of them this fall.

Overall provider comments mirrored our previous findings. Key issues were infant care, part-time, holiday and summer care, care when children are sick and affordability. They also emphasized the challenges created by various state policies. Generally the providers do not have a network for meeting and discussing common challenges or for communicating policy needs to elected officials. One of the providers expressed interest in expansion, though she faced many challenges in making this happen.

Recommendations:

Things we (UWEX/HHS) could do fairly easily:

- Form and coordinate regular meetings of providers.
- Provide educational materials to providers.
- Help communicate ways for finding and contacting providers.
- Provide some small-business training for providers.
- Research grant or other funding opportunities for those wishing to expand services and provide grant writing assistance.

Things that would take more work and collaborators:

- Form a task force including providers, local businesses/employers, schools, and government to investigate ways to increase numbers of providers or numbers of children that could be served.
- To encourage area employers such as MMC, WITC, Ashland School District, Walmart and Northland College (and possibly others) to work together to operate a daycare and share in the costs.
- Create and keep a website that is current on providers, openings, waitlists, focuses, hours, etc.
- Create other information and perhaps training opportunities for parents and parents-to-be about how to shop for childcare.
- Offer training opportunities to providers that would help increase the 'quality' of their services.

Summary

This investigation while limited, did confirm a serious need for additional daycare in the Chequamegon Bay area. The greatest need appears to be for additional infant care and there appears to be strong interest in more providers who offer educational components to their care. The current costs for care are affordable for some employees and not others. For some, childcare costs are a barrier to employment. The staff-to-children ratios are a challenge to providers trying to manage a successful business. Assistance from employers, economic development organizations, schools and/or government is needed to increase the availability of quality childcare in our area.