



Cuts to child care aid could threaten jobs

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Della Fothergill says she is able to work full time because the state helps pay for her childcare expenses.

But before the 28 year-old single mother was able to begin receiving the Care 4 Kids subsidy, she had to wait for the Department of Social Services to begin accepting applications again.

She said she would have had to quit her job had a relative not offered to help watch her two kids until she was able to find daycare.

"I was scrambling to find affordable daycare. It's impossible," she said. "I would have been working just to pay for it."

Last May, the subsidy was closed to new applicants who are not on federal assistance programs. The number of children receiving a subsidy dropped from 22,000 in May to 17,000 children in October, when the program again began accepting applications.

Child advocates warn that enrollment will likely close again July 1 because the state, struggling to close a \$726 million deficit, may not allocate enough to fully fund the program.

DSS spokesman David S. Dearborn said the program will continue at least through this June, but the department does not know what will happen after that.

"The program will remain open to working families until at least June 30, 2010, pending budget availability," he wrote in an email.

Full funding of Care 4 Kids would cost the state \$103 million for the fiscal year beginning July 1. Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell is recommending the program receive almost \$20 million less than that. The Democrat-controlled legislature is now working to close the deficit, and it's unclear how the daycare program will fare.

For the past two years the state has used \$13.6 million in federal stimulus dollars to help pay for Care 4 Kids deficits, but that has been spent, and two options remains - limit enrollment yet again or spend more money. The later seems unlikely.

Child advocates argue limiting enrollment will restrict parents' ability to work.

"This program is a huge job creator. You have parents who have no other affordable [childcare] options and nowhere else to turn. This allows your poorest parents to keep working," said Cyd Oppenheimer, a senior policy fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. Enrollment is currently available to those who make less than 75 percent of the state's medium income based on family size. That means a single mother with one child cannot make more than \$38,000 and qualify.

Besides keeping parents employed, DSS estimates the program has saved 4,715 childcare jobs over the past two years.

Kathy Queen, the executive director of Wallingford Community Daycare, said Care 4 Kids is a major revenue source. Almost one-third of her 104 children enrolled receive the subsidy.

If DSS does stop accepting new applications, or imposes more restrictive eligibility rules as it did last year, Queen said her daycare stands to lose \$6,000 a month, or 15 percent of her overall budget.

"If DSS stops picking up the tab, we don't just throw the child out," she said. "We just keep them here as long as we can afford to."

A budget agreement between the legislature and Rell may soon determine how much Care 4 Kids is funded, and if DSS will need to limit new enrollment come July 1.

If that does happen, DSS has struck an agreement with child advocates and legislators to give adequate warning that enrollment is closing.

"We agreed to a 30-day notice in the event of program closure, although the department maintains our position that this could make it difficult to achieve required savings when necessary to live within the budget," Dearborn said.

Last year one childcare provider accidentally discovered applications were being cut off in six hours when inquiring about another pending application.

"If you are going to make major changes both parents and providers need to be able to plan more than six hours ahead," said Oppenheimer. "Yes, if you give a 30-day notice there is going to be a sudden influx and a spike. ... But that's fair, the provider has been caring for that child for four months and they are at a financial loss when you suddenly close enrollment."