

Reopening Costs Straining Mass. Child Care System

Providers, Parents Seek Relief Amidst Pandemic

Matt Murphy | 6/16/20 4:13 PM

JUNE 16, 2020.....At the Open Center for Children in Somerville, Executive Director Sarah Sian is working through the logistics of reopening the child care center after being closed for months due to the pandemic.

When the center does reopen, Sian said Tuesday, she will only be able to welcome back half of the students in order to comply with state safety regulations. That means she will also be forfeiting 50 percent of the center's monthly revenue while needing to also keep all of her staff to comply with the safety rules.

"We will begin operating again at a loss of tens of thousands of dollars every month. At that rate we will deplete our reserves and be at risk of closure in a few months," Sian said Tuesday on a call with other providers and parents.

That's where Congresswoman Katherine Clark comes in. Clark, who organized the call, said she was filing a bill in Congress to create a \$10 billion grant fund to help day care centers pay for facility upgrades needed to reopen safely after their COVID-19 closures.

Unlike funding from the CARES Act relief bill, the money in Clark's bill would be available to both subsidized and private-pay centers, and child care providers said federal support would be critical to their ability to keep their businesses afloat under pandemic restrictions.

Clark said her Child Care Infrastructure Act is meant to compliment the Child Care is Essential Act, which was filed by Democrats including Clark and U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren in May, to create a \$50 billion fund to help day care centers pay for staff, personal protective equipment and expenses tied to resuming operations.

The Melrose Democrat said Tuesday that child care was an "already fragile" system that has been "pushed to the breaking point" by the pandemic. Citing the Council for a Strong America, she said businesses nationally lose \$12.7 billion a year due to employees' inability to find affordable and quality child care.

"We cannot let this system fall through the cracks and abandon women and children in the process," Clark said. She added, "Child care is part of the bedrock of our economy and it is a public good."

Gov. Charlie Baker gave child care centers permission to reopen under Phase 2 of his strategy to gradually bring people back to work and resume consumer activities. While that phase began on June 8, many child care centers are still working through the details of what it will take to reopen safely under the state's guidelines, which were updated as recently as Friday.

"While these safety requirements are necessary, we are asking an industry struggling to stay afloat to do even more with less. Providers and parents are frustrated and rightfully so," Clark said.

Katie Ring, a mother of two children aged 4 and 6, said she owns her own photography business. While her husband is getting paid to work from home, she said she struggles to network with clients and get her children on their own Zoom calls for remote school learning.

"Every day just feels like I'm triaging," she said.

While she doesn't want to give up her photography business, she said the prospect of being forced to pay more for child care than her family had been paying before the pandemic was "really frightening."

"If my childcare fails, then my business fails," Ring said.

The Department of Early Education and Care on Friday relaxed its standards for children wearing masks, opting to encourage rather than mandate a mask for every child older than 2, and eliminated an earlier requirement that children have their temperatures checked at the entrance before they are dropped off.

The updated guidelines also backed off earlier staffing requirements that would have required two teachers for every 10 students in a pre-school classroom, going back to one teacher for every 10 pre-school students.

But even those relaxed rules around staffing aren't necessarily making the challenge of operating a day care center during the pandemic easier.

"It doesn't terribly help me personally," said Jessica De Jesus Acevedo, who has run Little Stars of Ours in Cambridge since 2016. "Ten to one doesn't provide high-quality care."

De Jesus Acevedo, who has had to apply for unemployment and small business loans, said her biggest challenge has been getting personal protective equipment and materials that are affordable.

"I haven't been able to get bleach or cleaning materials for the last week," she said. "I would need funding immediately to even get my doors open and running."

As the operator of a larger center, Sian said salaries for teachers are the biggest "funding hurdle" she faces at her center.

"We pay what we think we can afford and it's still not enough," Sian said.

"We are already quite close to our tuition ceiling. How much more can we ask our families to pay?" she added.

Clark got asked several times during the call by parents and providers how quickly she thought the money might be made available for child care centers to access. She said she believed that House Democrats understood and supported the idea that safe and affordable child care is essential for parents and businesses looking to bring employees back to the office.

"We are going to continue to have to pressure the Senate to understand how vital child care is," Clark said. "If we want to see Americans back at work, it's all depending on child care providers being open."

In addition to the grants for child care centers to make the facility upgrades they must in order to operate under the new COVID-19 guidelines, Clark's bill would create a \$35 million loan forgiveness fund for early educators to pursue advanced education in their field.

Students who work at least five years in child care as a provider could qualify for up to \$6,000 a year toward their student loans.

Another \$200 million would go toward setting up daycare centers on college campuses to support parents who are pursuing their degrees.

"Through investments in infrastructure and loan assistance, this bill will dramatically improve both the working conditions and affordability of the early childhood field," said Naila Bolus, the CEO of the national early education non-profit Jumpstart, based in Boston. "Representative Clark's loan assistance proposal is urgently needed to recruit and retain new early educators and to provide a lifeline to those already in the field who are struggling to make ends meet."

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