

Officials brainstorm solutions to stressed child care network

Katherine Grandstrand, The Dickinson Press | Published July 19, 2012

City, county and state officials, along with child care providers and other interested parties, met Wednesday in Dickinson at the Badlands Activities Center to brainstorm solutions to relieve the area's overstretched child care network.

Suggestions include finding empty buildings to convert into child care centers, use of existing government programs to fund staff, and host a statewide child care summit in the early fall to increase awareness of the problem as an economic development issue and not a social issue.

In an effort to increase the quantity of child care providers, quality day care cannot be forgotten about, said Earleen Friesz of Hettinger who ran a facility for more than 20 years.

"Yes, we need all these new spaces in child care, but we also need them to be in quality, nurturing surroundings," she said.

When officials interviewed local governments, many at the state level were surprised that community officials listed day care as a top five need, State Rep. Shirley Meyer, D-Dickinson said. It was the top need for many communities.

Workforce retention and funding are two of the largest concerns shared by providers at the meeting, especially in 19 oil-impacted counties in the state.

"If I do find people to work, they come in for a day or two and then they put in applications other places, they get phone calls from those to come to work, and they can make \$15-\$16 per hour plus benefits while at my location they're only going to get between \$8.50 and \$9.50 an hour, no benefits and stress," said Sherry Wagner, who runs a Minot day care. "Well, what would you choose?"

Raising rates are often not an option because many of the parents are not making oil field wages, she said. Parents may pull children from day care and one parent stays home.

The lack of available space is also a concern, CCR&R Western North Dakota Program Director Linda Reinicke said. Industry standards dictate that child care needs are met if half of the children of working parents in a set area can be in licensed facilities. Family, friends and unlicensed regulated care takers would fill in the gap.

For brevity's sake, Reinicke plucked nine counties as an example: Adams, Billings, Dunn, McKenzie, Mercer, Mountrail, Stark, Ward and Williams. CCR&R found that 5,242 children in those lacked day care as of the first part of this year based on the 50 percent standard. The hardest hit was Ward, which accounted for 47 percent of the need at 2,463.