

Sometimes the pleasure ain't worth the pain... Day-care shortages persist

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child-care jobs simply vanished between February and April of 2020 due to pandemic lockdowns.

Succession within the industry has also sparked concern, for when childcare professionals retire, they are seldom replaced statistically.

Leaving the industry

"I loved the job and the kids, but the" said Rachel Hacker, a Kerkhoven provider since 2007 who is phasing out of the industry. "It just got to be too much to keep your license."

The prevailing rationale for her industry exit is that she simply no longer has children of an age where day care is a need, but since 2007, she has perceived a steady shift toward greater industry regulation.

There is another connection between the two beyond that Hacker was a nearby provider: Rein was Hacker's daycare instructor when she was young.

Succession in the industry has loomed large as a topic of discussion. Many providers are active in child care when they have children that age—a phenomenon of which Hacker is emblematic.

As compared to commercial care, the wear and tear on your home is significant if you are a home provider in a rural area.

"The income varies weekly and monthly," Hacker said.

"Preschool kids were at one rate. Elementary kids were at one rate. Infants were at one rate, so it depended on who I had at the time. You take full-time spots if you can but usually there is a mixture."

Another barrier to entry for those in rural areas is the scarcity and intermittent offering of classes specific to child care requirements. The extensive capital investment necessary to update one's home to be compliant with code before the children arrive is another barrier. To even achieve one's license, a home care provider would have to contrive to update various aspects of their home for compliance purposes. Other jobs, ones which pay significantly more on average, require much less training than child care.

In the Rein household, a calendar, tidily kept but almost every inch of which is covered with writing highlighted in blue, red and yellow, keeps tabs on the following as they occur throughout the day: which child ate what, general behavior, late pickups, all pickups, a log for driving, the number of minutes that passed while she was scouring the internet for worksheets for the children, and much more.

To be clear, Hacker is leaving the industry, not Rein.

Because of the significant shortage of daycare providers in this Kerkhoven and Murdock area, the inability to take on any more children in terms of enrollment is difficult for Rein, as she is aware of a distinct need in the area, but regulations and common sense born of simple arithmetic mean this is impossible.

"That's the most difficult call to get. I just got another call yesterday. And it crushed me yesterday because I can't legally take on another baby," said Rein.

She meditated on why so many care providers have vanished from the area. She said, for one, perhaps the government does not incentivize work in the industry enough—she said sometimes it is as if they make it as difficult as possible.

"Yeah, it's really faded out since I've been here. Sometimes I think the regulations are a part of it. I get it: the kids have to be safe, but some of the things we have to do are ridiculous."

Child care providers must undertake a recertification at two year intervals, often a sharp turn around for providers who feel as if that, though things do change—kids, for instance, the kids are different than they were years ago, Rein said—they are being exposed to the same material year after year.

Taxes on self-employment can also devastate child care providers. Rein's husband earns good money as a truck driver, so she tries to keep under a certain amount to continue in her current tax bracket.

Rein spoke about the disparities in funding, analyzing home versus commercial care.

"Sometimes I feel like the government wants us all to be centers. They have more control over centers," Rein said.

Also, Rein feels guilty about taking time off, and paid vacation time strikes her almost as an absurdity. For other providers, vacation days and sick days are built into a provider's contract.

"It's a business, yeah, but sometimes it doesn't feel like one. It would be hard for me to ask parents to pay for my vacation," Rein said. "Willmar is a lot different pay-wise compared to us. In Willmar, you have providers who are earning vacation pay, etc., paid leave."

Swift County

The main thing for Swift County is to attempt to cultivate more providers.

The regulations that day care providers follow are penned by Minnesota's Department of Human Services, but they are enforced by Swift County.

Swift County first posed child care as one issue its communities faced long ago, said Eric Rudningen, District 5 Commissioner for Swift County. Child care relates to a number of salient issues in towns:

Hiring managers representing various fields worry that the lack of availability may deter potential workers from moving into the community in a tight labor market where workers have increasingly absented themselves from the labor force.

There has been talk of a center in southeast Swift County, in Murdock or—as is more likely—in Kerkhoven, but the towns in the area that have combined centers and schools.

The consolidation of many rural Minnesota school districts, first home to rural schoolhouses and then districts that were quite small prior to these district partnerships, grants in many instances the existence of disused but worthy infrastructure such as old school buildings—such is the case in Benson and Appleton, the two towns in Swift County with daycare centers.

Rudningen, however, complimented the KMS

school board on a prudent investment history in terms of infrastructure sizing. In the KMS district, thus, no old empty, disused school buildings populate the town—all infrastructure matches a current need, so a center would require significant investment in infrastructure and capital.

Rudningen, who graduated from KMS in 1994, acknowledged the shortage, the rather severe tapering off of an industry vital to the community.

"Anecdotally, I went to school here, and I can think of at least 10 to 12 providers who are not here anymore," Rudningen said.

And Rudningen pointed out the truth is halfway—parents in the area have loved the option of home care providers. The issue remains there are simply too few.

"It's something we've worked on for quite some time in Swift County. It's a nuanced issue, and I think the solution is a combination of providers and centers," Rudningen said.

The county has taken on several measures and has extended grant opportunities to potential and current providers in an attempt to incentivize a wave of workers to take part in an industry that has so slackened. Open houses have been offered to spread the word, to educate potential providers on what it would take to render their current residence seaworthy in a day care sense; ads were placed in the newspaper.

But though the demand is high and the names on the list of providers low, only a certain number of families in these communities can afford child care. What that number is exactly, of course, is unclear.

Commercial daycares have been under duress especially in the pandemic era due to a shortage of workers. A daycare center in rural Minnesota might encounter an even greater staffing shortage. These are matters that must be analyzed before the hypothetical—in this case hypothetical—be undertaken.

And tasked with enforcing the checklists—home inspections, checklists, seeing to it that banisters and heating

units are consistent with code—the county is committed to granting leeway whenever possible instead of charging individuals with punitive measures.

Rudningen said they hope to provide solutions to deficiencies in residential infrastructure, working with providers to ensure that they are compliant. To ease the pain of provider investment and to calm mercurial changes in regulation, the county offers grant opportunities for such home-care providers. They have hosted open houses to educate current providers in an attempt to stimulate future providers.

"We always emphasize the education piece and that there are dollars to improve this. At the end of the day, providers are always trying to do a good job. Sometimes they just end up in a bad spot," Rudningen said. "But if you go into it with a good small-business model, which we can help with, you insulate yourself from a lot of those problems."

Though of course they are well privy to the child care gap, the county says it has been successful in making resources available to providers. Such grants and resources have been utilized to intended effect across the county, commissioners say.

Funding, Hesitant to take Money

Resources for day care providers exist, but many are left to make operational decisions on their own. One such decision is to weigh whether or not to go on the food plan. Another is wondering whether it would benefit them in the long run to accept the flood of federal and state funds that were pumped into the industry during a period of highest ebb when they feared they would later be taxed for the funds.

And for many providers, the food plan question has to do with which tier of the plan they qualify for, an item of high importance determined by the number of students in a district who apply for free or reduced lunch through the school.

Because Hacker and Rein are in the KMS district, they qualify for the Tier 1 funding,

which is always greater, rather than the Tier 2. Rein said the Food Program always leaves her slightly bemused, flashing an orange card with numbers on which Tier 2 always less than Tier 1. Thirty-five years ago, when Rein began her home-based daycare, the Food Program was not based on income and split into two tiers. All received the same amount of funding.

The rationale for the division is if you are a center that generates a large amount of revenue, you would likely qualify for Tier 2.

"When you look at it, how can someone afford food if they are on Tier 2? A lot of providers who do not get Tier 1 do not use the food program," Rein said.

Rein also mentioned the paperwork for the food program was extensive, quite the undertaking.

Rachel Hacker said the Food Plan is an immense help but that she was weary of the pandemic relief dollars suddenly available. Some of the funding struck her as redundant, covering similar aid programs long in existence for providers.

She said she was hesitant to apply for the funding, which would have mainly occurred in the form of reimbursements once receipts were submitted, which makes it an initial up-front cost for providers, that is money that later comes back into a provider's account.

For Hacker, COVID was another extreme to deal with.

"When COVID came, they really started throwing money at you. I opted out of a lot of the state funding because it didn't make sense to take it and then have to pay it back later through taxes. I said, 'I'm not going to dabble in that,'" she said.

The sustainability of these funds has also been called into question, though other providers cite this shot of federal pandemic relief dollars into the industry as instrumental in their ability to keep doors open through difficult periods.



Here is another angle of the old school lot in Kerkhoven, which may be developed into a residential

project. An open house in march will try gauge interest levels.

Former school to be developed???

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and suggestions from the public and to potentially generate outside investment.

"The open house will be for the development of his vision of four duplexes, Don's vision," said City Clerk Kim Harkema.

Dana Molenaar and Kelly Hauge are working on 3-D drawings of a proposed plan to give those who attend the open house an architectural idea of the potential development.

Due to Willmar's concurrent city council meeting, Rudningen was not able to attend the meeting in Kerkhoven Monday night, but Harkema presented these developments to the panel of four. EDA board members asked if Halverson intends to sell the lot to

a developer.

It is not known whether the lot would be purchased by a private party, a developer, or an association—but Halverson is open to anything right now, according to reports.

Halverson's idea for the development is a string of four duplexes, to each unit a two-stall garage, two bedrooms, a bathroom. Since December, Rudningen has made it known to Halverson that the EDA will support him in this venture in whatever manner possible.

It was explained at the meeting the EDA intends to promote the open house event through advertising. "We want to make it a big deal," Harkema said.

"The city, the EDA, the

county, everyone is on this and behind it. We need it," said board member Andy Thorson.

Further business transpired at the Kerkhoven EDA meeting. On unanimous voting, the council agreed to apply for a Community Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Grant through the Swift County RDA, an opportunity extended to all Swift County cities and townships, designed with the goal of assisting local marketing and promoting the goal of outdoor recreation and tourism.

"I think we're able to do the trail cost on the city's end for the next five years," said City Clerk Kim Harkema.

She proposed the EDA utilize these funds from the Swift

County RDA Grant to erect a handicap accessible bathroom alongside the trail in town.

Others agreed. "I think that would be the best use of this money," Mayor Kordell Van Heuveln said.

Andy Thorson said the bathroom was certainly a large enough project in scope for the \$25,000. All were in favor of applying for the RDA grant, specifically for the bathroom.

The application comes due March 15th.

Full Housing Study

Laura Ostlie, Executive Director of the Swift County RDA, has reached out to the city of Kerkhoven asking if the city would be willing to put money toward a county-wide full housing study. In addition to Benson and Appleton, Kerkhoven is one of the three largest towns in the county—which was why the city was presented with the request.

\$1,000 of city funds will go to the requested \$2,000. It was proposed that the EDA supply the other \$1,000. The motion carried.

PUBLIC NOTICES

"BECAUSE THE PEOPLE MUST KNOW"

SWIFT COUNTY VITALS REPORT FOR THE MONTH OF JANUARY 2022
RONALD VADNAIS
SWIFT COUNTY TREASURER & REGISTRAR OF VITAL STATISTICS

Tygen & Hannah Strand
 Girls
 Jose & Lucinda Duran
 Norsie Eitipei & Charangka Ramanis
 Klinton & Samantha Van Heuveln

MARRIAGES
 Andrew Carruth, Danvers and Brittany Meier, Danvers
 Bobby Carlson, Murdock and Shawna Freburg, Murdock

DEATHS
 Beverley Berens, 85, Benson
 Lynn Knutson, 71, Benson
 Delane Olson, 64, Holloway
 Orlen Pangrac, 90, Benson
 Dennis Peterson, 18, Benson

BIRTHS
 Boys
 Shayla Nelson
 Thomas & Erica Kack

Douglas Kruger, 83, Montevideo

WHAT'S IN YOUR AIR?

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