

## The Child Care Dilemma

In 2020, the Juneau County Department of Public Health conducted its every-five-year survey of health care needs. Four primary subjects were collated from approximately 5000 responses: Child care, transportation, housing, and good jobs/strong economy. At first, these subjects do not sound like “health care”, but all have a direct correlation to safety, stability, and wellbeing. Juneau County, like every other county in the United States, is facing a child care crisis.

**Child care center issues:** During the COVID pandemic, childcare providers were determined essential workers. Federal funds assured consistent service by increasing the wages of the childcare workforce – perennially among the lowest paid workers in the United States – and to support other vital needs of these centers. That funding is now gone, leaving childcare centers at a difficult crossroad, either charging up to 30% more for their services, letting staff go, or closure.

**Parent needs:** More than half of Juneau County’s approximately 11,000 working adults, need either full or part-time child care. In 2023, there were fewer than 300 certified and licensed child care slots available, with infant slots (children less than 1 year old) at zero or one. The average cost for one child in full-time care is \$1000 per month. The average commute to/from a licensed child care center is 20 miles. Childcare is daytime only – no second or third shift, weekend, holiday, unwell, or special needs childcare. Parents are frequently forced to work opposite shifts in order to minimize costs and the child’s time out of home – often at the expense of their own relationship. Some workers leave employment. Unlike their cohort, stay-at-home adults pay less into social security, have no retirement savings during that timeframe, and no pay raises or increased benefits. That individual will likely never catch up to workers of a similar age and background. In short, that decision will cost them at the beginning of their career and haunts them at retirement.

Because there are so few licensed and certified centers; family-based childcare has been the go-to solution for workers. With 1440 children living in Juneau County under the age of 4 (2020 US Census), the math says it all. Family childcare is in a private home, often a stay-at-home parent, grandparent or other relative, neighbor or friend. The major difference is one is highly regulated, the other is not. Most certified childcare centers are privately owned and operated, but licensed. Obstetricians and general practitioners are now counseling expectant parents to secure childcare as soon as the pregnancy is confirmed.

Juneau County needs more licensed childcare. It is extraordinarily difficult for parents to tap into the hidden family daycare network. Certified centers simply cannot offer the number of slots that the market demands, and with increased costs, it is possible that even fewer spaces will be available in the future.

There are opportunities to start or expand licensed centers. Family childcare facilities can also become licensed. If you are interested in addressing this crisis - or wish to assist with any of the other subjects revealed by the Public Health survey - please contact Tara Ennis at 608-847-9373. There are community action teams (CAT) awaiting your ideas and recommendations.