COVID-19 Turns Child Care Programs Upside Down

By Sharon Eastlake, Partner, Opportunity Exchange

In a few short weeks, the Coronavirus Pandemic has turned our world upside down. In the early childhood education world, two things we have always known about our work are now playing out in real time.

The first truth is this: Our work is vital to a functioning society. For years, advocacy groups have discussed “a day without daycare” to demonstrate the critical role of child care. The prospect of closing child care programs has long been enough to make headlines and instill fear. Now that that fear has been thrust upon us. And yes, the absence of child care has a devastating impact on the world of work and its workforce that child care is an “essential service.”

The second truth has become clear in this crisis: the fragile economic condition of our child care system. Discussions about continued funding are vital to the provision of playgrounds will be missed, but insufficient to address the current needs of those who rely on child care. Federal leaders have been forced to address the status of child care providers and the families they serve.

In a time to present our programs, protect the workforce, and provide essential services, we await the storm to pass. It is misleading to talk about relief packages from federal leaders. I offer a few “friendly amendments” to these ideas that could make all the difference for our child care infrastructure.

Protecting the workforce

Child care workforce compensation is problematic in the best of economic times, but chronic low pay has made ECE educators among the most vulnerable among us. We need unemployment compensation packages that guarantee full salary for those earning under $75,000 per year and provides family leave for those on leave.

When the storm ends, we need to have a serious discussion about how we build a child care infrastructure that is resilient enough to survive challenges. Can Social Service Advocates build stronger, more resilient child care programs that have a greater capacity to withstand more frequent economic cycles?

Supporting First Responders

Perhaps the most worrisome problem is how to provide child care services for our front-line essential service workers – health care, police and fire, and other critical workers. There are no perfect solutions, but guidelines are emerging from local communities that can begin to shape our response:

- Establish support groups of child care providers and parent-educators.
- Designate specific emergency care needs for front-line workers.
- Provide incentives to child care workers.
- Provide ongoing training for child care providers.
- Develop an emergency support network that can be activated in times of crisis.
- Establish a crisis hotline that can provide support and resources.

Above all, take care of yourselves and those around you.