COVID-19 Turns Child Care Programs Upside Down
By Sharon Zalkind, Partner, Opportunities Exchange

It is a sad shock to all of us that the Coronavirus Pandemic has turned our world upside down. In the early childhood care and education world, two things we have always known about our work are now playing out before us in real time.

The first truth is this: Our work is vital to a functioning society. For years advocates have discussed “day without daycare” to demonstrate the critical role of child care. The prospect of asking parents to stay at home day after day without child care seems too daunting. Now that scenario has become a reality upon us. And yes, the absence of child care has a devastating impact on the world of work and to self-wage that child care is an “essential service”.

The second truth is this: The fragile economic condition of our child care systems, discussions about continuing to guarantee subsidy payments to providers is helpful, but insufficient because the vast majority of child care revenue comes from private parent tuition payments. Our current market-based system not only results in inadequate levels of support (especially for the youngest children in the system), but it also undermines any level of durability in the child care infrastructure. It seems an ethical question, they cannot be expected to pay for child care, and if families drop out, there is likely to be no child care system when normal life resumes.

Is there a way to preserve our programs, protect the workforce, and provide essential services while we wait for the storm to pass? It is encouraging to hear talk about relief packages from federal officials. I offer a few “frequent 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 education among the most vulnerable among us. We need an unemployment compensation package that guarantees full salary for those earning under $72,000/year and waives future penalties on employers who use it. Caregivers who must temporarily close should have the option to furlough employees and know that both their employers and their businesses will have a safety net.

Protecting child care businesses
Federal level discussions about economic relief for industries (police, cruise, etc.) have also acknowledged the need to protect small businesses. Creating a pool of funds to ensure that businesses remain viable while their doors are shuttered will be essential to warding our child care business infrastructure. Just as the workforce is presently situated from chronic under-funding — as are child care businesses. Plans to be able to build cash reserves that would fund a few months of operations during closures.

When this crisis ends, we need to have a serious discussion about how we build a child care infrastructure that is resilient enough to face future challenges. How can Shared Service Authorities be build stronger, more stable child care programs that have a greater capacity to withstand more typical business cycles?

Supporting First Responders
Perhaps the most vexing problem is how to provide child care services for our front line essential services workers — health care, police and fire, and other critical workers. There are no perfect solutions, but guidelines are emerging from local communities that can help us shape our response:

• Keeping groups of children small and consistent (and including daily health checks) via tower ratios in classrooms as well as family, child care and even in home care options.
• Encouraging staff who can work from home to do so. This means maximizing the capacity of automation (which ECE has been able to do and testing new leadership and supervision models)
• Recruiting child care workers who are willing and able to serve as “ICC first responders” in these challenging times and offering high compensation as “rapid pay”
• Deep, regular cleaning of facilities and rigorous attention to health and safety routines
• Supporting those running health care staff as well as regular communication with local health and medical facilities

Communication with families, via text, best practice use of technology and mobile app
At Opportunities Exchange, our care value—Together we are Better—is even more true than ever.

What ideas and suggestions are you considering? How are you managing through this unprecedented challenge? We’ll be live from here and share stories in our virtual Shared Services community.

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