



No Kidding

Increased population, housing shortages and soaring prices for commercial space in western ND have all contributed to a daycare shortage.

By **Andrea Danelak**

“Sorry, we’re full.”

It’s a statement that some North Dakotans are all too familiar with hearing when searching for child care services. Daycares in several communities continue to turn countless people away or place them on already-full waiting lists, with some facilities seeing nary an open space for over a year. Indeed, significant population growth, housing shortages and high prices for commercial space have all contributed to the shortfall of child care facilities in the state’s oil-producing counties, creating an unprecedented need for daycares.

As the economy and workforce continue to grow, communities are struggling to fill the demand for child care facilities, with rising property values making it even more difficult for potential daycare owners to establish

those facilities. Unable to find daycares for their children, some North Dakotans have resorted to quitting their jobs and staying home with their children—or enrolling them in an unlicensed center—making licensed childcare a hot commodity.

And while there are daycare shortages across the state, the most significant are found in western North Dakota counties that are experiencing an influx of growth as a result of oil and energy development. According to North Dakota Child Care Resource and Referral, the child care supply in the Dunn, McKenzie, Mercer, Mountrail, Stark, Ward and Williams counties, for instance, averages 22 per cent of demand—industry standards recommend the child care supply meet 50 per cent of demand. To reach the recommended 50 per cent, the seven counties must collectively add 4,667 spaces over the next three years.

PILOT PROJECT PROPOSAL

The chairman of the North Dakota Board of University and School Lands, Governor Jack Dalrymple, recently proposed a pilot project to provide grants to energy development-impacted communities to help them increase the number of available child care facilities. Successful applicants receive a dollar-for-dollar match of up to \$125,000 per community; the community can then use the grants to expand or build publicly-owned early childhood facilities, or establish a new community-owned modular child care facility, designed to accommodate up to 18 children. The communities could use their own money or use other private or charitable funds to cover the local share of the cost.

Some North Dakotan companies have taken other unique approaches to help ease the oil patch daycare crunch. Naset Consulting Service Inc. recently broke ground on a new

office building in Tioga, ND. What makes the building unique is the fact that it incorporates a daycare for Neset Consulting employees. "It's really about worker retention—that's the driving force behind this. There just isn't daycare available," says Kathy Neset, one of the founders of the company. "I have a lot of very talented and exceptional workers, including a lot of young families, and I would like to keep them working."

With an anticipated completion date of spring 2013, the daycare will provide child care services primarily to Neset's employees but Neset is not opposed to opening the facility to other families in the community in the future. She estimates that the daycare will take care of 12 to 14 children, which will offer some relief to families desperately seeking child care services. "Moms and dads can have their children nearby and can travel with them to work, and they don't have to worry about finding quality daycare," says Neset.

STAFFING PROBLEMS

And the roots of the daycare shortage go far beyond issues related to availability and space. Staffing remains a major issue for many daycares, with some North Dakota facilities having trouble finding qualified staff. Neset anticipates that staff recruitment may pose challenges but she is confident that she will be able to find quality employees for the daycare. "It's a concern of mine but I've already had some inquiries about positions at the daycare," she says.

Incorporating features like natural play areas into the space, Neset has taken a hands-on approach to ensure that the daycare will meet the needs of the families it

Unable to find daycares for their children, some North Dakotans have resorted to quitting their jobs and staying home with their children—or enrolling them in an unlicensed center—making licensed childcare a hot commodity.

serves. "I've been working with experts in daycare and experts in construction to design this daycare properly," she says. And despite the occasional challenge, she's optimistic that the new facility will help families coping with the scarcity of daycares in the area.

"It's going to be a significant cost to build and run it but I know it's going to benefit my workers—I think the benefits far outweigh the challenges," she adds. "As of now, there is zero possibility of new, young families finding daycare in Tioga—this will be a wonderful thing for young families."

LONGER HOURS

Generations Daycare in Dickinson has also seen the results of the daycare shortage first-hand. "The hardest part is telling people 'no' and having to put them on a wait list," says Rita Dvorak, one of two daycare managers at Generations.

But Generations has found a way to provide child care services to more children in the Dickinson area. Open from 5:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., the facility offers longer hours for parents with schedules that stray from a typical 9-to-5 workday, ensuring people like nurses and shift workers have their child care needs met. "We're also open on weekends from 5:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.—something that's very rare in the community," says Dvorak. "It's tough for people to find child care on the weekends. They're very excited and happy when they find out our hours because they can work late and they know we're here for them."

Located in a house adjacent to St. Benedict's Health Center, Generations was first established for

the staff of the center, a health care organization specializing in long-term care. "It really is a benefit for the employees who work the 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. shift or from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. It's very difficult to find a daycare that is open so late," says Dvorak, adding that St. Benedict's employees also receive a reduced rate for daycare services.

FILLING A NEED

The 12-employee facility is also open to children in the surrounding community, who make up about three-quarters of the 56 children currently enrolled at the daycare. "The majority of the children we care for are infants and children up to five years old, with a few older children in the evenings," says Dvorak. "Because they require more care, it's particularly hard for people in the area to find care for their infants, so we're really filling a need."

Echoing Neset's concerns, Dvorak has also seen issues with finding suitable, qualified staff to work in the daycare. "There are a lot of people competing for jobs and it's hard to recruit good staff," she says. "The job requires a lot of hours and it doesn't pay as well as jobs in the oil sector, so it's hard to compete. We're hoping to get more people working in the field it's a very, very rewarding career."

Dvorak would love to see more companies create daycares to help fill the void for child care services. "I wish more businesses would step up and do something like this—it's such a great idea," she says. She stresses that similar daycares provide benefits not only to the parents, who need not worry about finding a licensed child care facility, but also to the children themselves, who benefit from having a stable, caring daycare environment. "Early childhood marks some of the most important years in a person's life," she says. "And when an employee has better child care, they're a better employee."

