by Kate Stohr
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On a recent Thursday morning, Ichenaphae Mason signed in at the Bronx office of the Agency for Child Development hoping to enroll her daughter in day care.

This was Mason's second trip to the waiting room, one of only five offices throughout the city where parents can apply for much sought-after spots in city-subsidized day care programs. Mason, who maintains both a full-time job and a full college course load, first applied nine months ago hoping to enroll her daughter into a center in her neighborhood. Now the city wanted the 23-year-old single mother to demonstrate she was still eligible even though her daughter had yet to spend a single day in day care.

"My mom has been taking care of her," said Mason. "But she has multiple sclerosis and she can't do it for much longer."

Mason is one of 47,000 eligible working parents waiting to get into the city's day care system. The number of child care openings has not increased since 1998, and children's advocates estimate that an additional 100,000 New Yorkers are eligible and in need of affordable day care.

The situation will likely get worse.

First, the city has a $6.4 billion deficit. Earlier this month, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's budget proposal called for cutting 2,500 day care slots.

"There is no argument not to do more for children," the mayor said at his budget presentation . "But we just don't have the money."

The City Council fought to restore the cuts this year, but they are likely to be part of the negotiations again next summer.

Second, the number of people in need of subsidized day care is increasing. Unemployment is on the rise at the same time thousands of New Yorkers are trying to move from welfare-to-work. And navigating the system is a complicated process that discourages many parents.

Third, a strike by day care workers - who have been without a contract for two years - also threatens to undo the city's already strained system. A contingency plan is in place in case of a strike, but some worry it won't be adequate.

"Maybe the city thinks it's not as important as police or sanitation workers walking off the job, but I guarantee you that child care is central to the city's economy and the city's economic recovery," said Gail Nayowith of the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York . "These families have to go to work every day."

Is the city doing enough to provide day care for New Yorkers?

CHILDCARE OPTIONS IN NYC

In Home Care
- Care by a relative or nanny

Workplace Child Care
- A few programs, mainly in hospitals or public agencies

Home-Based Child Care
Informal Child Care
- Not registered provider
- Up to 3 children

Family Child Care
- A registered provider in the home
- Up to 6 children

Group Family Child Care
- A licensed provider
- Up to 12 children with 2 adults

Part-Day Centers
Includes Nursery School, Head Start, Universal Pre-K, Early Childhood Centers
- Certified teachers required
- Set in community centers, churches, and housing developments
- Typically ages 2 1/2 to 5 years old

Full-Day Centers
- Certified teachers required
- Set in community centers, churches, housing developments
- Typically ages 2 1/2 to 5 years old

Public Schools
- Certified Teachers
- 4-year-olds in Universal Pre-K
- 5-year-olds in Kindergarten

Religious Institutions
- Parochial schools, churches
- Many programs are based in, but are not operated by, religious institutions

Childcare In NYC

There are approximately 550,000 children under the age of five in New York City.

Some people stay home with their children or turn to relatives or neighbors for child care. A few workplaces provide day care for their employees, but many New Yorkers turn to private centers,

which can be a costly option.

The average cost of day care for a four-year-old in New York State is $9,000 a year, which, as the Children's Defense Fund points out, is more than college tuition at a public university.

Most New Yorkers have to find less expensive options.

For those who qualify, the city currently provides some kind of day care funding or program for about 1 in 5 of the city's children. The city contracts with 344 private, non-profit centers around the city. Most centers typically open their doors as early as 7:30 a.m. and can close as late as 7:00 p.m. The city also provides funding to regulated family care providers, licensed individuals who take care of children in their homes.

Families can qualify for city-subsidized child care if they earn less than 225 percent of the federal poverty level, which translates into an annual income of $26,000 for a family of two or $40,000 for a family of four. However, most families receiving child care subsidies from the city earned $18,000 a year or less, according to a report by Child Care, Inc .

Families pay a portion of the fee based on sliding scale. Those that make less than the poverty level (for example $15,967 for a family of four) are exempt from all fees and are given priority on waiting lists. Others still pay between $50 to $215 a week.

Growing Demand

The need for affordable child care in the city is growing, experts say.

Beginning in December, the first wave of families who met the five-year cut-off for public assistance last year will now be ineligible for child care services as well. The 1996 law that transformed the nation's welfare policy came up for renewal in Congress last September. However reauthorization was postponed because lawmakers could not agree on work requirements. Funding was also an issue.

New York City faces its own challenges that are unique from the rest of the nation.

Between the recession and the 9/11 terrorist attack, the city has lost about 128,000 jobs, according to the New York State Department of Labor. Over 100,000 New Yorkers have already run out of their unemployment benefits and applications for public assistance have gone up.

The city had planned on creating new day care slots with federal and state money. In 1998, the Independent Budget Office estimated that increases in aid would help the city create nearly 19,000 new day care openings over five years.

SUBSIDIZED DAY CARE

If a New Yorker is on public assistance, the place to start is the city's Human Resources Administration.

The Human Resources Administration provides care (mostly in the form of vouchers to informal, unregul

Once a recipient has found a job, he or she is eligible for continued child care services for up to a year. A

The Administration for Children's Services provides care for low-income working families.

Depending on the age of the child, the family's need, and other factors such as abuse or neglect, the far

Head Start , the federally-funded program which began in the 1960's under President Lyndon B. Johnso

Universal Pre-Kindergarten is run by the Department of Education and prepares four-year-o

However, while the state and federal budgets devoted more money, New York City cut back on

its share of spending.

Washington's and Albany's contributions increased from $260 million in 2001 to $400 million in 2003, while the city has cut its share from $234 million to $163 million.

Some officials like State Senator Liz Krueger argue that supplanting city funds with federal Child Care and Development Block Grant funds violates state and federal law and the city's share of spending on day care should be restored.

"While I understand that New York City faces a severe financial crisis, the city must still follow state law, which is designed to ensure that child care programs are adequately supported," wrote Krueger in an open letter to Mayor Bloomberg in June.

The net result of all of this, explains Gail Nayowith of the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, is that overall spending has remained the same and few, if any, new slots have been added.

The Good News About Day Care

There is some good news. New Yorkers who do manage to enroll their children into one of the city's programs tend to be happy with the care their children receive.

"It's good quality care and many people get a subsidy and have access to it," said Candice Anderson of the Citizens' Committee for Children.

Janean Patterson, who recently got her daughter and son into Hudson Guild, a city-funded program in Chelsea, agrees.

"Once it does work out, then you are fine," said Patterson who was on the city's waiting list for two weeks. The center even helped arrange a speech therapist for her son when he began stuttering. "Everybody is really nice," said Patterson. "If you need help, they are there."

Also in recent years, the city has worked to better coordinate services between the Human Resources Administration
and the
Administration for Children's Services
.

The introduction of new programs, such as Universal Pre-Kindergarten through the Department of Education
, along with the flexibility to combine funding from different sources, has also helped make it easier to place children between the ages of three and five.

Navigating The System

The bad news is that city's day care system is a complicated.

Families must apply for child care benefits from up to three different city agencies depending on their financial situation, what kind of assistance they need, and the age of their child.

Barbara Brandon-Croft, a cartoonist and freelance researcher and her husband, Monty, a jazz musician, recently experienced a typical day in the child care registration process in New York.

The couple, who makes approximately $30,000 a year, waited in the Agency for Child Development's Queens office from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., to enroll their son, only to be told they were missing a piece of paperwork and had to come back the next day. The agency also said it would be easier to qualify if Monty filed for unemployment, which the couple did not want to do.

"We fit the criteria," said Barbara Brandon-Croft. "But whatever our situation was, it didn't work for them."

They came back the next day, filed out more paper work, and lost another day of work. In the end, their son was accepted, but to a day care center that did not meet their needs. The couple

decided to find other options.

The system is even more complicated for families transitioning from welfare to work.

Under federal requirements, families on public assistance are guaranteed child care for up to a year once they have found a job. But a study by the Community Service Society found that seven out of ten families did not know they were eligible or were denied care. Many of the families who applied for benefits never received a response from the Human Resources Administration. More than half of these families said that they had jeopardized their jobs while seeking services, and some even lost their jobs.

"One wonders sometimes whether the system is intentionally complicated," said Nancy Rankin of the Community Service Society . "The administrative systems can - and do - pose barriers even when [the placements are] guaranteed and the funding is there."

Workers Demands

The city's day care workers - part of a union that also include cooks, custodians, and pre-school teachers - have been without a contract for nearly two years. The average worker makes less than $28,000 a year, according to the Day Care Council of New York.

Child care teachers, who are required to meet New York State Teachers certification standards, make on average $5,000 to $7,000 less than other New York City school teachers. Day care workers also argue that they work longer hours and year around.

And the day care industry often loses its best employees to the school system.

"Our teachers are not babysitters. They are early childhood educators," said Lisa McCreary, a day care book keeper, who says that her center loses five to six teachers to the Department of Education every year. "We should not have to beg to earn a decent salary."

The city has said it cannot afford raises for day care workers.

"While we recognize the services offered by these child care agencies are essential, the city's fiscal situation limits what we can do," said MacLean Guthrie, a spokeswoman for the Administration for Children's Services.

Last week Mayor Bloomberg signed the "living wage" bill, which requires companies contracting with the city to pay their workers a minimum of $ 8.10 per hour with health benefits and $ 9.60 without health benefits. However, because most day care workers earn more than that, union officials say the law's effects won't be felt for several years.

Meanwhile the union is preparing to strike, but say it is still too soon to say if and when workers would walk off the job. If they do, as many as 50,000 children and their families could be affected.

A strike would be just as devastating for workers, argues Ragland George, Executive Director of District Council 1707 .

"We don't want to go on strike," said George. "We are dragging our feet and taking our time because we know that the communities and the parents and the children are going to be devastated, but if the city does not come forward and negotiate fairly with us, we will go on strike."

The city says it has already begun to put a contingency plan in place. "We've asked the centers to remain open and provide services to as many children as can be served safely," said Guthrie.

The city has also asked providers to give priority to children-at-risk and families who receive care mandated by the state, such as families transitioning from welfare to work, and many parents have already received notices asking if they can make alternative arrangements.

"Half of the city workers who already received their contracts, we take care of their children." said Jeanette Hudson who teaches at a child care center in Far Rockaway. "If we're not there to care for their children, how are they going to go to work?"

Additional Resources:

- Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc
- Child Care, Inc.
- Community Service Society
- The Administration for Children's Services
- Agency for Child Development
- Human Resources Administration
- New York State Council on Children and Families
- How To Start A Certified Day Care Program
- Head Start
- Universal Pre-Kindergarten