

CHILD CARE

Funding concerns prompt child care merger

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By Mike Faher, Special to the Reformer



Photo by Mike Faher - Special to the Reformer
Chloe Learey (left), executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, stands with Margaret Atkinson, executive director of Windham Child Care Association. The child care association is merging into Winston Prouty at the end of June.

BRATTLEBORO — For more than 35 years, Windham Child Care Association has worked to support a variety of early childhood services and the families who depend on them.

But a change last year at the state level abruptly eliminated a funding stream that accounted for about 25 percent of the organization's budget.

Fearing for the financial viability of the association, administrators have come up with solution: Windham Child Care will cease to exist at the end of June, and its services and staff will merge into the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, another Brattleboro-based nonprofit.

It was a difficult but necessary decision, said Margaret Atkinson, Windham Child Care's executive director.

"I think people do understand that it's done in the service of the community," Atkinson said. "It's a good organization — no question about it. But the landscape in which we operate has changed so much that this is the sensible path."

For their part, Winston Prouty administrators believe they've got the space and the resources to integrate Windham Child Care's operations.

"Even though the name 'Windham Child Care' is going away, the good work is not going away, and the good people are not going away," said Chloe Learey, Winston Prouty's executive director.

Both of the organizations involved in the merger have deep roots here, and both have grown beyond their original missions.

Windham Child Care Association was founded as a support organization for early childhood care providers.

"The majority of folks who provide care for children under 5 in the region are really operating standalone businesses out of their homes," Atkinson said. "So it's a very intense kind of practice. It's very demanding, and it can be very lonely."

Over time, Atkinson said, the association added responsibilities as a "community support agency" that offers programs including referrals and financial assistance for parents seeking child care. The organization even took over the Early Learning Express bookmobile.

Winston Prouty, named after the former U.S. senator from Vermont, got its start in the late 1960s and early 1970s as one of the nation's first preschools for special-needs children.

Now, Winston Prouty operates an early learning center that's more "inclusive" - only about a third of the students have special needs.

The organization also specializes in a number of "community based" programs that provide social and educational services to about 150 families at any given time. There's also a housing program aimed at homeless families with young children.

Winston Prouty is growing: Last year, the organization purchased and moved into the former Austine School for the Deaf campus in Brattleboro.

Things have not gone as well recently for Windham Child Care. That's because the association last year learned it was losing a major contract with the Child Development Division of the state Department for Children and Families.

That \$101,605 contract had paid for professional development services for early educators. But state officials are transitioning away from regional entities providing such services and instead have contracted with the Community College of Vermont to create a more standardized, centralized program.

The funding loss put all of Windham Child Care's programs at risk.

"What was super-important to me, besides really making sure that our local providers are going to still have access to the kind of support they need, is to make sure that all the other programs that we do remain available," Atkinson said.

Out of several paths Windham Child Care could have taken, a merger with Winston Prouty "seemed like it would be the best for the community and really, the best for the staff," Atkinson said.

Most of Windham Child Care's staffers are heading to Winston Prouty. So are services including the Early Learning Express; the child care referral and financial assistance programs; and a child and adult care food program.

Though Winston Prouty administrators hope to soon subdivide and sell portions of the Austine campus, there's plenty of space available for Windham Child Care's staff and programs.

And Learey, an outspoken advocate for expanded child care services, also sees the merger as a natural move. The two organizations already had been partners on some programming.

"I think, really, it's the alignment of the work that we do," Learey said. "What we are integrating feels like part of the whole of what we do, in terms of working with kids and families. And it broadens our continuum of support that we're able to provide."

Learey acknowledges that buying the Austine campus and taking over Windham Child Care's services "are not necessarily two things you'd want to do in one year." But she also says Winston Prouty is on solid financial ground, and absorbing Windham Child Care is not a "heavy lift."

"I see us as actually gaining an asset," Learey said.

Atkinson - who's also making the move to Winston Prouty - said that's in part because of the foundation Windham Child Care has built over the past three decades. While state funding accounts for about half of the association's budget, staffers also work hard to fundraise in the community and secure grants.

"The organizational infrastructure is already here, (as well as) what we bring as far as our funding streams and our contracts and our supporters who care about our work," Atkinson said.

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