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Chloe Learey: Child care capacity is a concern for all of us

What is the impact of losing child care capacity in Vermont? It means economic growth will slow down. It means our state will continue to grow its aging demographic. It means that our workforce will shrink. It means that there will be less money spent. It means that people will not seek further education and training in their careers. It means that growing Vermont will become a pipe dream if this critical piece of infrastructure crumbles.

The recent report from the Joint Fiscal Office indicates that we have lost almost 26 percent of child care slots in registered homes and 7 percent of slots in regulated homes and centers. Understanding why this is happening is clearly a next step, as is ascertaining the demand for slots, which is in the works. This data is important. We already know that access to childcare is a problem for families. So, knowing that the availability is shrinking can only exacerbate that problem. This is not just a concern for families with young children; it is a concern for all of us.

In early 2018, the Windham County Child Care Counts coalition did a regional survey to better understand what employees and employers were grappling with when it came to child care. The results are clear that it is a challenge on multiple fronts. Families have a difficult time finding care and affording it. Some of the comments from families included that they would not have moved here if they had known it would be so difficult, not having a second child, and turning down promotions. Employers understand their employees are struggling but do not necessarily know what to do. One of the questions on both surveys was about benefits employers might consider offering and what employees would consider using. There was a significant mis-match in the responses between employers and employees on two benefits in particular: (1) help paying for child care and (2)

creating access to child care. Over 70 percent of employees would use a subsidy while less than 30 percent of employers would offer it. Over 70 percent of employees would use on-site child care while less than 30 percent of employers would offer it. This does not mean that businesses need to add child care as an additional business function, or that they need to pay for child care. It does mean that we need to get creative about addressing these challenges together. For example, Casella Waste Management in Rutland is helping ensure employees don't pay more than 7 percent of their income towards child care. It does not have to cost a lot and it is one of the things that will make them an employer of choice. In this era of low unemployment and high competition for employees differentiating companies on benefits that employees care about most can make a big difference.

If we do not reverse the trend of losing child care capacity in Vermont, we face a future where birth rates continue to decline, young people continue to move away, school costs continue to rise with the shrinking population, the economy contracts and we are unable to bring together the necessary elements for robust communities to thrive. A recent article in Seven Days ("How the Green Mountain 'Baby Bust' Is Changing One Vermont Town") paints a picture of what will eventually happen statewide if we do not find ways to invest in the infrastructure needed to attract and retain young families and children. Child care is a critical piece of that infrastructure.

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