

Child Care Council sees demand spike during pandemic

April 16, 2020



When pandemic social distancing guidelines began shutting down large swaths of the community last month, the demand suddenly shot up for other services.

Such was the case for the Del Norte Child Care Council. Executive Director Melodee Fugate said her 40-year-old organization was expecting a surge in California, but locally, it happened literally overnight.

“With COVID-19, when school shut down on Sunday (March 15), we immediately started getting calls. So, we to work on a Sunday. Because we knew if they closed, we would get hit for parents looking for childcare for all their displaced children,” Fugate said.

“So, we started surveying all our childcare providers to find out how many open slots they had – infant, toddler, school age – then we started fielding phone calls and we stayed open that week,” she said.

The nonprofit Del Norte Child Care Council recruits and trains family childcare providers and helps pay the childcare costs of parents who go to school. Their services are available throughout Del Norte County, from Klamath to Gasquet, Fugate said.

The council has 39 licensed providers and 32 licensed exempt providers. Licensed providers can operate either a small-capacity daycare, eight, or a large, 14. Licensed exempt provides can watch only one family’s

children, Fugate explained.

She estimates they provide daycare services for between 250-300 children and about 200 families, with qualification based on need and income eligibility.

The demand skyrocketed that first week schools closed.

“What happened was, all these parents were still working, all the businesses weren’t closed yet, our slots literally filled up that first week,” Fugate said. “Then we saw a decrease because now businesses were starting to close. And then there were a bunch of open slots. Then there were families that were essential workers and were able to slide them into an open slot. So, it’s been a jigsaw puzzle.”

Ther other challenge they immediately came across, in the local community as well as across all of California, was a shortage of supplies.

“So, we’ve been working for the last week and a half to order supplies, from around the back door (channel) and through donations. What you see here is a collection of things purchased with our funds and donated from Home Depot and First 5 Del Norte,” Fugate said, pointing to another nonprofit organization that helps families with children ages 5 and under.

Fugate set up a drive-up operation to disperse, one at a time, supply bags with gloves, tissues, sanitizer and reading materials.

“We surveyed them asked what do you need? This is to tide them over,” she said. “We’re supposed to be getting a big order. First 5 California is working with our state sister agency – Research and Referral Network – to order mass for whole state of California.”

Fugate figures about \$6,000 in supplies have been donated on top of their own \$4,000 in expenditures paid for through their Health and Safety grant and Childcare Expansion grant.

“We wanted to disperse these supplies last week, but all the supplies hadn’t come in yet. We finally got the right type of hand sanitizer. That’s why we said that’s why we’re doing it now,” she said.

Fugate added that the Child Care Council set up home deliveries for the providers who couldn’t come and pick up their supply bags.

In addition, the Child Care Council received a batch of children’s masks that Fugate will donate to the school district Monday for when they open their two childcare centers for essential working parents.

Fugate said like many other agencies, they’ve had to tweak their services to accommodate social distancing guidelines. The first step was to blast out messages to the community that even though their doors were closed, their services were continuing.

“We’ve had to get creative to continue to offer other services. For example, we offer supervised visitations, which have to be court ordered. It’s a stellar program, very tight, all supervised visits are monitored and we

report directly to the court. They can't come here physically now. So we offer virtual visits. And for our parent education, we can't bring them to the class, but we offer the class virtually," Fugate said.

Another successful tweak was to their Wonderbus – a mobile reading lab on wheels. Rather than shut it down, drivers and staff now host storybook reading time and post it to their Facebook page.

"So, we're still offering our services, it just looks different," Fugate said.

To learn more about the Del Norte Child Care Council and their ongoing services during the pandemic, go to www.dnccc.com.