

EJSWN

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WELFARE NETWORK

Child Care Committee

Bushwick Child Care Access Snapshot Summary Report of Findings

The Bloomberg administration is proposing to stop paying its City-funded child care centers their actual cost of care and convert instead to an enrollment based payment system, which is called the Project Full Enrollment Initiative.

In response, the Child Care Committee of the Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network ¹, housed at the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, undertook a process to create a snapshot of the experiences of families in one city neighborhood in trying to get their children enrolled in City-funded child care programs. Our hope was that a concentrated picture of on-the-ground experiences would help inform the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) as it moves to implement the Project Full Enrollment Initiative and close purportedly under-enrolled center classrooms and under-utilized child care centers.

The Committee developed a survey instrument in June, 2008, and selected the primarily-Latino Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick. Bushwick's density of low-income families who are eligible for ACS and HRA services, and its large population of foreign-language speakers provided a rich microcosm for analyzing the considerations relevant to this study.

EJSWN's member organization Bushwick IMPACT ¹ was identified to administer the survey. During July and August 2008, Bushwick IMPACT's six Parent Advocates surveyed a non-random sample of convenience of 209 parents of children under age six, most of whom were not receiving Cash Assistance when applying for child care.² The survey data revealed that parents faced numerous challenges in identifying and enrolling in child care services that met their needs.

¹ Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network's Child Care Committee members responsible for this work came from the following organizations: Agenda Children Tomorrow (ACT), Bushwick IMPACT, Coalition for Hispanic Children and Families, Federation for Protestant Welfare Agencies, New York Legal Assistance Group, Resilience Advocacy Project, United Neighborhood Houses, and Camilla Flemming Co-Chair of NYC Comptroller's Child Care & Education Committee of his Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention Task Force.

² Founded in 2005, Bushwick IMPACT is a grassroots, early childhood resource center that strives to empower the parents with the knowledge to equip their children for success. IMPACT was designed by its parent organization, Agenda for Children Tomorrow, as an innovative neighborhood-based model to provide information, referrals and advocacy, all focused on early childhood and related services and resources. Run primarily by parents from the community, IMPACT has served over 1,500 families.

To supplement the survey findings and further explore the challenges parents encounter in accessing, enrolling in, and maintaining child care, the Committee followed up with three focus groups with 22 parents. Focus groups were held at Bushwick IMPACT in May 2009, in both English and Spanish. The focus group participants shared experiences that conveyed a more nuanced picture of what the search and maintenance of child care entail.

IDENTIFYING CHILD CARE OPTIONS

Parents generally lacked accurate information about how the City's child care subsidy program works, including how to locate child care, how to apply for child care, and the possible effect of child care subsidy funds on other benefits.

Difficulty Locating Child Care Centers

Although the ACS funded child care centers in the neighborhood had vacancies, and parents themselves had heard of or found centers with vacancies, they still found it difficult to locate an opening in a center that met their specific needs. For example, the survey revealed that 68 percent of the parents had trouble locating centers with available space for their child because of the lack of slots for their child's age group. Similarly, 59 percent reported challenges in finding appropriate care near enough to their home.

Several focus group parents also reported being unable to obtain information about available space for infants and toddlers. Neither 311 nor the ACS website provide information about the ages served by various centers, making it difficult for parents to locate care for 2-year-olds.

Inability to Obtain Accurate Eligibility Information

Though experiences varied, most of the focus group participants reported needing help understanding how subsidized child care works, and cited numerous difficulties obtaining straightforward and consistent information using the City's resources. Parents reported that both 311 and the ACS Resource Area offices were frustrating to access, and most found the ACS website list of centers outdated and difficult to utilize.

A number of focus group participants shared examples both of receiving misinformation and facing a lack of information that undermined their efforts to obtain or maintain child care. For example, one focus group parent reported that when she called 311, she was told that in order to qualify for a child care subsidy she would need to be able to show at least 20 classroom or work hours. She was told that because she was in class for only 18 hours a week, she was ineligible for ACS child care. In reality, parents are eligible for ACS-funded child care if they are full-time students, carrying the number of class hours that their school considers to be full-time. This misinformation cost the parent her child care subsidy – The parent reported that as a result of the information from 311, she quit school to take care of her children.

Several parents mistakenly feared that they would lose other benefits, such as subsidized housing or food stamps, if they were to get subsidized child care. This problem was particularly acute for the many focus group participants who were receiving Cash Assistance. The majority of these parents reported that when they were given a start date for their mandatory work assignments, they were told that they needed to find child care

by that date, even if it was informal care from a relative, neighbor or friend. Despite having difficulty locating child care fast enough, none of the parents were given information about applying to ACS child care centers that were accessible to them, or information about the ACS family day care networks in their neighborhoods.

A third problem identified by parents concerned language barriers. Parents reported that they had trouble understanding what they were told, as well as difficulty making themselves understood when dealing with public employees. In addition, many Spanish-speaking focus group participants reported that they had found very few locations where translators were available and a common occurrence of workers' incorrect assumptions about their immigration status and eligibility.

Similarly, for language and cultural reasons most parents in the survey and focus groups turned to local sources to answer questions, obtain information about child care, and get referrals. The survey revealed that 47 percent of parents received help in finding child care from friends or family members, and 35 percent received help from centers and other community-based organizations. Only 12 percent reported receiving help from 311, ACS's website or any of the ACS Resource Area offices. None of the parents reported getting help from any of the city's five child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs).

Without a clear streamlined process, the practice of using family and friends as the primary sources of information had at times made the process of locating and securing child care more cumbersome and circuitous than necessary.

Concerns About Quality Programs and Meeting Special Needs

Several focus group parents expressed dissatisfaction with their child care options for their infants and toddlers.

In addition, the focus group dialogues emphasized that parents wanted strong educational components for their children. Both survey results and the focus groups highlighted parents' desire for greater access to Head Start centers. The highest ranking among parents' preferences was Head Start at 41 percent.³ Head Start was seen as the most consistently desirable early childhood education program and was also in the greatest shortage. The second ranking was publically funded day care at 29 percent.

An overwhelming need for care was during traditional weekday hours between 8:00am – 6:00 PM. 20 percent of survey participants needed care on Saturdays and approximately 5 percent needed care on Sundays.

³ As of May 2009, the Bushwick community lost 106 Head Start slots, with the closing of St. Barbara's Head Start.

⁴ 18 NYCRR, Chapter II, C, Article 2, Part 415.4

THE CHILD CARE ENROLLMENT PROCESS

The surveys revealed that parents ranked the lengthy and confusing child care enrollment process as one of the top barriers to accessing child care.

Timeline

Primary among the challenges cited were problems assembling the required documentation in a timely manner, the length of time that it takes for ACS to approve their eligibility after all the paperwork was completed and submitted, and the length of time it takes to find an actual opening. Focus group parents reported that even when they found a suitable opening for their child, they encountered problems and delays in getting their child enrolled.

According to ACS, two weeks' turnover is standard procedure once parents have submitted their paperwork. In reality however, the survey found that 46 percent of the families had to wait for more than three months to get their application approved by ACS and another 29 percent waited one to three months. Only 25 percent got approved in less than one month.

Even after getting their eligibility approved by ACS, focus group parents reported waiting up to a year or more for space in a center. One parent noted: "The applications take a long time, to get off the waitlist took a year and a half of calling all the time...it wasn't easy." During the time it took to find child care, wait to get their ACS eligibility approved, and wait for an opening in the center, working parents reported having to cobble together arrangements with friends, neighbors, family or paid baby sitters. In the focus groups several parents experienced times when they had not been able to work because of lack of child care.

Administrative Barriers: Systems Fragmented and Unclear

The survey and focus groups both illuminated serious administrative barriers to care. Primary among these problems were: (a) the lack of easy access points into the child care system; (b) the lack of clear application and enrollment steps; (c) the lack of easily accessible information about care options; (d) inconsistent rules; and (d) waiting lists that were unclear.

Focus group parents almost universally expressed confusion about eligibility for subsidized child care. Many parents believed that submitting documents to a center secured them a space in that center. This prevented them from pursuing other options.

Their unfamiliarity with navigating systems also translated into many parents believing that they had only one choice for child care, and that if the center did not respond to their application, there were no other options. As a result, many parents spent months or even a year waiting for a slot when in reality that center was always fully enrolled and had a long waiting list. Other parents said they were confused about which centers had waiting lists.

Parents reported simply needing assistance with the application and enrollment process including, tracking down documentation to support eligibility, securing letters from

doctors for special needs children, understanding where and how to apply for care, and understanding the implications of waitlists for the available care.

Lack of Cultural Sensitivity of Front-Line Human Resources Administration Staff

Several of the parents in the focus groups, who receive Cash Assistance, cited instances where they felt disrespected, derided, or ignored by staff when seeking subsidized child care. This was a problem for both native English-speakers and non-English-speakers. For example, one mother shared a story in which a staff member seemed to be making fun of her struggle to express herself in English. The majority of non-English-speaking parents shared stories in which they felt they were singled out or treated inappropriately because of their status as immigrants.

Many immigrant parents also reported the fact that city staff consistently assumed that they were undocumented, and therefore not entitled to the same quality of service or rights.

Finally, non-English-speaking focus group participants cited throughout the discussions that they had had numerous difficulties receiving language-appropriate and culturally competent services. These Spanish-speaking parents felt they had been discriminated against for their status, whether or not they were documented, and they expressed experiencing racism, particularly with regard to public benefits.

MAINTAINING CHILD CARE

Problems Maintaining Eligibility for ACS Child Care

Parents felt that they were at risk of losing their subsidized child care any time there was a change in their living situation that impacted their stated reason for needing care. One parent reported that she was told that she would lose her child care subsidy upon her June 1st graduation from her education program because she would not be working enough hours to justify care. She said that, with her education schedule, she had not had enough time before June 1 to look for a job with more hours.

Parents also expressed concern about the time required to get their eligibility for child care recertified. Focus group parents that had two or more children in ACS child care questioned why ACS required them to recertify each child individually and not all at one time.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the survey reflect challenges that parents face in finding and securing care for their children. The challenges also have an impact on programs' ability to enroll and retain children.

The findings also reveal problems with ACS's current enrollment system and the agency's compliance with State regulations that require local social services districts to provide parents with the information they need to make an informed decision.⁴

To address the challenges parents face accessing subsidized child care, the Child Care Committee of the Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network recommends:

- Enhance the current central database of early care and education options to ensure it is comprehensive, regularly updated and specifies: type of care, age of children served, hours of operation, and program addresses with cross-streets.
- Increase locally based outreach/advertising for citywide information sources.
- Provide ACS funded centers with resources to support staffing of the enrollment process.
- Support community-based organizations' ability to help parents navigate the subsidized child care system.
- Provide simple guidelines to applicants that lay out the steps of the application, eligibility, enrollment, waiting list, and recertification processes, as well as the problem resolution and appeals process.
- Simplify the recertification process for parents and programs.
- Provide staff training on eligibility rules as they relate to immigration status, and clarify common incorrect assumptions that impact eligible households.
- Clarify and simplify the process by which public assistance recipients can access ACS child care.
- Ensure translation services are available for parents with limited English proficiency.

⁴ 18 NYCRR, Chapter II, C, Article 2, Part 415.4