Growing day care squeeze

Providers priced out of S.F. — poorest families hit hardest

By Emily Green

Finding child care in San Francisco has long been challenging. The housing crisis and resulting financial squeeze on individual providers has made it even harder. Thousands of low-income families are on a wait list to get subsidized care, while wealthier families who can afford to pay more say they can't get their children into coveted day care centers.

New mother Stephanie Ong Stillman had two decades of experience working with families and child care organizations. But when she started looking to place her infant son in day care last year, she couldn't find an open slot anywhere. She estimates she contacted "at least 15" day care centers. "Some of them"
Day care gets ever scarcer

Squeeze from page C1

told me, 'you should have contacted us 6 months ago, when you were pregnant,'" Stillman recalled.

And that wasn't for subsidized child care — rather, the monthly cost averaged around $2,000.

Stillman ended up hiring a nanny with another family for a year. Her 21-month-old son is now enrolled at the Montessori School of the Bay Area and on a wait list to get into preschool.

"It's a full-time job finding child care in San Francisco," Stillman said. "And I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I am resourceful because I know people to call and I worked in this area for a long time, and it's still difficult."

Challenges pile up

In addition to many centers being full, child care is expensive. The average fee for an infant ranges between $1,600 and $2,400 a month, according to the nonprofit Wu Yee Children's Services. The cost of preschool ranges from $1,400 to $1,800.

"There are so many pressure points," said Monica Walters, CEO of Wu Yee. "The housing crisis is probably the biggest pain for a family's budget. Add on top of that the need for child care. And even finding something. All these things create a lot of difficulties until the child is school age and has access to public education."

The Board of Supervisors has tentatively passed legislation by Supervisor Norman Yee imposing additional fees on new residential and commercial developments that will help fund child care facilities. It will generate an estimated $5 million over the next seven to 10 years — an amount Yee called insufficient but a good start.

It also includes a new option for developers to have the fee partially waived if they designate housing units to a licensed child care provider for at least 10 years.

"I am really worried, because I know lots of families are moving out," Yee said of families fleeing the city. "When they can't find child care, they get frustrated and leave."

Yee also negotiated with the developer of the huge $1 billion development at Fifth and Mission streets to make a "good faith effort" to set aside 3,000 square feet for a child care facility — which he hopes will become a precedent for future developments. (That project, 5M, is being developed by Forest City and the Hearst Corp., owner of The Chronicle.)

Favors a tax

But some developers criticize the new fees and obligations. Oz Erickson, president of the developer Emerald Fund, said city officials are tacking on multiple fees for various pet causes, driving up the cost of construction and contributing to the housing crisis.

"All these causes are good, but it's like a Christmas tree — eventually the tree falls down when you put too many ornaments on it," Erickson said. "I would be fully in favor of a
Irene Thomas-Jacks prepares lunch for the children at her home child-care service, Our Children's Destiny. Her landlord wants her to move out, and she says she has nowhere to go.

Malia Washington, 6, gets out art supplies to make Kwanzaa mats at Thomas-Jacks' home day care business.

Citywide tax (to fund child care facilities), but to put it on housing strikes me as counterproductive.”

Adding another layer of difficulty to the child care situation is the huge wait list for low-income families seeking subsidies from the city and the state. Roughly 3,500 children in San Francisco age 5 and younger are on a wait list to get financial help. Families of four must earn $46,896 or less to qualify, with the lowest-income families generally going to the top of the list.

“There is a lot of subsidized care in town, but not enough to go around,” said Sandee Blechman, executive director of Children's Council San Francisco. “Only about half the kids that are eligible for subsidies are getting them.”

Many families turn to individually licensed child care providers, who can take care of six to 14 children in their home depending on the license. They tend to charge less and are spread out across the city. But anecdotes abound of such providers leaving the city, either because they are evicted or they can no longer afford the city's rents.

Irene Mahasin Thomas-Jacks is one such individual. She has worked as a licensed child care provider for 30 years, the past 15 out of the three-bedroom house she rents in the Ingleside neighborhood.


'Don't know where to go'

That may soon come to an end. Five years ago, the owner of the house sold it. The current owner wants to move in with his family. And while the new owner has given Thomas-Jacks time to find a new house, she says it's a 'dead-end street.'

Nothing she sees is remotely affordable.

"I love my business, and I just don't know where to go," she said. "I don't want to go out of business. I have been doing this a long time and I love it. Especially the kids — they make you laugh."

Emily Green is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: egreen@sfgate.com Twitter: @emilytgreen