

EARLY LIFE LASTS A LIFETIME: A Child Care Desert Pandemic Community Response

Jefferson County Child Care Landscape

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for child care in East Jefferson County was at a crisis level. The rurality of the region contributes to long commutes, a limited number of licensed child care options exist, and strong social support networks are lacking. Just under 1000 children under the age of 5 and approximately 3000 children ages 5-18 live in the county. Of the preschool children, approximately 75% live in families where both parents work. Only one licensed child care center (110 spaces) and four licensed family child care programs (52 spaces) provide full time week-day care in the entire county. The two Head Start programs operate part-time. In all, there are spaces for only 237 children including the 75 spots reserved for school-aged children. Infant care is especially sparse with only 20 slots available for the approximate 180 infants born per year.

The Role of a Rural Health System

As the largest employer and the only health system in the county, Jefferson Healthcare (JH) prioritizes increasing the county capacity of quality child care. JH is motivated by the strong research showing long term health benefits for children who attend high quality early childhood education. In addition to the population health impact, the organization's access to high quality child care directly affects JH's ability to recruit and maintain employees. In 2019, JH created a task force to explore the low county child care capacity and offer solutions. Their evaluation showed:

- 81% had a difficult time finding child care
- 57% missed work due to child care issues
- 78% reported job performance lapses due to insecure child care
- 69% would take on more responsibility if they had reliable child care
- 52% of respondents knew people who had left JH or who had chosen not to work there due to lack of child care.

Many reported that limited child care options led them to "settle" for lower quality care. Others "cobbled together" care with part-time preschools, neighbors, and relatives. After school, holiday, and summer care for school children was challenging to find. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived.

Stay-At-Home Order Effect on Child Care

In March 2020 schools closed and child care facilities for essential workers halved their capacity to allow for physical distancing of children, exacerbating the already dire child care situation in the county. Although some child care capacity was created by non-essential workers staying home, insufficient supply remained. Essential workers had limited options for their school-aged children and most could not afford the added expense even if there were openings.

As JH planned for a potential COVID-19 surge and the anticipated increase in employee hours to staff the hospital, the lack of child care in our county was a glaring obstacle to ramping up staffing needs.

Washington State Recommendations

To address this issue, Governor Jay Inslee included in his March announcement of school closing, that public schools would be asked to provide free child care to essential workers. However, schools were faced with quickly pivoting to teach remotely, feeding low income children who relied on school meals, and union contracts that required navigation as new roles were clarified. Unlike Seattle and King County, where local governments and non-profits could collaborate to financially support free care at the YMCA's, Jefferson County did not have the baseline child care capacity to fall back on nor the financial ability to support such a pivot.

Community Response

Collaboration

Jefferson County organizations swiftly convened to identify child care solutions as schools were closing. Meetings included the Port Townsend School District, Jefferson Healthcare, the City of Port Townsend, Olympic Community Action Program (OlyCAP), Head Start and Early Head Start, the Olympic Peninsula YMCA, and Trinity Methodist Church. Looking for local child care operators who could expand and spaces that could be licensed quickly, the Jefferson Healthcare collaborated with these organizations, local preschools that were empty, a private school, Head Start, and licensed child care businesses.



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Spring 2020 Solutions

Collaboration was effective:

- Port Townsend Schools staffed free child care ages 5-12
- Cedarbrook ELC created contingency expansion plans for 0-5 year-old's, with an agreement to use Head Start licensed space if a surge occurred (did not need to deploy)
- JH Foundation created a Healthcare Worker Assistance Fund subsidizing pandemic-related child care costs
- Two licensed in-home child cares increased options for essential workers' children
- OlyCAP coordinated community volunteers able to provide child care in a surge. Background checks were funded by JH Foundation (surge did not occur so not needed)
- Informal friend and family child care increased

Summer 2020 Solutions

At the end of the school year, public school child care closed. The YMCA provided summer day camps for 5-12 yo's of essential workers, supported with usual camp fees. They expanded to all families after 2 weeks as the county moved to Phase Two. JH Foundation continued to provide financial aid for JH families' child care costs.

Fall 2020 Challenges and Solutions

School re-entry in the fall consisted of hybrid and distance learning models, necessary to minimize viral spread. These models increased parents' role supporting home learning daytime supervision. JH anticipated significant employee stress as parent employees balanced their children's needs with work. JH faced losing employees, straining an already stressed health care system. To support employees, JH continued to work on solutions.

Expanded Child Care Availability

Working with the YMCA and the Port Townsend School District, JH supported efforts to rapidly identify space and expand licensing for before, during, and after school care for 40 more 5-12 yo's. This expanded child care

opened at Salish Coast shortly after school started. The Chimacum School District collaborated with the Y to create a similar program anticipated to accommodate 15 more children. Licensing and staffing will be completed for an early November start. Cedarbrook ELC and in-home child care programs expanded as well, supporting learning and offering wait-lists once full. JH began encouraging flexible work hours for parent employees when feasible to help parents support home learning.

JH Child Care Cost Support

While the governor's March school closure proclamation lead to free child care for the spring, by fall, the cost responsibility shifted to child care organizations and families. The new school-day child care expense remained unaffordable for most families, even as the child care providers kept costs low. Local non-profits stepped in with donations to child care organizations to support scholarships and operations. Jefferson Healthcare Foundation and Jefferson Healthcare were among them.

JH Foundation Assistance Fund

Jefferson Healthcare Foundation, a 501c3 non-profit dedicated to enhancing regional medical services and supporting local public hospital programs, anticipated increased essential worker stress in the spring of 2020 and began the Healthcare Worker Assistance Fund. They have provided support for JH employee child care costs since. Their flexibility supporting diverse families' needs has been met with gratitude and relief. As of 9/30/20, they raised \$42,325 and have supported 18 families, 39 children. October child care financial aid totaled \$8075. That monthly cost is expected to be the same or higher through the end of the year.

Jefferson Healthcare Sliding Scale Subsidy

Jefferson Healthcare stepped into the child care financial support world along side Jefferson Healthcare Foundation in the fall as school opened and expenses increased further for employers. JH collaborated with the YMCA and Cedarbrook to create a sliding-scale child care subsidy for employees. They plan to expand the subsidy to licensed in-home child care in October.

