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Waiting lists, missed workdays and rising costs: Child care matters to Hampton Roads businesses, stakeholders say



First Spark, a nonprofit that supports early childhood educators, and Women United convened stakeholders to explore next steps in tackling child care issues in the region. (Darren Svan/Idaho Education News via AP)



By **KATIE KING CORRESPONDENT**

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Diane Umstead believes fixing the nation's child care crisis will require an all-hands-on-deck approach.

"It doesn't just have to be paid for on the backs of parents," said Umstead, executive director of First Spark, a nonprofit that supports early childhood educators. "It also doesn't just have to be a government issue. I think businesses are pivotal. We want to bring people together."

Umstead was among those in attendance Tuesday for a discussion about child care at the Newport News Marriott at City Center. The event, organized by First Spark and Women United, featured several panelists who shared different insights and perspectives.

Sarah King, an economics lecturer at Christopher Newport University, explained child care costs are spiking due to a decline in providers.

"A lot of child care facilities have closed," she said. "We are seeing a lot of labor turnover, and we're seeing that people who had been working in child care facilities have left the profession looking for other jobs."

This in turn harms the overall business community, King said, because it exacerbates ongoing labor shortages.



“They are facing this issue (since the pandemic) of just getting people who are willing and able to work, which is made worse by the child care issue,” she said.

Lakisha Leeks, owner of Amazing Childcare and Learning Academy, said at one point her facility had 125 children on its waiting list.

“We recruit talent to come to our area but are we really looking at the full picture?” she asked. “What are we going to do when we recruit them with a nice salary but they are having to miss days off work because they can’t find child care?”

Anna James, senior vice president of government and community relations at Sentara Health, one of the state’s largest employers, said the company used to offer child care facilities but stopped due to liability concerns. She said the company wants to support employees and is eager to explore new ideas and strategies.

Del. Shelly Simonds, another panelist, said the legislature recently ramped up state support. The Newport News Democrat said this year’s budget allotted about \$1 billion over the next two years for programs like the Virginia Preschool Initiative and the Child Care Subsidy Program.

The General Assembly also recently established the Early Childhood Care and Education Commission, Simonds said.

“It has some of our most senior legislators who are on the Appropriations Committee because they are making sure that we have sustainable funding models for child care and that we are collecting the data so that we know what the demand is,” she said.

The price of child care increased by about 230% from 1990 to 2022, according to an issue brief last month from the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy. Meanwhile, the number of working parents with children under age 6 has been growing faster than the number of child care agencies since 2016.

After Tuesday's event, Umstead said she felt it was a success.

"I think the audience was engaged and interested and willing to figure out how to explore and take next steps," she said. "The hard part now is to keep people together on the issue."



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