

# Quest for affordable child care

By Tina Barna

The quest for affordable, quality child care continues to challenge parents, according to the 2009 California Child Care Portfolio.

The 2009 Portfolio is a series of statewide and county-by-county reports documenting licensed child care supply and demand in California. The data was collected in 2008 from local child care resource and referral programs and prepared by the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, a statewide organization. The 61 locally-based, state-funded child care resource and referral agencies (R&Rs) work to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of child care in their communities. The R&Rs talk with parents daily as they counsel them in their search for quality child care.

The 2009 Portfolio report indicates that:

• The supply of child care would fall far short of demand if all families with children 0-13 in the workforce needed child care. Child care availability varies by county, with licensed care available for 33 percent of children 0-13 in El Dorado County with parents in the labor force.

• El Dorado County has more than 1,800 children living in poverty. More than 600,000 children ages birth to 5 years old live in poverty. Statewide the number of children living in poverty has increased 5 percent between 2006 and 2008. This increase in poverty underscores the importance of maintaining child care subsidies to serve low-income families, including publicly funded centers which represent about a third of licensed center-based programs.

â€¢ Parents need full-time care. Sixty-four percent of child care requests to R&Rs in El Dorado County for children birth to 5 years old are for full-time care and 43 percent are for part-time care. Eighty percent of parents are requesting care because they are working.

â€¢ Parents lack care options during non-traditional hours. Statewide about 9 percent of parents request care during the evening or on weekends, however only 1 to 2 percent of licensed centers offer this type of care. While family child care homes (27 percent) are more likely to offer care during non-traditional hours, they only represent about one-third of the overall licensed supply.

Conscious of the continuing downward spiral of Californiaâ€™s economy, the Network took the initiative in 2009 to survey the local R&R programs to assess if and how child care supply and demand had been impacted in their county since 2008.

Patty Siegel, executive director of the Network, expressed concern about these reports, noting, â€œAt a time when working families are struggling harder than ever to find and keep their jobs, everyone concerned about economic recovery should be paying close attention to what is happening to our licensed child care supply in California.â€

In response to the Networkâ€™s survey, in El Dorado County, we have seen a drop in both the demand and the supply of licensed child care. For now this is a hidden problem, as demand for child care has declined due to job losses. However, as people return to employment, families will have fewer child care options which will complicate their return to the workforce. It is clear in our community that supporting the supply of quality child care must be included in steps to our economic recovery.

The 29-year-old California Child Care Resource & Referral Network is a nonprofit association of 57 member agencies in

counties across California. Resource and referral programs (R&Rs) are a unique hub in the world of child care, connecting parents, providers, and policymakers in each community. R&Rs help parents find child care by providing referrals to licensed programs and by offering important information on how to recognize and choose quality care. R&Rs help child care providers by offering training in child development, safety, and business skills, and they help policymakers by gathering standardized data, identifying key areas of local need, and participating in policy discussions.

***Tina Barna is director of Choices for Children***