

Calif. childcare cuts put Tahoe parents, providers on brink

By Jessie Marchesseau

It's a snow day in South Lake Tahoe, and children busily put on jackets and hats as instructors at Under the Magic Pine Tree wrestle to pull snowpants onto the less cooperative little ones.

Eight-year-old Corey Johnson sits on the floor cramming the bottoms of his gray snowpants into his boots. He explains that he doesn't want to rip the bottoms by walking on them.

Corey is one of more than 100 children in El Dorado County who has access to daycare thanks to the CalWORKs Stage 3 childcare assistance program. But not for long.



Nicole Johnson pushes her daughter Timber, 12, on the tire swing.

Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

"I'm just really worried about the children that are on this,"

said Candi Bailey, owner of Under the Magic Pine Tree preschool and daycare center. "Not only here, but across the state."

More than 55,000 children in California have had their access to child care programs in limbo since Oct. 8 when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger slashed the Stage 3 program from the budget, electing to send the money to the state's rainy day fund instead.

The CalWORKs childcare program was established as part of Welfare-to-Work in 1998. It provides childcare assistance to eligible working families who have moved off of welfare cash assistance and have had steady employment for more than two years.

"This is the one thing I do get so that I can succeed and make an example for my kids," Nicole Johnson, Corey's mom, said.

Just a few days earlier, Corey and his older sister, Timber, were laughing with joy as their mother spun them around on a green tire swing at a local park. She says it's their favorite thing there; they always go straight to the tire.

Johnson, 29, is a single mother of three. She started the CalWORKs Welfare-To-Work plan as a young mother needing cash assistance, but has worked at Lake Tahoe Pediatrics for the past three and a half years. Johnson says she is proud of her place in the community and has become a fixture at Lake Tahoe Pediatrics, where clients often ask for her by name.

Despite her success at work, Johnson still needs a little help to make ends meet. And it was working, until last month when she was one of 30,000 families in California told they had two weeks to find other child care options. Johnson said her first reaction was that she was going to have to quit her job. Then she was angry.

"I worked hard to get here," she said. "All of us in my

situation worked hard to get where we're at and don't want to go back to the beginning."

But some people are afraid that might be exactly what will happen.

Since the announcement, Tina Barna, director of Choices for Children, an organization providing childcare resources and referrals for CalWORKs families in El Dorado County, said a number of parents have expressed they may have to quit their jobs because they cannot afford childcare. Even though a subsequent lawsuit has required the state to continue providing assistance through the end of the year, what will happen in 2011 is still up in the air.

Barna said parents basically have three options: be placed on a waiting list with more than 200,000 other families, find a way to pay for childcare on their own or quit their jobs.



Corey Johnson, 8, works on a coloring project at Under the Magic Pine Tree.

Bailey at Under the Magic Pine Tree concurs.

"Some of the families dropped by Stage 3 will have to consider returning to welfare and starting again," she said. "The wages in this area are not healthy enough to support housing, food,

clothing and childcare, especially as a single parent.”

But the effects of slashing Stage 3 do not stop at the parents or their children.

Childcare providers will also feel the hit. Many are already struggling because of high unemployment rates. If parents are not working, they do not need childcare services. If more parents are forced to pull their children from the childcare system, businesses will be forced to downsize or even close.

Bailey said she has been trying hard not to add to the unemployment in the basin. But if the Stage 3 funds are not reinstated, she may have to reduce her staff.

Sheila Kennedy, also a childcare provider, knows what it is like to be in both positions. Kennedy provides day care services to a family with four children. The family receives Stage 3 assistance.

But just four years ago, she was receiving Stage 3 assistance.

“That program helped me to be able to be self-sufficient,” she said. “They need that little bit of help to get over that final hill.”

She works another job part-time, but if Stage 3 is cut, her childcare salary will go away. If this happens, she will likely be forced to go back on food stamps.

Kennedy predicts the cuts will result in a domino effect with parents being forced to quit jobs and claim unemployment, welfare and other government aid. Childcare workers will likely follow, then other working families who can no longer find childcare for their children.

“Eliminating this program would be one of their biggest mistakes ever,” she said. “I don’t see how eliminating day care is a responsible or viable choice.”

Meanwhile, Johnson says she feels like she's on a teeter-totter. One minute they say they're taking her assistance, then she gets one more week, then two. She says she is tired and stressed, but for the well being of herself and her children, she just has to accept it and hope for the best.

It must be working, because as Corey plays in the snow with his friends and laughs at the snowballs forming on his gloves, he shows no signs of the stress his mother described.

"I think our future is in our kids," Bailey said, "and I think we had better take care of them."