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February 16, 2010

New Social Services chief, agencies still sparring over informal child care

The Herald-Sun followed up this morning with more analysis and scrutiny on a proposal by Durham's relatively new chief of the County social services division to open up child care subsidies to "informal child care" providers -- relatives, friends, and neighbors willing to look after Durhamites' children outside the structure of formal, state-licensed child care centers.

As Ray Gronberg's article notes:

In a letter to DSS Director Gerri Robinson -- also relayed to County Commissioners and key city officials -- [the directors of Durham's Partnership for Children and the Child Care Services Association] said they "strongly oppose Durham County Social Services' decision to shift subsidy dollars to support unregulated care for low-income children."

A separate five-page memo went into more detail about their objections. Among other things, they said the department's initiative would undermine established state and local policies designed to boost children's scholastic achievement and prevent crime.

It's definitely worth a read. And this is an issue that's absolutely crucial for Durhamites to track and watch in the months to come. Ultimately, there are two questions that have to be addressed.

First, would a move towards unregulated, subsidized at-home care open more opportunities for lower-income women and families to work and earn income, in a world where Robinson claims quality licensed child care centers aren't always affordable even with subsidies?

And second, and perhaps more important: What's the significance of two respected and influential organizations long partnered with local governments over social services throwing up red flags about this issue so early in Robinson's term?

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One thing's worth noting off the bat: the question of informal child care is not new for Robinson.

She served for some time in Baltimore's social services department; Maryland is a state where informal child care options are routinely made available and publicized to residents, something legal in North Carolina as well but utilized by what the H-S estimates to be less than 1% of the population.

In Nashville, where Robinson ran the city/county social services agency before a contract non-renewal last winter, Robinson seems to have been engaged in discussions about the merits of such a system.

In 2007, Robinson participated in and led a workshop hosted by her department and titled "Informal Childcare: A Time Honored Tradition," as noted in the agenda at right.

An earlier 2005 Nashville technical conference on the TANF program's child-only cases featured a number of panels discussing the implications of grandparents' and other relatives' participation in child care support, including

INFORMAL CHILD CARE, A TIME HONORED TRADITION PANEL DISCUSSION HOSTED BY MEMPHIS/COLUMBIAN UNIVERSITY NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE COUNTY FRIDAY, JUNE 29, 2007

8:00 AM	Registration
8:30 AM - 9:30 AM	Continental Breakfast
9:30 AM - 10:30 AM	Keynote & Introduction John Deane, Chancellor Shirley Evers, Memphis Board of Commissioners
10:30 AM - 11:45 AM	Featuring the Key Gene Robinson, Executive Director Memphis Social Services
11:45 AM - 12:15 PM	Panel: Memphis, A Time Honored Tradition Moderated by County
	Facilitator: Tom Anderson, DSS
	Facilitating Agency East Tennessee Memorial Center, Columbia Park Police & Sheriff's Office, Child Care Program Department of Children & Family Services
	Reference: A Child's Place to Stay Program, Memphis
	MC Event Page http://www.memphis.gov/CommunityServices

Illinois' work to get extended families more state support for their role as caregivers.

And while it's not an extended track record by any stretch, there's enough out there to suggest this has long been a priority for Robinson, or at least an area of investment she's been supportive in funding.

In Durham, Robinson's pitch on the program is that relative- and friend-provided informal child care services will be more affordable than those provided in child care centers, and that persons who cannot afford or find available child care services even with subsidies see the doors of work closed to them.

We haven't done exhaustive research on the issue, but a cursory glance at what's available on the subject suggests some pro's and con's.

A 2003 study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign found significant growth in that state's use of informal, unlicensed child care services provided by relatives and others, finding that almost two-thirds of children receiving child care subsidies used a "single license-exempt provider" -- probably a single relative or other support connection. The vast majority of these children's parents qualified as having very low incomes, \$13,000 or less on average per year.

Most of the providers of license-exempt care had only one or two children under their care -- and those providers were disproportionately impoverished themselves, with almost 40% of providers having received TANF, Medicaid or food stamp services within a two year timeframe.

Parents who chose to use friends or relatives to look after their children largely cited a higher degree of trust in leaving their children with someone they know rather than a child care facility: "Trust in the caregiver provided a sense of confidence that children would be safe in care, and fostered the belief that providers shared parental philosophies about child-rearing," the report cites, adding that this is an even stronger draw in Latino families.

Informal subsidized care was also seen as more flexible than traditional child care settings -- many of which around here, BCR hears from co-worker parents, have strict penalties if you're late to pick up your child, something harder for poorer parents who might rely on transit to abide by.

Child care agencies were cited as being suspicious over the motivation of extra income among those providing at-home care, but many providers noted (particularly in the case of relatives) that they'd provided these services for free before receiving subsidies, and that the subsidies didn't amount to much financially.

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Yet there's a case to be made in opposition to this direction, too.

One of the hallmarks of North Carolina's social services policy in recent years has been the trend strongly towards professional, licensed care being available to pre-school aged youth, based on early child development research that stresses the importance of exposing children to learning concepts and principles early in life.

As the Herald-Sun notes in the memo of opposition provided to Durham County officials by two local children's advocates, some studies have criticized informal child care arrangements as providing less stable and beneficial environments for children than a professional day care center would:

"This means that children in these homes likely experienced environments that were inadequate for their health and safety and did not promote their cognitive and social-emotional development," their supporting memo said.

Low-income children placed in high-quality, licensed day cares, by contrast, are generally better prepared for school and appear less likely to turn to crime later in life, they said.

A study delivered at the 2005 World Congress of the Econometric Society **sounded a similar dire warning:**

Using a sample of 1,519 single mothers drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the States, Professor Raquel Bernal of Northwestern University, and Professor Michael Keane of Yale University, evaluated the impact of maternal time and income on child development.

The results revealed that formal childcare, such as pre-school or formal centre-based care, does not have an detrimental effect on children. Only non-formal arrangements, such as grandparents, siblings or non-relatives, lead to significant reductions in a child's achievement, particularly if they're used after the child's first year. The researcher found that an additional year of informal childcare reduced test scores by 2.8 per cent.

They also found that household income has little effect when the mother's level of education is taken into account.

"Extensive research has shown that a child's early achievement is a strong predictor of a variety of outcomes later in life: high achievers are more likely to have higher educational attainment and higher earnings; and less likely to have out-of-wedlock births, be on welfare or turn to crime," says Professor Bernal.

"For this reason, the issue of what determines the ability of individuals at early stages of life is critical for the design of public policy aimed at improving labour market outcomes. Our research suggests that separation from the mother has a negative effect on a child's ability but this can be partially offset by the appropriate choice of day-care."

To some extent, proponents and opponents of informal child care arrangements are talking on different terms -- terms that reflect a long-standing division in American society as to how we frame and value social services programs.

Many advocates for the poor have long encouraged that the focus of social services activities should be improving lives today, through direct action -- action such as child care subsidies, one can surmise, that help a struggling single parent accomplish something tangible (easier access to work) immediately.

Other advocates for the poor tend to take a more longitudinal approach, seeking ways to break cycles of poverty and create gains for the next generation. The evidence suggests that professional, licensed child care services help with learning and cognitive development for kids, but how does one balance that good with the challenges ever-present around institutional paternalism?

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Which leads to the second question: what does this debate signal about the state of the County's social services efforts and its new director?

Of course, it's too soon and too little data to reach conclusions. But it's a subject that bears watching.

After all, the proposal on the table is more than an academic debate. The proposed change in strategy would be a marked change in course from what the State of North Carolina has pushed as a direction for the past decade or longer in early childhood education.

What's really concerning about the whole proposal, however, is the claim of these two respected advocates that the possible change is taking place without due collaboration with the County's existing partners.

(Gronberg's story this morning describes the change as one "unilaterally embarked on" by Social Services.)

That in and of itself should be feedback to the director. Durham's a collaborative town, and one where there's longstanding and valued relations between non-profits and local agencies. Those agencies can work at cross purposes at times, and sometimes need guidance from officials on delivering tangible, measurable outcomes -- something long a complaint when funding time comes around.

But if this change is coming without collaboration and input from partners, that should be an opportunity for board feedback to the new director.

An issue worth watching in the coming months is whether this reflects a well-meaning attempt to augment available services, or a sign that communication and outreach between DSS and agencies needs help.

We at BCR wonder if Robinson may have felt burned in her last assignment. **In Nashville, media reports suggest**, she faced pressure from an oversight board that was pushing Metro Social Services to a "planning and coordination" role, pulling the levers of service delivery through increased outsourcing and provision of services through third-party agencies.

Robinson objected to the direction -- presumably preferring to continue a path of direct service provisioning through metro government programs -- but went along with the move, proposing shifts in direction towards more of a planning/coordination design. Yet the board, unsatisfied with the progress made and feeling that P&C activities weren't as well organized as direct-support activities, chose to move in a new direction for leadership.

The key question for social services in Durham in light of the current social services dust-up: is that Nashville ancient history and/or irrelevant to today's circumstances, or is it a harbinger of challenges to come?



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