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Svetlana Popova
University of Maine

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Increased on-campus child care sought by UM families

By Svetlana Popova
Staff Writer

On-campus child care at UMaine can be hard to get, forcing

some students and staff with young children to make difficult choices between working and child-raising, parents said.

"I was never able to get my

daughter into the Children's Center," said Kathleen March, professor of Spanish and director of the Critical Languages Program in UMaine's department of modern

languages and classics.

March said she often had to bring her daughter Kimberleigh to work, and still does sometimes. March first applied to the Center in 1985 when Kimberleigh was two-weeks-old, only to get to the top of the wait list and receive an invitation almost five years later.

The Children's Center, which currently accommodates 74 children between the ages of six weeks and six years, has a wait list of 170 families. There has always been demand for child care not only at the Children's Center, but also at the other two child care centers on campus — the Child Study Center and the Child Learning Develop-

ment Center. However, according to the directors of these centers, downsizing at UMaine will not permit any future expansion.

"We've always had a wait list, ever since 1974 (when the Center opened)," Director Gary Quimby said.

And such wait lists are not unusual, said Don Heyes, former director of the Child Study Center and professor of psychology at UMaine.

But according to March, a list of 170 is "totally inappropriate."

"People should not have to make those choices between being a

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parent and being a professional," March said.

In an attempt to make child care available to parents when they need it, the Children's Center accepts applications for unborn and even unconceived children. But to March, this situation seemed ridiculous.

"They told me that I had to put my daughter on the list before she was born! When I told my friends about this they asked me, 'Do you have to put yourself on the list even before you get pregnant?'" March said.

Nit-Noi Hauger, a UMaine journalism senior, applied at the Children's Center when she was two-months pregnant.

"My girlfriend told me, 'Apply now or you will never get in!'" Hauger said.

Hauger was able to enroll her son Zachary when he was 1 1/2 years old.

It took Muriel Doyle from Belgium

over a year before she got child care for her daughter Lauren, even though she had wisely applied before coming to the U.S. Doyle, who is a graduate student of nutrition at UMaine, placed her daughter on the list immediately after she was born.

Diane Tierney, the Children's Center admissions coordinator, said that the wait list can be misleading because many families enroll their children in other programs without notifying them.

There are no prospects for an increase in child care slots, but the Children's Center has been having financial difficulties maintaining its present programs, its director said.

"We have been losing funding for our current program," Quimby said.

The university reduced the Center's funding by about a third four years ago and

has continued to reduce it since, Quimby said. Federal and state funding also diminished. As a result, the Center had to raise its fees and cut its staff to a minimum.

"All this will translate into a reduction of the subsidized slots for UMaine students as well," Quimby said.

Currently, with a subsidy from the Maine Department of Human Services, the Children's Center provides about 30-35 families with reduced-cost child care. The subsidy is calculated on the basis of family size and income, which should not exceed 75 percent of the state's median.

According to Tierney, even the current size of the subsidy is insufficient to cover all the families who need it. Still, parents seem to appreciate the help.

"It is a very fair system and the income limit is quite high," Doyle, a parent, said. "Even if you earn as much as \$25,000 a year for a family of four and you may be able to get subsidy."

Subsidized parent Hauger said that the fee she pays is "very reasonable," especially in comparison to other local child care providers.

Indeed, despite the initial difficulty getting in, once parents enroll their children in the Children's Center, they are very pleased with its affordability and convenience, as well as with its curriculum, staff and facilities.

"There's a real shortage of such professional day care centers in the region, like (UMaine's Children's Center), which provide year-long child care. They are very reliable,"

Doyle said. "And once in the system, you can be sure your child will be taken care of well for the first five or so years of his or her life."

In fact, before the university was hit by downsizing, there was a plan to double the child care slots on campus by building a new facility. The new center, with an estimated cost in 1990 of \$2.2 million, would combine elements from the three UMaine children's programs — the Children's Center, the more academically inclined Child Study Center and the kindergarten-type Child Development Learning Center. It would serve up to 375 children in 209 slots and would have potential for evening care.

However, other projects were ahead on the university priority list at the time because they had already been partially funded by the state, the director of the Children's Center said.

"The university concentrated on raising private funding for them," Quimby said.

Peter Lafreniere, director of the Child Study Center, said that, "The plan is in a kind of perpetual moratorium now. There's no public funding and there will be no movement on that plan at least in this century. This is a safe statement."

However, Quimby said he doubted that there would have been sufficient demand for child care to fill the 209 slots of the new facility because of the increased competitiveness of the day care market.

Heyes had a different view.

"Quality child care is in demand nationally," Heyes said.

He said that after-school care is even more difficult to get, and the new facility might have been useful in that respect too.

Parents seemed to agree that child care on campus should be more readily available.

"We definitely need more such day care centers," parent Doyle said.

Moreover, March pointed out that, "Child care in other countries is more accessible and more affordable. Parents with small kids are able to go about their lives in a more normal way."