

# Child care where you work could be path forward when economy reopens from virus lockdown



## SLIDE 1 OF 4

Erika Lubensky, right, executive director of Community Resources for Children, plays with a child at a care center. (Community Resources for Children Photo)

### JESSICA ZIMMER

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A small group of North Bay employers offer on-site child care, an amenity that supports local families and boosts hiring and retention. Although the child care centers are closed for

the immediate future because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they will provide a path forward for other businesses and organizations when doors begin to open.

Keysight Technologies is planning the development of its new on-site child care center, and several North Bay employers will continue their unique, popular, and long-running on-site child care programs. This group includes Sonoma County Family YMCA and local institutions of higher education, Santa Rosa Junior College, College of Marin, Sonoma State University and Napa Valley College, the last through the Napa County Office of Education.

Keysight Technologies, local child care councils, and the organizations mentioned above have developed a wealth of information to share with other companies considering on-site child care. This benefit has great potential to drive local hiring and retention. With dedication and collaboration, on-site child care could be a factor to offset the North Bay's high cost of housing and comparatively lower salaries.

## **Stories from the playroom**

The costs, availability, and approaches of on-site child care programs in the North Bay vary considerably.

Jeremy Hodgdon, senior program director at the Sonoma County Family YMCA, said the organization's Childwatch center is located on its Santa Rosa campus. The center, which has been open for over 35 years, offers free care from infants to children up to age 10 for up to eight hours a day. The care is available to part-time, full-time, and seasonal employees on shift. All of the child care staff are YMCA employees.

Hodgdon said on-site child care keeps staff morale up. It also helps employees who have recently had a child come back to work sooner.

“The cost of child care is so high that if they had to pay a babysitter, it wouldn't be worth working in some cases. Since our child care is free, they have the opportunity to work and also interact with their children,” said Hodgdon.

Hodgdon, who is a parent of a daughter, said he utilized the service when his daughter was young.

“When my daughter was there, it made my day go easier and happier than if she had been somewhere else,” said Hodgdon.

Activities at Childwatch include arts and crafts; projects; puzzles; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) projects, and outside play.

“We want to do things that challenge their minds, but don't feel like school. We make sure the time involves fun and creativity,” said Hodgdon.

At Sonoma State University, The Children's School has been offering early childhood education to children between one and five since 1972. The center's curriculum includes nature-based outside play, art activities, story time, and small group play.

Cost varies according to the age of the child and the amount of time they spend at the facility. The maximum cost is \$76.50 for a full day for a child between one and two years old.

“There are a few staff and faculty who receive child care at The Children's School, but the service is primarily for students. The Children's School is offered by the Associated Students of SSU. This is a student-run corporation owned and governed by students,” said Erik Dickson, the executive director of Associated Students at SSU.

College of Marin offers care for children ages 2-9 and first-grade entry (around 6 years old) at two centers. The first is at the Kentfield campus. The second is at the Indian Valley campus in Novato. The college's program, which began in 1974, is available in the fall and spring semesters. Activities include outdoor play, creative arts and music, early literacy, and math and science explorations.

Nicole Cruz, director of marketing and communications at College of Marin, said the cost of care depends on the amount of time the child spends at the center. The highest cost is \$83 for a full day plus, 7:45 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. There is also a registration fee of \$150 per family per year. College employees can apply to receive a discounted rate based on income and family size. They have access to a dependent care flex spending account that allows a pretax deduction from their paycheck. In addition, the college offers a sibling discount of 15 percent off for a second child.

“This is applicable to siblings enrolled at the same time. It does not apply to state-subsidized families,” said Cruz.

*(The care also) had the benefit of making my family feel connected to the college community. My children were part of it as well. Cari Torres-Benavides, assistant vice president for instruction at College of Marin and a parent of children at the center*

Cari Torres-Benavides, assistant vice president for instruction at College of Marin, is a parent whose children received care at the center. Torres-Benavides said having her children attending the preschool was transformative.

“It is a laboratory school and there is a system of support for the child and families. I learned a lot about parenting and how best to support my children and their developmental needs. I feel like my ability to parent was vastly improved by the education and support provided by the program,” said Torres-Benavides.

She said the hours of the program were convenient.

“(The care also) had the benefit of making my family feel connected to the college community. My children were part of it as well,” Torres-Benavides said.

## **Waiting list for employees**

Santa Rosa Junior College's Robert Call Child Development Center, which opened in 1996 on the Santa Rosa campus, offers care for children ages six months through five years. Activities include inside and outside play that can incorporate science, drawing, building, music and movement. The center offers care in the fall and spring semesters, primarily to SRJC students. The center has an open door policy for parents which allows parents to visit their children in the classroom or observe from observation booths.

“There is a wait list for the full cost slots for faculty and staff. Care costs \$55 per day,” said Maleese Warner, director of early childhood education at the Child Development Center.

Warner said SRJC employees have the option to use a flex spending account to pay for child care. These accounts allow a pretax deduction from a paycheck. Like College of Marin's center, SRJC's center was also developed as a lab training site in conjunction with the college's child development department.

## **Costing employers**

Melanie Dodson said the high cost of child care in Sonoma County discourages many parents from working. Dodson is the executive director of Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County, also known as Sonoma 4Cs.

“Child care centers and family child care homes, which are licensed care (providers) based out of a caregiver's home, are expensive. Parents who cannot afford licensed care use a variety of people to care for their children. (These caregivers) may not be as dependable. A parent may lose their job (if) an inconsistent caregiver does not come on time or at all,” said Dodson.

Dodson said the lesson is that employers should consider supporting their employees' access to child care.

“It's a great return on investment. It builds not just morale but loyalty,” said Dodson.

4Cs is a nonprofit contracted with the California Department of Education to help parents at all income levels find child care. The agency also provides child care vouchers for low-income working families. In addition, 4Cs offers child care in its own preschools located in cities from Cloverdale to Petaluma.

Dodson said the cost of care for a preschooler in a child care center in Sonoma County is between \$1,250 and \$1,400 per month. This is far higher than the most recent data suggest. The latest numbers, from 2018, come from Kids Data, a program of The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. This study indicated that Sonoma County offered child care at the lowest rate in the region, at \$948 a month for a preschooler at a child care center.

Dodson said the cost rose partly because in the 2017 fires, Sonoma County lost child care centers and family child care homes.

“We (4CS) have addressed this by partnering with Corazón Healdsburg and Santa Rosa Junior College's Adult Education Department. Together, through 4CS's Child Care Initiative Project, we train caregivers to become licensed family child care providers,” said Dodson.

Dodson said 4Cs has run the project for 20 years. Corazón Healdsburg hosted the training for the first time in 2019.

“In fiscal year 2018 to 2019, there were 55 participants in CCIP. We saw 20 graduates of the program go on to become licensed providers. In fiscal year 2019 to 2020, we have had 81 participants so far,” said Dodson.

Dodson said the shelter-in-place order related to COVID-19 may impact the next project session.

“We are currently assessing our ability to provide the training online if that becomes necessary. (We're also) connecting with our next round of trainees to see if they would be able to participate if we provide all or part of the training online,” Dodson said.

She said the future of existing child care provider businesses after COVID-19 is unknown.

“Child care providers and preschool programs (are small businesses that) operate on very slim margins. Some are accessing small business loans. They and 4Cs are very concerned about their ability to maintain their business beyond this emergency,” Dodson said.

Dodson said many providers are staying open as an essential business under Sonoma County's shelter in place order.

“(They're) serving a greatly reduced number of children (as) per the order for safety and small group sizes, and only children of essential workers. 4Cs is working feverishly to place and refer essential workers to the child care providers who are staying open. Our early care and child care workforce are truly part of the heroes facing this pandemic head-on,” Dodson said.

## **Marin child care costs**

Aideen Gaidmore, executive director of Marin Child Care Council, said cost and availability of child care is one of the reasons Marin County residents commute out of the area to work.

“We may see it with residents of areas such as San Rafael who work in Petaluma. They take their children with them to receive child care there. They want their children close to them and the cost is lower,” Gaidmore said.

Marin Child Care Council, also known as MC3, is a nonprofit that contracts with Marin County to help parents find child care. MC3 primarily with the state of California and on a more limited basis with Marin County to provide vouchers for child care.

Gaidmore said that the cost of child care is so expensive in Marin, that some parents who can afford it will hire in-home care. In 2018, the average monthly cost for a preschooler at a child care center in Marin County was \$1,337.

## **Napa workers need more**

Napa residents and workers are in need of drastic, large-scale changes to effectively support families, said Erika Lubensky, executive director of Community Resources for Children.

It is a Napa-based nonprofit that contracts with Napa County and the California Department of Education to help parents who live in Napa County find child care. The organization also provides vouchers for care to parents.

Lubensky said low wages and non-traditional hours have created an environment in which employees travel between two or three different jobs in Napa County.

“They leave home early and come back late. Even after working two or three jobs, many still do not have enough money to pay for child care,” said Lubensky.

The monthly cost for a preschooler in a child care center in Napa in 2018 was \$975.

Lubensky said Napa County has fewer care centers than neighboring counties.

“I have talked to parents who live in American Canyon and work in Calistoga. They drive more than an hour out of their way to the town of Sonoma to a child care site there,” said Lubensky.

Lubensky said other than Napa Valley College, she is unaware of any employer in Napa County that provides on-site child care.

“There have been a lot of informal discussions about it but no action yet,” said Lubensky.

She said even if every employer in Napa County offered on-site child care, a parent would still have to move a preschooler two to three times a day. This would be because they were traveling between jobs that required nontraditional hours.

Lubensky said many parents find the cost and stress associated with finding child care so overwhelming that they are unable to work. The parents who do work engage in what Lubensky called “patching.”

“A parent may leave the home earlier than 5 a.m. to get to a job at 5:30 a.m. They bring their child to the home of a family member. That family member then cares for the child a

while, later bringing them to a child care center or school. The child may get picked up by a second family member or friend after the center or school day ends. The parent may then pick up the child late at night, like 8 p.m., after their work day is over. In the end, the child has been cared for by three different people, at minimum. They've had to go to at least three different places, not all of which may have stimulating or age-appropriate activities. They've also spent very little time with their parents."

Lubensky said there is an additional concern regarding after-school care.

"There are not always enough slots at the school that the child attends. Children need to be transported to another site for after-care. The second site is out of the way for the parent, which takes additional time and money," said Lubensky.

She added parents who speak primarily Spanish have been disadvantaged.

"Schools and after-school programs sometimes have sign-ups online. Sometimes they send only email notifications. Not all families have an Internet connection. I haven't heard of parents always receiving sign-up directions in Spanish. As a result, families in which Spanish is the primary language are delayed in signing up. Their children end up not getting a slot at the site where the child goes to school," Lubensky said.

She said there have been general discussions about the lack of child care and its impact on the community.

"Vouchers are part of the answer but expanding the availability of child care needs to be part of it as well. Child care centers and the majority of family child care homes are usually open only Monday through Friday between regular business hours. A parent who works weekends has no place to take their child. We have seen slots for weekday spots in preschools go unused. Parents who are off days like Monday and Tuesday want to spend time with their child," Lubensky said.

As the Community Resources for Children, Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County, and Marin Child Care Council address the needs of working parents searching for child care, Dodson said expanding discussions on child care is useful. She added that the community should come together to make child care more available.

"On-site child care can be a recruitment tool for different industries, including health care, tech, and wine. We need families to come live here. Collaboration on flexible, income-blended centers could be part of the answer," Dodson said.