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**meeting hopes to find solutions**

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Preschool children rarely weigh even 40 pounds. They're small, they're young and they don't wield much power.

Yet when it comes to finding quality daycare and preschool services in Seward County, small children are at the center of a big problem.

"We've reached a point where the problem has hit critical mass," said Kay Burtzloff, director of the Seward County United Way. "Over the last few years, we've watched the slow decline of licensed daycare providers and the closure of local preschool programs, and now we're looking at a crisis."

The numbers bear out that description. Longtime preschool Kid Connection closed several years ago. No one bought the business, leaving more than 100 children without preschool services. At the same time, licensed daycare providers in Seward County decreased from 29 to 19, despite an overall growth in population. Head Start of Liberal and the USD 480 preschool program both have waiting lists of 50 children or more.

With the recent announcement that First Baptist Church will soon close its preschool, reality has become painfully clear to the community as a whole. At a recent USD 480 school board meeting, members and directors estimated the number of children waiting for services in Liberal at close to 300.

Sarah Mersdorf-Foreman, director of the Liberal Coalition for Families, said the problem is no secret.

"Anyone who has small kids knows this," she said. Now, "everyone seems to know at least one family that will be affected by the closure of First Baptist preschool. When an issue becomes personal, that's when people are motivated to take action."

At least that is what Burtzloff and Mersdorf-Foreman hope to see. To get the process started, Liberal Coalition for Families will host a public discussion at 6:30 p.m. today, at Seward County Community College conference room 229. The event aims to gather clear information about what the community needs and wants through guided, round-table discussions.

"We want to keep it positive," said Mersdorf-Foreman. "It's not a bashing session. It's a way for us to talk about what parents and professionals see, what their particular challenges and concerns are, what we might identify as barriers to solutions."

The session is open to the public, and the organizers hope for lively participation from parents of children birth to age 6, members of the USD 480 board of education and administration,

current daycare providers and people who might be interested in becoming licensed daycare providers or preschool operators.

One issue affecting the dearth of providers, Burtzloff noted, is that “state regulations have become more stringent. Some people might want to start a daycare, but they can’t afford the start-up money to comply with regulations.” Grants are available for items like smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, she said, “and it’s important for people to learn about what’s out there.”

Conversely, it’s also important for people in positions of influence to understand what’s needed.

“Some parents might be primarily interested in preschool programs, while others are trying to sort out the problem of how to get their children picked up from school and cared for until the parents get off work,” said Mersdorf-Foreman. “I’m sure there are people who’d love to see half-day preschool, five days a week. Another piece is the educational perspective: early childhood education is directly connected to how children do in school, whether they graduate, what kinds of jobs they get.”

Burtzloff added that the problem is not confined to one particular economic group or population in the county.

“We’ve got families where both parents are working, and the mother’s job is primarily in order to get insurance that they can afford,” she said. “These are middle-class people who can’t find affordable options for their children. The answers are not as simple as saying, ‘Well, why don’t the moms just stay at home with their kids.’”

With so many threads to untangle, Mersdorf-Foreman’s primary goal is to come away from the meeting with problem-solving information.

“I hope to be able to provide the people who make decisions with an accurate picture of what this community wants,” she said. The benefits are not limited to parents of small children, she pointed out; she hopes to see a wide spectrum of participants in Thursday’s meeting.

“This is not just about child care or early childhood education — it’s about what kind of community Liberal is,” she said. “It’s an economic development issue. Think about what it’s like for young professional families that visit Liberal for job interviews. They ask, ‘What are my options for my preschool-age children?’ If the answer is, ‘There’s nothing available,’ why are they going to choose to make Liberal their home?”

Burtzloff noted that such issues are critical for smaller, rural communities that often dwindle as young people leave to earn an education and never come back. By contrast, communities that are friendly to young families attract, recruit and retain new members.

“If you’ve got kids,” she said, “you’ve got a community.”

**Community Conversation meeting set for 6:30 p.m. today at Seward County Community College, room 229. Organizers invite residents of Liberal to discuss daycare and early childhood needs, including preschool. The guided discussion aims to gather information and look for solutions. Light refreshments will be served.**

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