

Protect child-care subsidies

Pennsylvania families and the commonwealth economy depend on them

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By David Goldberg

Allegheny Health Network employs almost 18,000 people, and we know the importance of attracting and retaining the best and brightest talent.

One thing this means is ensuring that our employees have access to high-quality child care. At our Allegheny General Hospital location, for instance, we have partnered with Bright Horizons, a nationally recognized leader in child care, to provide onsite care for our employees' children. Beyond just supporting our employees, Allegheny Health Network believes that the more investment we make in our kids today the more we can grow our region, our state and our economy.

Last fall, I was honored to be appointed by Gov. Tom Wolf to serve on the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission, a group of business leaders who know that effectively educating children from birth to age 5 is the key to growing a talented workforce and thus a strong economy for the future. We also know that today's workers are more productive when they know their children have high-quality early-learning opportunities.

But, while reliable, high-quality child care makes a big difference to employers and employees, even when it is available it is often unaffordable. In Pennsylvania, child care costs more than 12 percent of a typical middle-class family's income and can cost more than 100 percent of a low-income family's income, pricing them out of the market completely. This is why Pennsylvania, with federal support, provides subsidies to help working families cover the cost of child care — so that, while parents are working, children can benefit from a safe and enriching learning experience.

Yet even with high costs to families and state support, many child-care providers struggle to make ends meet. For those serving low-income children and receiving subsidies, reimbursements from the state have been frozen since 2007. Child-care workers are bearing the brunt, with the average worker earning roughly \$19,000 per year. It is no wonder that 43 percent of child-care workers qualify for public benefits themselves.

Across Pennsylvania today, nearly 14,000 children are on waiting lists for child-care assistance. Proposed cuts to the program in House Bill 218 could make the number swell to 25,000 within a year. What happens

when you are a low-wage worker and you can't get help paying for quality child care? You either don't work or your children end up with substandard care. Neither option is good for our workforce or for eradicating the brain drain in our region and state.

Affordable, viable child care is critical to support working families and to grow our economy. As the General Assembly continues deliberations on the next state budget, we urge our elected leaders in Harrisburg to support the governor's proposed \$35 million increase to the state's child-care support program and to make investing in high-quality early learning a key priority for our state.

David Goldberg is executive vice president of administration for Allegheny Health Network.