

# Calumet County works to bring child care relief

By David Nordby  
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CHILTON – Calumet County is collaborating with Child Care Resource and Referral to try to provide relief for child care providers and workers in the county.

The Calumet County Board of Supervisors recently approved ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding for an Early Childhood Stabilization Program designed to help child care providers retain staff through training and bonuses.

The county's collaboration with Child Care Resource and Referral, a group based in Kimberly, has a project cost of \$689,783 and will include the following initiatives:

- Entry-level training opportunities and reimbursement of necessary hiring expenses
- Child care discounts for children of staff
- Sign-on bonus program for staff
- Quality support specialists to assist each child care facility.

The county says there is a need to increase child care capacity, but staff shortages make that difficult. Lack of child care has a trickle down effect to employers.

“Calumet County as a large employer had been and continues to lose employees due to lack of available child care. It's just practical reality. If you commute into the community for a job, you may need to end up placing



Ariens Company is a unique company who addressed child care needs for its employees by working to build the Brillion Early Learning Center. In general, child care remains a challenge in Calumet County. (David Nordby/BN)

your children in child care at home and then your children may end up being up at that child care center for long hours or the child care center's hours don't jive with your own work schedule,” Calumet County Community Economic Development Director Mary Kohrell said.

Kohrell has been hearing from employers who have struggled to hire

and retain employees throughout the county because their workers need child care. The child care providers also struggle to retain staff. The pandemic exacerbated the staffing problem for providers.

“We have child care providers in the county that are not able to use their entire space, so there's more demand for service than they can offer

because they don't have enough classroom teachers,” Kohrell said.

Prior to the pandemic, there was less of a spotlight on child care, Kohrell said.

“This has been a silent problem for a lot of years,” Kohrell said. “(Child care providers) tended to deal with

this problem quietly or maybe within their child care provider networks ... They sort of tried to deal with this problem on their own but it was really shown as we went through the pandemic, and we're kind of coming out the other end now, where employers started really putting two and two together in various obvious ways to say: if my employees don't have a place to bring their children, then I really have a much bigger problem hiring people.”

The four initiatives in the funding was from direct feedback from providers.

“Child care businesses run on one of the tightest margins of any other form of business,” Kohrell said. “If you want to raise employee wages,

you don't have a lot of sources of income ... you have to charge your clients more and families can't really afford to pay more, so they're really caught in this vicious catch-22.”

Judy Olson, the executive director with Child Care Resource and Referral, says wages and lack of benefits for staff are part of the staff shortage problem.

“We have people still making 11 or 12 dollars an hour,” Olson said. “I just talked to a director the other day and they said, 'Well, we just boosted our people to 13 and 14 dollars an hour. I'm like, wow, that's really hard work for that level of pay, so that's one of the issues.”

Calumet County's funding will help workers get training without paying for it, or without the provider paying for it. Training includes introduction to child care, which allows them to be in a classroom.

“That will be a great piece and something the child care centers don't have to pay for,” Olson said. “We're trying to fill in some of those gaps to take off some of those other expenses that they incur to keep them afloat.”

The seven group child care centers in Calumet County provide discounts to children of their own workers that save employees thousands of dollars each week.

“It's a nice incentive. It's a nice way to recruit people into your program ... but on the other hand, it's still money that (the provider is) losing. So, this grant will help cover those expenses as well,” Olson said.

Many Calumet County providers have applied to a separate grant to help employee wages through reimbursements.

“We're hoping that's going to help retain child care staff ... That's a

different grant opportunity, which is really great,” Olson said.

Many of Calumet County's employers, because of the nature of their business, cannot offer the ability to work from home.

“The data that I do have says we do have, relative to other locations, we have a high percentage of our workforce employed in manufacturing,” Kohrell said. “You have to be at your job. You cannot work from home, so there is very limited flexibility.”

And even when employees work from home, many still need child care help.

“It's very difficult to work from home and have a 2-year old laying around your house,” Olson said. “A lot of people try it and call ... and they say, 'We just can't do this anymore. It's not fair to me. It's not fair to my (child).' A lot of employers

require that too. You want to work from home, ok, prove to me you have child care because it's just not conducive to getting your work done.”

In Brillion, Ariens Company, the largest employer, collaborated with KinderCare to build a new child care facility. It opened earlier this year, and has fought off staff shortages, too.

“Ariens is a unique employer in that they chose to take this issue on and try to address it on their own, and they did that, but that didn't solve the problem everywhere,” Kohrell said.

The goal by Calumet County is to help alleviate pressures for providers, parents and employers.

“I'd hate to lose one of our large employers, or even a small employer, in the county and there was something more we could have done, and I think addressing this child care need is a part of that puzzle,” Kohrell said.