



CHILDCARE IN CRISIS

THE SITUATION: We don't need any studies to tell us that we are in childcare crisis in Ticonderoga, throughout the entire North Country, and for that matter, in all of rural America. That being said, because childcare has been much talked-about but minimally funded for decades, the Child Care Coordinating Council of the North Country did a study last year that provided clear data (The Childcare Deserts Report). Unfortunately the report was even more dismal than expected. In Essex County we have almost 2,000 children under the age of 6 in the and 1 childcare slot for every 5 kids. We lost 208 child slots between November of 2019 and November of 2021 with two more providers closing between November 2021 and April 2022. By the end of the 2021-2022 school year, ACAP projects that there will be just 16 total licensed childcare slots in Ticonderoga. In addition, almost 20% of the children live in poverty in households that can't pay for daycare. . . .which in turn, keeps parents that desire to work from being able to work. Tragic.

HERE IN THE TICONDEROGA AREA Ti-Alliance just completed a childcare survey that confirms the complete lack of available caregivers, and that the care that is available can be unreliable. Of the 103 survey respondents, 73% of them reported that unreliable or unavailable childcare causes them to miss work monthly, with 29% indicating that they lose 3-5 days of work monthly due to childcare issues. In the past month Ti-Alliance has gotten several letters from people that say that they have lost their daycare provider 4-6 times in 2 years. It's all in-home care, some licensed, some not. But people decide that they don't want to do this work in their home, or get shut down for lack of license, or their family situation changes, and in a heartbeat you're desperately on the hunt again for whatever you can find. Even if you have a solid provider, chances are that they don't want to start before 8 am or stay after 5 pm. That eliminates any teachers that are in class by 7:45am and any shift workers from 6 am or after 5 pm. This is horribly stressful for families, unstable for children, and disruptive and unprofitable to employers.

WHY CAN'T WE SOLVE THIS?

Well, it's complicated. Let's start with the requirements of publicly accessible or a privately-owned non-in-home childcare business. The state mandates of X-number of caregivers that are required for each age group of children --- more for infants that must be in a separate space from toddlers, who must be in a separate space from 3-5 year-olds, each with the requisite # of caregivers/teachers. Of course, you are required to pay everyone minimum wage (never mind a living wage). But there is a limit on what you can charge people for their childcare. So before you even open the doors, your mandated minimum-wage payroll is more than your income will be. That's before you've done all the building capital modifications that are mandated for adding extra doors, ADA accessibility, additional kitchen and bathrooms, or furnished the joint which has amazingly prohibitive regulations that make it nearly impossible to meet with any existing building. And with the cost of new construction and the required investment, well, frankly it can't be done in a rural area.

The regional childcare council has given up trying to help people create out-of-home centers because it's not financially feasible. They are now concentrating on adding more in-home care providers. The problem is, they can't get people to do it. They have new programs to help people set up their business, do their accounting, get licensed, and get great assistance through the process, but they can't get people to attend the 1-hour training session (offered mornings, evenings, and weekends). Who wants to turn their home into a houseful of screaming kids? Who wants to work that hard, for such long hours, for so little money? Actually, people do want to take care of kids and help families, they just want to be able to make a living at it and have some life-work balance. We'll get to that in a minute.

We think we can solve this. . . .as a community.

Can the Ticonderoga Area Have a Publicly-Accessible Childcare Center?

We are in the very early stage of discussions on a strategy to get there within the next year, maybe sooner. We need the entire community to come together on this partnership — to figure it out, to finance it, and to put in some sweat equity to create it. This will be a Community Childcare Center and include paid management and staff, and community volunteers who want to pitch in. Here's what's currently in the works. . . .

LOCATION: We have a number of potential locations for the center. There are a couple of buildings that could be renovated to meet requirements. We have talked with those building owners and they would be interested in supporting the community by hosting the center in their buildings, so long as it doesn't cost them out-of-pocket money.

Ticonderoga Revitalization Alliance is a 501c3 non-profit, local development corporation whose mission is to restore economic prosperity in the Ticonderoga region by serving as a catalyst for innovative ideas and resources, and for public-private partnerships and investment opportunities.

Cynthia Ford-Johnston, the Ti school superintendent, knows this issue as much as anyone. Every day she hears the desperate stories of the teachers who call in with childcare crises and live day to day not knowing if they will have childcare tomorrow. Recent events with multiple teachers compelled her to take action. She made an appointment with the state licensing agency to look at the space at the Middle School and assess what might need to be done.

In the 2021 school year, our middle school (grades 5-8) was split and consolidated into the elementary school (grades 5 & 6) and the high school (grades 7 & 8). Much of their space in the rear of the Alexandria Avenue school is now unused, including a section of a hallway with 3 large unused classrooms, bathrooms, outside entrance/exit, and adjustable space. There is a separate driveway and parking lot around the back side of the building for pickup and drop-off, an open lawn for playground, and two kitchens (used to be the home-ec room). We would be required to segregate that section of the hallway and create a second outside door among other relatively small modifications, but the "bones" of a childcare facility are there. This seems like an excellent solution right? Except.competing facility regulations of the State Education Department (they own the building), and the Office of Children and Family Services (they license childcare facilities), would necessitate considerable renovation costing hundreds of thousands of dollars to meet the mindboggling amount of restriction and regulation required for just these few rooms. Nevertheless, it could be an option, and there are others, each with their challenges.

FINANCING & MANAGEMENT: We are going to need a business partner in this endeavor. We believe we have an experience childcare providing company interested in being our partner. They are one of the largest childcare providers in the state and have the ability to scale up and down to tailor to the needs of the communities they serve. They could even potentially provide afterschool care for school-aged children.

Recent funding from the federal rebuilding programs has just come down through the state to help create new childcare resources and we will be applying for funding in April. But that money has many restrictions for how it can be used and we'll be working with our partners to access the most generous resources we can find. Additional grant funding in smaller amounts can be available from private foundations and individual donors, and we are working with these partners on a plan.

PERSONNEL: A center would be staffed with local talent as much as possible. We are already talking with a number of qualified and some already-licensed childcare providers that would be interested in helping us plan and work at a publicly-run center, and we are looking for more people interested in becoming staff or volunteers. We're finding that some of these people just didn't want to do it in their own homes anymore, or didn't want the administrative responsibility of running their own business, but would gladly work for someone else doing the management. They just want to take care of kids and have a normal life schedule. If you know of anyone that would be interested in becoming licensed, we have access to scholarship money to pay for licensing classes and costs. There will also be many positions that don't require licensing or degrees. Those interested in working at a center can contact Ti-Alliance to be notified when hiring begins.

COMING TOGETHER: This is going to be a community project with many people lending their expertise, funds, and elbow grease to the planning, financing, building, and sustaining aspects of creating a true Community Childcare Center. It's a community project. We're just starting to formulate a strategy and plan. It's a great time to get involved if you have an interest in this topic. Read the Childcare Survey Report at https://www.ticonderoga-alliance.org/files/ugd/153b3f_d52ac21974544f8a91e23ee02b04aa57.pdf

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