June 2007

Putting Child Care in the Picture

Why this service is a critical part of community infrastructure.

By Mildred Warner, Kristen Anderson, and George Haddow

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Mississippi in August 2005, Chevron executives moved quickly to restart the Pascagoula refinery and get gas flowing again. They also took stock of other types of infrastructure, including an often overlooked one: child care.

"After the hurricane, I understood how little I knew about how interconnected everything was, how everything could disappear overnight," says Steve Renfroe, a member of Chevron's leadership team. "A disaster of the magnitude of Katrina has the power to stop the economy, but how do you restart it? We used portable electric generators to generate the fuel we needed to restart the refineries. Child care is like that generator. It enables parents to go back to work — a key factor in getting the rest of the economy back up and running."

With more than 70 percent of the area's child care facilities damaged or destroyed, much work needed to be done. Renfroe went to local, state, and federal authorities but found out that child care was not on the federal government's list of critical services, and thus not eligible for disaster recovery funds. So Chevron joined with local foundations, the nonprofit Save the Children, and Mississippi State University's Early Childhood Institute to rebuild the child care centers without government support.

Redwood City, California, provides another example of why child care should be considered a basic infrastructure need. In that city, the master planned community called Redwood Shores is home to 5,000 housing units and six million square feet of office space, including the headquarters of the Oracle Corporation. There were no affordable locations for child care and preschool programs, and no easily developable land was available. So in 2001 the city created an unusual public-private partnership in which it leased part of a water tank site and provided financing to an experienced developer who built a child care center that accommodates 156 children.

To develop the parcel, both the city's general plan and zoning ordinance had to be amended. The site's land-use designation was changed from open space to commercial-office, and the site was rezoned from tidal plain to commercial park. The city's longtime child care coordinator and planner, Kristen Anderson (one of the authors of this article), worked with a community task force to get city council support for the project. She notes that sites for child care facilities could have been set aside when Redwood Shores was planned decades ago, but that child care was not on the city's radar screen then.

Taking off the blinders

Why this blindness to the importance of child care as a critical social infrastructure for economic development? Why isn't the supply and affordability of child care on planners' radar screens or FEMA's list of critical services? Government officials ought to recognize that more than 70 percent of mothers with children under age six are in the workforce, and more than half of them use child care, according to the U.S. Census. Shouldn't child care be part of local, state, and federal planning efforts?

More and more planners and economic developers think so. A 2006 Cornell University survey of chamber of commerce and economic development leaders in New York State found that eight of 10 respondents believe child care should be part of economic development policy. Over 80 percent believe the lack of affordable child care reduces worker productivity, and more than half (58 percent) acknowledged a shortage of quality child care in their communities. New York's situation is not unique. Parents all across the U.S. struggle to find quality, affordable child care.

Families are spending between nine and 25 percent of their annual income on child care, according to census estimates. Low-income parents spend the largest percentage of income on child care or are forced to exit the regulated child care system and seek care in informal settings.

Child care can be likened to an iceberg with regulated care representing the smallest portion of the sector, the only part visible above the water line. The vast majority of care is not in traditional day care centers, but in family child care homes, with family, friends, and neighbors, or with parents themselves.

Most child care continues to be invisible in national economic accounts and in much economic development policy; but that is changing. Across the country, teams of business leaders, planners, local government officials, and child care leaders are coming together to identify problems with supply, price, and location, so that they can craft planning solutions to address those problems.

More than 70 teams have conducted economic impact studies in the past five years — many with the support of Cornell University's Linking Economic Development and Child Care Project. The January 2006 *PAS Memo* (available online to subscribers to APA's Planning Advisory Service) explains how planners can take the lead in bringing stakeholders together to effect change at the local level.

Zoning, impact fees, and the region

Planning can be part of the problem. When new housing or businesses are developed, child care is typically not on the list of critical infrastructure. Later, when child care centers begin to be built, residents oppose them for fear of the traffic and noise they might generate.

Planning is also part of the solution. In 1997, the American Planning Association published a policy guide on the provision of child care that specifically called for family child care to be exempt from zoning controls and suggested that planning take a friendlier view of child care facilities. This work grew in part from an early legislative initiative in New York State that exempted family child care from local zoning.

On the West coast, California's Local Investment in Child Care project has worked in numerous counties to craft zoning rules that do not restrict child care. The United Way in Orange County, California, has received a venture grant from the Linking Project to partner with affordable housing developers, child care organizations, and municipalities to develop inclusionary zoning ordinances for child care facilities and affordable housing.

To date, 16 cities and counties in California have established programs that assess impact fees on residential or nonresidential development or both. The cities of Palm Desert and Santa Monica are the latest to adopt impact fee ordinances to support child care facility expansion. These communities differ dramatically: The first is in the fastest growing county in the state, the other is built out. However, elsewhere in the country where development pressures are not as great, impact fees have proved infeasible.

Ellen Pratt, a planner with Windham Child Care Association in Vermont, spearheaded a statewide economic impact study that resulted in a state law passed in 2003 to amend the Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act. It requires all town plans to include child care as one of 13 goals. "This has changed the way planners view child care and encouraged new partnerships between child care advocates and planning," Pratt says. Windham Child Care Association partnered with the regional planning commission to produce a child care planning guide that highlights ways to integrate child care in municipal planning, addresses planning data needs, and discusses financing options.

Expanding the choices

Child care, like parks and schools, is important to families and can be included in new developments. An example is San Diego's City Heights Urban Village, a master planned redevelopment project that includes a Head Start center along with a school, police substation, library, recreation center, retail, housing, and other public and private uses. Many affordable housing developments across the state have incorporated child care facilities that serve residents and surrounding neighborhoods, and market-rate developments are being asked more often to help mitigate increased child care demand.

But parents are looking for a variety of services. Family child care providers are especially popular for infants. In rural areas, family child care may be the only option available. For single-family home owners, the decision to provide care in their home for other people's children is their own. But for tenants in rental units, the owner must agree. Many apartment management firms, even affordable housing developers, prevent tenants from offering family child care as a term of their lease.

Child care leaders are partnering with rental housing developers to change that. At Jardines del Monte, an affordable townhouse project in Salinas, California, all 11 homes were designed to facilitate the provision of family child care. Four units are rented to licensed family providers. This supports the economic self-sufficiency of providers as well as that of the families they serve.

Even cities that want to support the development of child care facilities may struggle with policies on allowing centers in industrial areas. Child care operators may be attracted to these zones because of lower real estate costs or a desire to provide services convenient to area businesses. Depending on the industries in question, child care is sometimes permitted with conditions addressing safety concerns.

San Diego and Sunnyvale, California, allow child care centers in these zones but require proof that no hazardous uses exist within 1,000 feet of the proposed site. The city of San Francisco used $2.7 million in redevelopment funds to construct a child care center in an office park to serve local biotechnology companies, an industry cluster critical to the city's economy. The 0.7-acre site was contributed by the office park developer as part of a development agreement.

The city's progressive child care activities, including general plan policies and a developer fee ordinance, were initiated in the late 1990s by councilmember Gene Mullin. Later, as a member of the state assembly, he introduced successful legislation for a density bonus provision for child care space built in housing developments.

Cynthia Aikman, planning and economic development program manager in Auburn, New York, has used Empire Zone tax credits to create a subsidy program for low- and moderate-income families living or working in the city's Empire Zone. She later matched these funds with dollars from Auburn's Community Development Block Grant program.

Getting there

Just as transportation enables parents to go to work, so does child care. Federal transportation funds can be used to support planning and community services, including child care at transit centers, hubs, or stations. Most working parents travel extra miles between home and work to drop off and pick up their children, but better connections decrease traffic congestion and give busy parents more time to spend at home with their children.

Some transportation agencies have supported development of transit-linked child care through provision of land and funding. California, with its relatively dense coastal cities, has been at the forefront of this effort. Child care centers were built at several Metrolink commuter rail stations in the greater Los Angeles area and downtown at Union Station. Originally developed for use by transit employees, they also serve commuters and community families.

San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit has included child care in its planning for several new stations. California's Local Investment in Child Care Project has received a federal transportation planning grant to study child care centers at or near stations, and to identify practices and conditions that support child care parents' use of transit.

Such transportation-linked developments are less common in the state's rural areas. Watsonville, in rural Santa Cruz County, built a small child care center in the ground floor of a new high-density affordable housing project (21 units on less than an acre) next to the transit center bus station. Funds from the Federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program and the California parks and recreation department were used to build the child care facility.

In Ithaca, New York, federal transportation funds were used to build a park-and-ride lot at the largest child care center so parents could drop their children and take the bus the rest of the way to work. In Auburn, Cynthia Aikman got the bus system to reroute buses to go past child care centers on the way to and from a new employer.

Disaster relief

If providing adequate affordable child care is tough under normal circumstances, imagine how much harder it gets during emergencies or disasters. Facilities eligible for federal disaster assistance include public roads and bridges, schools, hospitals, courthouses, fire stations, police stations, and power, water, sewer, wastewater treatment, communications, and emergency medical care, but not child care. We should change this before the next hurricane strikes.

Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, Mississippi State University's Early Childhood Institute did a reconnaissance of child care centers in Jackson County and determined that roughly one-fourth were destroyed and another 39 percent needed repairs. "I started approaching government officials about what they were going to do about fixing the child care centers," says Steve Renfroe of Chevron. "I talked to local government, state government, and FEMA and none of them indicated they were going to help."

Renfroe then approached Chevron officials and received the go-ahead to spend $500,000 on repairing and rebuilding child care centers in Jackson County. Recognizing that technical expertise would be as important as money, Chevron also contributed the services of experienced construction engineers and crews.

The Early Childhood Institute received over $1.5 million from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and donations from the Children's Defense Fund, We Will Rebuild '92, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and the Community Foundation of Greater Jackson. All told, Chevron and the institute rebuilt and resupplied 40 child care centers in Jackson County.

Chevron and ECI then turned their attention to neighboring Harrison and Hancock counties, where they joined with Save the Children, a nonprofit based in Westport, Connecticut, to repair and resupply 42 child care facilities. This work was funded by a $795,000 grant from Save the Children to the Help and Hope Foundation based in Jackson, Mississippi.

Help and Hope's volunteer grant administrator, Louisa Dixon, managed the contracting work on all facilities with the advice of a Chevron project manager. "We minimized the red tape and organized the work to take advantage of local contractors' availability so that we could reopen the doors as quickly as possible," says Dixon.

In November 2006, Chevron pledged an additional $2 million to Save the Children for construction of two new centers in Bay St. Louis and Waveland. Child care center owners invested over $1.6 million in insurance payouts, their savings, and countless hours of sweat equity to repair and rebuild their centers. This public-private partnership was a key to the recovery's success.

"The goal was to build back the child care infrastructure in Mississippi's Gulf Coast to a higher standard than it was before the storm," notes Cathy Grace, director of ECI. "Each child care center that participated was required to have its staff participate in professional development training before we would resupply the center. Now these rebuilt centers have new buildings, playgrounds, and educational materials and offer a higher quality care to the children than before the storm."

It's the right thing

Across the country planners and business leaders are beginning to recognize the importance of child care as a critical infrastructure for family-friendly communities. Funds traditionally focused on physical infrastructure and business development are being broadened to also focus on child care.

"I never really understood how . . . taking care of children's needs for quality child care could impact my company's bottom line and my community's economy until Katrina," says Renfroe.

Investing in child care yields triple returns — by promoting children's human development, supporting employers and parents' career trajectories, and ensuring the overall health of a community and the broader regional economy.

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Child Care Makes a Comeback along the Gulf Coast

After Hurricane Katrina, Rebecca Dickensauge, director of the Imagination Station, a child care center in Harrison County, Mississippi, returned to find the facility severely damaged.

Before the storm, Imagination Station was one of the county's largest child care centers and one of only two that offered 24-hour child care, accommodating alternative work schedules.

Save the Children committed to funding the center's reconstruction as part of its larger initiative to help restore child care throughout the region.

Today, the center's doors are open again. "I didn't know what I was going to do when I saw my center after the storm," Dickensauge says. "Seeing the kids back brings me so much happiness because I never thought we would be able to rebuild."

Resources

Images: Top — Save the Children funded the reconstruction of Imagination Station, a child care center in Harrison County. Middle and Bottom — Save the Children , Mississippi State University, and the Chevron oil company got temporary tent operations up and going after Hurricane Katrina. Photos Save the Children/Susan Warner.

Cornell University's Linking Economic Development and Child Care Project offers research and planning guides on how to measure the economic impact of child care and apply planning and economic development strategies to strengthen the sector. This project is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and is a consortium effort of the Alliance for Early Education Finance, Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research. For a complete list of reports, policy recommendations on child care, and venture grants, see http://economicdevelopment.cce.cornell.edu.

Kristen Anderson's 2006 book, *Planning for Child Care in California*, is an excellent guide on the specifics of how to incorporate child care in planning, zoning, transportation, and housing. Available from Solano Press Books: www.solano.com.

Local Investment in Child Care Project helps build an infrastructure that supports child care facilities development. See www.lincc-childcare.com.