

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Supporting childcare workers in Northwest Minnesota one town at a time 01H6CEVM36ESGS98S95N55C2X0**

INTERVIEWER: If you're a working parent, you know there is a special kind of stress that hits you right in your gut when you're searching for someone amazing to care for your kids while you're at work. Child care is a major cost for parents. Meanwhile, child care workers put in long hours for low pay.

In rural, Northwest Minnesota, a team of professionals has been working together, for the past five years, to help more people get into the child care profession and stay there. And they're seeing success. Earlier this week, I spoke with three of those leaders about child care challenges, solutions, and resources. I'll let them introduce themselves.

**MARIA STEEN:** I'm Maria Steen. I'm the director of our Child Care Connections Program at CAPLP. It's a community action agency based out of Moorhead, Minnesota. And we are a grantee, through the Department of Human Services, for Child Care Aware services. And we deliver those across 21 counties in Northwestern Minnesota.

**MISSY OKESON:** I am Missy Okeson. I am the Child Care Program lead for Northwest Minnesota Foundation. And we have 12 counties and two tribal nations that we serve, up in Northwest Minnesota.

**KIM LAGE:** Welcome. This is Kim from White Earth. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] And I am working for the White Earth Reservation Tribal Council. And I am the licenser for the tribe, for our child care programs.

**INTERVIEWER:** OK, well thank you so much for being here with me today. I want to talk about some of the great community work you have and some of the solutions you have in place, to support child care workers. But first, we should probably define the scope of the challenges and the problems. What does child care availability look like where you are?

**MISSY OKESON:** Well, I can head that off a little bit. All of us partner with First Children's Finance. And they did some work around our region, and found that we are short 3,410 child-care slots. So that starts us off at an extreme disadvantage for our small towns that are really struggling to sustain, or to even open, and then sustain centers. So we really do rely on family child-care providers in our area.

And then we have manufacturing companies in our region, as well, that are looking for staff also. And so they are offering bonuses. They're offering benefits, higher pay. Plus there's co-workers, which many of our family child-care providers don't have. So those, I think, our big three struggles.

**INTERVIEWER:** Kim?

**KIM LAGE:** Yes, it's something that I refer to as tipping the scales because we're all competing in a business of labor market here, and that we have a shortage of people applying for jobs today, in many venues. So I think the child-care world is one that has been very burdened these last couple of years.

And with the definite changes that we're seeing in this climate, it has been also hard to recruit people to come into the business because there's still the lack of information out there, that there are supports. There is funding to help a business get started. And a majority of our workers are women-- and women of color. So I hope that through the collaboration of both Maria and Missy here, in their work, is that we're making some successful strides to recruiting.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. Maria, anything to add?

**MARIA STEEN:** I do think for listeners to also understand is that the business of child care is what some people would refer to as a market-rate failure. In child care, you can't produce more widgets to increase your income. You're providing care for a set number of kids because we have standards to keep them healthy and safe.

And in order to pay people more, you can't continue to price parents out of the market. And so without some key investment in the industry-- which thankfully, I think Minnesota is taking some great strides and definitely leading the way in ways that we're working on addressing that. But for over the course of at least the last decade, we've seen a continual, steady decline in people opening up childcare.

**KIM LAGE:** And we don't want to burden the provider with requesting they take more children. As big as their hearts may be, it's also very difficult for families to find infant care because those are very limited numbers in our child cares-- hardship cases of a parent coming to me today, very passionate about going to work, being employed, being a single mother.

I have children but I have no place to take them. How am I going to get a job and keep a job if I don't have child care? And that hurts. That hurts me as licensor. And it makes me think about what is the future for these young babies too, in this world if they don't have a quality childcare because this mother, maybe, has to seek other ways to support her family or seek other ways to finding her childcare, if it isn't family there to support her.

**INTERVIEWER:** I would love to talk about some of the programs that you have in place and the solutions that you've been working on to address these big issues. Where should we start?

**MISSY OKESON:** So this is Missy with Northwest Minnesota Foundation. And our organization looked-- at about 2018, we started thinking about the child care world and how we needed to start working towards solutions. So we decided to bring together, throughout our region, early-childhood experts, just bring them together quarterly, and have conversations about what they see is working, what they see is not working, maybe just think outside the box, do some brainstorming together with people that are all in the same field, trying to figure out how we can help specific communities, those that are ready to step up and create a task force.

And then we help them with what they need. Do they need someone from Child Care Aware to come in and talk to them about what quality child care looks like? Or do they need somebody from First Children's Finance to come in and tell them, this is how big of a gap you have in your community. So if

You have a need of 200 children, or child-care slots, then maybe you start looking towards the idea of a center. Or if you have a gap of 42 children, let's start talking to people-- individuals that would like to be child care providers in their homes.

So we try to come up with a solution for each specific community that's detailed towards their specific need instead of a one solution for our entire region because rural Minnesota doesn't work that way. Each community has their own need. Maria and Kim are both part of my collaborative team. So they can speak to that as well.

**MARIA STEEN:** This is Maria. Over the last decade, the state has really focused on Parent Aware, which is our quality rating and improvement system in Minnesota. And we've had coaching services that are available. And there's extra grants for programs that choose to participate in that. And I do think we have a pretty great success rate with people who participate in Parent Aware. They're twice as likely to stay in business. And so I think that's been a great support.

And yet, I think with all of that, we would say there were still some pieces missing, and over the last year and a half or so, when the state chose to put some of the federal funding, that child care had gotten, into some very, really specific programming, to help actually target, how do we help open more child-care programs as well as try to maintain the folks who are in business, so providing some supports for that.

**MISSY OKESON:** This is Missy. Specifically, our Child Care Finance Program, that we started in 2018, is a program where if someone is looking to open their doors to become a child-care provider, they can get up to \$5,000. If they stay in business for five years, it's completely written off. It's completely forgiven. And we have found that that's been a pretty successful use of our funds.

Since 2018, up to December of 2022, we added 1,100 child-care slots to Northwest Minnesota with forgivable loans alone. And I just got the report from my coworker, that in fiscal year '23, so July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, 208,000 more dollars went out in that program alone, so just in this last year.

And I think that word is getting out now that that's available. And that's a source of-- the ability to use funds to get your license. Because sometimes you need an egress window. Or sometimes you need to fix your steps or get a fence or something just to get licensed.

And there's many people out there that would love to do that, but can't afford just that setup piece, to get licensed. So we help them get over that hump. And then they're able to open their doors. So we're starting to see some numbers change with that program.

**INTERVIEWER:** I think that's really exciting. And so we're at five years since that started. And so now, those people who have been in five years are getting those loans forgiven. Are you finding that most of the people who received those grants are still, indeed, in business?

**MISSY OKESON:** The last heard, three head backed away.

**INTERVIEWER:** Out of--

**MISSY OKESON:** From 2018 to December of 2022. That would be 110 providers. So 3 stopped.

**INTERVIEWER:** That is a fantastic success rate.

**MISSY OKESON:** I think it's not just that they're getting started with some help, but they're also getting all the supports that Maria and Kim are talking about. We don't just get them started. But then we have technical assistance. And we have First Children's Finance come in and give them training on the business side of child care. And we have Child Care Aware and Parent Aware people coming in and teaching them about quality programming. There's a lot of help that maybe wasn't there in the past.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's fantastic. And is this specifically in your region, in Northwest Minnesota? Or is this available-- this is a statewide thing?

**MISSY OKESON:** This is our region. It's Northwest Minnesota Foundation Program.

**KIM LAGE:** Yeah. And this is Kim. Just to add on to that, too, getting people involved is so key to this. But also, stressing in that is this is a profession. This is something that there's training available for. There's dollars for education, continuing education. Whether you choose to do a CDA or an early childhood degree or go on to your master's, it is all available within that realm of child care, early childhood education.

**MARIA STEEN:** This is Maria. One of the new programs I alluded to is called Wayfinder. And it's meant to be-- I believe the state legislature termed it a one-stop shop for growing and maintaining child care. And so every Child Care Aware region, across the state-- and we are in every part of the state-- was funded to have actual staff, boots on the ground folks.

They're called navigators, child care start-up and retention navigators, who can help walk people through the process of getting a child-care business started, both family child care and center-- licensed centered care.

I'm really excited about all of that's been accomplished in the state of Minnesota for early childhood. We are-- the governor and the Lieutenant Governor and the legislature just stepped up-- there was an impending fear in the field about American Rescue Plan Act, the federal ARPA dollars.

A lot of that had been invested in what was called child-care stabilization grants. And those were set to expire. That funding had been tapering off and was set to expire in June. And the state stepped up and decided they were going to commit to funding them at the level that they had been at before they tapered off. And the majority of that funding is going to supplement wages.

**INTERVIEWER:** What else has been working, that you're excited about?

**MISSY OKESON:** And this is Missy. And I was just going to say, just based on this little sampling of my collaborative team, just the three of us, how we come at such different angles-- and we all come from different parts of our region. And we all come from different professions within the child-care world. And I just feel like that collaborative has been helping.

We're now in 20-plus communities, working with task forces in just our little region, to try to develop solutions. And it just feels like we're turning a corner. And it feels pretty good.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ladies, thank you so much for your time and for your good work.

**KIM LAGE:** Thank you.

**INTERVIEWER:** That was Maria Steen, Director of Child Care Connections Program at CAPLP in Moorhead, Missy Okeson with Northwest Child Care Foundation in Bemidji, and Kim Lage, Child Care Licensor for White Earth.