

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 44: An Examination of Childcare in Iowa (Pt. 1)

(24:07; published Nov. 5, 2020)

Description: *Our guest is Ryan Page, Childcare Regulatory Program Manager and Team Lead for the Childcare Bureau under the Division of Adult, Children, and Family Services within the Iowa Department of Human Services. Ryan speaks with host Steve Adams on the status of childcare in the state—especially the effect the pandemic has had on service providers and the various resources the state provides to this critical industry.*



[music]

Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development, and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Steve Adams, host 00:54

Hi, I'm Steve Adams, field specialist three at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, part of the Community and Economic Development unit and your host for these podcasts. Today, our guest is Miss Ryan Page, Childcare Regulatory Program Manager and Team Lead for the Childcare Bureau under the Division of Adult, Children, and Family Services within the Iowa Department of Human Services, otherwise known as IDHS. This is the first in a series of podcasts dealing with childcare during the pandemic, and its effects on families, providers and the Iowa workforce. Ryan, first off, thanks for being with us today.

Ryan Page 01:37

Thanks so much for having me.

Steve Adams, host 01:39

Well hey, that's an awful lot of information to get on one business card. Do you have a double-sided business card by chance?

Ryan Page 01:44

[laughter] I don't, I don't.

Steve Adams, host 01:48

Well, it seemed like a lot of hats to wear too. So could you kind of explain what your job is with IDHS and what do your duties entail?

Ryan Page 01:58

Sure. So my primary role at the department is to oversee regulatory policy for childcare licensing and registration. That involves partnering with numerous public and private partners when developing or

implementing state and federal legislation or rules that apply to regulatory requirements for our childcare facilities. In addition, that just means being an ongoing support to our providers, working with our childcare resource and referral and other entities, and making sure that everybody's on the same page when we're working with them.

Steve Adams, host 02:31

Okay, so when the federal stimulus money came out, and I'm talking specifically about the CARES Act funding, were any of those— I know they were put in place to kind of shore up, to prop up the economy. Did you see a lot of Iowa childcare providers take advantage of that program?

Ryan Page 02:51

Yeah, so Iowa was actually awarded almost \$32 million in CARES funding that was specifically for childcare programs. So DHS has been responsible for dispersing that funding to our programs. Feedback from our childcare providers is that our funding opportunities have allowed them to remain open, and that without it that perhaps they wouldn't even be able to continue to serve families.

Steve Adams, host 03:15

So this must have been a major way then for childcare centers to stay open or at least try to hit a breakeven point, is that correct?

Ryan Page 03:23

Absolutely. We have had multiple strategies to assist our childcare providers and our low-income families utilizing childcare assistance. From April to October, a basic monthly stipend was available to all regulated childcare facilities, as well as a special add-on for those programs giving essential employees a 25% discount. We also had that rejuvenation grant that I previously mentioned. We are also extremely happy to report that we are able to continue offering the monthly stipend in November and December. And in addition to these funding opportunities, we have also allowed for unlimited absence day billing of our children on childcare assistance, something that was previously limited to four days per month. This assures that programs that rely on billing DHS for families that receive Childcare Assistance are not losing funding if children are out for extended time due to COVID-19 exposure or a positive case.

Ryan Page 04:19

So to ease burden on families on Childcare Assistance, we have also provided copay reimbursement to childcare programs, which has allowed families to keep that money in their pockets. We have also provided support to programs by assisting our childcare resource and referral partners with purchase of PP equipment and cleaning supplies. And we really do believe that this has been a helpful way to keep the doors open at Iowa's childcare facilities. Early in the pandemic we saw peak closures of 65% of our licensed childcare centers. And at this point we have less than 5% that are remaining closed, that I can also tell you about here in a little while.

Steve Adams, host 04:59

OK, so I guess in your opinion, and I'm strictly asking for that opinion, what does long-term sustainability look like for childcare providers once these financial support programs run out of money? And is there anything you can do to help after that point?

Ryan Page 05:17

Yeah, you know, long term, I do think it remains to be seen. We know that childcare can be really expensive for families, we have business models that are changing, and the need for childcare shifted and will continue to shift. Nationally, we know that there's concern that upwards of 40% of providers

are closed. So it is extremely important that we continue to think about how any of our short-term fixes will impact long-term sustainability for our programs.

Steve Adams, host 05:49

Well, how would you say then that the pandemic, due to school closures, remote learning or parents forced to work from home, how has that impacted the number of children needing childcare, and do you consider that number to be significant?

Ryan Page 06:04

Yeah, so early on, we did see many parents staying home, really reducing the need for childcare early on. Our agency quickly developed an opportunity for our communities to stand up what we were calling temporary emergency childcare sites to assure that childcare for children with parents considered essential employees, such as medical providers, critical government, infrastructure and first responders, could be accessed. We had strict social distancing guidelines early on and the unknowns of the pandemic, really reducing that need for childcare.

Ryan Page 06:37

What's important to know is that often, Iowa often ranks number one in the nation for parents in the workforce. 75% of all children under the age of six in Iowa have all available parents in the workforce, and the national average is only 65%. So we know that Iowa is hard-working and our families are getting back to work. As that's occurred, we do begin to see an increased need, and as our school districts develop their own individual plans for return to learn models, whether that be in person full-time, remote learning, or a hybrid combination of both, we have seen that that's impacted the need for childcare differently in each of our communities.

Ryan Page 07:16

It's also important to note that childcare typically covers infant to age 12, meaning that we have children that need full childcare, and others that might only need it before and after school. And as I previously had mentioned, how COVID-19 has affected business models and policies, employee work requirements, student learning in the long term, it really does remain to be seen, as we know that there are so many variables that can influence a family's decision on whether to utilize childcare services or not.

Steve Adams, host 07:47

Well I know, for example, in some recent focus group work that Iowa State University did for Early Childcare Iowa, and we did those focus groups with both parents and providers. It was pretty apparent and evident that parents, even pre-pandemic, were having trouble finding childcare, especially in the rural areas, and that providers were not only getting older, but they were having troubles getting certified or maintaining the necessary CPUs to remain in that certification program. Are you noticing some of those same things going on? And now we're talking pre-pandemic and post-pandemic here, Ryan.

Ryan Page 08:28

Yeah, Iowa's educational requirements for childcare do include initial training that is required by federal regulation. There are a series of federally required content areas of professional development. And in response, Iowa developed the 12-hour pre-service orientation training that we kind of call essentials. So we offer that at no cost to the participant, but it is 12 hours. So additionally, we require first aid, CPR, mandatory child abuse reporter training. These are also required by federal regulations, and our ongoing professional development is determined by an individual's role in a childcare program. However, this does not exceed 12 hours per year.

Ryan Page 09:16

So we do allow our trainings to be in person or in an online format, they're often free of charge. And actually, we do not require CPUs to be involved in childcare in Iowa. It is certainly true that access to childcare, particularly in rural communities can be difficult. And we know that it's financially harder to have a sustainable business model in areas where there is a reduced need. We typically see family friend and neighbor care in these areas. And Iowa does allow people to care for five or less children without a childcare registration or license, meaning that there are numerous informal supports that the DHS simply does not have record of.

Ryan Page 09:56

We do have partnerships with Iowa Childcare Resource and Referral and with the Iowa Women's Foundation, and they have recently developed a coaching, mentoring and best practices workshop called Childcare Ready, and that is to help prepare childcare providers to serve children and families in their communities. And this includes the effort specifically to build up family childcare providers in more rural communities, which is often a much more sustainable business model.

Steve Adams, host 10:23

Understood. So how many childcare closures have you noticed since the start of the pandemic and hasn't COVID-19 just kind of exacerbated the entire situation?

Ryan Page 10:37

Sure, childcare is often fluid in operations and has been more so due to the pandemic. We have had some closures of family childcare homes and licensed childcare centers. But our rejuvenation grants have provided funding support for programs to safely reopen. Overall, our numbers of total childcare providers and slots available have remained relatively stable. It's important to note that some of our licensed childcare centers are operated in school districts, and due to return to learn plans, they're aligning their own reopening plans with their district.

Steve Adams, host 11:10

So have we hit the peak percentage do you think of licensed childcare closures, or is this just the tip of the iceberg?

Ryan Page 11:17

Yes, we saw our peak in April and our programs continued to open every week, we had a peak closure of about 65% of our childcare centers being closed back in April. But we are now under 5%. And what we recently found out is there was a study conducted by Yale researchers that found that childcare programs that remained open throughout the pandemic did not contribute to the spread of the virus. So specifically, exposure to childcare was not associated with an elevated risk of spreading COVID-19 from children to adults and communities where spread was contained, provided that the childcare program took multiple safety measures such as disinfecting hand washing, screening for symptoms, mask wearing, all of those good things. But that study has really helped identify that we are doing everything that we can in the safest way possible, and that we're not contributing to community spread.

Steve Adams, host 12:17

You mentioned those safety guidelines. Are you working with the Iowa Department of Public Health to help keep those risks at a minimum? And are you asking these providers to go above and beyond what the CDC is recommending at this time?

Ryan Page 12:34

So DHS regularly works with our Iowa Department of Public Health to review CDC guidance and then develop those recommended guidelines for our childcare facilities. The Department of Public Health also houses Healthy Childcare Iowa, which is a program that offers childcare nurse consultants directly to programs. We've had a long-standing strong relationship with Healthy Childcare Iowa, and it's really been instrumental in our success to providing consistent guidance to programs. Additionally, the director of DHS, Kelly Garcia, is currently the Interim Director of the Department of Public Health, which is allowing for even more intentional conversations on how to effectively collaborate across agencies.

Steve Adams, host 13:17

Well, good. We now know about IDPH and their role, and it's nice to have an interim director that you're sharing with them, but are there other partners and collaborators you're working with? And who's kind of coordinating this kind of multi-prong approach?

Ryan Page 13:34

Absolutely. One of the best things I can say is that we have such strong partners with a variety of stakeholders. We have Early Childhood Iowa partners, they are operated out of the Department of Management, and that really brings together so many of us to cross-collaborate on an almost daily basis. Sometimes we've had, we've been successful with our support programs because of our relationships, you know, with public health and those nurse consultants I just previously mentioned, but also Childcare Resource and Referral, providing technical assistance to our providers and working with us daily, often with very quick turnaround times.

Ryan Page 14:13

I also work with the Iowa After School Alliance, and that allows me to understand the impact on providers that serve predominantly school-aged children. Our cross-sector collaboration with multiple stakeholders has made working through a pandemic a success. We have partnered even with distilleries for making hand sanitizer, Iowa National Guard for distribution of that hand sanitizer. And we also can't ignore the importance of feedback that we receive from our provider community. We make sure to survey out and know that what we're doing is helping and working, and I talk with providers directly almost every day.

Steve Adams, host 14:53

Well, you mentioned the Iowa Childcare Resource and Referral office, and that partnership. Why is that so significant?

Ryan Page 15:04

Yeah, so we contract with Iowa Childcare Resource and Referral to provide a number of services. Particularly in the pandemic, they have done a lot of purchasing and distribution of PP equipment. And so those masks and cleaning supplies, and you know, the little booties, if you need to wear those, monitors for doing temperature checks, so they're doing a lot of purchasing and helping our providers access that stuff. They also provide, typically it would be in-person consultation, to programs, looking to meet minimum regulatory expectations, but also quality standards. And they have moved to virtual consultation.

Ryan Page 15:47

So they have not stopped providing those supports, they do virtual trainings, they have posted lots of peer to peer meetings via Zoom, or another virtual platform, often times with special guests, including myself or other people from other state departments or private partners that can do anything to offer support. And they really are such a strong conduit of sharing information from providers directly to us at DHS so that we know how best to support them. And then we utilize them for communication

standards, like emailing out some of the mass communication that we need to do to provide updated guidance or information on financial support to our providers.

Steve Adams, host 16:39

So I'm getting a kind of a pattern here about this consistent messaging that has to occur in order to get the most up to date information out to the general public. Do you find that effort sometimes to be just a bit daunting?

Ryan Page 16:59

Yeah, you know, I think that that is a great question and possibly a good way to describe it, too. We are constantly working to assure that our guidance developed in partnership with public health is up to date with CDC guidance, and then having that communicated timely to providers through a variety of mechanisms. We know that people need to get information in multiple ways. And as I had mentioned previously, you know, we've surveyed those providers to follow up on understanding how we have or have not assisted them, particularly with funding opportunities. And we have also hosted phone calls, webinars, with both our public and private partners to see what's happening. So yeah, there's just a lot of players, and a lot of information that needs to go out in a timely and consistent manner. And sometimes it's just putting all of the pieces of the puzzle in to kind of work simultaneously.

Steve Adams, host 17:58

I see by your website that you have a COVID-19 resource page, which I think everybody's starting to arm themselves with that. Have you seen a significant amount of activity on that side? And have you had an uptick in call volume and frequently asked questions from parents and providers?

Ryan Page 18:16

Sure, so we did develop that resource page and we, you know, keep it up to date as things change. I had it looked at and we've had 400 unique hits to that page specific to childcare services. And you know, even when we are not in the middle of a pandemic, we get a lot of questions when we change something, right. So our childcare providers have often talked directly with their licensing consultants or compliance staff. Those are the people that go out and do inspections. And then we have our CCR&R, our childcare nurse consultants. And then we also developed a separate email box even, where providers can reach out and ask questions directly, typically regarding funding support. So we also know that, you know, we didn't hire any additional staff and so we are often a one-man team. And you know, the people that are answering that, can we help email box is typically somebody from my bureau.

Steve Adams, host 19:19

Again, I used the word daunting, it sounds a little overwhelming to be quite honest with you.

Ryan Page 19:25

Yeah, no, I think overwhelming is maybe a good word, but we have definitely found our groove. So everything that we have been able to implement has, I can't say it's gone without a hitch, but it's definitely gone about as well as could be expected. And we're doing pretty well with it now.

Steve Adams, host 19:44

Yeah, we had a guest on previously that I think described what they were doing as orchestrated chaos, which I thought was pretty appropriate. Well at a statewide listening tour, Vice President of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Dr. John Lawrence heard from constituents and employees alike, that childcare was one of the top five priorities for lowans. Do you agree with that and why?

Ryan Page 20:11

Absolutely. We have seen momentum over the last several years regarding access to safe and high-quality childcare at both the state and the national level. Childcare has been identified as a workforce behind the workforce. It's regularly featured in national news articles, it's recognized as an economic driver. And the pandemic has showcased the importance of access to childcare to keep an economy up and running. And in addition, people are gaining an increase in awareness to the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences and quality out-of-school time opportunities, and how that impacts childhood brain development, school readiness, and even later crime prevention.

Steve Adams, host 20:54

Okay, Ryan, it's crystal ball time, I'm gonna put you on the spot a little bit here. What is your forecast for childcare in Iowa, short-, mid- and long-term.

Ryan Page 21:07

So, childcare is not an easy business and it's not extremely lucrative. With reduced enrollments and extra expenses, we continue to prop up our childcare workforce as much as we can with the funding supports that we have. However, we know that it is so much more than that. At this time, we don't know if additional federal funding supports will come. But DHS certainly stands ready to quickly implement any strategies to continue supporting our providers as long as we can. And as I mentioned earlier, I think long-term it really remains to be seen. Childcare is expensive, business models are changing and the needs will shift. And we're going to have to see how...we're going to need to be careful about the decisions that we make today and how those do affect us long-term.

Steve Adams, host 21:58

Ryan, all I can say is what a very special pleasure it is to have you with us as our guest today. And a special thank you, I mean this from the bottom of my heart, thank you for all you're doing to keep Iowa a very special place, especially for our children. Say, if someone wanted to get a hold of you and inquire about resources or assistance that might be available to them, what's the best way for them to reach out to you, Ryan?

Ryan Page 22:23

You know, I am easily accessible via email. So I will give you my personal email address at the department. It is rpage@dhs.state.ia.us.

Steve Adams, host 22:39

Very easy and very simple. And please do take advantage of that offer. So, Ryan, thanks again for being our guest today.

Ryan Page 22:48

Thank you very much for having me.

Steve Adams, host 22:49

You bet. As a reminder, this is the first in a series of three podcasts directly related to childcare and its impacts on working Iowa families, so stay tuned for more, folks. If you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, at stadams@iastate.edu, and thank you again for listening. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the Small Business Development Centers of Iowa. We are always serving Iowans, hashtag strong Iowa. Folks, our justice statement is as follows. This institution is an equal-opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, please go to www.extension.state.edu/diversity/ext. Hey, we'll see you all next time on Back to Business Iowa. Again, thanks for listening.

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