

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

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

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 45: An Examination of Childcare in Iowa, Pt. 2

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Description: *Today's guest is Jillian Herink, executive director of the Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children, a non-profit organization which promotes high-quality education for children from birth to age 8 by connecting practice, policy and research. Ms. Herink connects the importance of quality childcare with creating and sustaining a healthy economy in Iowa.*

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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

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 Jillian Herink, executive director of the Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children. This is the second in a series of podcasts dealing with childcare during the pandemic and its effects on families, providers and the Iowa workforce. Jillian, thanks for being with us here today.

Jillian Herink 01:26

Yes, thank you, Steve, for the invitation and the opportunity.

Steve Adams, host 01:31

Jillian, could you explain a little bit to our listeners what the Iowa Association for Education of Young Children does, and what its mission is?

Jillian Herink 01:40

Absolutely. First of all, Iowa AEYC is a membership organization, and we are tied to the federal or the national organization, which is National Association for the Education of Young Children. And our overarch is that we support efforts to improve teaching and learning. Our mission is to promote high quality early learning for all children, birth through eight by connecting practice, policy and research. We advance a diverse dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for and educate and work on behalf of young children.

Jillian Herink 02:15

So our vision is that all young children thrive and learn in a society dedicated to ensuring that they reach their full potential. So because we're a membership organization, we reach out across the state in a chapter structure. And we try to promote professional development for the field of childcare providers



and early childhood educators. Also in our efforts, we work to promote a well-qualified and fairly compensated and stable workforce.

Jillian Herink 02:49

We do that with a couple of our main programs. One is TEACH, which means Teacher Education And Compensation Helps program, which is a scholarship program. The other one is WAGE\$, which is a salary supplement program, providing stipends to those that work in early childhood based on their level of education. And then we have several other programs underneath our umbrella that work to improve teaching and learning across the state and outcomes for children.

Steve Adams, host 03:20

Outstanding. I know in some of the work I've done in early childcare, too, that it seems like providers have a hard time sometimes breaking away for that continuing education programs and things that like you offer. I know that you've tried to work and be as amenable as possible to those providers, even providing some online and some weekend type opportunities, isn't that correct?

Jillian Herink 03:49

Yes, certainly this year, for our fall early care and education conference, we certainly changed it to virtual and offered some night and weekend opportunities. Generally, that's a two-day all-day in-person event, but we needed to be responsive to the pandemic as well as to the needs of those providing care across the state.

Steve Adams, host 04:12

So Jillian, could you tell us a little bit about your duties and responsibilities as executive director of this organization?

Jillian Herink 04:19

Absolutely. I always say that my first primary responsibility is to stay out of the way of my staff, to make sure they have the tools to do their job and that I'm not preventing them from doing it. So I work with my management team and board, of course, to fulfill the mission of the agency and the requirements of the grants from our funding partners. And I work to keep us fiscally sound, including grant-seeking and fundraising. But the other aspect to what I do is just what we were talking about earlier, and that is to support our membership, really by reacting to their needs, which are ever-changing as the field changes or things in the state happen, you know, just like our COVID-19 pandemic.

Jillian Herink 05:04

But some of that support includes the professional development, but also connecting providers and early childhood educators to resources. And certainly during some of these times, providing them a mechanism for their connectedness as well. And then the last thing that I really have to do is, I work on partnering and connecting to statewide organizations and efforts and also connecting to federal efforts, including advocacy work.

Steve Adams, host 05:35

You mentioned your staff, do you have a fair number of people working with you and for you?

Jillian Herink 05:39

I do, we have three managers, and then they are part of a 21-member staff. So we have several different programs in our house and different groups that work on, you know, all different efforts supporting early childhood in the workforce. But we all have different areas of expertise, but do a lot of overlapping and partnering within the agency and programs as well.

Steve Adams, host 06:06

Jillian, with childcare being a key component in not only childhood development but also in Iowa's ability to work away from home, how have you seen things change, let's just say, pre-pandemic versus where we are now.

Jillian Herink 06:22

Well, pre-pandemic, we were already suffering from a childcare crisis in Iowa. But the things that we knew were what children were in our programs, how often they were coming, parents had the stability of their positions and their schedules. Post-pandemic, or in the middle of it now, we have so many unknowns for families, childcare providers, and for employers. We have daily changing health and safety standards, and we have parents with fluctuating hours or needing to stay home for different things for their children for their schooling. And so it's really introduced so many unknowns into the childcare field that is hard for them to predict their incomes, their schedules, and their expenses.

Steve Adams, host 07:08

We touched a little bit on this, but why have families, businesses and schools relied on childcare more than ever during this pandemic?

Jillian Herink 07:18

Certainly. As I mentioned earlier, some of the unknowns and flexibilities and ever-changing schedules, but we also now have childcare providers often responsible for school-agers that were never serving those children before. And so they're often juggling several different school district schedules. They might have to be monitoring, online learning. And then also the families need them to be available and to have healthy environments for their children and to protect their health more than ever.

Steve Adams, host 07:53

Jillian, how essential would you say is Iowa's economic recovery and its dependence on the health and long term sustainability of the childcare industry?

Jillian Herink 08:03

We know that prior to the pandemic, Iowa touted the lowest unemployment rate in the nation, and also simultaneously had the highest percentage of working parents for children under six. So we know that Iowa's recovery in the childcare industry is essential for people to get back to work and for parents to feel assured and be able to enter the workforce again.

Steve Adams, host 08:29

You mentioned a little bit earlier, Jillian, that partnerships are going to be critical of the childcare recovery process in Iowa. Who do you see as being essential partners going forward?

Jillian Herink 08:42

I really think that the partnership to support childcare has to broaden. We have had a huge amount of interest lately from businesses, knowing that they can't attract or retain quality employees without quality childcare. We also need to partner with all of our churches, who have often run childcare within their parish or within their systems. We need to partner with school districts. It's more important than ever for center childcare and family childcare to partner with all the departments across the state. So not only our typical Health and Human Services, but Workforce Development, Early Childhood Iowa and Department of Education. And we absolutely and central to the discussion are partnering with our families and those providers themselves.

Steve Adams, host 09:34

That certainly is understood, I think all those people need to be players as we go through this. Well, this pandemic has certainly brought on lots of stressors, but what kind of a special stress are childcare providers going through today? Are there any best practices or steps they can take that to fight kind of this environment of uncertainty?

Jillian Herink 09:58

Yeah, I think that the best tip that I have heard among the providers that helped them deal with all of this is really finding a place to connect to other providers and to get that network of support. We as an agency have tried to provide those mechanisms, but so has other agencies, Health and Human Services, Childcare Resource and Referral, just to give people a network to talk about what they're doing, whether it's health and safety standards, whether it's their funding, how they're handling their opening and closures with outbreaks and things like that. It's just more critical than ever for us to reach out and expand communication and support for childcare as an industry.

Steve Adams, host 10:44

That support system I think would be critical. I'm also not sure that all of our listeners are aware of this, but isn't it true that childcare workers earn an income that's considered to be in the bottom 3%?

Jillian Herink 10:58

Yes, it is true. And at the same time, out of our agency we conducted a workforce study back in 2016 and early childhood teachers at that time earned between \$9 and \$13 an hour, and it really has not changed. And childcare directors were under \$20 an hour. On top of that, most of those folks working in early childhood are not receiving benefits. They're not getting paid sick leave or paid vacation. They might not have insurance, or any employer-paid insurance. And so it even adds to those low income state wages that they're earning. Health care providers and child development workforce wasn't even included in the Future Ready Iowa plans because they didn't meet the threshold of a viable occupation, which was \$16 an hour.

Steve Adams, host 11:58

Well, that's just crazy. Is there anything we can and are there things we must do to combat maybe this income disparity we see here with childcare workers?

Jillian Herink 12:08

I really think we need to move away from people saying, Oh, you need to run your childcare business better. Childcare costs more to provide than parents can afford to pay. And so we need to look at it like structure. It's something needed for our society to operate and for our economy to recover. We need to adequately fund childcare. And I realize that that might mean more federal and state spending, and some people don't like the idea of increases there. But it also leads to lowering expenses and other services. We know that quality childcare has been tied to lowering dropout in high school, lowering expulsion rates, that it has lowered health risks in many different areas, and incarceration rates. And then it also creates a workforce, early childhood, quality early childhood, creates a workforce that eventually as an adult needs less support.

Steve Adams, host 13:13

Well, I'm glad to hear you bring that point up about infrastructure. Senator Elizabeth Warren, as I remember right, not more than maybe a month, month and a half ago said that childcare needed to be a serious part of the nation's infrastructure program. I assume you agree with that?

Jillian Herink 13:30

I do. And I think you know, I'm not saying that I agree with all of her plans and things like that. I'm certainly not an economist. But I do think that we have to move away from the cost of childcare relying

on a family to pay it. Childcare is about the same as one year of college for one child and there's not college loans for childcare. And people can't afford to pay it. But we need those folks in the workforce. And often people are going to work to make just a little bit above what they pay for childcare, but that little bit keeps their families sustainable.

Steve Adams, host 14:07

Well, Jillian, I think most people understand that, certainly all the research supports this. But the fact is that early childhood education is essential to brain development. But isn't there also an economic impact? And I think you touched a little bit on that.

Jillian Herink 14:22

Yeah. And really the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation put out some really good reports. Back in February they unveiled one that is titled Untapped Potential. And within that report, Iowa specifically, they stated that childcare issues result in a total estimated \$935 million annual loss for Iowa's economy, and that the state misses out on an estimated \$153 million on tax revenue due to childcare issues. And they went further in this state and it's not always an economic issue, but if you think about turnover of your staff and employees, that absences and employee turnover, estimated another \$781 million of expenses per year.

Steve Adams, host 15:11

Well therein kinda lies the economic conundrum or the catch 22, if you will—childcare and early childhood development is a central issue, but no one seems to be willing to pay for it. You talked about, you know, more federal subsidies perhaps to support that. And I was astounded to hear you just say that the cost of childcare for one child for the year was the same year as the cost of a college education for one year, that just kind of blows my mind. But is there an answer, is there a solution to that dilemma? I know, I'm asking you things here you probably don't feel like you can answer correctly. But just kind of give me your thoughts on that a little bit.

Jillian Herink 15:51

Yeah, I do think that there's some things that we can look at. I think it's a mix of funding, local, state federal funding, and also those partnerships that I spoke about. I think that there are things that we can do more efficiently to create funding streams or to channel funding. What I don't think can continue is that childcare providers should continue to make poverty wages. They end up costing us more, if they're relying on assistance and things like that, as well. And they have a lot of responsibility to provide the health and the education for our youngest Iowans.

Steve Adams, host 16:29

Well, in this perfect storm of income in the childcare industry at the bottom 3%, parents out there who do not earn enough to pay for childcare, and really a lack of childcare centers or home providers available, what's the outlook going forward? And I'm, you know, not even in this pandemic environment, because as you mentioned, pre-pandemic there were some shortages going on inside the childcare industry. So what do you think going forward? What's it look like to you?

Jillian Herink 16:59

I actually think that the outlook going forward is very optimistic. There was a Selzer poll done in 2019 asking which issues were most important to Iowa voters, and that was June of 2019. And the poll revealed that 80% of Iowa voters believe that improving the health, education and well-being of children was a high priority for the presidential candidates. And so moving forward, I think that Iowans and also others across the nation really feel like investing in our children is important. I think that our businesses know it's important, and they also are needing the support for their employees. And so I'm

optimistic that these things have just kind of fueled it, and it's up in conversation on a daily basis, and that we'll find some solutions to the workforce compensation and also the quality of early childhood.

Steve Adams, host 17:59

Well, myself having been involved with early childhood in daycare centers across the last 25 years, is there a perfect business model out there in the childcare industry? Or as we used to say, in some of the daycares and childcares I worked with, hey, a win is breakeven. But do we have to operate at a loss or is breakeven the best you can expect? Or, again, what are your thoughts on that?

Jillian Herink 18:26

I don't think we have to operate at a loss, and I certainly don't think we need to maintain our breakeven mentality. What that perfect model is, I don't know. I do know that the Department of Defense on their military bases has a model that boasts high-quality available childcare, that it's accessible for our military folks, because it's been a necessity. And I think it goes back to funding partnerships, communication and working effectively, to provide that. One of the things that we hear a lot is, well, you need to run your childcare center like a business. Well, a business has a profit margin, and childcare is run differently in that we need to pay people well, but it's really not that industry that's looking for a huge profit. So I think just we have to shift in some of our mentality.

Steve Adams, host 19:19

I think a lot of people that get involved with childcare have a real passion for it. And that certainly shows through I think, with a lot of these professionals and paraprofessionals that work in that field. Jillian, I tell you, you've been a wonderful and wonderfully informative guest today, and I do appreciate all your insights and thoughts on this. If I wanted to reach out to inquire about resources or assistance that you had available, what would be the best way for me to get ahold of you?

Jillian Herink 19:47

I think info [at] iowaAEYC.org is fine or you can reach me at my personal email which is jherink@iowaAEYC.org.

Steve Adams, host 20:00

Terrific. Jillian, thanks again for being our guest today.

Jillian Herink 20:04

I appreciate the opportunity and thank you as well.

Steve Adams, host 20:08

As a reminder to our listeners, this is the second in a series of three podcasts directly related to childcare and its impacts on working Iowa families. Please stay tuned for our next podcast on childcare. Well, if you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, stadams@iastate.edu, and thank you for listening.

Steve Adams, host 20:36

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