

Over the past several months, I have heard of many communities losing their childcare. Unfortunately, I hear about this only after the childcare center announces that it is closing. If you own a childcare center or any type of business and are thinking about closing in the next six months or even in the next 5 years, my contact information is at the bottom of this column, call me. Let me look for solutions that work for you and your community.

I've been attending some meetings and learning about childcare issues over the past year. Some of the issues have solutions, and some do not. It seems that one issue that I hear over and over again is the availability of workers. Did you know that to be a childcare worker you need to be fingerprinted and approved by the state? Sometimes you must travel to a State Patrol facility in order to get fingerprinted. It can take more than a month in many cases to get approval to work, after you've been hired. A childcare worker is not allowed to work while their fingerprints are being processed. Can you imagine another job where you couldn't work for a month after you were hired? Also, you have to be fingerprinted again if you choose to work in the daycare across the street, the permission to work is not transferrable. This issue is one of the many reasons why it is difficult to fill positions in day care centers.

Another reason is wages, this may be a touchy subject. Childcare jobs are lower paid positions in our society. As minimum wage rates increase, the cost of childcare also must increase to ensure that the childcare provider pay stays above minimum wage. This increase in costs is passed on to the parents. There is a point where some parents decide that it is in their best financial interests to have one or the other stay home to take care of their own kids. This is a double financial problem for the community. First it takes a child or two out of the daycare, which possibly eliminates one job, and then you lose one potential employee in the local workforce. Unfortunately, as people move their children out of childcare centers, there is less demand for childcare, and at some point in time, you don't have enough children to make a child care center sustainable. What can we do?

This problem is not any different than many of the problems we face in rural Nebraska. As our populations decrease, demands for goods and services also decrease, which lead to fewer stores and fewer jobs. Possible solutions include regional day care centers perhaps for the entire county. Be supportive of

your local day cares, perhaps volunteer to work at one where your children attend. If there is a lack of day cares, perhaps two families work together to provide childcare for each other. A longer-term solution is to create a community where young families want to live, be a welcoming community, welcome outsiders, and increase the population. An increasing population increases demand for all services.

If your community could benefit from any of the Rural Prosperity Nebraska ideas that I've discussed in this column, please reach out to me. I'd love to speak to your community about these topics. You can reach me at jason.tuller@unl.edu or at the Thayer County office at 402-768-7212.

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