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Child care often a labor of love



The Herald-Sun | Christine T. Nguyen

Teacher assistant Renita Harvey listens as Victoria Farrar, 5 (far left), makes up a story based on pictures from a book on Thursday at Triangle Day Care Center. Also pictured is Iyana Davenport, 5 (second from left), and Kellyn Stallings, 5 (right). What started as a side job for Harvey turned into a career in caring for children.

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DURHAM — When Renita Harvey got a job at Triangle Day Care seven years ago, she learned that she enjoyed helping children. And as an assistant teacher in a More at Four classroom, she encounters plenty of children who seem to need help.

“You may have a child that doesn’t have another child to play with, so all weekend, nobody’s talked to him,” the 31-year-old said. “You make a difference.”

It’s not possible to know for sure, she concedes. But some children seem like they don’t get

hugs or even nutritious meals when they're not at her center.

Of course, those are exactly the children that More at Four is meant to help. The state-sponsored program was designed for children at risk of struggling in school. Risk factors include poverty, limited English proficiency, disability, a chronic health problem or an identified developmental or educational problem. Children of active-duty military personnel are also eligible for More at Four; priority is given to youngsters who have not been served by other preschool or child-care programs.

"In the beginning of the school year, a lot of those children have never been to day care. ... They have never been with anybody," Harvey said. "So they may come in the first day fighting, because they don't know. But then, by the end of the week, they're comfortable learning. They go home and they tell their parents, 'Look what I did today in school! Look what I did, look what I did! This is my room.' That makes me feel good."

Harvey is a North Carolina Central University dropout who worked factory and retail jobs before turning to child care. Initially, it was just a way to pay her bills. Since then, it has become a passion, a career in which what she does has positive effects that she can see.

Educating educators

Now, in many ways, Harvey is a model for how local officials are trying to remake the face of child care. She has taken advantage of two programs administered locally by the Child Care Services Association that are aimed at enhancing and professionalizing Durham's child-care work force.

Last month, Harvey graduated from Durham Technical Community College with an associate's degree in early childhood education. The association's Teach program — the name is an acronym for Teacher Education and Compensation Helps — covered some of Harvey's tuition costs and resulted in extra pay when she finished the degree. The Wage\$ program also supplemented Harvey's salary with twice-yearly payments. Her Wage\$ stipends, which are linked to enrolling in and completing early childhood courses, started off at a few hundred dollars when she started attending Durham Tech about five years ago, and will amount to \$1,000 annually now that she has her diploma.

Low pay, no benefits

In some ways, however, Harvey's story is a cautionary tale about the obstacles to improving the quality of child care in Durham County. To make ends meet, even with the association salary supplements, Harvey works part time at a second child-care program. "I manage to get by on my salary with the part-time job, but many people in my line of work are not quite so fortunate," she wrote in an e-mail.

Harvey's job doesn't provide health insurance or retirement benefits, either. "I would love to be able to go to the doctor when I'm sick," she said. "But I don't; we don't have that here."

Harvey is not alone. A study conducted last year by the Child Care Services Association found that just 28 percent of Durham's child care centers offer retirement benefits. Less than two-thirds — 61 percent — offer some kind of health insurance. And about 40 percent of Durham child care workers received some type of public assistance between 2006 and 2009.

Teach and Wage\$ may have helped increase the level of education among local child care workers, the association's survey suggested. In 2003, 27 percent of in-home child-care

providers and 34 percent of teachers and assistants had earned an associate's degree or higher in some field. Last year, 38 percent and 45 percent, respectively, held degrees.

But the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a federal agency, reported in May 2009 that local preschool teachers averaged salaries of about \$25,000. Family child-care workers were earning close to \$20,000. By contrast, general office clerks made \$29,000 and elementary school teachers — who typically earn less than middle or high school instructors — were paid \$45,000 a year. (The bureau's figures covered Durham, Orange, Chatham and Person counties.)

Last year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers reported that the average starting salary for new graduates with sociology degrees was more than \$33,000.

So while on the one hand, advocates for early childhood education want to raise the education level of the work force, college graduates can earn more in other fields. Therefore it's not surprising that the 2009 work force survey found that about a fifth of all child-care teachers planned to leave the field within three years. (By comparison, in 2003, 30 percent planned to leave by 2006.)

Sticker shock

That's not the only quandary facing advocates. Quality child care — the kind that they say can help children succeed for years to come — is expensive and difficult to find. In fact, even lower quality child care can be hard to locate and hard to afford.

"A lot of times, when people are planning families, they always talk about, 'Oh, I've got to save for college,'" said Linda Chappel, senior vice president of the Child Care Services Association. "But they are shocked when they are faced with child-care costs because the average cost of care is quite high."

It's more expensive, she notes, than many state colleges. The average cost of attending a four-year public university this year was just over \$7,000, according to the College Board. Last year, the average cost of placing a North Carolina infant in a center full-time was nearly \$8,150, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies found. Locally, the average price is now close to \$9,500 a year. For a Durham child-care center with a five-star rating — the highest awarded by state regulators, and a rating associated with workers being better educated and receiving better pay and benefits — the yearly cost can exceed \$14,000.

The state and federal governments do provide child-care subsidies to families. The income cap for this program, at about \$35,000 annual household income, is the most generous administered by the Department of Social Services, said Sharon Hirsch, an assistant director with that agency. Subsidy recipients can get significant savings, but they don't get free rides. They're still required to pay about 10 percent of their annual income.

This spring, only about 29 percent of Durham children ages 0 to 11 who were eligible to get subsidies were receiving them. But the county doesn't have enough funding to cover everyone who meets the criteria. When applications from too many eligible families came in this spring, county social services administrators had to start a waiting list. About 760 children are now on the two-month-old list, of whom 553 are younger than 6.

Durham's Partnership for Children, which coordinates many of the early childhood care activities here, estimates that there are about 16,000 children in the county under the age of 6 who live in households with a single parent who works or two parents who work. Another 9,000 Durham children in that age group live with one or more parents or

guardians who do not work. About 6,700 Durham under-6ers are enrolled in licensed local family child-care homes or child-care centers, and some 600 additional 4-year-olds attend state or federally funded preschool. Operation Breakthrough's Head Start program, which is also federally funded, and which makes a variety of social services available to the families it serves, accommodates about 460 additional preschoolers.

But that still leaves more than 17,000 youngsters who are cared for by relatives or neighbors, either by choice or out of necessity.

Since Durham is a county where close to 60 percent of school-age children are deemed eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a commonly used poverty measure in education circles, the numbers suggest that many of the preschoolers in poor families who aren't being cared for professionally will be at risk. In other words, there are significant gaps when it comes to providing quality child care for that at-risk group.

There are some efforts under way that will expand local agencies' capacity to serve impoverished youngsters. But there is no comprehensive plan for covering all at-risk children, as Tuesday's story will show.