



## **Child Care Shortage Stunts Quality Community Development**

**By Marc Homer, Kids Count Coordinator, Wyoming Children's Action Alliance**

Wyoming families are challenged to find child care solutions in an economic climate that often demands that all available parents join the workforce. To improve the quality of life in Wyoming and enhance prospects for sustainable and diversified economic development, it is critical for children to have equal access to high quality early care and education.

To help put the child care shortage in perspective, imagine UW's War Memorial Stadium filled to capacity with an additional 7,713 on the field—40,293 kids. This is the Wyoming KIDS COUNT estimate of children who use or would potentially use child care services if it were available, representing 48% of all children age 0-12. The problem is that there are only 17,565 "seats" available for all these kids, roughly half the stadium.

The most critical shortage of licensed care is for children ranging in age from 0-24 months. In 2006, there were a maximum of 2257 licensed slots for as many as 6478 children competing for these slots. There is also a very short supply of child care slots for kids age 6-12, with only 2803 slots for an estimated 21,500 children.

Compounding the problem is the lack of extended hour care, a problem that impacts parents and employers alike. Many parents must work multiple shifts or overtime just to make ends meet, juggling schedules that require them to work late nights, early mornings, weekends, and holidays. Most Wyoming communities have no capacity or virtually no capacity to meet the need for extended hours care.

The child care shortage is a challenge for every Wyoming County, ranging from an 82% shortfall in Sweetwater County to a 50% shortfall in Albany County. Stunned by these numbers, I picked up the phone and dialed every licensed child care providers in Rock Springs—all 21 of them. My story was that I needed half day care for a 20 month old girl and after school care for a 7 year old boy. When pressed, I told providers that I was considering moving to Rock Springs in a month. The results of my informal survey would be discouraging for a family thinking of relocating. One provider said, "I am full for the next several years."

While the child care shortage may discourage hardworking families from relocating to Wyoming, it also destabilizes families that are already here. A 2006 Child Care Needs Assessment commissioned by the Department of Workforce Services summarized the consequences of ignoring the child care shortage stating, "For incoming workers with families, child care is increasingly regarded as an essential service by parents who desire to pursue and maintain full-time jobs. If the availability of child care constrains the potential opportunity to work and earn income, these family households will likely relocate to another community or state where child care is more readily available."

As child care providers, lawmakers and community leaders work to increase child care capacity it is also important to raise the bar and ensure that pre-kindergarten opportunities are high quality in nature. A 2007 Economic Policy Institute (EPI) study shows that state governments will reap huge savings in remedial education, law enforcement and child welfare if children are given better pre-kindergarten opportunities.

The study makes clear that states also will realize higher tax revenues from these more productive citizens over time.

In our part of the world, success on the gridiron is one measure of community vitality. And so a lesson about priorities can be learned from a neighboring small town. Smith Center Kansas' high school team has won three consecutive state championships, won 51 games straight, and outscored opponents 704-0 last season. Coach Roger Barta was quoted in the New York Times as saying, "None of this is really about football. We're going to get scored on eventually, and lose a game, and that doesn't mean anything. What I hope we're doing is sending kids into life who know that every day means something." He added, "What we do around here real well is raise kids." Communities that focus on raising good kids will naturally celebrate their success on the playing field and more critically in life as well. We in Wyoming should rise to the challenge of making quality early care and education available to all children.