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Child care providers build alliance

Small centers will lobby for insurance, better pay

Mike Chalmers

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By MIKE CHALMERS

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During the 23 years Claudette Sherwood has been in the child care field, she has watched small in-home businesses such as hers struggle and close because of low pay and lack of health insurance.

So Sherwood is helping to organize family day care centers statewide into one voice for better rates and possibly benefits from the state. The group, named the Delaware Family Childcare Alliance, has been growing quietly and slowly over the past year and now has about 200 members, said Sherwood, the organization's executive director.

"We're not talking about a union or striking or sitting on somebody's doorstep," said Sherwood, who cares for five children in her New Castle home. The group, which hosted a conference and workshop last week in Newark, wants to educate the public and state leaders about their business and its importance, she said. It is a spinoff of the nonprofit Providers in Practice, which offers training courses.

In Delaware, there are about 1,600 family day care centers licensed to care for six to nine children each. They care for about 13,000 children statewide. About 400 large child care centers, which are regulated differently, care for about 30,000 children.

"They are extremely ready to get together and get organized and have a voice," said Mary Dupont, executive director of **Nehemiah Gateway** Community Development Corp., a Wilmington-based nonprofit group that is helping to organize the alliance. "The providers are so frustrated, and they feel so powerless."

The state Office of Child Care Licensing's effort earlier this year to update child care rules about staffing and provider education applies only to large child care centers, not the small centers that are part of the alliance.

The state added about \$1.1 million to its budget this year to help low-income families pay child care costs, bringing the total to \$24.8 million. Officials have said they cannot afford to add more money until the state's financial picture improves.

The reimbursement still is less than 70 percent of the average rate statewide. Sherwood, for example, charges \$110 a week, which is on the low end of the market, but is reimbursed about \$77 a week from the state for low-income children. Many providers refuse to take

low-income children because the state's rate is so low, she said.

Sharikka Frisby, who owns Forever Young Child Care in Claymont, said the state's reimbursement rates for low-income children are too low to cover a provider's costs. "I don't have enough income, after I pay my bills and cover my expenses, to have anything left," Frisby said. Her husband's income supplements hers, she said.

Many women go into the child care business because they see it as a way to earn a little money and still be able to stay home with their own children, Frisby and Sherwood said. But they usually cannot afford health insurance on their own, they said.

"A lot of child care providers are leaving the field because of the lack of health insurance," Sherwood said. The alliance wants to see whether providers could get group insurance, she said.

Sharon Strohm, who owns In Sharon's Care in Holly Oak, said the public and state officials need to understand the value of good child care providers, without which working parents could not maintain their jobs. Providers also are expected to give children a stimulating, nurturing environment during their most crucial development period, she said.

"It's such an important job we're doing, by molding these kids for what they'll do later," Strohm said. "It's such low pay, and there's so much expected of us."

Contact Mike Chalmers at 324-2790 or mchalmers@delawareonline.com.