How Red Tape Keeps Parents From Getting the Day Care They Need

Kahandie Elliot does not give up easily. A mother of four children, she spent the past year studying to be a medical assistant. Last month, she qualified, completing her internship and passing a state exam. But she could not conquer the maddening bureaucracy of New York’s subsidized child-care system, a set of programs that are supposed to help low-income working families with affordable care for infants and toddlers but have struggled during the pandemic. Long waits, a confusing application process, pandemic-related closures and funding cuts have stranded parents and threaten to close day care centers, operators and advocates say.

On paper, any families whose earnings fall below a low-income threshold set at the state and federal level are eligible for subsidized child care, either by using vouchers to enroll in private centers or home-based day care or by sending their children to a city-contracted day care center. In practice,
many parents struggle to access help, a problem that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, just when people are poised to try to get back to work and the city is reeling from the economic blows of the Covid-19 crisis.

“The system has never worked. It marginalizes a specific class of people and sets a tone for the child’s educational journey. But the pandemic has magnified the problem,” said Lillian Rodriguez-Magliaro, a senior program director at the Child Center of N.Y., a center in Queens that serves low-income families.

Even before the pandemic, parents found the application process so befuddling that many visited public assistance offices for help. But during the shutdown, the city’s welfare agency, the Human Resources Administration, has closed the majority of its offices dedicated to voucher applications. The agency has directed people to apply online.

“If you want to speak to someone on the phone, you wait for hours,” said Ms. Elliot, 27, who finally enlisted her family to babysit while she trained. “I have two kids with medical needs and an infant who requires most of my time. I don’t have two hours to spend on hold.”

For years, underfunding of the system has meant that only a minority of eligible families could get vouchers. But this year, the budget for vouchers has shrunk even more to $477 million, down from about $513 million in 2020. Special funding for a program that uses city money to get children off voucher wait lists was slashed to about $31 million from $47 million. Unless they are receiving public assistance or child welfare services or are homeless, eligible families are directed to a wait list.

At the same time, the pandemic has worsened a Catch-22 built into the system: With very few exceptions, only parents who are already working at least 20 hours a week or are actively job searching are eligible for subsidized care. But many low-income parents lost their jobs at the start of the pandemic or had to quit or reduce their hours when the Health Department closed most day care centers last April. That makes it hard for them to get back into the system, especially given funding cutbacks and a backlogged process to assess eligibility.

Between December 2019 and December 2020, the number of vouchers in use dropped to about 49,000 from nearly 66,000. Some parents have been reluctant to send their children back to day care because of Covid-19, but many more just cannot get vouchers.

The program’s financial and logistical troubles have affected not only parents but the child care centers that serve them. Beanstalk Academy, a network of 15 day care centers, has hired a full-time employee to help parents navigate the system to get vouchers when they are available. “Enrollments were so low that we just couldn’t see a way to stay in business,” said David Handler, the director of enrollment at Beanstalk Academy. “I have a list of hundreds of parents waiting to get their children enrolled.”

Beanstalk closed two of its locations, and the infant programs at all of its other centers are operating at 10 percent of capacity. The Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation in the Bronx, which works with about 400 home-based child care providers, said that 100 of them are closed.

Parents who are applying for services often deal with three city agencies: the Human Resources Administration, the Administration for Children’s Services and the Department of Education.
The education department, which took over management of the city’s contracted subsidized program for infants and toddlers shortly before the pandemic, said it is hiring more staff to handle a backlog of applications.

“We’re committed to expanding child care access and expediting the eligibility process by working with the state and federal government, increasing our staff and improving our operations,” said Sarah Casasnovas, a press secretary with the department.

Ms. Elliot said she had received vouchers for her children in the past, but she said she cannot weed through the pandemic application process. “It’s harder now because many of the offices are closed and most of the stuff has to be done online,” she said.

Without vouchers and with no family members now living in New York to help her with child care, Ms. Elliot said she is unsure she will be able to search for a job as a medical assistant, the goal she has worked toward for the past year.

Francina Almonte cobbled together child care for her toddler daughter with the help of relatives. “I started working as a home attendant in April,” the 30-year-old mother said. “It’s not the type of job where you can tele-work.”

Ms. Almonte said she cannot rely on her family’s good will and live on a part-time salary forever. She submitted an application for subsidized care with the Department of Education in October. She is still waiting for a response.

In October, the day care center that Morgan Shaw’s 15-month-old daughter attended shut down because of low enrollment. Ms. Shaw put her daughter on the wait list for Little Scholars Early Development Center in the Bronx.

But after the first day care closed, she had to stay home from her job as an IT support specialist, so when it came time to recertify her benefits, she didn’t have all the paychecks she needed to prove she had a job. Her employer has told her she will be welcomed back, but Ms. Shaw, 29, wondered how long she could survive on unpaid leave.

“I’ve exhausted all my options. I used all my leave at the start of the pandemic, and I don’t have the $350 a week I’d need to pay for care out of pocket,” she said. “I can’t work if I don’t have a voucher, and I can’t get a voucher while I’m not working.”

The owner of Little Scholars, Jasmin Corniel, opened her first day care center in the Bronx to fill a gap. Like many new parents, she hunted for the perfect day care center when her baby girl was born 12 years ago.

At the time she was a childhood educator on the Upper East Side and hoped to find the same kind of services in her Bronx neighborhood.

“I started touring around my neighborhood and I was just horrified, I was like, ‘Nah huh. Where are the enrichment programs, where is the organic food, where are all these great programmatic pieces that were available downtown, where are they here?’”

So Ms. Corniel opened her own center in the commercial space of an apartment complex in Crotona Park East in the Bronx. The classrooms were light and airy. There was also a big outdoor space where the children grew fruit, vegetables and herbs.
She closed the center in April, when most New York City day care centers shut down. Centers were allowed to start reopening in July, but without enrollment, Ms. Corniel could not make it work. “A lot of people in the neighborhoods where we operate rely on public assistance, and that system is very screwy right now,” she said. “We have parents who have been trying for months to get H.R.A. vouchers, and they’re hitting roadblocks left, right and center.”

Though she still has two centers open, to close her first has been devastating. “That first center was my baby,” she said.

When a child care center closes, it’s unlikely another one will replace it, said Gregory Brender, the director of public policy at the Day Care Council of New York, a nonprofit alliance of early childhood education programs.

“It takes a lot of infrastructure to open an early childhood program, because it’s understandably a very regulated field,” he said. Staff have to go through comprehensive background checks, and buildings have to meet extensive safety requirements, he said. “It’s not the type of business that ‘pops up’ easily.”

Link: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/nyregion/child-care-vouchers.html