

# Opinion | More childcare could help Iowa's struggling economy

## The lack of affordable and accessible child care costs Iowa about \$1.1 billion a year in lost earnings and tax revenue

**Rita Hart, Iowa Democratic Party Chair**

When Kim Reynolds gave her big annual speech at the beginning of the year, she told Iowans that “the condition of our state is strong” and that “childcare has been a longstanding priority for my administration.”

Now that we're seven months into the year, I have some questions for Kim Reynolds.

What makes Iowa so strong?

Is Iowa strong because the Bureau of Economic Analysis ranked Iowa as 49th in the nation in economic growth and 48th in personal income growth? Or because Iowans' hourly pay is lower than most other midwestern states, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics?

Certainly, the Republican-championed Medicaid cuts that could soon put many hospitals in a tough position where they have to reduce services and close departments won't make our state any stronger.

The fact that 25 percent of Iowans and 35 percent of rural Iowans live in areas that do not have access to childcare isn't making our state any stronger, either.

Researchers at the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that the lack of affordable and accessible child care costs Iowa about \$1.1 billion a year in lost earnings and tax revenue. Think what a difference that kind of money would make to individual families.

Iowa Child Care Connect reports that as of April 23rd of this year, 41,435 children in Iowa lack child care. The number of child care businesses has dropped by more than 60 percent in the last 10 years, according to the Iowa Women's Foundation. I have a feeling that those businesses did not close because they were “strong”.

Kim Reynolds has been governor for over eight years, and her ‘longstanding priority’ has left enough children without essential care to fill an entire city.

This is a serious issue in our state, not only because of its effect on the well-being of children, but because of its effects on their parents and extended families and the economy in general.

Many parents in Iowa are unable to remain employed because their child care options are so severely limited. The Annie E. Casey Foundation study I mentioned before found that 14 percent of Iowans have been forced to quit, change or turn down a job because of childcare issues. Twenty percent of Iowa parents who were interviewed reported they were fired because of ongoing childcare struggles. That leaves these same children in financially-strapped households.

As a grandmother myself, I am aware that my own children and their spouses struggle to find and be able to afford adequate child care. It's particularly difficult to find providers for babies and the cost of infant care can be astronomical.. Child care providers all over the state struggle to pay their staff a living wage while keeping their prices low enough for young families to afford.

Iowa clearly needs more investment in our most precious commodity, which is our children. Access to childcare needs to be affordable, high-quality, and spread out across the state so that all communities and families can benefit.

This will require significant planning and investment by the Iowa state government as well as creating alliances with businesses and schools to develop out-of-the-box solutions, something that eight years of 'longstanding priority' has clearly failed to provide.

We need a change in leadership, one that will take this issue seriously instead of merely using it as a statement piece for speeches.

Iowa families deserve better.