

City, county to connect essential workers to child care

By Jasper Scherer STAFF WRITER



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

The parents of youngsters like Victor Parache, 6, left, and Emiliano Arango, 7, can receive help in finding child care if they are essential workers forced to continue working during the crisis.

Houston and Harris County officials launched a service Monday to connect essential workers with child care providers, a critical need for doctors, first responders and other parents operating on the front lines of the coronavirus crisis.

The service, which also covers some child care expenses for low-income families, operates through a website, findchildcarenow.org, run by the child care nonprofit Collaborative for Children. Workers in 13 counties around the Houston area with children 12 or younger are eligible to participate.

The process works like this: After a worker submits an online form, officials will identify up to three child care centers with immediate openings within two business days. Workforce Solutions, a state organization that operates under the Texas Workforce Commission, is handling applications for financial aid and will notify workers within four days if they are eligible for subsidies.

Through the service, workers can get linked to child care providers even if they are not eligible for financial help. Those who already have child care may apply only for financial aid, officials said. Workforce Solutions has set aside \$10 million to subsidize child care in the Houston region, Mayor Sylvester Turner said.

"We can't afford to have a single medical worker or grocery store clerk or essential employee benched because they have to be home taking care of their child, because they don't have access to child care," County Judge Lina Hidalgo said at a news conference Monday.

The service covers those defined as essential workers under Gov. Greg Abbott's executive order allowing only essential services to remain open across Texas. Abbott's definition of essential services is guided by the Department of Homeland Security's menu of industries needed to keep the country running.

The website directs those who have tested positive for COVID-19, or live with someone who has, to not apply for child care services. Workers who have a COVID-19 case "under investigation" or are presumptively positive also should not apply, according to website guidance.

Turner said he was "overwhelmed by the rapid responses" to a citywide survey conducted by his administration aimed at identifying the child care needs of essential workers in Houston. The goal of the new service, Turner said, is to provide a "streamlined process" for workers to find providers and receive financial support.

"Finding quality child care is critically important for parents who work outside the home," Turner said. "And today this issue is further complicated by the fact that many of our most reliable systems of child care, from local public schools to child care centers, are challenged by COVID-19 closures and a great deal of uncertainty."

Melanie Johnson, chief executive of Collaborative for Children, said many children already do not receive the early care they need even during non-pandemic times.

"Children, specifically those ages birth through 5, need very much to have a consistent learning environment so that they are ready for school," Johnson said. "In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we saw that it took about 2 years for school children to be able to recover lost learning. And we do not want that to happen to children in our county and our city."

Scores of child care centers in Houston and across Texas temporarily have closed during the coronavirus pandemic, while schools are closed until May 4 under Abbott's order.

The difficulty of finding child care providers has been further exacerbated by the reality that many workers rely on grandparents or other older relatives to care for their children, said Amber Brown, an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. Workers who want to avoid exposing their children to their own parents or relatives — who face a higher risk of developing severe illness from the coronavirus — may be put in a bind, she said.

Even under normal conditions, Brown said, Texas parents struggle to find quality child care providers unless they are willing to cough up sizable monthly fees. Brown said she hopes the coronavirus crisis reveals the importance of child care to lawmakers and others who influence how the system is funded and organized.

"In order to have a functioning society and workforce, we have to have child care. There's no way around it," she said. "And if we start viewing child care in the same way as we do public schools — we absolutely support public schools, we know that to have an educated and functioning population, we need to have public schools. But we don't treat our youngest members of society with that same respect."

The state of Texas launched a similar program Monday with Care.com, a company that helps families find child care and other services. The company has launched a portal at care.com/texasfrontline where essential workers and health care providers can connect. jasper.scherer@chron.com