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Commentary: Child care facilities are critical recovery building blocks

Author: Singletary, Mark

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Abstract (Abstract): Before the storm, there were about 300 child care facilities in Orleans Parish, maybe that many more in Jefferson and St. Tammany. Functional, safe and secure facilities to care for children while their parents work is a significant factor in having dependable and productive employees.

The Women's Leadership Initiative is an organization within the United Way for the Greater New Orleans Area that was founded by a group of corporate, civic and community leaders working together to improve the quality of life for women and children in the New Orleans region through leadership, philanthropy and advocacy.

The 90 child care facilities operating in Orleans Parish aren't enough. According to United Way reports, we need at least 100 more really soon. The Community Impact Committee from United Way wants to have at least 100 operating child care facilities by the end of this year, and they would like to see an additional 100 by the end of 2008. That number would still be well short of the 300 open before [Katrina].

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Full text: We are at our best when we help each other.

Before the storm, there were about 300 child care facilities in Orleans Parish, maybe that many more in Jefferson and St. Tammany. Functional, safe and secure facilities to care for children while their parents work is a significant factor in having dependable and productive employees.

Today, Jefferson and St. Tammany have about the same number of child care facilities as they did before Katrina. They need many more.

Orleans Parish, on the other hand, has fewer than 90 child care facilities operating, roughly one-third of the pre-storm number.

It doesn't take much analysis to determine how important these facilities are to our recovery process.

Businesses need employees. Employees tend to have children. Children need a safe place to stay while their parents work.

Business needs child care.

This isn't groundbreaking thought. Smart folks have recognized this for years and have compassionately addressed the need for child-care and early childhood development as a cornerstone of quality-of-life issue. Those who are smart and compassionate usually do something about it.

The United Way of Greater New Orleans regularly reports the progress of charity and charitable giving in our region. Several years ago, our United Way committed to helping children succeed by paying attention to pre-school development. The program is called Success by 6.

It should be obvious that Success by 6 depends mightily on child care facilities that can monitor and guide young children toward a successful life. In our United Way, Success by 6 is of special concern to a subset of donors called the Women's Leadership Initiative.

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The WLI has identified these seven issues as very important:

- * high-quality child care,
- * strong relationship with parent/caretaker,
- * economic opportunities for families,

- * engaged neighborhood residents,
- * safe, attractive neighborhoods,
- * families with access to services and healthy development on track.

High-quality child care is the highest focus, according to WLI literature.

Child care facilities that meet certain requirements are funded with United Way contributions channeled through charities that meet United Way guidelines. These guidelines ensure standards of care, cleanliness, training and facility are met. The state and federal governments also have standards for child care facilities that must be met for licensing and accreditation.

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These facilities are mostly individually owned and operated, small mom-and-pop shops, often in the home of the provider. Regulations and licenses are, as they should be, difficult to adhere to and qualify for and these operations demand bureaucratic oversight. And, they are businesses.

These small business owners make payroll, pay taxes and insurance, create jobs and provide safe comfort for our most treasured possessions - our children.

As the annual fund drive for the United Way winds down and you might be looking for the hook that makes you want to write them a check, do it for the children, their parents and your future employees.

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