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NEWS

Hundreds of Hawaii parents on waitlists for afterschool child care services

At least 2,600 children in critical need of afterschool care are currently on A+ Afterschool program waitlists across the state due to severe staffing shortages.

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Lannis Waters/USA Today Network

A shortage of child care workers has forced many families to wait for afterschool services that

are currently at capacity. And COVID restrictions and protocols have made it harder for providers to accommodate struggling parents.

For many working parents, the Department of Education's After-School Plus or A+ Program is a lifeline. It costs \$120 per child per month, with subsidies available for low income families. Demand for the low-cost program is so high, more than 2,600 children are waiting for a spot. Making matters worse-- staff shortages and COVID confusion.

Single parent Jeanelle Miller has two children at Voyager's Public Charter School who were enrolled in the A+ program there. She says due to COVID-19 exposures in class they had to quarantine at home for nearly a month. That caused some confusion with Kama'aina Kids which removed them from the program to accommodate other students on the waitlist.

"My kids were wondering what had happened. And it sounded like they had done something wrong to them. So it was frustrating for them. And then also for me, because now I just had to pivot and start picking them up in the middle of my work day. And on top of that, they didn't even have room on the waitlist for me to join anytime in the near future," she said. "It's just really sad that as the economy is ramping back up, and workers are being pushed to come out more, there aren't the services for their kids. And so a lot of women particularly are having to carry this heavier burden of looking after our children possibly sacrificing our careers, because there just aren't options for childcare right now."

Kama'aina Kids CEO Dana Vela acknowledges the situation could have been handled better, but it raises the question -- how long should you hold a child's space in the program if he or she is not attending school and there are dozens of other kids on the waitlist?

These are just some of the challenging COVID-19 policies every child care provider is grappling

with, along with a debilitating employee shortage.

"This A+ after school program has been broken. It's been very, very difficult for providers. And now it's affecting the parents that we can't get the staff now to take care of the children," said Lisa Ontai, vice president of marketing and mission development for the YMCA of Honolulu. "Even before the pandemic, the real challenge to try to get staffing in our A+ after school programs because we're not able to pay that competitive wage."

"It's really heartbreaking that they're going part time or they are having to quit their jobs completely. And what's really also very scary is some of those who have children who are a little older, maybe they're in fifth or sixth grade. They're having them just walk home on their own, and they're home alone for a couple of hours, which is exactly what we don't want to see happen," Ontai added.

Miller says communication between schools, programs and parents is key, especially with situations constantly changing.

"Because of different parents schedules and the schools and how they're handling things. So there's a lot of room for miscommunication. And especially if there's a lot of staff turnover," she said. "I'm not sure. What can be done for us when you know, we can't afford any other services. And there are no other available services."

Providers are working with the state to come up with long term solutions such as increasing fees but still offering subsidies for the neediest families.

Both YMCA of Honolulu and Kama'aina Kids are offering benefits, sign-on bonuses and incentives like tuition reimbursement, to bring in more applicants.

To see open job positions for the [YMCA](http://www.ymcahonolulu.org/careers/job-opportunities), [click here](http://www.ymcahonolulu.org/careers/job-opportunities) (<http://www.ymcahonolulu.org/careers/job-opportunities>) or call (808) 678-4296.

To see open job positions for [Kama'aina Kids](http://kamaainakids.applicantstack.com/x/openings), [click here](http://kamaainakids.applicantstack.com/x/openings) (<http://kamaainakids.applicantstack.com/x/openings>) or call (808) 262-4538.