

Child care less accessible for NM families

Families were better off five years ago

ALBUQUERQUE—Working parents in New Mexico who rely on childcare assistance to make ends meet were better off five years ago than they are now.

That's because in 2001 New Mexico significantly reduced the income level at which families are eligible, according to a new report by the National Women's Law Center (NWLC).

The report, "State Child Care Assistance Policies 2006 Update: Gaps in Child Care Assistance Remain, With New Challenges Ahead," was released Tuesday.

The report shows that five years ago, a New Mexico family of three could earn up to \$28,300 a year and still qualify for childcare assistance. In 2006 that same family can only earn up to \$24,960 and still qualify for child-care assistance.

For parents this can mean the difference between leaving their children each day in an environment of nurturing, developmentally appropriate

childcare and the minimally interactive care of a much less supportive environment. For the child it's a difference between healthy brain development and a lifetime of lost potential.

"Eighty-five percent of brain development happens in the first three years of life," said Bill Jordan, deputy director for Policy at N.M. Voices for Children. "In New Mexico, less than one percent of our educational budget is spent on those years. We've got it upside down."

New Mexico is one of 17 states in which working families cannot

qualify for assistance if they earn more than 160 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). Prior to August of 2001, child-care assistance was available to New Mexico families earning up to 200 percent of the FPL. Today it's only available for families earning up to 155 percent FPL.

The Early Childhood Alliance, a coalition of advocates, providers and parents, is asking the Legislature for an additional \$18.2 million next year in order to restore eligibility to 200 percent FPL and expand several initiatives to improve quality.

Across the nation, state

policies have failed to provide needed support for working families. Besides income eligibility, the report looked at parent co-pays, waiting lists, and the rates at which states reimburse child-care providers. Forty-one states, including New Mexico, fail to meet the federal benchmark for reimbursement rates. The lower the reimbursement rates, the fewer choices families have in child-care providers.

"Failing to sufficiently compensate providers has negative consequences for children, parents and providers,"

said Helen Blank, Director of Leadership and Public Policy at National Women's Law Center and co-author of the report. "Low-income children are denied critical early learning experiences. Parents find it difficult to access the child care they need to work. And providers, who are often low-income women themselves, face earning less or going out of business."

The good news for New Mexico is that its parent co-pays are relatively low (6 percent of family income) and that the state has no waiting list.