

Opinion EDITORIALS

Lack of child care makes the rural house of cards wobbly



Opinion

Jennifer M. Latzke

It's something that not many people acknowledge out loud, but rural economies are houses of cards built on agriculture and natural resources, manufacturing and small Main Street businesses.

Rural economic development types in sparsely populated counties know their communities are one crisis away from falling apart. A natural disaster, a market downturn or a trade imbalance, or a black swan event like COVID-19 and it doesn't take an expert to see the house of cards start to get a little wobbly. That's why communities have long figured out that creating opportunities for better standards of living for families in their small towns is actually good for agriculture and businesses as well. Ensuring that

there is available, quality child care for working families is now at or near the top of the list.

But still, there are those in community leadership positions who scoff that this is a threat to the business economy. They say this is a private family issue and local and state governments and businessmen shouldn't intrude.

Frankly, they're wrong.

In researching this week's cover story, I spoke with dozens of mothers, rural economic development folks and others who are raising the alarm over rural child care. Time and space on the page didn't allow me to put them all in, but the experiences they shared deserve a voice.

For various reasons, some parents didn't want to go on the record with their stories. The competition for child care openings in rural areas is so fierce, among the licensed and unlicensed providers alike, they were concerned that they'd lose their children's placements by speaking on the record.

I heard from young professionals—the very ones we actively recruit to our rural commu-

nities to work in our hospitals, schools and businesses. But with crushing student loan debt, some of these two-income families are having to choose between having another child and that childcare price tag, and being able to pay their current bills. Let alone being able to save for their children's college funds and their own retirements. One mother told me her child care bill was about as much as a house payment for her and her husband.

With many blue-collar families, and single parent families, the price of child care can overwhelm a family budget. As so many in the field explained, shift work jobs don't have a lot of leeway for absences and tardiness because the drop off line at daycare was running slow. These families routinely use their vacation and sick leave to take care of children if their providers have to close. And during COVID-19, many of these providers had to close for quarantining, leaving these families in a sudden lurch.

Time and again, I heard from mothers who said they had to choose between a rock and a hard

place. Do I go back to work and leave my child with this unlicensed provider so we can continue to pay our bills? Do I risk leaving my child in this licensed facility, with its precious opening that we finally got after two years on a waiting list, even though my gut tells me my child is not thriving there? Is my child forgoing precious enrichment at the critical stages of their development because our only option doesn't offer it?

Do we have children at all?

In the last instance, I heard from one young married couple that has chosen to not have children due to cost and distance to the nearest available facility. Others in the same position told me that the decision to have children or not have children because of the price of child care has strained their marriages to the point of divorce.

The issue is more complex than this meager space allows me to fully explore. We still haven't touched on the families who have children with special needs and their limited options. We haven't mentioned the plight of

our homeless and working poor families. Or how many licensed providers are quickly approaching retirement age with no replacements in sight. Or how financial and regulatory hurdles prevent some child development professionals from relocating and starting businesses in rural counties.

And while some are finding creative solutions, the progress is slow and it's filled with pitfalls. Some are working with large businesses in their communities to share the cost of childcare with their employees or to subsidize childcare facilities. There's been a push in some counties to build community childcare centers to fill the gaps for families. There are even recruitment initiatives to bring qualified childcare professionals to rural counties.

It's still not enough to address the crisis. To be quite blunt, it's past time to get this rural economic house of cards in order.

Our neighbors are counting on us.

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The show goes on

Harvest is winding down or already completed. Cattle are turned out on winter pasture. And I'm sure some have already selected their turkey for Thanksgiving. Yes, the end of 2020 is approaching fast—thankfully, mercifully.

Like the previous 101 years, this one won't end without Kansas Farm Bureau's annual meeting. Normally we'd gather hundreds of members in person to celebrate another harvest, recognize agricultural leaders and conduct the business of this great organization.

We'll still do all that good stuff at our 102nd annual meeting Dec. 3 to 4, with the slight change of beaming the workshops, speakers, panel discussions, general sessions and more to your living room, tractor cab or barn.

The virtual sessions on Thursday and Friday will allow all Farm Bureau members in Kansas to participate for free, including Vance Crowe's keynote address to lead off the meeting Thursday morning. Members can view the annual meeting agenda and register at www.kfb.org/annualmeeting.

Other highlights include an appearance from U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, an update from Andrew Walmsley on American Farm Bureau Activities in Washington, D.C. and a townhall with our newly elected federal officials.

Additionally, there's time set aside for networking, chatting about sessions and

providing feedback. It's similar to what would happen in the hallways and around meals at a regular convention.

I won't try to sell you on the notion technology will fully replicate the KFB annual meeting experience because it can't. However, like so many other things this year, it's the safest way for members and staff to mark the trials and tribulations of 2020 and honor the achievements of agriculture and its practitioners.

Believe me, I know social distancing, mask wearing, avoiding public spaces have become tiresome chores. But we're getting closer to the end of this malignancy. Just last week promising news of a vaccine was announced. Others are in the works as well. With the aid of science, hopefully this will be the first and last annual meeting held over computer screens.

The fact is right now, there's no good way to bring hundreds of people together from every corner of the state and have them gather together for an extended amount of time. Significant modifications have been made to allow delegates to conduct KFB business when they gather on Saturday.

Voting delegates will debate and adopt policy statements for 2021, elect the KFB president and board members from even-numbered Farm Bureau districts. Delegates will attend in-person at one of the 10 hubs corresponding to their district. Attendance on Saturday is limited to KFB staff and voting delegates. These will be



Photo by Kathy Anderson, Jamestown, Kansas.

small groups with masks and plenty of space to spread out.

The logistics behind this year's annual meeting are mind boggling, and I've been impressed with how many solutions, as imperfect as they may be, are available to help connect everyone at a distance. The show will go on with or without you, but I strongly urge you to take a look at the agenda, register and make plans to join us. There's so much to see, learn and do, I know you'll find something to grab your atten-

tion. I hope to see you there. And, of course, as with every other virtual event this year, pants are optional.

—Greg Doering is a writer and photographer with Kansas Farm Bureau.

