

Addressing child care

After almost two years of discussion, progress in solving Austin child-care issues seems to be dragging partly because of a lack of money and joint goals among concerned groups.

While the diverse groups are committed to the well-being of our youngest citizens, many of whom spend 10 hours, five days a week at a child-care center, they don't always appear to be working together. When esteemed panelists at a recent gathering on how to improve child care were asked what legislators were doing to help, U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, was the only lawmaker mentioned.

This despite the high-profile plans by members of the Travis County delegation and the Texas Democratic Party to make child care a top issue in the 1999 legislative session. This month, the party announced its support of initiatives to improve the quality of child care.

As it turned out, the panelists, most of whom are working in the local child-care trenches, weren't asked for input by state leaders. Why? Because the state officials talked to other experts who are familiar faces in the Legislature. While nothing is wrong with that, the situation highlights the need for more coordination among child-care advocates.

Last week's panel discussion at the Headliners Club, convened by six of Austin's charitable foundations and moderated by Mayor Kirk Watson, could be a landmark gathering if the foundations pool their money to pay for child-care programs or use the money to leverage business and government agencies to make commitments, as one of the event's organizers stated. The well-attended event, which included a panel discussion and comments from the audience, was co-sponsored by the

Hogg Foundation, Lola Wright Foundation, RGK Foundation, Shield-Ayres Foundation, Trull Foundation and Expanding Horizons.

For the past year or so, several forums have been held on child-care issues, and several local problems have been identified. But the joint action necessary for solutions has been elusive. The struggling Austin Child Care Collaborative, which has received tremendous support from IBM's Mike Lacour, has yet to attract solid business support. The big problem, Lacour says, is getting businesses to commit money.

The statistics should be enough to make the case for business support for quality child care. The quality of care a child receives by the age of 3 determines long-term mental developmental, so poor child care often results in costly social problems later. Also, U.S. companies lose billions of dollars

a year because of employee absences related to child-care problems.

The local horror stories about children who attend unlicensed child-care centers also should jolt executives into action. More than a year ago, a child died in a fire at an unlicensed child-care center run out of a neighbor's home.

The facts and the anecdotes are available. What's needed now is money to finance a project that can improve the quality and availability of child care for Austin parents and children, and more cooperation among child-care providers, funding sources and businesses.

The view from the Headliners Club, on the 21st floor of the Bank One building, was exquisite as ever Tuesday afternoon. But despite the excitement generated by the successful event, the view served as a reminder of the heights child-care advocates must scale to make collaborative efforts happen in Austin.

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