Panel tackles child-care issues

Foundations, businesses, agencies seek solutions for Austin parents

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Six of Austin's charitable foundations sponsored a panel discussion Tuesday on improving the quality of child care in Austin, and they may give the issue the clout needed to reach concrete solutions and raise the money to back major initiatives.

More than 140 people representing businesses, government and child-care centers attended "Early Childhood at Risk: What is the cost of neglect?" hosted by the Hogg Foundation, Lola Wright Foundation, RGK Foundation, Shield-Ayres Foundation, Trull Foundation and Expanding Horizons.

"This is one of the most important issues our community can address," said Mayor Kirk Watson, who moderated the discussion. The five panelists were representatives of the Hogg Foundation, IBM and Child Inc., which is a nonprofit child-care provider, as well as a University of Texas professor and a criminal court judge.

The event, at the Headliners Club, was the first time six local foundations have joined to tackle Austin's child-care problems. Because of the involvement of the foundations — which have given millions to nonprofit groups and charitable causes in Austin over the years — many of those attending are optimistic about the effort.

For the past few years, child-care advocates have said Austin is in a child-care crisis, like much of the rest of the nation. Problems include high costs, inadequate pay for workers and poor-quality care.

"People have to decide that this is a priority," said panelist Michael Lacour, director of Human Resources for IBM in Austin.

IBM is part of the American Business Collaborative for Quality Dependent Care, a group of companies that have committed to spend $100 million to improve child- and elder-care programs by 2000.

Lacour said getting a collaboration off the ground in Austin has been taxing. "I'm ashamed to say we're having a tough time doing so," he said.

One major difficulty is getting businesses to commit money because they want to see clear results for their dollars, Lacour said.

During Tuesday's discussion, panelists and audience members gave their ideas to improve child care. Some included:

- Creating savings plans with incentives at banks so people can invest in child care before becoming a parent.
- Giving discounts at child-care centers to people who take parenting classes.
- Linking with businesses such as car dealerships that will make donations to specific child-care centers when customers make a purchase.
- Educating the public about the importance of quality child care and bringing all parts of the community together to come up with solutions.

The challenge ahead will be getting money to make some of the initiatives become a reality, said many who attended the meeting.

Several people said they have more hope that the foundation-sponsored event will lead to tangible solutions than some events that have been held in the past.

"The key thing about this particular revival is we have the commitment and ear of city leaders," said Julie Todaro, board president of the Connections Resource Center, a nonprofit agency that provides information to parents and child-care providers. "There are also so many foundations involved that might provide seed money for some of these solutions."

"I feel very hopeful because we had six foundations sponsoring this event," said Gretchen Lara Shartle, executive director of Expanding Horizons. "By lending their name to this, they are saying that they want to get behind this issue."

Shartle said she hopes several of the foundations can pool their money to award grants to nonprofit groups tackling solutions or use the money as leverage to get businesses or government agencies to make commitments. A followup meeting is planned for July, she said.