

## Waiting list for state child care aid hits 10,000

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Arizona's child-care system will hit a grim milestone today when the 10,000th child is turned away from a program that provides assistance to working parents.

The children have been placed on a waiting list instituted earlier this year by the Department of Economic Security in response to budget cuts. The department's child-care assistance program provides an average subsidy of \$350 a month for about 35,000 children.

But with deep cuts expected at all levels of government next year, few expect the children will eventually get admitted to the program. In the meantime, parents are becoming unemployed to stay home with their children.

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## 10,000 waiting for state child-care aid

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Although Joline Corona works at a day-care facility, the single mother from Phoenix says she needs the aid because she has no one to watch her 1-year-old son and 2-year-old nephew. She has been on the DES waiting list for three months, and a child-care scholarship from the early-childhood-development group First Things First expires at the end of the month.

"I'm going to have to quit the job," she said.

### Waiting list called necessary

Families can become eligible for the child-care assistance program if they have children 12 or younger, need child care to allow them to work or attend school, and are at or below 165 percent of the federal poverty level. That's up to \$36,400 for a family of four. Children can remain in the program until they turn 13.

Steve Meissner, a spokesman for the DES, said creating the waiting list was necessary to cut the department's budget.

"We very much would like to provide subsidies to at least some of these children, but we can't spend money that the elected officials haven't given us," he said.

The DES budget was cut by \$153 million in the fiscal year that ended in July. Last month, Gov. Jan Brewer approved an additional \$155 million in cuts to the DES' 2010 budget of \$555 million.

The department provides a range of social services to low-income, elderly and disabled residents. The child-care program began in the early 1980s and expanded in the 1990s as federal subsidies became available. It was budgeted at \$200 million this year.

Advocates say the reductions in the child-care program have exceeded the \$30 million figure they were told by the DES to expect.

According to estimates by the Arizona Child Care Association, cuts are on track to reach at least \$55 million.

The DES could not account for the discrepancy on Wednesday.

The department has instituted waiting lists for assistance in previous downturns. The previous high came in March 2004, when the number on the waiting list hit 9,362.

A year ago, 49,000 received child-care

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*Spokesman for the Department of Economic Security*

subsidies. Since then, the number enrolled has declined by 29 percent as parents have moved, lost or quit their jobs, or been turned away from the program because of budget cuts.

When someone leaves the program, the DES does not replace that child with one from its waiting list, in an effort to reduce its assistance rolls and the cost of the program.

Advocates say that working-class families have no good alternatives to the program beyond quitting their jobs and that most parents who stay employed leave their children with older siblings, boyfriends or caregivers "who do not meet basic qualifications."

### Working poor hit hard

"We're cutting the program for the working poor at higher levels than other programs," said Bruce Liggett, executive director of the child-care association. "This is the worst time to continue to reduce a program that keeps parents employed and keeps teachers working in child care."

At A Kiddie's Kingdom in west Phoenix, up to 95 percent of children receive the DES child-care assistance. But the weak economy has caused enrollment to plummet; only about 100 children currently attend the 257-child facility.

"I had one lady in here just last week crying," said Sandra Hannar, the facility's director. "She's having to quit her job because she has three children, and she has nobody to leave the children with."

The woman also is on the DES waiting list, Hannar said.

A Kiddie's Kingdom, which will turn 60 years old next year and is among the oldest child-care facilities in the Valley, could close if conditions don't improve.

"There's a good possibility," Hannar said. "We've been trying to cut back a couple hours from each girl, split shifts, just trying to keep everyone having a job."