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Some DHR child care subsidies at risk

By Markeshia Ricks

Advocates for low-income Alabama families are calling on the governor and the state Legislature to save a subsidy program that helps make child care affordable so parents can keep working.

The Alabama Department of Human Resources is on the verge of cutting the enrollment of the Alabama Child Care Subsidy Program by 3,000 children because of the downturn in the economy. It would cost the state about \$240,000 to keep the slots open another month.

In a few weeks DHR will have to decide whether these children will lose their slots on April 1.

"This will be the third time in six months that low-income working parents have had to recover from child care subsidy cuts," said Sophia Bracy Harris, executive director of the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama Inc.

Last year cuts affected about 5,000 children, who lost the subsidy that pays for part of their child care.

The Arise Citizens' Policy Project, the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama Inc. and Voices for Alabama's Children want state officials to hold the slots open to allow time for the stimulus package funding to become available.

Harris said that about \$38 million in stimulus money is on the way over the next two years to help pay child care costs for workers who will get jobs because of other facets of the stimulus program.

So without the child care money, the workers who need jobs the most might not be able to take them.

Arise policy analyst Ron Gilbert said it would cost the state about \$1.4 million to sustain the subsidy program for the rest of the year. But Gilbert said the cost of not covering the child care of those 3,000 children could be far more devastating if the parents of those children lost their jobs because they couldn't afford day care.

"This would be a crisis of huge proportions," he said.

DHR receives funding from both the General Fund and the Education Trust Fund, and was forced to reduce the enrollment of the child care subsidy program to meet Gov. Bob Riley's directive to state agencies to trim their budgets by 10 percent.

State Sen. Hank Sanders, D-Selma, vowed Thursday that he would do all that was in his power to ensure that the program is not cut any further.

"I see no reason why we can not find a way to keep from cutting this child care program," he said.

Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children, said she believes that DHR is trying to hold off on sending the notices to families to allow state officials to see if they can get the money.

The federal government requires 10 days' notice if people are going to lose their subsidy, Tilly said.

"This is urgent," she said.
