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## Hawaii News

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### Preschool subsidy cuts considered

Hearing on Monday will take testimony on state proposal

By MARY VORSINO, The Honolulu Advertiser

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HONOLULU - The state is considering drastic cuts in subsidies for preschool care for thousands of children from low- to moderate-income families, which in some cases would result in parents having to quadruple what they pay for care.

The changes would affect subsidies that cut preschool tuition costs for the families of about 2,500 children in licensed preschools and about 6,000 in licensed-exempt care, according to the Good Beginnings Alliance.

The decrease in subsidies is being sought as the state faces a worsening fiscal crisis, and as demand for the subsidies is increasing because of the economic downturn.

Child care providers say the proposed subsidy decreases could mean incredible hardships for some parents.

Some families could have to pay upward of \$450 more per month for care or be forced to take their kids out of preschool.

"If it's going to be \$300 or \$400 more out of your budget, that's a significant bite," said Steve Albert, executive director of Rainbow Schools, which has five preschool locations. "It could mean food. It could mean rent." Albert said preschools are bracing for big declines in enrollment - by as much as 20 to 50 percent in some communities - if the subsidy change goes through.

And preschools warn that could have long-term effects on kids.

"Research has repeatedly shown that at-risk children benefit greatly from being in quality early education programs," said Christina Cox, the president of KCAA Preschools of Hawai'i and liaison for the Childcare Business Coalition, which represents 44 licensed preschools. Of the 4,000 children at the preschools in the coalition, more than 1,200 get state subsidies. Cox said about half or more of those 1,200 kids who get subsidies will have to move to less-expensive care if the subsidy changes go through.

"We know these families, and we know they're not going to be able to make it," Cox said.

The state will hold a public hearing in Honolulu on Monday to hear parents' concerns about the subsidy change.

State Department of Human Services spokeswoman Toni Schwartz said DHS does not have a targeted date for starting the subsidy change, since it is still being considered. Schwartz said she could not comment further on the proposed changes until after the public hearing.

But in a statement, DHS Director Lillian Koller said she had received "a lot" of comments from parents and providers. "We look forward to addressing all concerns starting Tuesday," after the comment period is finished, Koller said.

Schwartz could not confirm how many children get the child care subsidies.

Preschool tuition can cost upward of \$600 a month.

Under the proposal, a family of four that earns \$21,696 to \$23,856 a year, and has a preschooler in a program that costs about \$600 a month, would have to pay about \$180 a month - three times the amount under the current subsidy program. The state would pay the remaining \$420 with its subsidy. Meanwhile, a family of four that earns \$43,380 to \$56,100 a year would have to pay \$540 a month for care. That's more than four times the \$120 that that family would pay under the current program.

The subsidy changes come as more parents are seeking the aid, child care providers say.



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Cox said it appears that the increase in demand - coupled with budget restrictions - is driving the subsidy change.

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