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## **Warning of crisis, child care advocates ask for federal dollars**

Nikita Biryukov

A bevy of speakers urged officials Monday to direct federal dollars toward boosting staffing at child care centers during a listening session on how the state should spend New Jersey's unallocated American Rescue Plan funds.

Child care advocates and business groups said the state's child care system is faltering in the face of surging inflation and a broader hiring crunch that has pushed up wages in other sectors, drawing workers from the low-paying field that underpins much of the state's economy.

"My colleagues and I across the state recognize that our early child care system is crumbling around us, and we don't see how we can save it without immediate relief through compensation strategies," said Meghan Tavormina, president of the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children.

The shortages have grown severe enough that child care centers are, on average, running 10 seats below capacity, with especially dire gaps for age groups like infants and toddlers that require additional care, said Cynthia Rice, a senior policy analyst at Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

Shortages are widespread in 20 of the state's 21 counties, and roughly three-quarters of centers said a lack of staff is the reason, Rice said, citing a survey of licensed child care centers her group will release this week.

New Jersey has already set aside some federal funds to aid child care centers. The state has twice provided \$1,000 bonuses to child care workers in hopes the additional pay would disincentivize moves to warehouse or hospitality jobs, which have boosted pay to address their own hiring shortfalls. But advocates say that wasn't enough.

"We need to understand the numbers. For example, if an early childhood teacher is making \$26,000 a year, living within New Jersey's high cost of living, a \$1,000 check is helpful in the moment, but it does not change the fact that they are now making \$27,000 a year," Tavormina said.

Advocates suggested the state match every dollar above minimum wage paid to child care workers, adding that child care subsidies for workers in the industry could keep more teachers in the field.

But they warned that the other steps would amount to little if federal funds do not also boost wages.

New Jersey has roughly \$1.4 billion in unallocated American Rescue Plan money. Funds disbursed to states under the law must be allocated by the end of 2024, and they must be spent by Dec. 31, 2026.

### **Lead, water, and water bills**

Numerous speakers urged the state to put more money behind its efforts to replace aging lead water lines and remove lead paint.

Using federal funds, lawmakers set aside \$300 million for water infrastructure and \$170 million for lead paint remediation when they approved the annual spending bill in late June, but some said the investments fell short or risked being pulled to other programs.

“None of that money has been specifically allocated to address lead service lines,” said Rshan Prailow, cochair of Lead-Free New Jersey.

Prailow asked the state to set aside an additional \$430 million for lead abatement, \$130 million for lead paint removal, and \$300 million to replace lead water lines. During budget negotiations earlier this year, advocates had sought two separate \$300 million allocations for lead paint and water line replacements.

Others said the state should put more federal money into utility assistance, noting some ratepayers are still struggling to meet bills accrued during the pandemic.

New Jersey’s utility shutoff moratorium expired at the start of 2022, and while Gov. Phil Murphy in March signed a bill that bars shutoffs for 60 days after customers file for state assistance, roughly 800,000 ratepayers were still in arrears in June.

“Our members have been and will continue to provide assistance and promote programs that help those in need,” said Christina Farrell, senior director of government and public affairs for the New Jersey Utilities Association. “At the same time, the utilities can only do so much.”

Chris DeMarco, business development coordinator for the International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical Officials, asked the state to put \$1 billion behind utility aid and lead line replacement, noting the latter could cut costs for ratepayers.

The consequences of inaction could be dire, DeMarco said.

“Water debt, which impacts underserved individuals particularly hard, can lead to utilities shutting off water, tax liens, and even collection efforts that can lead to foreclosure,” he said. “Increased funding could prevent this.”

### **Unemployment and legal aid**

Business groups repeated their request for the state to use federal funds to head off unemployment insurance tax hikes triggered by the pandemic's draining of the state fund that pays for jobless claims.

Employers saw their second scheduled increase in unemployment insurance tax rates last month and could face another if the state does not pay off federal unemployment loans it took to keep the fund solvent by September.

Immigration activists asked the state to set aside \$4.5 million for legal aid and other services for undocumented immigrants and undocumented children, specifically.

“For immigrant youth, winning permanent status can be transformative, a path to a life without fear, and access to resources they need to thrive,” said Sarah Nolan, legal director of the New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children. “We know children are far more likely to win their legal cases when represented by a lawyer.”