

Investing in Child Care: **ON-SITE PROGRAMS**

Memorial Health Care Systems

On-site child care programs can help employers such as Memorial Health Care Systems in Seward address their employees' child care challenges while reducing the burden on other community child care programs, especially in rural Nebraska.

Key Points

- ▶ Health care professionals—especially women in direct care roles—faced particularly serious child care challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ On-site child care centers, like the Memorial Health Care Systems Child Development Center, effectively support frontline health care professionals by ensuring their children are cared for in a safe, quality early learning environment.
- ▶ On-site programs can help reduce stress for health care professionals who typically work 12-hour, irregular or rotating shifts outside of traditional business hours.



Cultivating a workplace culture of care

Memorial Health Care Systems has served families in Seward County and the surrounding region for more than 70 years. In addition to an award-winning critical access hospital, Memorial Health Care Systems encompasses family medicine clinics in Seward, Milford and Utica, a pharmacy and a physical therapy office. In 2022, Memorial Health Care Systems was named one of the top 100 critical access hospitals in the U.S. by Chartis Center for Rural Health. The privately owned, nonprofit system employs about 265 full-time, part-time and rotating staff. More than a third of its staff are Millennials, many of whom have begun raising families and putting down permanent roots.



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In the 1990s, Memorial Health Care Systems opened an on-site child development center. The Memorial Health Care Systems Child Development Center is rated Step 2 in Step Up to Quality and cares for about 30 children, from infants to school age. Melissa Kratochvil has served as center director for nearly 20 years, overseeing a full-time staff of up to five and a rotating group of part-time teachers and support staff. Early childhood students from nearby Concordia University often work at the development center to fulfill their practicum requirements.

The child development center was previously housed in a former physician clinic across the street from the hospital. As Memorial Health Care Systems has continued to add new care offerings and staff, the need for more child care has grown, leading to the construction of a new facility that was completed in May 2020.



“We built a brand new facility a couple of years ago and were able to expand our infant care area from four to eight infants,” said Corey Mann, who has led employee recruitment and retention as Memorial Health Care Systems’ human resources director since 2015.

“Caring for the children of health care workers poses its own set of challenges,” said Kratochvil. Many of the center’s students are the sons or daughters of nurses, who typically work three 12-hour shifts a week.

“You’re caring for kids two days one week, maybe three days the next week. It can get a bit challenging from a staffing schedule, but it’s great to be able to provide care for those families,” she said.

Memorial Health Care Systems has extended that same flexibility beyond just scheduling, and has incorporated it into its tuition and billing practices.

“If they only need a couple of days of care a week, we’ll only charge them for a couple of days. They don’t have to pay five full days a week to save their spot,” said Kratochvil.

The center also offers half-day rates for part-time health care workers. Overall, the cost to parents is about 10% less than they would pay at an outside child care program.

The child development center’s teachers and staff are eligible to receive the same benefits as other employees who work for Memorial Health Care Systems. They have access to benefits that educators at home- and center-based programs may not, including health insurance, paid time off and access to flexible spending accounts.

Navigating the worldwide health crisis

Hospitals were not able to simply close during the pandemic. Memorial Health Care Systems, along with its child development center, remained in operation as usual. They experienced some variations in the numbers of children they served during that time, but ultimately it evened out as kids went back to school and families working remotely returned to the office. The hospital was also able to retain their staff through a federal COVID-related loan program.

As the health system looks to recruit new workers and support their current staff, the child development center has become an important part of its benefits package. It reduces stress for working parents and especially new mothers, whose young children are safe and cared for in an on-site, ultramodern facility.

“They see the commitment of the organization toward child care. Knowing they may be starting families or already have young families, it’s something that really piques their interest,” Mann said. “I’m only aware of about four to five critical access hospitals around the state that have child care centers, so it’s a good selling point.”



Memorial
Health Care Systems
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Founded in 1950, Memorial Health Care Systems provides modern, technically-advanced health care services in the Seward County area through an award-winning hospital and three clinic sites. Learn more at mhcs.us.

Impact on Seward County

In 2021, the Seward County Chamber & Development Partnership (SCCDP) identified access to early childhood care and education programs as a critical issue for local families. The SCCDP was selected to participate in Communities for Kids, a community-based initiative of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation designed to help communities develop strategies to enhance and expand local child care opportunities. The SCCDP estimates that Seward County needs 61 additional child care slots.¹

While Memorial Health Care Systems' child development center is only serves employees, it eases the burden of other home- and center-based providers in Seward County, increasing overall child care capacity in the community.

"Having the child care center connected to our hospital is really good for parents because if they know their kids have a safe place to go, that's peace of mind and they can concentrate on work," Kratochvil said.

In areas of the state where early childhood programs are hard to come by, parents have to make tough decisions about where to place their kids.

"The more quality childhood centers we have in our state is a good thing," she added.

Memorial Health Care Systems also supports the local early childhood workforce by offering continuing education opportunities for other providers in the community. And with its proximity to Concordia University, the center is a great location for early childhood students to do their practicums and observations.

A legacy of community support

Memorial Health Care Systems has developed a long legacy of support for working parents and commitment to Seward County. Kratochvil's six-month-old son, as well as Mann's grandsons, all attend the on-site program.

"I have the proud distinction of being a daycare grandpa, so that's pretty exciting for me to both have a senior director role here at the hospital and then see my grandsons cared for over at the child care center," said Mann.

Some of Memorial Health Care Systems' longest tenured staff remember bringing their children to the center when it first opened. Now those kids are grown and bringing their own kids to the center. There's even a staff member who works at the development center who attended the program as a child herself.

"I'm so appreciative of this organization making the commitment that they have, because on-site child care centers are often not money makers," Mann said. "But we see this as a critical employee benefit."

Learn more about how your organization can impact child care in your community at FirstFiveNebraska.org. For more information about Memorial Health Care Systems employee benefits and careers, visit mhcs.us/about-us/employment or contact hr@mhcs.us.

¹ Smith, L., Bagley, A., Wolters, B. (2021). *Child care in 35 states: What we know and don't know*. Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://childcaregap.org>.



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