

NUSAC

Northwestern University Staff Advisory Council

Date: June 6, 2001

To: Henry Bienen, President
Larry Dumas, Provost
Eugene Sunshine, Senior Vice President for Business and Finance

From: Suneetha Vaitheswaran, Chair

Re: Proposal for On-Campus Child Care at Northwestern University

The Northwestern University Staff Advisory Council, NUSAC, represents the views and concerns of its large constituency of non-exempt and exempt staff employees of the University. NUSAC advocates for improvements in the salaries, benefits, and work environment of staff in order to assure that the University's infrastructure remains viable to in turn enable progress teaching and research, and that the valuable contributions of staff are appropriately acknowledged and rewarded. In this regard, some in our constituency would benefit from affordable, quality dependent care services for their children and elder dependents. Therefore, NUSAC very much appreciates the opportunity to be involved in discussions with faculty and graduate student colleagues regarding provisions for improved childcare at Northwestern.

NUSAC has demonstrated a history of support for improved benefits in this area, based on the need expressed over the years. For example, in 1997 NUSAC co-sponsored a childcare survey with the General Faculty Committee (GFC) and the Organization of Women Faculty (OWF). While many of the staff and faculty who responded did so because of their keen interest in the subject of the survey, they articulated and reflected the variety of issues, options, and challenges implicit in the subject of childcare.

While we support the concept of improved benefits in childcare for staff, NUSAC represents all staff and must consider the tensions inherent in the following areas:

- ❖ The ongoing priorities for all staff of improving compensation and core benefits. Unfortunately, we fall behind our peers and very far behind our faculty colleagues in these most basic areas.
- ❖ The percentage of our staff who would benefit from onsite center care.
- ❖ The percentage of these staff who could afford the suggested costs of onsite center care.
- ❖ The percentage of staff who would benefit from improved childcare options in general.

These important issues lead to the premise that our support of childcare for staff warrants analysis of parallel and alternative options to onsite center care. For example:

1. Consider implementation of cafeteria benefits as a means to make childcare improvements relate to better choices for all staff in terms of the benefits that meet their needs at any given stage of life. In approaching this idea the administration should:
 - Address the overhead to operate such a plan.
 - Recognize that the costs to fund adequate core benefits for each employee/family, and to accommodate floating benefits based on the needs of each employee/family at

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any given phase of employment will likely require increased funding for benefits overall.

2. Revamp the Dependent Care Program, which in its current form does not approximate employee need, either through program provisions or subsidy rates. Low participation in the current program is not an indication insufficient need, but of a mismatch between employee needs and program features:
 - Adjust income ceilings and benefit scale to afford more opportunities for middle-income parents to receive the benefits.
 - Increase the rate of subsidy at all levels.
 - Research alternative processes and procedures to improve convenience and decrease complexity of the current program for employees and administrators.
 - Market the program.
3. Continue working with childcare providers in Evanston and Chicago to improve the number and quality of slots in these communities, possibly buying or reserving some for University use.
4. Improve childcare Referral Services

In further contemplating onsite center care in particular, NUSAC raises the following concerns on behalf of staff:

- ❖ Funding (capital investment, and/or ongoing operations and subsidies) must emanate from a source other than the current benefits or capital pools. Staff cannot choose or be chosen for while still lagging on salaries and basic benefits.
- ❖ Costs for center care should not exceed current costs that the average staff member pays for childcare:
 - The rates defined in the proposal exceed the affordability threshold for many if not most staff.
 - Lower paid staff in particular have responded to the proposal with great concern about the extent to which they will be left out of onsite center care, through a combination of affordability and prioritization of limited slots.

Based on the points highlighted above, NUSAC provides a limited endorsement to the "Proposal for On-Campus Child Care at Northwestern University". We look forward to our upcoming dialogue with you and with the coalition of interested campus groups. We further welcome the opportunity to continue to work with these groups, with the hope that further discussions on this issue with the guidance of experts in the childcare field will lead the University to the best possible implementation of childcare benefits to meet the needs of its broader constituency.