

Meriden, Southington YMCAs provide free child care for hospital employees, first responders



March 31, 2020 06:55PM
By Matthew Zabierek, Record-Journal staff



MERIDEN — Two local YMCAs are participating in a new state-led initiative to provide child care for children of hospital employees and first responders during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The state Office of Early Childhood is using a \$3 million donation from Dalio Philanthropies to launch "Project 26" — which matches the state's 26 hospitals with a nearby day care center.



The centers will receive money from the Office of Early Childhood to provide child care at no cost to hospital workers and first responders. Locally, the Meriden YMCA's Early Learning Center has been approved by the state to partner with MidState Medical Center, and the Southington/Cheshire YMCA has been paired with Bradley Hospital.

"These first responders and medical professionals are working hard and going through difficult times, and we're just trying to make it easier so they can do what they do," said John Benigni, CEO of the Meriden-New Britain-Berlin YMCA.

Both YMCAs have already begun serving the children.

Related Stories:



[Can daycares stay open during the COVID-19 crisis? State says yes.](#)



"As a YMCA, we need to be here to fulfill community needs, especially during a crisis like this," Mark Pooler, CEO of the Southington/Cheshire YMCA, said in a statement.



"I am proud of our staff for their willingness to step up to the challenge..."



The OEC is allowing up to 30 children at each day care.



Both Benigni and Pooler said this week their programs are about half filled, and they expect slots to go fast. Both YMCAs said they may be able to work with OEC to open up an additional day care space with another 30 slots if the demand is too great.

Many health care workers and first responders have suddenly needed child care because schools are closed. In some cases, families have had to look elsewhere because their usual day care center closed, Benigni said.



The \$3 million pledged by Dalio Philanthropies, founded by Connecticut billionaire Ray Dalio and his wife Barbara, is expected to support eight weeks of child care.



"Ray and I are deeply concerned about these frontline hospital workers, and the additional burdens they're bearing as a result of this pandemic," Barbara Dalio said in a statement. "... To us, they are heroes. The least we can do is make sure their children are taken care of while they're on the front lines providing medical care."



To be eligible, day care centers were required to have a licensed space available, be within three miles of the hospital, have a licensing status in good standing, and an ability to serve infants/toddlers, preschool children and school-age children.

'Cash flow challenges'

While the Southington/Cheshire Y awaits funding from the state, the Main Street Community Foundation has donated \$25,000 to get the child care services up and running, Pooler said.

The money is much appreciated, Pooler said, because the Y has experienced "cash flow challenges" from the pandemic. The donation should be enough to cover at least two weeks of day care operations, he said.

"This program would not be running right now without their support and generosity," Pooler said.



In addition to providing free emergency child care services, Project 26 will help participating day cares continue to operate and maintain staff.



Prior to enrolling in Project 26, Benigni said the Y had closed all five of its day care centers in Meriden for financial reasons and also to encourage the public to stay home.



Jaclyn Kish, owner of My Little Rascals in Southington, said her day care has lost about 75 percent of its families — from about 30 to 9 — because many either cannot afford day care or no longer need it because one or both parents are now at home. As a result, Kish has had to temporarily reduce from 10 part- and full-time employees to five.

"It's definitely had a huge impact," she said.

Kish said she is serving two families with a health care worker. Her day care was interested in stepping up to participate in the Project 26 program, but the Y ultimately got the donation and state approval.

The Office of Early Childhood said it is contacting day care facilities that have closed and "may be willing to reopen specifically to provide child care for health care workers; or currently open programs that can dedicate specific classrooms for this effort. We will be reaching out to specific locations who may meet the need."

mzabierek@record-journal.com 203-317-2279 Twitter: @MatthewZabierek