

Arizona Capitol Times

September 17, 2010

UpClose with Bruce Liggett

By Luige del Puerto



Child care advocate says governor should lift cap on subsidy program

Armed with fact sheets and graphs, Bruce Liggett laid out his case: He understands that child care can't be spared from budget cuts, but he argues that investing in child care pays off.

The logic is simple. The subsidy allows parents to go to work, stay off unemployment rolls and contribute to the economy. There is another economic argument. For every eight children on child-care subsidy, one job is created. Put another way, for every eight children taken off the subsidy, one job is lost.

You could say that Liggett, executive director of the Arizona Child Care Association, has a personal stake in the fate of child care in Arizona. He helped craft the state's child-care laws in the mid-1990s and helped create the Arizona Child Care Administration within the Department of Economic Security.

The former DES deputy director has been fighting to lift the "waiting list" for new child-care enrollees, which was put in place early last year as part of the state's response to a historic budget problem.

At its peak, there were more than 48,000 children in the program. By May this year, it was down to about 32,000 children. In this interview, Liggett talks about his government service and No. 18, a special number.

How did you start working in the child care sector?

When I was at DES, I worked for seven years in development disabilities. I worked in the central office policy unit. So I did a lot of work in long-term care for the elderly when we brought that into Medicaid under Title 19. I did a lot of work in welfare reform, and in one of the inevitable director changes at the DES — it happens all the time — they said, "Well, we're going to do some things different. What would you like to do?" And I said, "I think child care is underdeveloped here." And under welfare reform, it was going to expand greatly. So I said, "Let me go and try and put together a child-care program that the state can be proud of." And they did, and what an exciting time.

You helped craft some of the child-care laws that are still in place today. Is that correct?

Oh, absolutely. Welfare reform in 1995-1996 passed at the national level. It required us to relock at how we're doing things in Arizona. Back then the Legislature was really engaged in welfare issues. Back

then we knew that the trade off in Washington to get rid of the mandate, the entitlement nature of welfare, involved a commitment to help people with child care and health care. So then we could apply the expectation that they would get jobs.

So yeah, we wrote these child-care statutes. Mark Anderson chaired the block grant committee. My later-to-become-wife, Jodi Beckley, staffed that committee. And the leaders were Mark Anderson and Carolyn Allen.

We were at the table as the state agency helping to craft and shape the welfare reform legislation. I was asked to write the child-care piece. So, I did.

You said the Legislature then was very engaged. Can you describe their attitude toward child care and compare it with how it has changed through the years?

It has been really challenging — frustrating — because it has evolved in a really negative way, I think. The child care subsidy program in DES started back in the 1980s, back when there was some federal money. But it was a product of much legislative and Republican discussion.

Legislators cared about the child-care program. They knew how it worked. They knew what the eligibility was. There were discussions about whether people going to school should get help versus people working. Senators like John Mawhinney from Tucson were very involved and, frankly, were sometimes upset about the program — about how it was working and not about whether it existed, which is a key distinction.

The change that you now see in the Legislature, how do you think that began? Where do you think the shift happened?

I think for some in the mid-1990s the support was grudging. It was a necessary evil. I think some viewed it as that. And I was frustrated because we never really embraced what we could have done for the children had we invested more in quality to get them ready for school as long as we're paying for child care.

But people like senators Dave Peterson and Rusty Bowers and Tom Patterson, I remember, grilled me several times about how we were doing and how it was working, but they made the commitment and put the resources there. The program then in the late 1990s, you know, slowly and steadily grew, and it was really kind of under the radar.

I think people felt we fixed welfare. But then after we did welfare reform everybody moved on and then I think the next awakening was when we had budget problems.

All of a sudden we hit the budget problem of 2002 and 2003, and for the first time ever the child-care caseload was exceeding its appropriation. And it was a crisis that occurred in the transition from (Gov. Jane) Hull to (Gov. Janet) Napolitano, and it became a political focal point.

Where were you at this time?

I left. The Napolitano people made a change, which, you know, surprised me. I had been a lifelong child-welfare and child-care administrator under multiple administrations.

I think at that same time, if you looked at the composition of the Legislature, there was less support for DES programs in general. We had a Democratic governor then and Democrats were viewed as more supportive of those programs, so it became a focal point.

I think the key (then) was even when people didn't necessarily like some of the programs in DES, they knew about them and they wanted them to run well. It's not like they didn't want them to exist. And they had a history.

Term limits are another issue. I smiled to see some of the candidates' summaries (in the ~Arizona Capitol Times~ election guide) saying what we need to do is, you know, look at welfare and reform

welfare. I thought, wow. In fact, I'd love to look back at the new class coming in to see if anyone was even there during welfare reform. Carolyn Allen is gone. Bob Burns is gone.

Why does government have to subsidize child care? Isn't it the job of people to be responsible and make sure, before they decide to have babies, that they are able to support those children?

Well, it really starts with your fundamental role of government and how you view government. If you are compassionate and understanding of how things really work, the vast majority of people who have children take care of their own children. They do.

Now there are people who made what you might consider or I might even consider bad choices. So then what do we do as a society? Do we turn our backs on them with the ultimate harm coming to their children, who are going to be another whole generation because of our philosophy? Well, it is not like that. Most people don't come to government for help. Some who do, don't qualify. Those who do qualify have to meet certain conditions now because we have tightened this thing up over the past 20 years.

How is the child care situation today? I presume that the freeze is still in place.

Yes, and we are really seeing a lot of negative effects. When the waiting list was put in place, the program was serving at its peak 48,000 children. What we have seen because of what the governor referred to as a hard cap is a steady decline in the program through attrition. What people need to realize is it's not one person on, one person off. It is nobody is getting in. The program is steadily running aground.

What is the effect of the drop (of child care enrollees) on the child care industry?

What we have seen in the first six months of this year is a net reduction of 15 child-care facilities in Arizona per month. Centers are closing, and homes that serve larger numbers of children are closing. The job loss that I mentioned: For every eight children that the DES stops funding, we lay off one person.

My estimate is that with the federal care money and the state match, which is only \$30 million by the way — maintenance of effort and match is \$30 million. This was a \$200 million program — we could be serving 35,000 children. You can see since October of last year we are below that level and look how much more below we are going. So what I've asked the executive (Governor's Office) to reconsider is this absolute cap on child care.

Child care has got to take its proportionate care of cuts. I understand that. But we are so far below now that we are not at a level where we are able to draw down the federal (money).

What would you say to them if you are given the opportunity to convince them that this cap should be lifted?

I have said I understand how bad the budget is and the really tough choices we have and a lot of the programs that have suffered and the people who suffered. But this is also a time when we need to have leadership to make the right decision based on investment. So allow me to make the business case for child care.

I won't talk about the families trying to stay off welfare because you had just cut a bunch from mental health services. I understand that.

For every eight children who are funded in child care through the subsidy, we create a job in child care. So child care can create jobs, can keep small businesses open, can put money back into Arizona's economy, which stays here in the state, and child care money churns around. There is a multiplier effect. Every dollar you put in child care there is a \$2.52 impact throughout Arizona's economy.

I'm convinced and the data support the fact that this is an investment that has returns for Arizona.

UP CLOSER with Bruce Liggett

What did you want to be growing up?

You know, I had not a clue. I came from a working-class family. I'm one of these kids who kind of found myself at college. I thought I was supposed to be a business major because that's what boys did then. I was doing horribly, and I took an interest test and I started working in juvenile corrections. So I worked at reform schools that housed gang kids from Chicago when I was 18. And so I worked in corrections for several years.

Have you ever seen the movie "Bad Boys?" I worked at that facility.

What did you do exactly there?

Oh, I watched the kids and counted them because they were runaways. And I worked at a different one there in Illinois. I even worked at the girls' lockup for a while. And I'd find out that the kids who left, went back home and were killed. I remember having an epiphany thinking "This is too late."

What did your parents do?

My mom worked as a bookkeeper, and my dad worked in a factory. But in my family we didn't talk about books. We were kind of like feral children. We'd just get up and go and play, you know. (Laughs).

I have an older brother and a younger brother. I did horribly in high school. I never did my homework. I was at the bottom third of my graduating class. I took the ACT and I did get, I guess, a decent score. A high school counselor at my senior year, right before the end of the school, said you could get into a state school with this score, on probation.

So I went to Southern Illinois University and struggled in the first quarter. In the second quarter, I got all As and Bs and was on the dean's list. It was like I got it. Something happened.

Maybe you just needed a structured learning environment.

An environment, I think, that supported thinking and ideas. And it was 1969. My draft number was 18. I was going to Vietnam if I didn't stay in school.

I was in the classroom and it was the first lottery. So all of us — and I think it covered people who were 18 and 19 — and they pulled ping pong balls out of a hamper.

You just stayed at school and that's how you stayed out of the military?

Right! Great motivator. Not fair — that deferment. If we had a draft again I certainly would not advocate for a deferment based on people who got into school compared to kids who had no opportunity.