

# Resource Centers

## Help Child-Care Providers



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Photos by Marco Nicovich

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Help was on the way in 2005 to northeastern Mississippi's child-care workers, teachers and parents, but when Hurricane Katrina hit, the effort to provide educational and resource materials expanded to include the devastated Gulf Coast counties.

Mississippi State University's Extension Service and Early Childhood Institute are receiving funds from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Day Foundation that helped establish a northeastern Mississippi Childcare Resource and Referral system. Resource and Referral Centers provide training, technical assistance and resources emphasizing literacy and age-appropriate teaching strategies for the early childhood field. Teachers in child-care centers and family child-care homes as well as parents can access the educational materials.

The pilot project, which began in January 2005, has been a partnership with Northeast Mississippi Community College (NEMCC), Itawamba Community College (ICC) and East Mississippi Community College (EMCC). Before Katrina, the project served the 24 ARC counties in northeastern Mississippi.

Louise Davis, professor of child and family development for MSU's Extension Service, said the initial project addressed the training needs of about 7,500 people employed in licensed child-care centers and family child-care homes in 24 counties in northeastern Mississippi. These programs serve more than 13,000 children from birth to 5 years of age.

Sites on ICC's Tupelo campus, EMCC's Mayhew campus and the NEMCC campus in Booneville will house child-care resources and offer workshops for issues related to preschool children. An additional site separate from ARC funding was added at the First Regional Library in Hernando to include Desoto, Tunica, Tate, Panola and Lafayette counties. Other partners in the Hernando site include the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi and the Day Foundation of Memphis with matching grants of \$40,000.

"These sites provide educational materials and resources to families, Head Start teachers and child-care workers," Davis said. "They offer convenient and educational opportunities for people in this area with special interests in early childhood issues."

After Hurricane Katrina, the methods were in place to expand on the coast and provide support to the caregivers in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties. A coastal site has been established at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Jefferson Davis campus in Biloxi. More than a dozen workshops have taken place to provide materials to child-care centers damaged by Katrina. A toll-free number has been established to assist centers in finding workers and to help parents find appropriate centers for their child-care needs.

Bettye Wadsworth, Extension area child and family development agent based in Jackson County, said the help has been exactly what caregivers needed.

"Centers have been stressed. They are dealing with so many other needs, like insurance, building repair and personal home issues," Wadsworth said. "It has been a load off their minds to have our help both in materials and in supplying training hours."

Wadsworth said the parents also benefit from the resources.

"Everyone appreciates the ability to check out materials at no cost," she said.

Partners for the Gulf Coast Resource and Referral include the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative, the National Association on Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Embrace Mississippi's Children, Moore Community House and United Way of South Mississippi.

Davis said this partnership between the community colleges, MSU's Extension Service, MSU's Early Childhood Institute and others is a significant opportunity to enhance early childhood education for the communities.

"Together, we can provide greater access to materials and information to benefit children, families and the early childhood community," Davis said.

The Extension Service area agents, site coordinators and technicians at each site conduct workshops for parents and child-care providers. They also go to child-care centers in the area to address needs on the spot.

"The site coordinators overseeing the resource and referral sites have experience in the early childhood field and can answer questions from personal and educational experience.

Carol Bishop, child development technology instructor at ICC, described the project as a "wonderful asset" for her community college because it helps reinforce early child development programs on both the Tupelo and Fulton campuses.

"We provide more than just classroom education. Students have a place to go for new ideas and knowledge about child-care centers in the community," Bishop said. "The sites give students the opportunity to interact with people who come in, take part in workshops and use the centers themselves for a variety of purposes."

Sandra Ford, child development technology instructor at NMCC, said the resources benefit her students as well as providing more items for the public from educational materials developed in classes.

"This resource site helps the people in the community, not only the child-care providers, but also the parents," Ford said. "Most places with resource materials are only open from 8 until 5, but this one is open at night and on some weekends."



Paul Miller, vice president for the Golden Triangle campus of EMCC, also appreciates the role of the Resource and Referral Centers in supporting the training needs of existing child-care centers and parents in the area.

"I hope it will help establish a child development program at EMCC, which will complement our existing early childhood education program. Our involvement may lead to expanding our facilities as well as our programs," Miller said.

As parents and child-care professionals come to the campus for resource materials, Miller said they should become comfortable in the educational setting and consider furthering their education.

Laurie Todd, director of state initiatives for MSU's Early Childhood Institute, said the project helps parents by supplying valuable information on child-care choices and providing tips for selecting child care.

"This project should help businesses and enhance economic development by supporting high-quality child care for families in Mississippi," Todd said.