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HARD WORK DOESN'T PAY\ COALITION DRAWS ATTENTION TO LOW WAGES IN CHILD CARE CENTERS.

BY NANCY H. MCLAUGHLIN Staff Writer

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He wiped noses, led the line to wash hands and made sure the playroom was as much fun for 8-month-old Chandler Spaulding as it was for 2-year-old Justin Hertzell in his two hours as a child care provider.

Then he sat on the floor and read in an animated voice that kept 2-year-old Aninah Danzy and 1-year-old Riley Lockhart's attention. For two hours Tuesday, the Rev. Nelson Johnson, who normally spends his days ministering to his congregation, ministered to the needs of four children at the LifePlay Family Child Care Home.

Johnson got a taste of child care provider Donna Danzy's schedule, which begins at 6:30 a.m., an hour before the children arrive at LifePlay Family Child Care Home, and ends each day after the last one leaves at 5:30 p.m.

"It would be a huge challenge to do this for a full day, for every day," Johnson said.

Johnson spent those hours shadowing Danzy as part of "Worthy Wage Day," a project of the Worthy Wage Coalition, a national group created to draw attention to the plight of child care workers, some of the most poorly paid employees on any salary scale.

According to a survey by the Center for the Child Care Workforce, the average child care worker in Guilford County made between \$5.87 and \$6.50 an hour in 1999.

They make less than bus drivers, service-station attendants and animal trainers, yet they are responsible for the most important years in a child's development. At the same time, the cost of high-quality child care is out of reach for many parents.

Wages are one reason child care centers have such high turnover rates nationwide. Guilford County has a turnover rate of 38 percent for child care workers, according to the survey.

Familiar faces aren't the only things the children lose when child care workers quit, said Rosemarie Vardell, who is a North Carolina representative of the Child Care Workforce.

"People are leaving jobs that they love, that they are trained to do ... and for children, a trusted adult is gone," Vardell said during a press conference for the event at the Women's Resource Center.

Danzy, who has a degree in elementary education, makes \$4.64 an hour. She spends 61.5 hours a week on her job. Gathering supplies takes 2 hours; lesson planning, 1 hour; cleaning, 6 hours; and she operates for 52.5 hours each week. She makes \$1,380 a month, has expenses of \$150, and nets \$1,230.

One solution, she said, is for the government to become financially involved, as it has for kindergarten.

"Brain research tells us what children are exposed to from birth to age 3 makes the biggest impact," she said. "I think with where we are making our investment, we are missing a window of opportunity."

At the end of the day, Johnson got a mock check for \$5.70 for his two hours of work - less than Danzy, because he didn't have the required certifications to work in day care.

"And that's a shame," he said.

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