

Commissioners tap poor fund to pay for day-care position

By RICK HULL
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The county commissioners have tentatively agreed to fund a local day-care coordinator.

The action comes as the clock ticks closer to the Oct. 1 start of state welfare reforms. Families Achieving Independence in Montana, the most extensive welfare overhaul in the nation, will emphasize putting mothers to work.

"If we don't have child care available, we're going to sabotage welfare reform," said Susan Christofferson, director of the Nurturing Center.

The \$40,900 is to come from the county poor fund, which has been set aside for just such expenditures. But the county commissioners warned that the funding may not survive the coming struggle over the county budget.

The coordinator position comes at the urging of the local FAIM task force.

Two programs in the reform will put pressure on child care, said John Gardner, director of the local Montana Public Health and Human Services office and member of the advisory council.

One is job supplementation for the working poor. Rather than cash payments, welfare clients will get help with child care, Medicaid health services,

food stamps and other assistance.

The other program is the family investment agreement, which requires welfare recipients to put in 10 to 20 hours a week of volunteer work or schooling.

"If they come back and say they can't find any child care, the whole thing fails," said Gardner.

There is already a shortage of child-care slots in the Flathead, said Christofferson.

The idea is to hire someone who will recruit new child-care providers and offer technical advice on licensing and insurance.

One advantage is Flathead Valley Community College's growing program of child-care instruction, and the coordinator will make use of that training source.

The coordinator will also work to keep existing day-care centers in business, said Christofferson. The industry is crippled by a 45-percent annual turnover rate, partly because of the job's low prestige, she said.

Among those encouraged to enter the business will be welfare clients.

The coordinator will work out of the Nurturing Center. The contract must be written so it is clear that the coordinator is not a county employee, said Earl Bennett, administrative assistant to the commissioners.