HOW CHILD CARE ISSUES ARE AFFECTING COOP MEMBERSHIP

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Above: The Room Formerly Known as Childcare.

By Suzanne Cope

As of July 12, the Coop has reinstated member work requirements, requiring that every adult member of a household work a shift every seven weeks, for now.

Members can ask for a COVID exemption through October 31st (for reasons that include having a child at home who is too young to be vaccinated), but after that date nearly every adult member will need to sign up for shifts through the new scheduling

system accessed via the online Member Services site. Hopes are that the Coop will begin to return to a new normal. Although there is one notable exception: the indefinite closing of the child care room.

No more choking concerns.

While I didn’t hear from any parents who want the child care room open, and the office has yet to field any requests, some parents who relied upon Coop-based child care to facilitate their work shift pre-pandemic find themselves in a challenging spot that echoes broader societal conversation around parenting and working in a pandemic.

Countless articles have highlighted the plight of working parents with limited or nonexistent childcare during the pandemic, who have had to negotiate work and sudden school closures and classroom quarantines, and whose mental health has suffered from the non-stop working and care-giving. Further, there are a record number of people leaving positions—often citing a disconnect between their own work-life balance and job expectations.

Here at the Coop, too, there is evidence that the return to in-person work requirements, with no flexibility for parents of young children, is taxing some parent-members.

Nell, a new member and parent to two elementary-aged kids, was excited to join to expand her family’s access to healthy and affordable foods. But she has become disillusioned with the seeming lack of flexibility of work requirements for parents of young kids, and worries that she will have even fewer options as she job-searches.

Nell said, “an issue I encountered is that there are few shifts that I can sign up for because I have to schedule the times where I know the kids are at school,” which are not plentiful. She had signed up for one on Monday, October 11th but then realized that she would have to reschedule because it was a school holiday. She added, “and once I find a new job, my options will dwindle down to nothing.” Gone, for the time being at least, are the days when one could bring their children in during the late afternoon or early evening, grab some snacks from downstairs for dinner, and have them work on homework or play during a parents’ shift.

Maya and Dora Solovey, mother and child. Maya says that she has to shop more frequently since there is no childcare, and that her daughter would love to play at the Coop. Sergio and Caetano Krakowski were the only other parents shopping together with their children at 11:00 a.m. on October 12.

A solo mom with a one year old said she might take a leave of absence after the October 31 COVID exemption is over, and another new parent, Sarah, has echoed the same. She says, “we’re definitely worried about what it will be like when [parent leave] runs out and we both have to do shifts with two kids and both of us working full time. We’re already thinking we might have to take a leave from the Coop.”

But the Coop is also in a tough position. The Coop has lost around 4,000 members in the last 18 months and has not been accepting any new members (although they will begin to do so soon). More members are needed both to provide people-power—and

to shop to bring in revenue.

The lack of child care has had an effect on shopping habits as well. Stephanie, a parent to a two and six year old, praised how the Coop has handled safety and resiliency over the last year and a half, and also loves the flexibility and ease of the new shift sign-up system. She says that her family has been "able to deal" with completing their shifts, but adds, "the combination of an earlier closing time and no child care means that we go less."

For her, these factors greatly limit when she can schedule solo shopping since she can't go after her childrens' bedtime, nor does she bring them over the weekend as the Coop had initially requested that children not accompany parents while shopping. She suspects other parents have limited their shopping for similar reasons, which frustrates her, because, she says, "I love the Coop and I want it to survive!"

Childcare challenges have affected my family as well. My new work shift on the *Gazette* is virtual, which fulfills my work requirement. But my husband Steve is the primary caregiver to our two year old, who is only in daycare part-time, and he must also pick up her brother from school by early afternoon. He has yet to schedule a shift

because he would be forced to give up some of the few hours he has to meet colleagues during normal work hours.

I work outside of the house and don't return until after the last shift starts. Most weekends are spent visiting extended family in upstate, leaving few options. "I would literally be paying daycare and losing money from lost work so that I can work at the Coop," Steve says. Luckily he had banked a number of FTOP shifts from years ago, so we have some time to figure out a workable solution.

Annette Laskaris, PSFC Membership Coordinator, has responded to these concerns noting that the decrease in members has made the work requirement more urgent. But she has some hopeful news as well, adding that she expects shopping hours to be lengthened again "within six months or less."

Annette also commented on the request to not bring children shopping, saying that it was done in the beginning of the pandemic when the lines were long and capacity limits were first introduced, with an aim to allow more shopping members into the Coop. The Coop has decided to continue these capacity limits but, she said, bringing children shopping is becoming less of an issue as there have been few, if no lines lately. "We want people to come shop," she said. "We need people to shop!"

Annette also noted that she has heard only a few complaints about the work requirement from parents with childcare challenges, and doesn't see the child care room opening in the foreseeable future.

Rather, she said that parents need to get creative about finding ways to schedule their work shifts. "You already have to manage your life outside of the Coop without anybody watching your kids," she says. "You can schedule whenever you have time, or can get a friend to watch your child… I think you can manage, even as a single parent."

The Coop still serves children.

Once the COVID exemption expires in a few weeks, time will tell if parents of young children can fulfill their work requirement, or if it becomes a reason they might have to leave the Coop as some have indicated. The grace period for suspension has been extended to 35 days, so that might give some caregivers time to find needed child-care. But perhaps the Coop can use this time to come up with a more tenable solution, possibly inspired by approaches that came up during the research of this article.

Often parents of young kids would use working in the childcare room as their work requirement, allowing them to contribute while still being with their children. Can we reframe the care of young children as a shift in and of itself: that one partner of a family with young kids might receive an earned work credit automatically to show we value the work done in the home to keep our young members healthy and safe? This would allow the Coop to be seen as a leader among institutions on prioritizing family care over traditional productivity, as they have shown themselves through their leadership keeping shoppers and workers safe and healthy during the last 18 months.

Or at the very least perhaps the Coop administration can model a program based on the long history of mutual aid in progressive communities, creating a formal system where members can contribute FTOP shifts for those who most need it. Certainly many families can “make it work”—as more than one interviewee told me—but why push already taxed families to the limit? Why create one more barrier to being a part of our community for access to affordable and healthy food?

Long-time member Carl, who is also the dad of two elementary-aged kids, supported finding easy avenues for Coop members to help out caregivers in need. He and his wife have some scheduling flexibility and will be able to manage their work shifts, but he acknowledges their privilege. “It’s people like me who should be stepping up to support the Coop for those who aren’t so lucky,” Carl said. “That’s the part of being in the Coop community that is meaningful to me.”