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**Child care advocates don't want to be left out**  
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Jan. 22--When planning for growth, developers and government officials often talk about new roads, parks and schools.

But a new group in Merced County wants child care facilities to be a priority on that list, too.

"The need for child care in Merced County is only going to grow," said Christie Hendricks, coordinator for the county's Constructing Connections program.

Constructing Connections is a statewide program trying to boost the number of child care facilities by simplifying the process of starting one and including them in local government and housing development planning.

"We've got to change the developers' thinking," said Denard Davis, president of D&D Associates, a management consulting and diversity training firm in Merced and Constructing Connections partner. "They just don't see child care as a part of the plan."

At a Friday Constructing Connections meeting, Hendricks broke down the actual needs in the county based on estimated population growth.

"The rule of thumb is one licensed child care space for every 20 housing units," Hendricks said at a Constructing Connections meeting Friday.

With Merced County's population slated to reach more than 373,000 by 2025, she said hundreds of new child care facilities will need to be opened to serve the area.

Hendricks broke down child care needs by city to share at the meeting.

"I'm just astonished by the projected growth in Livingston," she said.

With an estimated 13,587 homes projected in Livingston in upcoming years, about 697 child care spaces will be needed there.

Hendricks said typically half of those children will be watched by a family or friend, leaving 339 children needing child care.

Today, only 15 licensed child care providers do business in Livingston.

"We don't have enough child care in Livingston right now, think about what will happen (when the city grows)," Hendricks said. "We have to push developers to include child care just like they do parks and schools."

Funded by a two-year \$60,000 grant, Constructing Connections has already made a step toward another one of its goals -- streamlining the child care provider process.

The project has released a resource guide for opening and operating child care facilities in Merced County. The resource guide gives step-by-step instructions, a list of fees and applications and code requirements about family child care providers or child care centers.

But that is only the first step.

If processes could be put in place that simplify financing and permit approval, childcare businesses in the future will be able to get facilities built, renovated and approved quickly, Hendricks said.

**Low Income Investment Fund** Senior Program Officer Manuel Fierro, who has worked with other counties on their Constructing Connections, brought a list of what those counties have done to add child care needs to their development plans and land use designations.

For example, in Alameda County's East County Area Plan, wording is included that requires mitigation for child care if a demand for it in an area will increase.

"I think the intent is to make it easier not only for the operator, but the municipalities," he said.

With the help of child care providers, city and county planners, business owners, public safety officials, building inspectors and others involved in planning, developing and approving child care centers and preschools, the group will continue to advocate for the future of child care in the county.

"We have to be very proactive in planning," Hendricks said. "The demand will be huge."

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