

Juneau already had a childcare shortage. Then two more centers closed

January 18, 2023 by Katie Anastas, KTOO

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Childcare workers interact with infants at Gold Creek Child Development Center in Juneau on May 11, 2018. (Photo by Jeremy Hsieh/KTOO)

Two of Juneau’s childcare centers are closing after months of trying to hire new administrators. The closures will worsen Juneau’s [shortage of childcare options](#), particularly for infants and toddlers.

The Gold Creek Child Development Center and the Aurora Lights Childcare Center were two of only a handful of childcare centers in Juneau that accepted kids under 16 months old. And Discovery Preschool had to close waitlist applications this week as Gold Creek and Aurora Light families sought other options.

“Our waitlist is so long that some of these children will be in first or second grade by the time we have space available,” said Rosemary Williams, the owner and administrator of Discovery Preschool.

Williams said the waitlist was already long, especially for their infant room. Gold Creek and Aurora Lights' closures have added to the backlog.

"I have parents that are pregnant on the waitlist for the infant room, parents that are planning on getting pregnant asking about waitlist applications, just because the childcare need in Juneau is so huge," she said.

Closures of childcare centers during the pandemic caused many workers to leave the industry. Now, as more and more parents have gone back to work in person, persistent staff shortages have kept childcare scarce in Alaska and nationally.

Gold Creek closed on Friday as board members search for a new executive director. The close is temporary, and the nonprofit center's board will try to reopen in the next 90 days while it is still licensed to operate by the state. Before the closure, between 40 and 45 students were enrolled, and others were on a waitlist. When fully staffed, it has room for 60 students. The closure meant layoffs for a dozen staff members, most of whom had worked there for less than a year.

Gold Creek's former executive director left in mid-November. The center's volunteer board has offered the job to eight applicants so far, but none have accepted it, according to board member Ashley Snookes.

She said most of them were local parents with full-time jobs who ultimately decided against the career switch.

"There's been a lot of interest in helping us in the short term, but finding somebody who wants to make this their long-term career, I think that's a little bit different," Snookes said. "We just haven't been able to find the right person."

Gold Creek serves federal employees, including those who work for the Coast Guard, the FBI, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium. It will remain closed until the board hires a new executive director.

Aurora Lights Childcare Center is closing Thursday after its own search for a new administrator proved unsuccessful. They announced the closure to families and staff in mid-October and intended to stay open through March, but a drop in enrollment and loss of staff caused them to close this week.

Outgoing administrator Betty Csech said other childcare centers were offering higher wages and benefits for similar positions.

“We don’t have outside resources like some of the other, bigger centers that may be funded by the state or funded by federal funds,” she said. “We work off of what we bring in from tuition, so it’s really hard to compete with others that can offer higher wages and benefits that we just cannot as a smaller facility.”

Csech said Aurora Lights had eight students and three staff members on its last day Wednesday. She’s not sure where those students will go.

This story has been updated to clarify that Gold Creek’s closure is temporary.

We want to hear more about the impact of the childcare shortage on our community. Are you a parent or childcare provider affected by these closures? Share your experience with us. We will contact you if we wish to use any part of your story.