

Sick-child care programs can be a worker's 'lifesaver'



Nurse Erin Elliott kneels by 15-month-old Matthew Robinson's cot to check on him. He has an upper respiratory infection and is staying at a sick daycare at Rainbow Station in Virginia Beach. (David B. Hollingsworth | The Virginian-Pilot)

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VIRGINIA BEACH

Brian Robinson didn't have to take time off from his new job to care for his sick son.

Instead, he took him to Rainbow Station, a child care center on Sandbridge Road that accepts mildly ill children, including those not enrolled in the center's regular program.

There are only about 325 such places in the country, said Dr. Jacqueline W. Stewart, an Alabama pediatrician who heads the National Association for Sick Child Daycare.

"Calling out sick is not always feasible," said Hazel Mariano, a pediatric nurse practitioner who opened Rainbow Station in June 2007.

Sick-child programs offer a separate area for ill children, a medical professional to take care of them and enough staff to cover the varying number of children who arrive on any given day.

Like most similar programs, the Get Well Place at Rainbow Station loses money. But Mariano said it's valuable to parents.

Stewart said employers value it too. She estimated that for every dollar an employer spends on day care for a sick child, it gains \$2 to \$3 in worker productivity.

Rainbow Station has just begun to market the Get Well Place. A GEICO insurance operation in the Corporate Landing office park has signed the first business contract.

For children who aren't regularly enrolled at the center, the cost is \$40 for a half-day or \$60 for a full day, plus a one-time \$40 registration fee.

For regularly enrolled children, the Get Well Place fee is \$25 for a half-day or \$42 for a full day. That is in addition to regular weekly tuition.

Rainbow Station even picks up sick students from schools within a five-mile radius.

Rainbow Station enrolls about 280 children in nursery, preschool and after-school programs. The younger children are based in an area designed to look like a train station. The older children stay in "The Village," arranged around a Disney-esque town square. Children can choose activities in surrounding "shops" including an arcade, a cafe, an art gallery, a construction site, a computer lab, a library, a gym, a science area and a theater.

The Beach site, one of 10 Rainbow Station locations in Virginia, North Carolina and Texas, last week earned a merit design award from the Virginia Beach Planning Commission.

The Get Well Place has its own ventilation system and a door to the parking lot. Inside, the small lobby looks like a school nurse's office. Four rooms with cots, cribs and toys separate children with different illnesses.

In a room called "Woozy Station" for gastrointestinal illnesses, 2-year-old Carmine Spano, son of a Rainbow Station employee, watched "Dora the Explorer" on TV, ate M&Ms packed by his mom and pushed around a construction truck with registered nurse Erin Elliott. His mother, Nicole, said he hadn't felt well that morning.

Brian Robinson's 15-month-old son, Matthew, recuperated from an upper respiratory infection there Tuesday and Wednesday.

"It's been an absolute lifesaver," Robinson said.

He moved to Virginia Beach six weeks ago from Wichita, Kan., to start a job as a purchasing manager at Stihl Inc.

His wife hasn't moved yet, and they don't have family in the area.

"The fee really was not very much compared to the implication of missing two to three days" at a new job, he said.

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