TenderCare Children's Centers

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Dear TenderCare Families and Community Members,

TenderCare has been a part of our community since 1987, when Ken and Dale began what would become nearly four decades of caring for generations of local children and families. Ten years ago, I was given the incredible opportunity to carry that legacy forward when I became the owner of TenderCare's Clarkston centers.

Today, after 39 years of TenderCare serving families in Clarkston, and after 10 years of having the privilege of calling these centers my own, I am heartbroken to announce that TenderCare Children's Centers in Downtown Clarkston will permanently close. Our final day of care will be September 30th, 2026.

This is a letter I never imagined I would have to write. This decision has not been made quickly, lightly, or because of any single event. For months, I have worked through every option I could reasonably find to create a sustainable path forward for our centers. Unfortunately, we have reached a point where three significant challenges have converged at the same time, creating what can only be described as a perfect storm.

From 2023 through June 2026, our two Fair Street locations dealt with increasing perceived outside safety concerns beyond our control. These concerns have not been hypothetical, nor have they been something we simply accepted without trying to find solutions. We have spent an enormous amount of time communicating these concerns, documenting incidents, working with local agencies and law enforcement when appropriate, increasing our own awareness and security measures, modifying procedures, and doing everything reasonably within our control to protect our children, families, and employees.

We have also advocated publicly and persistently for solutions. We have brought our concerns before the City Council, spoken openly about the impact these issues have had on our childcare centers, and participated in local media coverage that brought these concerns to the front page of our community newspaper. Our team has continued showing up every day and providing care while navigating circumstances outside our doors that a childcare center should simply never have to navigate.

On June 16th, 2026, after a very long road, we finally saw meaningful success in addressing these concerns. We are incredibly grateful for that progress and for those who listened, took our concerns seriously, and helped bring about change. Unfortunately, by the time that resolution came, the impact on our centers had already been significant. Our enrollment had declined throughout this prolonged period of uncertainty, and there simply was not enough time for enrollment to recover to its previous levels before we were faced with the additional challenges now affecting our future.

In many ways, we finally received the resolution we had spent so long fighting for. It just came too late to undo the financial and enrollment impact that had accumulated along the way.

Then came another significant change. The announcement of the potential closure of Walla Walla Community College's Clarkston campus in two years' time also created additional uncertainty for TenderCare and for parents looking for long-term childcare options. Two of our three centers operate in leased buildings, making approximately two-thirds of our childcare operations dependent upon properties we do not own. With the future use and availability of those properties uncertain, it became increasingly difficult to confidently tell prospective families what our long-term future at those locations would look like.

Relocating our centers has also been carefully considered, but moving a licensed childcare program is not as simple as finding another available building. TenderCare has operated in these two Fair Street locations for decades, and the buildings have been modified specifically for childcare. Our current lease agreement with the college has allowed us to operate at rates significantly below current market costs. That agreement expires June 30th, 2027, and even if we were able to remain in the buildings beyond that date, we cannot predict what the future lease terms or increased costs might be.

Moving to another location would require finding a property suitable for childcare, completing the licensing and approval process, making any required renovations and safety improvements, and investing significant time and money before that location could serve a single child. Moving across the river to Lewiston would not eliminate those realities.

Families understandably want stability when choosing childcare. They want to know that the center they enroll their child in today will still be there tomorrow. The uncertainty surrounding our long-term locations has made enrollment increasingly difficult at a time when stable enrollment is critical to operating a childcare program.

Unfortunately, a third and significant challenge is arriving this fall. During Washington State's 2026 legislative session, Substitute House Bill 2689 (SHB 2689) was passed, making significant changes to the Working Connections Child Care subsidy program. One of those changes directly affects how childcare centers are reimbursed for children receiving state assistance. Those changes are scheduled to take effect starting on October 1st, 2026, and will shift reimbursement away from being based on a child's authorized enrollment for the month and more heavily toward a child's actual daily attendance.

That distinction may sound small, but for TenderCare, it is enormous. Currently, approximately 75% of the children we serve receive care through the state subsidy program. In other words, roughly three out of every four children currently enrolled at TenderCare are directly affected by this reimbursement system.

Childcare expenses, however, are not based solely on daily attendance. We must schedule and employ enough high-quality teachers to safely care for the children authorized and expected to attend. Whether a child is present on a particular day or absent because of illness, vacation, family circumstance, or simply life happening, our staffing obligations and operating expenses do not disappear with that absence.

Our teachers still need to be paid, and Washington's minimum wage increases annually. Our classrooms still need to be staffed according to required ratios. Mortgage and lease payments, utilities, insurance, transportation, food, toys, supplies, and the many other expenses required to safely operate our centers continue.

That reimbursement structure has also helped make it possible for TenderCare to keep childcare rates affordable and flexible for our private-pay families. For years, we have been able to offer hourly care rather than requiring families to pay a monthly block rate, regardless of how much care they actually use. The stability of our overall enrollment and reimbursement model helped make that flexibility possible.

Under the new reimbursement structure, maintaining the same model is no longer financially sustainable. We considered whether substantially changing our private-pay structure, including moving to required block rates and significantly increasing what families currently pay, could offset the costs. Unfortunately, the increases necessary to make the numbers work would be unreasonable compared with what our families currently pay and would fundamentally change the affordability and flexibility TenderCare has always tried to provide. We could not reasonably assume that enough families would be able or willing to absorb those increases to make that a sustainable solution.

For a childcare program where approximately 75% of enrollment is supported through Working Connections Child Care, this legislative change fundamentally alters the financial model under which we operate. After carefully analyzing the anticipated impact beginning in October, the numbers simply do not provide a financially sustainable path forward without compromising the quality and stability of care we have worked so hard to provide.

Any one of these challenges would have been difficult, but if we were facing only one, I believe we could have built a plan to overcome it. Together, they became our trifecta: the lasting enrollment and financial impact of the safety concerns surrounding our centers, uncertainty regarding the long-term availability and stability of two-thirds of our locations, and a fundamental change to the reimbursement structure supporting approximately 75% of the children we currently serve. Together, they created the perfect storm, one that could not reasonably be solved by simply relocating our centers, increasing tuition, or restructuring how families pay for care.

I have spent months running numbers, considering different configurations, looking at our buildings and programs individually, reducing expenses, and considering possibilities I never imagined I would have to consider. I desperately wanted to find the combination that worked.

Eventually, I had to stop asking whether I could somehow keep TenderCare open and start asking whether continuing under these circumstances was responsible for our families, our employees, and the long-term financial health of the business. I ultimately determined that it was not.

I know this news will create very real concerns for our families. Finding childcare is difficult, and many of you have trusted us with your children for years. Some of you have trusted us with multiple children, watched them move from one TenderCare classroom to another, and allowed our teachers to become part of your family's story.

Please know that you will not be left to navigate this transition alone. Between now and September 30th, one of our greatest priorities will be helping our children and families transition into their next chapter with as much care and support as we can possibly provide.

I have begun conversations with local childcare providers to identify available options for our families, taking into consideration things such as location, age groups, and individual childcare needs. While we cannot guarantee placement, we are doing everything we reasonably can to help connect families with programs that may be a good fit and make the process of finding new care a little less overwhelming.

We also know there will be many practical questions in the coming weeks regarding billing, disenrollment, state subsidy authorizations, records, final dates of care, and everything else that comes with a transition of this size. You do not need to have all of those answers today. We will be providing clear information and guidance, and our administrative team will work directly with families to make sure these details are handled appropriately. Our goal is for every family to feel informed, supported, and taken care of throughout this process.

While we completely understand that every family must make the childcare decision that is best for them, we are hopeful that many of our children will be able to remain with us through our final day on September 30th. Our families have stuck with us through an incredibly difficult season, and that loyalty has meant more to our team than I can adequately express. After everything this past year has brought, we would love nothing more than to spend these final weeks together, caring for your children, making memories, and giving our TenderCare families and team the opportunity to close this chapter together.

Until that final day, we are still TenderCare. Our teachers will continue showing up, our classrooms will continue operating, and our children will continue receiving the same safe, loving, high-quality care you have trusted us to provide. September 30th will come soon enough. Until then, we intend to make these final days very special.

I also want to recognize our incredible TenderCare team. Many of our employees have dedicated years, some of them decades, of their lives loving and educating the children in this community, and they are experiencing this immense loss alongside our families. I could not be more grateful for the love, commitment, and resilience they have shown, particularly throughout the challenges of the past several years. They are, and always have been, the heart of TenderCare.

TenderCare has been part of this community since 1987. Thousands of children have walked through our doors. Some of those children eventually returned through those same doors as parents with children of their own. Generations of families have trusted TenderCare, and being part of their lives has been an extraordinary privilege. While our Clarkston centers are closing, this is not the end of TenderCare. TenderCare in Lewiston will continue operating under Lindsey Smalley, allowing the TenderCare name and the legacy that began so many years ago to continue serving children and families in our valley.

There is no version of this announcement that makes September 30th any easier. But after exhausting every reasonable alternative available to us, I believe closing our Clarkston centers is the kindest and most responsible decision I can make for our families, our employees, and TenderCare.

To every family who has trusted us with your children, every employee who has poured their heart into this work, and every community member who has supported TenderCare for nearly four decades: thank you.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your children's childhoods.

It has been a true honor.

Jenifer Orr
8/14/2026