

Cut Through the Red Tape Help Fix the Child Care Subsidy System

Background

Thousands of low-income families (making less than 200 percent of the poverty level) depend on child care subsidies to help them afford child care. Without these subsidies, families would have to choose between going on public assistance or leaving their child in an unsafe environment. For many families, however, enrolling and maintaining their child care subsidy resembles a maze of obstacles and red tape in the form of lost paperwork, endless waiting on hold, and required visits to DSHS offices during hours they would otherwise be working. On average, families receiving child care subsidies must go through an eligibility redetermination every 3 months—even if there is no change at all in their income, job status, or provider. With such frequent redeterminations taking place, mistakes are commonplace. The red tape simply becomes too much to handle for families and for the bureaucracy that is trying to administer the program. Parents that should be eligible for subsidies get mistakenly kicked off the system which results in their children losing access to child care for weeks or months at a time, as well as a major disruption in parents' ability to work.

House Bill 3141

Last year the Early Learning Action Alliance, a coalition of more than 40 state wide organizations, partnered with Rep. Ruth Kagi (D-Shoreline) to fix the system and eliminate the red tape, while providing much needed stability for the most at-risk kids. After a long legislative session in which parents and providers testified at several hearings, House bill 3141 was signed into law by Governor Gregoire. The new law directs the Department of Early Learning (DEL) to establish and implement policies in Working Connections Child Care to promote stability and quality of care for children. Families with kids enrolled in Head Start, Early Head Start, and ECEAP, and also receiving a child care subsidy, are to receive 12-month subsidy authorizations.

Department of Early Learning (DEL) Proposes Draft Rules

But there's a catch. DEL must decide which circumstances must change in order for families to have to go through a full eligibility redetermination sooner than 12 months. DEL has put out draft rules for consideration at www.del.wa.gov and they initially answer the question of which circumstances would trigger an eligibility redetermination by simply saying "all of them." If a family's income changes even slightly, a redetermination process would need to take place; if they lost their job temporarily, the family would have to go through a redetermination process; and even the most at-risk, homeless and foster care families, would have to go through regular redeterminations. This is no change from the status quo. We still have an opportunity to change the rules before they are final. If we are going to create more stability for kids and less red tape for families and providers we need DEL to put rules in place that will move the system forward, not leave existing obstacles and inefficiencies in place.

Key Messages

There are three common sense things that can be done to improve the rules and promote stability and quality of care for low-income families and their children:

- 1. Allow family income to rise or decrease by \$250 or less a month.** Small changes in a family's income should not result in going through a full eligibility redetermination. Under the current rules if a parent gets a small raise at work the family has to go through an eligibility redetermination. This is not a good way to encourage folks to do better, but more importantly it does not help move us closer to the goal of stable child care for kids. Families and kids should not be punished for minor fluctuations in wages.
- 2. Extend job search to 6 months.** Right now if a parent loses his or her job, they may receive child care subsidies for 28 days to allow for job search. Imagine a similar scenario in which a parent of a school age child loses their job. Would their child be kicked out of elementary school if their parent loses their job? This rule is a particular hardship for single moms who make up the majority of recipients receiving child care subsidies and are dealing with much higher unemployment rates during this very difficult recession. Moreover, if we want people to get back to work it can often be a bit difficult to go on a job interview with a crying baby or fussy toddler in tow. A better solution is a simple trade-off: if a parent loses their job but participates in a job search activity they can hold onto their child care subsidy for 6 months.
- 3. Provide special protection to homeless and foster care children.** Kids in the child welfare system and/or homeless are facing constant instability and chaos. For these kids the only stable place might be with their child care provider. These families deserve special protection and should receive a blanket 12 months of service without having to go through an additional eligibility determination.

Action Needed

We are urging everyone to take two critical steps to help us fix the child care system so low income moms can provide stable child care to their children.

- 1. Send an e-mail to the Governor and the Department of Early Learning.** Here's how e-mail your thoughts on the proposed child care subsidy rules to: Rules@del.wa.gov, Bette.Hyde@del.wa.gov, and Leslie.Goldstein@GOV.WA.GOV
- 2. Go to the public hearings and tell them what you think.** The Department of Early Learning will hold public hearings on the proposed rules the week of June 21st.

BELLINGHAM

Tuesday, June 22—6 p.m.

Bellingham Public Library—Fairhaven Branch Auditorium
1117 12th Street

TACOMA

Wednesday, June 23—6 p.m.

Tacoma Public Library—Main Downtown Branch Auditorium
1102 Tacoma Avenue South

SEATTLE

Thursday, June 24—5:30 p.m.

Seattle Public Library—Beacon Hill Branch
2821 Beacon Avenue South

YAKIMA

Friday, June 25—6 p.m.

DSHS Yakima Valley School—Training room
609 Speyers Road, Selah

SPOKANE

Saturday, June 26—1 p.m.

Spokane Public Library—Shadle Branch
West 2111 Wellesley Ave.