

Southern Regional Task Force on Child Care

Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South

GOAL 1

Federal, state, local and private funds should be sufficient to meet 100% of need for direct child care assistance, based on initial eligibility levels at 85% of the state median income. Redetermination levels should allow families to retain child care assistance until they reach 100% of the state median income.

Action Steps

- 1.1. Educate federal and state policymakers on the need for action.
- 1.2. Educate the business community on the need for leadership in achieving state, federal and community resources to meet 100% of need.
- 1.3. Increase federal funding for the Child Care Development Fund to fulfill current policy allowing federal matching funds for child care assistance up to 85% of the state median income.
- 1.4. Increase state funding to provide child care subsidies to all eligible families who seek child care assistance.
- 1.5. Mobilize federal, state and community resources in support of families who need child care assistance.

GOAL 2

States and communities should broaden their child care eligibility and subsidy policies to meet the economic, work and education needs of families.

Action Steps

- 2.1. Establish co-payments not to exceed 10% of gross family income.
- 2.2. Provide child care assistance to students who qualify under the income guidelines.
- 2.3. Explore broad use of income exemptions to address affordability of child care.
- 2.4. Eliminate asset testing (e.g. automobile or savings account) from criteria for child care assistance.
- 2.5. Index income eligibility levels for inflation.

GOAL 3

Outreach initiatives should be designed and aggressively implemented to assure that families have accessible and easy-to-understand information on child care assistance and are provided assistance in applying.

Action Steps

- 3.1 Provide information on child care subsidies through multiple sources, venues and the media.
- 3.2 Ensure that information is accurate, family friendly, employer friendly, culturally sensitive and provided in multiple languages, as appropriate.
- 3.3 Present information in a manner that would remove the stigma associated with receiving subsidies.
- 3.4 Provide literature and assistance to help parents make informed provider choices.
- 3.5 Coordinate ongoing and strategic outreach activities among common organizations and providers.
- 3.6 Offer cross-training and information to providers, community organizations, faith organizations and state agencies to inform them about child care assistance programs and how to assist families in filing applications.

GOAL 4

The child care application and redetermination processes should be uncomplicated and family friendly.

Action Steps

- 4.1 Simplify applications for child care assistance.
- 4.2 Allow filing by mail, phone, fax or internet.
- 4.3 Minimize requests for documentation at initial application and utilize documents already on file.
- 4.4 Provide applications at multiple sites.
- 4.5 Offer non-conventional hours of operation for eligibility offices and provide toll-free phone lines to include evening and weekend hours.
- 4.6 Explore presumptive eligibility or otherwise provide immediate eligibility contingent upon final approval.
- 4.7 Eliminate requirements for a face-to-face interview both for initial application and for redetermination.
- 4.8 Provide consultation on making appropriate choices when excessive requests for provider changes are filed.
- 4.9 Establish a 12-month redetermination period where there are no changes in income or job status.
- 4.10 Continue eligibility for full subsidy for 12 weeks if family loses employment but can document that a job search is underway.

GOAL 5

Establish a coordinated, seamless eligibility system so that funding sources are invisible to families and support continuity of child care.

Action Steps

- 5.1. Eliminate the need for families to reapply when eligibility categories change by automatically searching to exhaust all eligibility categories before closing cases.
- 5.2. Explore the potential for policy and procedural changes to achieve linkages with or combined applications for child care assistance, Head Start , Pre-K, and Title I.
- 5.3. Continue eligibility in programs with multiple funding sources to assure continuity of care in the event that eligibility has expired or terminated in one program.
- 5.4. Work collaboratively with all public and private programs and funding sources to assure that children receive stable and consistent early child care services.

GOAL 6

Establish customer service outcome goals and set standards to ensure that all families are treated with dignity and respect and are served in an efficient manner.

Action Steps

- 6.1. Provide professional and well-trained eligibility staff who are culturally and linguistically sensitive.
- 6.2. Facilitate quick eligibility determination through reasonable caseloads and/or administrative structure.
- 6.3. Conduct periodic, independent and thorough consumer satisfaction assessments, assuring the confidentiality of information collected.
- 6.4. Provide adequate support for child care resource and referral services.

GOAL 7

Design the subsidy system so that rate structures assure that families receiving child care assistance have access to all types of child care and disallow charges above established co-payments

Action Steps

- 7.1. States should cap reimbursement rates at no less than the 75th percentile based on a market rate survey conducted every two years that accurately reflects the price of all types of care in communities across the state.
- 7.2. Establish and evaluate reimbursement policies that encourage provider participation and are responsive to family needs.
- 7.3. Prohibit providers from charging above the established co-payments.

GOAL 8

Create partnerships with employers to expand child care assistance for working families.

Action Steps

- 8.1. Educate employers about the bottom line benefits associated with public and private child care assistance.
- 8.2. Enlist business leaders to champion the involvement of southern businesses and to serve as mentors to other businesses.
- 8.3. Provide information to employers on all available tax benefits related to child care assistance, including deductions for donations to tax-exempt child care organizations, capital costs for constructing a child care center and establishing a pre-tax dependent care assistance plan.
- 8.4. Facilitate collaborative initiatives that enable employers to share ideas as well as pool their resources to address child care needs.
- 8.5. Provide matching funds or other tax or financial incentives for employers to invest in child care.
- 8.6. Establish incentives for employers to create child care benefit programs for their employees or to contribute to child care purchasing pools in their state or community.
- 8.7. Reduce the administrative burden on employers participating in any joint public/private child care assistance program.

GOAL 9

Provide child care assistance to working families through federal and state tax laws.

Action Steps

- 9.1. Make the federal child and dependent care tax credit refundable.
- 9.2. Establish refundable child and dependent care tax credits in states with income taxes.
- 9.3. Raise federal and state child care tax credit expense limits to accurately reflect the price of quality care.
- 9.4. Index for inflation the state and federal child and dependent care tax credit income eligibility and expense limits.
- 9.5. Ensure that child and dependent care tax credits are clearly identified and easy to claim by filers using either the short or long form.
- 9.6. Encourage the use of effective state tax strategies to provide financial support for child care.

GOAL 10

States should have effective, coordinated systems to guide child care and early childhood policy decisions and direct use of resources.

Action Steps

- 10.1. Facilitate greater coordination in eligibility policies across child care and early childhood education programs at state and local levels.
- 10.2. All southern states and the District of Columbia should participate in a collaborative effort to develop and collect common data elements across states.