

Policy Recommendations Informed by COVID-19 Impact on Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships

Positioned at the intersection of child care and Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (Partnerships) offer a lifeline to families with young children and are proven to strengthen the quality of child care for infants and toddlers in under-served communities. Federal, state, and local policies that maximize key features of Partnerships, both immediately to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and to shape the future of the broader early care and education system, will:

- Benefit children, families, child care providers, the early education workforce, and communities through timely and significant investments.
- Stabilize and sustain operations of child care centers and family child care homes that keep parents working and educate and nurture their children.
- Expand opportunities for families with infants and toddlers through targeted education, health, nutrition, educational, and economic supports, prioritizing those who are farthest from opportunity and with a focus on equity.
- Maximize opportunities across existing and new funding streams resulting from federal stimulus legislation to shore up the early care and education sector now and help reinvent service delivery systems to address long-standing structural barriers that prevent families' access to high-quality affordable care.

Immediately implement strategies to ease the devastating economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on child care providers caused by closures, high absence rates, and elevated costs to meet stringent health and screening requirements, support smaller group sizes and teacher-child ratios for social distancing, and connect families to health, mental health and other community resources.

Supports for Child Care Providers

Target community, state and federal funding to child care providers using flexible, realistic strategies to pay employee salaries, benefits and operational expenses, whether they are currently open, temporarily closed, attempting to re-open, or serving families remotely. Getting America back to work requires stabilizing the child care sector to enable workers across the economy to return to their jobs or find new ones.

- Pay providers by enrollment and suspend policies that reduce payments for child absences or provider closures to ensure child care providers have resources to cover ongoing expenses, such as payroll and operating expenses when mandated to close, or to address the increased costs to meet mandates for lower group sizes and higher caregiver to child ratios.
- Waive parent co-pays and pay providers full subsidy rates to address any reductions in attendance for families negatively impacted by changes to their work or training status, schedules and income.

- Offer grants to cover the increased costs of securing and using protective gear, cleaning staff and supplies; staff safety and hygiene training; diapers, formula, and food; recruiting and hiring additional staff to mitigate the costs of reduced staff to child ratios, smaller class sizes, and lost tuition due to lower enrollment; staff hazard pay for providing congregate care during the pandemic; and technology to automate business systems and to connect remotely to families.
- Prioritize funding for programs serving young children and families in African American, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous communities experiencing disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as child care programs in Partnerships that are providing comprehensive services to families in poverty.
- Leverage Statewide Disaster Plans, which require states to issue guidelines for continuation of child care subsidies, to allow for broad flexibility to adapt policies that maintain continuity of services for families affected by disasters.

Supports for Families

- Maintain child care subsidy eligibility for enrolled families regardless of job status, particularly for families with infants and toddlers.
- Expand eligibility to at least a 24-month period and allow job search status for 12 months.
- Implement policies that encourage greater flexibility in family eligibility determination processes and required documentation to respond to variation in families' incomes over the next year, including locally determined Head Start income eligibility. Offer guidance to programs on how to enroll and recruit new children and families.
- Expand the capacity of child care providers to serve children with special needs and their families, who in the best of times face significant barriers to child care access, by covering the cost of smaller class sizes and specialized staff, equipment, other necessary accommodations.
- Make personal family technology resources available to help families purchase data plans, cell phones and expanded plans, computers, and hotspots to close the digital and resource gaps that lead to inequities in remote learning and access to community resources.

Supports for Coordinated Early Care & Education Systems to Maximize Recovery Opportunities

- Allow greater flexibility to align policies, funding, professional development, and service delivery across Head Start and child care to achieve and sustain quality, continuity of care, and equity in parent choice across early education systems. This requires building stronger connections between Head Start and child care leadership at all levels of governance.
- Support local early childhood systems to develop coordinated enrollment systems for Head Start, child care, and state pre-K to ensure young children in under-resourced families get access to settings that best meet their needs.
- Invest state and federal funding in Partnerships and/or state or local models that link child care centers and homes to Head Start grantees to provide implementation supports and higher-quality comprehensive services to families remotely and/or on-site.

- Fund expert technical assistance to help child care and Head Start providers access and maximize funding from different sources including state CCDBG and CARES Act funds.
- Allocate \$250 million in CARES Act funds for Head Start to Early Head Start programs to meet locally determined needs given the \$500 million allocation to summer Head Start programming for preschoolers.
- Expand trauma-informed practice and mental health supports (e.g. teletherapy, screenings, hotlines, mental health consultation and staff training, and referrals to substance use & domestic violence services) within early childhood settings and communities given spikes in unemployment, social isolation, food insecurity, health concerns, and other trauma.

The Ounce report, [*Expanding High-Quality Child Care for Infants & Toddlers - Lessons from Implementation of Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership in States*](#), offers many concrete examples of policy reforms and funding strategies states have enacted that could be scaled further to support local child care success and raise the bar for what quality infant and toddler child care can and should be based on Early Head Start standards.