State of Connecticut

Office of Early Childhood

Office of Early Childhood
Testimony before the Human Services Committee
Proposed H.B. 5357 – An Act Increasing Access to Child Care Subsidies for Working Families
Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D., Executive Director
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The Office of Early Childhood respectfully submits this testimony in regard to H.B. 5357 – An Act Increasing Access to Child Care Subsidies for Working Families. This requires the Office of Early Childhood, in consultation with the Commissioner of Social Services, to study application and eligibility requirements for the Care4Kids program with the goal to increase access for families.

The Care4Kids program is part of Connecticut's Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) plan. The Care4Kids program was transferred from the Department of Social Services (DSS) to the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), effective July 2, 2014 and administration of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) was transferred from DSS to OEC, effective in October, 2014. Harriet Feldlaufer, director of the Early Care and Education Division within the OEC, also serves as our state CCDF Administrator.

At the federal level, there is a sea change occurring regarding the Child Care Development Fund. No longer is the child care subsidy program seen solely as a work support, but equally as a child development support. The recent re-authorization of CCDBG this past December infuses child development and quality provisions in recognition that a child's early healthy development and preparation for school is critical for that's child's future. The new vision is that the child care subsidy program can both support the parent and the child at the same time.

One major change under the CCDF reauthorization requires states to set redetermination at 12 months, which provides stability of care for the child. The re-authorization requires that states cannot terminate the child care subsidy due to loss of employment and must continue assistance for at least three months to allow the parent to search for a job. In addition, states must take into account irregular fluctuation in hours and earnings for initial determination and re-determination. The OEC fully supports these policies.

The federal re-authorization also requires annual licensing inspections of early care and education settings. Connecticut is out front on this quality provision. The FY15 budget funded 16 new licensing specialists to support annual inspections of our family child care homes and center-based programs. Those staff will be on board in February.

Phone: (860) 713-6410 • Fax: (860) 713-7037
165 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, Connecticut 06106
www.ct.gov/oec
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Apart from the CCDF re-authorization, there have been significant improvements in the Care4Kids application process over the past year. Many of improvements streamline processes and make use of technology that was not in existence when the current Care4Kids regulations were developed years before.

Below are highlights of changes to the Care4Kids application and eligibility process.

- ***Streamlined and Simplified Application Materials***. The number of pages of application and redetermination forms was reduced from 6 to 4 pages. All forms now use "plain" language and the use of technical terms has been reduced. (December 2014)

- ***Acceptance of Verbal Information from Clients***. A new protocol was implemented for Care4Kids Case Managers to call clients to collect missing information from the application instead of sending a missing items notice via mail. The Case Manager takes the information over the phone and enters it onto the application form. Application processing time has been significantly decreased. (December 2014)

- ***Expedited Verifications for Vulnerable Populations***. Agencies working with vulnerable populations were provided with a Care4Kids program liaison and streamlined methods of verification submissions for their clients.
  - **Teen Parents - SPPT** (Support for Pregnant Parenting Teen program). Care4Kids is currently working with Social Workers in high schools in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, Waterbury and Windham on Care4Kids enrollment of their teen parents. (March 2014)
  - **Jobs First Employment Services**. A new protocol was implemented allowing JFES workers to electronically submit client eligibility information to Care4Kids. The previous process required attempts to contact workers by phone and voice mail messages or for clients to obtain documentation from their JFES worker and submit paper copy to Care4Kids. The result has been a decrease in processing time and effort. (February 2014)
  - **DCF Foster Parents**. A new protocol was implemented to allow DCF Case Workers to electronically submit information regarding foster child eligibility and DCF stipend information. The previous process required foster parents to collect documentation from their DCF workers and submit paper copies to Care4Kids. (January 2014)

- ***Work Number National Employer Verification Service***. Care4Kids now has access to expanded employment information via electronic format. The turnaround time to obtain information has been reduced from 5 days to same-day receipt. (April 2014)

- ***Acceptance of Self-Declared Verifications from Clients***. The requirement for paper submission of multiple paystubs or employer documentation to validate discrepancies in work schedule has been eliminated. The number of paystubs required for verification of discrepancies has been reduced by 50 percent. The requirement to document variable work schedule with written proof of shift start and end times has been eliminated. (May 2014)

- ***Employer Verification Submissions***. Barriers and delays caused when employers were required to submit required employment verifications has been eliminated. Submissions from employers on formal company letterhead are no longer required. The acceptable methods of verification were expanded to include electronic submission (scan or email) or verbal. (November 2014)

- ***Summer Care Application Timeline.*** The timeline to submit summer care applications was expanded from 30 days to 60 days prior to start of care. Parents are allowed additional time to secure child care arrangements for school age children. (April 2014)

- ***Seasonal Employment Automatic Case Resumption***. The requirement for seasonal employees to re-verify their employment status and schedule after hiatus was eliminated. Those cases are now automatically reinstated. Examples of seasonal employment include teacher aides, school bus drivers, and janitors. (September 2014)

- ***Split Shift/Multiple Shift Gap Increase Coverage***. The approvable hours of care for parents that work split shifts or multiple shits (i.e. bus drivers, home health aides, two jobs) were increased. The allowable gap between activities covered from 2 hours to 4 hours was increased. This significantly reduces disruptions to child care arrangements. For example, a school bus driver with a split shift no longer has the pick the child up in the middle of the day in between the bus route shifts. (May 2014)

- ***Care 4 Kids Website Redesign***. The Care4Kids website (www.ctcare4kids.com) was redesigned to improve ease of navigation and expand utilization. The site is promoted to program consumers and providers as an alternative to phone contacts. The expanded information includes answers to frequently asked questions, access to download forms and notices and a program processing status page (applications, payment and invoice information) that is updated daily. Key program changes, alerts and reminders are also updated in real time. 265,000 visits were made to the Care 4 Kids website in 2014. This is an increase of 60 percent compared to 2013 visits to the former site. This has resulted in a significant reduction in phone calls.

- ***EFT – Electronic Funds Transfer***. Care4Kids has transitioned from paper check to electronic funds transfer via direct deposit or pre-paid debit card. This major change has resulted in elimination of mail delays to receive payments, lost or stolen checks and trips to banking or check cashing institutions. (July 2013)

All but one of these changes was implemented in 2014, some under DSS and others under OEC. The OEC will continue to seek changes to outdated policies and regulations that improve access to the Care4Kids program that will benefit children, parents, and providers. The OEC is more than willing to work with legislators to identify additional strategies and changes that will continue our work to support Connecticut's children and families.

Regretfully, I am not able to testify in person today as I am in Washington, DC at an early childhood conference. I would be happy to meet with you to answer any questions that committee members may have concerning this testimony.