

B5: Parents' Experiences Accessing Child Care and Early Education and Subsidies in the Wake of the Pandemic

Wednesday, June 28, 2023

2:30 p.m. – 3:45 p.m. | Gallery I

1. Descriptive Information

<p>B5: Parents' Experiences Accessing Child Care and Early Education and Subsidies in the Wake of the Pandemic</p> <p>Grantees from four states (District of Columbia, Minnesota, Maryland, and New Mexico) will present findings from data collected from families seeking child care or child care assistance in 2021–2022 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The District of Columbia team will describe findings from a telephone survey and focus groups that describe the sources of information parents used to look for care, their use of D.C.'s child care search website, and their thoughts on the supply of child care in D.C. The Minnesota team will summarize the results from a survey that describes how receiving child care assistance has impacted families' care options, the extent to which financial assistance covers care costs, what it has meant to families to receive assistance, and factors prioritized during care searches. The Maryland team will discuss findings from a survey and follow-up focus groups describing families' experiences with applying for child care subsidies and how having subsidies helps with regard to their search for care. Findings from New Mexico will describe new data from a family survey with follow-up interviews that sampled families who lost their subsidy benefits at a recertification point, as well as those who successfully recertified. The findings explore the challenges that led to losing the benefits. Recommendations will be provided.</p>	<p>Presenters</p> <p>Heather Sandstrom, Urban Institute</p> <p>Kara Ulmen, Child Trends</p> <p>Holly Keaton, Child Trends</p> <p>Hailey Heinz, Cradle to Career Policy Institute, University of New Mexico</p> <p>Scribe</p> <p>Jeremy Long</p> <p>Number of Attendees: 25</p>
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2. Documents/Presentations Shared (Please list any electronic documents, PowerPoint presentations, or web links used during the session.) *Collect presenter PowerPoints or other documents on the flash drive provided.*

- 4_CCEEPRC 2023 ICHQ slides_final_clean
- ASQC Parent Study_CCEEPRC 2023
- CCEEPRC 2023 Families Experiences NM_shorter
- Child Trends CCPRC Theme 3 CCAP Presentation

3. Brief Summary of Presentations

Summary of Presentation #1: What Were Parents' Experiences Searching for and Using Child Care in the District of Columbia? - Heather Sandstrom, Urban Institute

- Over the past 4 years, our partnership study with DC has been examining the supply and quality of licensed child care in DC and efforts to improve the quality of care through DC's new quality rating and improvement system, called Capital Quality.
- As part of this project, we were also interested in learning more about families' experiences looking for and selecting a child care provider, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.
- In spring 2022, we launched a survey of parents using licensed child care in DC. We recruited parents and guardians through their child care programs, targeting families with a child under age 6 that had recently enrolled in a licensed child care program in DC. With this approach, parents could reflect on their recent

experiences looking for and selecting a child care provider and how they ended up with their current provider.

- We conducted 30-minute computer-assisted, telephone interviews with 137 parents and guardians.
 - All 8 DC Wards were represented in our sample, so we got perspectives from parents living in different areas across the District.
- The survey participants were similar to the DC adult population in terms of racial groups, Latino ethnicity, and educational attainment. We also saw a wide range of income levels, with about 40% receiving a subsidy voucher.
- Several months later, we followed up with a subset of survey respondents and invited them to participate in virtual focus groups.
- We were curious about the timing of care searches because there is less research on that topic. We asked, *About how far in advance before you started care at this provider did you begin looking for care?*
 - Most parents reported beginning to look for care about 1-2 months in advance of starting the arrangement. But we also see some parents starting to look much earlier, 20% 7-12 months in advance, and 9% a year or more in advance.
- One focus group participant who had more difficulty said, “I found that it was a nightmare when I was first trying to find anything. I had applied to a day care center when I was three months pregnant and somehow just thought that would work out. After she was born, then I was scrambling to find a place...I was throwing money around on deposits... I was trying to find something nearby, and it was really terrible, and finally I found that home day care. It took a long time. It was both stressful and expensive.”
- We also asked, *Once you started looking, how long did it take you to find your provider?*
 - In our response options, we gave parents the choice “I never conducted an active search.” We’ve seen in previous research that some parents know the provider they want to use and don’t actively “search.” They might confirm that the provider is available, but otherwise, are not out looking and comparing providers. We found 25% of parents fell in that category of never conducted an active search.
 - Most who did search found a provider in one week or less. Some took a few weeks or even a few months.
- Asked parents what resources they used while searching for child care. We list here the top resources mentioned by at least 10% of the sample.
 - The sources that we might consider more informal, such as asking friends, neighbors, and family members, and providers parents already knew, and walking or driving around the neighborhood.
- Other strategies involve searching online, using social media or posting an ad, or asking for help from a subsidy worker, health professional or a CCR&R specialist.
- **You can see the most common reasons, with Google searches and asking friends and neighbors with kids as the most common reasons.**
- **38% used the My Child Care DC website, the state’s child care search site hosted by the DC government.**
- Asked parents who used My Child Care DC what they thought about it, and what they liked and didn’t like. Some found it helpful while others explained reasons why it was hard to navigate. A few mentioned that information on vacancies and cost were missing and how this information was critical to their decision-making. A few others had trouble with the various search tools on the site.
- **Notable mention: most parents were not familiar with Capital Quality, DC’s quality rating and improvement system, when we asked about it. Only 4% of all surveyed parents said they used Capital Quality ratings to help select a provider. These parents narrowed their options to higher-rated programs and then visited or looked into those options further.**
- On the survey, parents were asked to rate the overall supply of DC child care as poor, fair, good, excellent, or not sure. Most parents said fair or good, with 12 to 14 percent rating on the higher or lower ends or saying “don’t know.”
- Asked parents “Do you feel there are **good choices** for child care and early education near your home?”
 - Almost two-thirds (64%) said yes. 22% said no, 14% said “I don’t know.”
- Particularly interested in those parents that are saying **no, I don’t have good choices** as well as those that **don’t know what their choices are**

- Parents reported a mix of experiences looking for child care with nearly half saying it was somewhat or very easy and another half saying it was somewhat or very hard.
- Whether parents received a subsidy voucher or not.
 - Parents generally reported having an easier time finding child care if they received a subsidy.
- Parents indicated they had difficulty finding a provider who...
 - Parents indicated they had difficulty finding a provider who had open slots for new children and was affordable. Care hours and location were also top reasons.
- Conducted focus groups with 39 parents who had completed the telephone survey. Covered many topics, but primarily focused on their care search and their priorities and challenges. This slide summarizes those details, and our research reports provide much more detail if you are interested in learning more.
 - Parents' key priorities while searching for child care included location, cost for families receiving child care subsidies, the acceptance of subsidy vouchers, and their comfort with the program.
 - As one parent said, "It was a balance between cost and location. There were some day cares that were a little bit more affordable, but because of distance, they weren't really viable."
 - Factors that made their search difficult included the high costs of care, scarcity of open slots in desirable programs (not programs overall, but in the programs they wanted), difficulty finding information, restricted program hours (since many programs needed to close early because of staffing issues and maintaining ratios), and concerns about health and safety protocols and care quality. The pandemic really heightened parental concerns about the health and safety of their children, adding another layer of complexity to child care decision making.
 - In many cases, parents were unable to visit child care programs in person when they were searching for care, which made it challenging to pick a provider they couldn't see. Some programs offered virtual visits.
 - Parents who received a subsidy voucher to help pay for care described administrative burdens associated with the subsidy voucher application process, and they reported having a more limited pool of programs that they could use with their voucher. Only about half of licensed programs in DC accept subsidies. They described the process as too long, very complicated, and had too many steps. Parents also mentioned that the combination of finding a program that accepted vouchers, had immediate availability, and was high quality was a challenge.
 - The point about difficulty finding information is an important one. Parents that had an easier time described having personal connections and word-of-mouth recommendations that made the search process easier and helped them identify child care programs that met their quality standards.
 - Proximity to programs in their apartment buildings or neighborhoods also helped ease the search process.
 - But for some parents, especially first-time parents and those new to DC or who did not grow up in the area, they were uncertain where to start and weren't as familiar with program options in their area. We mentioned the My Child Care DC website to them, and like I mentioned, many had not heard of it or used it a little in combination with other resources or word-of-mouth recommendations.
- Child care experiences in wake of the pandemic:
 - Parents reflected on issues that arose during the pandemic that made their child care experiences somewhat different than the norm. This included temporary program closures when there was a COVID case that forced families to keep children at home or obtain alternative care arrangements.
 - They also mentioned reduced care hours because of staffing shortages or group size limitations when practicing social distancing.
 - At the time of the focus groups, many parents were still not able to visit programs in person and discussed not having the same connection to staff and a feeling of community with other parents.
 - Along the same lines, some parents mentioned a lack of or inconsistent communication from program staff. They felt the pandemic really limited their interactions with teachers.
 - Parents reported a mix of experiences with staff turnover. Nearly half of parents we spoke to had observed staff leave their programs. Parents speculated on reasons why early educators are leaving the field in such high numbers, including low pay, high cost of living, and COVID-19-related

challenges. Some parents shared how staff turnover negatively affected their children and suggested ways to improve staff retention.

- Publications found on project web site: <https://www.urban.org/projects/dc-child-care-policy-research-partnership>

Summary of Presentation #2: Families Experiences with Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program and the Early Learning Scholarship - Holly Keaton, Child Trends

- In line with the goals of the Minnesota Research Partnership, this study focuses on understanding families' experiences with searching for and accessing child care. Specifically, we were interested in the experiences of families with children receiving financial assistance through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) or the Early Learning Scholarship (ELS). The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care and to support children's development. Consistent with federal law, CCAP aims to support family choice of providers that meet their child care needs. The Early Learning Scholarship (ELS) is another financial resource that increases access to high-quality child care in Minnesota.
- The sample included 362 families living in Minnesota who are currently receiving financial assistance through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and/or the Early Learning Scholarship (ELS). These are programs, in which income-eligible families can participate to help pay for child care and early education expenses, have slight differences in how financial assistance are distributed. CCAP is Minnesota's CCDF funded subsidy program. The ELS program is income-based, but has no parent work requirement, no copay and it requires the use of a QRIS-rated provider. Families who qualify can use ELS to cover copays or other costs they owe the provider above the CCAP payment.
- Families were surveyed two separate times: the first time, from Nov 2021 to Jan 2022, families were identified through a parallel provider survey that was launched at the same time. Providers were asked to distribute the survey to families in their care. Forty-four families reported that they received subsidy from CCAP and/or ELS. To hear from more families who receive financial assistance, we worked closely with the MN Dept of Human Services and the MN Dept of Education to survey families who are involved in CCAP and/or ELS. These efforts resulted in our launching a second family survey. It was distributed in fall 2022 directly to those who receive CCAP and ELS and a total of 318 families responded. Between the two surveys, a total of 362 families who receive child care financial aid were included in analyses.
- Response rates: 6% of the initial survey were families who receive assistance. Conducted outreach to 4,000 families for the second survey and had an 8% response rate for the second survey.
- The first finding is related to how financial assistance impacted the number of child care options families perceived to be available to them with the assistance. For about half of families, they perceived no difference in the number of options available to them. However, some families did report that that it increased the number of options, with a smaller percentage indicating that it decreased the number of options available to them. This was consistent across subsidy types.
- We also asked families whether they still paid out of pocket expenses for child care, or if their financial assistance generally covered the entire cost. Overall, 38% of families indicated that they paid out-of-pocket expenses, but this varied across different subsidy types. Three quarters of families who received CCAP-only reported that they paid out-of-pocket expenses, while only 30% of those who receive ELS-only and 51% of those who receive both CCAP and ELS reported the same. One important thing to note is that CCAP has a copay while ELS does not have a copay. There was also a significant difference between families living in Greater Minnesota, which tends to be more rural, and families living in the metropolitan area surrounding Minneapolis and St Paul. While two thirds of families in Greater Minnesota paid out-of-pocket expenses, a smaller proportion in the metro area paid out-of-pocket at 48%.
- Furthermore, the average cost of out-of-pocket expenses varied by both subsidy type and location. Of those who paid out-of-pocket, the average cost for CCAP-only recipients was only \$262 per month compared to the \$495 per month paid on average by ELS-only recipients. The cost also tended to be higher for those living in the metro area at \$357 per month, compared to \$253 per month on average for those living in Greater Minnesota.

- Families were also asked to rank a series of factors related to child care access on a five point scale, from “not at all important” to “crucially important—I would not choose a provider who did not offer this.” In regards to cost factors, the most relevant to families was that their provider accepted subsidy, with 61% indicating that this was crucially important to them. Forty-one percent of families also indicated that costs being within their ideal budget was crucially important, with 31% indicating that the provider offers financial aid and 20% indicating that cost information being easily accessible was crucially important.
- When looking specifically at the factor “provider offers financial aid,” there was some variation in the proportion of families who marked it as crucially important. A greater proportion of families who attend centers indicated that it was crucially important than families who attend family child care providers. Additionally, a greater number of families living in the metro area than families living in Greater Minnesota indicated that it was crucially important.
- We also asked families to select one factor that was the primary reason they selected their child care provider. Families selected this reason out of all the factors that they had marked “crucially important.” Thirty percent of families indicated the primary reason they had selected their current provider was because their provider accepted child care subsidy.
- Other common primary reasons were that the facility is within driving distance of the family’s home, the use of quality learning activities or curricula, cost being with the family’s budget, and the opportunity for the child to spend time with other children their age.
- Finally, the survey had an open-ended question that asked families to describe what receiving financial assistance has meant to them. Their responses were coded and this table shows three of the biggest themes that emerged in their responses. 38% of families noted in their response that the assistance allowed them to maintain their employment, with one person saying, “Receiving the grant makes it possible for us to work. If we did not receive the grant, the cost of daycare would be more than one parents income.”
- Many families also showed appreciation for the program. One parent said that the program has meant “everything. Truly, it has meant everything. I am more appreciative of these programs than anyone could know. Thank you to whomever makes sure they are in place. Bless.”
- The third biggest theme that emerged was the recognition by parents that the subsidy allowed their child to receive a high-quality education that they may not have received otherwise. As one parent said, “It’s allowed me to enroll my child in a center that offers languages and other enrichment activities that he may not be offered in another care center.”
- Other themes also emerged, which included: allowing parents to attend school; affording families financial stability and assisting with living expenses; decreasing stress; allowing some families to keep their housing; and the remaining challenges of affording child care and navigating system.
- In conclusion, several notable findings emerged from these surveys.
 - The first is that for the majority of families, financial assistance does not change the number of child care options they perceive to be available to them. Thus, while it may improve access to child care in other ways, it does not usually open the door to additional programs, but may instead render existing options more affordable. However, for some it did increase the number of options, perhaps by making them more affordable. For a smaller group it did decrease the number of options, which may be due to only some providers choosing to accept subsidy payments. Additionally, it is important to note that the sample in this study comprised of families who have successfully found a provider when using financial assistance, and it is possible that if we had a sample of families who experienced reduced options, they may not be using a provider or CCAP.
 - Furthermore, while these programs do help mitigate costs, many families still pay out-of-pocket expenses, with those receiving CCAP and those in rural Minnesota being more likely to still pay out of pocket. However, it was for those receiving ELS and those in the metro area that these expenses were higher on average. This may reflect differences in how different subsidy types are determined and distributed as well as different tuition and reimbursement rates across Minnesota counties.
 - Cost is still a crucially important factor to most families, and many families reported prioritizing certain cost factors when searching for care, with nearly a third saying that the provider accepting subsidy was the primary reason that provider was selected. However, many families still selected a different primary reason for selecting their provider, indicating that while cost is a crucially important

factor to families, their experiences and perceptions may vary based, for example, on the type of care they choose.

- Finally, many families view these programs as vitally important and are extremely grateful for the assistance.
- As part of this work, we shared and discussed these findings with our state partners. Our partners were especially struck by the discussions of cost and affordability and discussed ways to streamline and simplify financial assistance so that it is easier on both parents and providers. This past legislative session, Minnesota made sweeping changes to its child care financial assistance program, which include a plan to merge the ELS and CCAP programs and create a plan for a 7 percent copay. As these and other changes are implemented, our partners are eager to continue hearing from families about their experiences with financial assistance and accessing child care.

Summary of Presentation #4: Who Recertifies and What Happens If They Don't? Results from a Survey of New Mexico Families on their Child Care Assistance Recertification Experiences - Hailey Heinz, University of New Mexico Cradle to Career Policy Institute

- Research questions: What facilitates enrollment continuity for families? What family characteristics are associated with smooth renewal.
- 501 complete surveys, 460 in English, 41 in Spanish between 2021-22.
- Re-newers are: more likely to be working full time, lower income, lower educational attainment, have more preschool-aged children on average, more likely to identify as Hispanic.
- The system tends to work better when there's less adults in the home.
- Around 40% delayed life changes in order to keep access benefits.
- Recent changes: advanced enrollment based payments, presumptive eligibility, fewer attendance verification audits, family navigators, online provider and parent portal, customer service updates
- Recommendations: ensure customer service reps are equipped to help parents, assign a caseworker for each family, streamline paperwork for redetermination application, establish physical offices for families to visit and ask questions, train staff or refer or connect families to other eligible financial supports.
- Challenges:
 - Delay and turnover.
 - Electronic communication was helpful, as well as language supports.
- Implications:
 - Recert easiest for low wage full time workers
 - Communication and awareness needed
 - Multiple recert modes
 - Rebuild eligibility systems strained by COVID.
 - Prior to COVID, NM didn't have an online application.

4. Brief Summary of Discussion

Audience questions.

- Rural issues for families
- Has anyone reached out to families who qualify but don't participate/
 - MD does, child care scholarship vendor sends out materials to all eligible families.
 - New Mexico: has done this, they recruited at WIC clinics. Many families with their first baby aren't aware of the program.
- Is there something you saw in another state that you wished could have been done in your state?
- MN – importance of communication, talking to each other. Liked the open ended responses to questions. Would have been nice to actually be able to talk to families.
- DC – parts of community of practice where they get to share updates with each other.
- DC conducting a new survey of parents with infants (under 1 year) who aren't using the child care benefits.

- 11 states have partnership grants in 2019.
- Massachusetts lets providers do recertifications. DC does this too.
- Cohabitation question:
 - Teal pie in the pie chart: another situation:
 - Specific to NM: they're planning to implement universal child care. If implemented, but people still prefer other providers, how would the subsidy process change who prefer non public universal care but can't afford to do it.