

CHILD CARE

Opportunities for Progress on Infant and Toddler Care: New and Proposed Federal Initiatives

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Early care and education is gaining increased attention from federal, state, and local policy makers and among the broader public. Policy makers are implementing new early learning programs, discussing and debating renewal and revision of existing programs, and proposing significant expansion of early learning investments. The following is a roadmap of new and proposed federal policies and initiatives that can support and improve early care and education for infants and toddlers. These initiatives are important given how critical the earliest years are to young children's development and future success. Infants' and toddlers' early experiences in and out of the home set the foundation for their later growth and learning. Stable infant and toddler care is also essential for parents trying to get and keep a job so they can support their families. Yet high-quality infant and toddler care is often extremely hard to find and too costly for parents trying to make ends meet. The new and proposed initiatives would help address these gaps in the availability of high-quality infant and toddler care. However, these initiatives will only succeed in achieving their goals and reaching the many young children who currently lack high-quality early learning opportunities if sufficient resources are provided.

Reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant

The Senate has passed the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (S. 1086), which is designed to renew and strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant program, which was established in 1990 and last reauthorized in 1996. The legislation aims to improve the health and safety of care and the accessibility of child care assistance. This could benefit children across a broad age range, but infants and toddlers in particular, since safe, stable, affordable care is so important for children in their earliest years. In addition, the legislation includes several provisions specifically targeted toward infants and toddlers. For example, the legislation:

- Sets out new requirements for state standards, monitoring, and criminal background checks that are designed to ensure the health and safety of child care. One requirement specifically focused on infants would mandate pre-service training in safe sleep practices to ensure that providers serving families receiving child care assistance are aware of the dangers of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and take pro-active steps to avoid it.
- Requires states to describe how they will develop and implement strategies—such as higher payment rates and bonuses to child care providers as well as grants and contracts—to increase the supply and improve the quality of child care for four particular groups of children specified by the bill, one of which is infants and toddlers.
- Requires states to set aside 3 percent of their CCDBG funding to improve the quality of infant and toddler care. This provision makes permanent and expands a longstanding reservation of funds for infant and toddler care.
- Specifies allowable activities that states can support with their infant/toddler set-aside funds. The list of activities includes establishing family child care networks, creating statewide networks of infant and toddler care

specialists, establishing or expanding neighborhood-based high-quality comprehensive family and child development centers that can serve as models and resources for other providers, supporting professional development for providers caring for infants and toddlers, developing components of a quality rating and improvement system related to infant and toddler care, and improving parents' access to information about high-quality infant and toddler care. States are neither limited to these activities nor required to support these activities, but the list may encourage states to adopt these approaches.

- Requires states to take steps that make it easier for families to retain their eligibility for child care assistance, including by establishing a 12-month eligibility period. Families would be able to continue to receive assistance during this time period without recertifying, even if their income changes (provided their income does not exceed 85 percent of state median income) or the parents have a temporary change in work status. This measure helps families maintain their child care assistance and a stable child care arrangement, which can be particularly important for very young children.

Child Care and Development Block Grant Revised Regulations

The Administration for Children and Families has proposed revising the regulations that govern implementation of the Child Care and Development Block Grant. The agency is reviewing comments that were submitted in response to the proposed regulations, and will release final regulations in the coming months. The proposed regulations are intended to ensure the health and safety of child care (through steps such as requiring regular monitoring and more extensive criminal background checks of child care providers), improve the quality of care, and make the child care assistance program more family-friendly. The proposed regulations include a number of changes that would specifically affect infants and toddlers. For example, the regulations:

- Require that providers serving families receiving assistance complete minimum health and safety pre-service and orientation training in certain areas, including safe sleep practices and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) prevention as well as child development and the stages and milestones of all developmental domains appropriate for the ages of children served.
- Require that states identify shortages in the supply of high-quality child care, including for specific localities and populations, and describe how they will address these shortages using grants or contracts. The preamble to the regulations notes that there is often a shortage of care for infants and toddlers and that contracts may be useful in addressing the shortage of care for this population, among others.
- Specify that states may use their quality set-aside funds to establish and implement age-appropriate learning and development guidelines for children of all ages, including infants, toddlers, and school-age children.
- Require states to set a 12-month redetermination period for child care assistance; families would be able to remain eligible during that time without having to recertify. The preamble to the regulations notes that this longer eligibility helps enable families to maintain their child care arrangement without disruption, and that this stability and continuity of care is particularly important for infants' development.

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Grants

A new Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership Grants initiative received \$500 million in the FY 2014 budget. The President's budget proposal would provide \$1.45 billion for this initiative in FY 2015. The initiative is intended to increase the availability of high-quality early care and education for infants and toddlers, particularly for working families. New or existing Early Head Start programs will partner with local child care centers and family child care providers serving low-income infants and toddlers. Funding will be available to help child care programs meet the Early Head Start standards and for training and technical assistance. Partnership Grants will be available to every state and programs will compete for the funding within each state. Programs will be able to apply for grants after a Funding Opportunity Announcement is issued this spring.

Home Visiting

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program provides grants to states to fund voluntary home visits to vulnerable families. Families receive support, referrals to community resources, and parenting education to help them in caring for their very young children. Home visiting can help to promote maternal and child health, increase children's school readiness, prevent child abuse and neglect, improve parenting practices, and strengthen families. The program received \$1.5 billion in federal funding for the five-year period from FY 2010 to FY 2014. Congress has extended the program into 2015 at the current funding level of \$400 million but must act by the end of March 2015 to continue the program. The President has proposed to increase funding for the program to \$500 million in FY 2015, and to provide \$15 billion in mandatory funding over 10 years to extend the program through FY 2024.

Preschool Development Grants

Preschool Development Grants, a new initiative, received \$250 million in funding in the FY 2014 budget. The funding will be awarded competitively to states to build their capacity to develop, enhance, or expand high-quality preschool programs, including comprehensive services and family engagement, for preschool-age children from families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. States can subgrant funds to local educational agencies and other early learning providers, such as Head Start programs and licensed child care providers, or consortia of providers, for preschool programs. Local educational agencies that receive subgrant funding must collaborate with early learning providers, and early learning providers that receive subgrant funding must collaborate with local educational agencies. The President has proposed to provide \$500 million in additional funding for the grants in FY 2015.

While this grant program does not specifically target infants and toddlers, it provides additional resources for early learning that could help support professional development for early care and education teachers and strengthen the overall quality of early care and education options, including infant and toddler care. As preschool is expanded, it will be important to monitor the impact on infant and toddler programs and ensure that resources continue to be targeted toward making high-quality infant and toddler care available and affordable.

Strong Start for America's Children Act

The Strong Start for America's Children Act, introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Representative George Miller (D-CA), and Representative Richard Hanna (R-NY), would significantly expand access to high-quality preschool for four-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families through state-federal partnerships. It would also increase access to high-quality infant and toddler care through an optional set-aside and partnerships between Early Head Start and child care.

- States would be allowed to use up to 15 percent of their funds for high-quality early care and education for infants and toddlers from families with incomes at or below 200 percent of poverty. States could use the funds for providers serving infants and toddlers that offer full-day, full-year care or otherwise address the needs of working families and that meet high-quality standards.
- Grants would be provided to Early Head Start agencies to partner with center-based and family child care providers, particularly those that serve children receiving child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and that aim to meet Early Head Start standards. The grants' purpose would be to increase the quality and capacity of providers serving children through age three. Priority would be given to applicants that coordinate with other federally and state-funded home visiting, child care, and prekindergarten programs to create a continuum of services from birth to school entry.
- The legislation expresses support for continuing to provide resources for voluntary home visits by nurses and social workers to at-risk families.