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# STRENGTHENING CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE OUTREACH: STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING WITH ALL FAMILIES

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High-quality, affordable child care is essential to the well-being of children, families, and our economy. It provides children with an opportunity to learn the skills they need to succeed in school and life. It also benefits the millions of parents who rely on child care in order to work. When mothers receive help affording child care, they are more likely to get and keep a job, and work more hours at their jobs,<sup>1</sup> which enables them to support their families and gain financial security.<sup>2</sup> Their increased labor force participation supports our broader economy as well.

Despite these benefits of high-quality care, many families—particularly low-income families—cannot access it because they cannot afford it. The average annual cost for full-time care ranges from over \$3,800 to nearly \$20,900, depending on the age of the child, the type of care, and where the family lives.<sup>3</sup> Low-income working families with children under age five who pay for child care spend over one-third of their income for that care.<sup>4</sup>

Some low-income families are able to receive help paying for child care through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the major federal child care assistance program. Yet, because CCDBG is not an entitlement program—eligible families are not guaranteed assistance—and is severely underfunded, most eligible families do not receive assistance. Fewer than one out of six children eligible for federal child care assistance receives it through CCDBG and related programs.<sup>5</sup> Access to child care assistance is particularly limited for Latinx and Asian children.<sup>6</sup>

After years of stagnant funding, CCDBG finally received a historic funding increase of \$2.37 billion in March 2018;<sup>7</sup> this higher funding level was maintained—and slightly expanded upon—in FY 2019, with funding reaching \$8.193 billion.<sup>8</sup> This funding boost offers an opportunity to make child care assistance available to more families, particularly those who face intersecting forms of disadvantage and who have experienced the greatest barriers to accessing assistance. Achieving broader and more equitable access to child care assistance will require the implementation of thoughtful, deliberate, and persistent outreach strategies

to help families learn about the availability of assistance programs and encourage them to enroll in these programs. It will also require efforts to strengthen the child care assistance programs themselves, so that families see clear benefits of enrolling. Finally, it will require increased federal and state investments in child care assistance programs so that they are available to all eligible families who want assistance.

Federal and state policymakers, leadership and staff of state and local agencies, community leaders, and child care advocates can ensure effective outreach to families for child care assistance programs through several key steps:

- **Leverage existing networks, relationships, and community leaders:** To reach those families who are most isolated and least likely to know about child care assistance—and who are most underserved and most likely to benefit from assistance—it is crucial to build respectful partnerships with the individuals and institutions they most know and trust, including health care providers, teachers, public libraries, and community centers.
- **Develop outreach and enrollment infrastructure that reflects and responds to families’ needs:** The forms, materials, websites, and technology used to inform families about child care assistance and enroll them in programs should be designed to be accessible to all parents, with recognition of and respect for the languages they speak, their cultural backgrounds, any disabilities they may have, and their varied education levels. It is also important to dedicate funding to supporting outreach staff and infrastructure to assist families with enrolling—and maintaining enrollment—in the program.
- **Build relationships between caseworkers and the families they serve:** Families are more likely to go through the process of applying and reapplying for child care assistance if they feel respected and understood by the staff at state and local child care agencies. It is essential for agencies to hire caseworkers that reflect the communities they serve and to provide appropriate guidance and training, including anti-bias and racial equity training, to ensure all caseworkers understand their role in supporting parents as they navigate the process.

- **Make child care assistance programs work for all families:** Families will only apply for child care assistance if they expect that they will actually receive help when they apply and be able to access the child care they want for their children with that assistance. States must strengthen their programs by broadening eligibility criteria, eliminating waiting lists, lowering parent copayments, and raising provider payment rates—and federal and state funding must be increased to support these improvements.

These approaches, for the child care assistance program and other federal assistance programs, have demonstrated their effectiveness in reaching families, including those who are the most disadvantaged. With time, staff, and resources dedicated to implementing these outreach strategies—and with policies and practices that are developed with input from the families being served and that are adequately funded—those families who most need help affording child care will be able to receive it.

## Leverage existing networks, relationships, and community leaders

The parents most in need of child care assistance are often disconnected from—or distrustful of—formal networks. They may not respond to a notice from a government agency—and may not even receive that notice. They may be juggling family responsibilities with irregular or nontraditional work schedules, making it difficult to find time to seek out information on assistance programs through official government channels. As a result, traditional channels of communication and information-sharing are often less effective for these families. Instead, these families may be more likely to receive and respond to information from those they know and trust.

A range of organizations and entities—including libraries, schools, community centers, food banks, health care institutions, home visiting programs, faith-based institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, and other nonprofit organizations—could play a valuable role in reaching out to families to let them know about child care assistance programs. These institutions and the individuals who work for them offer the advantage of being able to connect with families where they already are—for example, while at the pediatrician’s office for their child’s annual check-up or while at the library to borrow a book. In addition, parents are more likely to listen to suggestions from these trusted sources because they have relied on them in the past to offer other supports and resources. To effectively serve as ambassadors for child care assistance programs, doctors,

nurses, behavioral health specialists, and other health professionals as well as librarians, school principals, and other community leaders should receive information about child care assistance programs—including how families can benefit from assistance and how families can apply for it.

Among those individuals who are already connected to and trusted by families—and who can therefore serve as a source of information about child care assistance—are staff employed by the Early Intervention program under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>9</sup> The program aims to identify infants and toddlers who have a developmental delay or disability, assess the children and their families' needs, and coordinate support services for the children and their families.<sup>10</sup> Early intervention specialists, who provide services in the child's own home, can be reliable messengers about the child care assistance program. The specialist can talk with parents about how the assistance can help them access the child care services that meet their child's special needs.

Child care providers could serve as a valuable source of information for families as well. These providers—whether centers, family child care homes, or family, friend, and neighbor care providers—could be given information about child care assistance programs that help families better afford the care that they are already using. Providers can then convey this information to the families they serve.

States and localities could also work to identify leaders in communities who could help inform their neighbors about child care assistance programs. Trusted friends and relatives can be the most influential sources of information for many families. These community leaders can be particularly valuable in reaching families who are disconnected from other institutions—who do not go to the doctor regularly because they lack insurance, or who do not feel comfortable bringing their child to the library because they have low literacy, or who are reluctant to interact with other institutions and entities due to language barriers and lack of trust.

In addition to encouraging existing community organizations and institutions to play a role in outreach efforts about the child care assistance program, states and localities should also consider directly funding these community entities to participate in outreach efforts. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—which, unlike CCDBG, is an entitlement program—offers a model for providing financial support to such organizations for outreach activities. Under the federal program, states receive 50 percent of expenditures back in the form

of federal reimbursement for outreach work, including screening and application assistance activities.<sup>11</sup> States can conduct their own outreach activities or contract this work out to nonprofits, which are often better situated to spearhead community outreach efforts. In the past, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has also offered federally funded competitive grants to support nonprofit groups and public agencies in conducting SNAP outreach activities focused on underserved populations.<sup>12</sup>

With a multi-pronged approach that takes advantage of existing community institutions, leaders, and networks, information about child care assistance can reach a broad swath of families—including those families who have few other connections and who stand to gain the most from assistance with their child care costs.

### **Develop outreach and enrollment infrastructure that reflects and responds to families' needs**

Once parents have learned that child care assistance is available, they need to be able to navigate the enrollment process to actually receive child care assistance. Families can often become frustrated by technology that is unfamiliar or hard to use, materials that are not available in the languages they speak, agencies in inaccessible locations, unwelcoming offices, and other barriers. It is essential for states to adequately fund and carefully design systems for application and enrollment so that they are usable for the families they are supposed to serve, and to review access and eligibility policies to ensure they do not include any unintentional barriers.

State and local agencies should ensure forms and informational materials for enrollment are streamlined, written in easy-to-understand language, and translated into multiple languages. Agencies should be well-staffed and open during hours that accommodate parents' work schedules—whether they work during regular business hours or during nights and weekends. Parents who lack time or transportation to go to an office in person should be offered the option to apply by phone, by mail, or online. An adequate number of staff should be available to answer phone calls promptly and during extended hours—so that parents trying to apply for or inquire about assistance are not discouraged by being placed on hold for long time periods. Agencies should have staff available, both in person and on the phone, who can speak the languages of the families applying for and receiving assistance, or should have reliable use of a translation service.

Technology can be effectively used for both outreach efforts and the enrollment process. But it must be designed and thoroughly tested before rolling it out to ensure that when it goes live it is as straightforward as possible and easy to use even for parents with little computer experience. Online options should also be designed to work reliably on smartphone platforms. And as technology is used more extensively, agencies should continue to offer the option of applying using paper forms for those families who do not have access to a computer, a smartphone, or the internet.

It is important to devote sufficient federal and state resources to ensure the effective operation of the enrollment process. The Children's Health Insurance Program, which targets funds at outreach and enrollment, provides an example to follow.<sup>13</sup> The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has provided \$210 million to 285 eligible nonprofit entities and states through the Connecting Kids to Coverage program since its inception in 2009—including up to \$48 million to support 39 new cooperative agreements in 25 states as of July 2019.<sup>14</sup> These awards fund activities aimed at informing families about Medicaid and CHIP, identifying children likely to be eligible, and assisting families with the application and renewal process. Many of the grants are focused on reaching those families who are most disconnected from other resources, including those who speak languages other than English or who live in isolated communities. With dedicated funding for outreach and enrollment—along with enhanced funding for CHIP itself, simplification of the eligibility and renewal processes, and an emphasis in both policy and practice on reaching eligible children—the take-up rate is very high; as of 2015, 93 percent of eligible children were enrolled in Medicaid/CHIP.<sup>15</sup>

## Build relationships between caseworkers and the families they serve

In addition to ensuring that the systems and processes for applying for child care assistance work for families, it is also necessary to address the personal interactions between families and caseworkers. Many families encounter caseworkers who are unhelpful or demeaning, which can discourage families from following through with the application or recertification process. And because word travels fast, one family's negative experience can deter that family's friends, neighbors, or fellow community members from even trying to apply. It is essential to develop better relationships and greater respect between caseworkers and families so that the process of applying for child care assistance is empowering, not demoralizing.

State and local agencies should ensure that their leadership and staff have training to address their implicit biases and negative stereotypes against people who apply for assistance and people of color. Caseworkers should be made aware of their biases and ways to overcome them so that families feel welcomed, not stigmatized, when they apply for assistance, and so that families see caseworkers as facilitators, not barriers, in the process. Agency leadership should assess and encourage ongoing progress in caseworkers' interactions with families by holding regular check-ins with caseworkers and seeking feedback from families.

Agency leadership and staff should also receive training on the broader goals and specific requirements of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014, which reauthorized (renewed and updated) the program. In the past, staff have had incentives to focus on preventing fraud, which often led to an undue emphasis on preventing ineligible families from getting and keeping child care assistance, rather than on helping eligible families obtain and retain it. The CCDBG reauthorization law reoriented this emphasis, both through establishing that children's well-being and access to stable child care is a primary goal of the program and through specific provisions designed to help families retain more continuous assistance—such as provisions allowing families to retain child care assistance for a full 12 months without having to recertify their eligibility.

Maryland has provided training to its administrators and staff to help them understand the CCDBG reauthorization law and its new emphasis on continuity of care. The state has accompanied this training with a rebranding of the program as a "scholarship" to reduce stigma and improve the perception of the program—among parents and caseworkers as well as child care providers, legislators, and the broader public.<sup>16</sup>

Building better relationships between caseworkers and families not only makes it easier for families to apply for assistance but also helps families feel more comfortable offering feedback on the program's policies and practices. Such input can further strengthen a state's outreach and enrollment strategies and overall child care assistance policies.

## Make child care assistance programs work for all families

Ultimately, for outreach about child care assistance to be effective, families must believe they will truly have access to assistance, and that the assistance will meet their needs. Many families are able to benefit tremendously from the program and greatly appreciate the help it gives them. But many families go through the challenging process of learning about and applying for child care assistance, only to find out they are not able to receive help, or that the help offered is not enough.

Families who apply for assistance may be turned away because they do not meet the state's restrictive eligibility criteria. Families who are eligible may not actually receive assistance and instead be placed on waiting lists for months or years because funding is insufficient to serve all eligible families who apply. And even if families do manage to receive assistance, they still may have a significant cost burden due to high parent copayments. In addition, they may not be able to purchase the child care they want for their children due to low payment rates for child care providers. Low payment rates discourage many providers from enrolling children receiving child care assistance—and providers that do serve these families are deprived of the resources they need to support high-quality care. Families may also not be able to take advantage of child care assistance if there are no providers eligible to participate in the child care assistance program that meet the families' particular needs—such as for specialized care for children with disabilities or nontraditional-hour care for parents working evenings, nights, or weekends.

To address these barriers that can cause parents to give up trying to receive or use their child care assistance, states should improve their child care assistance policies—which will require a significant increase in federal and state funding. Additional investments will allow states to expand eligibility and eliminate waiting lists so more families can receive assistance; reduce copayments so they do not pose a financial strain for families receiving assistance; increase provider payment rates so that parents receiving assistance have access to high-quality child care options; and build the supply of child care and facilitate more providers' participation in the child care assistance program so that families can choose the care—whether center-based care, family child care, or family, friend, and neighbor care—that fits their needs and preferences. Only with greatly increased federal and state child care funding and more generous policies will most parents view child care assistance as attainable and valuable.

## Conclusion

High-quality child care supports children's healthy development and parents' ability to work, and child care assistance is essential to help low- and moderate-income families access and afford this care. Yet most families who need help are unable to receive it, or unaware it is even available. The recent increase in federal child care funding, and accompanying additional state investments in child care, offer an opportunity to begin to address this unmet need. Even further investments will be required to significantly expand access to assistance and to ensure that assistance is generous enough for families to afford high-quality care. And sustained and well-designed outreach efforts will be necessary for any expansion of assistance to reach those families who most need it. Substantial new investments in child care, paired with effective outreach, will enable our most underserved families to access the stable, high-quality child care that will put them and their children on a path to success.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is based on a convening on child care assistance outreach strategies co-hosted by the National Women’s Law Center, CLASP, and the Partnership for America’s Children in March 2019. The convening brought together more than 25 participants, including advocates and experts from local and national organizations that work on community and parent organizing, child care outreach, and outreach for other family support programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, and IDEA. NWLC staff also conducted follow-up interviews with several of the participants for additional information. NWLC is grateful to the meeting participants for sharing their insights and recommendations.

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