

Seven Ways States Can Make Child Care Subsidies More Accessible and Equitable

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ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH CHILD CARE SUBSIDY SYSTEMS

The child care subsidy system can play an active role in [addressing the impacts of systemic inequities](#) on the ability of parents of color and immigrant parents to gain economic security and support their children's development.

Structural racism has [restricted access to quality education, employment, wealth, and housing for many people of color](#), leading to higher levels of poverty and lower incomes, less access to good jobs, and other challenges.

As a result, parents of color are disproportionately likely to face realities—such as internet barriers and nontraditional work hours—that [impede their ability to access child care assistance and options](#).

States can examine their subsidy systems and [work with parents and community members](#) to find ways to ensure child care subsidies are accessible to families who face challenges because of structural racism and other inequities.

Child care subsidies and other safety net programs are crucial for the well-being of families with low incomes, including parents' economic stability and children's development. But research has shown that policies and practices in the child care subsidy system can prevent families from accessing and keeping child care benefits that ensure their children receive care in stable, quality settings.

These barriers create unnecessary costs and inefficiencies for families and program agencies. Families trying to access additional work supports for which they are eligible—such as nutrition, medical, or cash assistance—face further complications, with overlapping requirements leading to unnecessary duplication and administrative costs. These issues also prevent states from efficiently using limited public resources to support children and families.

Amid a recent renewed federal focus on expanding the availability and affordability of child care, improving safety net program access and delivery, and advancing equity through government programs, we have pulled out lessons from our previous research on how states can make child care more accessible and equitable for families and more efficient for agencies.

1. EXAMINE CUSTOMER SERVICE FLEXIBILITY, QUALITY, AND EFFICIENCY

Inefficient or inflexible customer service practices—or practices that don't recognize the constraints that families face—can make it challenging for parents to access assistance and can increase the likelihood they won't get help. Explicit or implicit bias about people of color, people whose primary language is not English, or people with low incomes can also create barriers. Addressing bias, providing a range of flexible options for connecting with the agency, and assessing the quality and accessibility of service delivery are key to improving access.

2. SIMPLIFY APPLICATION, REPORTING, AND VERIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Complex application forms with extensive documentation requirements for income, work schedules, and family circumstances can be challenging for parents to produce and burdensome for agencies to process. States can simplify these processes by reducing required documentation to only the core elements mandated under federal law, focusing on the total number of hours worked, allowing parents to self-report work hours, giving parents more flexibility in the documents they must provide, and using technology to streamline verification.

3. CHANGE ELIGIBILITY THRESHOLDS

Setting a higher income eligibility threshold for losing benefits than for initial eligibility can help support continuity of care. States can allow families to continue receiving subsidies even if their income rises above an initial eligibility threshold if their income stays below a set higher threshold for continuing eligibility.

4. TALK WITH PARENTS, PROVIDERS, AND CASEWORKERS TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO SUBSIDY ACCESS AND RETENTION

Policies can often play out on the ground in ways that policymakers do not intend, and agency processes and management structures can create inadvertent barriers to implementing policies as designed. Engaging directly with parents and providers involved in the subsidy system and with caseworkers and agency staff can provide important insights into potential problems that need to be addressed.

5. IMPROVE COORDINATION ACROSS PROGRAMS

Better coordination between child care assistance programs and other work support programs (such as food assistance or Medicaid) can reduce inefficiencies for agencies and families. Building stronger relationships between administrators and staff members of these different programs requires communication, planning, and information sharing.

6. ALIGN AND INTEGRATE POLICIES AND SYSTEMS ACROSS PROGRAMS

States can align policies across different work support programs and improve efficiencies by comparing existing rules, linking eligibility documentation requirements, and establishing mechanisms for considering the cross-program implications of future policy decisions. States also can integrate or link eligibility information systems for child care subsidies and other work support programs to simplify the application process and reduce administrative burden.

7. BUILD DATA, INFORMATION, AND REPORTING CAPACITY

State agencies can use data to monitor program implementation and outcomes, identify problems or opportunities for improvement, evaluate policy and process changes, assess levels and factors for churn in caseloads, explore whether services are being delivered equitably, and see how many families receiving child care assistance also receive other supports for which they are eligible—and use those data to make informed decisions.

ADDITIONAL READING ON IMPROVING CHILD CARE SUBSIDY SYSTEMS

Assessing Child Care Subsidies through an Equity Lens: A Review of Policies and Practices in the Child Care and Development Fund

Gina Adams and Eleanor Pratt <https://urbn.is/3tGAvHk>

Improving Child Care Subsidy Programs: Findings from the Work Support Strategies Evaluation

Heather Hahn, Monica H. Rohacek, and Julia B. Isaacs <http://urbn.is/2s9wLIE>

Confronting the Child Care Eligibility Maze: Simplifying and Aligning with Other Work Supports

Gina Adams and Hannah Matthews <http://urbn.is/2vKVwC2>

WHERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE STRATEGIES

This fact sheet summarizes findings from multiple Urban Institute resources, including reports resulting from the Work Support Strategies initiative (WSS). This multiyear initiative—funded by the Ford Foundation and other foundations—supported six states from 2011 to 2016 in their efforts to reform and align systems delivering work support programs.

See all WSS evaluation resources at <https://urbn.is/worksupportstrategies>, and see our fact sheet summarizing the findings for safety net programs at <https://urbn.is/3rUevIE>.