

Session # B-3

Title: Strategies for Creating a More Efficient and Accessible Subsidy Program

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Gina Adams, M.A., Senior Research Associate, Urban Institute
Robert Frein, M.S., Director, Bureau of Subsidized Child Care Services, Office of Child Development and Early Learning, PA

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

The moderator, Patti Banghart, introduced the speakers and the structure of the session. Gina Adams provided an overview of the methodology of her team's study on strategies that support access and retention of child care subsidies. This methodology is available in documents on her website. She then provided an overview of the findings from this study. These findings are summarized under key points below. Robert Frein, the State child care administrator in Pennsylvania, provided an overview of strategies used to support child care access and retention in this state.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Decentralization of resources (using community resources)...can states put computers into community agencies so applications could be processed there? Open portals would be helpful, but there are liability and confidentiality issues with putting computers in community agencies. Providing information online is helpful and for special populations, going into an agency can be scary, providing information online might be less threatening and more accessible.

Some resistance can be experienced when work is transferred among state employees, especially resistance from the unions. This can be overcome with support from state officials (such as the governor).

Integrative data systems are expensive, but a great first step. If this is not possible, cross-access of systems is a good first step. Though IT investments are efficient in the long term, they are not efficient immediately and thus it is hard to get funding for it.

The balance between alleviating access issues and increasing costs/longer waiting lists was raised.

Investigations of fraud: who does it? How? Frein- first information services look into the situation, then if fraud is strongly suspected the Office of Inspector General investigates the parent. If a provider has acted fraudulently- criminal charges may be in order, also future reimbursements can be withheld.

Former TANF recipients are treated as a priority population until the children age out of the program in PA.

Child care subsidy outreach can occur through low-income employers.

The idea of tracking of abuse, neglect, and juvenile delinquency through unified

computer systems was introduced.

Reporting child support is a barrier to child care subsidy use. Pennsylvania no longer requires child support. It is counted as income if it is received.

KEY POINTS

- Linking benefit systems, especially between TANF and child care, through comprehensive approaches. Alignment of paperwork alleviates burden on families and child care subsidy staff. Alternatively, allowing workers to access databases from other programs so duplication of paperwork can be alleviated. Combining responsibilities among caseworkers (so they offer clients multiple programs) is another method of linking benefit services. Combining application forms, with simplification so forms aren't too long, were useful. These efforts help with both efficiency for the counties, alleviating parent burden and alleviating parents' mistakes in filling out paperwork.
- Improving customer service efforts included explaining subsidy policies in simple terms, requiring local agencies to address customer service (though enforcement of these requirements were challenging), engaging in customer service surveys, and minimizing in-person visits (there are pros and cons to doing this), and making it easier to get in touch with staff (including toll-free numbers, having a dedicated customer service staff, putting information online, and extending office hours/having meetings in other locations). Getting in touch with staff was one of the biggest problems parents had. Agencies need to consider their strengths and limitations in developing strategies for improving customer service.
- Simplifying the application process efforts included making applications available at alternative locations, streamlining the application form and linking systems and forms, and improving the timeliness of eligibility processing through consolidating an eligibility unit, providing a deadline for processing applications, and allowing for presumptive eligibility (in limited circumstances).
- Strategies must be considered thoughtfully so improper payments are avoided.
- Recertification periods are a ceiling, the caseworkers in many states did recertification before the end of this period. Some states provided recertification reminders. Some states send recertification reminder notices to providers as well. Some states also made it easier for parents to recertify by simplifying the information requested of parents and by giving parents grace periods in returning their recertification paperwork.
- For states that do not want to go to a 12 month recertification, efforts to make the recertification process easier should be considered.
- Interim reporting innovative efforts included only requiring reporting of major

changes, only adjusting subsidies with some changes during the interim period, making interim reporting easier, and identifying alternative ways of getting interim information (i.e. linked data systems, employers).

- Efforts to minimize inadvertent terminations/support continuity of subsidies include developing policies to address potential subsidy loss due to changes in the families' circumstances (i.e. gaps in employment, income).
- Dealing with special populations was challenging for all states. In working with families who had non-traditional hours, states created more flexible authorization approaches, allowing providers to bill for more/less hours, and authorizing care for more than one provider. In working with families who had English language learners, states provided materials in other languages, made interpreters available, and tracked the families' language in the computer system (so materials provided to the family are in the appropriate language).
- States should remember that improper payments may be due to state legislation definitions. These policies may be one point of intervention.

- Seven main strategies implemented in Pennsylvania were presented:

1: Linking benefit systems in a multi-dimensional approach by linking subsidy and quality systems on programs (offering providers who serve subsidy children and have high quality ratings a higher reimbursement rate), linking computer systems (R&R, Keystone STARS Quality Initiative, and other early care and education programs). The unification of the child care system was recently completed and an online application as well as information on providers (including their quality ratings) will be opening to families and providers in January 2008.

2: Improving customer service by providing counseling, quality information, and R&R for subsidy and non-subsidy families, including customer service as a performance standard that is measured and monitored through parent surveys and on-site monitoring tools, maintaining databases of providers that include quality ratings and provider characteristics (i.e. location), and offering alternative locations and hours (including nights and weekends) for applications.

3: Simplifying the application by making it more user-friendly and readable, simplifying the verification procedures allowing for more options including self-declaration, processing applications in a timely manner, offering TANF families priority status and a grace period of 183 to find a job and meet the eligibility criteria, developing policies/practices for seamless transferring of families among TANF, FCS, GA and child care services, and linking forms and systems so there are multiple ways to submit the application.

4: Simplifying re-determination by allowing families to simply return the form if no changes have occurred in the family (and reporting changes within 10 days if there was a major change in employment) and systems that 1) automatically predetermines eligibility for other programs, and 2) automatically sending a notice of redetermination when applicable.

5: Simplifying interim reporting by accepting multiple forms/documents for interim reporting, offering call centers and the client self-service online module (coming January 2008).

6: Minimizing inadvertent terminations by allowing 60 days for involuntary loss of work or completion of a degree so customers can find a job, allowing TANF families 183 days to meet the eligibility criteria, and allowing families to maintain eligibility for the program while suspending child care subsidies for 90 days due to a 30 day break in work/education/training.

7: Offering flexibility to special populations, especially domestic violence documentation waivers, authorizing care to multiple providers in special circumstances, providing materials in different languages, tracking languages in the computer system, and having envelope tag lines in multiple languages.

- Keys to making changes in the subsidy system: engagement of parents in public speaking, advocacy and councils; engagement of early childhood education and community advocacy leaders, and coordinating state programs for children aged 0 through kindergarten.