Making Child Care Subsidy Systems Work:
A Workshop on Strategies to Support Access and Retention of Subsidies

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Introduction

- Ensuring that eligible families who need subsidies can get and keep them is critical for CCDF goals:
  - parental choice
  - helping low-income parents work
  - supporting children’s development

- Research suggests some eligible families who need and want help are not getting it, and shows that those that do have short spells

- Many factors responsible, including subsidy policies/practices that can create barriers to subsidy use
Overview of the Study…

1) 2005-2006 study on state/local strategies to support subsidy access

- Funded by the Joyce Foundation
- Focus on 7 Midwestern states (IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, OH, WI)
- Reviewed state policy manuals and state CCDF plans, conducted state policy survey on common policies, conducted interviews with state and local respondents on key policies/strategies
- Policy brief and in-depth report available at www.urban.org
...Overview of the Study

2) 2006-2007 CCB funded follow-up work to:

- Collected strategies from additional states (identified with CCB, regional staff, and NCCIC)
- Integrated findings with Joyce data to create topical modules
Research Questions of Joyce/CCB Projects

- What are subsidy agencies doing to support subsidy access and retention?
  - Overall, for parents with fluctuating work/non-traditional work schedules, and for English Language Learners
- What lessons have they learned?
- What tradeoffs are involved?

NOTE: Focus on state experiences and perspectives - does not assess impact or implementation
Considerations in Making Policy Decisions

- CCDF administrators have to balance concerns about:
  - Parent burden
  - Staff workload/administrative costs
  - Controlling improper payments
  - Being fiscally responsible/keeping program costs low
How Agencies Approach Tradeoffs

- Tradeoffs not always obvious – some strategies are positive in multiple areas, allowing administrators to achieve multiple goals

- Different agencies/administrators weigh these considerations very differently – no “right” answer

- Occasionally have very different perspectives on how particular policies play out
Key Policy Areas

- Overarching strategies (linking systems, customer service)
- Simplifying steps in process (application, recertification, interim reporting)
- Minimizing inadvertent terminations
- Special populations (non-standard work, English Language Learners)
Link Benefit Systems

- A multi-dimensional approach to aligning systems (computer systems, policies, eligibility, recertification, reporting, etc)

- Structural/administrative approaches:
  - Link computer systems (integrated system, or allow workers to access data across systems)
  - Combine responsibilities within a single worker

- At particular steps in the client process:
  - Combined applications
  - Synchronize review dates
  - Coordinate interim reporting
Improve Customer Service...

- Simplify/explain subsidy policies/practices
- Require local agencies to address customer service
- Conduct customer service surveys
- Minimize in-person visits
  - Debate about eliminating in-person visits for initial application
  - More consensus about eliminating visits for redetermination
...Improve Customer Service

- Make it easier to get in touch with staff
  - **Phone systems**: State level toll-free numbers, phone call tracking system, scheduling hot line
  - **Staffing approaches**: Dedicated customer service staff, alternative access points, different models of customer service
  - **On-line options**: Put information on-line
  - **Easier to meet with staff**: Extend office hours, meet in other locations
  - **Improve data management/computer systems and technological infrastructure**
Simplify Application

- **Make applications easier to access**
  - Make available at alternative locations
  - Strategies listed earlier re customer service

- **Make it easier to fill out/submit applications**
  - Streamline the application form, link systems and forms, ease documentation requirements, provide alternative ways to submit applications

- **Deal with timeliness of eligibility processing**
  - Consolidated eligibility unit, “real-time” processing, presumptive eligibility (under limited circumstances)
Simplify Recertification

(Note: interacts with interim reporting)

- Longer recertification periods (12 mos.) - challenging issue, some states doing selectively
- Make it easier for families to remember (reminders to parents and providers, synchronized dates with other systems)
- Make it easier for families to get information to the agency (see customer service strategies)
- Simplify what information parents have to report (only report changes, use other data sources/systems)
- Give parents an “extra chance” through grace periods and backdating
Simplify Interim Reporting

- Only require reporting of major changes
- Only adjust subsidies with some changes during interim period
- Make it easier to report
  - Change reporting forms, call centers, on-line, etc
- Identify alternative ways of getting the information
  - Linked data systems, other data systems, employer
Minimize Inadvertent Terminations/Support Continuity

Policies to address potential subsidy loss due to changes in circumstance:

- Short gaps in employment
- Temporary increases in income
- Brief periods of ineligibility or not needing care (suspend payment)
- Continue payments when families change eligibility categories
- Delay or suspend copayment increases
Special Populations

Fluctuating/Non-traditional Work Hours (area needing more focus and support)
- Create more flexible authorization approaches
- Allow providers to bill for more/less hours
- Authorize care for more than one provider

English Language Learners
- Provide materials in other languages
- Make interpreters available in multiple ways
- Track language in computer system
Concluding Thoughts…

- Area of ongoing activity and concern for state administrators

- Improving access is of interest to agencies despite (because of?) fiscal constraints and improper payment concerns
  - Improper payment problems can flag areas where policies need to be reformed
Concluding Thoughts...

- CCDF agencies finding partners
  - Linkages and lessons from other systems and benefit programs (Food Stamps, etc)
  - Other individuals or organizations working with parents (CCR&R, provider organizations, providers, local community service agencies, etc)
What to do if you want to examine these issues? *(see separate handout)*

1) Assess your system – Where do families face challenges? Why?

- Gather data from wherever possible – i.e. clients, caseworkers, and administrative data (including improper payment info)
- Examine whether your policies and practices reflect the dynamic and complex realities of low-income family’s lives
...Concluding Thoughts...

2) What is the cause of the problem?
   - Work backwards to the source – each problem can have many causes (i.e. policy, infrastructure, implementation, etc).

3) Assess solutions – What can be done that conforms with subsidy system goals?
   - Be creative
   - Different solutions will work for different systems
   - May be more than one solution

4) Implement solutions and assess the results
...Concluding Thoughts

- Partnerships with research community
  - Assess impact of policies
  - Identify most promising strategies to evaluate further
  - Identify where research support needed
    - Designing effective mechanisms to gather customer service surveys
Selected Source Documents

all available at www.urban.org


