Key Steps Child Care Subsidy Agencies Can Take
to Improve Subsidy Access and Retention

There are four steps policymakers and community leaders can take to improve customer service and family-friendly policies, and to help low-income families access and retain subsidies. They are:

(1) Assess how well the system works in helping families access and retain subsidies

- Look at *policies and administrative structures* in place for *each step* of the process— application, authorization, getting a provider approved, reporting interim changes, getting recertified, and dealing with problems. At each step, examine
    o what parents have to do,
    o what caseworkers have to do, and
    o how often these steps occur for any given family.

- Look at *actual practices* of how these policies or structures are implemented, and assess customer service practices. For example,
    o talk to, or gather information from, parents and caseworkers
    o if you have multiple sites, recognize the impact of local leadership and local variation in implementation, and make sure to look at how this works in more than one locality or local agency

- Look at program *data* to flag potential problems— such as points when high proportions of families seem to be losing eligibility, particular types of families that seem to have particularly short subsidy spells, or an incidence of improper payments that may identify policies that may not be working.

(2) Identify problems from (1), and then work backwards to identify the basic cause(s) of the problem.

Think backwards to disentangle the cause(s) of any issues identified in (1). This strategy, also called "backward mapping" (Elmore 1979), is critical because the same symptom can have a different cause (or multiple causes) depending on the situation. For example, high termination rates may be related to parents not being able to contact the agency due to telephone problems or caseworker workload or training, or the rates may be due to policies that do not recognize normal fluctuations in parental eligibility.

There are many places to look for possible sources of almost any problem—including

- policy requirements or administrative procedures,
- agency practices or leadership,
- agency resources or infrastructure,
- individual caseworkers,
- client, community, or market demographics that create unusual demands on the subsidy program (i.e. non traditional employment patterns, rural/urban, etc), and
- some combination of the above.

(3) Think about the problem in the big picture and identify creative solutions

Consider the problems and causes identified in (1) and (2) above, and assess them in the following ways:

- The goals of the subsidy program—is this problem undercutting the goal of supporting stable employment and work advancement for low-income families? The goal of supporting the development and well-being of their children? The goal of running a fiscally responsible and well-managed agency?

- What kinds of solutions can solve the problem? Consider creative ones as well as more obvious ones:
    - Find out what other CCDF programs are doing to address this problem
    - Rethink key policies to better reflect the reality of parent's lives and program goals
    - Link to other programs or data systems, or learn from them (i.e., Food Stamps, other systems databases, etc)
    - Identify new allies to help (i.e., providers, CCR&Rs)
    - Think about administrative or management approaches to support better customer service
    - Identify possible technology-based solutions

- Recognize that different solutions will work for different program administrative structures, client demographics, or subsidy agency realities. (For example, some solutions work better in urban areas, others in rural; some solutions will work better for clients in stable employment with a traditional schedule, others will work better for clients with nontraditional schedules, and so on.)

- Recognize that there may be more than one solution to any problem. (For example, if interim reporting requirements are burdensome for parents and staff, possible policy strategies could include reducing what changes parents have to report, limiting subsidy adjustments between recertifications, linking data systems to minimize parent reporting requirements, or simplifying actual reporting process.)

- Weigh possible solutions within the context of the agency's trade-offs and program priorities. In particular, this means finding the appropriate balance between:
    - parent burden,
    - administrative burden or costs,
    - overall program costs, and
    - improper payments.

    How any particular agency or administrator weighs these trade-offs will vary depending on what is viewed as the appropriate balance between particular trade-offs and priorities, agency resources, opportunities and constraints, and so forth.

(4) Implement the solutions and assess the results

Finally, it is important to not only put the solutions in place, but also—to the extent possible— to monitor them to see whether they are having the desired impact and are being implemented as planned. While in-depth formal evaluations can be very useful, it is also possible to assess these efforts by going back to the often less-costly strategies identified above in (1) to see whether the original problems are being resolved by the new policies or practices.