

## **Southern Regional Task Force on Child Care**

### **Action Plan to Improve Access to Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families in the South**

#### **GOAL 1**

Federal, state, local and private funds should be sufficient to meet 100% of need for direct child care assistance, based on initial eligibility levels at 85% of the state median income. Redetermination levels should allow families to retain child care assistance until they reach 100% of the state median income.

#### **Action Steps**

- 1.1. Educate federal and state policymakers on the need for action.
- 1.2. Educate the business community on the need for leadership in achieving state, federal and community resources to meet 100% of need.
- 1.3. Increase federal funding for the Child Care Development Fund to fulfill current policy allowing federal matching funds for child care assistance up to 85% of the state median income.
- 1.4. Increase state funding to provide child care subsidies to all eligible families who seek child care assistance.
- 1.5. Mobilize federal, state and community resources in support of families who need child care assistance.

#### **GOAL 2**

States and communities should broaden their child care eligibility and subsidy policies to meet the economic, work and education needs of families.

#### **Action Steps**

- 2.1. Establish co-payments not to exceed 10% of gross family income.
- 2.2. Provide child care assistance to students who qualify under the income guidelines.
- 2.3. Explore broad use of income exemptions to address affordability of child care.
- 2.4. Eliminate asset testing (e.g. automobile or savings account) from criteria for child care assistance.
- 2.5. Index income eligibility levels for inflation.

### **GOAL 3**

Outreach initiatives should be designed and aggressively implemented to assure that families have accessible and easy-to-understand information on child care assistance and are provided assistance in applying.

#### **Action Steps**

- 3.1 Provide information on child care subsidies through multiple sources, venues and the media.
- 3.2. Ensure that information is accurate, family friendly, employer friendly, culturally sensitive and provided in multiple languages, as appropriate.
- 3.3. Present information in a manner that would remove the stigma associated with receiving subsidies.
- 3.4. Provide literature and assistance to help parents make informed provider choices.
- 3.5. Coordinate ongoing and strategic outreach activities among common organizations and providers.
- 3.6. Offer cross-training and information to providers, community organizations, faith organizations and state agencies to inform them about child care assistance programs and how to assist families in filing applications.

### **GOAL 4**

The child care application and redetermination processes should be uncomplicated and family friendly.

#### **Action Steps**

- 4.1. Simplify applications for child care assistance.
- 4.2. Allow filing by mail, phone, fax or internet.
- 4.3. Minimize requests for documentation at initial application and utilize documents already on file.
- 4.4. Provide applications at multiple sites.
- 4.5. Offer non-conventional hours of operation for eligibility offices and provide toll-free phone lines to include evening and weekend hours.
- 4.6. Explore presumptive eligibility or otherwise provide immediate eligibility contingent upon final approval.
- 4.7. Eliminate requirements for a face-to-face interview both for initial application and for redetermination.
- 4.8. Provide consultation on making appropriate choices when excessive requests for provider changes are filed.
- 4.9. Establish a 12-month redetermination period where there are no changes in income or job status.
- 4.10. Continue eligibility for full subsidy for 12 weeks if family loses employment but can document that a job search is underway.

## **GOAL 5**

Establish a coordinated, seamless eligibility system so that funding sources are invisible to families and support continuity of child care.

### **Action Steps**

- 5.1. Eliminate the need for families to reapply when eligibility categories change by automatically searching to exhaust all eligibility categories before closing cases.
- 5.2. Explore the potential for policy and procedural changes to achieve linkages with or combined applications for child care assistance, Head Start , Pre-K, and Title I.
- 5.3. Continue eligibility in programs with multiple funding sources to assure continuity of care in the event that eligibility has expired or terminated in one program.
- 5.4. Work collaboratively with all public and private programs and funding sources to assure that children receive stable and consistent early child care services.

## **GOAL 6**

Establish customer service outcome goals and set standards to ensure that all families are treated with dignity and respect and are served in an efficient manner.

### **Action Steps**

- 6.1. Provide professional and well-trained eligibility staff who are culturally and linguistically sensitive.
- 6.2. Facilitate quick eligibility determination through reasonable caseloads and/or administrative structure.
- 6.3. Conduct periodic, independent and thorough consumer satisfaction assessments, assuring the confidentiality of information collected.
- 6.4. Provide adequate support for child care resource and referral services.

## **GOAL 7**

Design the subsidy system so that rate structures assure that families receiving child care assistance have access to all types of child care and disallow charges above established co-payments

### **Action Steps**

- 7.1. States should cap reimbursement rates at no less than the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile based on a market rate survey conducted every two years that accurately reflects the price of all types of care in communities across the state.
- 7.2. Establish and evaluate reimbursement policies that encourage provider participation and are responsive to family needs.
- 7.3. Prohibit providers from charging above the established co-payments.

## **GOAL 8**

Create partnerships with employers to expand child care assistance for working families.

### **Action Steps**

- 8.1. Educate employers about the bottom line benefits associated with public and private child care assistance.
- 8.2. Enlist business leaders to champion the involvement of southern businesses and to serve as mentors to other businesses.
- 8.3. Provide information to employers on all available tax benefits related to child care assistance, including deductions for donations to tax-exempt child care organizations, capital costs for constructing a child care center and establishing a pre-tax dependent care assistance plan.
- 8.4. Facilitate collaborative initiatives that enable employers to share ideas as well as pool their resources to address child care needs.
- 8.5. Provide matching funds or other tax or financial incentives for employers to invest in child care.
- 8.6. Establish incentives for employers to create child care benefit programs for their employees or to contribute to child care purchasing pools in their state or community.
- 8.7. Reduce the administrative burden on employers participating in any joint public/private child care assistance program.

## **GOAL 9**

Provide child care assistance to working families through federal and state tax laws.

### **Action Steps**

- 9.1. Make the federal child and dependent care tax credit refundable.
- 9.2. Establish refundable child and dependent care tax credits in states with income taxes.
- 9.3. Raise federal and state child care tax credit expense limits to accurately reflect the price of quality care.
- 9.4. Index for inflation the state and federal child and dependent care tax credit income eligibility and expense limits.
- 9.5. Ensure that child and dependent care tax credits are clearly identified and easy to claim by filers using either the short or long form.
- 9.6. Encourage the use of effective state tax strategies to provide financial support for child care.

## **GOAL 10**

States should have effective, coordinated systems to guide child care and early childhood policy decisions and direct use of resources.

### **Action Steps**

- 10.1. Facilitate greater coordination in eligibility policies across child care and early childhood education programs at state and local levels.
- 10.2. All southern states and the District of Columbia should participate in a collaborative effort to develop and collect common data elements across states.