



Oklahoma child care providers are the backbone of our state's economy, and they are playing an especially vital role during the pandemic. We are grateful that Governor Stitt recognized child care as critical for health care workers so they can perform life-saving work. Approximately 267,000 Oklahoma children under 12 — whose parents work in health care and other essential industries such as grocery workers, pharmacy staff, and critical public jobs — need care. However, providers cannot sustain this critical resource, and families will struggle to keep their children safe, without urgent emergency relief and critical policy changes.

Child care providers need immediate support during and after the coronavirus crisis to continue their essential work. In the best of times, child care centers and family child care homes operate on razor thin margins, and now many are struggling to stay afloat. Providers are at risk of permanent closure, undermining the ability of our workforce to return to work. This also impacts the ability for businesses to rebound once the threat from COVID-19 subsides. A national survey found that 30 percent of providers would not survive a closure of more than two weeks, and about half are losing income because families cannot pay. Rough estimates show that just over a quarter of Oklahoma's licensed care facilities have closed since March 15, and will struggle to cover fixed costs. Providers that remain open are struggling financially due to low attendance and their efforts to maintain smaller child to staff ratios. Many are also having difficulties securing adequate food, medical, and cleaning supplies. Without immediate public investment, most providers will not survive the COVID-19 crisis.

Families are facing financial hardship during this crisis, which puts the health and safety of their children at risk. Parents are struggling to cover copays and tuition as their work hours have been cut or their employers struggle to make payroll themselves. Many working parents have temporarily lost jobs and can no longer afford the copays or fees needed to secure their child's spot when they do go back to work. Essential workers also need assistance finding and paying for care in the midst of increased or unpredictable hours and child care closures.

We need to use all the tools available for a comprehensive response to support both providers and families. The state should utilize existing Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds along with the additional \$49.5 million in additional CCDBG funding the state will receive as part of the federal CARES stimulus package. Federal CCDBG funds are the primary source of funding for Oklahoma's child care subsidy program, which provides assistance to low-income parents who are working or in school. The CARES Act has allowed significant leeway in the expenditure of the additional CCDBG funds. We urge the state to consider the following recommendations as they consider how to appropriate available funding:

Reimburse child care centers and family child care subsidy providers based on enrollment rather than attendance. This includes paying child care providers that have closed to allow them to cover fixed expenses. Costs can be calculated based on February payments and this strategy would be cost neutral.

Expand the development of networks using new CCDBG funds for child care facilities to get the supplies they need such as thermometers, cleaning supplies, milk, and food. This can be done by utilizing the existing Shared Services network operated through Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral. Also the state should exempt child care providers from limitations retailers have placed on buying limited quantities of groceries and other supplies to ensure that providers can obtain what they need.

Pay all child care providers (including non-subsidy) for loss of income across all care settings just as the state is doing for the PK–12 education system. Provide emergency funding to cover fixed costs so providers can pay staff wages during closures to ensure enough workforce and facilities when the emergency ends.

Waive copayments for families through the coronavirus pandemic and retroactively for March 2020. Parents who choose to keep their children home or parents who lose their jobs during this emergency should not lose their eligibility for quality child care. Slots for subsidy families should be held, and families should not be charged place holding fees, which most families will struggle to pay.

Protect subsidy eligibility for families by extending 12-month eligibility. No family should lose subsidy during the coronavirus.

Develop a survey or other dedicated means to coordinate care for essential workers and reimburse providers at the three-star rate. Pay these child care workers hazard pay for the increased risk for workers and their families. Follow other states that have utilized surveys to document needs and match families with available care or partner with the Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association to utilize their existing referral services.

- Avoid “pop-up” care facilities that have relaxed licensing and training.
- Focus on existing licensed child care sites as the primary way to provide child care for essential workers with young children (ages 0-5), particularly infants and toddlers.
- Existing programs already have the equipment and physical structures, as well as trained staff, to provide the safest care to young children given their unique needs.

- Allow teachers and teacher’s aides with background checks to step in as temporary child care workers and hire child care providers who have been laid off as the first priority when staffing expanding emergency child care centers.
- Extend in-home care options to allow children of essential workers to be cared for by trusted friends or relatives and receive subsidy payments.

Ensure child care providers have access to a variety of benefits. These include direct grants, zero-interest loans, mortgage forbearance, deferral of rents, and support for utilities and insurance for a minimum of three months. Provide assistance in securing SBA loans and ensure all workers have access to paid family leave and paid sick leave.

Given the level of concern and crisis already facing the early childhood and education sector prior to this outbreak, your choices in the days and weeks ahead on the above topics will create “make or break” scenarios for many providers. We ask you to work quickly and thoughtfully, in conjunction with parents and providers and those that support them, to adopt and communicate the needed changes as soon as possible.

Without action, our child care system in Oklahoma will collapse, leaving countless families and children vulnerable and exposed. To help keep families and child care programs economically stable and healthy through this challenging time, our state must ensure our child care assistance policies are responding to the realities and needs of families, providers, and staff. We urge you to support the recommendations outlined above. We appreciate your urgent attention to this matter and are available to help communicate information, updates, and the implementation of these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Oklahoma Child Care Association
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
Oklahoma Policy Institute
Oklahoma Women’s Coalition
Potts Family Foundation
Learning Care Group
La Petite Academy
Childtime Learning Centers
The Children’s Depot
Licensed Child Care Association of Oklahoma

¹ Essential workers should include, but is not limited to: health care operations, critical infrastructure, critical manufacturing, grocery workers, pharmacy, and other critical services, news media, financial institutions, providers of basic necessities to economically disadvantaged populations, construction, defense, critical services necessary to maintain the safety, sanitation and critical operations of residences, vendors that provide critical services or products, including logistics and technology support, child care and services