

CONNECTICUT'S CCDF STATE PLAN 2025-2027

KEY APPROACHES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

BACKGROUND

The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act is the law that authorizes the federal child care subsidy program known as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). It is the primary federal funding source for providing low-income families that are working or participating in education and training with help paying for child care; and for improving the quality of care, learning, and development for all children. Connecticut's subsidy program is Care 4 Kids.

The CCDF plan reflects key goals of an integrated system of child care for low-income working families. The intention is that states and the federal government will be able to use this information to track and assess progress of child care service delivery; determine the need for technical assistance to child care programs; and monitor compliance with specific state and federal requirements.

1. CCDF Program Administration

- As Connecticut's CCDF Lead Agency, the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) is responsible for administration of the CCDF Program, but operates in unison with other partner agencies, such as United Way of CT and Care 4 Kids, to implement CCDF services.
- The OEC is committed to an inclusive and collaborative approach to develop the Plan.
- Several 2025-2027 CCDF Plan informational sessions were held in-person and remotely.
- A virtual Public Comment session on the 2025-2027 CCDF Plan is scheduled for May 13, 2024.

2. Child and Family Eligibility, Enrollment, and Continuity of Care

- The OEC is dedicated to making sure that applications are processed efficiently and timely. The OEC has designed an online Parent Portal for parents to manage their Care 4 Kids application online. Families can create an account and log in to apply for benefits; use a prescreening tool to see if they are eligible; upload documents; view benefits; report changes; renew benefits; and view notifications and correspondence.
- The OEC developed an Online Screener to determine if families meet some basic eligibility criteria before submitting an application.
- OEC expanded program eligibility requirements to allow families enrolled in undergraduate programs, workforce development programs, and high school equivalency programs.
- Prioritizing Services for Vulnerable Children and Families by creating Protective Services, which means "an at-risk population of children as defined by Connecticut General Statutes § 17b-749, for which eligibility is determined on a case-by-case basis. Effective July 1, 2023, such at-risk populations include (1) children placed in a foster home by the Department of Children and Families and for whom the parent or legal guardian receives foster care

payments, (2) children who are adopted through the Department of Children and Families for one year from the date of adoption and (3) homeless children and youths, as defined in 42 USC 11434a, as amended from time to time.” Income, asset limits, and family fees are waived for this population on a case-by-case basis.

- For families caring for a Department of Children and Families foster or adopted child and families experiencing homelessness.

3. Child Care Affordability

- Waiving family co-payment for all families who are considered Protective Services, effective July 1, 2023; such at-risk populations include (1) children placed in a foster home by the Department of Children and Families and for whom the parent or legal guardian receives foster care payments, (2) children who are adopted through the Department of Children and Families for one year from the date of adoption and (3) homeless children and youths, as defined in 42 USC 11434a, as amended from time to time.” Income, asset limits, and family fees are waived for this population on a case-by-case basis.
- Established a 20% quality bonus for accredited licensed child care centers (DCCC), group child care homes (DCGH), and license-exempt providers (DCEX) that have or obtain a valid national accreditation with one of the approved accreditation organizations: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Council on Accreditation (COA), or New England Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

4. Parental Choice, Equal Access, Payment Rates, and Payment Practices

- OEC funds statewide family child care networks to increase the availability of care for infants and toddlers; and reduce administrative costs of family child care providers through technical assistance, training, and back office support.
- OEC works with the Women’s Business Development Council (WBDC) to provide a comprehensive suite of business development services to support child care service providers to help sustain their business. WBDC has expanded services to support the rollout of the Child Care Program Stabilization Funding, which is funded by the American Rescue Plan Act. This is to support the child care field to build more effective business practices, so programs can remain open.
- Connecticut’s Governor, Legislative and State Leadership, and the OEC Commissioner established a plan to reach increasing rates toward the 60th and 75th percentiles, over time. With the commitment to an 11% increase for each year for three consecutive years to the licensed providers, and a 6% increase for each of three years to unlicensed relative providers, allows for a balance in the number of families able to receive child care subsidy within the State and Federal budget allotments.
- The OEC has a multi-year contract with the O’Donnell Company to increase awareness of why quality child care is important and what services are available to families. This campaign will ensure consistent messaging through a set of communications that are easily accessed by families. Outreach to targeted groups including English as a second language,

homeless, deep poverty, and families with new infants. Strategies include press outreach, Google ads, Facebook, community newspapers in English and Spanish, billboard and bus cards, and shelter ads in major cities.

5. Health and Safety of Child Care Settings

- Care 4 Kids providers are required to complete a pre-service and/or an orientation program within three months of serving children. Based on feedback received from providers, the OEC has modified training topics to more closely match the setting and ages of children served. The health and safety training requirement is being extended to all licensed providers regardless of their participation with Care 4 Kids.
- Providers who receive a Care 4 Kids subsidy are required to complete ongoing professional development to build their knowledge and skills. Each Care 4 Kids provider is regularly monitored to confirm they have met the online health and safety orientation, and ongoing professional development requirements. While professional development is already a requirement for staff working in licensed child care centers and group child care homes, such requirement will be extended to family child care home providers and staff regardless of their participation with Care 4 Kids. The training topics for licensed programs will align with the requirements of providers eligible to receive Care 4 Kids.
- To align the pre-service training and professional development training topics for Care 4 Kids providers with licensed providers, the OEC has proposed changes to the child care center/group child care home regulations. Those proposed changes have been published for public comment and must be approved by the Attorney General for legal sufficiency before being approved by the Legislative Regulations Review Committee. Similar changes to the regulations will be proposed and published for public comment before being adopted for family child care homes.
- The OEC utilizes the Background Check Information System (BCIS) as a tool for individuals to submit to comprehensive fingerprint supported background checks that are mandated under both Connecticut and Federal law. People who are required to have a background check via BCIS at least once every five years are Connecticut child care providers, including but not limited to: 1) employees and volunteers of child care centers age 16 and older who provide direct care for children or have unsupervised access to children, 2) family child care home providers, assistants, and substitutes, and 3) everyone age 18 or older who lives in a licensed family care home. BCIS ensures that individuals submit all required information and consents for a background check. BCIS maintains a record of the results, whether a person successfully completed their background check, and if they are eligible to work in the field of child care. Child care programs and family child care homes are able to ensure their staff is up-to-date with background checks requirements by developing program rosters in BCIS. A BCIS program roster lists all employees or volunteers of a specific program, their background check status, and the date which their background check will expire. All background checks completed through BCIS include the following components which are compulsory under 45 CFR § 98.43:

- (1) A Federal Bureau of Investigation fingerprint check using Next Generation Identification;
- (2) A search of the National Crime Information Center's National Sex Offender Registry; and
- (3) A search of the following registries, repositories, or databases in the State where the child care staff member resides and each State where such staff member resided during the preceding five years:
 - (i) State criminal registry or repository, with the use of fingerprints being:
 - (A) Required in the State where the staff member resides;
 - (B) Optional in other States;
 - (ii) State sex offender registry or repository; and
 - (iii) State-based child abuse and neglect registry and database.

6. Support for a Skilled, Qualified, and Compensated Child Care Workforce

- The OEC to develop a proposed early childhood educator compensation schedule for lead teachers employed by State-funded programs.
- The OEC issued guidance to state-funded programs to meet minimum compensation recommendations for early childhood education (ECE) educators to help sustain the workforce. It is not currently a mandate for providers.
- To support this increase, the OEC has raised subsidy rates by 11% per year for three years, which will provide additional compensation to programs which could increase salary for ECE educators.
- OEC offers support to the workforce through monthly webinars touching on various aspects related to mental health. Promoting professional development while also taking care of self can be mutually beneficial.
- The OEC provides an incentive program (Qualified Workforce Incentives – QWI) that awards providers monetarily for achievement of defined education benchmarks (CDA Credential, associate's degree in early childhood education, or bachelor's degree with early childhood education credits or OEC equivalent). These awards build on the OEC's scholarship assistance fund that provides debt free paths to those benchmarks.
- OEC has partnered with the Connecticut Community College System (CT State) in order to increase the capacity and create an ECE pathway for child care workers in the State of Connecticut. These supports include ECE program leadership training through the offering of a Program Leader Initiative (PLI), 12 defined credit hours at an Associates level, the offering of an enhanced Child Development Associate Credential (CDA) effort across the state, and additional adult learning theory classes (ALT) to better educate future higher ed educators and trainers in the field of early childhood learning programs.

- The OEC offers scholarships to program administrators and family home owners to strengthen their business competency. In addition, continuation of the Governor's Education Emergency Relief Fund (GEER) project provides an Online Learning Hub where directors receive technical assistance, coaching, and mentoring to support program management around the use of technology for communication and learning with families.

7. Quality Improvement Activities

- Elevate is the OEC's quality improvement system for licensed and many license-exempt child care programs in family, group, and center-based settings. Our system gives child care providers the tools and guidance they need to improve their programs over time at their own pace. Elevate builds on Connecticut's licensing requirements and links to national accreditation standards. Elevate offers members 3 levels of engagement: Member, Member+, and Member Accredited. Providers demonstrate their commitment to continuous quality improvement by creating Elevate Program Plans in which they develop SMART Goals, action steps, and detail how they will reach their goals and continue their program quality over time.
- OEC has added 1,300 new infant and toddler spaces to the state-funded system statewide. We offered professional development opportunities for infant/toddler providers to improve the quality of child care services.
- Accreditation Quality Improvement Support (AQIS) is a statewide initiative that provides center-based programs with access to a team of staff (facilitators) with expertise in continuous program improvement using the NAEYC standards and assessment items as the framework for growth.
- CT Staffed Family Child Care Networks are initiating support of NAFCC accreditation for member family providers by providing Communities of Practice on the topic of accreditation.
- OEC funds accreditation fees for NAEYC and NAFCC accreditation, and provides bonus payments through the Care 4 Kids system to accredited providers.

8. Lead Agency Coordination and Partnerships to Support Service Delivery

- The OEC has contracted with the regional Education Service Center (EdAdvance) to provide a series of train-the-trainer events to inform providers about the trauma of homelessness. The target audience for this activity is providers who receive the Care 4 Kids subsidy, and other key partners that work with this population, including the Coordinated Access Networks and the state's McKinney-Vento Liaisons.
- The OEC has a partnership with CT State, our consolidated community college system, to provide courses toward a CDA and a set of 12 defined early childhood credits on a path toward a degree.
- The OEC continues to collaborate and coordinate with *The Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet*, *CT Indian Tribal organizations*, *CT State Department of Education Part B*, *Birth to Three (IDEA Part C)*, *State Head Start Collaboration*, *CT Department of Public Health*, *CT*

Department of Labor, Office of Workforce Competitiveness, OEC Licensing, CT Department of Children and Families, the Child and Adult Food Program, Department of Social Services – Medicaid, TANF, SNAP, McKinney-Vento State Coordinators, and other state agencies; as well as private funders to execute a vision of Connecticut’s statewide child care system that increases access to high-quality, affordable child care while improving the experience for families and simultaneously expanding, professionalizing and stabilizing the child care business in our state.

9. Family Outreach and Consumer Education

- OEC, in collaboration with Eastern Connecticut State University, has developed a series of video-rich training modules for home visitors to improve their knowledge and skills in serving young children and families. These videos are posted on the Center of Early Childhood’s website and are available to the public.
- The OEC also collaborated with Connecticut Health and Development (CHDI) to develop training tools for child health care providers on infant mental health and maternal depression. These tools were utilized in workshops with pediatricians.

10. Program Integrity and Accountability

- Continue to implement program accountability activities as specified by CCDF.
- Continue to administer the CCDF program with controls to direct and monitor vendor performance. All vendors are required to meet the standards set in their contracts.
- Continue to implement safeguards to identify and prevent fraud or intentional program violations. Care 4 Kids has access to family records in several public databases to determine family eligibility. United Way of CT reviews cases for accuracy in eligibility; OEC utilizes the Department of Social Services Fraud Early Detection Unit to prevent errors before an agency approves benefits.