

House Children and Youth Committee Informational Meeting - March 29, 2023
Shante' Brown, Deputy Secretary
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Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Jozwiak, members of the House Children and Youth Committee, and staff. My name is Shante' Brown, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). OCDEL is a dual deputation, reporting to both the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education. OCDEL strives to build a strong foundation for children, starting at birth through age five. The success of our efforts today will translate into a brighter tomorrow, with citizens who are strong, independent, and well-prepared for the future.

As a parent, former early childhood education teacher, and director of two early learning programs, I have experienced first-hand the importance of child care and its essential role in the development and well-being of children, as well as the value for parents and all of Pennsylvania. Child care provides a safe and stimulating environment where infants, toddlers, and preschoolers can learn, grow, and develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. OCDEL's Bureau of Certification ensures that child care providers meet basic health and safety standards. Also, Pennsylvania's Quality Rating Improvement System, Keystone STARS, supports the continuous efforts of early and school-age care programs to improve program quality. Keystone STARS providers receive ratings from STAR 1 to STAR 4. As programs earn more STARS, they demonstrate that they are providing higher quality care for children.

Child care is essential to the state's economy, allowing parents to maintain employment or pursue education and/or training. Pennsylvania's subsidized child care program, Child Care Works (CCW), helps make child care more affordable for eligible families by assisting with their child care fees. At initial eligibility, parents making 200% or less of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines (FPIG) who are working or in an education or training program generally qualify for CCW. Families undergo annual redeterminations of eligibility for the program. Thanks to the General Assembly and passage of Act 54 of 2022, families can generally continue to receive CCW subsidies if they do not exceed 300% of the FPIG. Currently, there are 68,500 children enrolled in CCW and there is no waitlist for services attributable to funding. CCW increases affordability for lower income, working parents, thus helping to navigate the access barrier that could otherwise prevent these parents from building a career and better future.

Child care also provides opportunities for children to interact with peers and adults, learn social skills, and develop relationships. This can promote a sense of belonging, instill confidence, and prepare children for success in school and later in life. This is true for both children reaching developmental milestones on target and children with special needs or disabilities. OCDEL's Bureau of Early Intervention Services and Family Supports provides no-cost supports and services to meet the developmental needs of children with a disability in one or more of the following areas: physical development (including vision and hearing, cognitive and communication development), social or emotional development, and adaptive development. Early Intervention supports and services are embedded in typical routines and activities within the family, community, and/or early care and education settings.

Access to high-quality child care also helps level the playing field for children from low-income households, which is the motivation behind CCW and two other programs that help families navigate these barriers: Pennsylvania's Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) and Pre-K Counts

(PKC). HSSAP provides state funds to supplement federal allocations to expand high quality pre-kindergarten Head Start services. HSSAP serves 3 and 4-year-olds in families at 100% FPIG. In addition to education services, HSSAP offers families health and nutrition resources, as well as parent involvement services. PKC provides quality half-day and full-day pre-kindergarten to eligible 3 and 4-year-olds living in Pennsylvania families earning up to 300% FPIG.

OCDEL has plans to further invest in services for our youngest learners. In December 2022, OCDEL was awarded a three-year Preschool Development Birth Through Five Renewal Grant (PDG-R) from the federal Office of Child Care to build upon work from an initial grant that ended in 2020. These PDG-R funds will be used to conduct a variety of activities to support Pennsylvania's children and families including:

- An updated statewide needs assessment;
- Marketing materials for child care access programs like CCW, HSSAP, PKC, and more in other languages;
- Additional early childhood mental health supports for both families and staff;
- Resources to support families/children experiencing homelessness; and,
- Mini-grants to help child care providers expand facilities in areas that have little to no access to child care providers.

We must continue to invest in child care to support children, working families, and Pennsylvania's economy. According to research from the Women's Law Center, the cost of lost earnings, productivity and revenue from a lack of good child care options is an estimated \$57 billion annually in the United States.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to working with the House Children and Youth Committee on continuing to support child care and the critical support this industry provides.