

Budget offers support for child care providers struggling during pandemic

Child care providers have been particularly hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides struggling with the increased costs of meeting new state and federal health guidelines, smaller class sizes to keep children and staff safe reduced their revenue.

With child care businesses rapidly closing, the state faced a possible collapse in the child care market that would have affected about 100,000 working families in Washington. To prevent this, Gov. Jay Inslee used nearly \$191 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding to support child care businesses and help low-income families afford child care. The governor's supplemental and biennial budgets continue these efforts.

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, child care workers need personal protective equipment because their work requires hands-on contact with infants, toddlers and children. The governor's 2021 supplemental budget includes \$2.2 million to provide PPE for licensed child care providers.

Many teachers, assistant teachers and other staff working in child care centers do not have access to employer-sponsored health care insurance. To help child care workers access affordable health care coverage, the governor proposes \$29 million for a four-year health care insurance premium sponsorship program for employees working in a licensed child care center. The program will help child care workers afford a qualified health plan through

the Health Benefit Exchange. It will reduce monthly premium costs by \$100 per month for approximately 10,000 workers.

The pandemic has increased Wi-Fi costs for many child care businesses that serve school-age children who need access to remote K-12 instruction during the day. The budget provides \$9 million to expand broadband access for licensed child care businesses that serve about 20,500 school-age children.

Knowing that a national economic crisis disproportionately impacts low-income households, the governor's biennial budget helps low-income families afford child care, and expands access to state-subsidized child care. Since last spring, the governor used CARES Act funding for copay relief, but the funding is set to end June 2021.

The governor's biennial budget adds \$39.7 million to reduce the monthly family copayment by approximately 50% for roughly 8,600 families enrolled in the Working Connections Child Care program whose income falls between 144-220% of the federal poverty level. It also provides \$23.9 million to increase the income limit by 10% for applicants. This would create a new application income threshold of 210% of the federal poverty level. This will allow another 4,900 more children to access high-quality child care each year. The additional resources will also help child care providers keep classrooms filled.

Preschool

In recent years, Inslee and the Legislature have significantly expanded access to the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, the state's preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds whose family income falls below 110% of the federal poverty level.

Since 2013, the number of ECEAP enrollment slots has increased from fewer than 6,000 to nearly 15,000 slots, with the goal to make the program an entitlement by the 2022–23 school year. The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed progress to sufficiently meet ECEAP entitlement by 2023. To address this setback, the governor's budget provides the department with \$1 million to develop a roadmap to meet statewide ECEAP entitlement. This includes identifying capital investments to build enough classrooms to meet demand and strategies to recruit, retain and educate the workforce. It provides funds for DCYF to work with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to complete a report on how to align all high-quality, early learning programs administered by the agencies.

The budget also proposes adding 750 ECEAP slots and a 7% rate increase for the 2022–23 school year to keep program growth on trajectory for meeting the future ECEAP entitlement date. (\$19.3 million GF-S)

Child welfare

The governor's 2021–23 budget puts an emphasis on increasing services to prevent child abuse and neglect. This is especially

important during this time when families face increased isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and children have less contact with mandatory reporters. It will improve the quality of child welfare case management, and lead to more expedited outcomes for children and families.

The governor's budget hires staff to lower the average statewide caseload ratio to 18 families per Child and Family Welfare Services worker, and to eight families per Child Protective Services worker. These staff assess and investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, provide case management for families with children in temporary out-of-home placements and help families reunify. Case-carrying social workers, supervisors and support staff are phased in with the goal of filling 120.4 positions. (\$13.2 million GF-S; \$2.3 million General Fund-Federal)

The governor also proposes adding child abuse and neglect prevention services to 23 geographic areas around the state with historically high rates of child maltreatment. Services include grants to non-governmental organizations to purchase and deliver necessary goods (such as diapers, formula and gas cards) to 8,280 low-income families. It also includes grants to expand the Home Visiting Program to 530 families, and create a new Early Learning Engagement Navigator program. The new program will identify at-risk families, assess their early learning needs, match the family with services in their community and help families enroll (\$11.1 million GF-S; \$900,000 GF-F).