

# TRANSFORMING KANSAS' CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: A Strategic Framework for Improvement

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Access to high-quality child care is necessary for Kansas children and our economy to be able to thrive. It is critically important for working parents of young children to be able to find quality, affordable child care, because it aids healthy child development and allows them to return to the workforce.

In Kansas, the most powerful tool we have to improve access to child care is the Kansas Child Care Assistance Program, or child care subsidy program. Over the last five years, Kansas has strengthened this program by expanding eligibility and investing in the program. Unfortunately, though, just 7.4% of potentially eligible children participate. With 90% of brain development occurring before age 5, it is critical we strengthen the child care subsidy program so that Kansas kids have access to the child care they need to thrive. In an effort to improve the program and ensure it works better for families and providers, the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund (Health Fund) embarked on a collaborative, systems-level process to better understand and improve Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program. As part of this process, we brought together state agencies, researchers, child care providers, and advocates. We heard from families and providers directly. Together, we reviewed policy, data, best practices, and lived experiences navigating the child care system. We then developed a set of recommendations for the Kansas Child Care Assistance Program that are intended to create meaningful, lasting improvements for Kansas families and child care providers.

The report includes commonsense solutions that ensure the system is easier for parents to navigate and enroll their children in the program. Likewise, the report aims to make it easier for providers to enroll in the program and we aim to reduce barriers to participating by recommending they be paid directly and have direct contact with program administrators to troubleshoot any problems they have. For families, we hope for a system where accessing child care assistance is straightforward, where they can begin child care quickly, and the whole process respects them. For young children, we envision a system that provides consistent access to high-quality early care that supports healthy development and learning. For child care providers, we hope to achieve a system that partners with them by reducing administrative burdens, improving payment processes and communication, and providing helpful incentives to serve subsidy-eligible families.

We would like to acknowledge Governor Kelly and her office for their leadership and support in advancing this important work. We also wish to acknowledge the Kansas Department for Children and Families and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment for their collaboration and ongoing commitment throughout this project. We appreciate that Kansas State University provided a strong research partnership and dedication to ensuring that the voices of families and child care providers remained central to this effort. We are grateful to the steering committee members, whose time, expertise, and thoughtful guidance shaped this initiative at every stage. Most importantly, we thank the families and child care providers who generously shared their experiences with us. Their insights were essential in shaping meaningful and actionable policy recommendations. And, lastly, we want to thank Kelly Davydov, our strategic consultant who worked tirelessly to coordinate and oversee this entire effort. We could not have done this without her. Together, these contributions set the stage for informed policy decisions that strengthen the child care system and support Kansas families.

Our support extends beyond the recommendations in this report. We will continue to support programs, policies, and initiatives that strengthen Kansas' early childhood systems through collaboration, research, and advocacy. We are dedicated to seeing these recommendations come to life and to continuing our work collaboratively until all Kansas children have access to the high-quality early care and education that will help them and our state thrive.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Jordan".

David Jordan, President and CEO, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to affordable, high-quality child care is fundamental to the well-being of Kansas families, the strength of our workforce, and the long-term economic success of our state. For parents, reliable child care means the ability to work, pursue education, and provide stability for their families. For employers, it means a dependable workforce and stronger productivity. And for children, high-quality early care and education lays the foundation for healthy development and lifelong learning, shaping the future workforce that will drive Kansas' economy forward. In short, when families can find and afford the child care they need, everyone benefits, from local businesses to entire communities.

Key to making this a reality is Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program, which provides critical funding to offset the cost of child care in the form of subsidies. When administered effectively, child care subsidies help parents join or stay in the workforce, pursue education or training, and provide stability for their children while giving child care providers the dependable revenue they need to sustain their programs and continue offering high-quality care.

Kansas families and child care providers deserve a subsidy system that works for them. With this shared goal in mind, the Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee came together to take an honest, data-informed look at how Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program is working today and to identify meaningful, achievable ways to make it better. Made up of early childhood leaders, child care providers, advocates, state partners, and researchers, the committee spent six months reviewing data, exploring best practices from other states, and most importantly, listening to Kansas families and child care providers. Their voices were central to this process and directly shaped the recommendations in this report.

These recommendations aim to simplify the system, reduce barriers, and improve both family and child care provider participation. For families, this includes streamlining the application process, introducing presumptive eligibility so child care can begin without delay, increasing transparency and communication, and addressing policy barriers that can make accessing child care subsidies more difficult. For child care providers, it means strengthening and streamlining the enrollment process, moving toward direct payments, improving communication and transparency, and creating stronger incentives and support for those who choose to participate.

The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) has already made important progress toward these goals, including investments in expanding family eligibility criteria, child care provider reimbursement rates, and a recent public awareness campaign. The recommendations in this report build on that foundation while aligning with federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) requirements, positioning Kansas to continue leading the way with innovation and collaborative partnership.

Implementing these recommendations will require coordination across state agencies (particularly critical as we transition to a consolidated early childhood system under the new Kansas Office of Early Childhood), alignment with legislative and budget processes, and continued engagement from families, child care providers, and early childhood partners. But the goal remains clear: to create a Child Care Assistance Program that reflects the values of Kansas' early childhood system, one that is practical, equitable, family-centered, and sustainable.

This work represents the best of Kansas: collaboration among state agencies and system partners, a commitment to listening and learning, and a shared belief that public programs should meet the needs of the people they serve.

## How to Read This Report

The sections that follow provide a comprehensive look at Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program (referred to interchangeably as *child care subsidy*), including how it operates today, the experiences of the families and child care providers who interact with it, and the policy and system factors that shape those experiences. The report begins by outlining the broader context of the CCDF and how Kansas administers its child care subsidy program, then summarizes what we heard directly from families and child care providers about what's working and what's not.

Building on that understanding, the report explores key challenges, including access barriers for families, declining child care provider participation, and administrative processes that create friction for both. It then presents the recommendations developed by the Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee, including strategies designed to strengthen family access, improve child care provider participation, and ensure Kansas' child care subsidy program operates efficiently, equitably, and sustainably.

Each recommendation is grounded in data, informed by both lived experience and national best practices, and designed to align with existing federal requirements and state priorities. Together, these recommendations form a roadmap for continued collaboration among state agencies, early childhood partners, the legislature, child care providers, and families.

# INTRODUCTION

Kansas families rely on access to affordable, high-quality child care to work, pursue education, and build stable lives. Yet for many, the cost of care remains out of reach without public support. The Child Care Assistance Program, funded through the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and historically administered by the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), offers a critical means for helping families offset the cost of child care when they meet certain eligibility criteria, including income guidelines (85% of the state median income, or \$95,981 for a family of four). When administered effectively, the child care subsidy system benefits families and serves as a revenue source for child care providers, ensuring that children are cared for in safe, nurturing environments while families maintain employment or pursue education.

Over time, Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program has evolved in response to both family and child care provider needs and federal rule changes. Despite recent changes and investments, persistent administrative challenges ranging from complex family eligibility processes to low child care provider participation continue to limit the program's ability to meet the needs of Kansas families and child care providers, with only 7.4%<sup>1</sup> of potentially eligible children participating and just 40%<sup>2</sup> of licensed child care programs accepting subsidies. These administrative challenges undermine access, choice, and stability for both, and may be particularly impactful in rural communities, where child care is especially scarce<sup>3</sup>.

Recognizing these challenges, the Kansas Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee was established and convened by the Health Fund in 2025 to identify practical, data-driven strategies to strengthen the child care subsidy system. Guided by input from families, child care providers, and early childhood system partners, this report offers an in-depth look at this process, beginning with an overview of how the child care subsidy program works, followed by an analysis of challenges, examples from other states, and a set of recommended strategies that align with Kansas' broader vision of being a place where all children can thrive.



## KANSAS' CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM SEES LOW PARTICIPATION RATES

**40%**

OF LICENSED CHILD  
CARE PROGRAMS  
ACCEPT SUBSIDIES

**7.4%**

OF POTENTIALLY  
ELIGIBLE CHILDREN  
ARE SERVED

# APPROACH & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Early childhood systems nationwide rely on the voices of families and child care providers to help shape decisions about everything from how scarce resources are invested to designing policies that support access to high-quality early care and education. When those closest to the challenges are centered in the decision-making process, policymakers and administrators are better able to understand the real-life implications of their decisions, and, importantly, to avoid unintended consequences. It was in this spirit of shared decision-making that we embarked on a six-month effort to examine the Kansas Child Care Assistance Program and identify opportunities to improve it in ways that benefit both families and child care providers.

## The Steering Committee

Convened by the Health Fund, a group of dedicated public administrators, non-profit and philanthropic partners, advocates, and child care providers came together to form a Steering Committee charged with guiding the development of key recommendations to strengthen the Child Care Assistance Program. Over the course of several months, members asked hard questions, examined data, engaged in thoughtful dialogue, and brought their unique and varied experiences to the table. The Steering Committee met monthly from June through October 2025, working collaboratively to identify practical, meaningful improvements. A summary of these meetings and a detailed look at the resulting recommendations are provided in a later section of this report.

## The Core Group

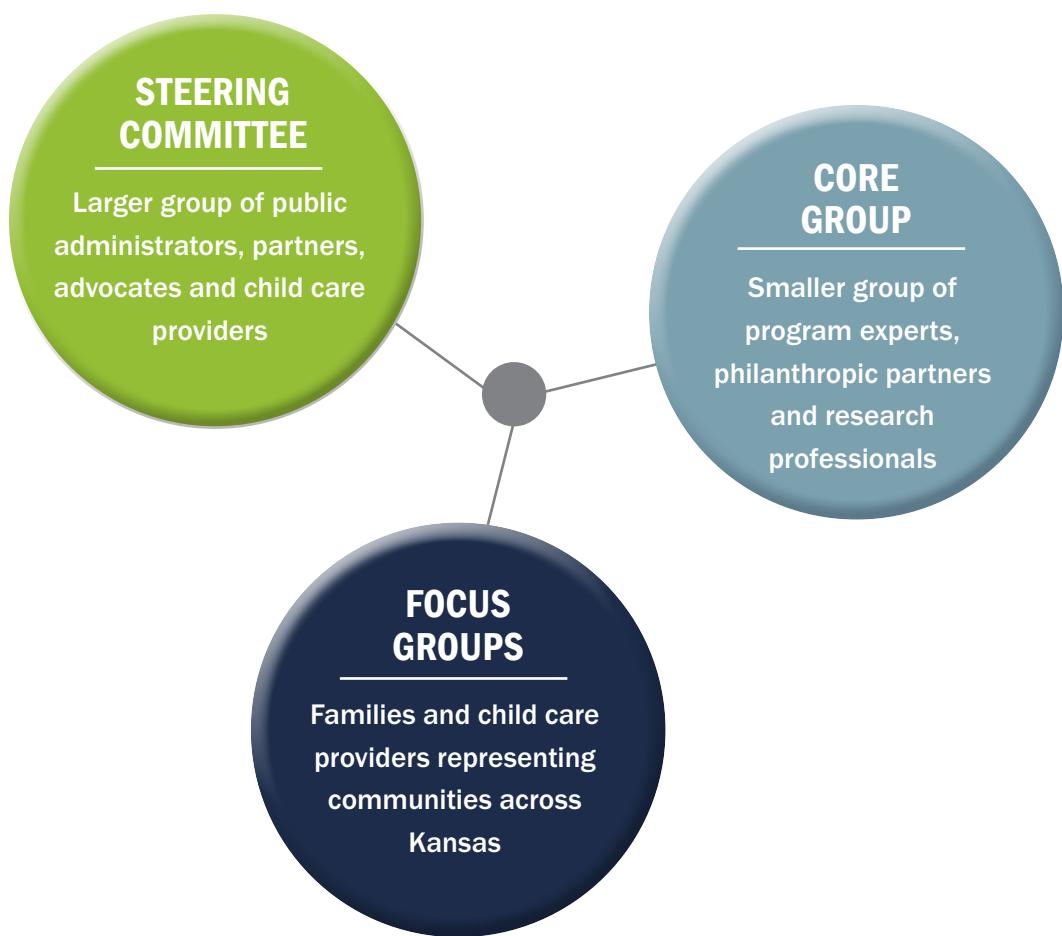
A smaller group of program experts, philanthropic partners, and research professionals formed the Core Group, a working team responsible for gathering data and insights about the Child Care Assistance Program, seeking technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Child Care and other states, and facilitating the work of the Steering Committee. Meeting biweekly from April through November 2025, the Core Group provided critical coordination and analysis throughout the project.

## Family and Child Care Provider Focus Groups

The work of both the Steering Committee and the Core Group was grounded in direct input from families and child care providers, both those who had experience with the Child Care Assistance Program and those who did not. Independent researchers at Kansas State University gathered feedback through a series of focus groups representing communities from across Kansas. The focus

groups engaged a total of 75 families and child care providers who generously shared their time, experiences, and thoughtful suggestions for improving the program. Through qualitative thematic analysis, the researchers identified key themes that emerged from the focus groups. The voices of these families and child care providers are woven throughout this report via these themes, bringing depth and lived experience to what might otherwise be a policy-focused discussion. A full report of their contributions, including a detailed discussion of the methodology and analysis, can be found in Appendix VI, and we encourage readers to explore their insights in full.

Together, the Steering Committee, Core Group, and focus groups created the foundation for this work, bringing data, policy expertise, and lived experience into one shared conversation. The Core Group provided the research and coordination needed to inform decision-making; the Steering Committee analyzed that information through the lens of policy and practice; and families and child care providers ensured that every discussion remained grounded in real-world impact. This collaborative approach allowed the project to balance technical feasibility with human experience, ultimately shaping recommendations that are both practical and responsive to the needs of Kansas families and child care providers.



# UNDERSTANDING THE SUBSIDY SYSTEM

To fully understand where Kansas can go, it's important first to start with where we are. The following sections provide an overview of how the Child Care Assistance Program works in Kansas, its federal foundations, how it is administered at the state level, and the policies that shape how families and providers experience the system. This context sets the stage for understanding both the strengths and the challenges that have informed the Steering Committee's recommendations.

## Federal Policy Framework

### THE CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT FUND (CCDF)

The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 1990<sup>4</sup> is the primary federal law supporting child care subsidy for working families with lower incomes. It authorizes federal funds for states, territories, and tribes to help families afford child care and to improve the overall quality and availability of early care and education.

States combine discretionary CCDBG funds with mandatory funding from the Child Care Entitlement to States (CCES) under the Social Security Act. Together, these funds make up the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), which is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) at the federal level.

In Kansas, CCDF funds have historically been administered by the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF). The portion used to offset the cost of child care for families (subsidies) is referred to as the Child Care Assistance Program. CCDF funds also support other initiatives that strengthen our child care system, including investments in workforce development, training for child care providers, and quality improvement programs.

### ELIGIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION

Under federal guidelines, children are generally eligible for child care subsidy if they:

1. Are under age 13;
2. Live with a parent or guardian who is working or in an approved education or training program;
3. Have a family income at or below 85% of the state median income (SMI); and
4. Have family assets below \$1 million.

Currently, Kansas' income eligibility threshold matches the federal maximum of 85% SMI.

Subsequent sections of this report will examine the impact of eligibility expansion on family access to the Child Care Assistance Program over time.

## CHOOSING A CHILD CARE PROVIDER AND FAMILY CO-PAYS

Families that are approved for the Child Care Assistance Program may choose an eligible child care provider through a child care certificate or, in some cases, through child care providers that have grants or contracts with the state. In order to be eligible, a child care provider must meet certain health and safety requirements and be enrolled with the program to accept child care subsidies.

In addition to receiving child care subsidy, participating families also contribute to the cost of child care based on a sliding fee scale by paying a co-pay. In Kansas, this is referred to as the Family Share Deduction. Per federal guidelines, co-payments may not exceed 7% of a family's income. Kansas limits co-pays to 3% or less of a family's monthly income before taxes. States may waive family co-pays for some, but not all families. Kansas waives family co-pays for the following:

- Families at or below 100% FPL
- Families enrolled in Kansas Early Head Start
- Families receiving care for a qualifying social service reason
- Families in which at least one person receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance
- Two-parent families in which one parent is employed, and the second parent is participating in Food Assistance education and training work programs
- “Assistance Planning” for families applying only for a child receiving SSI (waived in most cases)



**CHILD CARE ISN'T NECESSARILY FREE FOR FAMILIES RECEIVING SUBSIDIES. THEY MUST PAY A CO-PAY BASED ON A SLIDING SCALE TO HELP PAY FOR CARE.**

## CHILD CARE PROVIDER REIMBURSEMENT RATES

Child care providers receive compensation for care provided to children participating in Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program. In order to pay child care providers, states must set child care provider payment rates (generally referred to as "reimbursement" rates) based on an assessment of market rates or other approved cost methodologies to ensure that families receiving subsidies have equal access to care as private-pay families. In 2023, HHS required states to set rates at least at the 50th percentile of local market rates, while recommending the 75th percentile for broader access.

Kansas utilizes both an annual Market Rate Survey and financial modeling to determine the cost of care. Reimbursement rates for child care providers are set at the higher of either the 75th percentile of the market rate or the cost of care. Further, child care providers are permitted to collect the maximum reimbursement rate even if that is higher than the fee they charge to private-pay families (i.e. their standard fee). Kansas also allows child care providers to charge families the difference between their standard fee and the amount of the subsidy benefit (plus family co-pay). According to Kansas' 2024 Market Rate Survey, approximately 25%<sup>5</sup> of child care providers do so, meaning that families may pay more than 3% of their monthly income for child care.

## THE IMPACT OF REIMBURSEMENT RATES ON CHILD CARE AFFORDABILITY

To get a better sense of how child care provider reimbursement rates impact affordability for families receiving child care subsidy, let's take a look at an example from Saline County, Kansas. Family child care providers offering an infant slot can expect to receive \$2.88 per hour (as of October 2024<sup>6</sup>) as compensation for care provided to an infant whose family income is at or below 100% FPL. This translates to \$619.20 of compensation for one month of full-time care. Yet the average monthly cost for full-time infant care in Saline County is \$728.53, leaving a difference of \$190.32 that either the family will have to come up with or the child care provider will have to absorb. If the family earns over 100% FPL and has a co-pay, the amount they may be required to pay would be higher.



## 2014 CCDBG Reauthorization and 2016 Final Rule

Signed into law on Nov. 19, 2014, the CCDBG reauthorization<sup>8</sup> strengthened several key provisions aimed at improving child care quality and access. States were required to ensure that child care providers serving children funded under CCDF met specific health and safety requirements across 10 topic areas. In September 2016, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued the CCDF Final Rule<sup>9</sup>, operationalizing these requirements.

After passage of the reauthorization and the final rule was issued, DCF worked closely with licensed child care providers to ensure compliance with the changes. This included providing free training opportunities and issuing multiple notices explaining the new standards. Despite these efforts, in 2017, DCF unenrolled 848 child care providers from the Child Care Assistance Program for failure to meet the new requirements, reducing the total number of child care providers that could accept subsidy from 3,037 to 2,189 (a 28% reduction)<sup>10</sup>.

As noted, only 40% of licensed child care programs in Kansas currently accept child care subsidy, a rate that has remained stable since 2018. This low rate of child care provider participation in the Child Care Assistance Program limits child care options for families, especially in rural and underserved areas of the state.



**IN 2017, DCF UNENROLLED 848 CHILD CARE PROVIDERS FROM THE CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR FAILURE TO MEET NEW REQUIREMENTS.**

## 2024 CCDF Final Rule

### PROSPECTIVE PAYMENTS BASED ON ENROLLMENT

The 2024 CCDF Final Rule<sup>11</sup> introduced a transformative change to how states must pay child care providers. Historically, payments have been made retrospectively, that is, based on attendance and reimbursed after services are rendered.

The new rule requires states to pay prospectively, meaning payment is issued at the beginning of the service period based on a child's approved enrollment, not on how many days the child actually attends. Child care providers receive payment up front for the child's slot, even if the child is absent part of the time (subject to state attendance policies, if applicable). This approach gives child care providers more predictable revenue to cover fixed costs, such as rent, staffing, and utilities, and aligns subsidy payments with private-pay practices, which typically require families to pay for services ahead of time.

The vast majority of states pay child care providers directly. However, Kansas, Hawaii, and Wisconsin pay subsidy benefits directly to families, who then pay their child care provider(s), typically through an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. Kansas and Wisconsin provide access to child care subsidy funds at the beginning of each month via the EBT card, which is also used to disburse other public assistance including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In addition to the EBT card, Hawaii also offers direct deposit of funds to family bank accounts. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child Care, six states including Kansas already meet the 2024 federal requirement to pay providers prospectively based on enrollment:

- Hawaii
- Kansas
- North Dakota
- Maryland
- Utah
- Wisconsin

## PRESUMPTIVE ELIGIBILITY

In addition to its payment provisions, the 2024 rule also aims to strengthen access for families by encouraging states to offer presumptive eligibility. Under this provision, states may make a child temporarily eligible for child care subsidy for up to 90 days so that child care can begin before full documentation and income verification are complete. This approach expedites access to child care subsidy when a family's eligibility appears likely and the child's care is urgent, thereby helping parents maintain employment, education, or training. States must still follow up with full eligibility determination, but during the presumptive period the child care provider receives payment as if the child were fully eligible, thus reducing risk to the child care provider of a delay or loss of payment. If

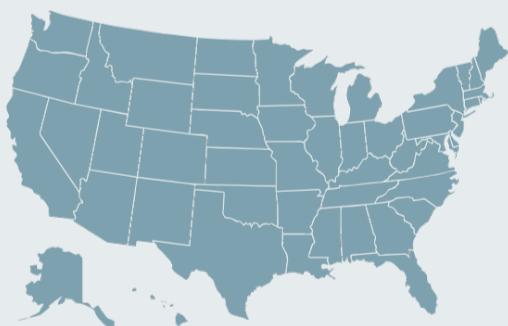
## TIMELINE OF KEY FEDERAL POLICY CHANGES



a child is determined eligible, the presumptive period counts toward the first 12 months of eligibility. However, if the child is ultimately determined ineligible, child care subsidy ends. As long as no fraud or intentional program violation are present, child care providers are paid for the services provided during the presumptive eligibility period (states may only recoup those funds in the case of fraud).

## Implementing CCDF Requirements

In general, states have flexibility in how they implement CCDF requirements for child care subsidy. However, state approaches are often shaped both by funding constraints and by varied and sometimes competing values, priorities, and perspectives. Inherent within CCDF itself are priorities related to addressing affordability for families, ensuring parental choice and equal access to high-quality child care, and ensuring continuity of care for young children. States must also contend with and balance compliance considerations, internal and external pressure to work within funding limitations, and ensure fiscal stewardship while assessing the distribution of administrative burden (i.e. how that burden is shared among families, child care providers, and state administrators and staff). Each of these factors influences the policy and practice decisions made by states, as well as how those decisions are implemented.



**STATES HAVE FLEXIBILITY IN HOW THEY IMPLEMENT CCDF REQUIREMENTS FOR CHILD CARE SUBSIDY.**

**HOWEVER, STATE APPROACHES ARE OFTEN SHAPED BOTH BY FUNDING CONSTRAINTS AND BY VARIED AND SOMETIMES COMPETING VALUES, PRIORITIES, AND PERSPECTIVES.**

# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

While Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program meets federal requirements from a policy and practice perspective, the experience of accessing and participating in the program tells a more complex story. The following section takes a closer look at challenges faced by families and child care providers by exploring how participation has changed over time, what policy and funding shifts have shaped those trends, and how recent efforts, such as outreach and eligibility expansion, have influenced participation more recently.

We'll begin by examining family access, followed by child care provider participation. Together, these perspectives help illuminate the policy and system-level barriers described later in this report, and the opportunities Kansas now has to design a stronger, more equitable, and more responsive Child Care Assistance Program.

## Family Access Challenges

By looking at trends in family participation, we can better understand how systemic challenges show up in measurable ways. As noted, only 7.4% of Kansas children who were potentially eligible for child care assistance under federal income guidelines received support through CCDF in 2020. That year, Kansas' eligibility threshold was below the federal maximum of 85% SMI. Even when measured against the state's own eligibility limit of 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL), however, Kansas reached just 12% of potentially eligible children.

Kansas' child participation rates lag behind both the national average (9.5%) and several neighboring states. In 2020, Oklahoma (12.9%) and Missouri (9.6%) served a higher proportion of potentially eligible children (based on federal income guidelines), while Kansas' participation was comparable to Colorado (7.1%) and Nebraska (6.9%). CLASP estimates that roughly 31.9% of Kansas children under age 13 (roughly 158,973 children out of nearly 500,000) were potentially eligible for child care subsidy.



**KANSAS' CHILD PARTICIPATION RATES LAG BEHIND BOTH THE NATIONAL AVERAGE AND SEVERAL NEIGHBORING STATES. ONLY 7.4% OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM.**

TABLE 1: REGIONAL COMPARISON OF % OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN SERVED

STATE	% OF ALL CHILDREN POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE	# OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN	% OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN SERVED (FEDERAL INCOME GUIDELINES)
ALL U.S.	30.2%	15,047,966	9.5%
KANSAS	31.9%	158,973	7.4%
IOWA	33.7%	173,307	9.5%
COLORADO	27.4%	240,270	7.1%
NEBRASKA	31.7%	108,022	6.9%
MISSOURI	30.5%	298,250	9.6%
OKLAHOMA	28.4%	193,159	12.9%

TABLE 2: NATIONAL COMPARISON (SELECT STATES) OF % OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN SERVED

These states were selected for a broader review of their child care subsidy programs and currently meet the 2024 Final Rule requirements to pay child care providers prospectively based on enrollment.

STATE	% OF ALL CHILDREN POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE	# OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN	% OF POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE CHILDREN SERVED (FEDERAL INCOME GUIDELINES)
ALL U.S.	30.2%	15,047,966	9.5%
KANSAS	31.9%	158,973	7.4%
HAWAII	21.1%	46,266	5.6%
MARYLAND	34.5%	327,834	6.0%
NORTH DAKOTA	30.6%	41,519	5.8%
UTAH	23.4%	156,546	7.9%
WISCONSIN	33.2%	294,791	6.2%

# Timeline and Implications of Policy Changes, Legislation, and Outreach Efforts

## **POLICY CHANGES IN THE TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES PROGRAM**

Between FY 2006 and FY 2022 the number of children receiving child care subsidy in Kansas fell from 22,400 to 11,700, a decline of nearly 50%<sup>12</sup>. While multiple factors likely contributed to this decrease over time, one of the most consequential has been a series of significant policy changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program<sup>13</sup>.

These changes, first implemented by DCF and later written into state law, shortened the amount of time a family could receive TANF cash assistance, commonly referred to as the “lifetime limit.” As these limits progressively tightened, the number of families participating in TANF dropped sharply from 17,622 families in FY 2005 to just 2,995 in FY 2024<sup>14</sup>.

This matters for child care subsidy participation because the two programs are closely connected. As TANF lifetime limits shortened, fewer families remained eligible for TANF-related child care subsidy, thus contributing to steady declines in the number of children served.

## **FAMILY ELIGIBILITY EXPANSION**

Recently, however, Kansas has increased the income eligibility for Kansas families to match the federal maximum income of 85% SMI. Leveraging COVID-era funding, DCF strategically expanded the family income eligibility threshold from 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL) to 250% FPL in July of 2021, and then to 85% SMI in April of 2024. While the total number of children served initially

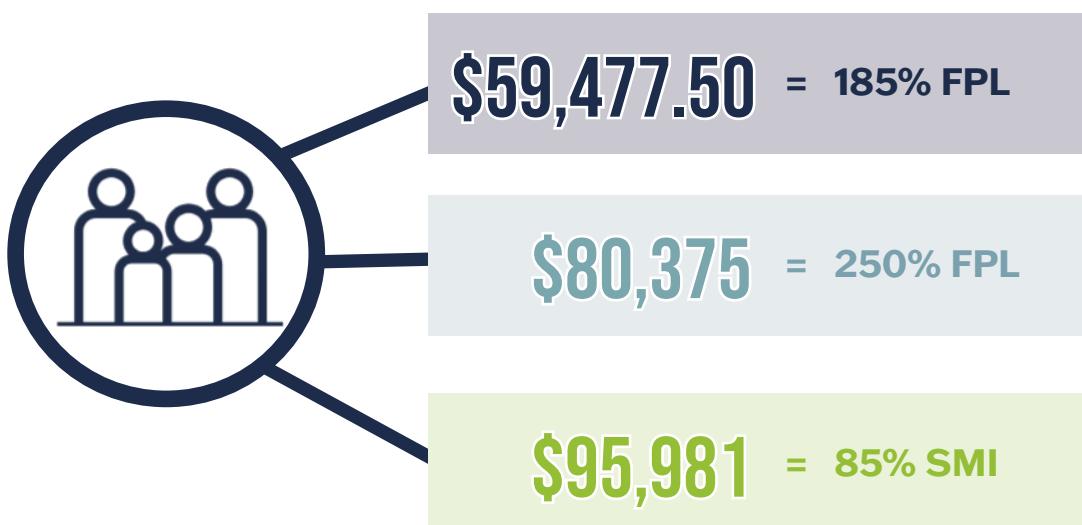


**THERE WAS A 50% REDUCTION IN CHILDREN RECEIVING CHILD CARE SUBSIDY IN KANSAS FROM FY 2006-2022.**

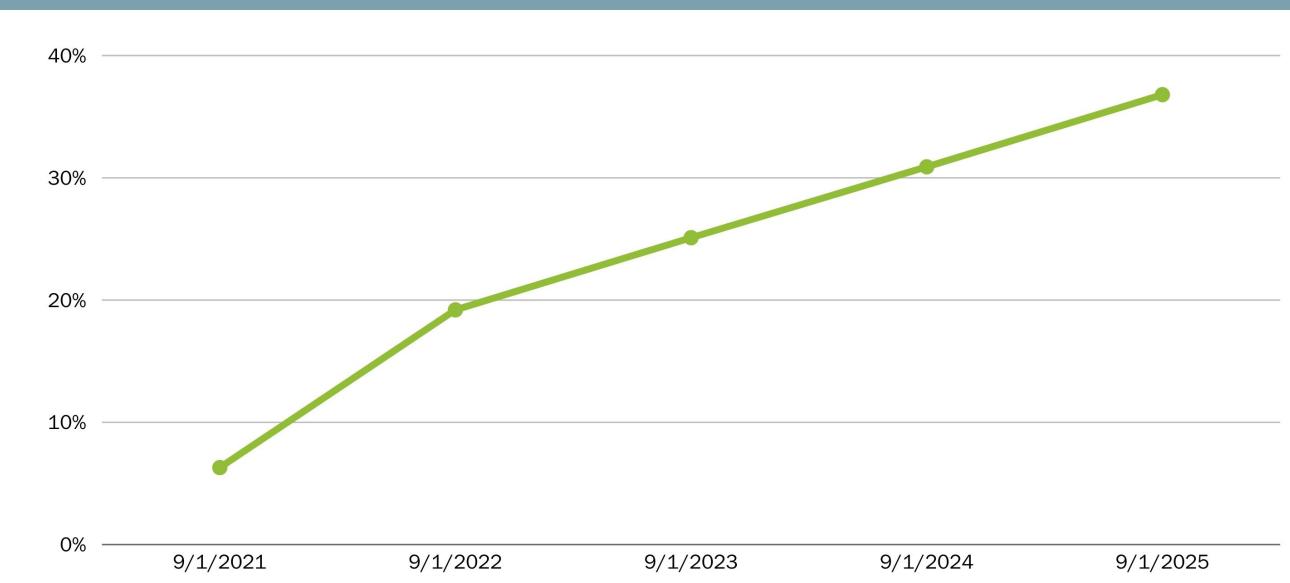


declined by 11% in 2021 (the first year of eligibility expansion), participation began to rebound in subsequent years, with a 6% increase in 2024 (the most recent year that eligibility was increased).

#### 2025 INCOME ELIGIBILITY FOR FAMILY OF FOUR<sup>15, 16</sup>



#### % FAMILIES RECEIVING CHILD CARE SUBSIDY WITH INCOME BETWEEN 185% FPL AND 85% SMI<sup>17</sup>



Eligibility expansion has broadened access to the Child Care Assistance Program, yet we are still meeting only a fraction of the potential need across Kansas. Sustainability is a significant concern: since the conclusion of COVID-era funding, the cost of expanded eligibility has been offset by surplus CCDF funds, which are expected to be exhausted by SFY 2029 based on current budget trajectories. Ensuring continued progress in addressing the affordability of child care will require stable, long-term funding and a sustained commitment to making child care subsidy accessible for all families who need it.

## COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN

While policy changes have contributed both to long-term declines and recent rebounds in family participation, it is worth highlighting the significant increase in children served in 2022 (33% over the prior year). This increase may be due in large part to targeted communication efforts by DCF. Between 2022 and 2024, DCF leveraged American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to implement a robust communications campaign aimed both at increasing awareness of the Child Care Assistance Program and recruiting new child care providers in Kansas. The campaign leveraged multiple DCF platforms and achieved a combined total of nearly 400 million impressions<sup>18</sup>.

Although the communications campaign successfully boosted awareness during that time period, maintaining momentum will require continued investment. Once ARPA funds ended, communications capacity declined, and child participation growth plateaued. Families with young children represent a constantly changing audience, seeking information about child care when they need it and moving on as their children age. Without consistent, ongoing communication, new families may never learn that child care subsidy is available.

Together, these factors (historic policy changes and restrictions, uneven communications efforts, and changing eligibility thresholds) have shaped access to child care assistance in Kansas over the past decade. They also preview what's needed to move forward: consistent outreach, clear communication, and policy strategies that make child care assistance more accessible, more trusted, and more responsive to the needs of Kansas families.

TABLE 3: CHANGES IN CHILDREN RECEIVING CHILD CARE SUBSIDY

	STATE FISCAL YEAR	# OF CHILDREN RECEIVING SUBSIDY IN JULY OF EACH YEAR <sup>19</sup>	% CHANGE FROM PRIOR YEAR
2011: TANF CHANGES	2012	18,876	N/A
TANF CHANGES	2013	16,971	-10.08%
	2014	15,542	-8.42%
	2015	13,605	-12.46%
	2016	12,049	-11.46%
	2017	10,893	-9.61%
	2018	10,145	-6.68%
	2019	8,905	-12.22%
COVID	2020	10,031	+12.65%
FIRST INCOME ELIGIBILITY CHANGE	2021	8,862	-11.65%
MARKETING CAMPAIGN	2022	11,841	+33.59%
SECOND INCOME ELIGIBILITY CHANGE	2023	12,465	+5.28%
	2024	13,269	+6.45%
	2025	15,128	+14.01%

DCF introduced policy changes that reduced the TANF lifetime limit from 60 to 48 months.

The HOPE Act passed, reducing the TANF lifetime limit from 48 to 36 months.

An amendment to the HOPE Act further reduced the TANF lifetime limit from 36 to 24 months.

2011

2015 2016

## Child Care Provider Participation Challenges

Just as multiple factors determine who can benefit from the Child Care Assistance Program, child care provider participation determines whether that benefit can be realized at all. Even when families are eligible and approved for assistance, they must be able to find a child care provider who accepts subsidy. Access and availability are two sides of the same coin: when too few child care providers participate, families struggle to find care, and when the process feels too cumbersome or financially unreliable, child care providers choose not to participate.

The rate at which child care providers have participated in Kansas' child care subsidy program has varied over time. At its peak in FY 2006, 6,338 child care providers accepted child care subsidy. As noted previously, only 40% of licensed child care programs in Kansas accepted child care subsidy in 2024, a rate that has remained stable since 2018. For comparison, Utah boasts 90-99% child care provider participation<sup>20</sup> and Maryland 74%<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, North Dakota reports that 62%<sup>22</sup> of their child care providers currently serve subsidy-eligible children (though the total number of child care providers enrolled in North Dakota's program may be higher).

Kansas' limited child care supply compounds the challenge of finding child care. Even without considering subsidy participation, the state's child care supply meets only 45% of the potential need<sup>23</sup>, a gap that leaves many families struggling to find available care at all. Within that already constrained landscape, the share of child care providers willing or able to accept child care subsidy is even smaller, further narrowing options for low- and moderate-income families. In some parts of the state, particularly rural and frontier counties, families face a near-total lack of access; four counties (Haskell, Morton, Stafford, and Stanton) currently have no subsidy-enrolled child care providers<sup>24</sup>. The result is a system where eligibility alone does not guarantee access to child care assistance.

Addressing the low participation rate of child care providers in the Child Care Assistance Program is key to improving family access. To better understand child care provider participation barriers and how to address them, in 2024 the Health Fund worked in partnership with researchers at Kansas State University to administer a survey to child care providers<sup>25</sup>. Notably, respondents reported their top five barriers to participation in the program as 1) their program being at full capacity, 2) experiencing difficulties with payment collection, 3) inadequate reimbursement rates, 4) administrative workload challenges, and 5) challenges with the way payments are disbursed. Conversely, when asked what might increase child care provider participation in the program, the top suggestions (by an overwhelming margin), were to 1) increase reimbursement rates and 2) pay child care providers directly.



**WHEN TOO FEW CHILD CARE PROVIDERS PARTICIPATE, FAMILIES STRUGGLE TO FIND CARE. CHILD CARE PROVIDERS DON'T PARTICIPATE WHEN THE PROGRAM FEELS TOO CUMBERSOME OR FINANCIALLY UNRELIABLE.**

# HOW THE CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM WORKS IN KANSAS

## Family and Child Care Provider Perspectives

Families and child care providers each experience the Child Care Assistance Program differently, yet both face barriers that affect access and participation. The following section describes these processes, highlights common challenges, and incorporates insights shared directly by families and child care providers through focus groups.

### For Families: Applying for Child Care Assistance

In Kansas, the application process for child care subsidy begins when a family submits an application to DCF for the Child Care Assistance Program. Families may apply online through DCF's Self-Service Portal, which supports integrated application and eligibility determination for other benefits programs as well, or pick up and submit a paper application at any DCF service office. The application process is supported by a pre-application checklist that is intended to help families understand the eligibility requirements and gather required documentation before initiating the application.

### ELIGIBILITY VERIFICATION

Families must provide proof of residence in Kansas, confirmation of the child's age (generally under 13, with exceptions for children 13-18 who cannot self-care), income and identity verification, and if applicable, evidence of cooperation with Child Support Services. They must also select a subsidy-enrolled child care provider during the application process (and may be referred to Kansas' Child Care Resource and Referral provider, Child Care Aware of Kansas, for additional assistance in locating a child care provider).

Once the application is submitted, DCF uses a Business Process Management (BPM) model for eligibility determination that enables flexibility across staff assignments (as opposed to a traditional case management model where families are assigned to specific caseworkers). Families are not required to have a face-to-face interview for child care assistance, though DCF may contact families (or leverage other systems) for additional information to complete the application prior to "pending" the case and requesting formal verification (referred to as "first contact resolution"). DCF is currently exploring additional technical improvements, such as increasing maximum upload size for document submission via the Self-Service Portal and developing automated status-check options for families.

When eligibility is determined, the family is notified via U.S. Mail. Family eligibility is determined even in cases where a family has not found or selected a child care provider that is enrolled in the

Child Care Assistance Program. If they are eligible for the program and have found and selected a participating child care provider, benefit amounts are then also determined.

## HOW BENEFITS ARE DISTRIBUTED

Once approved for child care subsidy, benefits are loaded on an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card issued by the state's vendor, FIS, at the beginning of each month. Typically, EBT cards should be issued and in-hand within seven business days. The intent is for families to use the card to pay their child care provider prospectively (or according to the payment terms spelled out in the child care provider's contract with families), and can be accomplished in three ways<sup>26</sup>.

### 3 WAYS FAMILIES PAY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS



#### POINT OF SALE (POS) DEVICE

This device functions like a credit card processing machine. However, not all child care providers offer a POS device to process payments (these machines may be leased, but at a cost to the child care provider). The POS will print a receipt at the time the payment is processed.



#### PHONE

When a POS device is not available, families may call a 1-800 number, enter their benefit card number and the child care provider's ID number along with the amount to be paid. Families must record a confirmation number as this method does not provide a receipt.



#### ONLINE ACCOUNT

Families can access their account online and transfer benefits to their child care provider to pay for child care services. DCF then sends funds to the EBT contractor (FIS) who transfers the amount to the child care provider's account. Families can print a receipt from the online portal if they have access to a printer.

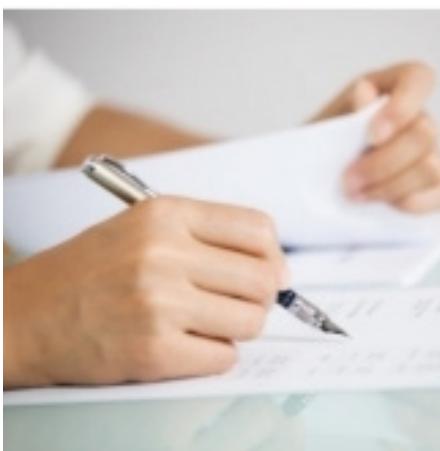
## Common Barriers for Families

Understanding how the Child Care Assistance Program works on paper is only part of the picture. Hearing directly from families provides valuable insight into how policies and processes play out in real life. While individual experiences may not always align perfectly with program data, they reveal patterns, pain points, and perceptions that numbers alone cannot capture.

### APPLICATION DENIALS

When we look at how families experience the application process, the picture becomes both clearer and more complicated. Applying for child care subsidy can be a high-stakes, time-sensitive process for families already juggling work, school, and other responsibilities. Even seemingly small administrative hurdles, like missing paperwork or difficulty finding an enrolled child care provider, can mean the difference between securing child care and losing it.

Between March 2024 and February 2025, DCF received 16,021 subsidy applications. Nearly 43% of those were “pended,” meaning that additional information was requested by DCF to determine eligibility. Of those that were pended, nearly 72% were ultimately denied. Key denial reasons included failure to provide requested information (35%), failure to provide income verification (16%) or not having a chosen or enrolled child care provider (15%). Even after denial, 28% of families turned in verification or reapplied within 30 days, and nearly half (46%) of those were ultimately found eligible. This data is limited, however, in that there may be additional families that would have been determined eligible had they turned in their paperwork or reapplied (72% of denied families simply gave up)<sup>27</sup>.



**31%**  
OF ALL APPLICATIONS  
ARE DENIED

**51%**  
OF APPLICATION  
DENIALS ARE DUE  
TO ADMINISTRATIVE  
REQUIREMENTS

**15%**  
OF APPLICATION  
DENIALS ARE DUE  
TO NOT HAVING A  
SUBSIDY-ENROLLED  
CHILD CARE  
PROVIDER

## NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

While application data may help illuminate where many families fall out of the process, focus group feedback helps explain why. For many families, the challenge isn't just in meeting eligibility criteria, it's navigating the complex – and at times confusing – process of applying for subsidy in the first place. Even when policies are designed to simplify access, the experience can still feel daunting, especially for parents balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities.

Despite DCF's ongoing efforts to streamline and strengthen the Child Care Assistance Program application process, families still report difficulties navigating the system, understanding what is required of them, and accessing assistance when they need it. Feedback from families, child care providers, and other service providers alike point to lengthy phone (4-6 hours) and in-person (at times up to an entire business day) wait times to receive assistance with application questions, lost paperwork, and delays in processing. DCF staffs a 1-800 number that connects callers with either support staff to triage the call or to an eligibility worker if available. Referred to as the Virtual Contact Center (VCC), this system is comprised of staff that are located statewide, with an average of 30 eligibility workers and 6 support staff available to provide assistance on any given day. However, these staff provide support for all assistance programs, not just child care subsidy. Child care providers report keen awareness of how families struggle with this system, and many report relying on local contacts (who may or may not have direct working knowledge of the Child Care Assistance Program) to access information or support.

As of August 2025, processing data from DCF show that applications were typically picked up within four days with many processed the same day, while average call wait times ran 1 hour 9 minutes, with peaks of 2 hours 31 minutes<sup>28</sup>. However, DCF program staff acknowledge that application processing timelines and call wait times have at times been much longer than recently indicated, though historical data was not available at the time of this review. DCF program staff further acknowledge that additional staff are needed to improve processing and assistance wait times, and that staffing for the VCC faces additional stress from turnover and vacant positions.

Families also report challenges completing the application itself. The following list represents a summary of challenges shared in family focus groups, as well as anecdotal information gathered from partners over the course of this project.

## MAIN CHALLENGES FOR FAMILIES COMPLETING APPLICATIONS

<b>1</b>	Difficulty uploading required documentation to the Self-Service Portal due to limits on file sizes, troubles with saving applications, or feeling like documentation requirements are duplicative.
<b>2</b>	Confusion about how to share good cause for non-cooperation with Child Support Services.
<b>3</b>	Confusion about what information or documentation they will be required to share for a child care subsidy application (DCF utilizes an integrated eligibility process whereby families may apply for more than one assistance program in one application listing multiple items that may be required for multiple programs).
<b>4</b>	Confusion about citizenship requirements (for child care subsidy, families must provide proof of citizenship for their children, but are not required to do so for adults).

Perhaps not surprisingly, families consistently shared their perception that the application process felt discouraging and, at times, designed to produce denials. Their experience underscores the need for more personalized, hands-on support to help families navigate complex systems.

Kansas already has a promising local model that could inform a statewide approach to improve families' experiences. Known as Start Young, this initiative is administered by Futures First, one of four Child Care Resource and Referral agencies in Kansas, and helps families in Wyandotte County connect with participating child care providers, complete their child care subsidy applications, and awards gap funding to families while they wait for approval or secure employment. Kansas law requires families to demonstrate "personal need" for child care subsidy. For families not participating in TANF with personal need related to employment, this means the adults in the family must already be employed and working at least 20 hours per week<sup>29</sup>. The gap funding provided through Start Young has been instrumental in helping families bridge that requirement and access care sooner. However, public funding for this model has been limited, and it has not yet been scaled to other parts of the state<sup>30</sup>.

## FINDING A CHILD CARE PROVIDER

For many Kansas families, applying for child care subsidy is only the first step. The next challenge is actually finding child care. We asked families participating in the focus groups to describe their experience trying to secure child care while applying for the Child Care Assistance Program. Families consistently shared that it was difficult to find an open space at a child care program enrolled in and willing to accept child care subsidy, especially for infants and toddlers in rural areas. They described experiencing long waitlists and not finding the flexibility they needed to accommodate their work schedules.

## UNDERSTANDING BENEFIT AMOUNTS AND HOW THEY ARE CALCULATED

Once families are able to secure a child care provider, the next challenge often lies in understanding how their benefits are determined, how much they'll receive, and how those calculations are made. In focus groups, families described confusion around income and resource limits and indicated they would like to better understand how benefit amounts are calculated. Families also suggested that this could be accomplished through improved communication in approval/denial letters or notifications.

## USING THE ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER (EBT) CARD AND PORTAL

Even after benefits are approved, the systems used to access and manage those benefits can pose challenges of their own. Families consistently reported difficulties with DCF's Self-Service Portal and with the EBT Edge portal. These include persistent lockouts that require password changes or change of email address and other general navigation challenges. Families also reported challenges in understanding what funds have been loaded onto their EBT card because the payments are not clearly labeled in the portal.

## COOPERATING WITH CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

Beyond the mechanics of receiving payments, families also face policy requirements that, while well-intended, often have the impact of discouraging participation in the Child Care Assistance Program. In Kansas, families applying for or receiving child care assistance must cooperate with Child Support Services (CSS) unless good cause is established. This requirement is rooted in state statute (the HOPE Act) and entails cooperation by appearing at CSS or court as required, providing requested information and documentation, and forwarding child support payments to DFC if required. Families must cooperate with CSS for the duration of their participation in the Child Care Assistance Program; cooperation is reviewed at application and after 12 months of continuous eligibility (redetermination). Non-cooperation can prompt denial or suspension of child care subsidy benefits, with escalating penalties for repeat non-cooperation (penalties include increasing periods of ineligibility following non-cooperation).

Data about the impact of this statute on family access to child care subsidies is limited. Between March 2024 and February 25, 49 applications (<1%) were denied for non-cooperation with CSS. While we do not have concrete data to illustrate the potential for this requirement to act as a deterrent to initiating the application process in the first place, this topic surfaced in feedback shared by families (and child care providers) in focus groups and was identified as a barrier to accessing the Child Care Assistance Program.

## FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Administrative and procedural challenges often intersect with the financial realities families face. While the Child Care Assistance Program is designed to make child care more affordable, families describe several gaps that continue to strain their budgets. First, not all families understood that they could seek reimbursement from the program for child care costs incurred while they were waiting for their application to be approved. Second, families also expressed how critical the Child Care Assistance Program is to their ability to maintain employment or education, but expressed confusion about what is available for students. Lastly, families who have not participated in the program noted that income eligibility limits often exclude working households that earn just above the cutoff, leaving them without support but still facing significant difficulty affording child care.

## COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

Finally, families' experiences with communication and outreach can shape their overall perception of the program, including whether they see it as accessible, trustworthy, and worth pursuing. We took the opportunity to ask families participating in the focus groups what they thought about outreach and communication from DCF. Families that have not participated in the Child Care Assistance Program shared that their perception of official messaging was that it seemed inconsistent and confusing. These families also reported relying on informal sources of information, such as the WIC program, caseworkers from other services, hospitals, other families, and Facebook to learn about the program. Families also expressed a sense of distrust with regards to seeking child care assistance, largely due to prior negative experiences with other aid programs.

Families' experiences navigating the Child Care Assistance Program tell only one side of the story. The other half belongs to child care providers – the individuals and programs who make it possible for families to access care once approved. Child care providers are essential partners in ensuring that subsidies work as intended, yet many face their own set of barriers when enrolling to accept child care assistance. The following section explores what that process looks like in Kansas today, where providers encounter challenges, and how those challenges ultimately affect the families they serve.

## For Child Care Providers: Enrolling to Serve Subsidized Families in Kansas

On the child care provider side, the process to enroll with the Child Care Assistance Program is structured to ensure providers meet eligibility, licensing, and program participation requirements (as set forth in federal guidelines). In order to participate, child care providers must be U.S. citizens or legally residing with a valid SSN, licensed by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) (though this function will transition to the Kansas Office of Early Childhood effective 7/1/26), and pass specified background checks (along with other household members and volunteers).

Information about the Child Care Assistance Program is shared with prospective child care providers during a pre-licensure informational meeting, and they are also given written materials describing the program and requirements to take with them. In order to enroll in the Child Care Assistance Program, prospective child care providers must opt in to the program and complete an application via the Kansas Provider Access Portal, which is maintained by KDHE, or via paper application.

As of the writing of this report, KDHE is in the process of developing a new Provider Access Portal that will automate several of the subsidy enrollment workflows that are currently manual (and that pose barriers to child care providers' ability to complete the enrollment process, such as not having the ability to upload required documents). The new system will also require new child care providers to opt out of participating in the Child Care Assistance Program, rather than opt in as currently required.

Participating child care providers must complete an online training about the Child Care Assistance Program within 60 days of being approved and share their direct deposit information with FIS, the state's vendor for issuing EBT card payments. Throughout enrollment with the Child Care Assistance Program, child care providers must maintain contracts with parents that specify rights and responsibilities of both parties, including stipulations for payment. They must also maintain records of daily attendance for each subsidy-eligible child enrolled in their care.



**CHILD CARE PROVIDERS ARE A CRITICAL LINK IN MAKING THE SUBSIDY PROGRAM WORK. HOWEVER, THEY SAID THEY FACE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS AND CONFUSION, INCONSISTENT COMMUNICATION, AND FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY.**

# Common Barriers for Child Care Providers

Just as families face obstacles navigating the Child Care Assistance Program, child care providers encounter their own challenges when trying to participate. Child care providers are a critical link in making the program work, yet what we heard from providers across the state echoes many of the same themes shared by families: administrative burden and confusion, inconsistent communication, and financial uncertainty. The following sections outline what child care providers told us about their experiences, including what's working, what isn't, and how the program can be strengthened to support both child care providers and the families they serve.

## OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

Child care providers consistently pointed to experiencing confusion about the Child Care Assistance Program and encountering misinformation about the requirements. On the whole, they reported a lack of direct outreach from DCF, with several child care providers that had never participated stating that they had never heard of the program and did not know anything about it. As noted above, information about the program is shared when a child care provider is in the process of becoming licensed, however this feedback indicates that the current approach to providing information could be improved.

## FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Child care providers that have never participated in the Child Care Assistance Program expressed concern and uncertainty about not only the “red tape” requirements of the program but also fear that payments could potentially be delayed or missing, causing financial instability for their programs. Child care providers with direct experience of the program, however, cited confusion over benefit amounts and coverage of other fees, and noted that repayments (situations in which a child care provider had been overpaid and required to revert funds to DCF) were stressful and financially risky for their operations.

## PAYMENT PRACTICES

Kansas utilizes the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card to facilitate payments to child care providers. Feedback from child care provider focus group participants indicated challenges in record-keeping that arise from this system. Namely, all payments made to a child care provider (regardless of the method – POS device, Automated Response Unit phone, or online account access) on a certain day will show as one deposit from the EBT vendor (FIS) on the child care provider's account statement. This process makes it difficult for child care providers to determine which child's subsidy benefits have been received and which may be outstanding.

Child care providers also indicated that they spend significant amounts of time assisting families in understanding how to make the payments. Further, pervasive concerns about the EBT Edge portal surfaced across all focus groups, with common challenges noted in experiencing lockouts from the portal, having to reset passwords multiple times, and general difficulty navigating the portal.

Feedback from child care providers who participated in focus groups and the 2024 survey consistently highlighted challenges with collecting payments from families receiving child care subsidy. While child care providers set payment terms in their parent handbooks, they have little recourse when families fall behind. Currently, DCF does not offer an appeal or remediation process for child care providers; however, if a family stops making payments to their child care provider for two full consecutive months without reporting a change, the system will send a notice to both the family and the child care provider. If no payments are made after four months, the system will send a second notice. If the family does not respond at that time, their child care subsidy plan will be closed. Collecting family co-pays, in particular, was identified as a persistent challenge.

Child care providers, by and large, indicated a preference for direct-to-provider payment practices, whereby funds would be deposited directly into their account (or sent via check) from the state, rather than relying on families to transfer the benefits. However, not all families shared this view; many expressed a preference for maintaining control over how and when their child care subsidy benefits are issued under the current system (even as they struggled with the technology and systems in place to support this approach).

## **COMMUNICATING WITH CHILD CARE PROVIDERS ABOUT FAMILY APPLICATION STATUS**

Under Kansas' current Child Care Assistance application process, only families can access information about their application, approval status, and benefit amounts via DCF's Self-Service Portal. Similarly, families are the only users who can view benefit details in the EBT system portal. For child care providers, the EBT portal provides only limited, summary information about all payments made in a single day, without details on which families or children those payments correspond to.

Both families and providers receive notices by U.S. Mail outlining approval status, benefit amounts, and the family's required co-payment (Family Share Deduction). However, feedback from both groups suggests that this communication method is inconsistent and prone to delay. Families and child care providers alike described instances where mailed notices arrived late (or not at all), resulting in confusion about payment timing, benefit changes, or eligibility status.

## OTHER FEEDBACK FROM FAMILIES AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Across focus groups, both families and child care providers recognized the Child Care Assistance Program as a vital support system, even as they called for change. They emphasized the need for better communication, more modern technology, and stronger navigation support for both families and child care providers. Further, both groups expressed strong support for presumptive eligibility and suggested incentives, such as enrollment bonuses or quality grants, to encourage greater child care provider participation.

Engaging families and child care providers throughout this process allows us to ground our collective path forward in listening. The experiences shared with us reveal not just where our Child Care Assistance Program struggles, but where it has the potential to grow stronger. Families and child care providers have been clear about what matters most: timely access, clear communication, streamlined payment, and a process that feels supportive rather than burdensome. Their voices form the roadmap for what comes next, while lessons from other states offer guideposts for how to get there, demonstrating that a child care subsidy program can be both administratively sound and centered on the people it serves.



**ACROSS FOCUS GROUPS, BOTH FAMILIES AND PROVIDERS RECOGNIZED THE CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AS A VITAL SUPPORT SYSTEM, EVEN AS THEY CALLED FOR CHANGE.**

# LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES: MODELS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS & STABILITY

To better understand how Kansas might address the access barriers inherent in our Child Care Assistance Program, we examined models from other states that have implemented innovative approaches to improve family eligibility processes, streamline application and payment processes, and stabilize or expand child care provider participation.

Initially, six states were selected for review because of their strong alignment with the 2024 CCDF Final Rule. These included Hawaii, Maryland, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, and Wisconsin. Several elements were reviewed, including each state's early childhood system structure, participation rates for child care providers and children, family income eligibility thresholds, payment practices and overpayment rates, and presumptive eligibility. A comparison chart is provided in Appendix I. Each of these states offered the Core Group and Steering Committee with insights into common challenges, lessons learned, and successes.

As our scan of other state systems progressed, so, too, did the number of states reviewed. In part, this resulted from additional technical assistance provided to the Core Group from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child Care.

## Presumptive Eligibility

As Kansas explores whether and how to implement presumptive eligibility, it's helpful to understand what this approach looks like in practice and what lessons we can draw from states that have already taken the lead. The following section summarizes how several states have structured their policies, what implications Kansas may need to consider, and how this could fit within our state's broader goals for improving and expediting family access.

While 16 states indicate they are offering presumptive eligibility in their 2025-2027 CCDF State Plans, the provision is still relatively new. States are required to collect data on its use, but these data have not yet been compiled by the Office of Child Care and/or made publicly available. Four states have offered presumptive eligibility longer than others: Maryland, Montana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. Summaries of the approaches taken in these states are provided below.

### MARYLAND

Beginning July 1, 2023, Maryland launched a Fast Track Application process for the Child Care Scholarship (CCS) Program that grants temporary eligibility to families while full documentation is reviewed<sup>31</sup>. Under this process, eligible applicants receive up to 60 days of temporary subsidy coverage, with the goal of processing eligibility determinations within three



business days. To access this fast track, families must submit initial proof of residency and evidence of employment, schooling, or enrollment in a training/education program. During the 60-day period, families complete the regular CCS application process and provide full verification; if they do, they may transition to a full 52-week scholarship.

## MONTANA

Montana's Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Program<sup>32</sup> takes a slightly different approach, using presumptive eligibility to ensure that both families and child care providers have confidence in payment from the first day of service. Presumptive eligibility begins the day an application is received by the local Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) office and remains in effect for up to 30 days while documentation is verified. Families qualify for presumptive eligibility once they submit a completed application, a signed release of information form, and identify a child care provider. Montana's policy explicitly allows child care providers to begin care right away, offering assurance that they will be paid for services rendered during the initial determination period. The state also safeguards against misuse by allowing CCR&R staff to deny presumptive eligibility when families repeatedly fail to complete the process, while clarifying that no overpayment is due if the family is later found ineligible unless false information was knowingly provided.



## OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma's child care assistance program provides a clear, structured pathway for presumptive eligibility when families need immediate access to care. Under Section 340:40-3-1(b) of the Oklahoma Administrative Code<sup>33</sup>, eligibility workers may presumptively approve up to 30 days of child care before completing the full determination process. This option applies in circumstances where families risk losing employment or cannot begin a new job without immediate care, and when the delay in verification is beyond the family's control. Workers may also approve presumptive eligibility for protective or preventive care. During this temporary approval period, the family must provide missing documentation, and continued benefits depend on verification being received within the 30-day window (or within 30 days of closure). Importantly, Oklahoma's system balances responsiveness with accountability; workers are guided to determine co-payments based on existing income information and to prevent repeated use of presumptive eligibility without proper follow-up. The policy's flexibility enables families to maintain job stability while ensuring the program's integrity.



## SOUTH CAROLINA

In South Carolina, the Child Care Scholarship Program uses presumptive eligibility on a limited but strategic basis to help families access care while full eligibility documentation is pending<sup>34</sup>. Under the policy, a family may receive up to 12 weeks (3 months) of full-time or part-time child care when they have obtained a new job (or need care to maintain current employment) and are still gathering required verification, or when they fall into specific funding categories such as



homelessness, dual language learner (DLL) status, or Head Start participation. The length of the care authorization is based on the number of hours the parent or case manager initially indicates the family will work or attend school or training; when a family is searching for employment, the full 12 weeks of full-time care apply. During this 12-week span, the child care provider receives payment while the parent completes the verification process. If families fail to complete documentation or otherwise meet full eligibility requirements, benefits may terminate at the end of the presumptive period.

These examples show that while states vary in how they apply presumptive eligibility, with some focusing on short-term access and others prioritizing job stability or specific family circumstances, the common goal is to remove barriers that delay child care when it's most urgently needed. For Kansas, turning this concept into policy comes with both opportunity and complexity, particularly in light of recent legislative changes.

## **LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESUMPTIVE ELIGIBILITY**

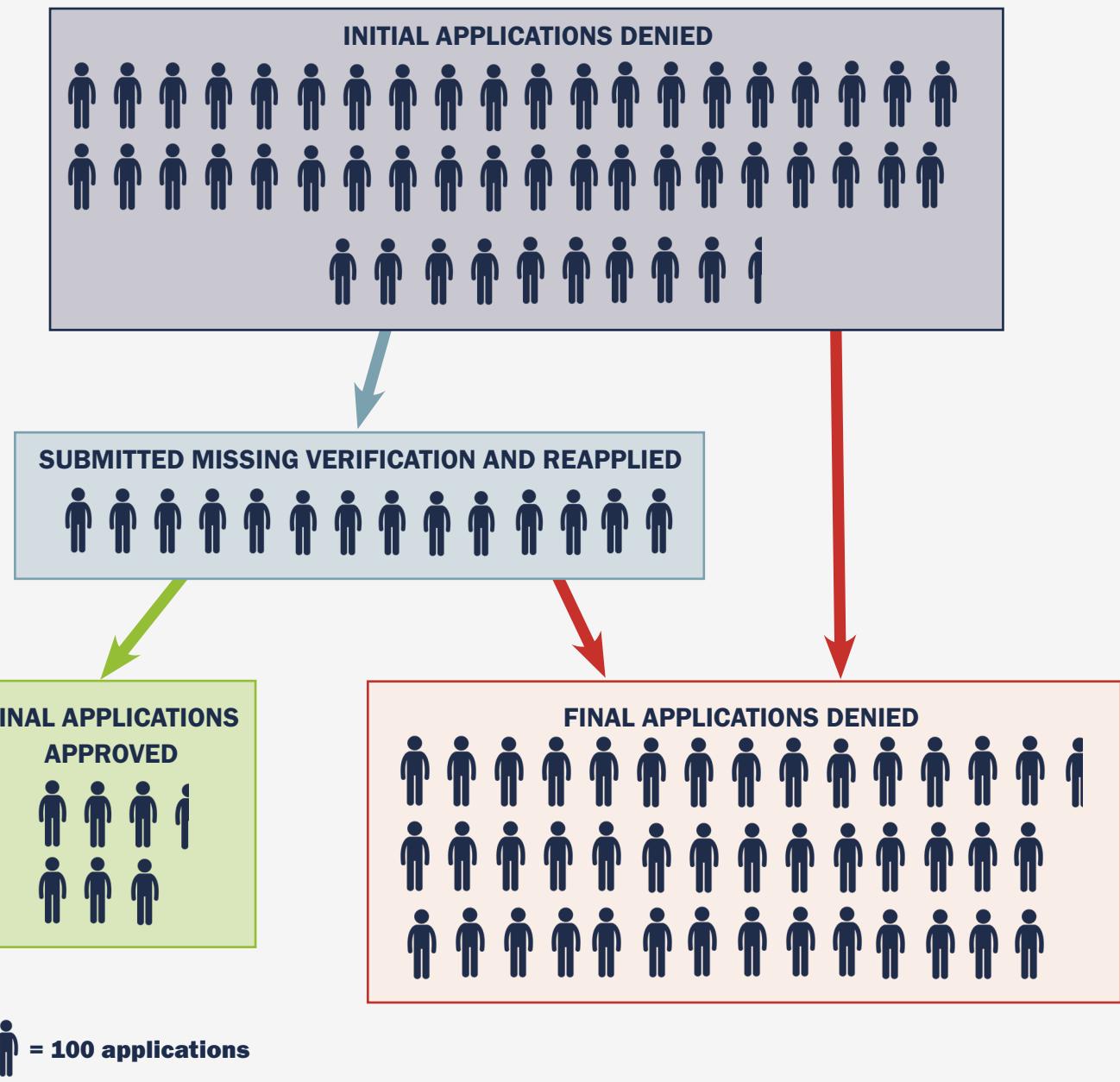
In 2025, the Kansas Legislature enacted HB 2240, which introduces new parameters governing how state agencies engage with federally funded public assistance programs, including the Child Care Assistance Program<sup>35</sup>. Beginning July 1, 2025, no Kansas state agency may seek or implement a public assistance program waiver or other federal authorization, such as a state plan amendment, demonstration waiver, or similar mechanism, that would expand eligibility to new individuals or groups or increase the cost to the state without the express consent and approval of the Legislature through a formal act.

Under this statute, the definition of “public assistance program” specifically includes those authorized under K.S.A. 39-709, which covers Kansas’ child care subsidy program. In practical terms, this means that any proposed policy, including presumptive eligibility, that would allow families to access benefits more broadly would require legislative approval.

## **PRELIMINARY FISCAL ESTIMATES FOR PRESUMPTIVE ELIGIBILITY**

Beyond policy implications, presumptive eligibility also carries fiscal considerations that must be carefully evaluated. Using Kansas’ 2024-2025 application data, we can begin to estimate what a presumptive eligibility period might cost, and what that investment could mean for families applying for child care assistance. Between March 2024 and February 2025, there were 4,917 application denials; of those, 1,397 applicants turned in missing verification or reapplied within 30 days. Among that group, 636 families were ultimately determined eligible, while 761 remained ineligible, leaving a final total of 4,281 denials after reapplication.

If Kansas were to provide 30 days of presumptive eligibility to all denied applicants, this would equate to one additional month of benefits after the application period, or roughly 45 days of total assistance coverage. Based on the current budgeted monthly cost per case of \$1,040, this would translate to approximately \$1,560 per family for the 45-day period. Extrapolated annually, the estimated cost of extending benefits under this model would be about \$6.68 million<sup>36</sup>, a figure that does not include potential system enhancements or additional staffing needs to manage the increased workload.



## OPTIONS TO EXPLORE: PRIORITY POPULATIONS & DURATION OPTIONS

Understanding both the legislative and fiscal realities of implementing presumptive eligibility provides a foundation for exploring how Kansas might move forward. Several potential pilot strategies could allow the state to test presumptive eligibility on a smaller scale, targeting areas and populations where impact and administrative feasibility would be greatest.

As Kansas considers potential pilot options for implementing presumptive eligibility, the Office of Child Care has identified several strategies to reach families and communities with the greatest need for immediate child care access. One approach could focus on high-poverty areas, prioritizing families in counties such as Riley, Crawford, Stevens, Kearny, Woodson, Sedgwick, Johnson, Wyandotte, Douglas, and Shawnee, all of which have been identified through the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2019 five-year estimates as having either the highest poverty rates or the largest number of residents living in poverty<sup>37</sup>.

Another option would be to consider prioritizing specific family and child characteristics, such as:

- Infants, given the shortage of infant care statewide;
- Families that are employed or beginning work within two weeks of application;
- Families in disaster-designated areas, where child care disruption can severely affect recovery and stability; and
- Families experiencing homelessness, through an expanded definition of “social service reason” that would allow temporary waivers of income and asset verification.

Under the 2024 CCDF Final Rule, states may implement presumptive eligibility periods of up to 90 days. Nationally, states have adopted a range of approaches within that maximum, with some allowing 30 days, others 60 days, and some up to 10 weeks, balancing administrative feasibility with the goal of reducing gaps in access.

Taken together, these strategies outline how Kansas could structure and target a presumptive eligibility pilot. Yet, any successful approach must also account for what happens after access begins, particularly for young children.

## CONTINUITY OF CARE FOR CHILDREN PRESUMPTIVELY ELIGIBLE FOR CHILD CARE SUBSIDY

Continuity of care in child care settings is incredibly important for young children. When children remain with the same caregiver(s) over an extended period, they form stronger, more secure relationships that support healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development. Research shows that children in stable care environments experience fewer behavioral regressions, are better able to explore and learn in predictable environments, and benefit from caregivers who know them deeply and can tailor interactions to their individual needs<sup>38</sup>.

Throughout this project, continuity of care was of the utmost importance to Steering Committee members when considering potential policy recommendations, and particularly in relationship to offering presumptive eligibility. Steering Committee members expressed concern that a significant number of children may experience a disruption in care if they are ultimately found to be ineligible for child care subsidy after a period of presumed eligibility.

Getting to a true understanding of the potential scope of this challenge is difficult, however. As noted earlier, only 28% of the families that are initially denied end up turning in verification or reapplying within 30 days, meaning that we do not have a clear sense of whether most denied families would have actually been eligible had they been able to successfully complete the application process. Of those that do turn in their verification or reapply, nearly half (46%) are found to be eligible.

We do, however, have access to data from DCF that shows how frequently families change child care providers while enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program. Between March 2024 and February 2025, an average of 8,390 families received child care subsidy per month. Of those, only 1.25% (105 total) changed providers per month. Further, 83% of the families that changed providers over that time period did so only once<sup>39</sup>. These data suggest that most Kansas families experience remarkable stability once they are connected to child care assistance, and underscores the importance of helping families secure and maintain consistent care from the start.



### MOST KANSAS FAMILIES EXPERIENCE REMARKABLE STABILITY ONCE THEY'RE CONNECTED TO CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE

**1.25%**

OF 8,390 FAMILIES CHANGED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS PER MONTH

**83%**

OF FAMILIES CHANGED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS JUST ONCE

## Enrollment and Payment Practices

As Kansas looks to strengthen how our child care subsidy program works for families and child care providers, it's helpful to look outward at what's working elsewhere. Other states have taken thoughtful steps to streamline payment practices, improve administrative practices, and make participation easier for child care providers, all areas of interest for Kansas.

### UTAH: DIRECT PAYMENTS TO CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Utah's approach to child care subsidy serves as an example of a well-developed system designed to facilitate rapid family access to child care, minimize the administrative burden on families and child care providers, streamline payments, and maximize child care provider participation, all of which correspond directly to the challenges inherent in Kansas' system. Launched in 2016 in response to child care provider feedback, the current approach has allowed Utah to reach a staggering 90-99% participation rate by child care program type. However, the rate at which Utah serves potentially eligible families is on par with Kansas at 7.9%. Prior to 2016, Utah provided child care subsidy benefits to families via the EBT card and served as the model for Kansas' current Child Care Assistance Program structure. Current caseload sizes for both states are similar (for both child care providers and families).

When asked in the state's most recent Market Rate Survey to identify barriers to participation in the child care subsidy program, only 3.3% of child care providers indicated any barrier at all. Of those that did, the top two barriers were that their program was at capacity and that there was no demand from families. Less than 1% of respondents cited reimbursement rates, paperwork, or eligibility requirements as barriers<sup>40</sup>.

### PROGRAM FEATURES IN UTAH

- Families apply online via Utah's "myCase" portal (or by other means) and can search for eligible child care providers via the state's "Care About Child Care" site.
- Families can seek "Upfront Child Care," which presumptively approves one month of eligibility for families that are employed or expect to start work within two weeks.
- Child care providers enroll in the state's child care subsidy program when completing their initial safety inspection with state licensing staff.
- In Utah, once a family's subsidy application is approved, payment is made directly to the child care provider at the beginning of each month (prospectively) via direct deposit (or check if necessary).



- Families receive monthly notification of their subsidy status and amounts via email, and are prompted to login to the myCase portal to report changes.
- Utah offers a robust Provider Portal and attendance tracking software (or approved alternative). The Provider Portal is used by child care providers to certify child attendance, report changes, view payment history, and monitor a family's application/case status.
- Utah also offers a help desk for child care providers that is staffed by 5 full time employees dedicated to assisting with access, navigation, and use of the Provider Portal.
- The state maintains an attendance policy that requires children receiving child care subsidy to attend a minimum of 8 hours per month in order to be considered enrolled.
- Utah has allocated state general funds to support families that change child care providers during the month under a limited set of circumstances (for example, for safety concerns).

## **NORTH DAKOTA**

North Dakota's Child Care Assistance Program, administered by the North Dakota Department of Human Services, shifted to a provider payment system based on enrollment (rather than attendance) effective November 1, 2022<sup>41</sup>. Payments are made at the beginning of each month for care to be provided. Child care providers must certify a child's enrollment through the Self-Service Portal (SSP) to receive payment in the following month. The portal can be used to upload required documents, invoice, and review payment history, and certify child enrollment. This portal also allows families to report changes and pay child care providers (providers have the option for payments to be made directly to families). In the event of an overpayment, the state reduces future payments to the child care provider or accepts direct repayment. A child must attend at least 8 hours per month to avoid overpayment. North Dakota utilizes its Market Rate Survey to ask child care providers about barriers to participation. In the most recent survey, the top response to this question was "no barrier."



## **MARYLAND**

Launched in January 2023, Maryland's Child Care Scholarship Program pays child care providers prospectively twice per month based on enrolled children. Each month is divided into two service periods, and "snapshots" of enrollment are taken twice monthly to determine payment amounts. The first advance payment (for example, on May 1) is calculated using the enrollment snapshot taken on the last Saturday of the prior month and covers care for the first half of the new month (May 1-14). A second payment is issued on the 15th to cover services through the end of the month.



While payments are made in advance, child care providers must still submit invoices for each two-week service period. Attendance records are required for documentation but do not affect the amount of the advance payment. If changes occur in enrollment or eligibility between the time a snapshot is taken and when services are actually provided, Maryland uses a “True-Up” process to reconcile payments. True-Up occurs 30 days after the advance payment and adjusts for over- or under-payments. If additional children were enrolled after the snapshot, the child care provider receives the additional payment during True-Up. Conversely, if scholarships ended early or a child care provider was ineligible during the payment month, the Lead Agency reduces the subsequent payment accordingly. Children may be absent for up to 60 days per year without affecting child care provider payment. In their most recent CCDF State Plan, Maryland noted that they have seen an increase in child care provider participation since launching the new system, though child care providers have expressed concerns with the administrative burden of the True-Up process<sup>42</sup>.

Maryland’s approach offers one final perspective on how payment modernization can drive both participation and accountability. Like Utah and North Dakota, Maryland’s model is built around timely, predictable payments and clear processes for reconciliation, features that support child care providers’ financial stability and strengthen trust in the system.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how intentional payment design can address many of the same challenges Kansas faces today: reducing administrative burden, building trust in payment reliability, and encouraging more child care providers to participate in the child care subsidy program. As Kansas considers its own next steps, these lessons offer valuable context for shaping recommendations that balance administrative feasibility with the needs of families and child care providers.



**INTENTIONAL PAYMENT DESIGN CAN  
ADDRESS MANY OF THE CHALLENGES  
KANSAS FACES TODAY.**

# STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are put forth by the Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee and build directly on what families, child care providers, and partners across Kansas have shared about their experiences with the Child Care Assistance Program. Throughout this report, we've looked at what's working, what isn't, and what we can learn from other states that have redesigned their programs to better meet the needs of families and child care providers. This next section brings all of that together in a set of actionable recommendations — rooted in data, policy analysis, and lived experience — that can move Kansas toward a stronger, more equitable, and more sustainable child care subsidy system.

## Committee Structure and Process

The Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee, convened by the Health Fund, was established to examine and strengthen Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program, with a focus on improving access, efficiency, and sustainability for both families and child care providers. With a charge to identify actionable opportunities for improvement, the committee explored enhancements to payment practices for child care providers, streamlining family eligibility and enrollment procedures, and refining child care provider enrollment policies to encourage greater participation in the subsidy program, including consideration of potential legislative and funding implications to support meaningful, long-term change.

Over the course of five months, the committee engaged in a structured discussion and review process to inform these recommendations. A summary of their meetings is provided below:

- **June 2025:** Committee members began by examining the current landscape of Kansas' Child Care Assistance Program, reviewing data, policies, and operational structures to establish a shared understanding of existing strengths and challenges.
- **July 2025:** The committee focused on identifying specific opportunities to improve how the program serves families and child care providers, with attention to access and enrollment barriers, payment practices, and administrative efficiency.
- **August 2025:** Members continued developing potential improvement strategies, incorporating additional data and context while refining ideas for policy and process changes.
- **September 2025:** The committee reviewed preliminary findings from family and child care provider focus groups, using these insights to better understand on-the-ground experiences and to formulate preliminary recommendations.
- **October 2025:** The group convened for a final working session to synthesize research, stakeholder input, and policy options into a cohesive set of recommendations for improvement.

## MEMBERS

The following individuals served on the Steering Committee, bringing decades of early childhood expertise spanning the public sector, philanthropy, non-profit, and direct service.

NAME	ORGANIZATION
<b>Zach Vincent</b>	<b>Office of Governor Laura Kelly</b>
<b>Dr. Carla Whiteside-Hicks</b>	<b>Department for Children and Families</b>
<b>Nichelle Adams</b>	<b>Department for Children and Families</b>
<b>Derik Flerlage</b>	<b>Kansas Department of Health and Environment</b>
<b>Melissa Rooker</b>	<b>Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund</b>
<b>Debra Porter</b>	<b>Our Lil Friends Childcare</b>
<b>Rachelle Copeland</b>	<b>Director, Kid Zone KC</b>
<b>Jessica Hunt</b>	<b>Patterson Family Foundation</b>
<b>David Jordan</b>	<b>The Health Fund</b>
<b>Christi Smith</b>	<b>Child Care Aware of Kansas</b>
<b>Paula Neth</b>	<b>Futures First</b>
<b>Patty Peschel</b>	<b>Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities</b>
<b>Dr. Jennifer Francois</b>	<b>Kansas State University</b>
<b>Kelly Davydov</b>	<b>Daydelys LLC</b>

# Recommendations

The recommendations that follow reflect months of collaboration, analysis, and engagement aimed at strengthening Kansas' child care subsidy program for families, child care providers, and communities across the state. They were developed with careful attention to fiscal sustainability and the legislative framework that governs program design and implementation, including the limited duration of surplus CCDF funds and statutory requirements related to eligibility and cost. These recommendations are intended to be actionable and realistic, balancing improved access and participation with long-term program stability. As Kansas considers implementation, ongoing attention to funding, budget planning, and legislative alignment will be essential, as discussed in later sections of this report.

## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE FAMILY ACCESS TO CHILD CARE SUBSIDY

### 1. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A PRESUMPTIVE ELIGIBILITY POLICY FOR KANSAS FAMILIES SEEKING CHILD CARE SUBSIDY.

- 1.1** Revise the CCDF FY27 budget and future service budgets as needed to fund a presumptive eligibility pilot and the system updates required to support it. This investment will provide the infrastructure needed to test the policy and ensure accurate tracking and evaluation, while maintaining alignment with Kansas' long-term goals for improved access for families and child care providers. Request additional state funding, or identify other funding sources, as necessary.
- 1.2** Seek legislative approval for changes to the Child Care Assistance Program's eligibility policy and the required CCDF State Plan amendment. Early engagement with legislators will help build understanding of presumptive eligibility's purpose and ensure legal and fiscal alignment across state systems.
- 1.3** Develop clear, audience-specific messaging for families, child care providers, legislators, and other stakeholders to communicate the intent, benefits, and safeguards of presumptive eligibility. This will help build trust and support across sectors, reducing confusion during implementation.
- 1.4** Pilot the policy with a defined population, such as working families starting new employment or families seeking care for infants/toddlers, to assess operational feasibility and family outcomes before statewide expansion.
- 1.5** Gather pilot data to refine processes, improve program performance and accuracy, and strengthen program integrity prior to scaling. Establish continuous feedback loops between DCF, the Kansas Office of Early Childhood, and community partners to ensure lessons learned inform broader implementation.

**1.6** Leverage pilot data to explore ways to improve continuity of care for children who are presumed eligible but later determined ineligible, aligning with Kansas' broader goal of promoting stable early care and education experiences.

## **2. ASSESS CURRENT AND AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS TO IDENTIFY HOW THEY COULD IMPROVE AND SIMPLIFY THE APPLICATION PROCESS FOR FAMILIES.**

Conduct a comprehensive review of the DCF Self-Service Portal (KEES) and other potential technology solutions to identify opportunities for automation, streamlined document submission, and family self-service tools. A modernized system could shorten processing times, reduce errors, and better integrate with other early childhood data systems, while ensuring a seamless experience for families.

## **3. DEVELOP OR LEVERAGE EXISTING “NAVIGATOR” MODELS TO ASSIST FAMILIES WITH THE SUBSIDY APPLICATION PROCESS.**

**3.1** Build on existing navigation supports, including local subsidy navigators, Community Health Workers, and home visiting programs to ensure that families receive personalized, culturally responsive assistance. This model may be particularly helpful for first-time applicants who may face barriers completing the process.

**3.2** Embed navigation expectations into early childhood service delivery contracts, ensuring that family support and communication are treated as essential program functions. This integration reinforces Kansas' vision for a coordinated, family-centered early childhood system.

## **4. REVIEW ALL COMMUNICATION TOUCHPOINTS WITH FAMILIES (WRITTEN, DIGITAL, PHONE, ETC.) TO IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE CLARITY, FREQUENCY, AND CONSISTENCY.**

By assessing the tone, accessibility, content, and timing of communication, Kansas can reduce confusion, improve compliance, and strengthen families' trust in public programs. Aligning messaging across platforms will also support coordination between DCF, the Kansas Office of Early Childhood, and community partners.

## **5. ASSESS, ADDRESS, AND INVEST IN PROGRAM INFRASTRUCTURE AND STAFFING NEEDS TO ENSURE THE PROGRAM IS ABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS (PARTICULARLY PHONE WAIT TIMES).**

Investing in staffing and infrastructure improvements, including call center responsiveness and application processing systems, will directly support timely application processing and

strengthen family access and satisfaction while ensuring the Child Care Assistance Program operates efficiently and equitably.

## **6. ADDRESS LEGISLATIVE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION, INCLUDING REQUIREMENTS TO COOPERATE WITH CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES AND EMPLOYMENT-RELATED REQUIREMENTS.**

Evaluating these statutory barriers will allow Kansas to align eligibility requirements with the 2024 CCDF Final Rule's emphasis on family stability and access. Modernizing these policies could reduce administrative denials, better support working families, and help Kansas better meet federal goals for equitable access to child care subsidy.

## **7. LEVERAGE USER TESTING DATA AND FEEDBACK FROM FAMILIES TO SUPPORT CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT.**

As system and policy changes are implemented, actively engage families in user testing to ensure that new tools, websites, policies, and processes are intuitive, accessible, and responsive to real needs. Gathering feedback through focus groups, surveys, and usability testing will help identify barriers families experience when applying for or maintaining child care subsidy, such as unclear instructions, technical issues, or communication gaps. Embedding these feedback loops into ongoing operations creates a culture of continuous quality improvement, allowing DCF and the Kansas Office of Early Childhood to refine messaging, streamline processes, and strengthen family trust in the Child Care Assistance Program.

## **STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CHILD CARE PROVIDER PARTICIPATION IN CHILD CARE SUBSIDY**

### **1. IMPLEMENT DIRECT-TO-PROVIDER PAYMENT PRACTICES.**

**1.1** Conduct a scan of statutory requirements, assessing implications of the HOPE Act and other legislation to determine what statutory or regulatory changes would be necessary to enable direct payments to child care providers. This foundational step will clarify the policy landscape and guide next steps in design and implementation.

**1.2** Seek approval and/or make changes to CCDF State Plan while remaining attentive to evolving CCDF requirements, ensuring continued alignment with expectations for prospective payments based on enrollment.

**1.3** Conduct discovery or issue a Request for Information (RFI) to understand the technical and staffing resources needed to support a transition to direct payments to child care providers.

This process will help DCF and the Kansas Office of Early Childhood identify system integration needs, vendor capabilities, and potential fiscal implications.

**1.4** Leverage baseline information gathered by the Core Group from other states that already pay child care providers directly, prospectively, and based on enrollment. Consider options such as bi-monthly prospective payments, which can better accommodate families that change child care providers during the month than a monthly prospective payment process. This approach supports child care provider financial stability and aligns Kansas with emerging national best practices.

**1.5** Develop a minimum attendance policy consistent with federal Office of Child Care guidance to balance program integrity with child care provider sustainability, ensuring child care providers are not penalized for normal fluctuations in child attendance.

## **2. ASSESS CURRENT AND AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS TO IDENTIFY HOW THEY COULD IMPROVE AND SIMPLIFY THE SUBSIDY ENROLLMENT AND MANAGEMENT PROCESS FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS.**

**2.1** Implement an “opt-out” model (currently in progress) to streamline the enrollment process by automatically enrolling eligible licensed child care providers unless they choose otherwise. Integrating subsidy enrollment with the initial licensing inspection will simplify participation and encourage new child care providers to accept subsidy from the start.

**2.2** Review the new licensing portal (LNK), CAPE (Kansas’ Child Care Workforce Registry), and other potential technology solutions to ensure that systems are interoperable, efficient, and easy to use.

**2.3** Assess options for improving child care provider-facing communication about the status of family subsidy applications. Timely, transparent updates will help child care providers manage enrollment, billing, and continuity of care for children whose subsidy status is pending, up for redetermination, or ending.

## **3. DEVELOP OR LEVERAGE EXISTING PEER NAVIGATION OR COACHING MODELS TO ASSIST WITH THE SUBSIDY ENROLLMENT AND MANAGEMENT PROCESS FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS.**

Consider leveraging CAPE Ambassadors or other child care provider coaching models to provide one-on-one guidance, technical support, and peer mentorship to child care providers new to the Child Care Assistance Program. Embedding this support within existing networks will strengthen

child care provider confidence, increase participation, and foster a more connected early childhood ecosystem.

#### **4. LEVERAGE THE NEWLY CREATED CHILD CARE OMBUDSMAN POSITION WITHIN THE KANSAS OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TO REVIEW AND ADDRESS PAYMENT DISCREPANCIES OR OVERPAYMENTS.**

The Ombudsman can serve as a neutral liaison between child care providers and the Child Care Assistance Program, helping resolve payment issues, clarify policy questions, and identify systemic barriers to participation. This function strengthens child care provider trust and ensures feedback from the field directly informs policy and operational improvements.

#### **5. REVIEW ALL COMMUNICATION TOUCHPOINTS WITH CHILD CARE PROVIDERS (WRITTEN, DIGITAL, PHONE, ETC.) AND IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE CLARITY, FREQUENCY, CONSISTENCY, AND TONE.**

Improved communication will reduce administrative confusion, increase child care provider satisfaction, and ensure that participation in the Child Care Assistance Program feels transparent and predictable. Clear, proactive communication also reinforces Kansas' broader goal of strengthening the partnership between the Kansas Office of Early Childhood, DCF, and the child care provider community.

#### **6. ASSESS, ADDRESS, AND INVEST IN PROGRAM INFRASTRUCTURE AND STAFFING NEEDS TO ENSURE THE PROGRAM CAN MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS.**

Consider implementing a designated child care provider "helpline" staffed by trained personnel familiar with subsidy policies and payment processes. A direct support line would reduce child care provider frustration, ensure consistent information, and improve overall responsiveness.

#### **7. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT AN OUTREACH STRATEGY TO ENGAGE THE 60% OF LICENSED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS THAT DO NOT CURRENTLY PARTICIPATE IN THE CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.**

Expanding child care provider participation is essential to ensuring equitable access and choice for Kansas families. A well-designed outreach and engagement campaign focused on existing child care providers that are not enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program can help build trust, address concerns about subsidy administration, and clearly communicate how recent and forthcoming policy changes support financial stability.



**7.1** Create a coordinated communication plan that reaches child care providers where they already access information — through licensing communications, regional and community networks, social media, and early childhood professional development and quality improvement systems. The campaign should emphasize transparency, consistency, and the benefits of participation, while addressing common barriers identified through child care provider feedback.

**7.2** Engage child care coaches, technical assistance providers, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, communities, and other “trusted messengers” who maintain direct relationships with child care providers. These partners can provide personalized support, reinforce messaging, and help child care providers navigate the enrollment process.

**7.3** Integrate messaging about participation in the Child Care Assistance Program with Links to Quality (L2Q) engagement and consider implementing tiered reimbursement tied to L2Q achievement. This approach can strengthen both subsidy participation and quality improvement efforts by aligning financial incentives with participation goals.

## **8. EXPLORE ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL INCENTIVES TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION.**

Research and adapt models from other states, such as Missouri’s quality grants or other financial incentives that help offset administrative costs and stabilize revenue for participating child care providers. These incentives can encourage more child care providers to join and participate in the Child Care Assistance Program over time.

## **9. LEVERAGE USER TESTING DATA AND FEEDBACK FROM CHILD CARE PROVIDERS TO SUPPORT CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT.**

As system and policy changes are implemented, actively engage child care providers in user testing to ensure that new tools, websites policies, and processes are intuitive, accessible, and responsive to real needs. Gathering feedback through focus groups, surveys, and usability testing will help identify barriers child care providers experience when enrolling in or managing child care assistance, such as unclear instructions, technical issues, or communication gaps. Embedding these feedback loops into ongoing operations creates a culture of continuous quality improvement, allowing DCF and the Kansas Office of Early Childhood to refine messaging, streamline processes, and strengthen child care provider trust in the Child Care Assistance Program.

# IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving from recommendations to action will require intentional coordination, clear accountability, and strategic collaboration among state agencies, particularly during the transition to the Kansas Office of Early Childhood and the months following its official launch. Sustained collaboration with families, child care providers, and community partners will also be key. The recommendations outlined in this report are designed to strengthen both family access to the Child Care Assistance Program and child care provider participation. Implementing them will require Kansas to align policy, practice, and infrastructure changes around a shared goal: ensuring that every eligible family can access affordable, high-quality child care, and that child care providers are adequately supported to participate in the program.

A phased and coordinated approach that complements the Kansas Office of Early Childhood transition and stand-up timeline will be critical. Early implementation efforts should focus on strategies that remove the most immediate barriers for families and child care providers, such as simplifying application processes, improving and streamlining communication, and implementing outreach strategies to enroll currently licensed child care providers that do not accept child care subsidy. These initial steps will create a stronger foundation for more complex changes, including implementing presumptive eligibility, direct-to-provider payments, and technology modernization which may require legislative action.

Each recommendation should be implemented with a commitment to continuous quality improvement (CQI). Data collection, user testing, and feedback loops from families and child care providers should inform adjustments along the way, ensuring that changes not only meet administrative requirements but also work effectively for the people the program is designed to serve.



**SUSTAINED COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES, CHILD CARE PROVIDERS, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS WILL BE KEY.**

Collaborative leadership during this time will be key; we recommend that leaders from the Department for Children and Families, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the new Kansas Office of Early Childhood establish an implementation workgroup to coordinate next steps, align timelines, and monitor progress. This group can serve as a bridge between policy development and on-the-ground practice.

Further, ensuring the fiscal viability of the Child Care Assistance Program and planned policy and practice changes should remain top-of-mind throughout implementation. Future budgetary planning should carefully consider and balance the continued need for funding to support child care subsidy payments that meet demand at the current eligibility threshold, maintenance of current child care provider reimbursement rates, and the investments needed to modernize program infrastructure. We encourage creative solutions to balancing these priorities, including seeking sources of funding beyond CCDF, such as private philanthropy or state general funds.

Lastly, implementing these recommendations will require a strong communication strategy, one that proactively keeps stakeholders informed, builds public understanding and trust, and reinforces the importance of investing in a child care subsidy program that works for Kansas.



**IMPLEMENTING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS WILL REQUIRE A STRONG COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY — ONE THAT PROACTIVELY KEEPS STAKEHOLDERS INFORMED AND BUILDS PUBLIC TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING.**

# CONCLUSIONS

Kansas stands at an important moment of possibility. The work of this committee has shown what's achievable when we bring policy, data, lived experience, and shared purpose together around a single goal: ensuring that every Kansas family can access affordable, high-quality child care. The Child Care Assistance Program has long served as a lifeline for working families, but as the insights in this report make clear, it also holds untapped potential to become a model of how state systems can better work for the people they serve.

The recommendations in this report are not just policy changes; they reflect a more intentional approach to how child care subsidy is delivered and sustained over time. They emphasize trust, transparency, shared decision-making, and simplicity, while recognizing the importance of fiscal stewardship and legislative alignment. They ask us to remove friction where families and child care providers experience it most and to design a system that reflects Kansas' core values: practicality, fairness, and partnership.

This work will take continued collaboration across state agencies, the legislature, and communities. It will also require thoughtful planning to ensure that program improvements remain financially viable as temporary funding sources sunset and as demand for child care assistance continues to grow. Kansas has already laid a strong foundation through the leadership of DCF, KDHE, the Office of the Governor, and early childhood partners across the state; the challenge ahead is to build on that foundation in ways that are both responsive and responsible.

Ultimately, this report reflects more than a set of recommendations; it reflects a vision for what Kansas can be. A place where parents can work and thrive knowing their children are safe and cared for. Where child care providers are respected and supported for the essential role they play. And where our systems are designed to meet families where they are, with dignity and efficiency.

If we keep listening to families, to child care providers, and to one another, Kansas can continue to lead the way in building a child care system that works for everyone.



**IF WE KEEP LISTENING TO FAMILIES, CHILD CARE PROVIDERS, AND ONE ANOTHER, KANSAS CAN CONTINUE TO LEAD THE WAY IN BUILDING A CHILD CARE SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE.**

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## APPENDIX I

### **Crosswalk of State Child Care Subsidy Systems**

An overview of information gathered and reviewed by the Core Group from select state child care subsidy systems is provided.

# State Snapshot\*

	HI	KS	MD	ND	SC	UT	WI
Governance	Coordinated	Coordinated	Consolidated	Consolidated	Coordinated	Consolidated	Coordinated
Provider Participation	1,675 in 2022	40% (July 2024); 2,305 in 2022	74% (68% FCC and 81% Center); 3,108 in 2022	1,417 enrolled (per CCDF State Plan); 62% currently serving subsidy children	1,231 in 2022	90-99% by type; 1,508 in 2022	3,448 in 2022
Child Participation**	5.6% of potentially eligible children (f)	7.4% of potentially eligible children (f)	8.4% of potentially eligible children (s)	9% of potentially eligible children (s)	5% of potentially eligible children (f)	7.9% of potentially eligible children (f)	12.3% of potentially eligible children (s)
Family Income Eligibility	85% SMI	85% SMI	60% SMI	75% SMI	85% SMI	85% SMI	200% FPL
Payment Method	Families (EBT)	Families (EBT)	Direct to Providers	Direct to Providers	Direct to Providers	Direct to Providers	Families (EBT)
Presumptive Eligibility	Limited	Limited	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Overpayments	2024: 375 provider repayments totaling \$420k	25 improper payments totaling \$86k over a 6 month period	135 repayments totaling \$208k	Not available	585 receivable adjustments totaling \$168k over one year; 133 repayment plans totaling \$167k	In 2023, \$723k recouped from providers and \$281k recouped from families	In 2023: \$1.1M in provider overpayments and \$630k in family overpayments. In 2020: \$1.3M from providers and \$2.2M from families.

\*Source: 2025-2027 CCDF State Plans: [FY 2025-2027 State/Territory CCDF Plans | The Administration for Children and Families](#).

\*\*Source: Hardy, A., Schmit, S., and Wilensky, R. (2024, June). *Child Care Assistance Landscape: Inequities in Federal and State Eligibility and Access*. Center for Law and Social Policy. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/inequitable-access-2024/>.

States denoted (f) have adopted federal income eligibility guidelines; those denoted (s) utilize separate income eligibility set by the state. The participation rate shown is based on either federal or state income eligibility accordingly.

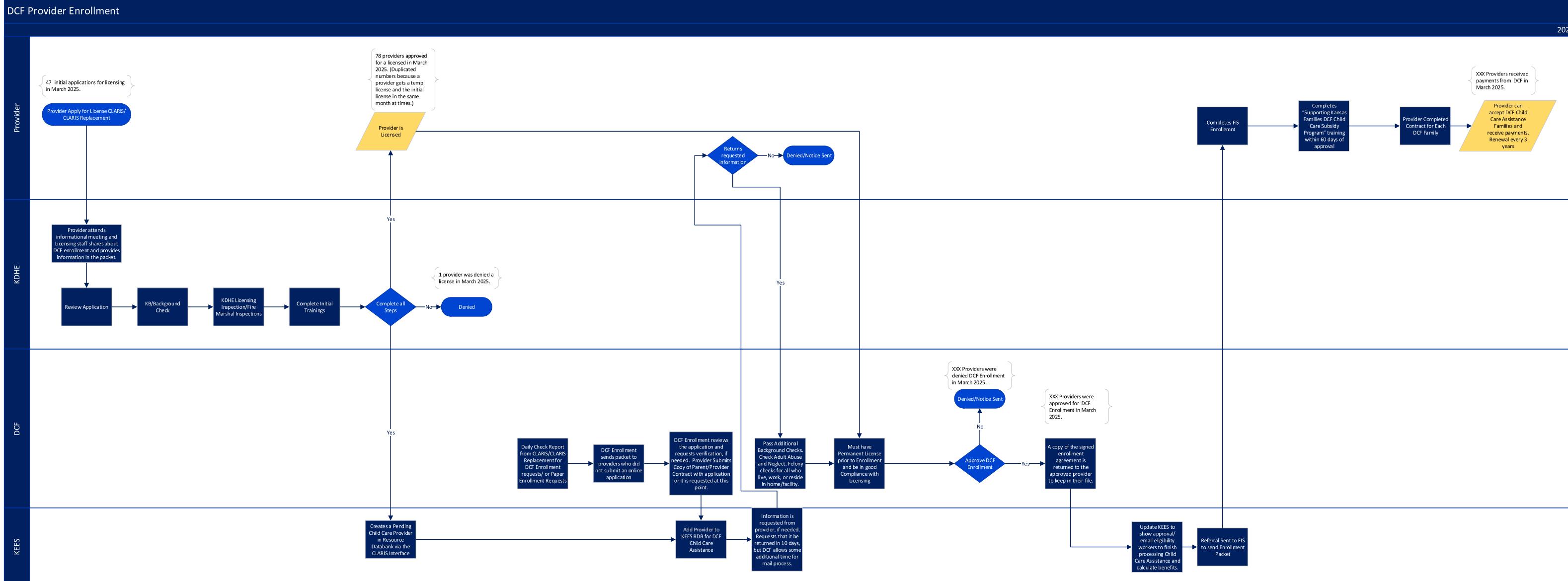
## **APPENDIX II**

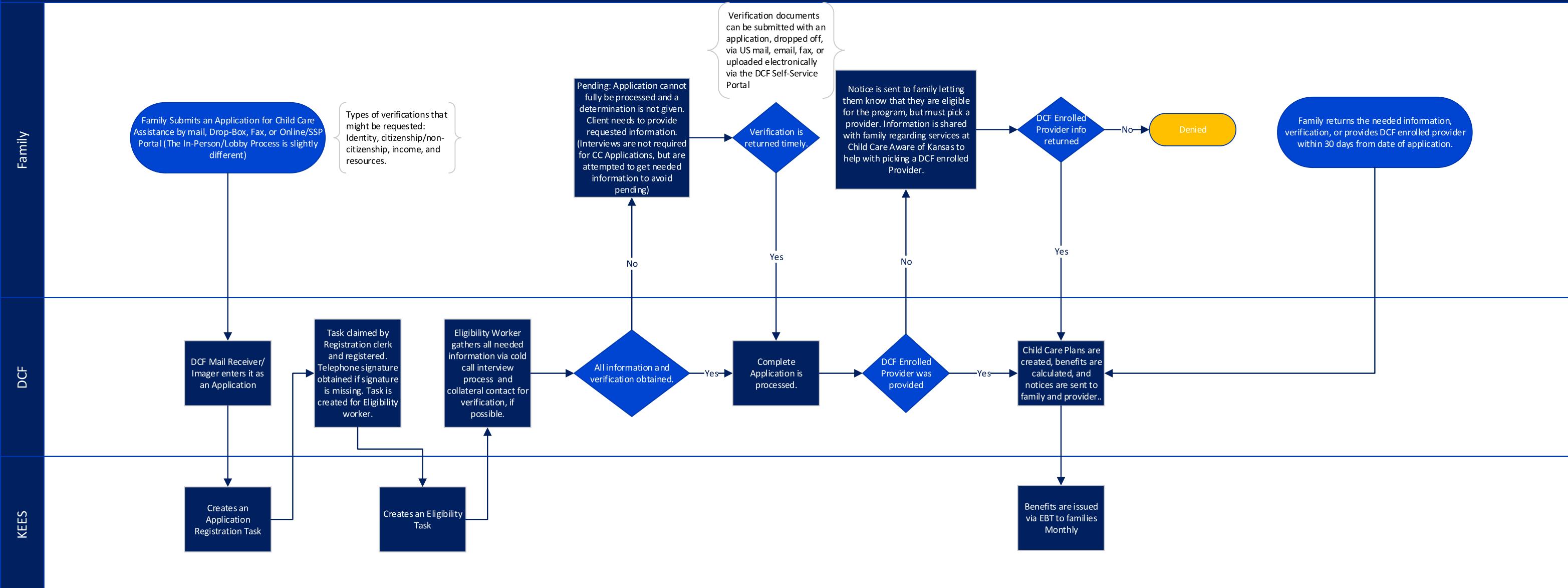
### **Family and Child Care Provider Application and Enrollment Process Maps**

These images illustrate the application process for families and the enrollment process for child care providers and were developed by the Department for Children and Families.

## DCF Provider Enrollment

2025





Application Desk Aid for Families: <https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/ApplyingforBenefitsDeskAid.pdf>



## APPENDIX III

### Family Applications for Child Care Assistance

# APPENDIX III

## FAMILY APPLICATIONS FOR CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE, MARCH 2024-FEBRUARY 2025

**Total Applications:** 16,021

**Pended Applications:** 6,846

**Pended Applications Denied:** 4,917

<b>DENIAL REASON</b>	<b>COUNT (UNDUPLICATED)</b>
Application Opened in Error	46
Child Support Services Non-Cooperation	49
Duplicate Application	1
Failed Minimum Hour Work Requirement	231
Failed to Complete Determination	1
Family Share Exceeds Cost of Care	2
Failure to Provide Income	880
Failure to Provide Name/Identity	14
Failure to Provide Residence	2
Failure to Provide Trust Verification	1
Ineligible Primary Applicant	273
Lack of Employment	114
No Application – Required Person	27
No Child Care Plan	24
No Eligible Member	244
No Enrolled Provider	246
No Need Indicated	41
No Personal Need	57
Not Eligible – Other Reasons	66
Not Initially Eligible	12
Over Income	185
Over Resources	8
Provider Not Chosen	479
Requested Discontinuance	21
Requested Information Not Received	1,743
Residency Requirement Not Met	3
Written Application Withdrawal	168
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>4,917</b>

Source: Kansas Department for Children and Families. Unpublished Data. (2025)



## APPENDIX IV

### Child Care Subsidy Payments by Funding Source

# APPENDIX VI

## CHILD CARE SUBSIDY PAYMENTS BY FUNDING SOURCE

Source: Kansas Department for Children and Families. *Unpublished Data. (2025<sup>43</sup>)*

	Monthly Cases	Monthly Children	Cost Per Child	Total Expenditures	1000 SGF	2000 CIF	3307 SSBG
2019	4,822	8,823	377.36	39,953,590	10,429,862	5,033,679	188,877
2020	5,474	10,104	427.37	51,815,037	10,429,859	5,033,679	188,877
2021	6,222	10,989	427.73	56,404,490	10,429,859	5,033,679	188,877
2022	6,808	11,733	452.06	63,647,580	7,429,859	5,033,679	188,877
2023	7,324	12,481	494.71	74,096,431	10,429,859	5,033,679	188,877
2024	7,899	13,466	524.48	84,751,747	14,511,032	5,033,679	188,877
2025 (Approved)	8,580	14,602	582.08	101,993,614	14,520,294	5,033,679	188,877
2026 (Approved)	9,071	15,438	611.19	113,226,630	14,520,294	5,033,679	188,877

	3028 CCDF Disc	3028 CCDF Disc Pandemic	3318 CCDF Mandatory	3318 CCDF Matching
2019	12,868,379		3,281,162	8,151,631
2020	20,604,724	127,054	2,955,524	12,475,320
2021	17,972,580	4,741,753	1,201,014	16,836,728
2022	20,430,453	12,891,155	5,679,448	11,994,109
2023	27,543,690	12,584,574	1,943,627	16,372,125
2024	33,673,091	6,176,992	4,165,205	21,002,872
2025 (Approved)	57,766,984	520,000	3,420,972	20,542,808
2026 (Approved)	69,520,000	-	3,420,972	20,542,808

- 2025 and 2026 are the approved budgets. Current estimates show subsidy payments to be just over \$104 million for FY 2025.
- Based on the approved budget, the surplus of CCDF funds on hand are expected to be exhausted by SFY 2029.
- These estimates are based on the approved budget and do not reflect changes or increases that will be reflected in the budget submitted this fall.
- Currently, CCDF expenditures are projected to exceed CCDF revenue by about \$23.7 million annually based on the approved budget.
- Any policy changes that increase costs will require additional CCDF funds to be used, reducing the balance sooner, or be covered with a different funding source (SGF).
- CCDF revenue is projected at the current levels. Increases or decreases will impact the available carryover balance.



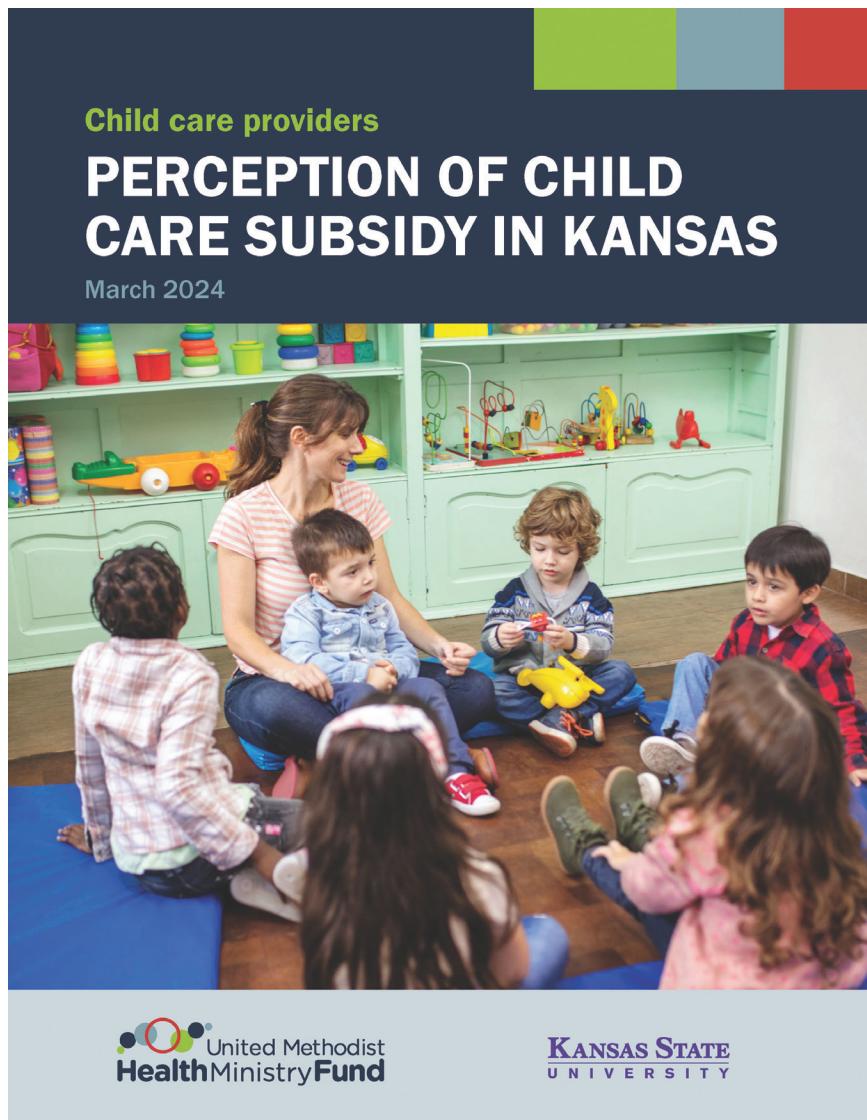
## APPENDIX V

### Child Care Providers: Perception of Child Care Subsidy in Kansas

# APPENDIX V

## CHILD CARE PROVIDERS: PERCEPTION OF CHILD CARE SUBSIDY IN KANSAS

[Click here to view this report, which was published in October 2024.](#)



Child care providers

# PERCEPTION OF CHILD CARE SUBSIDY IN KANSAS

March 2024

 United Methodist  
Health Ministry Fund

 KANSAS STATE  
UNIVERSITY

## APPENDIX VI

### Family and Child Care Provider Focus Group Findings

**Perceptions of the child care subsidy system in Kansas:**

**Child care administrator and family focus groups**

**2025**

**REPORT BY**

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**PROJECT FUNDED BY**

United Methodist Health Ministry Fund

## **Background**

Kansas State University partnered with the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund to conduct a series of virtual focus groups to learn more about child care administrators' and families' experiences with the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) Child Care Subsidy Program. The purpose of this qualitative project was to build on the findings of the 2023 statewide provider survey by collecting in-depth perspectives from both child care administrators and families who interact with the subsidy system. The Kansas State University Institutional Review Board approved this study, and all participants provided informed consent before participating.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Participants for this project included early childhood administrators and families who had and had not used the Kansas child care subsidy system. Recruitment for both early childhood administrators and families focused on achieving broad regional representation across Kansas's five DCF service regions (Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, Southeast, and Central). Partner agencies such as Child Care Aware and community-based organizations helped connect eligible participants through digital flyers, emails, and referral links. A Qualtrics survey was used to screen interested participants by role, county, and language preference. A total of 219 individuals indicated interest in participating in the Kansas Child Care Subsidy focus groups. To further determine focus group participation, interested individuals were sent a link to an informed consent document. Submitting a signed informed consent determined whether they were sent a follow-up email that included a time and date of their focus group. 103 individuals signed

informed consent and 75 participants were scheduled to participate in identified focus groups. Out of the 75 individual participants who agreed to participate, 50 completed the focus group process. This was a 66% completion rate (i.e., agreed to participate vs participated).

## **Procedure**

Focus groups were conducted virtually between July and August 2025, lasted approximately 100 minutes and were organized into four types of groups: (1) child care administrators currently participating in the subsidy system, (2) child care administrators who had never participated, (3) families currently receiving the subsidy, and (4) families eligible but not using the subsidy. Sessions were facilitated by the principal investigator, with note-taking and transcription support from a graduate research assistant. Each session was audio- and video-recorded for accuracy and later transcribed and de-identified for analysis. Participants were offered \$50 as compensation for their time.

Each session began with introductions, a review of confidentiality and consent, and an opening question to build rapport. The discussion followed a structured question guide designed to encourage open dialogue about application processes, communication with DCF, administrative burdens, payment procedures, and overall perceptions of the subsidy system.

All recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected Kansas State University server. Video files were deleted after verification, and only de-identified transcripts were retained for analysis. Participants were reminded that although confidentiality within a group cannot be guaranteed, identifying information would not appear in any report or publication.

## **Data Analysis**

Focus group interviews were collected for this research project. To determine similarities within the responses, a thematic analysis approach was used. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative method that is used to uncover patterns within data. Using a hand-coding process, descriptive words and short phrases were written in the margins to highlight repeated ideas related to access, administrative processes, communication with DCF, affordability, and overall satisfaction with the program. These handwritten notes were reviewed and organized into small groups of similar ideas. Over several rounds of comparison and refinement, these groups were developed into broader categories that captured the main concerns and strengths described across sessions. Through this systematic, manual approach, seven recurring concepts emerged: administrative and technology burden, communication and transparency, affordability and cost burden, provider access and availability, payment and eligibility challenges, trust and stigma, and awareness and outreach. Each of these concepts appeared across both family and administrator discussions, though their emphasis and impact varied by group.

## **Results**

The purpose of this project was to learn about child care administrators' and families' experiences with the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) Child Care Subsidy Program. Individuals were invited to participate in focus groups to share their perspectives on the child care subsidy system. These focus-group discussions provided rich insight into how Kansas families and child care administrators experience the Department for Children and Families (DCF) Child Care Subsidy Program.

## **Administrative and Technology Burden**

Child care administrator focus groups revealed both the value and the challenges of participating in the Kansas child care subsidy system. Administrators who were currently enrolled described the subsidy as an important way to serve families who otherwise could not afford care. However, they emphasized that the administrative workload, payment delays, and low reimbursement rates created significant strain on their programs. Many participants reported spending considerable time on paperwork and troubleshooting payment issues, noting that these tasks often detracted from their ability to focus on their programs and staff. Administrators described the subsidy process as complicated and time-consuming, especially when tracking authorizations or reconciling payments. They felt that the time and effort needed to manage paperwork were disproportionate to the financial return. One child care administrator noted, “I feel like I spend more time on paperwork than with the kids some days.”

Family focus groups provided an important insight into how Kansas parents navigate or perceive the child care subsidy system. Families currently using the subsidy and those who have never used it expressed both appreciation for the program’s intent and frustration with its processes. They described the benefit as essential to maintaining employment and stability for their family and children. When asked about the administrative process, some parents reported needing to reapply multiple times, waiting months for approval, or losing coverage during transitions. One parent reported, “The subsidy helps, but when the approval takes months, it’s impossible.” Using the online system was discussed frequently within the focus groups, both by administrators and families. The system was described as frustrating and confusing. They described experiences where the system did not always function properly and that when they

called DCF to inquire or get additional information those experiences often involved long holds or inconsistent information.

## **Communication and Transparency**

Communication with DCF was another recurring theme. Providers and families said they often waited weeks for responses or were unsure whom to contact about issues. Some administrators said the lack of clear communication channels led to confusion and frustration. One child care administrator commented, “You never know who to call or how long it’ll take to hear back.” Another administrator described how a family with a child in their care, “...sat on the phone from 7:15 to 4:30, then got hung up on.” To mitigate wait time, some participants said they relied on email communication to avoid long call wait times, often contacting a trusted source within the system (i.e., not necessarily a DCF child care subsidy specific employee) to get information.

Interactions with DCF staff, according to participants, was mixed. Both families and administrators described positive and helpful interactions while others reported negative and disrespectful conversations. One parent participant described an interaction they had when applying, “They told me I’d have to be pregnant in winter living in a car to qualify.” Another family described a conversation with a DCF worker who belittled her by telling she (i.e., the DCF worker) didn’t know why she (i.e., the family member) needed subsidy. Both administrators and families said that having someone specific that could help them would be beneficial. In fact, administrators talked about a mentor that could help new providers through the application process to become a subsidy program. Families talked about a navigator to help them. One family said, “If someone just explained the process, it would be less stressful.”

Administrators and families spoke about transparency, specifically as it related to how subsidy rates are calculated and why there are differences across the state. Across participants there was a general lack of understanding about the process and determination, both for eligibility and subsidy rate. Both want to be better informed and said it would be helpful to have more information.

Despite frustrations, both administrators and families consistently expressed gratitude for the assistance. Many families noted that without the subsidy, they would be unable to work or would have to choose lower-quality care. Administrators and families also recognized barriers that may be creating delays in communication. Some felt that the staffing at DCF was limited and that they needed additional support.

### **Affordability and Cost**

Both administrators and families are keenly aware of the costs of quality child care. Administrators understand that, for some families, access to child care subsidy is essential. For families, many understand that quality child care comes at a higher cost. For both, what families receive and subsequently what child care programs are paid, often, do not adequately cover what it takes to provide high quality care. Families who receive subsidy frequently spoke about how access to child care subsidy provides them opportunities to go back to work or further their education. They rely on their child care provider to create a space that is safe and supportive for their child. A couple of families described situations where they had to remove their child from care due to inappropriate practices. Finding an additional place for their child was challenging due to the limited availability of openings.

Both administrators and families continued to voice their desire for a system that provided access to quality care for more families. Administrators described how they often supported families by using their own funds to cover costs even when, they are financial strapped.

### **Provider Access and Availability**

Families were asked to describe the process for finding care providers that were enrolled in the subsidy system. Many spoke to the lack of quality child care in their area and the limited availability of subsidy funded “slots.” Several families described how they contacted between 7 and 10 providers before they secured a spot for their child. All talked about how they were lucky because their care program was located within a short distance from their home or close to their workplace. One family note that they if they had not received the spot they got, they would have needed to drive a much longer distance to find a child care provider. Rural families also described unique challenges that were specific to their location, including a limited number of providers, long waitlists, and few licensed programs that accept subsidy. Some parents relied on friends or relatives for informal care because they could not find available or affordable providers.

Providers, when asked about access for families, aligned with families in some instances and provided another prospective in others. Several administrators talked about the perception of DCF and how they believed this contributed to the lack of provider participation. They spoke about how they believed many providers who do not participate do so because the name DCF is associated with those individuals “who take children away from their families.” There was also some discussion from family child care providers who felt that the lack of participation stemmed from the belief that DCF was there to judge or evaluate them.

## **Payment and Eligibility Challenges**

Payment collection issues and reimbursement delays were also frequent concerns. Some providers said they had waited weeks or months for payment or received partial reimbursements that did not align with their fee structures. A few administrators described having to personally cover costs until payments arrived, which placed additional strain on small programs. Administrators spoke to spending time reconciling records in the DCF portal and the EBT Edge systems. During this conversation, administrators talked about what payments “show up as” when they log into the system to see if payment has been sent. Many described how difficult it was to determine which payment went to which family. They wanted a better way to denote that in the system. When asked about whether considering a different payment distribution process would be beneficial (i.e., direct to provider payments), most providers agreed that they would feel more secure if payment came directly to them. For families, however, this was the opposite. In fact, one family was emphatic, stating that they didn’t like that idea. Most families said they wanted to continue to have the payments come to them and many described how they liked overseeing the payments and didn’t want that to change.

Families spoke to several financial elements that were confusing or that they received inconsistent information from DCF. In several focus groups, some families described that they were able to get back pay for funds that they contributed while waiting for subsidy approval. Others noted that they didn’t know this existed and said they would have benefited from recouping those dollars. Families also talked about lost funds due to provider switches. One family noted they, “...lost more \$500 when I changed providers—the funds went back, not to me.”

When asked about eligibility requirements, many families noted confusion about policy around student coverage and eligibility thresholds. Both families and administrators talked about how many working families are excluded due to the eligibility requirement despite needing support to cover the high cost of child care. Several participants described being “a dollar over” the income limit or being disqualified due to savings or resource rules. Administrators and families were asked how they felt about an alternative process for determining eligibility (i.e., presumptive eligibility). Most expressed enthusiasm, noting that this would expedite the process for payment to providers and get families access to care sooner. At the same time, most also were skeptical of how the realities of this type of process would work and doubted if this would be something to ever come to fruition. Many administrators were concerned about whether they would be liable for repayment of distributed subsidy funds if a family ended up not qualifying for subsidy.

### **Trust and Stigma**

Across both administrators and families, participants spoke about perceptions and stigma related to the child care subsidy system. Administrators emphasized that they strive to treat all families equally, regardless of payment method. However, several participants acknowledged that stigma persists within the broader community. Some providers mentioned that private-pay families occasionally held negative assumptions about families receiving assistance, while some DCF-supported families feared being judged or treated differently. One child care administrator noted, “DCF doesn’t have the best reputation, and that hurts families.” Families echoed these concerns, noting that feelings of shame or embarrassment sometimes discouraged them from applying. Others said they appreciated providers who maintained privacy and created inclusive

environments. Overall, participants agreed that increased public education and communication could help reduce stigma associated with using the subsidy.

Administrators discussed a shared commitment to inclusion and equality within their programs. Many said they make deliberate efforts to ensure that children from subsidy-funded families are treated no differently from those whose parents pay privately. Confidentiality about payment sources was described as a standard practice to preserve dignity and privacy. Providers also reported offering flexible payment arrangements, discounts, or temporary support for families facing hardship. Some described partnerships with community agencies such as Child Care Aware, Head Start, and local schools to connect families with additional resources. Families highlighted how personal networks (friends, coworkers, or caseworkers) often played a critical role in helping them understand and access the subsidy. For some, these trusted connections provided the only reliable path to information. One parent commented, “I only found out about subsidy because my friend told me.”

### **Awareness and Outreach**

Administrators and families were asked about their understanding and awareness of the child care subsidy system. Administrators who had never participated in the subsidy system or who had discontinued participation described several reasons for their decisions. Most had never been contacted directly by DCF or offered information about the program. Their decisions not to participate were primarily based on fears of payment delays, excessive paperwork, and uncertainty about reimbursement rules. Many described hearing conflicting stories from peers, leading to further hesitation. However, these administrators also expressed willingness to reconsider if processes became easier and more predictable. When asked what might motivate participation, several administrators reflected on earlier discussions about paying providers

directly and commented how that process may entice programs to apply to be a subsidy eligible program. The security of the reliability of payments was what they felt would increase interest. Many administrators also said they already had sufficient private-pay enrollment and thus did not need to participate in the subsidy program. One administrator commented, “I’ve never had anyone ask if I accept subsidy.” Despite these challenges, many administrators remained committed to participating because of their relationships with families and their desire to ensure access to affordable care. Administrators who continued in the program said their motivation was primarily based on supporting families rather than financial or administrative benefits. One child care administrator spoke about their commitment to families, “We do it for the families. If we stop, they have nowhere to go.”

Families who had never used the subsidy were generally aware of the program through word-of-mouth, workplaces, schools, or caseworkers. This group and those who are currently participating reported that messaging from DCF was inconsistent and confusing. One family noted, “We learned from WIC and my provider — never saw it advertised anywhere.” There was also dialogue about low institutional trust due to prior experiences with aid programs.

## **Recommendations**

Focus-group participants offered practical ideas for improving the subsidy system. Their recommendations centered on simplifying communication, clarifying eligibility rules, ensuring timely payments, and expanding access to providers. Administrators recommended streamlining paperwork, offering clearer guidance on reimbursement procedures, and creating direct points of contact at DCF. They emphasized the importance of timely, predictable payments to stabilize their programs. When asked about direct to provider payments to ensure programs were paid, administrators felt strongly that this process would be beneficial. Many also noted that this

would encourage more programs to participate in the subsidy program. Positive attitudes toward direct to provider payments aligns with previous research on child care subsidy conducted in 2024 by Kansas State University and the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund where most respondents indicated they would be in favor of this shift. Schneider, Joshi, & Ha (2021) also described how direct to provider payments (i.e., contracts) can work to stabilize the revenue of child care programs. In some instances, this type of payment structure can create an avenue for states to enact regulations that specify programs must maintain specific standards of quality care. This benefits programs, children and families by creating high quality environments that support learning and development and that recognize the unique needs of young children and their families. Families also identified recommendations that would make the subsidy program more accessible. They urged DCF to improve the online portal, reduce wait times, and provide clear checklists of required documents to minimize repeated denials. Both families and administrators supported efforts to expand eligibility criteria to better include working families whose incomes exceed current limits but who still struggle with child care costs. Participants also suggested better outreach to increase awareness of which providers accept subsidies, particularly in rural areas. Finally, participants expressed the need for continued training and dialogue to address implicit bias and reduce stigma. Both administrators and families called for communication that reinforces dignity, respect, and shared responsibility in supporting Kansas children and families.

## References

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