

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

Access to affordable, high-quality child care is essential for Kansas families, employers, and communities. When families can find and afford care, parents can work, children benefit from stable early learning environments and employers gain a more reliable workforce. At the same time, investments in child care subsidy must be structured to be fiscally sustainable and aligned with state and federal requirements. Despite significant funding, Kansas' child care subsidy program is not reaching its full potential. Families who qualify often struggle to navigate the process or find a participating child care provider, while many child care programs choose not to participate because of lack of awareness, administrative, and financial barriers. Strengthening this program is not just a matter of efficiency, it's a matter of economic opportunity and child well-being.

KEY CHALLENGES

Kansas families and child care providers face two interconnected challenges that limit the effectiveness of the Child Care Assistance Program:

1 FAMILY ACCESS

Even when families meet eligibility requirements, many face challenges accessing child care subsidy due to complex administrative processes, difficulty submitting required documentation, and limited availability of child care providers willing to accept subsidy. Only about 7% of potentially eligible Kansas children are currently served, leaving thousands of working families without affordable options.

2 CHILD CARE PROVIDER PARTICIPATION

At the same time, only 40% of licensed child care programs in Kansas accept subsidy, a number that has remained stagnant since 2018. Child care providers cite inconsistent communication about family application/benefit status, challenges with the way payment is distributed, and administrative complexity as barriers to participation. Together, these challenges constrain family choice and create systemic barriers in access to care.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM FAMILIES & CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Over the last six months, the Health Fund convened the Child Care Subsidy Steering Committee. Comprised of representatives from state agencies, philanthropy, higher education, child care providers, and non-profit partners, the Steering Committee worked to understand these challenges through data review, policy analysis, surveys, and focus groups with families, child care providers, and system partners.



FAMILIES described the child care subsidy application process as confusing and time-consuming, often requiring multiple calls or visits to get help. They struggled with uploading documents, understanding benefit calculations, and finding child care providers who accept subsidy. Many shared that the process felt discouraging or designed to deny eligibility.



CHILD CARE PROVIDERS echoed concerns about administrative burden, citing difficulties with the EBT Edge payment system, tracking payments, and collecting family co-pays. Many said they lacked reliable communication from DCF about family eligibility and payment status. Child care providers new to the system reported not knowing how to enroll or whom to contact for help.



OUR PROCESS

Between June and October 2025, the Steering Committee met monthly to review data, identify root causes, and develop recommendations. The process included:

- Analyzing DCF data on applications, denials, and child care provider participation;
- Reviewing CCDF State Plans and policies from other states;
- Conducting focus groups with families and child care providers; and
- Exploring promising practices such as presumptive eligibility and direct-to-provider payments.

This collaborative process built consensus around actionable solutions that balance access, efficiency, accountability, and sustainability.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in the full report are organized around two core goals: 1) improving family access and 2) strengthening child care provider participation, all while maintaining a clear focus on fiscal responsibility and statutory alignment.

WAYS TO IMPROVE FAMILY ACCESS

1. PILOT PRESUMPTIVE ELIGIBILITY

Test a temporary eligibility period to allow families to access care while verification is pending.

2. SIMPLIFY AND MODERNIZE THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Improve the Self-Service Portal and application forms for clarity and accessibility, streamline document upload, expand online status tracking, and test updates with families before launch.

3. EXPAND FAMILY NAVIGATION AND SUPPORT

Build on models like Start Young and Community Health Workers, embedding trusted local partners who can help families apply, find child care providers, and maintain eligibility.

4. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Redesign approval and denial letters, expand use of text and email notifications, and offer real-time updates on application status to reduce uncertainty.

5. STRENGTHEN SYSTEM CAPACITY

Ensure adequate call center and application processing capacity to meet family demand.

6. REVIEW LEGISLATIVE BARRIERS

Review requirements that create unintended barriers for families, such as cooperation with Child Support Services or work participation thresholds.

WAYS TO IMPROVE PROVIDER PARTICIPATION

1. IMPLEMENT DIRECT-TO-PROVIDER PAYMENTS

Pay child care providers directly (prospectively and based on enrollment) to stabilize revenue and reduce administrative burden.

2. STREAMLINE CHILD CARE PROVIDER ENROLLMENT

Simplify the enrollment process by improving integration with licensing and offering automatic (opt-out) enrollment for eligible child care providers.

3. ENHANCE CHILD CARE PROVIDER SUPPORT

Leverage peer coaching or other technical assistance models to help child care providers navigate the program.

4. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Provide timely updates on family eligibility and payment status; utilize the Child Care Ombudsman to address payment discrepancies or other system barriers.

5. STRENGTHEN SYSTEM CAPACITY

Create a staffed helpline to assist child care providers with policy and payment questions.

6. EXPAND OUTREACH

Engage the 60% of child care providers not currently participating in the Child Care Assistance Program through coordinated communication and incentives.

7. EXPLORE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Utilize grants or bonuses to encourage participation and retention in the subsidy system.

LOOKING AHEAD

These recommendations provide a clear roadmap for building a more accessible, efficient, and equitable child care subsidy system, one that works better for families, child care providers, and the state as a whole. By combining data-driven decision-making with direct feedback from those most affected, Kansas can strengthen its foundation for early childhood success and ensure that every family has access to affordable, high-quality child care.