



Child Care & Community Services Division

Child Care Services-Transformation

Tennessee Department of Human Services | September 2021



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Introduction

The Child Care Services Program within the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) aspires to a world where all Tennessee communities have enough child care providers so that every family can choose from a range of quality programs in order to find the best fit for their needs. Those child care providers feel connected to TDHS child care staff who are supportive, communicative, collaborative and engaging, showing child care providers and families the potential for and impact of quality child care. Child Care Services staff deploy modern technology and streamlined processes to efficiently complete activities and deliver a seamless network of supports that promote continuous quality improvement.

By December 31, 2022, the Department will transform the Child Care Services business model to support overall improvements in the quality of child care services, while increasing access and improving business efficiencies. The purpose of this white paper is to outline the efforts and innovations underway at the Department of Human Services that will play a critical role in child care transformation.

Background Information

A recent [report from Child Care Aware](#) notes that “research continues to indicate that children who attend high-quality child care programs have positive long-term outcomes in later childhood and beyond. The long-term benefits include high school completion, higher income, better physical health and stronger families”.¹

In 2014, Child Care Services was centralized into one division at TDHS to include all programs governed by the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). The CCDBG authorizes the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) which provides financial supports for child care agencies and families eligible for child care payment assistance. The CCDBG Reauthorization Act of 2014 changed the complexion of the delivery of services to align with years of research promoting best practices for child

¹ ₁₀

https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/Picking%20Up%20The%20Pieces%20%E2%80%94%20Building%20A%20Better%20Child%20Care%20System%20Post%20COVID%2019.pdf?utm_campaign=Picking%20Up%20The%20Pieces&utm_source=Full%20Report%20PDF

development in early care and education settings and meeting the needs of children, child care providers and families.

The Reauthorization Act occurred around the same time State Lead Agencies were developing their CCDF Plans for the 2016-2018 plan cycle. These plans included new compliance standards with Health and Safety criteria, Background Checks, and Child Care Assistance Eligibility requirements. This was followed up with revisions and stakeholder training on policies, rules and regulations that provide governance of our programs. The CCDF plan cycle for 2019-2021 allowed for extended timeframes to meet compliance with the newer requirements.

Current Structure²

Child Care Services is comprised of three program units: licensing, assessment, and certificate. The licensing team reviews applications for and issues child care licenses; conducts regular monitoring visits for compliance with licensing rules; issues violations and legal enforcement actions; and investigates and responds to illegal operators. The assessment program conducts an annual quality assessment review on each licensed child care agency using an *Environment Rating Scales*[®] (ERS)³ tool which is supported by staff at the University of Tennessee. Certificate program staff review applications for 5 categories of care and complete referrals for Department of Children’s Services (DCS) cases, issue child care certificates, assist child care providers with enrolling in the program, and assist parents in understanding and finding quality child care that meets their family’s needs.

The Need for Transformation

Customer Experience: Child Care Providers: With the division between assessment and licensing, operations can be siloed, resulting in child care providers experiencing conflicting expectations and complicated processes that they must navigate in order to maintain their license. Obtaining an initial license involves a series of interactions with TDHS staff as well as visits from health and fire inspectors. Once the license is obtained, TDHS licensing staff make 4 visits during the 120-day temporary license

² This was the organizational structure prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ The *Environment Rating Scales* include the *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale*[®] (ITERS-R[™]), the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*[®]-Revised (ECERS-R[®]), the *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale*[®]-Updated (SACERS-Updated[™]), and the *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale*[®]-Revised (FCCERS-R[™]).

period. Once a permanent license is issued, staff will visit another 6 times during the first year. In subsequent years, the child care provider will reapply for a license annually, including the licensing fee, and licensing staff will visit between 4 and 6 times a year to observe compliance with licensing rules and to issue violations. Licensing staff currently carry a caseload of approximately 25-40 child care providers, which may vary depending upon distances covered in order to complete monitoring visits.

Assessment staff are assigned to visit agencies based upon the rating scales for which the TDHS staff member is reliable, and the types of services offered by the provider. As part of the annual license renewal process, Assessment staff visit providers once a year, with visits being guided by strict adherence to the rating tool and rules for its application. Assessment staff are not allowed to discuss the results of the assessment during the annual visit. At times, child care providers may receive conflicting guidance from licensing and assessment staff about how their program should be operated. Results from the licensing visits and the annual quality assessment are used to develop a mandatory report card and a voluntary star-rating for those agencies who choose to participate in the quality rating program. Child care providers have expressed concern that their performance on the one day of the annual assessment is too heavily weighted and an unfair evaluation of the overall quality of the program.

Customer Experience: Families: The Child Care Certificate Program, also known as the Child Care Payment Assistance program, provides child care payment support to families who meet income eligibility requirements; are working or in post-secondary education programs (Smart Steps); participating in the Families First program; and other parents/guardians who are working to improve their family's prospects. Child care assistance payments are made directly to participating providers on behalf of the clients.

Each Child Care Certificate Program staff member maintains a caseload of approximately 320 families, with the responsibility of determining eligibility based upon initial applications and to complete eligibility redeterminations at 12-month intervals. The eligibility determination process involves reviewing family demographic information and verification documents. Once eligibility is confirmed, the child care specialist must connect with the family to discuss placement of the child at a child care agency that participates in the Child Care Certificate Program, and the certificate must be issued. At this time, Child care specialists also assess family need, provide resources based on CCDF consumer education criteria and coach parents about the importance of quality child care and continuity. Both the Child Care Certificate Program application and verification processes have been heavily paper driven.

The structure of these programs can leave customers feeling frustrated as they navigate complex processes for compliance and eligibility. At times it can feel as though checking boxes is more important than the substance of quality care and meeting individual family needs.

Channel Strategy: Currently, processes of applying for a license, completing monitoring and assessment visits, and determining eligibility are heavily paper driven. This contributes to a primarily manual process that lacks the efficiencies of automation, does not support workflow tracking, and can leave customers and staff feeling frustrated. Currently, paper mail, phone, or email are the primary methods for communicating with customers.

Technology: Currently, Child Care Services operations are supported by 3 legacy technology systems:

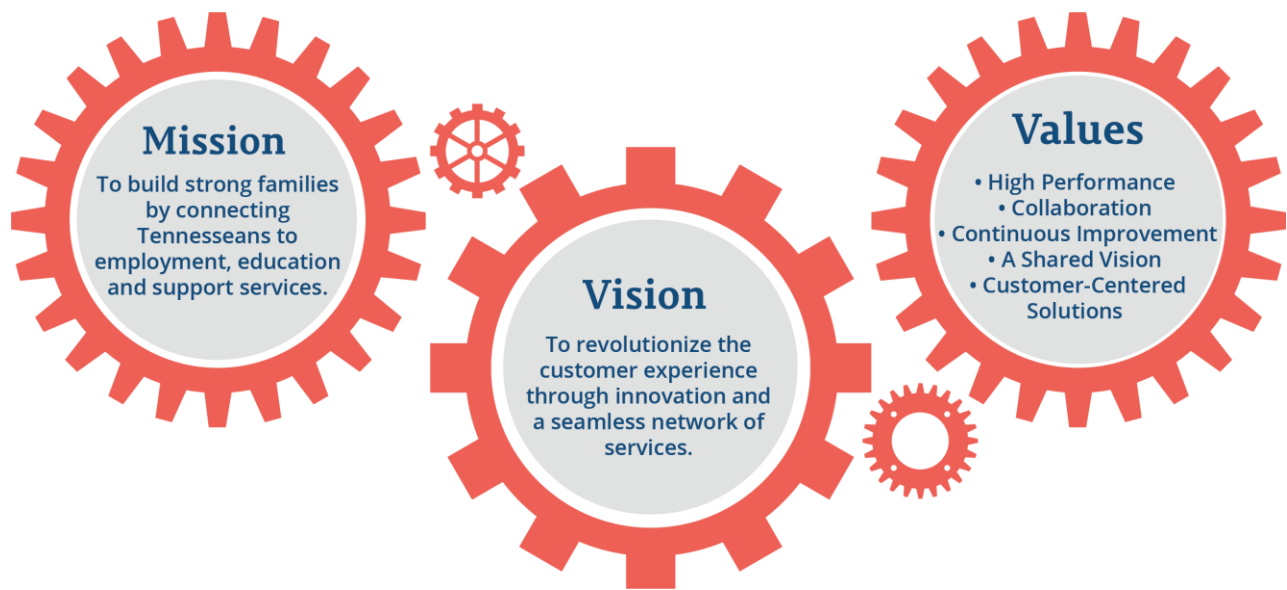
1. **TLCS** - the licensing database that tracks case activity, which must be manually entered after the conclusion of each child care agency visit or interaction.
2. **TCCMS** - the certificate eligibility system that also supports subsidy rate calculations.
3. **Website - Find Child Care** - a section of the TDHS website where parents can search for a child care agency by location and see basic characteristics of the program and link to licensing compliance history.

These legacy systems do not support automation of routine tasks that can be heavily time consuming for customers and staff. The current system limitations cause staff to spend significant time on tasks that are primarily data entry, rather than supporting customers through strengthened relationships.



Transforming Child Care in Tennessee

All transformation activities described in this document align with the Tennessee Department of Human Services Mission, Vision, and Values. TDHS works from the philosophy that when an intentional focus is placed on meaningfully improving the lives of each and every customer who interacts with the Department or its partners, there is an opportunity to help build a stronger household, neighborhood, community, and state - a stronger and more thriving Tennessee.



As TDHS continues to operationalize child care transformation initiatives, it will prioritize the following key areas:

- Creating a Culture for Change
- Engaging Child Care Stakeholders
- Increasing Partnerships with Workforce Development and Business Communities

Creating a Culture for Change

Starting in 2018, the Child Care Services leadership team adopted 3 high level goals to guide all program activities:

- Improve Quality
- Increase Access
- Strengthen Business Efficiencies

Through internal and external communications, TDHS began articulating their commitment to promoting early childhood environments that are safe, healthy, and educationally rich.

Tennessee is in a time of tremendous momentum for the child care industry. Understanding of the importance of quality early education continues to grow. More and more, there is demand for the sustainability and growth of the child care sector. In a growing economy or in a pandemic – access to quality child care is critical. TDHS is committed to leading the transformation of child care, ensuring that all Tennesseans can access and afford quality child care in their communities.

Stakeholder Engagement

In order to identify and implement strategies for child care transformation, TDHS has prioritized engagement of the following stakeholders:

- **Child Care Staff** must be fully invested in the future direction of the program, both as they implement the future operations and as champions and ambassadors to child care providers and families.
- **Child Care Providers** must be regularly engaged to provide feedback on future program design and gradually and consistently introduced to new strategies for monitoring, quality rating, attendance tracking, and payment processing.
- **Quality Partners** must be fully engaged as collaborators in providing resources and supports to child care providers to facilitate growth and continuous improvement.
- **Families** must receive communications that are clear and compelling to inform them about payment assistance, the impact of quality child care, and resources to help them find the right fit for their needs.

Engagement of TDHS Child Care Staff

In the Spring of 2019, the Child Care Services leadership team placed a deliberate focus on engaging staff at all levels to change the culture of how we do business in order to move the programs forward.

The Child Care Services Senior Leadership Team convened to develop the Child Care Services “Why” statement that became the foundational philosophy to drive our work. Defining our “Why” provides clarity for all staff in understanding our primary purpose and belief that guides all program decisions and customer interactions. [Simon Sinek, Start with Why]. Our “Why” statement is simple, yet powerful: “Every family should have access to quality care for children and adults.”

Child Care Services Supervisory staff also contributed to developing the core values or the “How” of our work. These values closely align with our visioning within the Department and include being communicative, supportive, engaging, collaborative, and simple.

In August 2019, Child Care Central Office staff convened to discuss accountability expectations and to cast a vision for the future state of child care, “the child care dream house.”

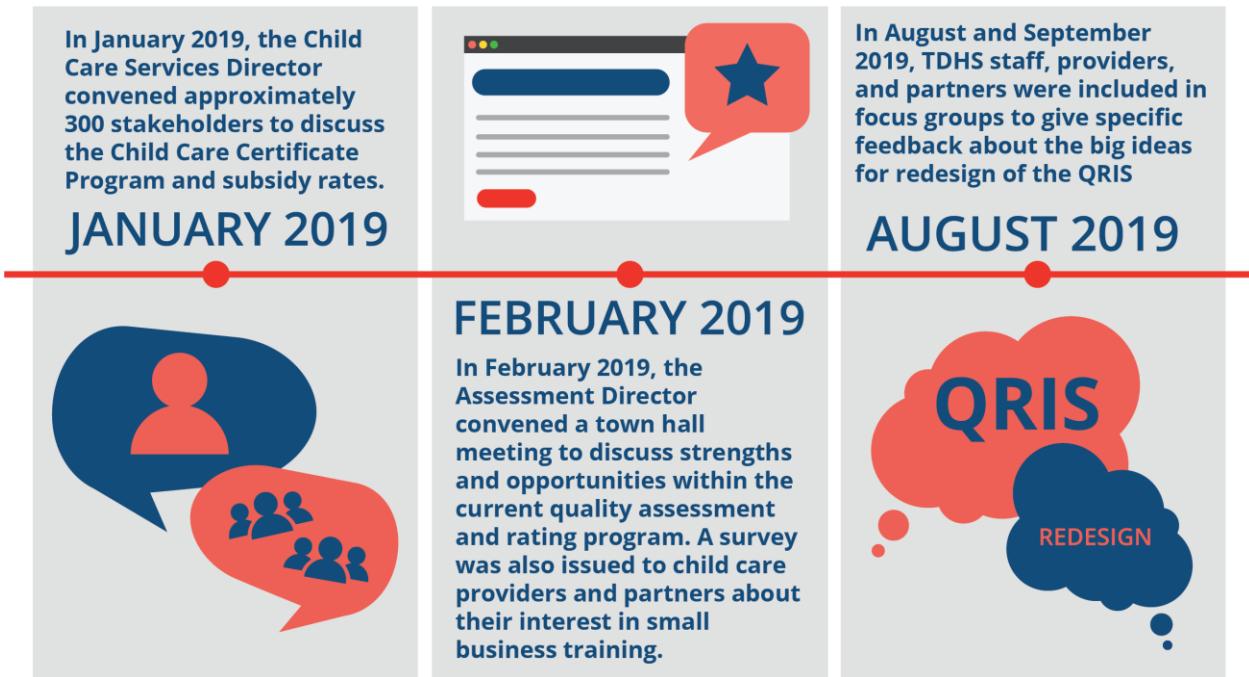
During October 2019, all TDHS child care frontline staff participated in *Growing our Culture* sessions, with a focus on change readiness, high performance, conflict resolution, and creating a vision for the future state of child care, “the child care dream garden.” In November 2019, TDHS Child Care Supervisors came together to review feedback from frontline staff, to discuss leading change, and to develop their vision of the future state, the “child care dream neighborhood.”

Child care frontline staff convened again in June 2020, followed by another supervisors’ meeting in July 2020 to continue discussions on transformation. Frontline staff and supervisory staff convened again in the Fall of 2020, with a focus on being ambassadors, leaders, and innovators for TDHS and our customers. These meetings continue to promote change readiness and to engage staff as the vision for transformation becomes tangible. Staff engaged in pilot projects in the fourth quarter of 2019 and in the first quarter of 2020 for the online child care application and mobile devices. Staff are also engaged with advisory groups as specific aspects of the QRIS redesign are developed.



Engagement of Providers

TDHS regularly engages providers. For example, focus groups and public hearings were held as new child care licensing rules and the state plan were developed.



Providers have also been invited to participate in advisory groups as we develop a scope of work for the electronic attendance tracking and payment processing system for providers participating in the Child Care Certificate Program. TDHS will continue to engage providers as the redesigned and holistic approach to monitoring and scoring is developed. Providers were engaged in the rules revision process to give input as each section was reviewed.

Engagement of Quality Partners

To accomplish the Child Care Services mission, TDHS contracts with a group of “Quality Partners.” Based upon their expertise, these partners offer a broader network of resources for providers. The types of support offered to providers through quality partners include coaching and training on child development and supervision; infant and early childhood mental health supports; early literacy resources; shared services and bulk purchasing; enhancement grants; and child care educator coursework and academic credentials. This group will continue to be engaged to provide coaching, mentoring, technical assistance and professional development supports to facilitate continuous quality improvement for child care providers. They will also provide input on the vision and implementation of the redesigned QRIS.

Engagement of Families

Engagement of families can be more challenging. In September 2019, a small number of parents participating in the Child Care Certificate Program were contacted directly to gauge their interest in an electronic attendance tracking system. Child Care Services has also asked members of the Star Quality Advisory Council to engage with parents to provide feedback on the QRIS redesign. Because a direct relationship exists with parents participating in the Child Care Certificate Program, a significant opportunity to obtain feedback has been identified. Child Care Services will continue to partner with providers in reaching out to parents, as appropriate.

Increasing Engagement of Workforce Development and Corporate Partners

TDHS seeks to prioritize partnerships with workforce development and business communities to assess child care needs, necessary supports and to explore solutions. By increasing employer knowledge and awareness of the importance of child care for their employees, TDHS seeks to identify opportunities for business community partnerships that will change the relevance of child care from a support to an investment in attracting, retaining, and growing a stabilized and productive workforce.

According to a Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce's survey of employers, many employers are interested in child care and ensuring access to child care for their workers; however, they are unfamiliar with programs and resources available through the Department.

TDHS is currently working to develop a Child Care Employer Toolkit, which will serve as a guide for partnering with employers and providing employer-sponsored child care for employees. Employers can support child care in a variety of ways:

- Operating an employer owned child care facility
- Providing financial support to an existing child care agency by paying operational costs
- Partnering with a child care agency to provide financial supports so the agency operates specifically for the children of the employer
- Creating child care incentives as part of the employees benefit package

Employers, Chambers of Commerce, philanthropy, and other community partners will provide feedback on this toolkit and serve as key partners for outreach and marketing.

Enhancing a System of Supports and Resources

The Tennessee Department of Human Services has contracted with State agencies and community-based organizations to build a network of Quality Partners to provide resources and supports for early child care and education programs. This network of services is structured to promote safe, healthy and educationally rich spaces so that children have environments where they may thrive. Services include but are not limited to training, technical support, coaching, modeling, professional development (tuition support, credentialing), guidance on business practices, developmentally appropriate best practices, supplemental salary supports, program enhancement grants, shared services, outreach and awareness, and targeted technical assistance.

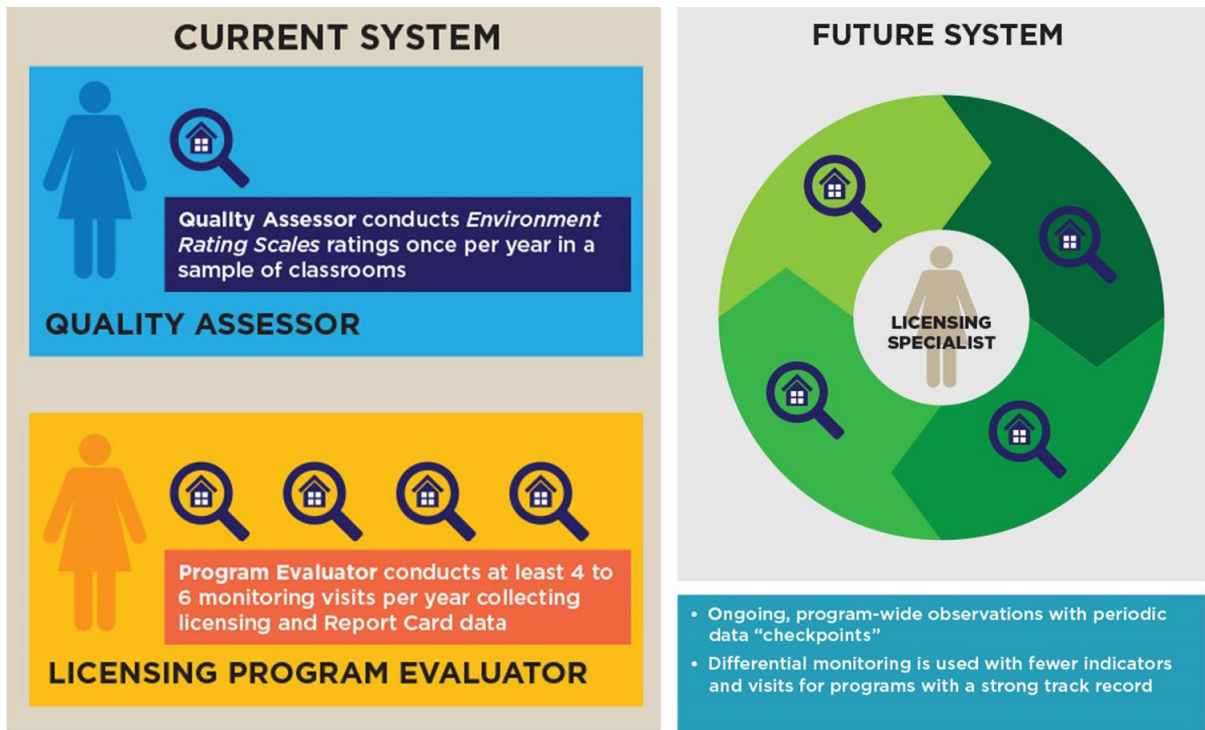
The Child Care Services team facilitates quarterly meetings to share best practices across Quality Partners. These interactions raise opportunities to address unmet need, build a cohort of services to address specific needs, and maximize resources. The Department uses these partnership meetings to continue to develop strategies for improving services. Each year, the Quality Partners submit work plans that outline their scope of services to address some of the opportunities for improvement identified throughout the year or to address new initiatives that support continued quality improvement. These plans are reviewed and cross referenced to determine remaining unmet need and to modify based on budget availability.



Child Care Staffing Restructure

2 Distinct Programs Centered on Child Care Relationships

In the future state of child care, relationships with child care providers and families will be emphasized and central to program design. While technology can help with transactions, personal interactions will be a central part of the licensing and payment assistance programs. Based upon recommendations for redesign of our child care quality rating and improvement system and strengthened alignment of the licensing and assessment team roles, Child Care Services will lead a complete redesign of program structure by mid-year 2022. There will still be a licensing team, that will issue licenses and monitor for compliance, including quality and health/safety factors. The role of this licensing team will expand to provide quality coaching and technical assistance on continuous improvement in collaboration with our Quality Partners. Child care payment assistance will continue to be administered by the Child Care Certificate Program staff.



Customer Experience

With this program and staff reorganization, the most meaningful indicators of quality will be measured on a consistent basis by licensing staff. Providers will see those staff members as partners in

supporting quality care for children and families. Every provider will receive a rating that helps parents easily recognize the strengths and areas for improvement at that agency. If a provider falls below a certain threshold, the licensing team, in collaboration with the Quality Partners will work with the agency on an intensive quality improvement plan and assist the agency in strengthening quality.

Child Care Certificate Program staff will focus less on paper processes and more on relationships with the family. Because the process of determining eligibility will be streamlined through technology solutions, child care specialists will have more time to connect with families. Staff will engage parents in understanding their goals and connecting them with resources available from TDHS through other programs.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Redesign

When it launched in 2001, Tennessee's Star Quality Program was one of the first child care quality rating programs in the country. The Star Quality Program is the state's primary mechanism for measuring the quality of early care and education providers that exceed minimum approval/licensing standards. The Star Quality Program is a voluntary program that provides a one, two, or three star rating based on program characteristics and quality levels of selected classrooms. Over the years, this program has significantly helped raise awareness about the importance of quality child care and has assisted many agencies to improve their programming.

Tennessee's QRIS has not changed since implementation in 2001. Since this date, there has been valuable research conducted showing how children develop. The quality of the early child care and education environment should be structured to promote holistic development of the child in order to facilitate successful outcomes that enable the child to thrive.

Town hall meetings and focus groups with Tennessee stakeholders have highlighted a number of issues with the current quality measurement system. TDHS employed a national consultant to further evaluate the current QRIS and provide recommendations based on findings. Concerns about the current system revolve around three key issues:

1. The content of the quality indicators does not focus on the program characteristics that matter most for children.

- Focus is on items easily measured/counted versus impactful teacher/child interactions.
- Certain procedures/expectations become overly complicated when measured using precise rating tools (ex. hand washing).
- Focus is on fidelity to observable procedures rather than the impact of teacher/child interactions on overall well-being and school readiness.

- The high volume of items measured can make it difficult to focus on the most impactful aspects of program quality.
 - Complexity of measurement tools can make it difficult to translate observations into understandable and useful feedback for providers.
- 2. The process is burdensome, redundant, inefficient, and lacks coordination between licensing, assessment, and technical assistance.**
- Conducting the quality rating assessment once a year does not capture the full picture of program quality daily.
 - There is significant overlap in items reviewed by licensing staff and quality assessment staff, as part of their distinct monitoring roles.
 - Child care providers can receive conflicting guidance from licensing and assessment staff regarding basic expectations and best practices.
 - Child Care Providers and their staff are concerned about a disconnect between the two units.
 - The current star-rating process does not consider licensing concerns such as rules violations and legal enforcement actions.
- 3. The purpose of the system is focused on compliance and measurement rather than improving quality and supporting parent choice.**
- Once a star quality rating is issued to a provider, the work is considered “done.”
 - There is wide variation of quality within a single star-category (ex. 67% of participating providers are rated 3-Star, but they are not of comparable quality).
 - Child care subsidy bonus rates are based upon achieving a certain star level rather than continuous quality improvement or sustained high levels of quality.
 - It is difficult for parents to understand the child care agency’s strengths and weaknesses which may be contained within a star rating.

Given these issues, TDHS has developed a basic set of “big ideas” for creating a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that focuses on improving child care programs by changing how quality is measured, supported, incentivized, and reported to parents. The emphasis of the redesign will change from Quality Assessment to Quality Improvement.



Big Idea #1: Streamlined Processes & Ongoing Engagement

- A streamlined system will support ongoing data collection in all licensed child care programs to gain a more accurate picture of program quality.
 - Child care providers will have one primary contact at TDHS who supports the child care agency in meeting expectations for licensing compliance, while continuously improving program quality.
 - Observations about program “quality” will be included as a part of regular interactions and not separate from licensing observations.
 - Rating of program “quality” will be inclusive of the full picture of an agency’s operations, including rules violations or legal enforcement actions.
 - Quality assessment evaluation will not be limited to an annual visit, so the agency rating will be informed by more regular interactions that reflect daily operations.
 - Interpretation of licensing compliance and program performance would be more consistent and would not have conflicting interpretations from different Child Care Services staff units.
 - All programs will receive the same monitoring and rating process, and results will be available to parents.
 - Potentially, programs that demonstrate sustained high levels of safety and program quality will not require as many monitoring visits each year.
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Big Idea #2: Strongest Predictors of Child Outcomes

- Early Childhood Education program quality will be defined by the strongest predictors of child outcomes.
 - A streamlined evaluation and observation process will focus on the strongest predictors of child development, learning, and well-being: teacher-child interactions and safe, supportive environments.
 - This process will be developed based upon a review of research, existing tools, and specific Tennessee resources such as licensing rules and the Early Learning Development Standards.
 - The process will be user-friendly and understandable for providers; supporting Child Care Services staff as they partner with child care agencies to promote early childhood environments that are safe, healthy, and educationally rich.
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Big Idea #3: Quality Coaching

- Programs receive targeted, relationship-based quality improvement coaching and are connected to the resources necessary to raise quality.
 - Child Care Services will use a relationship-based approach to support providers in meeting basic licensing expectations and in continuous quality improvement.
 - Through their ongoing visits and observations, Child Care Services staff would provide regular feedback to all agencies about how to strengthen quality across the essential quality indicators.
 - Based upon their monitoring and evaluation results, child care agencies will be connected with resources to strengthen program quality, consistent with level of need.
 - Along with Quality Partners, Child Care Services will work with agencies that are struggling developing an intensive improvement plan, and connecting those agencies to a network of coaches and supports.
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Big Idea #4: Invest in Quality Improvement

- Financial supports will be invested using deliberate strategies to support quality improvement.
 - Based upon circumstances of the specific program and Child Care Services staff observations, funds could be provided to child care agencies for staff training, classroom materials, curriculum or other costs related to improving quality or licensure compliance.
 - Specific consideration will be given for how to incentivize quality improvement in child care programs serving children of low-income.
 - Specific consideration will be given for how to incentivize quality improvement for all child care programs regardless of the ranking at which they start.
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Big Idea #5: Informed Family Choice

- Families can find child care that is the best fit for their family through a clear, simple process.
- The overall child care program score will be presented in a way that is easily recognizable and understandable to parents.
- Parents would be able to see the scoring components that contribute to an overall child care program rating.

- This will allow parents to look more specifically at the child care program aspects that are most important to their family.
- Information available to parents will represent the full picture of a child care program's operations, including licensure compliance, quality considerations, rules violations, and legal enforcement actions.
- ****Extra Credit** - After the redesigned system is established, it could be possible to develop an additional opportunity for providers to demonstrate excellence in certain categories of service. For example, perhaps a provider could earn a "badge" that shows specialization in serving children with special needs, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, or early literacy. This could be an opportunity for high-performing child care agencies to further distinguish themselves and market themselves to families.



Based on the approach as outlined above, Child Care Services will continue to partner with child care providers, families, and stakeholders to redesign the Quality Rating and Improvement System and restructure operations to improve overall quality and increase access, providing a system that is easier to administer for child care providers and the Department; and improves our business efficiencies through a customer focused approach.

Systems Transformation

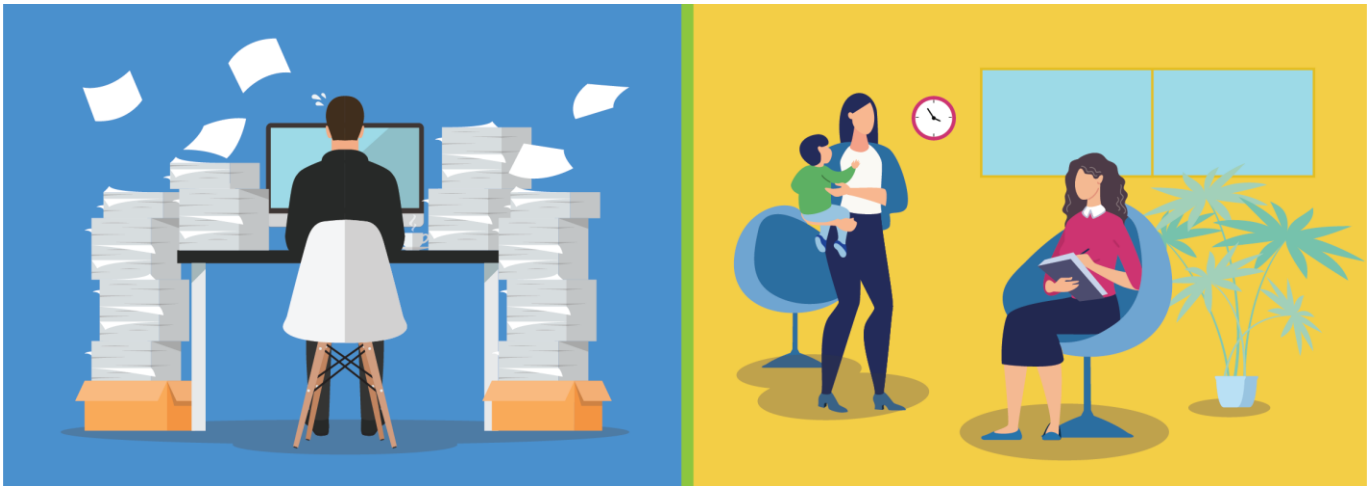
Channel Strategy

Critical customer relationships will be nurtured through in-person interactions, such as child care agency monitoring visits, quality coaching sessions, and conversations about family and child needs. Seventy percent of staff time will be spent in these direct customer interactions, either in-person, on the phone, or through virtual means. Child care staff members will spend approximately 30% of their time engaging with technology in order to complete customer transactions.

In the future state, the majority of customer transactions will occur online and will be integrated across programs. For example, a business owner seeking a child care license will create an account in the child care provider portal. Upon entering necessary information to be considered for a child care license, they will be asked if they wish to also apply to participate in the Child Care Certificate Program and/or the Child and Adult Care Food Program. If they answer yes to either prompt, they will see the supplemental questions required by each program. The technology system will route the applicant information to the appropriate Departmental customer service staff for follow-up.

In the future state, the majority of child care payment assistance applications will be submitted online. The online portal will assess basic client information and alert them to other programs that might benefit their family. If the client is interested in those services, the information they have already provided will be transmitted into the application process for the other program. With the bulk of information automatically populating within the eligibility system, the child care specialist will have more meaningful conversations with parents about their needs and their child's needs. Consumer education is a core component of CCDF expectations.

Phone, email, and paper channels must still be available to customers who do not have technology resources, but the bulk of transactions will occur online.



Technology

New technology will be deployed to support all aspects of customer service.

- **Agency customer portal system** - supports the customer portal for transactions.
- **Attendance Tracking & Payment Processing** - integrated with the agency customer portal system, allows parents to electronically log a child's attendance which filters into automated payment processing. Providers will review and confirm the information before it is submitted for payment. This system will interface with existing electronic attendance tracking systems already in use by providers. Other information such as status of payments will be viewable through the customer account.
- **Online Application** - integrated with the agency customer portal system, allows parents to complete an application and upload verification documents without visiting an office. Other information such as status of application processing and verification of the child care certificate will be viewable through the customer account.
- **Virtual Assistants** - activated on citizen and provider portals, this tool will be equipped to answer common questions 24/7.
- **Model Lobby** - consistent with other TDHS programs, walk-in child care customers will be supported in using on-site technology to complete transactions.
- **TCCMS** - interacts with the online application and payment processing systems to determine eligibility and support payment calculations.
- **Mobile Devices** - used by field staff to record observations from child care agency visits directly into TLCS and will generate monitoring checklists and reports that can be given to the provider and posted as part of the agency record online.
- **TLCS 2.0 (licensing)** - an improved database that tracks all interactions with a child care agency, including monitoring visits and quality coaching supports; and that directly posts information to the online Find Child Care site, including monitoring results and capacity.
- **TNPAL** - child care provider professional development database that tracks individual administrator and educator credentials and training. This system will be fully implemented as the system of record for this information and can be accessed by licensing and provider staff to eliminate paper files and ease administrative burden.

- **Find Child Care Website** - an enhanced Find Child Care website will allow parents to search for child care based upon more specific search filters that are tailored to their family's needs.
- **Phone Lines** - the opportunity to centralize telephone channels and deploy Interactive Voice Responses (IVR) with self-service options will be explored
- **Data Layer** - The backend database will allow data submitted by customers into one location to be shared across programs, such as to process agency applications across child care licensing, food program, and certificate program, or to process citizen applications for child care payment assistance and food assistance.

The Future State

Vision - These transformational activities will result in a future state where families across Tennessee have access to an expanded network of quality child care options, regardless of economic status. Child care providers and families will see TDHS as an impactful partner in continuous quality improvement and connection to resources. Providers and families will experience TDHS processes as a model of efficiency, with simple, user-friendly interfaces, supported by clear communication. Providers and parents will experience TDHS child care quality partners as a seamless network of supports.

Key Takeaways

Supports and Resources Implemented

The TDHS Child Care Services team has implemented several initiatives that support the transformation of the early child care and education system. These include:

- Revision of child care licensing rules which took effect in the summer of 2018. It had been approximately 10 years since the rules had been revised. The revisions updated various aspects of the regulations governing child care agencies, including aspects of supervision, safe sleep requirements, and staff educational requirements. Providers gave input on the revisions through focus groups and public hearings. TDHS held multiple training sessions on the new rules and provided a technical assistance and an operational grace period for providers to reach compliance.
- Following the licensing rules revisions, the National Resource Center (NRC) for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education cited those changes in a [report](#) ranking Tennessee's regulations as the most supportive of obesity prevention in the country. This is the first time Tennessee has topped the NRC's annual report and it marks a substantial improvement from the state's previous 39th ranking. Some of the licensing requirements that contributed to the ranking included:
 - Adopting the USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) nutritional guidelines.
 - Requirements for moderate to vigorous active play for both toddlers and preschoolers.

- Screen time limitations on usage and age of exposure.
 - Active teacher engagement in physical activities with children.
- For the first time in 10 years, TDHS increased the Child Care Reimbursement Rates to support quality and increase access for families approved through child care payment assistance programs. In April 2019, TDHS provided a 35% increase in infant/toddler care and a 20% increase in preschool and school age rates. In July 2019, a 15% incentive over the reimbursement rate structure was provided for counties identified as child care deserts or economically distressed. Additionally, a 15% increase was provided to agencies who offered care in non-traditional hours where the majority of care received is between the hours of 6:00 PM and 6:00 AM
 - The Family Child Care Network was moved to align with the technical assistance supports provided through Quality Partner, Tennessee State University. Supports include coaching, training, and peer support.
 - In October 2019, Child Care Services changed its Child Care Certificate Program payment policies in order to make subsidy payments to child care providers based upon a child's enrollment rather than attendance. This approach aligns more closely with the experience of families not receiving subsidy.
 - Additional resources and supports were also implemented through Quality Partner contracts:
 - The **Child Care WAGES® program** was implemented statewide in October of 2019. The Child Care WAGES® Program is an education-based salary supplement program for child care educators employed in TDHS licensed child care agencies. This program provides eligible educators an annual award, issued in two parts, based on specific qualifications that include working at least six months in the same child care program with children birth to five-years-old for at least 10 hours a week. An educator with six credit hours in early childhood education will receive a yearly supplement of \$400. The supplement rises with experience up to \$5,200 a year for eligible educators with a master's degree.
 - In October 2019, **Shared Services and Resources** became available. Resources including business management tools, human resource tools, program administration tools and classroom resources are available at no cost through an online centralized knowledge resource that aligns with State requirements. For example, emergency preparedness plan templates, and more. These tools can help child care providers focus more on the child care side of their agency, and less on business processes. TDHS licensed child care agencies have access to shared services including bulk purchasing at discounted pricing.
 - **Enhancement grants** were made available to TDHS licensed child care agencies that specifically support quality improvement, compliance with licensure rules and capacity enhancement. Agencies may apply for up to \$4,000 (up to \$5,000 for distressed counties) to support enhancement opportunities.

- To promote safe environments for children, **Pediatric First Aid, CPR training and certification** are available to child care educators and administrators of licensed child care agencies at no cost.
- **Small Business Academies** are available that promote best practices and strengthen business operations for child care agencies. The academies feature focus areas including:
 - Budgets, Projections, and Planning
 - Financial Reports and Internal Controls
 - Marketing for Child Care Programs
 - Staff Recruitment and Retention for Center-based Child Care Programs

2020 Projects

Due to the impact of severe storms and tornadoes across middle Tennessee in early March 2020 and the ever-evolving implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, Child Care Services has enacted multiple initiatives to support the sustainability of child care agencies and to meet the needs of families.

- **Disaster/Emergency Response and Recovery Grants**
 - The Department awarded approximately \$52 million in loss of income and operational support grants to assist child care agencies with expenditures.
- **Child Care Payment Assistance**
 - **Waiving of Parent Co-Pays** The Department waived parent co-pays in order to pay the maximum State rates for each child of an eligible family in care receiving child care payment assistance.
 - **Pandemic Child Care Payment Assistance** A new category of care was launched to serve children of families utilizing care in licensed spaces and who met criteria requiring work in certain employment fields during the pandemic. With this new category, new technology was implemented to facilitate ease of the application process for families. The application period for this category of care was extended until April 30, 2021 and payment assistance was extended until August 31, 2021.
 - **Extension of Eligibility Periods** To ease stress on families and to allow for retention of their child's enrollment with their child care provider, 12-month eligibility periods were extended.
 - **Increase in Provider Participation** With the launch of the financial supports and the new category of care, Child Care Services experienced an increase in the number of providers participating in the Child Care Certificate program. This is in alignment with the goal of increasing access for families.

- **YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs Contracts**

- Child Care Services partnered with the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs in Tennessee to provide free child care for school aged children of workers identified as meeting criteria of requiring work in certain employment fields during the pandemic. The YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs established a network of temporary/emergency child care locations across the state to meet the needs of families. These sites support remote learning for children in school systems that are offering this option. These contracts were extended until August 31, 2021 to align with the Pandemic Child Care Payment Assistance Program.

- **Monitoring Visits**

- Monitoring visits were suspended during the onset of the pandemic through the end of July 2020 while we closely examined the very fluid and ever-evolving impact of the pandemic on communities across the state. Child Care Services resumed monitoring visits with TDHS licensed child care agencies beginning the week of July 27, 2020. The goal is to remain sensitive to the continued impact of the pandemic on child care agency operations.
- The Department has developed a non-invasive approach for resuming regularly scheduled visits that will minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure to agencies, their staff, the children in care and our staff. This approach incorporates a hybrid model of desk audits and virtual visits conducted electronically. All visits are announced and scheduled in advance to minimize any disruption to the program. Licensing program evaluators contact the child care agency prior to the monitoring review to explain the process; to discuss how best to prepare; and to explain the information that will be requested.
- Child Care Services staff are meeting providers where they are. Some child care providers have internet connectivity issues, limited technology or technology experience. Child Care Services staff are adapting to each situation to accommodate provider needs, while adhering to licensing protocols. Child Care Services staff have adapted to maintain social distancing in many ways, for example reviewing files in parking lots, sitting on the front porch of a family home, sitting in an empty classroom that has access from outside to avoid contact, looking through windows to view materials and the spaces.

- **Annual Report Card/Program Assessment**

- As stated, the Department and Child Care Services have been on a journey of transformation to redesign the current Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in Tennessee. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic created the immediate need to revisit the Assessment Component of the Report Card more quickly, to allow for a temporary alternate solution to the current Assessment tool. The current tool requires

certain criteria to be in place for validity. Due to the unique circumstances that have altered normal operations that criteria cannot be met. Child Care Services continue to monitor the component areas of the Report Card through the hybrid approach of desk audit, virtual visit and interview process. Child Care Services has developed a method to evaluate program enrichment (quality) that is non-invasive and captures the requirements under the Assessment component area through a temporary Assessment Instrument.

- To maximize efficiency of staff operations and to minimize disruption of child care agency operations and health exposure, child care licensing staff are using the temporary instrument as part of the annual licensing/report card evaluation. It is an objective tool and everyone can read and refer to the guidance and examples provided within the Assessment Instrument document. This tool is applied to all age levels served at the child care agency and will apply to at least 50% of the classrooms in each licensed agency. For example, if the agency has six (6) classrooms, three (3) will be selected and the Licensing Program Evaluator will conduct interviews with the educator and/or director in order to validate whether elements meet the scoring component within the chart/rubric.
- Under the temporary assessment instrument, a child care agency is scored in one of four Item/Element Categories. The agency chooses which Item/Element Category will be applied to all the classrooms scored at that agency. The four Item/Element Categories that the agency can choose from include:
 - National Accreditation
 - Curriculum/Daily Planning
 - Developmental Assessment (This component is used for classrooms serving infant through preschool ages only.)
 - Emergent Literacy and Language
- Child Care Services worked with one of our Quality Partners, the Child Care Resource & Referral Network (CCR&R) to develop the temporary assessment tool and to provide training sessions to child care agencies on it and how the tool is applied.

- **Response and Recovery Technical Assistance**

- Child Care Services has worked to develop financial supports, technical assistance and resources to alleviate some of the economic impact and instability the pandemic has caused on child care providers. Child Care Services created a Response and Recovery Technical Assistance team that was available to provide more detailed information, guidance and toolkits on how to access the necessary supports and resources that help with sustainability moving forward. As our Licensing Program Evaluators were conducting monitoring visits, the opportunity to refer to the Response and Recovery

technical assistance team to provide additional support was available. Areas where providers may wish to have additional support may include, but are not limited to:

- Social distancing strategies
- Cleaning and disinfecting
- Parent drop-off and pick up
- Caring for infants and toddlers
- Food preparation and meal Service
- Infectious diseases reporting requirement
- Grant assistance
- Low attendance
- Difficulty in classroom management due to changes in groupings
- Difficulty in implementing developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) due to changes in groupings
- Difficulty in supervision
- Difficulty in positive teacher/child interactions
- Difficulty in daily health practices, hand washing and sanitizing
- Coordination of consultants to address stress, anxiety and grief

- **QRIS Redesign**

- Child Care Services continues work toward the launch of the new QRIS. Legislation was passed in the 2021 session to make the necessary statutory changes to allow for this redesign. Activities included redlining current rules and conducting committee meetings with stakeholders for input after each section was completed. Child Care Services is in the process of developing the monitoring and scoring process that includes health and safety criteria and teacher/child interactions. The indicators to be monitored and observed are those most reflective of successful child outcomes. Accompanying guidance documents and a scoring rubric will be completed as well. Child Care Services and Departmental support divisions are also developing a communication plan that will include opportunities to engage stakeholders such as child care providers and parents.

- **System Modernization**

- System modernization began in November 2020 with onboarding of the technology vendor. Work began with the payments and billing process to facilitate efficiencies in payments.. Additionally, Child Care Services began development of a new Attendance Tracking system to improve reporting of attendance for children enrolled in payment assistance programs. This modernization effort will ease the administrative burden on child care agencies.

- **Staff Readiness**

- Child Care Services continued with sessions to prepare staff for change. Child Care Services began with a series of *Growing Our Culture* sessions in 2019, held additional sessions in the summer of 2020, in November 2020, and March 2021.

2021 Projects

Staff Restructure and Reorganization

As we transitioned from our old way of doing business, Child Care Services underwent a huge reorganization and restructure beginning in January 2021 and completed in June 2021 to align with our approach to be more customer-centered and supportive to child care providers. This focus on partnerships and continuous improvement not only impacts us internally; it will also have a great impact on the child care industry as a whole. We are shaping the future of the next generation.

What is different?

Our service delivery model changed, which includes our organizational structure. We disbanded the former child care quality assessment team and merged those functions into the licensing program. We increased the number of Licensing Consultants to provide more opportunity to engage with child care agencies as a partner.

- We organized our districts to match the Department's approach by aligning with the state's nine (9) workforce regions.
- Licensing and Assessment functions merged into one larger Licensing program.
 - Licensing Consultants (formerly known as Program Evaluators)- This role will be responsible for the full scope of observation including compliance, quality evaluations and scoring. The Licensing Consultants will be a partner and support agencies by serving as a consultant and resource for individualized quality improvement.
- The newly launched Pre-Licensure Unit works with programs seeking licensure to explain expectations, answer questions, identify resources, and helps applicants navigate the licensure process.
- The Child Care Certificate Program includes a Customer Response Team to support families and providers.
- Assessment no longer exists as an independent program. The Licensing team will conduct all monitoring using a holistic approach and scoring process.

Systems Modernization

Systems modernization will continue with the development of a new licensing system that will align with transformation activities. In addition to moving staff operations online, this system will include strategies to gather more real-time data about supply and demand through an interactive provider portal. The child care payment assistance eligibility system will be upgraded to be more interactive with other systems to support more efficient service delivery.

COVID Relief Grants

Child Care Services continues to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the child care industry to plan strategies to support the needs of child care providers across the State. Through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) signed in December 2020, additional funding was made available to each state to promote sustainability of Child Care Programs. The Department launched COVID Relief grants in April 2021 to support expenditures directly related to COVID for cleaning and sanitation and increased operating expenses such as salaries, insurance, rent and personal protective equipment.

Child Care Reimbursement Processes

Child Care Services uses information from the annual Market Rate Survey and the cost of care analysis to evaluate rate adjustments for providers who participate in the child care subsidy program. Proposed adjustments will be based on the amount of annual award budgeted, number of children to be served based on identified need, and recommendations from our federal partners. TDHS is planning for a rate increase beginning October 1, 2021 of 10% across the board.

Child Care WAGE\$ Program Increase

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program that launched statewide in October 2019 is an education-based salary supplement program for child care educators employed in TDHS licensed child care agencies. With many providers citing access to child care workers as a challenge, and wages of child care workers often being low, TDHS is planning to increase the WAGE\$ eligibility cap from \$15/hour to \$20/hour and increase supplement amounts by 50 percent beginning October 2021. This stronger supplement will enhance providers' ability to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.

Targeting Support to Families of Children with Special Needs

Parents of young children with disabilities are significantly more likely to experience job disruptions due to lack of access to quality child care that accommodates their children's needs. For children who have been identified with disabilities and special needs, TDHS is planning a 15% differential above standard reimbursement rates. The anticipated start date for this program is October 1, 2021.

Child Care Services is funding the Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) Network through CCDF quality dollars to provide a network of supports including a qualified team of Inclusion Quality Coaches to address the challenges of including children with disabilities in early child care settings. The Inclusion Quality Coaches will work closely with child care agencies licensed or subject to licensure by the State to create program policies and procedures, including accommodations and strategies for inclusion, to assure the promotion of a quality inclusive early childhood program. The network of supports will include the following features:

- CCR&R will work in partnership with AIMHiTN to develop trainings in best practices surrounding inclusion and provide specialized technical assistance for quality coaches to support social and emotional behavior aspects of disabilities.
- Create tools and resources for child care agencies as well as partners and families.
- Standardize inclusion training accessible to early childhood educators at basic and advanced levels.
- Provide a coaching system for inclusion providers using best practices. The Inclusion Quality Coaches will provide coaching on challenging behaviors, developmental delays and medically identified disabilities.
- Provide on-site coaching to help children with disabilities receive safe, high quality care and appropriate accommodations. Inclusion Coaches shall utilize an Inclusion Coaching plan that provides a blueprint for educators to ensure children in the classroom have sufficient learning opportunities, activities, and materials; and provides opportunity to work with educators and parents to individualize accommodations and supports that may be necessary for all children to participate in activities and build relationships with their peers.
- CCR&R coaches will evaluate the need for adaptive equipment or technology to support inclusion and guide child care agencies to available enhancement grants administered through CFMT.
- CCR&R will liaise with and facilitate connections and referrals to the Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities/Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS) for children up to age three (3) and with the Tennessee Department of Education for children ages 3-5 to support smooth transitions between early care and kindergarten.

Collaborative Partnerships with State Agencies

Further engagement with the business community and economic development will be a focus to support and facilitate growth in child care to meet identified needs. Child Care Services has partnered with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, The Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and Tennessee Board of Regents to strategize solutions for creating child care capacity, strengthening career supports that promote early childhood education through a vocational or academic pathway, creating early childhood education apprenticeship or entrepreneurial opportunities and creating employer toolkits that support child care as a business and community asset.

Attracting and retaining qualified staff continues to present challenges for the child care industry. Through these various collaborations with partner state agencies and as we continue to build out proposed strategies, we are working on solutions to support the industry in addressing this critical issue.

In May, we shared information with child care agencies to support them in recruitment. Our partners at the Department of Labor & Workforce Development have tools available for employers to post jobs to reach potential applicants. We shared these tools so that agencies could post vacant positions on the www.jobs4tn.gov page.

Child Care Services is exploring opportunities to braid funding available through our partner State agencies to support child care capacity growth.

Increased Funding for Quality Partners

Increased funding for direct supports for child care agencies including technical assistance, training, professional development, coaching and mentoring will continue to be available through the Quality Partnership Contractors beginning October 2021. The partners are working together to create a seamless network of supports to maximize individual areas of expertise to create an early care and education system where every child can have the opportunity to thrive.

Pre-Licensure Unit

Child Care Services launched a Pre-Licensure Unit focused on specific components that will build a strong foundation for new child care agencies to become stable businesses that provide educationally rich programs that foster safe and healthy environments. The Pre-Licensure Unit is tasked with the following objectives:

- Support new agencies throughout the child care licensing process
 - Deliver training that equips agencies with the tools needed to serve families *and* run successful businesses
 - Provide guidance that ensures compliance with licensure rules and regulations
- Grow child care capacity across the state, particularly in rural areas
 - Build partnerships with community and business leaders to assess child care needs and explore solutions and necessary supports
 - Establish local contacts, facilitate effective and impactful connections
 - Recruit prospective providers to increase the number of child care slots available in rural and urban areas of the state
 - Assist prospective licensed agencies with applying for funds through the Establishment Grant program to purchase the necessary materials, equipment, and supplies to open their doors.

QRIS Redesign

The QRIS redesign is on schedule to launch in early 2022 after all actions are completed including:

- Statutory revision (approved and signed in to law effective July 1, 2021)
- Rules revisions (completed and routing through promulgation process),
- Aligning staffing to accommodate the new process (completed staff reorganization in Spring 2021),
- Continuing to engage providers and quality partners to “hear their voice” of what is most critical to them in the design and implementation (multiple focus groups, surveys, town hall discussions completed),
- Creating the tool that includes indicators most reflective of successful child outcomes for Tennessee’s children (under review and approval process),
- Technology system design (e-licensing system development in process),
- Communication (ongoing communication in newsletters, staff updates, WebEx discussions),
- Policy development (drafting of policies to be completed September 2021),
- Training (training for staff scheduled for late Fall, training for providers scheduled for early 2022)
- Successful transition (opportunities to utilize the tool prior to roll out for staff and provider understanding and adoption); and
- Rollout (full roll out scheduled for mid-year 2022)

American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA)

Under the ARPA, Tennessee is receiving approximately \$900 million to support the child care sector. Approximately \$345 million is designated to provide expanded child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) to support families and providers, including supporting the child care needs of essential workers. The remaining \$555 million are designated to support stabilization activities. Lead agencies (TDHS) must spend most stabilization funds (at least 90 percent) as subgrants to qualified child care providers to support the stability of the child care sector during and after the COVID-19 public health emergency. Lead agencies may set-aside up to 10% to administer funds, provide technical assistance and support for applying for and accessing subgrants, and activities to increase the supply of child care.

Below is a list of priorities for how American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and recurring Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars will be deployed to maximize supports for families and providers. Through the expansion of existing programs and establishment of new programs, TDHS will support families and aid child care providers in pandemic recovery, while investing in long-term strategic goals to grow child care capacity and quality across the state.

Initiatives are organized into 3 categories, consistent with ARPA priorities:

1. **Supporting families** through access to child care payment assistance, with a focus on equity
2. **Strengthen child care providers** through financial stabilization
3. **Grow capacity** of child care providers statewide through strategic partnerships and technical assistance

Supporting Families

- **Pandemic/Essential Employee Child Care Payment Assistance:** This new category of care was launched in April 2020 to serve children of families utilizing care in licensed spaces and who met criteria requiring work in certain employment fields during the pandemic. Through contracts with the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs, TDHS also supported temporary child care locations for school-aged children of essential workers. ARPA funds were used cover the costs of extending these programs through August 2021.
- **New Reemployment Category of Child Care Payment Assistance:** Referral-based category of child care payment assistance for parents currently unemployed but engaged in job search activities, established in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD). Designed to help Tennesseans seeking to re-enter the workforce, this one-year program will provide 12 months of child care payment assistance to DOLWD customers who are coming off of unemployment services.

Strengthen Child Care Providers through Financial Stabilization

- **Child Care Stabilization Grants:** ARPA requires lead agencies to award stabilization grants to child care providers. In Tennessee, this equates to approximately \$500 million funneled directly to child care agencies. TDHS is building a process to minimize the burden on agencies when applying for these subgrants. A formula based on an average cost per child will be used to determine the award amount. Using this cost estimate model avoids placing the burden on each agency to collect and produce individualized financial materials as part of their application. The estimated cost per child is based on data from a recent cost of care analysis and market rate survey of licensed Tennessee child care agencies completed by our partners at the University of Tennessee and includes operational costs such as rent/mortgage, personnel costs including salaries and benefits, food and educational supplies, training and professional development, general liability insurance, and transportation expenses.

- **Technical Assistance with Application Process:** TDHS will use a portion of the 10% stabilization administration set-aside to deliver outreach activities and technical assistance in explaining the application process and supporting payment distribution and backend accountability. Application materials will be made available in multiple languages.

Growing Capacity

- **Addressing the Digital Divide:** Beginning in October 2021, TDHS will deploy the “Tech Goes Home” model, including provision of technology hardware, coaching and technical assistance on the use of the equipment and how it strengthens business operations. This program is in collaboration with Signal Centers, the Child Care Resource and Referral Network and will support child care agencies in modernizing their systems and equipment in order to lessen the administrative burden and allow providers to focus on family/child interactions and delivering quality care.
- **Establishment and Expansion Grants:** TDHS is committed to increasing access to quality child care. Through Establishment and Expansion Grants, TDHS will use ARPA funds to provide financial support for furniture, equipment, supply, and curriculum costs associated with opening a new child care agency or expanding licensed capacity at an existing agency. Promotion of the establishment grants aligns with announcement of the new TDHS Pre-Licensure Support Unit which launched on August 1, 2021. TDHS is also partnering with staff at the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development regarding how Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds could possibly be used to support construction or renovation of child care spaces.
- **Modernization eLicensing System Costs:** ARPA allows lead agencies to use child care stabilization admin set-aside funds for strategic supply building activities, including improvements to lead agency data systems that will be used to better meet the demand for child care. Some ARPA funds will be used to support development of the eLicensing system, which will allow providers to complete more actions online, including licensing activities and posting information about enrollment opportunities.

2022 - 2024 Actions and Projects

- Systems modernization projects are anticipated to launch in early 2022 and align with transformation activities including the new QRIS redesign. There are three projects within Child Care Services that are in development and will roll out simultaneously. There is a new licensing system that supports an interactive provider portal, a streamlined billing and payments module that supports more efficient payment practices, and an automated attendance tracking system that will eliminate manual processes and improve the provider journey in doing business with the State. In addition to moving staff operations online, the licensing system will include strategies to gather more real-time data about supply and demand. The eligibility system will be upgraded to be more interactive with other systems to support more efficient service delivery.
- Further engagement with the business community and economic development to fully execute strategies that support building child care capacity.
- Continue to evaluate direct supports for child care agencies including technical assistance, training, professional development, coaching and mentoring available through the Quality Partnership Contractors to identify potential gaps in services. The partners will continue to work together to strengthen the network of supports that maximize individual areas of expertise in order to promote an early care and education system where every child has the opportunity to thrive.
- Fully launch the newly designed QRIS in early 2022.
- Explore Expanding Age Criteria for Smart Steps: Aligning the Smart Steps Child Care Payment Assistance Program eligibility criteria with the full early childhood age range will enable sustainability of quality care as children grow through the critical period for early literacy. For qualifying children, TDHS is exploring the possibility of expanding Smart Steps eligibility criteria for a child's age from kindergarten to 8-years-old.
- Targeting Support to Families Experiencing Homelessness: Families experiencing homelessness or families at risk of homelessness need access to quality child care in order to regain economic stability. TDHS is proposing to launch a referral process and prioritized category for homeless service providers to connect families to child care payment assistance. This initiative will be supported through partnership with TDHS 2Gen partner agencies, CSBG partner agencies, and TDOE McKinney-Vento programming.