

A Framework for Reopening Child Care in New Jersey

MAY 2020

During the last few days, our state began to take initial steps in reopening our economy – an important and positive process that will return us to a new normal. But our economy cannot reopen effectively and fairly without a clear and corresponding reopening plan for child care. As the Governor has recognized, child care is part of the backbone of a broader economy. Child care is a substantial \$2 billion industry in itself. And almost 40 percent of all workers have at least one child at home. Each incremental reopening needs corresponding support and guidance for child care to ensure an adequate supply of safe care for parents returning to work.

Over the last two months, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) and the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children (NJAEYC) have spoken to hundreds of center-based and family child care providers through emails, surveys, telephone and Zoom calls regarding the impact that COVID-19 has had on them and the children they care for and educate. Some programs have remained open to provide emergency care for the children of essential service employees; most are closed and are struggling to survive until they are able to reopen. Many fear that they will not be able to reopen fully or may have to close for good. The financial impact on them has been devastating.

From these many conversations, providers have given us invaluable information about what they will need to reopen. Based on this information, ACNJ and NJAEYC urge the state to take following action to ensure that programs can provide safe child care for children, parents can return to work and the economy can reopen.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF WHAT CHILD CARE NEEDS TO REOPEN

- **CLEAR STANDARDS THAT RECOGNIZE THE CHANGED LANDSCAPE FOR CHILD CARE.** Reopening child care cannot mean returning to pre-pandemic child care licensing standards. The threat of COVID-19 continues and the risk to children, families and staff remains serious. The standards developed for emergency care, including smaller class size and increased staff, must be maintained. Clear, coordinated guidance and regulations about how providers should reopen must be developed and released jointly by the Department of Human Services, Department of Children and Families and Department of Education. Financial supports currently provided for emergency care, including higher subsidy rates and payment based on enrollment rather than attendance, must continue.
- **SUFFICIENT TIME FOR PREPARATION AND SUPPORT TO REOPEN.** Providers are keenly aware that they will need time to adequately prepare for the anticipated increased health and safety requirements upon reopening. They recognize that their programs will look differently than they did pre-pandemic, and they will need a minimum of two weeks to meet any new state licensing and CDC health and social distancing guidelines, secure appropriate cleaning supplies and protective gear, reconfigure classrooms and provide supports to staff and families as they return to the centers. Programs will need time to bring staff back on board or hire new staff, if necessary. Staff will need training and support not only to adjust to new standards, but also to deal with the trauma they, the children and the families have experienced.

Giving Every Child a Chance

- **FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO HELP WITH THE COST OF REOPENING.** The majority of center-based programs have been closed for more than two months, with little or no funding coming in to pay their bills. Unlike other businesses, child care is unique. Programs cannot cut staff costs because of licensing standards with strict teacher-to-child ratios. And programs cannot increase tuition, as many families already struggled to pay for child care before the pandemic. Although New Jersey providers who accept child care subsidies have continued to receive funding, they have not been able to rely on private tuition revenues. Programs relying on private-paying families have had no income. Programs also fear that with such high unemployment, initial enrollment upon reopening will be lower than normal until parents can either return to work or find new jobs. Some states have established a special stabilization funds for child care programs to access to help with reopening costs. New Jersey may be able to do the same.

- **ASSISTANCE IN MEETING THE HEALTH AND SAFETY NEEDS OF THEIR CHILDREN.** The difficulty of finding necessary cleaning supplies, protective gear and health care items such as thermometers was voiced over and over by providers. While the state has provided some additional funding for supplies, finding them in sufficient quantity continues to be difficult. Providers urge the state to use its procurement ability to secure necessary supplies for programs. Securing supplies program by program is time-consuming and costlier. Providers also described needing access to health information in real time. Most programs do not have a nurse on staff. Several providers suggested that the state establish a hotline they could call and get answers to health questions.

- **CLEAR, COORDINATED COMMUNICATIONS.** Child care providers voiced their frustration repeatedly over the lack of clear information and guidance coming from the state agencies. Often, information from different agencies was either inconsistent, or varied depending on the county where the program was located. Better communication is needed between the state and child care programs. Programs also need a way to communicate information back to the state. Several state departments are responsible for the education and care of children between the ages of 0 and 13; the communications provided to child care programs should be the same.

