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# Washington State's Childcare Subsidy Falls Short for Families in High-Income Areas

Joelle Brown, Guest Author, Second-year MSW Student

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated childcare-related issues for U.S. families, including a decrease in the childcare workforce and a dramatic increase in the number of parents who report having to miss work for childcare-related issues. Beginning in March 2021, President Biden's American Rescue Plan provided \$24 billion in subsidies to the childcare industry, which, according to the White House, resulted in slower growth of childcare costs and a relative increase in childcare worker wages and employment. However, American Rescue Plan funds expired at the end of September 2023. With COVID-era federal safety net programs disappearing, state-level programs are more important than ever, especially for families in Washington state.

According to 2023 data from the US Department of Labor, the average annual cost of childcare in Washington state ranges from \$11,000-\$17,000. This figure sounds even more staggering when one considers that the U.S. government provides an average of \$500 per year per child in support for childcare costs, in comparison with an average of \$14,000 across other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, as the Annie E. Casey Foundation reports. While subsidies exist, both at the federal and state level, families continue to struggle with locating safe, affordable care for their children so the adults in the household can work or continue their education.

Washington state's Working Connections Child Care Program (WCCC) is a promising solution, as families in a variety of circumstances can be eligible, including those who are experiencing homelessness or those who have a parent in school. With that said, the current eligibility criteria exclude many families who would benefit from the subsidy. According to the WCCC website, families are eligible if their income is at or below 60% of the State Median Income (SMI). Basing eligibility on a statewide average puts families in areas like King County, which the Washington State Office of Financial Management reports have a higher area median income along with a higher cost of living, at a disadvantage. Families in these areas may not qualify for the subsidy because their income is too high compared to the SMI but are still likely to be paying a significant proportion of their income towards childcare.

Raising the upper income limit for the Working Connections Child Care program will allow this subsidy to be accessed more equitably by families across Washington state. Higher housing and childcare costs can often offset the apparent benefits of the higher AMI for families in areas like King and Snohomish County. Access to this subsidy is one way to prevent these families from falling through the cracks and ensure that they have access to safe, affordable childcare.

Eligibility for the Working Connections Child Care Program has already been expanded since its inception, most recently in summer 2023 to include parents in apprenticeship programs. Washington state voters can and should write to our state legislators to push for increased income limits for this subsidy, so that less families struggle to afford childcare.