

DRAFT

To: Workforce Solutions Capital Area

From: City of Austin Early Childhood Council

Introduction

In April and May of 2021, the Early Childhood Council (ECC) of the City of Austin heard from parents, child care providers, and community members about challenges they have faced successfully navigating the child care subsidy system. The ECC shared these concerns with Workforce Solutions (WFS) Capital Area Child Care Program Staff, and WFS staff graciously led a presentation and discussion at the August 2021 and September 2021 ECC meetings.

As a result of these discussions, the Early Childhood Council is interested in collaborating with Workforce Solutions Capital Area to support efforts to engage with community members and to create systemic improvements in the administrative processes that establish eligibility, initial enrollment, and recertification as well as addressing client/provider questions.

The ECC Council members acknowledge that WFS, as part of a state system, has to accommodate state and federal administrative burdens. We appreciate how the agency is trying to provide high quality services with limited resources, and want to lend our voice and efforts to collaborate on problem solving.

Background:

According to the Early Childhood Council Bylaws, the Council is responsible for recommendations to Austin City Council including the following:

- develop, for recommendation to city council, programs and activities that contribute to the continued development of a system of high-quality early care and education and after school programs for Austin's children;
- develop, for recommendation to city council, strategies encouraging individuals and agencies to continually improve the quality of their services for young children;

As part of these responsibilities, the ECC launched a Community Engagement & Partnerships Work Group to build authentic, two-way paths of communication between the greater Austin community and the ECC in order to strengthen the policy and advocacy work of the ECC and amplify community voice and perspectives. The Work Group launched efforts in 2020 to hear directly from the community about their specific needs.

In April 2021, the ECC Community Engagement and Partnerships Work Group heard from parents, child care providers, and community members about challenges they faced trying to navigate the child care subsidy system.

In May 2021, the full ECC heard a presentation from community members about their concerns and experiences with the subsidy system. In addition, some written testimonials were submitted. A copy of this presentation and additional testimony is included in [Attachment A](#).

Concerns raised by community members:

Overall, the feedback suggests that customer service operations at Workforce Solutions Capital Area need improvement. Community members asked that WFS provide child care services that guide families on eligibility and application navigation with a positive and encouraging trauma-informed approach rather than meeting them with a compliance mindset. As noted in Attachment A, problems that parents encounter include failed communication, inaccurate information, delayed authorizations, lost correspondence, postponed transfers, unreasonable timelines and more. Specifically,

- WFS tends to address problems of lost documents, miscommunications, and other issues on a case-by-case basis rather than examining systemic changes needed.
- The website for the application process is confusing and unnecessarily cumbersome. There are too many links, often resulting in dead ends. It often takes one or more phone calls to complete the application.
- The website portal is not reliable. Parents report that documents submitted were “lost.”
- Parents are declared ineligible because one document is missing without sufficient opportunity to supply the missing document.
- Clients often have to make numerous phone calls before connecting with the right person.
- Clients and advocates sometimes report brash, insensitive and rude treatment.
- Parents are concerned that they could face retaliation if they complain.
- Parents often encounter miscommunication or lack of communication, even last minute communication that sometimes puts parents in situations where they must pick between working and addressing immediate application requests.
- Administrative actions are arbitrary without giving parents sufficient opportunity to reply. For example, when WFS was trying to “clear” their wait list, they emailed parents to request documents, and then promptly removed them from the wait list if they did not respond.

· Providers are pleased that WFS is taking more interest in home-based childcare, encouraging more providers to become licensed and to become part of Texas Rising Star. These efforts need more funding for training and subsidies. Many providers cannot attend meetings at lunchtime, so some meetings need to be scheduled outside of business hours.

Steps by WFS to address concerns:

In the [Child Care Services Presentation by Workforce Solutions Capital Area](#) in the August and September 2021 meetings of the ECC, a WFS staff member discussed many of these issues and noted several efforts to address them. We commend the following efforts that are already in motion.

- Working to incorporate texting feature for improving parent communications
- Planning to incorporate trauma-informed services training to frontline staff
- Planning to incorporate videos, QR codes, text and other feedback from stakeholders for communicating with families (communications in other languages, especially Spanish)
- Exploring improved use of technology such as “IssueTracker” for workflow management
- Developing a Provider payment portal

We would like to note that the ECC requested (a) a report of the customer satisfaction survey from WFS regarding child care, and (b) further information about the WFS Board “Tiger Team” plans for a Town Hall to seek community engagement so that the ECC could assist in promoting and supporting community engagement. These are both currently pending.

Recommendations / Requests to collaborate on addressing concerns

As noted above, the ECC is interested in collaborating with Workforce Solutions Capital Area to support efforts to engage with community members and to suggest systemic improvements in the administrative processes. Workforce Solutions is an essential hub in the community’s system of high quality early care and education and after-school programs, and we appreciate and understand the complexity of managing federal/state programs with limited resources and high standards for compliance and many regulations without flexibility.

A webinar hosted by the Prenatal to 3 Policy Impact Center in October called [“Beyond eligibility: How can states reduce barriers to accessing benefits?”](#) noted that there are advantages for all parties when administrative barriers to accessing benefits are removed. We would like to assist in identifying opportunities and resources so that Workforce Solutions Capital Area can be an innovative model in Texas for families seeking to access child care services.

We look forward to discussing opportunities for collaboration. These might include participating in a joint working group, or assisting WFS in identifying community members to represent the community voice in existing or new groups. We also would be happy to make a presentation to the WFS Board of Directors.

Some of the potential ideas or recommendations from the Early Childhood Council include:

- Create a joint committee (ECC and WFS) to develop specific ideas or recommendations to address community perspective that align with the compliance requirements for WFS. These might include:
 - Clarifying role and responsibility of Board and Contractor in administrative processes, funding, and flexibility in making changes
 - Developing a process for WFS to capture and report metrics on some key measures potentially including Customer Satisfaction and Net Promoter Score
 - Creating a customer service improvement team that includes community representation that meets quarterly to review customer service metrics, offers design ideas to improve the overall process, and promotes collaborative conversations that develop a climate of increased mutual respect and professionalism where potential retaliation and unethical conduct is not allowed.
 - Provide suggestions for training of direct staff using strength based frameworks that see families a whole from their strengths and not only their deficits, for example developmental and relationship centered, self-reflection assessments on cultural humility to help understand their impact on others in their roles
 - Recruit community members to review the website and other communications tools with the lens (or input) of caregiver/family perspective, and frame communications with less jargon and more clear explanations of timelines, expectations and processes. (Ex: Compare [Workforce Solutions Capital Area child care pages](#) with [Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Child Care](#))
- Collaboratively explore sources of funding and other resources to support improvements at WFS specifically for Child Care Programs.