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Child Care Financial Assistance Program: Department of Children and Families (DCF)-Related Policies

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Applicability: The Department of Children and Families, Family Access Administrators (FAAs), Mass211, Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) agencies, Contracted Providers, and Families.

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BACKGROUND

The Massachusetts Child Care Financial Assistance System

The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) provides financial assistance to help low-income families in Massachusetts afford high-quality early education and care. This policy consolidates various 2023–2026 interim policies and advisories into a single consolidated guide to ensure clarity, transparency, and equitable access for all residents of the Commonwealth.

There are three Child Care Financial Assistance Programs to address the different needs of families across the Commonwealth:

- Income Eligible Child Care Program
- Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) Related Child Care Program
- Department of Children and Families (DCF) Related Child Care Program

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) Related Child Care Program

EEC works in partnership with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the state's child welfare agency, to ensure access to high quality early education and care to families working with DCF. DCF-Related Child Care includes comprehensive, developmentally appropriate early education and care and educational services, and, when offered by the provider, transportation services. If placement is with a contracted provider of Supportive Services, funding will also be available to provide case management and social-emotional support services, as needed by children and their families.

AUTHORITY

- M.G.L. c. 15D, § 1: General authority to assure children and families full opportunity to reach their potential.

- M.G.L. c. 15D, § 13A: Codification of CCFA program into statute.
- 606 CMR 10.00: Child Care Financial Assistance Regulations.
- 45 CFR Part 98: Federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Child Care Financial Assistance Overview of Massachusetts Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) programs. Resource for families to learn about help with paying for child care and out-of-school time programs.
- Hub for Child Care Financial Assistance Program Online repository for most recent regulations, policies, policy advisories, procedures, FAQs and training resources on child care financial assistance.
- Common Forms for Child Care Financial Assistance
- For assistance with the implementation or interpretation of these interim Child Care Financial Assistance policies, contact EEC at: eecsubsidymanagement@mass.gov

OBSOLETE

- Interim DCF-Related Child Care Financial Assistance Program Policies – October 1, 2023
- EEC Policy Advisory – Field Operations 2023 - 4 - Child Care Financial Assistance
- EEC Policy Advisory – Field Operations 2024 - 7 - Child Care Financial Assistance Updated Policy Guidance

ELIGIBILITY AND REFERRAL

DCF-Related Child Care services are provided consistent with federal and state requirements to all children with active DCF cases and children in families who have been approved by DCF for continued care after their case is closed including:

- Children living with a parent;
- Children living with relatives;
- Children living in foster care;
- Children in cases being managed by a DCF contracted agency; and
- Children of a Young Parent with an active case. For example, young parents may be in the foster care system or open DCF case for supports after 18 years old.

DCF will issue a referral for a family based on the parent's choice of a voucher or contracted seat. Families referred by DCF shall receive immediate access through the

referral and are not required to be placed on EEC's centralized waitlist. The DCF referral, alone, is sufficient to establish eligibility for child care. Assigned Family Access Administrators shall reach out to DCF-referred families within 3 business days of the referral to complete the child care financial assistance process. Family Access Administrators shall verify the identity of the parent(s) listed on the child care referral. No other eligibility documentation will be required for DCF referred child care. Families do not need to provide verification of income, asset limits, service need, and parent fee requirements do not apply to families receiving DCF-Related Child Care.

Referrals issued by DCF will be valid for 90 days from the date of issue. If a DCF parent is unable to secure child care placement during this 90-day period, DCF can send an updated referral for an additional 90 days. DCF will issue a referral to the Family Access Administrator to provide the family with immediate access to DCF-Related Child Care services through:

- **DCF-Related Child Care Contracts-** EEC contracts with specific child care providers to hold space available for care of DCF-involved children. Contracted providers offer additional supportive services to families such as transportation, mental health and service referrals, and ongoing communication with Family Access Administrators and DCF.
    - A DCF social worker will inform the family of the status of the referral, and the family should expect to be contacted by the early education and care provider directly to enroll.
- **Vouchers** for access to child care financial assistance to be used at the child care provider of the family's choice, as long as the provider participates in EEC's Child Care Financial Assistance Programs (i.e., has a signed voucher agreement).
- Family Access Administrators shall make the initial outreach call to the family to guide them through the enrollment process. This includes helping the family choose a provider that best meets the child's age and needs. DCF Child Care Coordinators and Family Access Administrators will work together to support the family throughout the process.

DCF-Related Child Care will be authorized for not less than 12 months. If the DCF case closes prior to the end of the 12-month authorization period, the current authorization will continue until a 12-month DCF Transitional Authorization has been issued. A child's placement shall not be disrupted due to the issuance of a subsequently issued referral unless a change is requested by the family.

Children referred by DCF and placed in care outside of Massachusetts will remain

eligible as long as DCF retains custody of the child for the duration of the child's open DCF case.

YOUNG PARENTS

DCF may issue a DCF-Related Child Care referral to a family with a Young Parent (a biological parent under the age of 24) to provide immediate access to child care financial assistance. The current DCF referral is sufficient documentation for the family to meet income, service need, residence, and family composition. For more information about how Child Care Financial Assistance serves Young Parents and their families, please see Income Eligible policies.

Family Access Administrators shall make themselves available through any means most accessible to families to inform and counsel Young Parents on the available Child Care Financial Assistance Program choices, services provided, and participation requirements.

TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Families who receive a referral from DCF will work with their DCF Social Worker to determine needs for transportation. If a family requires transportation assistance, DCF staff and Family Access Administrators will work together to provide a placement option that meets the family's transportation needs.

All children with active DCF cases and children in families who have been approved by DCF are eligible for no cost transportation services. This eligibility must be indicated on the DCF referral. If the child is eligible and services are available, transportation support is included as part of the child's child care financial assistance placement at no additional cost. For more information about transportation services funded by child care financial assistance, please see: Income Eligible Child Care Financial Assistance Policy, Chapter 6.

PARENT FEES

Families will not be responsible for parent fees, and no income verification information will be required from the family, during the time where the related DCF case remains open.

After the DCF case is closed, the following policies will apply:

- During the first 12 months of transitional care, following the DCF case closure,

families will not be charged parent fees and no income information will be requested.
- During the second 12 months of the transitional care or authorization, a parent fee will be assessed using the Income Eligible parent fee schedule.
- Family Access Administrators will work with families to determine their parent fees. Income information will be requested, and a family's income must remain below 85% State Median Income (SMI) to remain eligible for the second 12 months of transitional care and beyond.

For additional information about continuity of care and parent fees, please see Income Eligible Program policies.

CHANGE REPORTING

DCF staff and Family Access Administrators (FAAs) shall work together to ensure that families are informed of and understand any applicable change related to reporting requirements. Families referred by DCF must report certain changes to DCF staff or to the FAA within 30 days of the change. Changes that must be reported include:

- **When there is a change in the child's custody arrangements**, DCF staff will notify the FAA as soon as possible after the change, and a new DCF-related Child Care referral will be issued. A child's placement will not be disrupted while a new referral is being issued unless a change is requested by the family.
- **When there is a change in the family's contact information or a change in a custodial parent's residency**, the family must report the change to the FAA.
- **Families who no longer have active DCF cases, including those who have been referred for DCF-Related Transitional care**, must report certain changes directly to the FAA within 30 days of the change, including a change that results in the family's income exceeding 85% State Median Income (SMI).

For more information, please see Income Eligible Child Care Program policies.

ATTENDANCE

Once authorized, families will work with the selected child care provider to enroll their child and establish a schedule that aligns with the authorization and meets their family's needs. (i.e., full or part-time care). Providers will receive payment based on the family's enrollment.

- An **absence** is defined as any day that a child is authorized to attend an early

education and care program but is not in attendance.
- All absences must be recorded in the provider's attendance records.

When a DCF child is absent or going to be absent from care, the family must let the provider know. During a DCF family's authorization, the Family Access Administrator (FAA) must establish and maintain ongoing communication with DCF and the provider. DCF should inform the provider of any information relevant to the child's attendance or other needs. FAAs should report any concerns related to attendance to the DCF Area Office Child Care Coordinator and DCF Social Worker.

If a child has been absent for more than 30 days in a row or 45 total days during a 12-month authorization, and the family has not requested and received an Approved Break in Care, the absences will be considered a Non-Approved Break in Care. A Non-Approved Break in Care may lead to the termination of the child's placement.

A family's child care placement may not be terminated without contacting the assigned DCF Child Care Coordinator and receiving approval for termination from EEC. Before terminating a child's placement, the FAA must make two separate attempts to reach the family using different methods (e.g., phone call one day, email the next day). If the DCF case is active, the FAA must make contact with the assigned DCF Child Care Coordinator. The FAA must make significant efforts, as described above, to contact the parent(s) and DCF Child Care Coordinator to assess the family's situation and discuss available options.

FAAs must inform families of the option to end child care (ending their placement) but still keep their CCFA benefit subject to completion of the annual reauthorization process.

Termination of a child's placement (NOT the Authorization) may occur in the following circumstances:

- **After 30 consecutive unexplained absences:** a two-week termination notice may be issued on the 31st day
- **After 45 non-attended days including unexplained absences**: a two-week termination notice may be issued on the 46th day

APPROVED BREAK IN CARE

Families may request an Approved Break in Care to pause their child care services during their active financial assistance authorization for up to 90 days with approval from DCF. Family Access Administrators (FAAs) must contact the assigned DCF Social

Worker and Area Office Child Care Coordinator before offering a family an Approved Break in Care.

Once approved by DCF, FAAs may offer a family an Approved Break in Care if the child will not attend care due to an event of more than two (2) weeks in length, including, but not limited to:

- An extended illness or medical procedure;
- A break in care for the summer;
- A visit to a non-custodial parent; and/or
- An extended vacation.

EEC will not continue to pay for children on an Approved Break in Care. Parents have the right to opt out of an Approved Break in Care.

Providers are not required to hold a child's seat at the program during an Approved Break in Care. If a seat is no longer available when the family is ready to return, the family may transfer their financial assistance to another provider of their choice. This allows the child to resume care without being placed back on EEC's income-eligible waitlist. Unless the 12-month authorization expired during the Approved Break in Care, families returning from an Approved Break in Care during their current 12-month authorization are not required to secure a new referral or authorization prior to returning to care.

A new DCF referral will be required if the 12-month authorization expired during the Approved Break in Care and/or if a family does not return from an Approved Break in Care within the established time period and the family's 12-month authorization has ended.

REAUTHORIZATION AND CONTINUITY OF CARE

If a family's DCF case remains open, DCF may reauthorize the family for an additional 12 months of DCF-Related Child Care. Families do not need to complete a reauthorization in person. Virtual and telephonic options must be made available. A child's placement will not be disrupted while a new referral is being issued unless a change is requested by the family.

DCF-Related Transitional Child Care and Continuity of Care

DCF families may be eligible for immediate access to Transitional Child Care for up to 24 months following the closure of their DCF case. DCF may authorize a family by referral

for the initial 12-month transitional period following the closure of the family's case, and the family will not be required to pay a parent fee. The DCF referral is sufficient documentation for the family to meet income, service need, and residential requirements during the initial 12-month period. Families who seek access following the initial 12-month period will receive immediate access to child care financial assistance for one additional 12-month transitional period. The Family Access Administrator (FAA) will assess the family according to income-eligible guidelines, and the parent may be required to pay a fee.

A child is eligible to receive DCF-Related Transitional Care even if the child has not previously received DCF-Related Child Care. DCF families, who are within the 24-month period after their case closure, are also eligible to request Transitional Child Care and should not be placed on the waitlist.

FAAs should work with families to confirm the DCF case closure date when DCF has not provided a TCC authorization. If the family is in the middle of a DCF-Related Child Care authorization, the authorization shall not be shortened; the case closure date will be the last day of the current DCF-Related Child Care authorization and the transitional period will begin at the end of the authorization.

The Transitional authorization will always be a full 12-months unless a new referral is received indicating the DCF case has reopened, in which case a new authorization should be entered in accordance with the referral.

During the Transitional Child Care period, if the FAA becomes aware of the reopening of a DCF case for a family, they must inform the family of their possible eligibility for DCF-Related Child Care and direct the family to contact their DCF social worker to discuss their eligibility and referral if the family is interested: https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations.

DCF families living outside of Massachusetts at the time of their DCF Case Closure are not eligible for Transitional Child Care. A 2-week notice should be issued to the family.

Following the conclusion of a family's transitional care, the family will be eligible to receive continuity of care access to Income Eligible Child Care Financial Assistance provided the family meets eligibility requirements.

DENIAL AND TERMINATION OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

- Families who wish to appeal the termination of DCF-Related Child Care services

have the right to do so through the DCF Fair Hearing Process, in accordance with DCF regulations and policies.

- Families who wish to appeal the denial or termination of their Income Eligible Child Care Financial Assistance, including families experiencing homelessness and Young Parents have the right to request an EEC review, in accordance with the Income Eligible Denial, Termination, and Request for Review policies.

COMMUNICATIONS

Family Access Administrators (FAAs) will notify families and the assigned DCF Child Care Coordinator (if the DCF case is still open) at least twice that their authorization period is ending. At least one of these notifications must be in writing and provided no fewer than 60 days prior to the end of a family's authorization period.

- FAAs will send all notifications to families through at least two forms of communication, including phone, text, email, and/or US mail.

DCF TEMPORARY CHILD CARE PROGRAM

EEC and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) have partnered to offer the DCF Temporary Child Care Program. This program allows certain designated Family Child Care and Center-based programs to serve children who are in DCF custody and require a short-term child care placement. Programs participating in the DCF Temporary Child Care Program are licensed by EEC and contracted with and approved by DCF.

For additional information or to access the DCF Temporary Child Care Program, contact eecsubsidymanagement@mass.gov.