

February 25, 2021

Ellen Wheatley, Ph.D.
Acting Director of the Office of Child Care
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Director Wheatley,

The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) has given careful consideration to the opportunities made possible under the Coronavirus Relief and Response Supplemental Appropriations (CRSSA) Act. In order to ensure the funding is obligated in such a way that meets the needs of families and child care service providers, MDHS consulted its COVID-19 Task Force, which is comprised of leaders of early childhood professional organizations across the state. Conversations centered around the needs of families within their programs as well as providers within their organizations. The task force was very clear on what the needs are within Mississippi and advocated for several funding options. In addition, MDHS utilized data from the past eleven months of operation during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine feasibility of various funding scenarios based on the funding allocated under this award. This information was combined with current trends in pandemic-focused research indicating both a need for mental health resources and an alarming amount of learning loss among school age children due to pandemic-related school disruption. With these elements in mind, MDHS has developed the working plan described below for use of CRRSA funding. Please note that this plan is tentative and subject to be changed to align with the emerging needs of families and the early childhood workforce.

Direct Child Care Services (Subsidies)

While emergency certificates will not be included in the plan for CRSSA funding, MDHS is interested in supporting eligible families with increased financial supports during pandemic and recovery periods by paying 100% of family co-payments. Upon recommendation from the COVID-19 Task Force, MDHS has elected to continue this support that was initially launched with CARES Act funding. MDHS will use CRSSA funding to cover family co-payments from March 1, 2021 through December 31, 2021. This support costs approximately \$850,000 per month for a total expenditure of CRSSA funding in the amount of \$8.5M. MDHS may continue this support beyond December 31, 2021 if CRSSA funding remains unobligated.

Important to MDHS, subsidy payments have been based on enrollment since March 2020 and will continue at least through December 31, 2020. MDHS has utilized regular Discretionary funding for this and plans to continue to do so. While this is not a part of the plans for CRSSA funding, MDHS wanted to include this support so that stakeholders have a full sense of what will be offered to families.

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Implementation of Virus Mitigation Policies and Practices

Child care providers have the great burden of meeting higher standards for protecting staff, children and families from exposure to COVID-19. Higher standards means increased costs that program budgets were not prepared to absorb. To support providers in this effort, MDHS plans to offer funding to providers for the purpose of personal protective equipment (PPE) and/or equipment needed to provide proper sanitization of classrooms and materials. MDHS is currently collecting information needed to determine how much funding will be available to providers for this purpose. The intent is to offer a one-time payment to providers for this purpose.

Grants or Assistance (Other than Subsidies) to Stabilize Child Care Providers

Child care providers have suffered financially as a result of closures and/or reduced enrollment. In an effort to help stabilize child care providers until closures subside and enrollment increases, MDHS, at the request of the COVID-19 Task Force, has determined that increased monthly reimbursement rates will continue through December 31, 2021. Initially launched with CARES Act funding in March 2020, MDHS issues payments at a 25% increase over standard reimbursement rates. This support has an approximate monthly cost of \$2M making the total estimated amount of CRSSA funding obligated for this support \$20M. MDHS may continue this practice beyond December 31, 2021 if CRSSA funding remains unobligated.

Providers have been tasked with providing full time care for school age children throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Providers have been offering these services at reduced rates in order to serve families who have experienced decreased household income and job loss. Child care program budgets have been stretched as far as possible, and providers are desperate for assistance with caring for school age children when COVID disrupts the typical school service delivery. As such, MDHS will be offering funding to providers who are struggling to cover the costs associated with caring for school-age children with full-time care when schools are closed or meeting virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The intent is to offer one-time grants that can be used to cover current costs and/or recover revenue losses for prior service offered at reduced rates to families. The exact amount of funding per provider is currently under review by MDHS.

Assistance to Providers Not Participating in the Subsidy System Prior to the Pandemic

MDHS recognizes that all child care providers need support as a result of the pandemic and plans to offer training and support services to them using CRSSA funding. This support will be in the form of training, technical assistance, and materials designed to address issues facing both providers and families as a result of COVID-19. Please refer to the “Other” section below for a full description of the supports offered for social/emotional and mental health and to combat pandemic-related learning loss among school-age children.

As previously described, MDHS plans to offer providers funding for the purpose of purchase of PPE and sanitization equipment. CCDF eligible providers will be able to apply for this funding.

Other

Support to combat pandemic-related learning loss among school age children: MDHS is interested in helping to address learning loss specifically caused by pandemic-related disruption in educational program delivery in kindergarten through early elementary grades. MDHS is currently partnering with the Mississippi Department of Education to develop training for child care providers with summer programming that can help reduce losses or, at a minimum, prevent further learning loss. MDHS plans to utilize CRSSA funding to support the implementation of this training in multiple training formats. Providers who complete the training will be provided with school-age classroom materials to support summer learning through STEM projects. This

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training and additional materials will be available to all licensed providers within the state-including those who do not currently participate in the Mississippi Child Care Payment Program.

Support to address social/emotional development and mental health and wellbeing: MDHS wishes to address this topic for child care providers and children through training on social/emotional development and self-regulation best practices. Supporting materials and technical assistance will also be provided to providers who agree to enroll in this more intensive level of supports. All licensed providers in the state will be eligible for all components of this plan--even if they do not currently participate in the Mississippi Child Care Payment Program. The approximate projected cost of this support is \$4M.

MDHS is aware of the increase in the demand for family child care homes as an option for larger care settings. To address this option for families, MDHS will be launching programming for family child care homes so that they can support safe care environments with providers who have knowledge of best practice. Funding needed for this effort is currently under review and has not been determined at this time.

In an effort to support parents directly during this time, MDHS will be expanding services through the Mississippi Child Care Resource & Referral sites to offer a variety of supports for families that will offer information, training, child development support, mental health supports, financial training, etc. to families as needed. The amount of funding needed for this support is currently under review and will be completed in the coming weeks.

In an effort to support staffing within child care programs across the state, MDHS plans to use CRSSA funding to install electronic fingerprint scanning machines at multiple locations across the state. Locations will be selected because of their low likelihood of COVID-related closure or public use restrictions that existing locations have experienced during the pandemic. The addition of fingerprint scanning machines will help ensure access and timely completion of criminal background checks. The amount needed for this support is currently under review and will be completed in the coming weeks.

MDHS is seeking to take a varied approach with CRSSA funding in order to address needs across parents and providers. As data regarding the impact of COVID-19 continue to emerge, MDHS is prepared to adjust this plan. Thank you for your consideration of this plan.

Sincerely,

/s/

Chad Allgood, Ph.D.
Co-Director
Division of Early Childhood Care and Development

/s/

Vicki Lowery, J.D.
Co-Director
Division of Early Childhood Care and Development

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