



March 20, 2020

Ms. Dannette R. Smith
Chief Executive Officer
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

Dr. Matthew Blomstedt
Commissioner of Education
Nebraska Department of Education

Mr. John H. Albin
Commissioner of Labor
Nebraska Department of Labor

Dear CEO Smith, Dr. Blomstedt, and Mr. Albin:

The COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to put a profound strain on our state's early childhood programs and providers and, as a result, our broader civic and economic infrastructure. During this public health crisis, the reduction in service and closure of child care programs in Nebraska have reaffirmed how critical this industry is to the stability of our communities, state and nation.

Throughout this public health emergency, it is paramount that we continue to meet the nutrition needs of young children and families; ensure child care professionals and businesses are eligible to receive financial support to ensure the short-term and long-term economic viability of the child care system; and provide for the child care needs of individuals and families who are on the front line of the response to this pandemic.

We also recognize that individual programs across Nebraska will be making difficult decisions on whether to remain operational during this crisis, which is an issue of serious concern for the children and families they serve and for their caregivers, teachers, and communities. We understand the painful dilemma programs face: either close to stem the spread of the disease and protect their children, families, and staff and all of the others in their communities they will encounter, or remain open and potentially place children, families, and staff, as well as others, at high risk.

On behalf of the allied organizations focused on policies and programs that affect the strength of Nebraska's early childhood system, we request that your state agencies strongly consider the following recommendations:

- Use emergency federal and/or state funds to support child care providers who remain open to provide services for the children of health care professionals, frontline responders and other essential personnel.
- Extend and ensure the availability of temporary unemployment insurance to all child care business owners and employees who have suspended services due to the public health

emergency, as well as working parents. In addition, consider making paid sick and family leave supports available to the child care workforce and working parents.

- Temporarily suspend redetermination of family eligibility for support services such as WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, TANF and child care subsidy to ensure continuity of benefits during the public health emergency.
- Utilize the TANF rainy day fund to pay for any unexpected child care costs.
- Maximize federal flexibility in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to provide critical resources (food, formula, etc.) through delivery rather than community site distribution.
- For those providers remaining open to support health care workers and emergency responders, adopt temporary flexibility in federal and state operations related to regulation of the child care industry, while ensuring the safety, health and well-being of children in care.
- Increase access to and flexibility of loan, grant and financial incentive/support programs to help child care businesses resume service when the public health environment has stabilized.
- Introduce policies to base child care reimbursement payments on enrollment levels rather than current attendance to help stabilize funding and ensure child care programs remain financially viable.
- Allow providers to waive co-pays for families dealing with income interruptions and fluctuations.
- To the extent practical, explore temporary opportunities for the use of teachers and educational professionals who meet background check requirements to be utilized in support of the early childhood system.
- Ensure health and mental health resources are available to child care and early learning providers, as well as to children and their families, and are paid by federal funds to the greatest extent possible.
- Designate funding for community access to trauma-based services.

While these recommendations would be of immediate benefit to children, families and the child care community, they are also fundamentally relevant to our state's overall ability to weather and recover from the current emergency. A robust child care system will be essential to putting people back to work and rebuilding our economy. We recognize that this is an ever-changing situation and that a broader array of measures by your respective agencies may be needed to safeguard the well-being of the public.

We look forward to working with you to support Nebraska children, families and businesses throughout and beyond this unprecedented time in our state's history.

Sincerely,

Jessie Rasmussen, President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Jason Prokop, Director, First Five Nebraska

Mary Jo Pankoke, President and Chief Executive Officer, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

Samuel J. Meisels, Ed. D, Founding Executive Director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Shannon Cotsoradis, Chief Executive Officer, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative

cc: Nebraska Legislature