



Senator Holly J. Mitchell

SB 321- A Strong Start for CalWORKs Families Act

THIS BILL

SB 321 is the countdown to a stronger start for families participating in the CalWORKs program. This bill will streamline Stage 1 child care eligibility rules so that all CalWORKs families are afforded the same benefits of stable, reliable, and consistent child care necessary to improve their family's success and end the cycle of poverty.

SB 321 provides families who enter the CalWORKs program with quality affordable child care to bring stability to families in crisis. Stage 1 child care will be authorized for 12 months, or until transfer to Stage 2, establishing continuous affordable child care for families. This measure aligns Stage 1 child care rules to all other subsidized child care programs in California, including Stages 2 and 3. Continuous child care will minimize disruptions for children, parents, employers, and child care providers.

Finally, SB 321 ensures a seamless transfer between the various stages of CalWORKs child care by giving local child care contractors limited, read-only, online access to the information needed to transfer families.

Stable early care and education gives families more options to improve their future and gives children a strong start, closing gaps before inequities widen, particularly for low-income children of color.

PROBLEM

Less than 30% of CalWORKs eligible families are getting the child care that they need and are currently entitled to while working or participating in welfare to work activities. Parents are often unaware that they qualify for child care; they struggle with navigating the burdensome process of obtaining child care, and their child's care is constantly disrupted.

Stable child care is critical to strengthen parents' ability to work, improve their prospects in the job

market, and increase their earning potential. Continuity of care creates the stable conditions children need for healthy development and preparing them for lifelong success, inside and outside of the classroom.

EXISTING LAW

SB 321 builds on the positive impact of recent policy reforms, including the repeal of the Maximum Family Grant Rule in 2016; adopting 12 month eligibility for child care assistance in all Department of Education child care subsidy programs in 2017,¹ and lifting CalWORKs cash grants above deep poverty in 2018-2019. This bill is the next step in ensuring economic security for CalWORKs families and a bright future for their children.

Under existing law, families enrolled in CalWORKs are entitled to affordable child care in order to work, or participate in approved welfare-to-work activities.² Stage 1 authorizations are limited to the hours and duration of each specific activity, and to those services provided in the signed welfare to work plan.³ Families report that Stage 1 child care authorizations are usually short-term, sporadic, and difficult to secure. As a result, families struggle to access safe, stable child care options for their child(ren), parents can be sanctioned, leading to benefit reductions that drive families into deep poverty and homelessness. The lack of initial, stable child care holds families back, and threatens their ability to fully benefit from the safety net supports of the CalWORKs program.

Current law states that the Legislature intends "that families experience no break in child care services due to a transition between the three stages of child care services."⁴ Both county welfare departments and local child care contractors have authority to share family information in order to ensure this smooth

¹ Cal. Educ. Code § 8263 (h), as added by the Budget Act of 2017, A.B. 97, 2017-18 Sess. (Cal. 2017) (enacted).

² Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 11323.2; Cal. Educ. Code §§ 8350(a), 8350.5 and 8351(a) and (b).

³ Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 11323.2 (a).

⁴ Cal. Educ. Code § 8350 (b); Cal. Dept. of Social Services, Manual of Policies Procedures, Sec. 47-301.5.

transfer between CalWORKs child care stages, but current law does not specify that this information can be shared electronically.⁵

KEEPING PROMISES

When California enacted the CalWORKs program in 1997 it made a promise to families that affordable child care would be available to keep their children safe and learning as parents gained the skills they needed, got their families stabilized and (re)entered the workforce. In the 20 years since the CalWORKs program was created, we have learned that uninterrupted and consistent child care is the prerequisite for family economic security.

Stable, affordable early care and education increases the likelihood that low-income parents are able to focus on improving their families' prospects, assured that their children are cared for and safe. SB 321 implements key recommendations of the Interagency Task Force on CalWORKs child care.

SUPPORT/OPPOSE

Child Care Law Center (co-sponsor)
Parent Voices CA (co-sponsor)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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⁵ Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 11323.4(f), “Notwithstanding Section 10850, for purposes of child care supportive services, county welfare departments shall share information necessary for the administration of the child care programs and the CalWORKs program.”