

Montana Early Childhood Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

April 22, 2020 Location: Zoom

Attendance

The following members were in attendance:

Megan Ballenger, Marty Blair, Beth Branam, Jen Burckhard, Patty Butler, Stacy Clement, Caitlin Jensen, Kim Latrielle, Laurie Lincoln, Dani McCarthy, Tobin Novasio, Kathleen O'Leary, Meghan Peel, Ashley Pena-Larson, Kathleen Rich, Adam Schafer, Dan Stluka, Wendy Studt, Brock Tessman, Christie Twardoski

The following members were absent:

Lesa Evers, Laurie Bishop, Dr. Kristen Day, Nikki Grossberg, Leigh Ann Holmes

Welcome, Introduction and Orientation

The Advisory Council members introduced themselves to the council. Jamie Palagi, Administrator for the Early Childhood and Family Support Division gave an overview of the history of state advisory councils for early childhood and child care over the years. There has been an advisory council focused on early childhood for more than 20 years.

The council reviewed the [purpose and authority](#) for the council as well as the responsibilities of council members. The council also reviewed and discussed [consensus decision making](#) as the approach to making council recommendations. Discussion included questions related to how the process has worked in the past. In the event a consensus wasn't reached, the department shared that the council would likely ask for additional information to make an effective consensus decision. One member shared that the consensus model works well for more safe, informal discussions on issues. People feel more relaxed to talk candidly. The council agreed that the consensus model should be utilized with the understanding that if it needs to be revisited as a council, it can be in the future.

Early Childhood and Family Support Division Overview

Jamie Palagi, Administrator, gave an overview of the new Early Childhood and Family Support Division. Please refer to the [presentation](#). A member asked what programs and issues within the division does the council advise? Jamie Palagi responded that the council will oversee and advise on child care issues, home visiting, and Head Start programs interactions.

Legislative Updates

Jamie Palagi, Administrator, gave a legislative update on issues/bills that are likely of interest to the advisory council. This included an overview of how funding and authority work in government, especially with federal funds coming to the state. Please refer to the presentation materials attached. A member asked for clarification on fiscal year definitions and periods. The department responded that the federal fiscal year is October 1 to September 30, and the state fiscal year is July 1 to June 30. Further, reporting and submission of plans vary by fund type and grant. Some are quarterly, annually, every three years.

Jamie provided information about the funding and HB 2 and HB 632, as well as an overview and status of bills introduced this session. Please refer to the [presentation](#) for the snapshot details. **Action Item:** the OPI representative requested information regarding HB 328. Jamie Palagi provided this information after the meeting.

Healthy Montana Families Home Visiting & RFP Updates

Leslie Lee, Section Supervisor, provided an overview of the soon-to-be-released RFP to continue home visiting services. Updates include shifting contract years to align with the federal fiscal year as well as formula funding adjustments. The Department is in the process of extending current contracts to allow enough time to respond to an RFP in advance of awards for the October 1st start date. The RFP should hit the streets in the summer of 2021, it is anticipated that contracts will be valid for 7 years, renewable annually based on available funding.

Leslie Lee also provided an [overview of the Healthy Montana Families](#) required benchmarks and continuous quality improvement process. Leslie described that the state office is subject to CQI and improvement and works with local home visiting providers on CQI as well. Leslie indicated that the advisory council will receive periodic updates related to performance measures over time. **Action item:** Included with the minutes of the meeting, Leslie will send the recommendations from the home visiting steering committee. Please refer to the [attached document](#).

Child Care and Development Fund State Plan & Work Session

Patty Butler, Early Childhood Services Bureau Chief, reviewed the Child Care and Development Fund State Plan requirements and provisions. Part of the state plan renewal process includes public feedback and consultation from stakeholders. The advisory council provides consultation and guidance to the state child care program. During the presentation, Patty Butler reviewed the block grant and indicated that states have flexibility in the use of the funds within the basic parameters of the grant. The block grant supports state and tribal initiatives to provide affordable, accessible, high-quality child care for children and families. The state plan must be submitted every three years and can be amended as needed. The state plan documents policy and procedures that affect children, families, and providers, and serves as certification for the lead agency to effectively administer the program. Patty reviewed the various sections within the state plan, please refer to the attached [presentation](#) for details. Throughout the presentation, the council had opportunities to respond to and ask questions.

In Section 1 related to leadership and coordination with relevant systems and funding sources, there was discussion related to a possible gap in coordination with kindergarten readiness within communities. A recommendation was made to the division to work directly with the Montana Association of Elementary and Middle School Principals and The Montana Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development to discuss how best to support school readiness and transitions of children/families from early childhood to kindergarten. Patty also talked about the continuity of care and transitions that children face within early childhood programs or between programs, even before school starts.

In Section 2 related to promoting parental choice, discussion focused on how parents get information. This included Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Licensing, Child Find, DPHHS website, and Parentingmontana.org. There was a question on how the Montana Chambers of Commerce could help in getting child care information to their employees. The Department mentioned future action related to expanding online information for licensing and parents.

Section 3 core purpose is for continuity of care for children and stable financial assistance for working families. The discussion focused on ways to promote stability and affordability for children and families, even outside the child care assistance program. Best Beginning policies were identified that support continuity of care such as 12-month eligibility, job search of 3 months, and graduated phase-out of assistance. The discussion also included how the state prioritizes services for vulnerable children and families. A breakout session opportunity was available for small groups to offer input in ways the state agency can support families and children experiencing homelessness.

In Section 4 the discussion focused on parental choice and empowering working parents to make their own decisions regarding the child care services that best suit their family's needs. Market rate study, cost of care, and establishing an adequate payment rate were highlighted in this discussion. Patty told the council that the newest market rate study will be published by the end of June, and the information has been used to determine new reimbursement rates that will go into effect on July 1. The topic of child care deserts in Montana was discussed and how to serve children in all areas and including all vulnerable populations with equal access to services. The opportunity for a workgroup to address this need could be needed.

Section 5, which is dedicated to standards and monitoring processes to ensure health and safety, included discussion on the regulations for child care providers. The regulations include fire, sanitation, immunization, environmental quality rules, as well as the CCDF licensing rules we have in place. The comments included how we might support child care small businesses to work within a large system of expectations. Patty shared

the requirements for background checks for all providers and the proposed funding that will be offered to pay for all of the background checks. Questions about what defines a 'license exempt' provider were answered.

Section 6 related to the recruitment and retainment of a qualified and effective workforce, including the critical element of training and knowledge base. The [Montana Early Learning Guidelines](#) were identified as a tool and guidance in planning for professional development and for assessing benchmarks for curriculum and environment. Dan Stulka, executive director for the Early Childhood Project (ECP), spoke to the council about the role the registry plays in supporting professional development and tracking training and education on a career path. ECP is a partner of ECSB and works together to monitor the criteria required of providers for licensing and training, such as CPR and first aid. The apprenticeship program was identified by Patty as being a program of support for new providers and for building the workforce capacity.

Section 7 core purpose is to support continuous quality improvement. Patty described Montana's STARS to Quality system as a quality rating improvement system, stating that about 26% of providers participate in the voluntary program. Discussion included what is identified as quality in the state plan and CCDF and how all-encompassing it is. There is a lot of flexibility in the ways we think about quality and some of the ideas and identified areas were: training and professional development, early learning guidelines, STARS to quality, supporting infants and toddlers, system of child care resource and referral services, accreditation, and school readiness. A suggestion was made to include school-age quality standards in the STARS framework.

Section 8 included the Integrity and Accountability of the CCDF Program. Patty reviewed the areas of internal program controls to ensure accountability. The accountability must include reducing fraud, waste, and abuse, including program violations and administrative errors.

Small group breakout discussions were held in two areas: Services to families experiencing homelessness and emergency preparedness and recovery. ECSB program managers facilitated the discussion and a full group exchange was held following the breakouts. Notes were taken and input will be considered in finalizing the State Plan.

Public Comment:

Available for review and comment 4/23

Close 5/7/2021

Can be reviewed on the website.

New Pandemic Funds

Jamie Palagi, Administrator gave an overview of the new pandemic funds coming into the Early Childhood and Family Support Division as well as talked about HB 632. Please refer to the [presentation](#) materials for details.

Council Discussion

The home visiting program is seeking suggestions in types of organizations throughout the state that may be already providing diaper banks or essential supplies. The question arises due to the American Rescue Plan funding through the home visiting program. Suggestions from the council included job services, community service organizations, churches, chambers, places that are open during the nontraditional workday, pediatricians, TANF contractors, Head Start, CPS, WIC, hospitals.

The department also sought input from the council related to questions the council would like to see included in focus groups/surveys related to barriers to becoming licensed, maintaining, or starting up a childcare program. The following were suggested:

- What type of benefits are available for starting a business in childcare? To legitimize childcare as a viable business.
- Access information on difficulties to getting license and maintaining licenses.
- What are the barriers for providing service to children and families with children with special needs?

- How to retain employees. Where do they go? (who is competition) Are they competing among themselves?
- In terms of higher education, struggling to get P3 (Preschool to Third Grade Endorsement) because they cannot take time off work to complete work.

Additionally, the department sought input from the council for current ideas for the childcare American Rescue Plan funding. The following were suggested:

Bonus to staff to incentivize people to stay at the job.

Bonus for apprenticeship programs.

Economic development incentive to stand up new childcare centers.

Feasibility studies.

Financial and Technical Assistance Grants

Help in outreach.

Maybe expand the "Grow your Own" program. Partner with the University system on how to recruit workforce @ a younger age.

Sustainability of funds and assistance.

Program or Assistance for Employers to set up a Child Care on-premises.

Review Messaging.

Public Comment and Adjournment

- NO PUBLIC COMMENTS.
- Minutes, presentation materials, and a poll will be sent out to the council to set future dates.