

Expanding Illinois Child Care Assistance to Job and School Search: Experiences of Cook County Parents

May 2023



sylvia cotton
center for research
& policy innovation

powered by illinois **action** for children

Introduction

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a state- and federally-funded program administered by the Illinois Department of Human Services that enables Illinois parents to work and attend school by paying part of the cost of their child care.¹ CCAP allows families to access quality child care programs that would otherwise be unaffordable. Families are eligible if their income is less than 225% of federal the poverty level.

Historically, CCAP required parents to have a job or be enrolled in a school or training program to qualify for child care assistance, but it has long been a challenge for parents to look for a job or school program and attend interviews without already having affordable child care. These challenges became even more widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic when many parents lost or left their jobs. In October 2021, CCAP instituted a temporary policy that allows parents to receive three months of child care assistance to seek employment or enroll in school. This initiative is called the Initial Activity Search (IAS) and is effective through June 30, 2024.

Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) is the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency and CCAP administrator serving Cook County, Illinois, which includes Chicago and its inner suburbs. In the first 15 months of the IAS policy, IAFC approved 4,055 IAS applications and served 3,553 unique families. Since families can reapply for assistance through the IAS policy after 12 months, the number of applications is greater than unique families served.

This report attempts to capture the key benefits and limitations of Illinois' IAS policy in its early implementation, and in supporting parent employment and school enrollment. It relies on input from parents approved for the IAS during the first five months of the policy. Data were collected and analyzed by the IAFC Research Team.

¹ CCAP funds are a mix of the state's General Revenue Fund, federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and the federal Child Care Development Block Grant.

Methodology

In June 2022, the IAFC Research Team surveyed 166 Cook County parents who, according to IAFC program records, were approved for child care assistance under the Initial Activity Search between October 2021 and February 2022. We recruited parents through a text message campaign and offered a \$20 e-gift card for completion of the survey. All parents had the choice to take the survey in English or Spanish. While 166 survey responses are useful to learn about a range of parent experiences, they are not enough to generalize the results to all parents approved for the IAS.

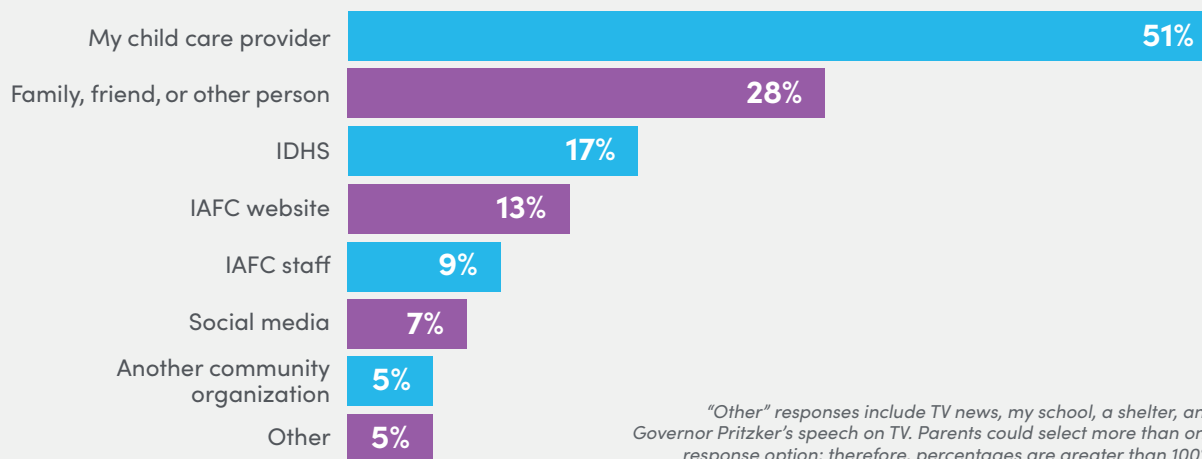
In October 2022, we conducted follow-up interviews with a subset of 28 parents, all mothers. These parents received an additional \$25 e-gift card. Our recruitment for interviews balanced the number of parents who found employment or enrolled in school during the IAS period (15 parents) with those who did not (13 parents). Additionally, we selected several interviewees who mentioned child care and job search issues in their surveys to better understand those challenges.

See the appendix on page 13 for information on the characteristics of parent respondents.

How parents learned about the Initial Activity Search

Half of the parents surveyed indicated that they learned that they could receive child care assistance to find a job or school program from their child care providers. Follow up interviews found that many of these parents were informed by the provider at the time they inquired about getting care. Some parents already had their children enrolled when their provider told them about the IAS. For example, three parents had children in center Head Start programs and their providers told them they could extend their hours or days of care by applying for the IAS. One parent had been, with difficulty, paying out of pocket for her center care until her provider told her about the IAS. Often child care providers helped parents apply for the IAS and fill out forms. Since many parents did not know how the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) worked, they let the providers guide them through the process.

How did you learn that you could receive child care assistance to search for a job or school program?

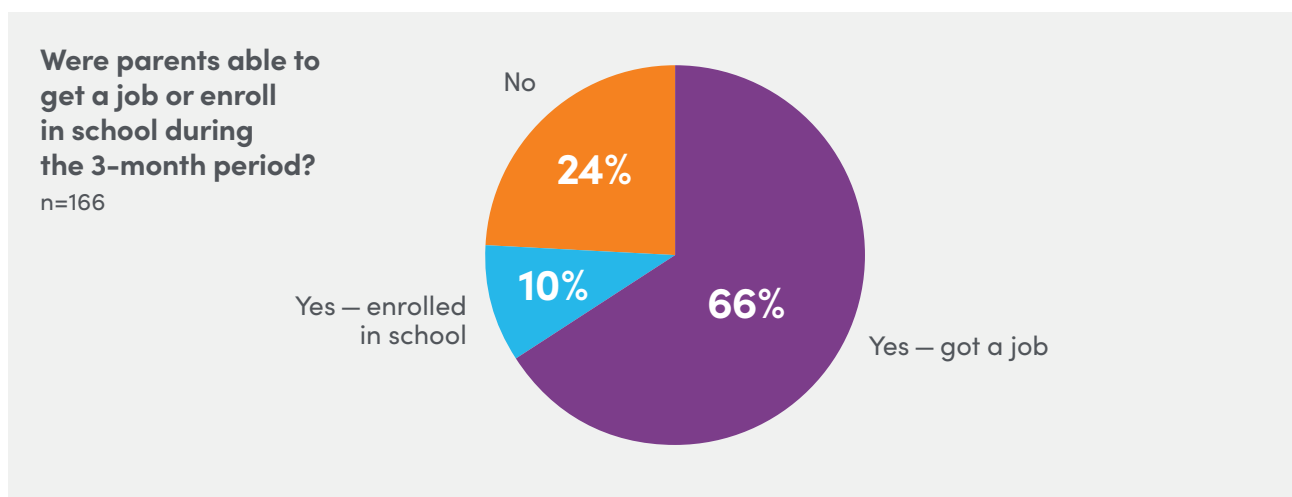


Benefits of the Policy

The IAS was highly successful in supporting parents looking for jobs or school programs, according to the parent survey respondents. The program allowed them to complete job and school search activities, to carry out these activities with greater efficiency, and to have peace of mind knowing their children were in trusted care.

A. Parents found employment and enrolled in school

The IAS policy enabled parents to return to the workforce. Two-thirds of survey respondents found employment and another 10 percent enrolled in school during the three-month period. Further, among the parents who found work, 88 percent were still working at the time of the survey, which was conducted four to eight months after they were approved for the IAS. Fifty-one percent had full-time jobs and 37 percent worked part-time. Parents found jobs in such fields as health care, customer service, education, child care and finance, as well as administrative and warehouse jobs. Some continued their job search once employed to find a better position.



B. Parents could conduct job search and school-related activities efficiently

Parents emphasized that having child care assistance freed them to do in-person activities that they could not do without reliable child care. First and foremost, it enabled them to attend interviews. Some described setting up interviews more quickly, keeping their interview appointments, and arriving on time. *“I was able to research job opportunities and go to all my job interviews as soon as they became available. Without childcare I would have been very limited to my available times and might have been left out of great opportunities.”*

In contrast, parents said that without the IAS attending even online interviews would be difficult. A mother of a two-year-old explained, *“I can sit her down and put her in her high chair and give her a snack, but at any moment she’ll be screaming my name, or she’ll climb out and walk into the room.”*

Parents also had time to attend job fairs, complete applications in person, visit the library to work on their resumes, work with temporary employment agencies, participate in training or job readiness programs, and shop for professional clothes. For school, they researched career paths, met with academic advisors, and applied for programs and financial aid. *“Even if I didn’t have an interview, I would be able to go and talk to the people and, you know, ask them if they were hiring, do the application right then and there. And it was just so much easier with the [IAS] program.”*

Finally, parents reported being able to do activities at home, such as online research and customizing resumes, without interruption or distraction. One mother said, *“I finally had a break to organize my thoughts.”* Another appreciated *“Just having peace and quiet where I can focus on the task at hand versus trying to be mom.”*

“I was able to research job opportunities and go to all my job interviews as soon as they became available.”

C. Parents had peace of mind and experienced less stress

Child care assistance relieved parents of the stress of finding someone to care for their child in order to attend interviews. One mother said that prior to having assistance, *“I would say yes to the interview and then I’d be kind of worried like, okay, what do I do now? Where do I leave the child?”* Another mother said, *“Having the assistance made it much easier for me to not have things to worry about. Just my job search.”*

“I finally had a break to organize my thoughts.”

Parents described their peace of mind knowing their children were in “safe” and “trustworthy” environments, and this enabled them to focus on their own needs. *“I was able to be worry and guilt free with the knowledge that my child was well taken care of,”* said one mother. Another said, *“It did bring down my anxiety about making sure that they were provided for. The job search was still tedious, but that part of the child care being taken care of was helpful.”*

Having child care also relieved parents of the stress of traveling with their children for job-related activities. *“At the time I began searching for a job I had a 2½-year-old toddler and a 3-month-old baby. Getting around with both was very difficult and I felt very stressed having to have both while searching for a job. The fact that the daycare was able to help me out was a huge relief.”*

D. Parents faced less financial strain

At least one mother interviewed had been paying for her child care out-of-pocket prior to receiving the assistance. It was difficult and she was behind on payments. Without the three months of assistance she said, *“honestly, [my son] would’ve been out of school until I had made payment, because right before y’all approved me I had owed, and I was struggling a little bit.”* For another mom, the IAS meant she did not have to use the *“little funds that I had from unemployment”* to pay child care tuition. Another mother emphasized the stability that the child care assistance gave her. *“It was helpful because I was able to get a job during that time. Even when I found and lost the jobs, because of Covid, the assistance was there. As a single mother, I live in uncertainty often. That was the one constant I needed.”*

E. Children benefited from their child care

Most parents using the IAS enrolled their children in formal child care programs: 69 percent of parents surveyed used center care and 29 percent used licensed home care. Parents said the child care provided their children important social and educational opportunities while also benefitting themselves. *“I was able to let my child interact with other children and learn to socialize...WHILE I looked for a decent job,”* one mom explained. A mother of a four-year-old said his *“social skills were lacking throughout the pandemic... so that’s why I was really trying to get him back into a daycare as soon as possible.”* Another parent considered the routine of the child care program to be very important to her child’s development. Other parents talked about the educational value to their children. *“I get free time to find employment, also schooling to further my career, while my child gets an education as well!”* Another said of the child care assistance, *“It was helpful, my son has learned so much.”*

What Parents Would Have Done Without Child Care Assistance

We asked parents what they would have done differently if they had not received the three months of assistance. Many said they likely would have put off their job search:

"I probably wouldn't even have the courage to, because I know job searching can be so hectic."

"Of course, it would've been almost impossible. You can't apply for a job with your kid. I mean, that alone, it's almost, I think it's like an automatic disqualification for that job."

Others would have continued to search but did not feel they would have made progress. One parent would try to find a remote job, and another mom would possibly try to start her own business. One mother could not envision what she would do:

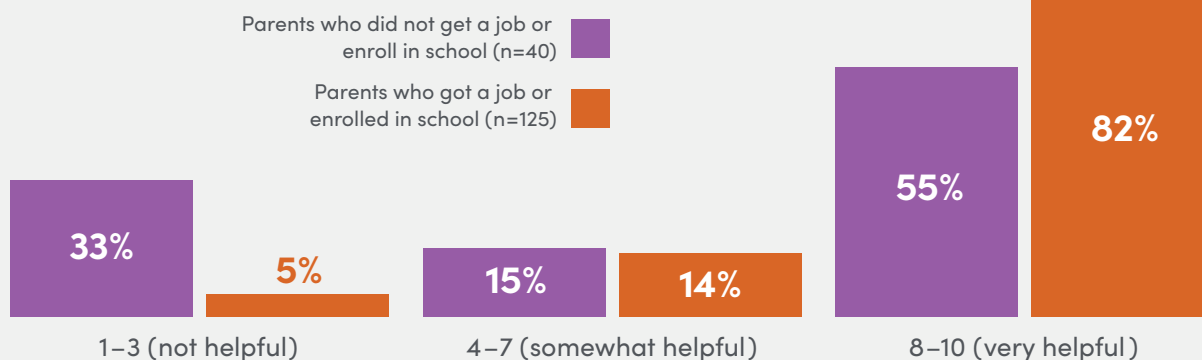
"I don't know. I really do not know. I can't answer that. I don't know."

Some parents would turn to family for child care as needed. Notably, only one quarter of parents had family or friends they could ask to watch their child to attend an interview. Many of these parents used words like "the last resort" and "not guaranteed" to refer to care by family or friends. One mother said:

"...but even then, I don't think I would even leave them with some family members."

Regardless of whether parents found a job or enrolled in school, the majority found IAS child care assistance to be helpful, as reflected in the chart below.

On a scale of 1–10, how helpful was the child care assistance during your job/school search?



Limitations of the Policy

Although the policy helped many parents, not all successfully secured a job or enrolled in school during the IAS period. Three months of child care assistance was not sufficient for these families for various reasons. Additionally, issues with the implementation of the new policy caused challenges for families.

A. The Three-Month Time Period Was Insufficient for Many Families

Some parents faced child care or family issues during the IAS period that prevented them from reaping the full benefit of the policy. Other parents found it took more than three months to do a thorough job search or find a job with hours that aligned with their child care schedules. Some felt pressure to take the first job offer rather than one that best met their needs or skills. Children, too, were impacted when the IAS came to an end and parents could no longer afford to keep them in their programs.

Child care and personal issues interrupted parents' search

Despite selecting a child care provider and being approved for assistance, some parents experienced disruptions to their child care when their arrangements fell through or were not a good fit. The IAS policy does not account for these child care interruptions, and parents lose valuable time from their three-month approval period searching for a new child care provider. This is a particular problem for parents who have difficulty finding new care arrangements. Additionally, if parents do not find work or school by the end of the IAS period, they must wait one year from the start of their initial approval to be eligible for the IAS again.

One child care issue reported by parents was that their child care slot was no longer available by the time their IAS application was approved. Another parent was still on her center's waitlist when she received her IAS approval and could not enroll her daughter. She was disappointed that *"her time was never prorated from the center."* Another mother shared how her center unexpectedly closed, *"I only used about three weeks out of the three months because of the center closing."*

Still other parents found that their child care was a not a good fit and chose to leave the program. This was the case for one mother who felt that her provider was discriminating against her daughter who has autism. A second mother of a child with autism faced frequent disruptions with her care, *"I wasn't able to look for [a job] due to the daycare provider always calling me because they couldn't handle my autistic son, so it was pointless."*

Personal or family circumstances also disrupted parents' job searches. Some parents unexpectedly had to care for sick family members, address their own health issues, or find new living arrangements during the IAS. One mother had to discontinue child care and care for her daughter at home when her daughter began to have on and off seizures. These responsibilities took parents away from their search.

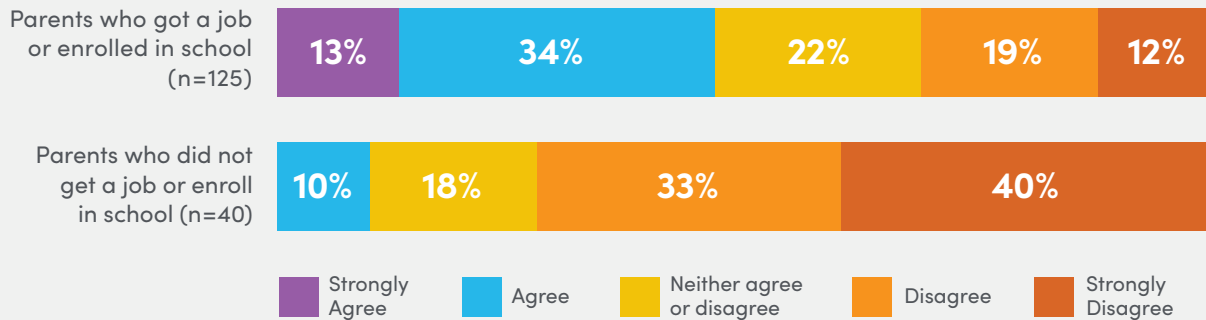
Finding a job often took longer than three months

Many parents need more time to find a job that meets their needs. This was the opinion of 73 percent of parents who did not find work or enroll in school during the IAS as well as the opinion of 31 percent of those who did.

Parents wanted jobs that were the right fit for them and their family. One mother who was returning to work after having a child said, *"This would be my first time being a working mom.... So, I wanted to make sure, wherever I went, it was a conducive environment to my home life as well."* However, the limited time of the IAS pressured some parents to take a job that was not the best fit for them. One said, *"I would've liked more time because I would've been able to apply to more companies. I felt like I went for the first job that called me back instead of choosing a job that I wanted to make more money.... Afterwards other companies that offer more money are calling me back. I can't interview because I'm at work."*

Is three months enough time for parents to find a job or school program that meets their needs?

n=165



Parents encountered the following difficulties with finding employment:

- **It took time to get hired in their field.** Some mothers held qualifications for jobs with strong earning potential, but such jobs can take more time to find or have lengthy hiring processes. This was the case for a recent nursing graduate who was interviewing with several hospitals. Another parent explained that *“when you’re in healthcare, you go in and shadow for a week or two...for free and see if it’s a good fit for you.”* Another mom with a master’s degree in education could not find a job that matched her qualifications during the IAS period. She reluctantly took a child care position so she could keep her child care assistance and her child in preschool.
- **It was difficult to find jobs that matched their child care hours.** This challenge was reported by 43 percent of the mothers interviewed and limited them to taking jobs with traditional schedules. One mother said three employers asked if she could work more hours, *“Especially because I work in healthcare, they need you to be more flexible.”* Another found there to be many openings for customer service jobs but not with standard hours, *“This job needs me to have weekend availability so I can’t do that.”*
- **Did not get job offers or timely responses from employers.** Some parents applied to many jobs and were not sure why they were not getting offers. At times this was after a lengthy screening process, *“they’ll give you interviews, you can make it all the way through drug screening, and they’ll still call you back and you didn’t get the position.”* One mother was hired for an administrative job but five months after having applied.
- **Options were limited by their transportation.** Some jobs were too far to travel to and too far for the parent to make it to the child care program by pick-up time.
- **It was difficult to get hired with a criminal background.** This was a barrier for two parents. One mother said, *“I’ve been hired for jobs and then when my background comes back they tell me [they] have to let me go.”*
- **Did not have work authorization.** This was the case for a mother seeking asylum. It was hard to find a well-paying job without a work permit. *“You just keep waiting and hoping and praying that...your [asylum] case comes on, you know, sooner than you expect.”*

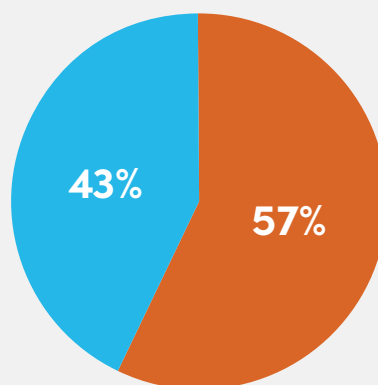
Children had to leave their child care programs

A result of not being able to find a job or enroll in school within the three-month period was that parents’ assistance ended and many had to remove their children from care. Close to half (43%) of the parents whose assistance ended either stopped using child care altogether or switched to more affordable programs.

Did parents keep their child care when they lost their assistance?

n=40

No — did not keep the same child care



Yes — kept the same child care

The change in care meant children missed out on stable child care arrangements with continuous caregivers, which is important for their development. One mother described how ending the care affected her two-year-old's daily routine, *"she was always waking up early, ready to go and then it would just be like me and her having breakfast. But I know like she knew that the routine wasn't the same."*

Leaving programs was hard for school-age children too. One child had many friends at her center's after-school program because she had attended the center when she was younger. Her mom said, *"they're at that social stage and she has her friends that she's been seeing since she was my other daughter's age, two or three. So...she was upset. And even to this day she still asks can she go back."* Another mother said her child's program helped with schoolwork but they lost this resource when they had to leave.

Some mothers tried to avoid removing their children from their programs but could not keep up with payments and eventually had to remove them. *"The payments were just getting too much for me, so I ended up pulling my eight-year-old out."* Two mothers mentioned going into debt to pay for child care expenses. One mom went into debt paying her friends for child care and for park district programs and had financial challenges, *"It was very stressful... I couldn't pay my rent. Sometimes, I couldn't pay my gas and light bills."*

B. IAS Implementation Issues Caused Challenges for Families

Parents and child care providers were not well-informed about the Initial Activity Search policy

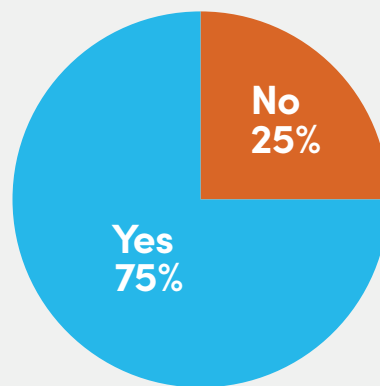
Many parents (25% of survey respondents) did not know they were approved for only three months of child care assistance and that to continue receiving assistance they had to have a job or school enrollment and re-verify their eligibility. This confusion seems to stem from unclear communication about the IAS from the CCAP program, problems with parents receiving CCAP notices in general, and receiving only partial information about the IAS from their child care providers.

First, the way CCAP notifies parents about their IAS approval is confusing. In part, this is due to federal requirements that all parents be approved for child care assistance for twelve-month periods. The "work-around" that CCAP uses to offer parents three months of assistance under the IAS is to first approve parents for 12 months of assistance (and mail parents a notice of this approval) and then, on the same day, to cancel the parents from CCAP and send a 90-day cancellation notice. Parents do not receive any additional notice of cancellation as their three-month period comes to an end.

This lack of notification near the end of the IAS period was difficult even for parents who were aware the IAS lasted only three months. They did not necessarily track the time and felt their assistance ended abruptly. *"I was just completely caught off guard that I didn't have the child care anymore...I don't know if you all had sent [a notice] or not, but I think that would be helpful for people that are on that type of program."* This mother ended up owing her child care center \$1,100 because she was unaware that her assistance ended and continued to keep her child in care.

**Parents understood
that their child care
assistance was limited
to 3 months**

n=165



Parents complained more generally about not receiving CCAP notices. Some mothers said their child care providers would get updates about their application status and case but the mothers did not. The Illinois Department of Human Services sends approval notices and other CCAP notifications to both the parent and child care provider. However, issues with postal service (e.g., mail getting lost and address changes) could result in parents not receiving important notifications.

Finally, many parents depended on their child care providers for information about the IAS program, but some said their providers did not inform them that it was only a three-month program. Some mothers felt both providers and Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) should have done a better job about giving parents information about the IAS at the time they applied, *"I just wonder why IAFC doesn't give out a flyer or pamphlet to state the program when people enroll in it."*

Not all child care providers themselves knew about the IAS policy, which made them hesitant to accept children receiving assistance through IAS. Three mothers were incorrectly informed by a provider that they needed a job to receive child care assistance. Two mothers tried to enroll their children in child care programs after they were approved for assistance, but the providers refused to enroll them or asked for check stubs. One of these mothers shared, *"well I know I'm not working but my child care was approved. So, what's the issue? The provider told me, 'well you don't have check stubs, you don't have this, you don't have that so you can't come.'"*

CCAP administrative challenges affected parents' ability to use the program

The IAS policy was instituted in the second year of the pandemic. Its first months of implementation coincided with sudden staffing shortages at IAFC, which delayed CCAP application processing. The staffing shortages also affected the capacity to answer parent phone calls and schedule CCAP appointments through which parents get support and information. These problems affected parents' experiences with the IAS and, in fact, prevented some parents from enrolling their children in child care altogether.

Six parents from the survey said they were not able to use a child care provider they preferred because it took too long for their CCAP application to be approved. One mother interviewed said she intended to use the IAS assistance with two child care providers (because she switched providers at one point) but neither provider ever received a payment. When she attempted to get information regarding her case, IAFC told her they were backed up by nine weeks and could not give her an update.

These experiences underscore the importance of timely application processing and available support from CCAP staff. They also suggest that the IAS policy has the potential, under improved conditions, for even better outcomes than those captured in this study.

Recommendations

The following are ways CCAP can adjust the IAS policy or its implementation to better support families seeking employment or school programs.

A. Make the Initial Activity Search (IAS) policy permanent

The high percentage of parent respondents who successfully found a job or school program during the three-month IAS period — though not generalizable to all IAS participants — suggests the potential of the policy to resolve the long-standing dilemma facing unemployed parents: they cannot find a job without child care but cannot afford child care without a job.

Having stable child care through the IAS allowed parents to attend interviews and perform job and school search-related activities with an efficiency not possible when also trying to parent. Some parents said they would not have looked for work without the IAS, while others felt finding a job would have been a much slower process.

Additionally, parents highlighted the value of their child care to their children, including its social and educational benefits.

The IAS policy is currently set to expire June 2024. Illinois can support parents' self-sufficiency by making this policy a permanent part of CCAP.

B. Extend the Initial Activity Search period

Many parents wished for more time to find work or school. A quarter of parents surveyed did not find a job or school within three months. Some experienced child care disruptions and personal circumstances that reduced their time to search. Others found it difficult to obtain jobs that fit their child care hours, qualifications, transportation options, and other individual circumstances.

Even many parents who found a job or school program during the IAS agreed that parents needed more than three months. Some felt pressure to take a job that was not the best fit for their family due to the time limit.

Most parents who did not find work or school removed their children from their child care program at the end of the IAS. This disrupted the child's routine and friendships and caused financial hardship to some parents who tried to maintain their care by paying on their own.

Some parents suggested that the IAS be five to seven months long. Extending the IAS would allow parents more time to find employment that fits their families' needs and to find new child care if needed. A longer period would also support continuity of care for children.

C. Improve communication with parents and child care providers about the Initial Activity Search and Child Care Assistance Program policies

Improved communication to parents about the IAS policy will allow parents to make informed choices. In particular, parents need upfront information on the IAS rules, clarity on the time period for which they are approved, and timely notification that their IAS child care assistance will be ending. One parent suggested distributing a pamphlet about IAS to all parents who apply to ensure parents are aware they would be approved for assistance for only three months, initially. Several parents were not aware of this detail and were not prepared to lose their child care assistance at the end of the three months or incurred debt because they kept their children in care.

Child care providers play an important role in sharing information with parents, but providers need to be better informed about the IAS policy as well. Several parents said their provider did not understand the policy rules and would not accept their child. More outreach and education to providers about the IAS policy can help them give parents accurate information and prevent providers from turning parents away due to lack of employment.

Additionally, creating a system that offers parents and providers the option to receive electronic communications could resolve issues stemming from parents or providers not receiving mailed notices. It would also allow for more timely notifications about parent approval status, which providers often require before children can begin care.

Finally, long application processing periods set parents back in enrolling their children in a child care program and securing a job. Administrative processes can be improved to ensure parents have access to child care when they need it.

D. Further support parents with obtaining and retaining employment

Parents mentioned additional supports that would have helped them as they looked for employment or school.

First, extended child care hours would allow parents more flexibility in the type of job they could accept. Many parents struggled to find a job whose hours worked with their child care hours, and some left jobs or could not take jobs because of this. Parents who relied on public transportation, have long commutes, or have children in multiple programs are particularly affected by limited child care hours. One parent suggested providing an incentive for child care programs to extend their hours.

Second, beyond child care, some parents needed more support with the job search process such as resume review or a job readiness program to help them find a job in their desired field. Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies can leverage existing partnerships or develop new partnerships to connect parents with job readiness and workforce programs.

Finally, additional forms of financial assistance for families, including immigrant families, can help parents manage expenses while searching for a job and re-entering the workforce. Several parents struggled to make ends meet and said they needed support to pay bills and student loans. One parent was undocumented and not eligible for the Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Medicaid.

Appendix: Characteristics of Parent Respondents

The table below presents characteristics of the 166 parents who completed the survey and 28 parents who completed interviews.

Parent Demographics	Survey Respondents, n=166	Interview Respondents, n=28
Region		
Chicago	68%	61%
Suburban Cook County	32%	39%
Age		
19-29	48%	40%
30-39	41%	36%
40 or older	11%	24%
Gender		
Female	92%	100%
Male	3%	0%
Unreported	5%	0%
Level of education		
Master's degree	NA	14%
Bachelor's degree	NA	21%
Associate degree	NA	11%
Some college	NA	29%
High school diploma/GED	NA	21%
Less than high school diploma	NA	4%
Number of children in CCAP		
1	65%	84%
2	30%	16%
3+	5%	0%
Race of their children		
Black	63%	64%
Latinx	17%	14%
Multiple races	4%	0%
White	2%	4%
Other or unknown race	21%	18%



4753 N. Broadway
Chicago, IL 60640

www.actforchildren.org
research@actforchildren.org

© Illinois Action for Children 2023. All rights reserved.