Child care supports ND Smart Restart; North Dakota extends child care emergency operating grants and modifies child care guidance

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Restarting parts of North Dakota's economy includes ensuring that working parents have access to licensed, quality child care that supports amazing early childhood experiences while protecting the health of children, families and child care workers.

Today the North Dakota Department of Human Services published updated operating guidance for North Dakota child care providers and reminded providers that the state's Child Care Emergency Operating Grant program, which has provided about $12 million in grants to date, has been extended through July 3 for qualifying, participating providers who remain open and agree to follow program parameters.

Modified operating guidelines aligning with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and North Dakota Department of Health recommendations, as well as the emergency operating grants, were first announced on March 26, to help financially support and sustain the operation of child care services in North Dakota.

The revised modified operating practices reflect an evolving understanding of COVID-19, address the impacts of increased testing and contact tracing efforts, update child screening questions and attendance guidance, and include other changes.

The state is increasing the maximum group size in child care settings from 10 to 15. This does not change adult-to-child staffing ratios set for licensed child care, but will allow programs some added flexibility in how they group children and adults in their programs.

Child care programs are also encouraged to provide opportunities for outside play in open green space and should limit travel involving group transportation and apply precautions if group travel is used, including social distancing, group sizes and cleaning and disinfection following CDC guidance.

There are several updates to screening questions and practices, including updated symptom lists and guidance around how to address child care attendance if a household member has been identified as having been in direct contact with someone confirmed to have COVID-19. Details about these and other updated modified operating practices are online at www.nd.gov/dhs/info/covid-19/child-care.html.

“Our goal of keeping children, parents and caregivers safe has not changed. These latest modified guidelines were needed as we move into summer and are effective June 1,” said the department’s Executive Director Chris Jones.

Jones said the emergency operating grants are helping stabilize the state’s child care industry.

“As we move forward with ND Smart Restart, businesses and employers are taking steps to safely reopen, and parents are returning to work sites. We need to continue to value and support the availability of quality child care in our state,” he said.

According to Jones, the department projects it may provide about $21 million in emergency operating grant funding through July 3, 2020, to over 750 licensed and self-declared child care providers in North Dakota who remain open serving children and families and voluntarily chose to opt in to the program.

Since March 30, when the emergency operating grant program began, Jones said child care providers across the state reported that more than 11,500 children have been attending child care, and about 75 percent of those children have been in health, safety and lifeline worker households.

“While we don’t know exactly how many child care programs would have closed without this assistance, we do know from voluntary reporting by providers to Child Care Aware that the number of closed and open programs has stabilized since the grants started on March 30. On April 1, there were 1,572 licensed child care programs in North Dakota. As of yesterday, 142 programs reported that they were closed. That number has been slowly improving,” he said.

He said the department continues monitoring child care needs and capacity. The number of self-reported closed programs represents about 14 percent of total licensed child care capacity in the state.

A list of participating providers is on the Department of Human Services’ website at www.nd.gov/dhs in the COVID-19 Child Care section. Providers can still choose to participate in the emergency operating grant program and can find information online there.

He encouraged parents who are looking for child care to visit the Child Care Aware Resource and Referral online database at www.ndchildcare.org. If a child has special needs, parents can also call Child Care Aware, which can provide personal consultation free of charge to identify quality child care options that work for individual family needs.

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