ND Emergency Commission approves extending child care grant program through December pending Budget Section approval

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On Aug. 3, the North Dakota Emergency Commission approved the Department of Human Services' request for an additional $12 million in remaining Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to again extend the state's Child Care Emergency Operating Grant program. The funding also requires approval from the Legislature's Budget Section, which meets Aug. 13.

The emergency grant program was first implemented March 30, 2020, to support working parents and child care providers impacted by the pandemic. Both are considered vital to the state's economic recovery.

Through July 31, North Dakota has distributed about $26.2 million in operating grants, which have helped almost 800 licensed and self-declared child care providers remain open and caring for over 17,000 children.

Providers have had to adjust to changes in the demand for child care while implementing state and federal COVID-19 guidance that limited child group sizes and added new child and staff health screenings, cleaning and sanitizing requirements and other modified operating practices that increased operating costs.

The operating grant program was initially set to end in June 2020. In June, the Legislature's Budget Section and the state's Emergency Commission approved an extension through August 14, 2020, and this latest extension request will support the child care infrastructure in the

state's recovering economy through December 2020.

The extension will bring the state's investment in supporting working parents and stabilizing the child care industry to $40.8 million.

"We continue to monitor child care needs," said Jessica Thomasson, the department's executive policy director for family stability. "We intend to keep the grant program 'as is' through Sept. 25. The application process, eligibility criteria, payment request process and payment rates will remain unchanged, and the modified operating guidelines related to 15-person limits on group sizes, screening, cleaning, and other guidance will continue to support the health and safety of children, families and caregivers."

Thomasson said, "Our goal is to evaluate both community and family needs with input from providers and partners over the next month, taking into account any needs that arise as K-12 school districts finalize their reopening plans and step into the school year."

She said, the department will review both the modified operating practices and the grant program in the coming weeks and by mid-September, will announce a plan for the rest of the calendar year.

Grant program information, including lists of participating providers, is online at www.nd.gov/dhs/info/covid-19/child-care.html. Providers who choose to participate can find information online there.

In June, in response to growing economic activity and more stable child care program attendance, the department adjusted the rates, increased group size from 10 to 15, eliminated the requirement that participating providers prioritize serving children of health, safety and lifeline worker households, and lifted the $50 limit on the fee child care providers typically charge families to hold a spot during extended child absences.

Parents looking for child care are encouraged to visit the Child Care Aware Resource and Referral online database at www.ndchildcare.org and can also call Child Care Aware, which provides personal consultation at no cost to help parents identify quality child care options that work for individual family needs.

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