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October 8, 2020 - NJ DCF Announces School-Age Childcare Program To Accommodate Working Families

NJ DCF Announces School-Age Childcare Program To Accommodate Working Families

'GAP' Centers Will Be Safe, Community-Based Spaces

TRENTON – In an effort to accommodate working parents whose school age children are learning remotely or in a hybrid model, Governor Phil Murphy and the New Jersey Department of Children and Families are allowing community-based organizations and Faith-based groups to open and staff General Accommodation Program (GAP) Childcare Centers, safe spaces for children to learn online and engage in socially distant interaction with their peers.

"With remote or hybrid learning models being adopted in school districts across the State, members of the local community have stepped forward in creative and admirable ways to provide spaces where the children of working parents can be supervised while receiving a remote education from their school district," said NJ DCF Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer, MSW. "Non-traditional community childcare programs have sprung up in churches, dance studios, gyms, community centers and myriad other locations where space is available. This is the sort of community-minded ingenuity that will help New Jersey get through the COVID-19 public health emergency, but we also need to make sure these programs are being operated safely and regulated fairly."

Under the new program, GAP Childcare Centers will be licensed and regulated, similar to the process that current licensed childcare centers must undergo. In addition to ensuring that GAP Childcare Centers comply with best practices from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to prevent the spread of COVID-19, licensing these centers will also ensure:

- That staff and volunteers at these programs are background-checked, and will undergo both state and federal criminal history checks as well as Child Abuse Record Information (CARI) checks;
- That there is sufficient staffing at the GAP Childcare Center for the number of children being served;
- That facilities are free of imminent dangers to the safety and well-being of children in the program, including environmental concerns and building code standards.

Through the GAP Childcare Center initiative, DCF will work to issue licenses for these programs and future programs using streamlined regulations and process that focus on areas of most critical concern. GAP Childcare Centers can pursue licensure on their own, or in partnership with an already-licensed childcare center. GAP Centers that choose to partner with an existing licensed partner will be able to more quickly access certain benefits of being licensed, including access to federal subsidies, and relaxed staffing ratios.

"DCF isn't interested in shutting these programs down, by any means," said Commissioner Beyer. "We appreciate that they are providing critical services to children and families as they struggle to find the balance between professional and family responsibilities during the public health emergency. We want to make sure that families aren't forced into the difficult position of choosing unsafe care options for their children because parents have to work, and ensuring GAP centers are appropriately licensed and regulated allows us to assure parents that their community option is a safe one."

Any existing GAP centers wishing to continue operating are required to submit an application for licensure to NJ DCF no later than October 23, 2020. The application form and details will be posted to the DCF website, and centers with questions or concerns can direct them to the DCF Office of Licensing. GAP centers, like all other licensed childcare centers in New Jersey, are also required to submit an attestation regarding compliance with COVID-19 health and safety standards as soon as possible.

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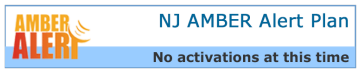

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