

Centralized Eligibility List (CEL) ***A Critical Link for Low Income Families Needing Child Care and Development Assistance***

The Centralized Eligibility List (CEL) is a program that helps connect families with subsidized child development programs as space and funding becomes available. Overall, the CEL's purposes are:

- To simplify the eligibility list registration process for families and increase access to subsidized child development programs for which they are eligible
- To eliminate the need for families to sign up and linger on waiting lists of multiple agencies
- To increase the pool of available eligible children from which child development agencies can draw to fill program vacancies as they become available
- To provide accurate, timely data on local child development needs for use by policymakers, child development programs, and others

The CEL has become a necessary component of the subsidized child development system for several reasons that are related to and go beyond its stated purposes.

Challenges of a Complicated Child Development System

The subsidized child development system consists of several program types and hundreds of contractors representing nonprofit community-based organizations, school districts, private proprietary programs, and faith-based groups. Not all program types serve all ages; sometimes service is time-limited based on the parents work or school status, the child's age, or time authorized through a child welfare agency. There are multiple documents and verifications required to prove eligibility and these 'proofs' must all be available at the time of enrollment. Enrolling in a subsidized program is a complicated process that can be overwhelming for many parents.

Families are often unaware of the many elements of the California Department of Education (CDE)-contracted child care and development system, including:

- Rules of eligibility, including but not limited to income
- Documentation required to verify eligibility
- Various program types (Alternative Payment (AP) Program, California State Preschool Program, Child Care and Development Center or Family Child Care Home Education Network)
- Limitation of service based on need (hours of work or school, etc.)
- Different programs depending on the ages of the children
- Rankings and priorities for enrollment and the impact on waiting periods for families

CDE funding for child development services does not support staffing at the child care resource and referral (R&R) or individual program level to provide the case management services that the most vulnerable families require. Despite being among the highest priorities for enrollment in CDE-contracted services, families with very low incomes or other risk factors are seldom able to wait for a space to become available in a subsidized program. Their circumstances contribute to high rates of mobility, which in turn make them unreachable when space does become available for their children. Extra time is required to counsel these families on their immediate

and long term child development options and extra effort is required to maintain contact with them so that actual connections can be made.

Child development contractors concentrate on processing enrollments as quickly as possible to fill vacancies and recertifying parents of enrolled children as income or circumstances relating to eligibility change. Due to their immediate goals, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the contractor to counsel a family not being enrolled immediately (or at all) when the focus is on contacting and meeting with families who are enrolling.

Filling the Information Gap for Families

CEL staff are positioned to counsel families by telephone on the array of subsidized child development programs, how best to access them, and the realities of the subsidy system based on limited funding and space availability compared to need. Approximately 85% of calls to the CEL staff require conversations relating to accessing subsidized services. In Los Angeles County, this approximates 1,000 mini-counseling sessions each month with opportunities to provide information on:

- Processes for regularly updating the family's CEL file with the required information
- Rankings and priorities that determine when and how families are enrolled from the CEL
- Types of child development programs to help families make informed choices
- Rules of eligibility
- Obtaining documentation required for enrollment
- Responding to the invitation to enroll

These conversations with families often alleviate a lot of their frustrations because they have become better informed even though their immediate need has not been resolved. Furthermore, the counseling provided to families supports the CDE contractors as parents learn what to expect and are better prepared by the time they are invited to enroll their child. Moreover, CEL has become a bridge for low-income families to other programs, such as Early Head Start and Head Start, school readiness programs, and, in Los Angeles County, Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP). These non-CDE-contracted subsidized programs recognize the value of having a centralized source of families to enroll.

CEL staff also work with community social service groups and local County departments to train their staff on how to inform and assist families so that their low income clients are more knowledgeable of this critical resource. In addition to targeting the staff of community-based organizations, CEL staff conduct presentations and orientation sessions with low-income parents at a variety of community-based settings in partnership with social service and health care providers who work directly with the families.

Fraud and Error Prevention

CEL contributes to fraud and error prevention. If the first step for families is to register on their county CEL, then there is no chance they will be on more than one waiting list with different information about their eligibility or status. Duplicates are easily identified in the CEL and inconsistencies in reporting family size, marital status, or income are addressed before a family is called for enrollment.

Prior to the CEL, it was possible for a family to enroll in more than one program without the knowledge of either program. In some instances, a family would stop using one subsidized contractor and start with another without informing either agency. The agency in which the child was originally enrolled may carry that child for a few weeks as an excused absence before they

learned that the family changed to another agency. The contractor likely could have charged the CDE for reimbursement for those weeks at the same time the second agency claimed reimbursement for the same child, or the original contractor lost potential earnings because of the unplanned vacancy. In a more egregious example, a family could be enrolled in a child development center program while simultaneously have another provider paid through the Alternative Payment Program while the child attended the center.

Because most enrollments are now drawn from the CEL, it is possible to identify and prevent dual enrollments such as the examples outlined above before arrangements are finalized. As the CEL evolves, the better able the system can serve as a safeguard against the potential instances of fraud and significantly reduce errors, which can also occur as child development contractors experience fluctuations in staff handling administrative duties such as family registrations and enrollments. The CEL staff provide vital technical assistance and support to agencies dealing with staff turnover, helping to minimize potential errors.

CEL Data

Prior to the establishment of a CEL, it was impossible to know with any certainty what the real time demand was for subsidized care. While the overall number of families in CEL remains fairly stable (200,000 plus or minus statewide), there are local variations affected by economic booms and busts and there are always variations in looking at specific communities and zip codes.

Individual agencies, community groups and school districts, among others rely on the CEL for data to confirm the need for more child development services in local communities or as a signal that development of new spaces would be risky given the low demand expressed through CEL registrations. Additionally, CEL data has become an integral part of evaluating priorities for future funding or for requests to change program locations based on the needs of the local communities.

For additional information on the Centralized Eligibility List,
contact the Office of Child Care at (213) 974-4103
or visit www.childcare.lacounty.gov.