

September 11, 2019

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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Washington, DC 20201

Shannon Christian
Director, Office of Child Care, Administration for
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Dear Assistant Secretary Johnson and Director Christian:

As the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) develops the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) for Year 2 of the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Program (PDG B-5), the First Five Years Fund and other Early Childhood Education advocates would like to provide recommendations that will contribute to the program's future success. We appreciate ACF's commitment to this program as demonstrated by awards made to 46 states and territories in the Year 1 competition, though ACF initially intended to award only 40 grants. It is of the utmost importance that Year 2 funds be awarded in a strategic manner that builds on Year 1 work and allows states to progress in the creation and delivery of state systems committed to high-quality early learning and care for children from birth through age five.

The additional grants awarded in response to overwhelming state interest required many states to revise their original plans and caused delays in issuing funding. Consequently, states are in various stages of completing their Year 1 needs assessment and strategic planning activities. Given what we already know about state mixed-delivery systems, however, the needs assessments will likely show not only how valuable early learning and care programs are in the lives of young children and their families, but also the substantial unmet need that exists nearly everywhere. This demonstrates the tremendous importance of the work made possible by PDG B-5. States have been given the opportunity to inventory existing programs; reduce fragmentation and overlap; optimize federal, state, and local funding streams; and build partnerships to better meet the needs of children and families in their local communities. In light of efforts underway, we have the following three recommendations:

1. Funding Level Continuity

In addition to implementation of the Year 1 strategic plan, Year 2 funding must continue to allow for flexibility, creativity, and innovation, while also providing states with a roadmap for moving the process forward. To that end, the FOA should provide as much information as possible about the funding levels of the coming grant awards, which has already been appropriated, so states can be planful and are equipped to decide where funds will be most useful in building a sustainable network of services.

2. Encouraging Partner Engagement

Year 2 grants should encourage states to continue to meaningfully engage with partners and stakeholders across the early childhood field. Many states have started this collaboration, however, throughout implementation of a statewide plan, it is critically important to work with all stakeholders to create the most inclusive, least restrictive, highly creative system of care considering all children from birth through age five. Moreover, these partnerships have the potential to facilitate the sharing of best practices, streamlining administration, and shifting resources to where they are most needed.

3. Supporting States

The FOA and criteria should consider states on a spectrum. While many states were slow to start due to delays in receipt of funding, since beginning their work, states have committed to the process and vision of PDG B-5, and there should be room for all levels of progress toward Year 1 goals. Change takes time, and to make effective change, thorough planning and extensive discussion needs to occur. The emphasis of awards in Year 2 should be on the vision and feasibility of success, rather than a somewhat arbitrary timeline of task completion from Year 1. Specifically, grants should be awarded to states that address shortcomings identified in the needs assessment and who strive for continuous improvement to better serve children and families. With these goals in mind, the FOA must leave room to consider continued funding for states across a range of progress and continued needs.

Congress has shown bipartisan support and attention to PDG B-5 from conception to implementation and most recently in the United States House of Representatives by increasing funding in FY2020. As such, there is great value in ACF providing ample technical assistance and strategic direction to states in Year 2. Additionally, ACF should consider how continued technical assistance can be provided to states who may not receive Year 2 funding to ensure the hard work done in Year 1 does not go unrealized and to draw on what states are doing.

Governors across the country have applauded these critical federal investments. The PDG B-5 program affirms both the importance of early learning in advancing equal access to education and the central role of states in leading early childhood coordination and quality efforts. The program also represents a unique opportunity for the federal government to support state investments and initiatives as they consider how to best improve coordination, quality, and delivery of services.

We again thank you for your commitment to the PDG B-5 program and look forward to continuing our work together to ensure its success.

Sincerely,

Alaska Children's Trust
Alliance for Early Success
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Child Care Aware of America
Children's Advocacy Alliance (NV)
Children's Institute
CT Early Childhood Alliance
Early Care and Education Consortium
First Five Years Fund (FFYF)
GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students
Hawaii Children's Action Network
Kansas Action for Children
Kids Forward (WI)
Maine Children's Alliance
Maryland Family Network
MomsRising
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
National Black Child Development Institute
National Head Start Association (NHSA)
National Women's Law Center (NWLC)
New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children (NMAEYC)
Ounce of Prevention Fund
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Strategies for Children
Teachstone Training, LLC
Voices for Virginia's Children
The Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham