

Wait List Management

Approaches to managing wait lists vary. For example, some Lead Agencies complete comprehensive eligibility determinations prior to placing families onto the waiting list. Others perform abbreviated eligibility reviews, relying primarily on information submitted with the application for determining if families qualify for wait list placement. This paper examines wait list policies and methods Lead Agencies use to manage subsidy caseloads.

Program Closures

Some States and Territories use waiting lists as a strategy for managing subsidy caseloads and expenditures. At the start of the 2014-15 CCDF Plan cycle, 26 Lead Agencies reported having waiting list policies in place. Fifteen had active waiting lists statewide and nine at the local level.ⁱ A recent report published by the National Women's Law Center found that 20 States had waiting lists or frozen intake in calendar 2016ⁱⁱ. This number is slightly lower than the 21 states with waiting lists or frozen intake in 2015.

Most Lead Agencies close intake to specific priority service categories starting with families that fall into the lowest priority groups. For example, States may only close intake to working families with the highest income levels. This approach allows Lead Agencies to continue serving families and children with the highest service needs. For example, high priority groups that typically are exempt from program closures may include:

- Active TANF families
- Families transitioning off TANF
- Families with countable income below the Federal poverty level
- Households with minor parents attending high school or an equivalent program
- Families receiving protective services
- Homeless families, children with special needs and other vulnerable at-risk populations

Avoiding Application Surges

Lead Agencies must notify the public when intake closes. This can lead to a surge in application volume when the public receives notice or anticipates the program closure. Programs that close intake for large segments of the service population may have difficulty estimating the volume of applications submitted by the announced closing date. Generally, applications submitted before the program closes must be processed and determined eligible if the family qualifies. Program closures are easier to manage when the Lead Agency has authority to close and reopen intake to specific priority groups or a narrow range of income levels.

Application surges can occur when intake reopens, especially when programs open on a first-come first-serve basis for an undefined period. Because the application volume is unpredictable, intake may need to close again if the number of applications received is too high to support within current funding levels. As a result, programs that do not maintain waiting lists tend to remain closed for longer periods to ensure that caseloads fall within acceptable funding levels. Programs that remain closed too long may have difficulty enrolling enough children to meet their mandatory and matching CCDF expenditure requirements.

Using Wait Lists to Improve Caseload Management

Wait lists help manage caseloads more efficiently by providing greater control over the influx of new applicants. They allow Lead Agencies to determine which priority categories to reopen and the number of families to select from those on the list. Waiting lists also help avoid the surge in application volume that occurs when the public becomes aware of intake reopening. This generally occurs through public service or media announcements, and information posted on the consumer education websites.

It is important to have an automated system in place for tracking wait listed families. Lead Agencies need to record information such as the parent's name, mailing address, phone number, email address, income and family size, as well as the application date and priority service category of the family at the time of application. This information will allow program administrators to monitor and generate reports on the number and types of wait listed families, including:

- geographic distribution of wait listed families
- number of children at specific age ranges, such as school age or infants
- number of wait listed families with multiple children
- number of children by priority group

Recording this information also allows the Lead Agency to quickly match families to open slots and call the families from the waiting list as open program openings become available.

Wait lists become less efficient when they take significant staffing resources to establish and maintain. Examples of strategies Lead Agencies use for managing waiting lists efficiently include:

- Performing abbreviated eligibility reviews for applicants that do not meet the requirements of an open priority service category. For example, some Lead Agencies determine wait list eligibility based on the information submitted with the application without requiring additional verification.
- Conducting eligibility reviews for wait listed families only when a parent reports a change that qualifies the family for an open priority.
- Validating ongoing need for services by issuing notices to wait listed families at specific intervals asking them to confirm their continued interest in accessing services.
- Requiring families to report address changes so they can be contacted when program openings occur. Exceptions may include families that report address changes to TANF, SNAP, Medicaid or other assistance programs to which the child care agency has IT system access.

Research studies of low-income families indicate employment rates decline the longer families wait to receive child care assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ Financial instability and the high cost of care lead to job loss and the lack of need for child care. These observations are consistent with reports of extremely low response rates for initial cohorts of families called from waiting lists. In this context, waiting lists that become too large can impede progress toward moving families into the program.

Periodically validating the need for care helps to remove families who no longer require care from the waiting list. Another strategy is to implement policies for opening and closing waiting lists by priority categories. This gives Lead Agencies the ability to manage waiting lists more efficiently and with less administrative effort.

Call Volume and Services

The inability to access affordable child care has a significant impact on the ability of parents to accept or maintain employment. Well-trained call center staff can answer specific questions concerning the program closing and policies.

When families are placed on a wait list, many programs send parents a resource list, including contact information for Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R). Call centers and CCR&Rs should be prepared to handle the increased call volume during program closures. A common practice is for the Lead Agency to establish a triage process for routing calls to the appropriate entity and to include the contact information in any public information and media announcements.

Lastly, the ability for parents to access other programs for their children is often overlooked. Call center staff can explore options for enrolling in Head Start and Early Head Start programs, State funded Pre-k or other government subsidized or low-cost child care programs.

ⁱ U.S. DHHS Child Care and Development Fund Plans, ACF-118, §2.3.7 (effective October 1, 2013).

ⁱⁱ National Women's Law Center: *Red Light Green Light, State Child Care Assistance Policies*, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthews, Hannah. *Child Care Assistance Helps Families Work: A Review of the Effects of Subsidy Receipt on Employment*. CLASP 2006.