

# Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: Operational Considerations



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

## For State Child Care and Development Fund Administrators

This resource describes operational considerations for State Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) administrators responsible for managing or contracting for child care resource and referral call center services. This resource is designed to be used in conjunction with **Implementing Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Their Partners** and its companion training guide.

These resources focus on exemplary practices for child care resource and referral call centers that provide child care referrals and forward health and safety complaint calls to designated agencies.

## Why Do Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies Operate a Resource and Referral Call Center?

States, Territories, Tribes, and communities are providing consumer education in new and different ways as a result of interrelated CCDF requirements for hotlines, call centers, and consumer education websites. Call centers in particular remain uniquely positioned to serve as a resource for parents. Administrators may find the need to align and update their call center practices that relate to comprehensive child care consumer information. These specific practices include how to report health, safety, or abuse concerns from parents.

Each State, Territory, and Tribe has its own structure for implementing early childhood, school-age care, and consumer education requirements. Some Lead Agencies deliver child care consumer education and process child care health and safety complaints within their own agency. Others may contract with child care resource and referral agencies or other organizations for a combination of service delivery methods.

While the delivery structures vary, all call centers share the opportunity to provide families with direct, personalized information. Call center staff often are the first live contact parents have with early childhood and school-age care and education professionals and services. These staff open the door and create a first impression for families.



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This resource offers considerations for operating resource and referral call centers in the following areas:

- Budget
- Availability
- Training and professional development
- Quality assurance

## Budget

### Staffing

Consider staff recruitment and retention costs, wages, and benefits. Roles to be filled include direct call center staff (people who answer and handle calls), management, data entry and reporting, training, quality control, and IT support. The number of staff required depends upon the number of working families the center intends to serve, hours of operation, and service delivery area.

### Equipment

Budget for initial and replacement costs for desks, chairs, computers, phones, headsets, and office supplies. Governmental agencies can use their agency's budgeting guidelines. Nonprofit and privately owned entities may use the U.S. Small Business Administration's online resources to calculate business startup costs.

### Software

- Phone software. Consider software or a software service that will generate reports on calls (number of incoming calls, average hold time, average talk time, number of missed calls, etc.) and call recording capabilities. These features allow calls to be audited for quality assurance.
- Call records/tracking software. Identify software to track call data, including types of calls (e.g., referrals, complaints, or general information requests) and types of callers (e.g., parents, providers/programs, other agencies).
- Child care referral software. In addition to receiving CCDF-required licensing and monitoring information, parents will make decisions about which early childhood or school-age care and education program to choose based on the program's hours of operation, fees, approach to learning, and other preferences.

Resource and referral agencies generally use a database to store and retrieve this type of information. They may also use program information made available through the State, Territory, or Tribe's consumer education website. If you plan to make additional resource and referral services available, you will want to identify, link with, or build a provider database to support the work of call center staff. When designing business processes, be sure to follow applicable state and federal privacy rules and regulations related to collecting personally identifiable information.

Consider where the database will be stored. Determine how any additional provider information will be gathered. Decide whether you will allow early childhood and school-age professionals to login and update their own profiles, vacancies, and other information, and choose software accordingly. Or plan for staff to collect, enter, and routinely update the program data that parents need to make a choice that fits the needs of their family.

## **Toll-free Services**

Budget for toll-free (1-800) services for incoming and outgoing calls, based on number of minutes. Depending on the plan, call volume, and number of minutes used, toll-free services may cost \$1,000 or more per month.

## **Linguistic Responsiveness**

Determine how the call center will respond to callers who need information in languages other than English. You may hire bilingual or multilingual staff or contract with a translation service. Costs for translation services start at approximately \$100 minimum a month, plus usage fees. Find guidance for choosing language access providers on the website of the Limited English Proficiency Federal Interagency.

## **Initial and Ongoing Training and Professional Development**

Identify the resources you will use to train call center staff initially and thereafter. Your budget may include the purchase of a training package, or allow you to contract with trainers; or you may develop your own specific training modules. For more information, see the **Implementing Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Their Partners** and other resources available on the Office of Child Care's technical assistance website.

## **General Operations (Indirect) Costs**

If you are contracting for services, you may want to identify general operations (indirect) costs and how they will be allocated. These costs typically include such expenses as insurance, legal fees, banking and accounting fees, rent, utilities, and depreciation of fixed assets.

## **Marketing and Promotion**

Consider how you will promote call center services to families and other community partners on an ongoing basis. There is a new audience of first-time parents every year. Promotion of services is not a one-time event. Additional promotional and marketing costs may include telephone listing ads on social media, your consumer education, and signage. Promoting child care resource and referral can be built into all ongoing family support services.

## **Availability**

### **Operating Hours**

When determining call center operating hours and staffing, consider times that are convenient for families. Families may work nontraditional hours and need referral services at nontraditional times, including early mornings, "lunch hours," evenings, and weekends.

### **Easing "Hold" Times**

If you anticipate callers being on "hold," consider using a comfort message (a message that will play periodically while they are on hold). Comfort messages can include consumer education tips on how to select child care, information on community resources, and alternative ways to find information, such as your website. Also consider having an option for the caller to leave a message at any time if they are unable to hold.

## After Hours

Decide how you will handle calls that come in outside of (or after) operating hours. If callers will be invited to leave a voicemail message, set and monitor policies for how quickly call center staff must respond to the message. Be sure that the call center's outgoing message clearly states when callers can expect to have their calls returned and, if applicable, alternative ways callers can find help, such as by visiting your website.

## Emergency Preparedness and Response

Create a plan and practice emergency communication channels and operational procedures that will be used in the event of an emergency or disaster (e.g., for emergency closures or rerouted calls). Be sure that call center staff are trained in these procedures. Use actual experiences to validate existing procedures or to create new ones (FEMA, 2015).

## Training and Professional Development

**Implementing Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and their Partners** addresses exemplary practices for handling child care referral calls, and calls related to health and safety complaints. Other training topics relevant for call center staff include:

- **CCDF requirements for consumer education, including the “consumer statement.”** Find requirements for consumer education and consumer education resources on ACF's Child Care Technical Assistance website, CCTA.
- **Child development.** Find a number of resources and free, downloadable materials related to child development at ChildCare.gov or <https://www.cdc.gov>.
- **Family well-being.** Safety, health, and financial stability are key to family well being. Call center staff may have opportunities to connect callers with additional supports for family well being. The following resources available on CCTA address topics related to family well being:
  - **Family Well-Being: Strategies to Support Family Safety, Health, and Financial Stability** offers strategies early childhood professionals and programs can use to support family well being. While written for program-level professionals, many of the strategies are applicable for call center staff.
  - **Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness: An Interactive Learning Series for Early Childhood Professionals** includes eight modules and related resources defining homelessness, determining homelessness status, having sensitive conversations with families who may be homeless, and more.
  - **Helping Children Recover from Exposure to Trauma: Resources for Child Care Providers and Parents** provides links to teaching resources, training modules, publications, and other resources to assist early childhood professionals and parents as they help children recover from exposure to a natural disaster or other traumatic event. While written for program-level professionals and parents, much of the information is applicable to call center staff.

## Quality Assurance

### Standards

Establish and monitor standards to ensure that calls are promptly and accurately answered. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services call center standards require that:

- The average hold time may not exceed 2 minutes (the average hold time is defined as the time spent on hold by the caller following an interactive voice response [IVR] system, touch-tone response system, or recorded greeting and before reaching a live person).
- Eighty percent of incoming calls are answered within 30 seconds.
- The disconnect rate of all incoming calls does not exceed 5 percent (CMS, 2018, p. 21).

### Resources

**Implementing Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Their Partners**

**Implementing Child Care Resource and Referral Call Centers: Training for CCDF Lead Agencies and Their Partners**

### References

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (2018, September). *Medicare communications and marketing guidelines (MCMG)*.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). (2015). Emergency operations center assessment checklist.

For more information about this resource, please contact us:  
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