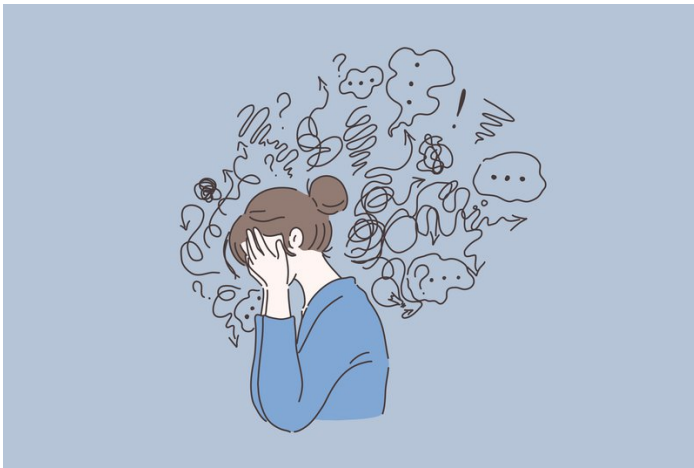# Lost in the Labyrinth: Helping Families Access Early Care and Education Programs

States vary widely with no shortage of opportunities for improvement

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Overview

*Families with the youngest children stand to **gain the most** from improved access to benefits, yet persistent fragmentation in early care and education (ECE) programs creates challenges in finding, applying for, and enrolling in services. As a result, families miss out on critical opportunities for their children at the time when these ECE programs have the highest impact. The New Practice Lab examined what these missed opportunities look like up close in one state and collected data on the fractured system of programs and funding streams across all fifty states to begin illustrating the complexity that families face. Ultimately, we see wide variation across states with plenty of opportunities to increase access to*

information, simplify application procedures, and create more equitable access to these services.

Early Care and Education System Lacks Cohesion

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services project on Healthy People 2030, early care and education – particularly the first five years of life – impacts long-term social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. At the speed of a **million neural connections per second**, infants and young children begin to understand and respond to the world around them. There are **23 million such children** living in the United States among **13.7 million families**, and supporting their healthy development is no small task.

The importance of the birth to five year old cohort has not been lost on policy makers, who have responded with a plethora of programs intended to support young children.

At the federal level, the **Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project** cataloged **36 federal programs that explicitly support child and family well-being**.

Exhibit I.1. Reviewed federal programs serving expectant parents, young children, and their families

Federal program	Department/agency
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	
Military Child Care	U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)
21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC)	U.S. Department of Education (ED)
Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS)	
Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A)	
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B Section 619	
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C	
Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native Education	
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families
Child Support Program	
Child Welfare Services Program (Title IV-B, Subpart 1 of the Social Security Act)	
Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) Grants	
Early Head Start	
Head Start	
Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5)	
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	
The Federal Foster Care Program and the Prevention Services Program (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act)	
Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (TMIECHV)	
Essentials for Childhood	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Learn the Signs. Act Early.	
Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
Medicaid	
Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Program	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Health Resources and Services Administration
Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) State Programs	
Family-to-Family Health Information Centers	
Health Center Program	
Healthy Start	
Infant Toddler Court Program (ITCP)	
Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Block Grant (Title V)	
Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)	
Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Grant Program	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health (Project LAUNCH)	
Mental Health Block Grant	
Family and Child Education (FACE)	U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), Bureau of Indian Education

Note: The programs are in alphabetical order by department, agency, and program name.

The catalog includes program descriptions, eligibility requirements, and supported populations for all 36 programs. Source: Airtable version of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project Catalog, accessed March 30, 2023, https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/82f836ad1d25d918 024cb0bc301a4023/ECS-Catalog.xlsx.

These programs provide a range of supports like early care and education, healthcare, and cash or food assistance. Many are targeted to economically vulnerable families or those with specific risk factors including developmental delays or disabilities, homelessness, or foster care involvement. These federal programs are complemented by state and locally funded initiatives, which may be similarly aimed at populations with risk factors, or designed to be universal in some cases.

Navigating these programs, however, can aggravate the already challenging experience of giving birth and raising young children. A **2018 case study from the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC)** illustrates the ways that poorly integrated early care and education programs might undercut a hypothetical family with two young children. In 2022, the Office of Management and Budget's Customer Experience (CX) team recognized that **childbirth and rearing for low income families** is a significant life event, warranting a "whole of government" approach that reorients services around the needs of people, rather than the structure of government agencies. Their human-centered design work resulted in several pilot projects slated for launch in 2023, including a "benefits bundle" of customized services for families. Additional federal-level efforts highlight **opportunities for improved coordination and alignment of ECE programs**. Nevertheless, these programs are not yet united into a single accessible system that supports vulnerable families during this stage of life.

The U.S. spends **less than half the average** of other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members on quality early care and education, but the funding issue is compounded by a lack of coordination across services. Programs for affordable child care, early intervention and preschool special education, and Head Start exist in every state, but are often administered by different state and local agencies. This fragmentation often leads to scattered program information and varying eligibility, application, and enrollment processes. State funded pre-kindergarten programs are a critical piece of the puzzle, but are also managed in myriad ways that further complicate the landscape. This lack of cohesion makes it difficult for families to know what's available, what they are eligible for, and how to enroll.

Meanwhile, chronic underinvestment in the ECE sector leaves some families who successfully navigate eligibility and application processes to languish on wait lists or continually reapply as shortages of early childhood educators, high quality programs, and funds hamper uptake. The U.S. lags behind other OECD members in early learning enrollment, ranking 23rd out of 26 countries. This is not due to lack of demand. A recent case for universal childcare and pre-kindergarten cites multiple studies documenting "child care deserts", wait lists, and labor impacts of our broken system. An early care and education infrastructure that is both underfunded and disjointed has real consequences for families with young children: families forgo work, pay

out of pocket costs, and rely on a hodgepodge of family, friends, and neighbors for care.

The New Practice Lab's Work on Complexity in Early Care and Education
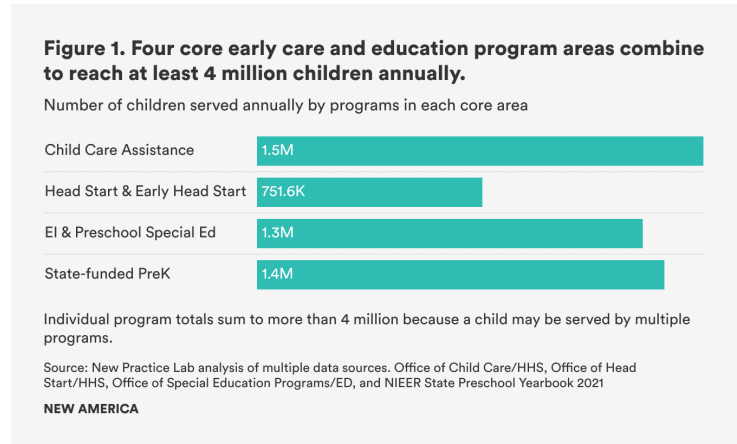
In 2022, the New Practice Lab collaborated with parents and community stakeholders in Minnesota to identify ways to reduce complexity in their early care and education programs. The difficulties they experienced selecting appropriate programs, understanding eligibility, and applying for services **reinforced existing work** describing opportunities to improve access to early care and education, and we highlighted **some of their observations in December 2022**.

To better understand this landscape nationwide, and to confirm whether the information access and application burdens we found in one state were typical, we scanned publicly available information on early care and education offerings in each state and DC. We focused on the four core program areas that receive the most **public funding**:

1. child care assistance;
2. Head Start and Early Head Start;
3. state-funded pre-kindergarten; and
4. Early intervention and preschool special education (including Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C and Part B, 619).

Together these four program areas reached at least 4 million children in 2021. Thus, reducing complexity and fragmentation and increasing coordination in these areas has the most potential to impact a broad swath of children and families.

Figure 1. Core programs

Figure 1. Four core early care and education program areas combine to reach at least 4 million children annually.

Number of children served annually by programs in each core area

Child Care Assistance	1.5M
Head Start & Early Head Start	751.6K
EI & Preschool Special Ed	1.3M
State-funded PreK	1.4M

Individual program totals sum to more than 4 million because a child may be served by multiple programs.

Source: New Practice Lab analysis of multiple data sources. Office of Child Care/HHS, Office of Head Start/HHS, Office of Special Education Programs/ED, and NIEER State Preschool Yearbook 2021

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Our scan included an examination of state websites to see what families encounter when seeking out ECE resources. Specifically, we looked for collocation of programs on single websites, family facing tabs or hubs, eligibility screeners, online applications, and accessibility tools like site translation and contact information. We also looked at program descriptions, application procedures, and timelines for service.
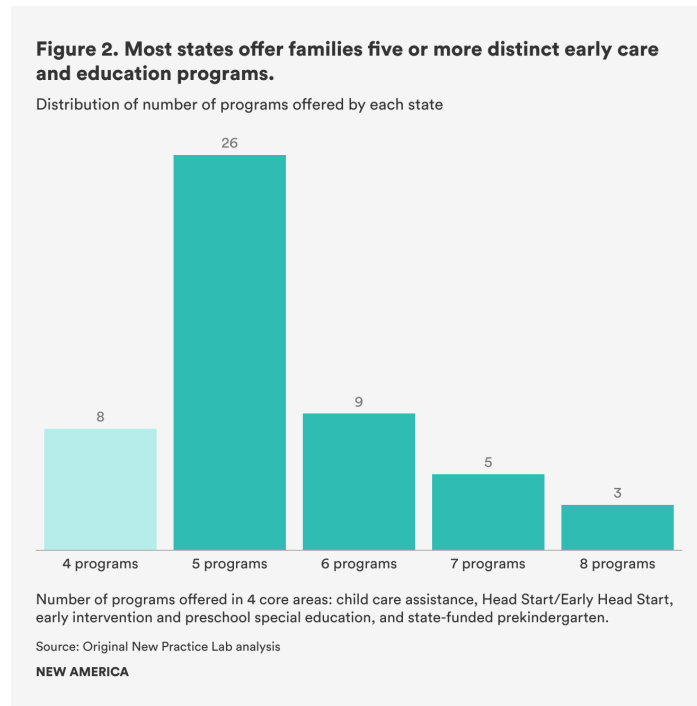
Families Face a Maze of Programs

Drivers of Fragmented Family Experience

Range of Services

Our review identified a wide range in the number of programs that are offered in these areas across states: **anywhere between four and eight programs are offered, though two-thirds of states offer five or six programs.** All states and DC offer programs in three of our four core areas: child care assistance, Head Start, and early intervention/preschool special education. There is no federally funded pre-kindergarten program in the United States, so the greatest variability in offerings is clustered in this group. All but six states offer some version of **state funded pre-kindergarten**, although **most do not enroll enough children to be considered universal**. Several states have multiple child care assistance and/or state-funded pre-kindergarten programs in place.

Figure 2. Number of programs

Figure 2. Most states offer families five or more distinct early care and education programs.

Distribution of number of programs offered by each state

	8	26	9	5	3
	4 programs	5 programs	6 programs	7 programs	8 programs

Number of programs offered in 4 core areas: child care assistance, Head Start/Early Head Start, early intervention and preschool special education, and state-funded prekindergarten.

Source: Original New Practice Lab analysis

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Varying Administrative Structures

Administration of most federally funded early childhood programs falls to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. In most cases, these agencies administer funds to states and/or local grantees that implement the programs. With the exception of **IDEA Part B, Section 619**, which funds special education for preschool aged children, these programs are not required to be implemented by a particular state agency. Still, state education departments most often administer the largest share of early care and education programs, alone or in combination with other agencies.[1]

A recent **Bipartisan Policy Center report** found improved integration of state governance systems over the past five years, with two or fewer agencies administering ECE programs in most states.[2] Indeed, in recent years several states have taken the step of aligning programs under a **state office of early childhood or learning**. Still, in 15 states, at least three state agencies administer early care and education programs, and there are five states where four or more agencies have a role in administering these programs.[3]

Fragmented systems of early care and education services can lead to potential information gaps and barriers to access for families, but not always. We examined the relationship between state ECE administration and public-facing program information. For each state, we focused on the same four core ECE program areas to understand which government agency administered them *and* where and how the public could access information about them.

We reviewed state agency websites to assess how often programs in the core areas are collocated.

- In 12 states, core area programs were spread out across four or more websites.
- In 22 states, program information was available from three websites.
- 15 states narrowed the window to two websites.
- In two states, programs in all four core areas were collocated on one site.

However, agency websites are only one way to access program information. Working from another direction, we searched for state websites focusing on "early childhood" or "early learning" to see how program information might be collocated and linked. We examined at least one website for each state and found at least 30 that provided information about programs in three or more of the core areas, including 14 with at least some information or link to programs in all four areas. Moreover, 18 of these early childhood hubs provided information about additional programs to support child and family thriving, like home visiting or child health programs, and links to other supports such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), respite care, developmental activities, and more. Most states with robust early childhood sites have streamlined ECE governance structures, but several are considered fragmented.

Overall, there is a clear association between more consolidated early care and education governance and comprehensive public information for families about available programs and services. That said, states without consolidated governance have made progress in collocating program information in ways that might increase program awareness and access. Usability

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testing and feedback from families about the ways they access program information would further inform the organization and design of early care and education resources.

Differences in Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria for the four core program areas vary based on the target population and intended reach of the program.

- Federal **Child Care Assistance** funds support state-level programs that offer subsidized child care for families or caregivers engaged in work, training, or education activities. Federal rules stipulate that **recipient income must be 85% or below of the state median income**, but states have flexibility to set additional hourly requirements and income limits.
- **Head Start** programs promote the school readiness of infants, toddlers and preschool aged children from families living **at or below the federal poverty level**.
- **Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education** (including IDEA **Part C** and **Part B, 619**) programs provide ECE services to children ages birth to five with diagnosed or suspected disabilities or developmental delay. **All children are eligible** for special education services upon referral and evaluation.
- **State-funded Preschool** programs have the most variability in eligibility requirements, with **some programs offering near universal coverage and most prioritizing vulnerable populations** that may or may not overlap with Head Start, child care assistance, and/or preschool special education.

States have a great deal of flexibility in adjusting eligibility criteria for multiple programs. For example, some states lower eligibility thresholds for federal child care assistance to less than 85% of state median income. Others align eligibility with the **federal poverty guidelines**, which are commonly used for other means-tested social programs. Qualification for child care assistance also requires participation in certain approved activities (usually work, training, and education) and states may establish the list of

acceptable activities. This list does not necessarily align with requirements for other means-tested programs, creating confusion about maintaining eligibility across programs.

Ways that Families Experience Fragmentation

Families eligible for one support program are often eligible for others. Ideally, those seeking early care and education services are aware of the array of programs available, understand the various eligibility requirements, and are well positioned to decide what fits their needs. Despite program fragmentation, many states are making progress in helping families navigate and access supportive services online.

Finding Program Information Through Official Digital Channels

Sharing information about available ECE programs online is an important service to families, but many other factors influence the experience of navigation and access. Our scan of early childhood hubs and program websites identified site features that facilitate understanding, access, and uptake of programs. These features include:

- Clear differentiation between parent-and provider-facing programs and services, such as separate portals or tabs indicating "get services" or "for families."
- A welcoming search function on family-facing pages, such as "How can we help?" or clearly labeled icons or links like "How do I get financial assistance?"
- Programs organized by age group, particularly when coupled with icons clearly demonstrating what populations would be served: pregnant people, newborns, infants, toddlers, pre-K, young children, and children with disabilities.
- Direct links to programs not administered by the owner of the website, portal, or hub.
- Program descriptions using plain language that clearly conveys what is being offered and to whom. For example, links to "Help Paying for Childcare" rather than CCDF or CCAP.
- Sites that are available in multiple languages, use third-party translation options, or offer phone translation assistance.

- Accessibility icons.
- A designated point of contact for additional assistance that is clear and easy to find.

Figure 3. Ohio's Bold Beginning website navigation

The header for Ohio's Bold Beginning website has clearly labeled sections for families separate from providers. It also has a quickly accessible link for a translated site to support families who may not be comfortable navigating a site in English.

Understanding Eligibility Criteria

Complex eligibility criteria can impede families' understanding of available supports, even when policy is well intended. For example, a state might ease income limits for families of children who are under five or disabled, or for enrolled families so they do not experience **the shock of a "benefits cliff"** if earnings increase. Policies should be carefully designed to avoid service interruptions as children benefit from **continuity of care**, but a possible consequence is that families need considerable expertise to interpret eligibility requirements, phase out schedules, and sliding scales. In such cases, care should be taken to ensure that the public can understand provided eligibility information.

For example, rather than presenting a series of tables with ambiguous headings and undefined technical terminology, states might consider developing interactive screening tools that prompt visitors for relevant information about their family, income, and care needs and provide a rapid, high-level assessment of which programs they might qualify for. These screening tools provide a user-friendly overlay to eligibility requirements for multiple programs while reducing administrative burden for users. Note that while screeners are very effective in educating users about available services, they do not replace eligibility determinations, and direct help should be readily available for families and other applicants.

Although most states include eligibility guidance for early care and education programs on their websites, only a few provide user-friendly screeners for these programs, and combined applications for ECE services

are very rare. We identified at least three states with screening tools for multiple ECE programs. We found six others with screening tools to help families determine whether they were eligible for child care assistance, and another nine with combined screeners for child care assistance along with other social services programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Most link directly to applications and offer next steps for how to apply. Although these combined eligibility screeners are useful tools to support families with other needs such as cash, health care, and food assistance, it is rare for them to include ECE programs other than child care assistance.

Figure 4. New Mexico's early care and education eligibility screener

New Mexico offers a 5 step eligibility screener that doesn't require any login information prior to using it. Results show all benefit programs the user may be eligible for, with links to applications where available as well as programs they may not qualify for.

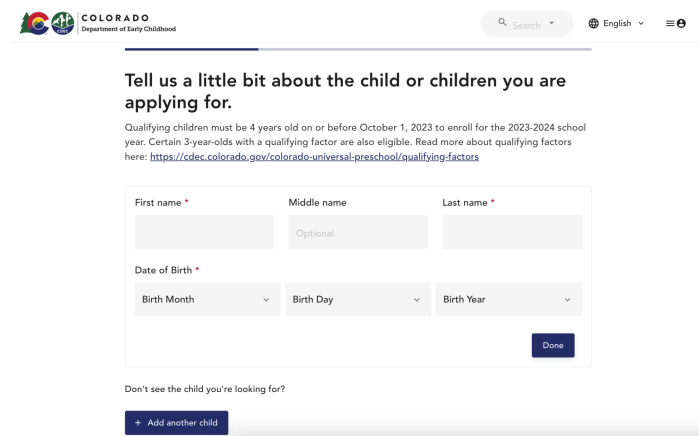## Navigating Multiple Application Processes

Though core area programs serve similar populations, fragmentation results in a lack of combined/unified application processes, and families seeking care often must apply separately to multiple programs to access affordable early care and education for their children.

For instance, federally funded Head Start programs are run locally and there is no common application or submission location, despite consistent and longstanding eligibility criteria that may support a more unified process. Children in families meeting **certain criteria are categorically eligible** for Head Start which may simplify the process, but families still do the footwork to find providers. Most state-provided Head Start information is brief and links to the **federal**

Head Start locator, which only provides contact information for nearby centers. Some locations are managed by regional offices or school districts that accept a single application for multiple sites, but this is not guaranteed.

Similarly, the administration of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs varies widely, with some states funding early learning scholarships for qualifying families, and others providing funding for slots in district schools or with private providers, or some combination of approaches. In most cases, those seeking access to publicly funded pre-kindergarten are directed to contact local school districts, providers, or similar entities. A few states do offer a single application point for state-funded pre-kindergarten (e.g., **Florida**, Colorado). Notably, Colorado's recently launched universal pre-kindergarten program has **one application** and submission process for families *and* the state handles the program matching process.

Figure 5. Colorado's Department of Early Childhood online application

Colorado offers a single online application for all preschool programs, alleviating the burden of having to determine which programs one is eligible for and then completing multiple applications

Early intervention services and preschool special education do not have a traditional application process. Services for children with suspected disabilities, developmental delays, or other risk factors are initiated by referrals through state Child Find programs. Referrals can be made by anyone, but are often made by pediatricians, child care providers, educators, social workers, or families themselves. Statewide information on referral services is generally easy to find with search terms like "early intervention" and "developmental

delays" but **health literacy may impact** the way families find, interpret, and act on information about early intervention. There are racial and social inequities in the way children are **screened and referred for services**, as well as the **services they receive**, suggesting ample room for process improvement. Despite limited visibility into that process, our scan revealed pronounced information gaps around how children transition from early intervention services (IDEA Part C) to preschool services (IDEA Part B, 619), often administered by different agencies. Understanding services available under IDEA Part B and C may encourage families to pursue specialized early care and education for their children (to which they are entitled by law), and reduce family care expenses.

Child care assistance programs are an exception to the mostly hyperlocal nature of early care and education administration. Applications for assistance are readily visible in most states, and we reviewed 37 of them to try to understand the administrative burden faced by families seeking care. Many of the applications reviewed were for child care assistance only, and several were combined applications for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. Standalone application form length varied from three to 18 pages, with an average of 8.2 pages per application. For combined applications, the paperwork burden was greater but may be offset when applicants are more aware of programs, and when applicants can upload documents to verify eligibility across programs. Of the 10 combined applications we reviewed, the shortest was 10 pages and the longest was 40, with an average of 22.4 pages.

Most states provided online and PDF application options, but 15 were PDF only and typically needed to be returned by mail, fax, or in person. Many states offered applications in multiple languages, but 12 of the applications we reviewed were available only in English. There was wide variability in the level of detail required in requests for information, with some applications requesting weekly work schedules complete with start and end times— a difficult proposition for those with varying shifts or fluctuating workweeks. Some application questions are mandated by statute. For

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example, all states must ask if applicants have more than $1 million in assets. Outside of those requirements, states have broader flexibility in how much data to collect for eligibility verification, and they should evaluate the administrative burden placed on families seeking care.

We also reviewed all state child care assistance websites for additional information on the application process. The methods states use to verify documents and eligibility varied, with at least 13 states requiring interviews for determinations, and many states lacking clear timelines for eligibility determinations.

Programs Are Too Complex Everywhere, Plenty of Opportunities to Improve Exist

Simplify Access to Information

Early care and education program complexity and fragmentation is not isolated to any one state, or even a handful of states. The number of public early care and education resources available in each state varies substantially, as does the extent to which programs are integrated and aligned. Our review found broad variation in the way information about early care and education resources is presented to families, which may negatively impact their ability to access programs.

At the federal level, agencies are reflecting on their role in **improving alignment and coordination** across early childhood programs. Several states are working to align ECE programs within an early childhood governance framework, focusing on streamlined access to programs and information, coordinated eligibility standards, combined or simplified applications, and tools to increase access. Although consolidation of administration does not always translate to a better experience for families, improving user experience does not require governance changes. States are demonstrating this with efforts to improve coordination across programs regardless of governance structure.

The **Preschool Development Birth through Five Grants** (PDG B-5) program offers states opportunities to improve disparities in access to and availability of early childhood services. PDG B-5 supports improved collaboration among existing programs as well as

"**mixed-delivery systems**" that include child care and family child care providers, Head Start, state pre-kindergarten, and home visiting. States are using these funds to increase program coordination and implement systems that increase ECE capacity and better serve families and providers. These efforts are demonstrating the possibilities of improving implementation and program capacity by combining multiple funding streams in one classroom while also reducing access barriers for families.

Minimizing the amount of work families must do to access ECE programs and services influences equitable program access and enrollment and improves well-being outcomes for more young children and families. Efforts to improve family experience should focus on developing an infrastructure designed around the end-user experience rather than funding streams or other administrative distinctions that families need not worry about. The back end may be fractured while access is simplified on the front end. Simplifying application procedures, increasing access to multi-program eligibility screening, and making better use of program data for eligibility, outreach, and enrollment are promising approaches to create more comprehensive and impactful change. Simple approaches like focusing on ease of website and system navigation or offering information in multiple languages can also increase program accessibility.

### Simplify Application Processes

Making better use of data can improve user experience and increase access and enrollment. Demographic data can be combined with provider and enrollment data to inform targeted outreach efforts. Personal data submitted for eligibility and enrollment in other public programs might be used to pre-screen and pre-fill other program applications. Data can be used to power **provider locator tools** that offer up-to-date information on where **slots are available** with options to filter by core programs offered (e.g., Head Start, state pre-k, EI/ECSE, subsidized child care).

Eligibility screening tools help families understand the range of services available to support child and family thriving. Knowing what programs are likely available to them prior to applying may reduce administrative

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burden, and the screeners can be an educational tool for families who may not understand what programs exist or who they serve. South Carolina's **First Five SC portal** is an excellent example of a one-stop resource for families with young children to learn about available public resources.

Other states, like **New Mexico**, offer easy-to-use eligibility screeners for multiple ECE programs and services. These resources do not replace eligibility determinations, but help educate families about what may be available to them, allowing them to quickly determine what is worth applying to.

Figure 6. South Carolina's First5 eligibility screener
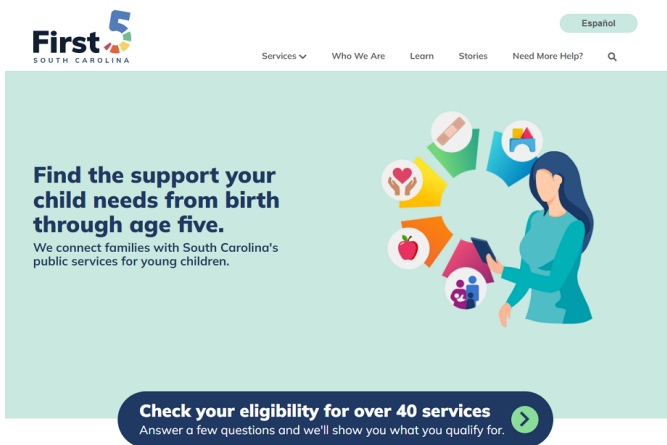
First5 South Carolina offers an eligibility screener for over 40 services.

Figure 7. Sample questions from South Carolina's First5 eligibility screener
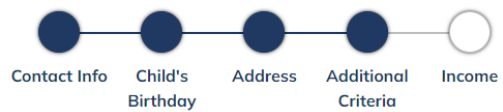
Sample questions from the First5 early childhood eligibility screener.

Design Must Center What Families Need

An array of government programs support the long-term social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children during the first five years of life. But, delivering early care and education services to families is not a simple endeavor. It involves multiple funding streams and programs, and is further hampered by an under-resourced care infrastructure. Sustained and meaningful funding for early care and education programs is critical to helping families with young children, but so are the ways in which current programs reach the families who need them the most. Many states are successfully improving the experience of families seeking care and education for young children. The collocation of programs into consolidated governance structures reflects a commitment to effective service delivery for young children. But, it is not the only tool available, nor is it sufficient in and of itself for increasing information availability, simplifying application procedures, and creating more equitable access to these services.

The improvements proposed here will not resolve consequences of chronic underinvestment, like workforce and program shortages. Our scan does not replicate a typical family's experience searching for early care and education services. Still, finding important information about what programs are available to families with young children was challenging, even knowing what we were looking for. To better understand what families experience as they attempt to apply for and enroll their children in early care and education services, public agencies should engage in further exploration of family experiences using human-centered research and design tools, such as **discovery sprints** and usability testing.

Notes

[1] Brittany Walsh, Linda Smith, and Katherine Mercado, *Integrated Efficient Early Care and Education Systems: Revisiting a State-by-State Analysis* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2023), https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BPC_State-Governance-Report-1.25.23.pdf.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.