Parents’ Perspectives on Child Care Subsidies and Moving from Welfare to Work

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Executive Summary

Child care subsidies are an important support service for families moving from welfare to work. The connections between child care and work, and the work-oriented focus within the welfare system since welfare reform, have increased the need for links between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems to ensure families receiving TANF and moving off TANF are connected to child care subsidies.

Despite the critical role child care subsidies play for welfare-to-work efforts, little research has examined how sites have linked these services for families and how the process works from families’ perspective. In a multiyear study, the Urban Institute sought to fill the information gap about the complex interactions of these two systems on behalf of families in the TANF welfare-to-work system. The first phase of the study (conducted in 2001) examined issues from the perspective of welfare-to-work and child care administrators and staff in 11 sites in 11 states, and focused on how the systems and policies interconnected for families on TANF and participating in welfare-to-work activities. The second phase of the project explored subsidy policy issues for parents who had left TANF. The third phase focused on the connections between the welfare-to-work and child care systems from the perspective of parents by examining how parents experienced accessing and retaining subsidies as they moved through and off welfare.

This paper summarizes findings from the third phase of the study. It is based on focus groups conducted in four locations in 2003 with current TANF participants and parents who had left TANF within the past year and were receiving child care subsidies. The report examines how these parents accessed and retained child care subsidies as they moved through and off welfare. However, it is important to note that this study did not examine the experiences of families that were not using subsidies. As a consequence, this study provides important information to help us better understand how these systems and polices work for families in the system, but it does not represent the perspectives of families that were unsuccessful in navigating these systems.
The main findings include the following:

- **Child care subsidies are critical for families receiving TANF benefits.** Focus group participants, those currently on welfare and those who had recently moved off welfare, spoke at length about the important role that child care subsidies play for their families. Subsidies were viewed as a vital source of financial help that made it possible for parents to engage in welfare-to-work program activities and employment. Focus group participants also noted that subsidies were important for their children because subsidies allowed parents to place their children in care where their children could be safe and learn. Overall, the significant role subsidies play for these families underscores the importance of ensuring families can access these services and are supported in their efforts to leave TANF and become self-sufficient.

- **The child care subsidy and welfare-to-work systems are closely linked in the minds and lives of TANF clients.** Parents often did not appear to distinguish between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems, and considered the child care subsidies they received part of welfare and their new work requirements. This supports findings from the first phase of the study, which indicated that while subsidized child care and TANF are two separate and distinct systems from an administrative perspective, they are closely linked for clients. Specifically, in most sites, at least some child care subsidy functions were handled by the welfare-to-work case manager; in some sites, parents never came into contact with a child care worker until they left TANF (see Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006).

  The intertwining of child care and TANF has several important implications for administrators and parents:

  - Some parents believed they could not get subsidies unless they were on TANF—a perception with some basis in fact, because some sites had waiting lists for non-TANF recipients needing subsidies. This belief appeared to provide an incentive for some parents to go on TANF.

  - Several parents believed they could not keep their subsidies when they left TANF. While not discussed by our participants, this misconception may create an incentive for parents to stay on TANF, and may help explain (at least in part) the low use of subsidies among recent welfare leavers (see Adams, Koralek, and Martinson 2006). Again, this belief had at least some basis in fact. While all sites allowed parents to retain subsidies for a priority period after leaving TANF, in two study sites we visited, parents at the end of their post-TANF priority period were likely to lose subsidies and be placed on a waiting list.

- **The welfare-to-work case manager played an important role in determining parents’ child care experiences.** The close links between the welfare and child care systems are also shown in the reports by focus group participants that welfare-to-work case managers were central to parents’ ability to receive subsidies, and to affecting their child care experi-
ences. In addition to authorizing care, welfare-to-work case managers affected whether respondents received information about child care options and assistance in finding care, and determined how long parents had to find care and whether their paperwork was processed in a timely way. Focus group participants’ experiences with their welfare-to-work case manager varied, with some parents reporting positive interactions and others having negative experiences. These relationships in turn affected parents’ experiences with several issues, including the relative ease or complexity of the subsidy process and finding a child care provider.

Many participants felt the requirements to obtain and keep subsidies were minimal. Most parents reported that getting and receiving subsidies (both while on TANF and leaving TANF) worked smoothly for them, that they were able to navigate the system successfully, and that they did not have many problems accessing and retaining care. For example, although parents leaving TANF had to assume additional requirements, most focus group participants did not consider these additions particularly burdensome. As noted in the report for the first phase of this study, many agencies had made a concerted effort to streamline the TANF and child care subsidy application and renewal processes to reduce the burden on families. Focus group participants’ observations suggest these efforts may have been successful for at least some parents. However, it is important to remember that the focus groups only included parents who were receiving subsidies and who therefore, by definition, had managed to make the system work for them. A conversation with parents who had not successfully made it through the process would likely provide a more complex picture.

Certain policies or practices appeared to pose challenges for accessing and retaining subsidies. Although getting and keeping subsidies (both while on TANF and when leaving TANF) worked smoothly for many focus group participants, some discussed policies or administrative practices that created challenges. Some challenges were related to certain policies in specific sites or to how the parent had experienced the program in particular sites. They included such issues as having to meet with multiple case-workers, tightly calibrating subsidies to participation in work-related activities (and the subsequent breaks in subsidy associated with gaps in activities), having difficulty getting providers set up in the subsidy system, having difficulties changing providers, lacking coverage for evening and weekend care, and dealing with additional fees not covered by the subsidy. These issues are important because they may make it more difficult for parents to get or keep child care, or to get the child care they want—problems that seem likely, in turn, to affect their ability to participate in work activities and to move off welfare.

Finding child care can be challenging. Across the sites, a primary challenge reported by families was finding child care before their work activity started. In particular, parents across our sites reported they did not have enough time to find care and/or would have liked more information or assistance in finding care. Parents also reported several challenges around finding care due to transportation problems.

This is a particularly interesting finding because it is both consistent with and contradictory to findings from the first phase of this study. It is consistent in that phase
Parents were frustrated by limited information. In addition to concerns about not getting information about finding care, some participants expressed frustration with what they perceived as limited information about the child care services they might be eligible for and/or those they received. This included, for some parents, the belief that clients were not proactively offered information about their eligibility for subsidies. Other parents lacked information about whether they would be able to continue to receive subsidies or other support services after leaving TANF. While it is unclear whether the problem is related to the parent not getting the information or not retaining it when given, it does suggest that more attention to ensuring parents get key information at various times throughout the process would be helpful.
Parents’ Perspectives on Child Care Subsidies and Moving from Welfare to Work

Child care subsidies are an important support service for families moving from welfare to work. Research indicates that child care problems are a common barrier for families receiving welfare (Flaming, Kwon, and Burns 2002; Rangarajan 1998), and a literature review on child care and work found that child care problems can contribute to unemployment (Strawn and Martinson 2000). At the same time, low-income families that receive child care subsidies are more likely to remain employed for longer periods than those that do not (Boushey 2002), and welfare leavers with subsidies are less likely to return to welfare within three months than those without subsidies (Loprest 2003).

While families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) make up an important piece of the families receiving subsidies, child care subsidy programs are intended for a broader group of low-income working families, including TANF families, former TANF families, low-income families not on TANF, and families with special circumstances (like those in child protective services). However, because child care is important for supporting work and the work participation requirements for TANF clients, it is not surprising that most states guarantee child care subsidies to families receiving TANF (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2002). Many states also guarantee subsidies for families transitioning off TANF. Inadequate funding for subsidies, however, has left many states with subsidy waiting lists or frozen intake for low-income families not associated with the TANF system (Schulman and Blank 2004); this includes three of the four states in this study at the time of our visits.

The connections between child care and work, and the work-oriented focus within the welfare system since welfare reform, have increased the need for links between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems to ensure families receiving TANF and moving off TANF are connected to child care subsidies. The Urban Institute conducted a multiphase study to examine these links and the implications for subsidy access, subsidy use, and child care choices:
Phase one of the study (conducted in 2001) examines these issues from the perspective of welfare-to-work and child care administrators and staff. It documents how these systems were set up and connected, the factors that aided or impeded coordination between the systems, and the processes clients needed to complete as they moved through the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems.

Phase two of the project examines the use of subsidies among families that recently left TANF, identifies several issues that explain low usage patterns, and highlights policies that might support access to subsidies among TANF leavers who need child care assistance.

Phase three of the project—the focus of this paper—focuses on the connections between the welfare-to-work and child care systems from the perspective of parents by examining how parents experienced accessing and retaining subsidies as they move through and off welfare. It provides insights into child care subsidy issues and concerns of parents attempting to become self-sufficient.

A synthesis report (Holcomb et al. 2006) highlights the key findings and implications of all three phases. For more information on each phase of the study, see appendix 1.

Study Design

The information provided in this paper is based on focus groups conducted during the summer and fall of 2003 in four sites with two groups of parents: parents receiving TANF and child care subsidies, and parents who left TANF within the previous year and were still receiving child care subsidies (also called “transitional parents” or “TANF leavers”). We chose 4 of the 11 sites from the study’s first phase (Denver, Colorado; Houston, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; and Miami, Florida) to look in more depth at the connections between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems from the perspective of parents. To maximize the relevance of the findings for other states and localities, we chose sites that varied in their administrative approaches, connections between the welfare and child care systems, client flow path, and individual caseworker responsibilities (box 1 and table 1).

Focus group facilitators followed a scripted protocol of questions and optional probes that was used in all four sites. TANF clients were asked about their experiences with child care subsidies, with special emphasis on their experiences obtaining subsidies, finding a provider, getting the provider approved, and their requirements for retaining subsidies while on TANF and after leaving TANF. Parents who had previously been on TANF were asked about their experiences retaining subsidies once they left TANF, and how their experiences getting and retaining subsidies after leaving TANF differed from their experiences while on TANF. The research team had several strategies to ensure data quality and consistency, and used a software package (NUD*IST) to organize and analyze the qualitative data.
We generally conducted four focus groups with TANF clients and two focus groups with parents who recently left TANF in each site, though this varied somewhat across sites. Altogether, we spoke with more than 130 TANF parents and 40 transitional parents across our four sites (see appendix 2 for information on the participants’ characteristics). Focus group participants were recruited locally by the agency in charge of employment and training.

Box 1. Welfare and Child Care Administrative Structure in the Four Study Sites

**Denver, CO:** The welfare-to-work case management and child care functions were handled by separate workers in different divisions within the Department of Human Services. However, from the clients’ perspective, TANF and child care services were accessed through the welfare-to-work case manager. Although designated child care caseworkers worked only on TANF cases, they never actually met with TANF clients about their child care subsidy needs. The welfare-to-work case manager authorized child care and sent new referrals to the colocated child care subsidy worker when client activities changed. The child care subsidy worker assisted the welfare-to-work case manager by entering the authorization information into the child care tracking system, dealing with provider-related issues, and acting as a liaison to the billing office for setting up payments to providers. The low-income child care program used different child care subsidy workers to administer subsidies for the non-TANF population.

**Houston, TX:** Texas exemplified a highly devolved TANF welfare-to-work program and child care system. Local TANF offices determined TANF eligibility and handled TANF recertifications, but they did not provide TANF work program case management or employment and training services and were not involved with the child care subsidy system. In Houston, TANF clients were referred to one of five employment and training providers for employment services and ongoing case management. These services were provided through 30 workforce development career centers. Child care subsidies were managed by a separate organization, contracted by the local workforce development board. Most child care subsidy workers were colocated in the career centers. Child care subsidy workers helped the TANF client choose a provider and issued the subsidy, but the welfare-to-work case manager determined the length of the subsidy and authorized and reauthorized the subsidy.

**Jackson, MS:** The staff person responsible for handling employment and training activities also handled the client’s child care subsidy, including authorizing the subsidy, approving the provider, and inputting the client’s child care information into the computer system. This worker did not handle the TANF eligibility function (a responsibility assumed by a separate TANF caseworker). A separate child care agency managed subsidies at the local level for low-income families not receiving TANF benefits.

**Miami, FL:** Local TANF offices determined TANF eligibility and recertifications but did not provide case management or employment and training services and were not involved with the child care subsidy system. TANF clients were referred to a local one-stop for assessment, case management, and supportive services including child care subsidy authorization. Child care subsidy workers, colocated in the one-stop or available in satellite offices, issued the child care authorization. The child care subsidy worker also educated parents about their child care choices and assessed the parent fee.

The data gained through the focus groups served two important purposes. First, it allowed us to gain insights into the child care subsidy experiences of current and former TANF clients—useful information in its own right. Second, it provided an important additional perspective that we can use to interpret the findings from the first phase of the study. The first phase examined some of these same issues, but from the perspective of the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy agencies and staff. As will be discussed in this report and in the phase one report, in some cases the parents corroborated what we heard from agency staff and administrators, while in other situations, conflicting reports raised questions about whether the staff or agency viewpoints about client experiences were accurate.

The focus group participants had important stories to tell and they provided useful insights into the experiences of others in their situation. However, as is always the case, this research approach has limitations. First, we only spoke with a small number of the parents who receive child care subsidies in each site, and those who participate in focus groups may not be a representative group of parents. Therefore, the findings presented in this report represent only the experiences and perspectives of those who participated in the focus groups and are not representative of the experiences of all parents within that locality. Second, as noted earlier, we also generally spoke with parents who had successfully navigated the subsidy system (i.e., they were currently receiving subsidies), so their experiences do not reflect the experiences of individuals who were unsuccessful in their efforts to obtain or keep child care subsidies. Third, given the variation in program structure and implementation across localities within states, these findings are also not representative of the states included in this study or the nation as a whole.

Also, because of the small number of focus group participants and the nature of the focus group discussion format (in which not every participant responds to every question or probe), this report does not make any effort to quantify respondent answers. Instead, our analysis focuses on uncovering the major themes raised in the focus groups and highlighting policies and practices that could shape respondent views and experi-

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ences where relevant. For the most part, the themes discussed in the remainder of this paper represent issues raised across sites. However, in a few cases, some issues seemed unique to a particular site (i.e., a particular policy or practice that worked well or was challenging). We reference sites by name where an issue appears to reflect the site rather than a common cross-site experience.

Finally, since the findings presented in this paper are based only on discussions with parents, we do not know all the events and circumstances surrounding particular experiences. For example, parents may not always be able to assess correctly why an action was taken by the welfare agency, so they may, for example, unfairly attribute something to the worker or agency that is actually a result of their own behavior (such as failing to show up to a work activity or not communicating with a worker). For this reason, this paper focuses more on the effect of these experiences on the parent, his or her work situation, and child care subsidies, than on the experience itself.

Main Themes from Focus Groups

Eight themes emerged from our focus group discussions with parents:

- Child care subsidies are extremely important for families on TANF and those that have recently left TANF;
- Many participants considered child care subsidies part of the welfare package;
- Welfare-to-work case managers influence parents’ child care experiences;
- Finding child care was a challenge for many participants;
- Many participants found administrative requirements easy to meet;
- Some participants reported problems with particular policies and practices;
- Some participants felt they received minimal information about services; they knew very little about what would happen to their subsidies once they left TANF; and
- Participants who had left TANF generally did not consider post-TANF child care subsidy requirements burdensome, though some reported problems.

Each theme is discussed in more detail below.

**Child care subsidies are extremely important for families on TANF and those that have recently left TANF.**

Focus group participants spoke at length about the important role that child care subsidies play for their families. Respondents made it very clear that subsidies were an integral part of their ability to complete their work activity, and that the subsidies helped
them financially. Focus group participants also noted that subsidies were important for their children because they allowed parents to place their children in care where the children could be safe and learn. Overall, the significant role subsidies play for these families underscores the importance of ensuring families that need child care assistance can access these services.

**Subsidies allow parents to work.**

Many TANF parents indicated they wouldn’t be able to participate in their work activity without help paying for child care:

“[The child care subsidy] is one of the ways we really appreciate [the welfare offices’] help. If it wasn’t for [the subsidy], we would have to bring our kids to school, or we would have to stay home and get nowhere.”

“If we cannot afford a child care provider, we can’t do anything to get off of welfare . . . we can’t go looking for a job and take our bab[ies] with us.”

“Child care was my biggest problem. Before child care [subsidies], I couldn’t work. . . . As soon as I got child care, I could work. . . . Now I go to school and . . . work for a couple hours. It helped me out a whole lot because at first I didn’t have a babysitter at all. Paying for five kids, that was my whole check.”

Former TANF clients who were now working also saw the benefits of subsidies for their work situation:

“[With subsidies] I can keep my job.”

“[Child care assistance] helped me to . . . buy more time . . . to be able to stand on my own two feet. That’s the best thing about the program.”

“Everything I’ve accomplished revolved around receiving child care. . . . I wouldn’t have graduated [high school], I wouldn’t have received a certificate. Now I’ll be getting my degree in two more semesters.”

**Subsidies help parents financially.**

Many participants in our focus groups also felt that subsidies helped them financially by paying for care they might otherwise not be able to afford:

“I wouldn’t be able to pay child care out of my TANF payment. I only get $252 a month.”

“I’m allowed to take my son [to places where people pay up to $150 a week for child care] and social services pays for it. That’s, to me, a fantastic situation.”

“It’s great to get [child care] assistance through TANF because if I didn’t have that I don’t know how I would . . . pay for [child care] because it is so expensive nowadays.”

Having subsidies also helped parents financially because it meant some of their income could go to other bills. As one parent pointed out: “Everything that happens in my house, I’ve got to pay for . . . [so child care assistance] helps me a whole lot,” while another
felt that subsidies allowed her to have “more money for the bills.” Several participants also wanted to make clear that the extra money they received was not going toward frivolous extras. For example, a parent who had left welfare and was in her first job said that with subsidies she was able to put her income toward other “needs,” not “luxuries.”

**Subsidies allow parents to access safe child care.**

In addition to the financial and work assistance parents received from subsidies, participants across sites noted that child care subsidies allowed parents to put their children in care they were comfortable with and where their children were safe:

“[Having subsidies is] more stress-free because your kids are somewhere safe, so it takes a lot of stress away from you . . . not having to worry about them; knowing they’re being fed and all that good stuff.”

“[With subsidies] you don’t have to worry about taking the child to a $30 place and being worried all of the time.”

“I’m glad that I can choose which ones [will be my provider], so I can feel safe about where my daughter is and who is taking care of her.”

**Subsidies help parents pay for care where children can learn.**

Participants saw additional benefits from subsidies for their children. As one participant pointed out, “[The subsidy program is] not just advantageous for us, but it’s advantageous for our children because they learn a lot of stuff at the centers.” Across the focus groups, other participants explained their children were learning in the care of their providers:

“My kids are learning more stuff in [day care] than they are learning in my house.”

“Usually in the summer [without subsidies], [my kids] have to be around the apartments . . . . At the Y [their child care provider], they’ll take field trips and different things, so . . . it’s a learning experience for the children.”

“[Child care] is helping [my child] learn so that when I do put her in Head Start, she will already know certain stuff, and [she will not] have a hard time catching up.”

**Many participants considered child care subsidies part of the welfare package.**

From the perspective of focus group participants, the welfare-to-work system played a critical role in the child care subsidy process, and child care and welfare were linked in the minds of many. This was particularly apparent in their discussions of subsidies, where participants often noted the importance of being on TANF to obtain and keep subsidies.

**In parents’ minds, child care subsidies and welfare were closely linked.**

Parents often did not distinguish between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems, and viewed the child care subsidies they received as part of welfare and their
new work requirements. In the words of one parent, “TANF is just like one package—it’s child care, Medicaid, food stamps.” Another parent described TANF and child care services as “balled together.” While there are often complex systems set up to provide welfare-to-work and child care services to families (see Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006), focus group participants did not think in terms of systems and did not necessarily see these systems the same way administrators and staff did.

Although parents may not understand how these systems are set up, these assumptions are expected, given the efforts of some agencies to streamline the TANF and child care processes for families. Phase one of this project found that in a number of sites, child care workers had few decisionmaking responsibilities regarding child care subsidies for TANF clients and in some cases never came into contact with TANF clients. Instead, the welfare-to-work case manager (the worker in charge of monitoring parents’ work participation) authorized subsidies and sometimes served as the main contact for parents regarding their subsidies (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006). In looking at the four sites in this study, parents in two sites—Denver and Jackson—did not have to interact with the child care workers until they left TANF (or after). However, even in the other two sites (Houston and Miami), where parents sometimes needed to interact with a separate child care worker, focus group participants often viewed the welfare-to-work case manager as the person who got parents subsidies—an accurate assessment, given that these case managers authorize subsidies for TANF clients.

While child care subsidies were often viewed as part of welfare, many parents were also familiar with the “other” child care office (such as the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District in Jackson) or child care subsidy programs in their area (such as the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program in Denver). These offices and programs were often seen as providing subsidies for low-income families not on TANF, which in the case of Jackson and Denver was true.

**Many parents considered TANF the gateway to child care subsidies.**

Many parents recognized that TANF receipt was also critical in their ability to get subsidies. This is particularly true in three of the four sites, which when we visited them had waiting lists for subsidies because of inadequate funds. In all these sites (as is common in states with waiting lists or frozen intake), TANF parents participating in welfare-to-work activities and parents who recently left TANF could bypass the waiting list, while low-income working applicants with no connection to TANF could not.

The consequence of this situation is seen in the comments of some parents in our focus groups, who reported that they went on TANF because they could not afford child care. Many focus group participants reported that going on TANF was a prerequisite for getting and keeping subsidies:
“The only real way you can just automatically get on [subsidies] is when you have [TANF] assistance.”

“If you don’t receive TANF, you can’t receive day care [subsidies].”

“How am I supposed to work and go to school if I don’t have anybody to watch my children. . . . Right now I have no information on how to receive child care without having to get to TANF. My only choice was to get back onto TANF.”

“The only reason why I signed up [for TANF] was for the day care voucher.”

A number of the focus group parents noted specifically that the waiting list was why they went on TANF. One TANF parent noted that before going on TANF, “I wasn’t making a lot of money, but I was paying a lot for child care. The waiting list was long for child care. That’s why people go this route [apply for TANF].” Other parents agreed:

“When I called my son’s day care when I was pregnant with my second child, they told me the best way to get on [subsidies] is if you are receiving [TANF] assistance. Because otherwise they’re going to tell you that they have a waiting list.”

“When you’re not on TANF and you have a job already, it’s hard to get the [child care] certificate. . . . The waiting list is long.”

“If you have a job and want to apply for child care, you don’t get it as quick as people who apply for TANF.”

 “[I had] no choice, but to apply for TANF” because of the waiting list for non-TANF families.

The struggles some participants faced in paying for child care before they went on TANF supports research indicating that child care can be a challenge for low-income families (Schulman 2000).

Parents believed they had to be on TANF to keep their subsidies.

Focus group participants noted the importance of meeting their TANF requirements to retain their subsidies. In particular, when asked about requirements to keep child care subsidies, often participants’ first response was that they needed to keep up with their TANF work activities and reporting requirements. One parent noted that “you have to report your hours [of employment] to TANF. . . . If you don’t report your hours to TANF, then they won’t pay for child care.” A parent in another focus group echoed this sentiment, saying, “You have to have your hours.” Many parents felt that the welfare-to-work case manager made clear that parents needed to keep up with their work requirements or they would lose child care subsidies. Parents’ assessment of the importance of TANF requirements in keeping child care is consistent with findings from our first phase of the study that indicated child care subsidies would be terminated if parents did not complete their required number of work participation hours or comply with TANF reporting requirements.
In addition, as is discussed later, some parents believed they would lose their subsidies when they left TANF. While in some ways this was not true—all these sites continued to give priority for subsidies to recent TANF leavers for a specified period—two sites were placing parents on the waiting list at the end of that priority period.

**Welfare-to-work case managers influence parents’ child care experiences.**

Focus group participants across sites discussed the important role welfare-to-work case managers play in their child care subsidy experiences. Parents in one site said the welfare-to-work case manager did all the work regarding child care assistance for them. This perspective is consistent with findings from the first phase of this study that indicated, while responsibilities varied across sites, the welfare-to-work case manager was often expected to inform parents that subsidies were available, authorize care, transfer required paperwork to the child care worker, and terminate care if requirements weren’t followed (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006). In some sites, the welfare-to-work case manager took on even more child care–related responsibilities.

Respondents discussed the importance of case managers in two ways. First, they talked about the importance of their overall interactions with their case manager, and of the variation in the quality of that interaction. Second, they discussed some specific ways that welfare-to-work case managers influenced their child care experiences.

**Focus group participants’ interactions with welfare-to-work case managers varied.**

Parents discussed both good and bad experiences with case managers. Some respondents reported positive experiences, and noted that good case managers made child care subsidies easier to access and retain:

“"In my case, it has been a very good experience. My [case manager] helped me a lot and that is why I have day care . . . and whatever I need I call her and she helps me.”

“If there is anything I miss, [my case manager] will call me and say ‘Can you bring this up? I need this.’ Most of them, if you don’t bring it, you’re out of luck. This [case manager] . . . is real good.”

“If you’ve got a good worker, she’ll tell you to come on in [saying] ‘you know your TANF is going to end’. . . . She’s going to explain to you why . . . and then she’ll say ‘but you do qualify for transitional, which will last a year.’”

Other focus group participants spoke about more challenging experiences with case managers. Sometimes, for example, parents had difficulty contacting the worker or felt the worker was disrespectful. One parent explained, “I would say that some of the caseworkers really aren’t as eager to help you get what you need.” Another participant felt that she often got “the runaround.” A few participants expressed frustration because they sometimes felt they got mixed messages from different people. One parent noted, “Her [case manager] is telling her something else and my [case manager] is telling me something else.”
Finally, respondents also noted that the quality of the case managers varied even within sites, as some case managers were better than others:

“[Your experience] depends on your [case manager]. If you have a [case manager] that really understands that you have needs . . . and they really work to help, then it’s fine.”

“Some of [the case managers] you get along with real well, but some of them act like the cash is coming from their pockets.”

“Some [people] have great caseworkers, some [caseworkers] don’t even take the time to tell you anything. . . . They don’t care.”

Although many participants were critical of case managers, some recognized the constraints they faced, such as high caseloads and many responsibilities. Some participants also discussed the high staff turnover in offices, with one parent noting, “I’ve been on [cash assistance] three months and I’ve had three case managers. And they’re all drowned in paperwork.” This perspective is supported by other research as well as reports from the agency level. For example, research has suggested that large variation in experiences working with welfare-to-work case managers is likely related to case managers’ discretion in implementing policies (Lurie 2001). Agency staff in the first phase of this project also reported challenges around adequately training staff in a context of high caseloads and staff turnover (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006).

Case managers affect parents’ subsidy experiences in many ways.
In addition to the overall quality of the interaction, focus group discussions indicated several particular ways welfare-to-work case managers could affect parents’ experiences, such as whether parents found out about subsidies and were able to access child care, how long they had to find care, and whether their paperwork was processed efficiently. While focus group participants generally focused on problematic interactions, it is important to remember the larger variation in experiences noted above.

Welfare-to-work case managers were often expected to inform parents about child care subsidies—obviously a key step in being able to get assistance. Many participants found out about child care subsidies from their welfare-to-work case managers when the agency’s policy said they were supposed to (e.g., during orientation or their pre-eligibility screening). However, across sites some participants reported they did not find out about subsidies before starting their work activity. One participant noted she didn’t find out about subsidies for some time after starting her work activity and had her mother care for her child. Participants in another focus group indicated that case managers did not inform parents about child care assistance and that parents found out about child care subsidies through word of mouth. One participant in that discussion noted, “Everyone found out [about child care subsidies] little by little. . . . We found out by each other—not [the TANF office], not by our [case manager]. As far as I am concerned, they are not doing their job.”
Participants in another focus group suggested it was important for parents to be proactive and to ask specifically for help with child care. Parents said, “It’s up to you to tell them you need child care [subsidies]. They’re not going to offer it.” A parent in another focus group also noted, “You have to mention [child care subsidies] to [the case managers] or they’re not going to tell you.”

Other parents described challenges in reaching their case manager to arrange getting subsidies. A TANF parent in one focus group had trouble getting her child care subsidies because she had difficulty contacting her welfare-to-work case manager. This participant explained that although the case manager told her to call between certain hours, she couldn’t reach anyone when she called and didn’t receive a call back. As a consequence, she had her mother care for her child while she participated in her required TANF activity, but found she had to miss the activity sometimes because this child care arrangement was not stable. Overall, she felt that “your life [gets] messed up because you’re waiting on [subsidies].” Another parent in this site faced a similar situation: she asked for assistance in figuring out child care and the case manager didn’t have time. The parent used the child care center at the TANF office temporarily while she started her work activity, but felt pressured by the center to go somewhere else: “It was really hard. I was taking these classes . . . and I was in a real bind.”

The welfare-to-work case managers can also affect parents’ subsidies through the timely submission of required paperwork. In all four sites, welfare-to-work case managers assumed responsibility for some subsidy paperwork, such as authorizations that needed to go to a child care worker (as in Denver, Houston, and Miami) or a certificate that needed processing so care could begin (as in Jackson). Therefore, obtaining subsidies required welfare-to-work case managers to complete the paperwork (and transfer it to the child care worker, if there was one) in a timely fashion.11

Many participants reported no delays in the processing of their subsidy paperwork. However, some participants across sites noted they had experienced these types of delays, which ultimately affected their subsidies. One parent said that caseworkers “can be slow on their paperwork,” which caused her to lose child care subsidies a few times. Participants in another site talked about paperwork getting lost and said they now ask for the case manager to stamp the date on it.

Lack of timely paperwork processing could also affect the parent’s child care provider. One participant’s provider didn’t receive paperwork from the welfare-to-work case manager even after the case manager promised to send it immediately. The provider let the child stay in care while this issue was worked out. However, this experience was very frustrating for the parent because she felt she was trying hard to get her requirements done on time: “When things don’t get done I get really mad. They give me [only] so much time to do what I’m supposed to do. Why can’t they do what they are supposed to do?”
Finally, as is discussed in the next section, parents noted the critical role welfare-to-work case managers played in determining the amount of time parents had to find care before they had to begin a work activity.

**Finding child care was a challenge for many participants.**

Finding child care can be a challenge for any parent. Many parents encounter long waiting lists at child care centers or face challenges finding specific types of care, such as evening and weekend care, special needs care, or infant care (Clark and Long 1995; U.S. General Accounting Office 1995, 1997). This issue is particularly important to examine for the TANF population, however, as some TANF families may face particular challenges in finding care—for example, because they may lack experience with (and information about) finding care, time to find care, transportation, or the ability to pay extra child care costs providers may charge. Those who are employed may also be more likely than other parents to have work schedules that require evening and weekend hours, when care can be scarce.

The issue of whether TANF families face challenges in finding care is particularly interesting in this study, as we found a significant discrepancy between what agency respondents reported in the first phase of this research and what parents reported in the focus groups. Across the 11 sites examined in the first phase, many administrators and staff felt that, by and large, most parents knew who they wanted to use for care and did not need help finding care. Also, sites varied in how much time they gave parents to find care, with most sites providing a limited period (between a few and 10 days, depending on the site) and some having no standard time frame (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006).

However, across our sites, the message was very different in the focus groups; parents were vocal about challenges they faced around finding care. Their concerns tended to fall into three categories: first, many parents had problems finding and/or choosing child care; second, a number of parents reported that they didn’t have enough time to find care; and third, some parents discussed transportation barriers. We discuss each category below, along with some of the possible reasons behind the discrepancy between these reports and the perspectives of the agency staff.

**Parents would have liked more information and help finding care.**

Finding child care can be a major issue for any parent, regardless of TANF status. Subsidy and welfare-to-work agencies could help parents find a provider in various ways—from offering lists of providers or the number of the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency to ensuring parents meet with a CCR&R counselor. The first phase from our study found that several agencies gave relatively minimal information to TANF parents (i.e., a list of providers, the number of the CCR&R agency,
and/or a brochure about finding care) and only provided this information to parents who said they didn’t know what provider they wanted to use or who had difficulty finding care. A few sites provided more support, such as incorporating information about finding care into existing activities or making a CCR&R counselor easily available.)

We found parents in each site who did not know who they wanted to use to care for their children before getting authorized for subsidies. Similarly, a number of parents in the focus groups in these sites were vocal about the challenges of finding child care and about the fact that they would find more help in this area useful.

As usual, these reports varied. Looking first at the issue of whether the parents received any assistance in finding care, some parents reported getting help. Those who received information typically reported receiving a phone number for a CCR&R specialist or a list of providers (these were by and large the parents who also reported not already knowing the provider they wanted to use). For the most part, the help parents received came from a child care worker or resource and referral specialist (to whom they were referred by the welfare-to-work worker), though in Jackson the welfare-to-work case manager gave information about providers. In some sites, the welfare-to-work case manager might be involved more directly in helping at least some parents find care.

However, many parents in the focus groups reported problems—sometimes in the same sites where other parents reported positive experiences. Some parents were unable to get information about finding or choosing child care. One participant who apparently had asked for information but did not receive it from her caseworker said: “I was supposed to get . . . information from my [case manager]—she told me that she was going to give it to me—but I still haven’t received it. And this was two years ago.” Another participant believed that whether a parent received a list of providers might depend on the case manager and “how the [case manager] feels at the time.” Still another participant felt parents really needed to know to ask for help in order to receive it: “Most of them, if you don’t ask them, they don’t want to take out a book [with a list of providers] when they’ve got other clients . . . They’ve got things to do. They are not worried about you individually.” These comments suggest there are several reasons parents may not get information on finding care—in some cases because they didn’t ask, in some cases because they asked but didn’t get it.

In addition, parents described the particular challenges involved in finding care to cover evening and weekend hours—even with a subsidy to pay for it (box 2). While finding evening and weekend care can be difficult for all families given it is in short supply, it may be particularly difficult for welfare recipients, who are more likely to have jobs with irregular work patterns (Rangarajan, Schochet, and Chu 1998).

Another important issue that parents discussed concerned whether parents received the kind of information and help they needed. Again, some parents were satisfied with the information and support they received. One participant said her case manager
opened up a book of providers to help her find care and then offered to let the client use her phone, while another parent noted that she got a “very detailed list [of providers].”

However, some parents were concerned about the kind or level of information that was provided. These parents generally received some information—that is, the typical information the agencies provided (CCR&R contact information or a list of providers)—but felt this information was inadequate. Some things parents thought would be useful included the following:

- More comprehensive information about providers, including the age ranges of the children the provider would care for, the price and any additional fees, the activities offered, and photographs of the center or family child care home.

- Specific information that might help parents assess the quality of the provider. Some participants discussed their frustration at the case managers’ inability to say whether a provider was good or not—though they recognized that staff were not allowed to tell them which provider to use. This additional information also seemed particularly important to parents who faced transportation constraints and might have had difficulties visiting many programs.

- One participant who had difficulties finding a provider within her area said that she would have liked to know which providers accept subsidies. She noted that she’d like to know from her case manager, “We work with [providers] A, B, C, and D, but not E, F, G, and H.”
The time to arrange care before work activity started varied.

The amount of time that parents have to find care—in particular, the period between determining the parents’ work activity and the actual start of that activity—is also a critical issue that parents discussed. (Generally, once parents were determined eligible for TANF, they met with their welfare-to-work case manager to determine their work activity. For TANF clients needing subsidies, this meeting was also usually the point where the start date of the activity was determined and the subsidy process began. The four focus group sites had different guidelines governing how long parents should be given to find care before their work activity started (table 2). Some sites had no standard time frame and others allowed 10 days.

Again, parents had disparate views on whether they had enough time to find care. Some participants felt they had adequate time to find care before their work activity started. However, others talked about having very little time to find care, with some parents having to begin their activity before care started, and others having only a few days to set up care:

“I had been in class . . . two weeks before I had got my child care.”

“When they opened my case back up, they gave me a job club activity before I could put my child in child care.”

“I haven’t gotten child care yet, and they have already started me off on the work activity.”

“You can do orientation today and [if] they have a spot for you to start school the next day, then they want you to start school the next day. . . . You have to get your hours. If you don’t get your hours, you don’t get your money.”

“[Welfare-to-work case managers] just want you to hurry up and get a job. You don’t have a lot of time.”

Despite the formal policies noted above, parents noted that welfare-to-work case managers appeared to have quite a bit of discretion—as one focus group participant

Table 2. Agency Policies on Length of Time to Find Care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Time to Find Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>No standard time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>10 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>10 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>No standard time frame</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gina Adams, Pamela Holcomb, Kathleen Snyder, Robin Koralek, and Jeffrey Capizzano, Child Care Subsidies for TANF Families: The Nexus of Systems and Policies (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2006).
noted, the time to find care “depends on your case [manager].” This discretion seemed to operate in determining both the amount of time parents had (with some giving less time than indicated by the policies above) and the amount of pressure parents experienced. As a result, participants within the same site sometimes had very different experiences.

One parent had difficulty finding care and noted that her case manager bothered her about it: “The [case manager] was saying ‘Well, what’s going on? You can just put him in any child care. . . . We can’t wait around for you.’” However, another parent in that same site noted, “Mine made sure that my kids were in day care first [before starting the activity].” In another site, a participant felt she had adequate time to find care and that her case manager focused on making sure she had care she was comfortable with. However, another participant in the same group said she didn’t have enough time; she was told to find care on a Saturday so she could start her work activity on a Monday.

Although it seemed the case manager often had discretion to determine the exact length of time to find care, it also appeared the case manager’s decisions were influenced by the start date of the TANF work activity. For example, if a job readiness class was scheduled to start in a couple of days, the case manager might try to enroll a parent into that activity rather than waiting for the next session. It also seemed staff may give additional time if parents push them on this issue, but it is unclear whether many parents are comfortable being this assertive.

Limited time to find care was problematic for parents because finding care can take time, particularly when parents are new to the process and lack transportation (see below). Also, focus group participants pointed out that they wanted time to find care they were comfortable with:

“When it’s something about your kids, you can’t be in a hurry, you have to go check that place out, and I went to three day cares. The first one as soon as I walked in [I knew] I didn’t want my child there.”

“I want to know who’s caring for my child. But if you don’t give me the time to get to know them as well as them [to] know me and my child. That kind of disgruntled me. If you’re going to assign me an [activity], fine, but give me some time to place my child in a day care I feel comfortable [with].”

In some ways, it should not be surprising that parents expressed this need for time to find care. Certain programs often have waiting lists, and certain types of care (such as infant, evening and weekend, and special needs) can be particularly challenging. As a result, finding a program with available space can be (in the words of a participant in Denver) “pure luck. . . . You fill out the paperwork and hope that your kid can start the next day, but if they don’t have an opening, you’re screwed.” Consequently, some child care organizations recommend parents look for care a few months before it is needed—significantly more time than that given to most focus group participants in the four sites.13
Some parents had transportation constraints.

Parents also often discussed their transportation constraints and how they could affect the search for care.¹⁴ Lack of transportation is a common barrier for TANF clients (Danziger et al. 2000; Green et al. 2000; Ong et al. 2001). Although all the welfare-to-work offices we visited provided transportation assistance for TANF clients, some focus group participants did not know they could receive transportation assistance. Even when parents were eligible, they sometimes lacked correct or consistent information on availability of and access to transportation assistance. Additionally, some parents who tried to get assistance reported they had trouble receiving it because the agency had run out of tokens or vouchers.

In addition to affecting a parent’s ability to work, the limited transportation available to focus group participants made it difficult to look at all available child care options. As one parent put it, “You have to keep on calling a bunch of day cares and a lot of us don’t have cars.” As a result, parents also reported that finding a provider took longer or that they were unable to research all the available options. One parent felt the child care agency should check up on providers to make sure they are complying with the rules, since parents might not have time to check a center out. “How can we know?” she asked. “We are working up the way and we don’t have time to go visit. We don’t know if our kids are being mistreated.”

Even if parents were able to research multiple care options in person, transportation was a factor in their ultimate decision on which provider to use. As one parent said, “I don’t have a car. I’m not going to go on the bus and take him to day care and pick him up. So I was like ‘I want [a child care provider] in my area.’” Another participant pointed out the implications of this problem for the quality of care parents can choose, noting that even if parents are able to find a good provider, if they don’t have a car to take children to and from care they might “have to settle for the [provider] that’s not so good.” Parents of school-age children also mentioned that transportation between school and after-school care can become an issue.

Exploring the discrepancies between parent and agency perspectives on finding care.

The discrepancy between parent reports about finding care and the experiences or perceptions of agency staff about client needs in this area is important and worth further exploration. Several factors may be at play. Some focus group participants mentioned they had never used child care before going on TANF, so had little experience or understanding of the issues involved. As one parent noted, “I knew nothing about child care. I’d taken care of my son for five years.” Because these parents are unaware of the challenge of finding care when they initially meet with their welfare-to-work case manager, they may not pay attention to the information provided or seek additional help. Other parents may be aware of the difficulties but not realize the range of help the agency can provide if their case manager does not offer it. Still other parents may be aware that assis-
tance is available, but may be concerned about being judged badly if they come to the agency with this problem.

In some cases, caseworkers may not encourage (or may actively discourage) parents from seeking assistance. The parents mentioned earlier who felt strong pressure from their case managers to find something quickly, for example, may be less likely to come back and ask for extra time or help. All these issues could be compounded by the relatively short time frame that many parents are given to find care.

Many participants found administrative requirements easy to meet.

Focus group participants were asked about obtaining and keeping subsidies. Many participants felt the requirements were straightforward. For example, when asked what they had to do to get and keep subsidies, many focus group participants felt they had few child care subsidy requirements:

“[The case manager] take[s] care of all the paperwork. All I had to do was fill out an enrollment packet for my daughter [at the provider].”

“I didn’t have to do anything. I just told my [case manager] that I wanted [the child care subsidy] and she did it all.”

“You just tell your [case manager] you need day care and then the [case manager] does the work.”

“It’s easy, [the case managers] do it all.”

“[Subsidies] are [a] pretty good set-up. . . . I think it moves pretty smoothly.”

These findings reflect, in some ways, the efforts made by several sites to streamline and coordinate the requirements for TANF and child care subsidies. As shown in table 3, parental requirements to obtain and keep child care subsidies in these four sites were often wrapped up in their TANF requirements, so only a few requirements were specific to child care (such as completing a child care application or reauthorization form). In Denver, for example, to retain child care subsidies, a parent needed to renew his or her Individual Responsibility Contract, which was a TANF requirement.

Even in sites with more requirements, however, it seemed some parents found their child care subsidy requirements easy because they were comparing them to their TANF requirements (specifically, maintaining work activity hours and providing work activity status reports), which they found more burdensome. A parent in one site noted: “Child care [is] no problem, that’s not where the problem lies with me. It’s the tasks I have to do with TANF [and the other programs] that I have problems with.”

It is important to remember, however, that the focus groups were only conducted with individuals receiving subsidies. By definition, we did not speak with individuals who had not successfully navigated the subsidy or TANF requirements. As a conse-
Some participants reported problems with particular policies and practices.

While parents generally felt their child care requirements were straightforward, some parents did experience challenges related to their subsidies. These challenges tended to
be more site-specific and were related to a particular policy or practice that was problematic for some focus group participants.

**Meeting with more than one worker.**

Miami was the only site in this phase of the study where parents were required to meet in person with a child care worker (in addition to the welfare-to-work case manager) to apply for and recertify subsidies, and to provide the required documentation. (A few other sites in the first phase of the study took a similar approach.) While participants generally were not critical of these policies, some parents noted that requirements to meet in person with the child care worker could be difficult. In particular, parents had problems with providing similar paperwork to different workers and going to a different office to fulfill their child care requirements. Additionally, participants encountered delays in getting appointments to meet with the child care worker—an issue that could affect parents’ abilities to work or complete their work activity. One participant noted,

> I was supposed to start [working] a week before I really started. The thing is, I couldn’t start it because I didn’t have my child care [subsidy]. I had to wait for my child care appointment so I could get the child care and get the job. When I went in to apply, they gave me the job but I couldn’t start [when they wanted me to] and that made me look bad. I’m just starting a job and I can’t start the day that they tell me to start.

A few participants at this site suggested it would be easier if they didn’t have to meet with the child care worker because of the delays in appointments. As one parent pointed out, “To me it would be so much simpler if everything was all in the same place.”

While a few focus group participants pointed out challenges with having to meet with a separate child care worker, this setup can also be advantageous. For example, a separate child care worker can have more specialized knowledge about child care and may be better able to help resolve provider issues (see Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006 for more on these issues).

**Difficulty setting up friend, family, and neighbor care with the agency.**

For the most part, participants did not have difficulty setting up their provider once they had decided on one. Some participants, however, reported complications with this process—for example, delays in processing paperwork, difficulty completing paperwork, and delays in receiving payments. These issues were not site-specific, but instead appeared more prevalent for parents using friend, family, and neighbor caregivers, who are typically unregulated.

Some participants in a Denver focus group noted that the paperwork was difficult for their relative or neighbor to complete. One participant said, “It is kind of confusing. My neighbor is my provider. She was like, ‘What is this question? What is that question?’ I read it over . . . and I couldn’t figure it out.” A participant in Houston said her caregiver
had to wait a month before receiving payment. These challenges are consistent with other research that has found approving unregulated providers can be lengthy and result in payment delays (Adams and Snyder 2003).

**Tightly linking subsidy eligibility and participation in work-related activities.** Participants also discussed challenges with several policies that kept subsidy receipt tightly calibrated to participation in work-related activities. This issue has been examined in other research (see Adams, Snyder, and Sandfort 2002 and Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006), which suggests that tightly linking eligibility with actual work participation may be related to breaks in subsidies and short subsidy spells. These breaks can be problematic on many levels—for agencies, as frequent stops and starts in subsidies can incur significant administrative costs; for parents, who may find it more difficult to stay in work activities and/or keep their provider; for children, who need stable child care arrangements; and for child care providers. Parents in the focus groups highlighted three policy issues in particular.

**Short recertification periods.** Some participants in Houston and Miami noted that how frequently they had to recertify (or renew) their subsidies was challenging. In Houston, most participants reported they had to recertify every 30 days, while in Miami participants reported recertifying every three months. Our research in phase one of this study indicates that these short recertification periods are often set according to the length of work activities to ensure parents don’t receive subsidies for any time they aren’t participating in a work activity. Some participants in Houston noted that while the requirements for recertification were not difficult in and of themselves, they became more difficult because parents had to come in every 30 days to meet with their welfare-to-work case manager. Interestingly, some parents who had left TANF pointed out that requirements for child care were easier for them once they left TANF because their recertification period was a year rather than a month. In Miami, participants noted that it can be difficult to time the appointments needed to recertify child care; while recertification happens every three months, parents need to be thinking about it sooner than that. One participant noted that the recertifications are “too close together. They should make it every six months. It comes too quick. It feels like you are in here every week.” Another participant pointed out the possible implications of recertification on employment: “If you have a job, you are constantly taking off days. Sometimes your jobs don’t tolerate that, just like mine. I had to take off to come down here to handle child care.”

**No child care subsidies for job search.** Some parents also reported not getting subsidies for the “job search” activity, particularly in Houston. It is unclear why these parents couldn’t receive subsidies for a job search, since according to agency respondents that activity could count toward work participation hours. One possible explanation is that these parents had already used up all their allotted job search time. For example, parents in Denver could only have 30 days of job search per calendar year. Parents would likely not receive subsidies for job search after 30 days in these cases. Not receiv-
ing subsidies during job search was challenging for some parents. A participant in Houston mentioned that she did not receive child care during her job search; when she asked her case manager, the case manager’s response was “Can’t you give [your children] to family members?” Another participant said caseworkers told her, “Once I get a job offer, I have the employer fill out the sheet that says I found a job, and [the case manager will] verify the information, and that’s when I’ll start receiving child care.” The lack of subsidies for a job search would likely make finding a job more difficult, particularly for parents who didn’t have anyone to watch their children.

Quick terminations of subsidies when parents lose a job. Another issue for some participants was how quickly their subsidies could be terminated after losing a job, potentially leading to breaks in their child care arrangement. The loss of subsidies was a particular issue for focus group participants in Jackson, many of whom had lost their subsidies in the past. In that site, several participants pointed out that welfare-to-work case managers made it very clear that if you lose your job or don’t complete your requirements, you will lose your subsidies. One participant noted, “If you lose your job or anything happens, they cut [your subsidies] off. They don’t give you any assistance to look for another [job].” While it may make sense to terminate subsidies if a parent is not engaged in an activity, the swiftness of subsidy loss seemed problematic to parents who lost a job and wanted to find a new one. As one participant discussed:

How are you going to find a job if you don’t have anybody to watch your kids? You can’t fill out an application with your kids. When you take them somewhere, everybody looks at you like you are crazy... trying to put in your application with your kids running around everywhere.

Difficulty changing providers.

A number of parents in Jackson mentioned that they found changing providers challenging. Many participants felt that case managers discouraged parents from changing providers and that parents had to have good reasons for case managers to allow a change of providers. One parent noted, “You have to have a reason why you are pulling that child because [case managers are] not just going to let you pull the child because that’s a lot of paperwork.” A parent in another focus group echoed this sentiment, saying, “It has to be a reason that is good enough for you to change.” It is unclear if participants’ perceptions about this issue are accurate. Some parents did note that they had been able to change providers. One participant, however, was unable to and ended up dropping TANF:

Once you get a provider, [the welfare-to-work office doesn’t] want you to change. This is the reason why I got off TANF the first time. I didn’t like the day care that my son was going to and at the time my caseworker thought that I didn’t have a reason [to change]. I didn’t like the day care [provider] worker so I got out of TANF ‘cause I didn’t like it. So you have to find one day care in a weekend and stick with it. Like it or not, you have to stick with it.
It is interesting to note that phase one of this research found that Jackson was one of the few sites that combined all welfare-to-work and child care subsidy responsibilities—including those related to providers—into a single worker. At the time of our interviews for the first phase of the project, staff in Jackson reported that the provider responsibilities (and particularly the paperwork involved in changing providers) added a significant administrative burden for workers (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006).

**Lack of subsidies for evening and weekend hours.**
As noted earlier, some parents discussed challenges with finding evening and weekend care. In Jackson, this process was even more difficult for some participants. They believed subsidies were authorized for eight hours a day, Monday through Friday only, so the subsidy didn’t really accommodate evening and weekend work hours. One participant noted, “You are only limited to a certain amount of day care. What if you worked six days a week? They will only give you day care for five.”

This appeared to cause some hardship for parents who worked during the evenings and weekends in terms of finding care (that they would have to pay for). One participant noted, “If you work odd hours, you have to dig deep to find child care,” while another said she has had to use “whoever can keep them.” Note, however, that these reports are inconsistent with information collected in the first phase of the study, where staff did not indicate this restriction. The reason for this inconsistency is unclear at this point.

**Lack of subsidy payment for extra child care fees.**
Finally, participants across several sites noted the challenges they faced when providers charged additional fees (beyond their assigned parent fee) that weren’t covered by the subsidy. Parents discussed the wide range of fees the provider can charge to families using their care, such as supply, activity, registration, field trip, and cot fees. Some parents had to pay for uniforms, transportation, and books, as well as any late fees. These fees were sometimes significant. One parent reported that she paid over $100 for four uniforms for her 2-year-old. Another parent used a day care that required her to purchase a $35 book for her 2-year-old. Agency policy about paying for extra fees appeared to vary across sites. While in some cases the subsidy agency might cover the additional fee (for example, in Jackson the subsidy agency paid for the registration fees), in others it did not.

Given that subsidies are for low-income families, it seems likely that any extra fee could constitute a real financial hardship if families have to pay it out of pocket. One parent pointed this out as she spoke about her daughter’s center, where there is a daily $3 activity fee, asking “If I didn’t have my mom, my dad, my grandmother, how would I pay that? Since I’m on [subsidies] why not pay whatever the school offers?” She felt her daughter would suffer if she didn’t pay for it and wondered, “Why not include all that in [the subsidy]?”
At the same time, a few parents spoke about looking for providers without additional fees. Fees may be a factor in parents’ decisions on who to use as a provider and may make finding care more challenging. Participants in one focus group, for example, felt that finding care was challenging because they weren’t sure what the subsidy agency paid for—one participant experienced a lot of back and forth between providers and her case manager to try to find a provider without additional charges not covered by the subsidy agency.

Some participants felt they received minimal information about services; they knew very little about what would happen to their subsidies once they left TANF.

A common theme across the sites was parents reporting they received inadequate information (both while on TANF and after leaving TANF) about different social services (including child care subsidies and other support services) and how they worked. Parents spoke about the lack of information on the types of support services they received or could receive, and the need to actively seek out information. One participant pointed out that if you don’t ask about services, you won’t find out about them: “If you don’t ask about it, they won’t tell you.” Participants in another focus group felt that “[welfare-to-work case managers] don’t give you information.” Participants in yet another site echoed these sentiments, with one noting, “They don’t tell you anything.” Another participant agreed, saying, “You’re not informed.” The lack of information appeared very frustrating to the parents who discussed this issue.

Parents also discussed not receiving the information they needed about subsidies. As noted earlier, in some cases parents did not learn about child care subsidies when they started their work activity. In addition, some parents across our sites seemed to have limited information about what would happen to their child care subsidies when they left TANF. While parents could retain subsidies for at least some period after leaving TANF in all our sites (as long as they were employed and met income eligibility guidelines), across sites many parents did not understand what would happen to their child care when they left TANF. Some mistakenly thought they would lose subsidies and others thought they would go on a waiting list. One participant said that when you leave TANF, “you can get the other type of child care . . . [but] that program has run out of money so you have to wait about two years to start.”

There are many explanations for why a parent might not know about post-TANF child care benefits (see Adams, Koralek, et al. 2006). A staff person may have informed the parent of these benefits, but the parent may have forgotten because she was overwhelmed by the level of information she received and, to her, the prospect of leaving TANF may have seemed a long way off. Some parents in our focus groups may not have been told of these benefits because they had just started on TANF. Many participants were at an early stage in the TANF process (i.e., they had been on TANF for less than six months), so there may have been less urgency to let them know about transitional bene-
fits; in earlier pieces of our study, it seemed parents found out about these benefits as they came closer to leaving TANF.

It is useful to recognize that while in each site some participants in our TANF focus groups knew little to nothing about post-TANF child care subsidies, some were more familiar with these benefits. For the most part (though it is not entirely clear), these parents seemed to have moved off TANF before, had asked their case managers about post-TANF benefits, or had friends or family members who had left TANF previously. Interestingly, while our focus group participants were by no means representative of parents receiving TANF benefits in these four sites, it also appeared that some of the more informed clients were in a site that discussed transitional child care benefits during TANF orientation.

While parents may not know about their post-TANF child care benefits for many reasons, discussions with focus group participants indicated that parents’ limited knowledge of this topic may produce difficulties, even at the early stages of their welfare-to-work experience. Specifically, this limited knowledge seemed to play into their concerns about what would happen once they left TANF and—although not discussed by participants—could discourage them from leaving TANF.

The idea of leaving TANF was stressful for some participants. One participant noted, “It’s a scary transition. . . . It’s like we’re being taken care of and we get comfortable. And then it’s scary, [when] you get out there.” Because subsidies were so important to parents, it isn’t surprising that losing them would be a chief concern. A number of participants across sites mentioned how not getting subsidies when they left TANF would be problematic. One participant noted, “What am I going to do [for child care] when I find a job? . . . They want me to get off the system and find a job, but they cut my day care. I could have a job within the next month, but TANF day care won’t just transfer.” In addition, absent any other information, the close link between TANF and child care in the minds of these parents may also lead them to incorrectly assume that they will lose child care subsidies when they leave TANF.

Participants who had left TANF generally did not consider post-TANF child care subsidy requirements burdensome, though some reported problems.

Research indicates that only a small percentage of eligible parents receive subsidies after leaving TANF (Schumacher and Greenberg 1999), even though they are a high-priority group. In the four sites examined in this study, parents leaving TANF could receive subsidies as long as they were employed and met income eligibility guidelines—though in some sites they might be placed on waiting lists at the end of the “transitional” period.21 For more information about the range of issues affecting subsidy use for this population, please see Adams, Koralek, et al. (2006).
Many focus group participants who had left TANF found requirements to retain subsidies manageable.

Overall, the parents who had moved off TANF did not report difficulties retaining child care subsidies during this transition, and did not seem to find the requirements they needed to fulfill difficult (table 4). However, our study included only 40 transitional focus group parents, and all these individuals had successfully moved off TANF and retained subsidies, so their experiences may not be indicative of others. From participants’ discussions, it also appeared these participants were highly motivated to keep child care subsidies. They saw subsidies as essential and would do whatever was necessary to keep them. In discussing requirements for subsidies, one participant noted:

### Table 4. Requirements to Retain Child Care Subsidies When Leaving TANF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Transition process</th>
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| Denver | The welfare-to-work case manager lets the special child care worker know the TANF case is closing (the special worker works as a liaison between the welfare-to-work case manager and the low-income program child care worker).  The special child care worker tells the welfare-to-work case manager what documentation is needed; the welfare-to-work case manager provides this information to the special child care worker, who passes it on to the low-income program child care worker.  

Parent responsibilities: None. |
| Houston | The welfare-to-work agency contacts the local TANF agency, which determines eligibility. After eligibility is determined, information is sent to the child care agency, which then sends a letter to parents informing them of their copay.  

Parent responsibilities: None. |
| Jackson | The welfare-to-work case manager sends a letter to the parents telling them the case is closing and to come in and apply for transitional child care. A parent comes in, fills out the application, and brings pay stubs if this information isn’t already in the computer. The parent does not have to meet with the case manager to do this.  When the application is processed, the parent must come in and pick up the certificate, which must be filled out by the provider and sent back to the agency.  

Parent responsibilities: Come in to fill out the application, come back to pick up the certificate, and make sure the provider fills out the certificate and gets it back to the agency. |
| Miami | Care can be authorized by a TANF eligibility worker or the case manager.  The case manager sends the parents a letter telling them to come in to receive transitional child care. When a parent comes in, the case manager issues a referral, which the parent brings to the child care worker.  

Parent responsibilities: Come in, receive the referral, and bring it to the child care worker. |

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4 In the past, parents were required to contact the subsidy agency to receive services (they would receive a letter from the TANF office telling them to do so). That policy changed before our visits, so parents no longer had to call the subsidy agency—not even some still did (likely because they transitioned off TANF when a call was required).
[If] you are going to wait [to return the child care subsidy certificate to the office] then you aren’t in a hurry for it and you don’t want it . . . I’m going to show you I want it. If you give [the certificate] to me at 8 o’clock in the morning, [by] 9 o’clock it might be on that desk [all filled out] waiting on [the case manager].

A participant in another site pointed out that she always brought any information directly to the subsidy agency rather than mail it because her children really needed their child care.

Some participants experienced challenges.
While many participants felt retaining subsidies during this transition was not difficult, some participants encountered difficulties. Although participants reported typically finding out about the availability of post-TANF subsidies directly from their case manager or by letter, a few participants reported they had not found out they could retain subsidies when they left TANF, resulting in gaps in their subsidy receipt. In addition, some participants in Jackson reported delays in payment once they began their transitional period. One parent noted that “it took them seven or eight months” to pay her provider. (The reasons for this delay are unclear, as Jackson is one of the few sites where parents leaving TANF did not change agencies or workers.)

Participant discussions also pointed to two challenges families might face. First, as our participants’ experiences indicated, retaining subsidies might be more difficult for certain families. Retaining subsidies in some sites was not automatic, so parents needed to do something to keep subsidies. Those who did not stay in contact with their welfare-to-work case manager once they were close to leaving TANF may have found it more complicated to retain subsidies since parents may not have learned subsidies were available. Also, given subsidies are linked to employment, parents who leave TANF and aren’t employed won’t be able to receive subsidies. Two focus group participants in Denver had left TANF without employment and lost their subsidies as a result. Both had since reconnected with the subsidy program for low-income families.

A second potential challenge for participants’ successful move off welfare—noted during focus groups in the three sites with distinct transitional periods for child care (Houston, Jackson, and Miami)—was what would happen to their subsidies at the end of that transitional period. At the time of our site visits, parents leaving the transitional child care period in two sites (Houston and Jackson) would likely be put on a waiting list for subsidies. Overall, participants knew very little about what would happen to their subsidies after their transitional period was over. Some participants were concerned about losing their subsidies. Participants in Jackson talked about the fact that transitional clients need to continue with their subsidies or, as one participant noted, “We will be back on TANF.” A participant in another Jackson focus group talked about the waiting list she might face after her transitional period:
The waiting list is a concern for me. . . . I just look at the children in the center where I work and they have siblings that have been on the waiting list for six or seven months. I often wondered when I get ready to go off of transitional child care, they are going to refer me to [the subsidy agency], but how [long] will I be on the waiting list for that? ‘Cause I cannot afford to pay child care. That is going to be a crunch on the person who is trying to work, you know. The initiative of the program is to get moms off of TANF and to get them back working. So we get this job, are they just going to leave us high and dry because if I lose my child care I cannot work?

Receiving subsidies in the transitional period differed from receiving them on TANF.
Participants also noted some important differences between their child care requirements while on TANF and those when they had left TANF. In some cases, these new requirements posed a challenge for parents, and in others it appeared to have little effect.

Copayments. The biggest change in three of the sites (Denver, Houston, and Jackson) was that parents had to pay a copayment once they left TANF. For the most part, parents didn’t complain about the copay because they realized it was a lot lower than what they would pay without subsidies. However, some participants had issues with their copay because, for example, they felt that their bills weren’t taken into account in figuring out the amount of the copay or that the copay started before they received their first check.

New requirements. In some cases, the transition off TANF gave parents less burdensome requirements. For example, in Houston, some participants noted that a one-year authorization rather than a 30-day authorization (as they had on TANF) made things easier. In other cases, parents were faced with new, more challenging requirements. In Jackson, parents had to submit each pay stub to their welfare-to-work case manager, who managed their transitional child care benefits. This was a requirement for all transitional benefits, but was particularly important for keeping child care. Two participants noted that—although they really needed subsidies—they could see themselves stopping subsidies because of the burden this requirement placed on them. One participant noted she has a lot of responsibilities at work, so turning in the pay stubs is “not on my mind. . . . I have so much to do.”

Conclusion

Child care subsidies are a critical work support for families moving from welfare to work. The close connection between the child care subsidy and TANF systems has important implications for parents’ access to and use of child care subsidies. Our focus groups provided important insights into the child care experiences of families receiving TANF and those that have recently left TANF, and suggest useful ideas for policymakers and agencies interested in improving services. (See appendix 3 for questions administrators and policymakers may want to consider as they examine their processes.)
Many agencies have made a concerted effort to streamline TANF and child care subsidy applications and renewals to reduce burden on families, often by putting many child care responsibilities into the hands of the welfare-to-work case managers and coordinating other efforts (Adams, Holcomb, et al. 2006). The findings from focus groups suggest that these efforts may have been successful, as parents generally reported that getting and retaining subsidies was not overly challenging. Remember, however, that we only spoke with a small number of parents, and only with parents who had successfully navigated this process, so they do not represent the experiences of all families.

The focus group comments also suggest several implications—both positive and negative—of closely linking TANF and child care subsidy programs. For example, the message that parents need to follow TANF requirements to retain child care subsidies may well promote compliance with requirements, given the importance many parents place on keeping their subsidies. However, linking TANF and child care subsidies so closely can create an incentive for families to go on TANF in order to get subsidies—a problem exacerbated by the reality in some of our sites that, because of inadequate funding, low-income families are unlikely to get subsidies unless on TANF. This close link, along with the lack of understanding among many parents that they can keep subsidies after leaving TANF, may also create a disincentive to leave welfare, as parents believe—absent any other information—leaving TANF means losing their child care subsidies.

Participants’ discussions also support other research that indicates frontline workers (like welfare-to-work case managers) play an important role in determining the quality of the services TANF clients receive (Lipsky 1983). In the first phase of our larger study, we found that welfare-to-work case managers played an important role in subsidies, and our discussions with parents showed the extent of this role and the many ways the welfare-to-work case manager can affect parents’ subsidy experiences.

For example, this study shows the influence of case managers extends beyond welfare-to-work activities to the child care subsidy, affecting the child care experiences of TANF families. Also, as has been found in other research on front-line practices, parents reported wide variation in the messages and treatment they received from different caseworkers (sometimes within the same site). These two findings highlight the importance of providing training and other supports to caseworkers, and to monitoring them to ensure policies are implemented appropriately. Given the central role of the welfare-to-work case managers on child care issues, it might be particularly useful for agencies to examine what these staff understand about child care issues (for example, problems that families may face in finding child care and how to provide support in these areas).

While many parents successfully navigated the TANF and child care subsidy processes, focus group discussions shed light on various challenges parents on TANF may face as they set up child care for their children. First, it was apparent that not finding out about subsidies in a timely manner could present a significant challenge as parents entered the welfare-to-work system. Some parents had to patch together a tem-
Some parents used a temporary child care arrangement so they could start their work activity. Others used a relative to care for their child or used the temporary child care available at the welfare-to-work office (an option in one of our sites) while they participated in their work activity. These problems underscore the importance of ensuring families find out about their eligibility for subsidies in a timely way.

Second, some participants expressed difficulties finding child care. Their efforts were hampered not only by issues faced by all families (such as waiting lists at certain providers or limited options for a particular type of care) but also by issues that seemed specific to their TANF or low-income status. In particular, some participants wanted to have more information and help in finding care, as well as more time to find care before starting their welfare-to-work activities. Their comments suggest that agencies may want to examine their policies and practices related to helping families find care to see if there are ways to support families better in this search. Agencies may also want to examine their policies around the length of time families have to find care, and to work to identify families who may need additional time and assistance.

Although getting and keeping subsidies (both while on TANF and leaving TANF) worked smoothly for many focus group participants, parents discussed policies or administrative practices that created challenges, including meeting with more than one caseworker, having difficulty getting providers set up in the subsidy system, the tight calibration of subsidies to work, difficulties changing providers, and challenges around evening and weekend care. These issues may hinder efforts to work and affect the child care choices of families in some cases, though it was often unclear how these challenges affected parents. Local agencies may want to consider examining whether policies or practices such as these exist in their community and, if so, whether the goals of the particular policy or practice outweigh the potential negative consequences to parents.

Parents also discussed their concerns about losing subsidies when leaving TANF. This fear unfortunately had some basis in fact, given that in some of these sites parents would only be able to stay on subsidies for a limited time after leaving TANF because current funds could not serve all eligible applicants. This, combined with the fact that in some sites families could not get subsidies without going on TANF, shows the close relationship between overall funding levels, the experiences and fears of families, and the incentives that families have to go on or stay on TANF.

One common thread running through many of the groups was that parents want more information and more consistent information. For example, “lack of information” appeared to be an issue for some parents around receiving subsidies in the first place, around finding and choosing care, around whether they could keep their subsidies after leaving welfare, and around other social services. This is challenging, as some case managers may well have provided this information but parents did not remember. However, it also appeared that in other cases, agencies relied on parents to ask for this informa-
tion, or that workers varied in whether they provided the information that parents needed (at least from the parents’ perspective). Regardless of the causes, agencies should examine how and when this kind of information is provided and try to identify more effective ways to share this information with parents.

Finally, parents across our sites were clear about the critical role subsidies played, not only in helping parents work, but also in helping them obtain safe settings where their children can be taken care of. Their concerns underscore the importance of child care subsidies in supporting the ability of TANF families to move from welfare to work, and provide further evidence of the importance of continuing to improve the links and coordination between these essential services.
APPENDIX 1

Overview of Study Methodology and Design

This report is part of a three-part study that explores how the child care and welfare systems intersect as families enter the TANF system and move from welfare to work. The overall study examines this intersection from the perspective of agencies and clients. This appendix describes the overall study and research design in greater depth.

The overall study occurred in three phases and examined three research questions:

- **Phase 1**: What are the key points of intersection between child care and TANF/welfare-to-work systems for TANF clients who need child care? For example, what are the steps in the process for TANF parents as they try to access and retain subsidies when moving from welfare to work? How do different localities structure and staff these intersections? What factors affect coordination between the systems?

- **Phase 2**: What do we know about subsidy retention when TANF clients leave welfare? For example, what do we know about welfare leavers and their child care needs? How do states or sites handle this transition in terms of helping families retain child care subsidies? What factors can explain low subsidy use among this population, and which of these factors might be amenable to policy solutions?

- **Phase 3**: What are TANF parents’ experiences with accessing and retaining subsidies as they move from welfare to work? What can we learn about their experiences with applying for subsidies, finding a provider, meeting ongoing requirements, and transitioning off welfare?

In all these areas, we focus on the implications of these findings for program administrators, caseworkers, community experts, and parents.

This research was conducted by a cross-disciplinary team that combined Urban Institute researchers who were expert in TANF welfare-to-work systems and implementation, and researchers who were expert in child care subsidy systems and implementation.
The overall study builds directly on data collected as part of the 1999–2000 child care and welfare/employment case studies of the Assessing the New Federalism (ANF) project. These initial ANF case studies were conducted in 17 sites across 12 states. One set of the ANF case studies examined how the child care subsidy system worked for families (including families on TANF), while the other examined how parents applied for cash assistance and participated in welfare-to-work activities.

For the overall study, we chose to focus on 11 of the original 17 sites, across 11 states. These sites were Birmingham, Alabama; Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; Miami, Florida; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Minneapolis, Minnesota; San Diego, California; and Seattle, Washington.

The first step of this research was to reanalyze the data from the child care and welfare case studies in conjunction with each other to obtain a baseline picture of the client flow in each of the 11 focal sites, specifically examining how parents entered and moved through the systems. We identified points in the client flow where the welfare-to-work and child care systems interconnected, as well as gaps in the existing data.

We then conducted semi-structured telephone discussions with key welfare and child care respondents in each site to obtain a more complete picture of the administrative structures and caseworker responsibilities in both systems, what parents had to do to get and keep subsidies as they moved through the welfare system, and coordination issues and challenges. Respondents included state and local welfare and child care administrators, as well as two to four TANF case managers per site, a TANF staff member familiar with TANF eligibility processes, and at least one child care staff member familiar with subsidy processes for TANF families. The number of individual and group discussions conducted in each site varied depending on how the local offices were structured. Where multiple local agencies managed the welfare-to-work program, we chose one focal office, generally the office with the largest caseload.

For phase one of this study, we then analyzed the data from this collection effort that were relevant to TANF clients while they were in the welfare-to-work system. These data provide a comprehensive and in-depth look at each step of the process for TANF clients as they applied for cash assistance, were connected to work activities, and were connected to child care subsidies, as well as what happened as they experienced the various changes inherent in the welfare-to-work system (i.e., changing work activities). We examined the administrative structures states and sites established to manage the intersection of these systems, the roles of the subsidy and the welfare-to-work agencies and staff in each step of the process, and what parents were required to do. We also examined the factors that affect coordination and communication between the TANF welfare-to-work and child care systems.

For phase two, which focuses on subsidy retention when leaving welfare, we focused on the data for these 11 sites that were relevant to TANF clients as they moved off
welfare. We also examined existing research on welfare leavers and subsidy patterns, reviewed different state policies regarding child care subsidies for welfare leavers, and interviewed national experts to discuss the retention of child care subsidies as parents transition off cash assistance.

Phase three involved looking in more depth at the connections between the welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems from the perspective of parents. We chose 4 sites from the original 11 (Denver, Miami, Jackson, and Houston), and conducted focus groups during summer and fall of 2003. We chose sites that varied in their administrative approaches, connections between the welfare and child care systems, client flow path, and individual caseworker responsibilities. These focus groups were with parents receiving TANF and child care subsidies, as well as with parents who had left TANF within the previous year and were still receiving child care subsidies.

Participants in our focus groups with TANF clients were asked about their experiences with child care subsidies, with special emphasis on their experiences setting up subsidies, finding a provider, having the provider approved, and requirements for retaining subsidies while on TANF and while leaving TANF. Participants in our transitional focus groups were asked about their experiences retaining subsidies once they left TANF, and whether their experiences with subsidies after leaving TANF differed from their experiences while on the TANF program.
Focus Groups with TANF Parents

We spoke with more than 130 women in our TANF parent focus groups. Most participants were under 30: 14 percent of participants were 20 years old or younger, and 57 percent were between 21 and 30 years old. Almost a quarter (23 percent) of participants were between 31 and 40 years old, and 6 percent were between 41 and 55 years old. The majority of participants (60 percent) were African American, approximately one-quarter (28 percent) were Hispanic, and 11 percent were white.22

Across the four sites, the number of children per participant ranged from one to six, with the median number being two. Many participants had young children: 62 percent had at least one child between 0 and 2 years old, and 37 percent had a child between 3 and 4 years old. Fifty-five percent of participants had at least one child between the ages of 5 and 12, and 11 percent had children age 13 and older (this number includes participants who indicated children over the age of 18 on their participant information forms).

Parents receiving subsidies can use any legal provider willing to accept their child and the subsidy, including child care centers, family child care (care in the home of a nonrelative), relative caregivers, and in-home caregivers. Seventy percent of participants reported using center-based care for their children. Twenty-nine percent used relative care, and 9 percent reported using a family child care home. Most participants had received child care assistance for less than a year (58 percent reported receiving subsidies for less than six months, while 21 percent had used them for six months to one year). Thirteen percent had been receiving subsidies for one to two years, and 8 percent had been using subsidies for over two years.

Most participants also reported being on TANF for less than a year (42 percent had been receiving cash assistance for less than six months, and 33 percent had been receiving it for six months to one year). Sixteen percent had been on cash assistance for one to two years, and 9 percent had been on TANF for over two years. Eighty-four percent of participants were not employed at the time of the focus group. Of those without employment, 26 percent reported being in a job club or job search activity, 15 percent in a training class, 31 percent in school, and 11 percent in a volunteer activity.
Table A2.1 presents selected characteristics by site.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Denver (%)</th>
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<th>Jackson (%)</th>
<th>Miami (%)</th>
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**Focus Groups with TANF Leavers**

We conducted focus groups with more than 40 participants in our welfare leaver groups. Like the TANF participants, most of these women were under 30 years old (5 percent were under 20, and 67 percent were 21 to 30 years old). Almost a quarter (24 percent) of participants were between 31 and 40, and 5 percent were between 41 and 55 years old. Sixty-seven percent of participants in the TANF leaver focus groups were African American. Twenty-nine percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were American Indian, and 5 percent were Caucasian. The TANF leaver group participants also had a median of two children. Fifty percent the participants had a child between 0 and 2 years old, 45 percent had a 3- or 4-year-old, 70 percent had at least one child between 5 and 12, and 8 percent had a child 13 or older. Like the TANF group, a majority of the TANF leaver group participants (84 percent) used center-based care. Eleven percent used a family child care home, and 21 percent had a relative care for their children. Participants had been using child care subsidies for varying amounts of time, with 18 percent receiving them for less than six months, 20 percent for six months to one year, 38 percent for one to two years, and 25 percent for more than two years.

In terms of cash assistance, 14 percent had left TANF less than three months before the focus group, 24 percent had left three to six months earlier, 38 percent had left six months to one year earlier, and 24 percent had been off cash assistance for over a year. Ninety-three percent of TANF leaver participants were employed. Of those who were employed, 62 percent worked 35 hours or more a week, 28 percent worked 20 to 34 hours a week, and 10 percent worked less than 20 hours a week.
APPENDIX 3

Key Questions to Helping Families Obtain and Keep Child Care Subsidies While Moving from Welfare to Work

Discussions with parents receiving TANF and those who have recently left TANF point to several policies and practices that can challenge families trying to access and retain subsidies as they move through and off welfare. Given the important role child care subsidies play for parents and their children, administrators, policymakers, and advocates should consider these issues as they assess local welfare-to-work and child care subsidy systems. In particular, these individuals may want to look at the following issues:

1. How are child care subsidy and welfare-to-work programs connected in their community? How much of the process of connecting child care subsidies and welfare is the responsibility of parents versus handled by the agency/agencies? Do parents have an incentive to go on TANF? Do parents believe they will lose subsidies when they leave TANF?

2. What role do welfare-to-work case managers play in the child care experiences of families? Do they have the appropriate training for these responsibilities—for example, are they trained in the complexity of finding child care and the challenges that can develop in child care arrangements? Do they understand how subsidies connect with work activity and the implications of subsidy starts and stops on the child care arrangement?

3. What help do parents receive in finding child care? In particular,

- who gives them information or help with finding care, and what kind of training has this staff person received in this area?
- are parents given information about different child care options? Are they given information on providers in their community? If so, what information is included—hours of operation, fees, whether the program has openings or has a waiting list, whether it requires an application fee, whether it provides transportation?
- which parents are given this information? Do they have to ask for it, or is it offered to all parents in an easily accessible format?
1. When do they get this information? Is it available at multiple times in the process?

2. Do parents receive transportation assistance so they can visit the programs?

4. How long do parents have to find child care? In particular, how long is it between when parents know the details of their work activity and when they have to start participating in the activity? Do caseworkers give parents the time suggested in policy, or do they encourage parents to start more quickly? Can parents have more time to find care, and, if so, how difficult is it to receive this additional time? Are they told they can have more time? Are they penalized for this?

5. How easy or difficult is it for parents to obtain and keep a subsidy while on TANF and when they leave TANF? What do parents have to do to apply and recertify for subsidies, whom do they have to meet with, and how many visits or workers does it involve?

6. How closely tied are subsidies to the parent’s work activity—for example, how long can parents continue to receive subsidies without having to recertify eligibility? How quickly are parents terminated for nonparticipation in work requirements? Can parents keep subsidies to find a new job? How frequently are ongoing adjustments made to the subsidy? What are the implications of these issues for the continuity of the subsidy and the care arrangement?

7. Are subsidies set up to promote work—for example, can parents receive subsidies for all job search hours? Can they receive subsidies during evenings and weekends?

8. When are TANF clients informed of their post-TANF child care benefits? What are they told, by whom, when, and how often? What might be the pros and cons of informing TANF clients earlier—such as during the welfare-to-work orientation—about post-TANF child care benefits, as well as at multiple points in their progression into and out of the TANF system?

Once these questions are explored, it is important to identify areas where parents may face particular challenges, and then, in turn, to examine the following questions:

1. What causes this challenge—state or local policy requirements? Local agency practices or leadership? Agency resources or infrastructure? Individual caseworkers? Some combination of the above?

2. Are these situations necessary from the perspective of the agencies? Are there other ways the state or locality can meet its needs while also meeting the needs of parents?

For additional questions to consider related to assessing the complexity of helping clients obtain and keep subsidies as they move from welfare to work, please see Adams, Holcomb, et al. (2006).
Notes

1. Throughout this report, we use the term “welfare-to-work” to refer to the TANF employment and training functions.

2. While the share varies by state, TANF parents can make up a considerable percentage of those receiving subsidies. The National Study of Child Care for Low-Income Families, examining 25 counties in 17 states, found the proportion of TANF clients receiving subsidies in 1999 as a proportion of all subsidized families ranged from 10–15 percent to almost 50 percent (Collins et al. 2000).

3. Throughout this report, we use the term “welfare to work” to refer to the TANF employment and training functions.

4. The seven other phase one sites were Birmingham, Alabama; San Diego, California; Boston, Massachusetts; Detroit, Michigan; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Seattle, Washington; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

5. Teams of two researchers participated in facilitating the focus groups, alternating roles as facilitator and note taker. The lead researcher participated in each focus group to help ensure consistency in the use of the discussion questions and probes. Focus groups were tape recorded with participants’ consent. The resulting tapes were used to create detailed notes of each focus group discussion that were reviewed for accuracy by the lead researcher and her research team partner for that group. All notes were coded into NUD*IST, a computer program that enables researchers to organize and analyze qualitative data more easily.

6. In Jackson and Miami, we conducted four focus groups with TANF clients and two focus groups with transitional parents. In Denver, we conducted five TANF focus groups, two transitional focus groups, and one focus group with low-income families. In Houston, we conducted five TANF focus groups and one transitional focus group.

7. In a few cases, participants in our TANF focus groups had not yet started receiving child care subsidies.

8. There was no separate child care worker handling TANF clients in Jackson, and TANF clients did not see the child care worker in Denver.

9. As mentioned later, some Houston participants appeared to have little interaction with the child care worker. However, in Miami, all parents needed to meet with the child care worker in person to receive and keep subsidies.

10. Jackson, Miami, and Houston had waiting lists for subsidies for low-income families. Denver did not have a waiting list at the time of our visit but was planning to implement one.

11. In the first phase of the study, some administrators and staff discussed the challenges their office experienced with coordinating and transferring necessary child care paperwork.
12. This participant said she had less than a week to find care and ended up missing some school days—and almost got in trouble for it.

13. See, for example, Child Care Aware’s “5 Steps to Choosing Child Care” or Maryland Department of Human Resources, Office of Licensing’s “Finding the Right Child Care.”

14. Transportation issues also appeared to make completing TANF and child care requirements more challenging for some focus group participants in cases where in-person visits were required. However, in one site it seemed that case managers might arrange for a home visit if they know a parent does not have transportation.

15. Interestingly, although we chose two sites from the first phase of our study where TANF clients did not have to interact with a child care worker (Jackson and Denver) and two sites where they did (Houston and Miami), we found in our Houston focus groups that many parents did not actually interact with the child care worker during the reauthorization of their subsidy, and some appeared to have minimal to no interaction with the child care worker to set up care (though this may differ by welfare-to-work offices). Consequently, it seemed that the subsidy requirements for many focus group participants in Houston were more minimal than reported to us by case managers and administrators in phase one. Also, it is unclear how representative these sites are of child care requirements for TANF clients in other states. Some sites in phase one of this study had more requirements than some of the sites chosen for this phase.

16. It appeared that not all families needed to visit a separate child care office to meet with their child care worker. In some cases, a child care office was located with the welfare-to-work office so the parent could meet with the worker there—though it also seemed at least some parents had to go to the main child care office to recertify their subsidies.

17. These recertification periods are significantly shorter than the maximum length of authorization periods reported in the first phase of the study. In particular, staff in Houston reported the maximum authorization period was three months, while staff in Miami noted their period was six months.

18. For an in-depth discussion of the implications of requiring in-person visits for recertification, see Adams et al. (2002).

19. From parents’ discussions, it appeared the agency covered only the registration fee of the first provider a parent chose.

20. As discussed in the next section, in some sites, parents may be put on a waiting list for subsidies at the end of their transitional child care period. However, in all the sites, parents would be able to receive subsidies when they initially leave TANF.

21. In three sites (Miami, Houston, and Jackson), parents leaving TANF would move into a transitional period that ranged from one to two years.

22. Ethnic background varied across sites. For example, 54 percent of participants in Denver were Hispanic, while 95 percent of Jackson participants were African American. In Miami, ethnic background seemed to vary according to where the group was held: in one location, 86 percent of participants were Hispanic; in another, 62 percent were African American.
References


Parents’ Perspectives on Child Care Subsidies and Moving from Welfare to Work

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