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Early Care and Education Subsidy Landscape: A Sonoma County Assessment

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I. Introduction

ABOUT THIS WORK

First 5 Sonoma County, in partnership with VIVA Social Impact Partners (VIVA), is leading a multi-phase effort to design a sustainable Family Early Care and Education (ECE) Scholarship Model to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care for families across Sonoma County. This landscape assessment provides a foundational understanding of the existing subsidy system, local conditions, and opportunities to strengthen access.

This work is taking place during a period of significant change for Sonoma County's early childhood system. In November 2024, voters approved Measure I, the Sonoma County Child Care & Children's Health Initiative. Measure I is a dedicated funding stream expected to generate approximately $30 million annually to expand child care access, early learning opportunities, and children's health supports. This effort is intended to inform how resources may be used to address persistent gaps for families who remain underserved by existing child care subsidy systems.

WHY THIS WORK MATTERS

Across Sonoma County, publicly funded child care subsidies play a central role in supporting families' ability to work, pursue education, and meet basic needs. However, available funding does not meet demand, resulting in long waitlists and limited access to care. Many families who qualify remain unserved, while others fall just outside eligibility thresholds despite facing significant affordability challenges. These challenges are particularly pronounced in high-cost-of-living regions like Sonoma County, where the cost of living exceeds statewide benchmarks used to determine subsidy eligibility. As a result, many families earn too much to qualify for assistance but not enough to afford market-rate child care, creating an affordability gap.

At the same time, Sonoma County's ECE subsidy system operates within a complex mixed-delivery structure shaped by multiple state and federal programs, each with distinct administrative requirements and funding mechanisms. These programs collectively form a mixed-delivery system that includes both direct-service and voucher-based models, administered by a combination of local educational agencies, Alternative Payment Program agencies, and community-based organizations. While this structure creates multiple pathways to access care, it can also result in fragmentation in how families navigate the system and how resources are distributed across communities.

PURPOSE OF THIS LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

This report documents the current ECE subsidy landscape in Sonoma County, including funding sources, administrative structures, and contractor roles. It also examines patterns of demand and unmet need using local child care subsidy waitlist data, analyzes how statewide eligibility thresholds align with the cost of living in Sonoma County, and reviews examples of locally funded scholarship models from other jurisdictions across the United States.

Together, these findings are intended to inform the design of a Family ECE Scholarship Model that expands access, advances equity, and aligns with the long-term vision and investments of Measure I.

METHODOLOGY

This assessment draws on desk research, administrative data analysis, and stakeholder engagement to develop a comprehensive understanding of Sonoma County's ECE subsidy system and to identify considerations for a locally designed scholarship model.

The Local Planning Council (LPC) Planning Coordinator helped guide the scope of work and connect the project team with relevant partners and data sources. Desk research included a review of state policies, publicly available resources on California Department of Education (CDE) and California Department of Social Services (CDSS) administered subsidy programs, and national family scholarship models for ECE.

A public records request submitted by VIVA to CDSS provided additional information on subsidy contract structures and local contractors. The analysis was further informed by input from local program and agency leaders, including Community Child Care Council (4Cs Sonoma County), River to Coast Children's Services (RCCS), First 5 Sonoma County, Sonoma County Child Welfare, and Children and Family Circle of Sonoma County, to better understand local processes, enrollment practices, and system-level challenges.

Together, these methods provide an understanding of both policy design and current implementation within Sonoma County's early learning system.

II. How the Current ECE Subsidy System Serves and Prioritizes Families

OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA'S CHILD CARE SUBSIDY STRUCTURE

California's child care subsidy system is designed to support families who need assistance paying for care so that parents and caregivers can work, pursue education or training, secure housing, or address family stability needs. While the system includes multiple programs administered through different state agencies, all subsidies operate within a common framework that defines eligibility, enrollment, and family fee requirements.

Income and Eligibility Criteria

To qualify for most subsidized child care, families must meet at least one condition related to income or family circumstances and demonstrate a documented need for care. This dual requirement, which requires families to meet both income and need criteria, shapes who can enter the subsidy system.[1]

Demonstrated Need for Care	Income-Related Eligibility
In addition to income-related eligibility, families must demonstrate a need for child care. Need may be established when: • A child is receiving protective services or is at risk of abuse or neglect. • The child is homeless. • The parent or caregiver is working or seeking employment. • The parent is participating in vocational training, educational programs (including English language learning), or pursuing a high school diploma or equivalent. • The family is seeking permanent housing. • A parent or caregiver is unable to care for the child due to a physical or mental condition.	A family may qualify if it meets one or more of the following conditions: • The family is currently receiving cash aid. • The family meets income eligibility guidelines. • The family is experiencing homelessness or seeking permanent housing (as defined under federal law). • The family has a child receiving child protective services (CPS) or identified as at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. • A member of the household is certified to receive benefits through public assistance programs such as Medi-Cal, CalFresh, WIC, Head Start, Early Head Start, CalWORKs, or related federal nutrition or tribal food programs.

SUBSIDY RANKING SYSTEMS

While eligibility determines whether a family may qualify for subsidized child care, the state subsidy ranking systems determine the order in which eligible families are served when funding and available slots are limited. Both the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) rely on income-based ranking structures that are directly connected to the state's income eligibility thresholds.

Each fiscal year, the State establishes updated income ceilings tied to State Median Income (SMI). Families whose adjusted monthly income falls at or below the ceiling for the subsidized child care program they are seeking are considered income-eligible. This income determination serves as the basis for how families are ranked or prioritized for enrollment in subsidized childcare programs.

California Department of Education's Ranking System

The California Department of Education (CDE) publishes income ceilings to determine whether families are income-eligible for the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), and it provides an updated Income Ranking Table that contractors must use to determine a family's enrollment priority based on income.

Income Eligibility: Families must meet the State Median Income (SMI) ceiling to be considered eligible for CSPP. If a family's adjusted monthly income is at or below the eligible amount defined by the current Schedule of Income Ceilings, they qualify for subsidy eligibility. In Fiscal Year 2025-26, the CSPP SMI ceiling is 100% SMI.[2] For a family of four, this equates to an annual income of approximately $127,338. Families at or below this income level are eligible for CSPP based on income, with lower-income families receiving higher priority for enrollment.

Income Ranking for Priority: The Income Ranking Table assigns a rank (e.g., 1–100 and above) to all eligible families based on household size and income relative to SMI. This rank is used by programs when there are more eligible applicants than available spaces. Families with lower incomes receive higher priority for enrollment. A rank of 1 represents the highest priority.[3]

Inclusion of Families Above Standard Eligibility: Even though eligibility is typically capped at 100% of SMI, CDE's ranking table extends up to 15% above the income threshold and includes income bands up to rank 115. This is intentional so that programs can rank and prioritize families who may be served under statutory exceptions or local policies while still using a consistent statewide ranking system.[4]

California Department of Social Services' Ranking System

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) also administers multiple subsidized child care programs and applies a uniform income eligibility and ranking framework across those programs. The income eligibility and ranking requirements apply to the following CDSS-administered subsidized child care programs:

- Alternative Payment Programs (CAPP)
- California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) programs, including CalWORKs Stage 1 Child Care, CalWORKs Stage 2 Child Care (C2AP), and CalWORKs Stage 3 Child Care (C3AP)
- General Child Care and Development (CCTR)

- California Family Child Care Home Education Networks (CFCC)
- Migrant Child Care and Development Programs (CMIG)
- Migrant Alternative Payment Program (CMAP)
- Child Care for Children with Severe Disabilities (CHAN)

Income Eligibility: CDSS establishes annual income ceilings based on State Median Income (SMI). For FY 2025–26, the entry eligibility is set at 85% of SMI, adjusted for family size. For a family of four, this equates to an annual income of approximately $108,237 per year. Once enrolled, families may continue receiving services until their income exceeds 85% of SMI, at which point they are no longer income-eligible.

Priority Categories & Ranking: When there are more eligible families than available subsidized slots, CDSS contractors must enroll families in priority order:

1. First Priority: Children who are receiving child protective services or who are identified as abused, neglected, or at risk, upon written referral.
2. Second Priority: Income-eligible families, with those having the lowest gross monthly income relative to family size, are admitted first.[5]

Similar to CDE, CDSS requires contractors to use the Income Ranking Table, which assigns a numerical rank based on family size and income relative to SMI. Lower-income families receive higher priority rankings. When families share the same income ranking, CDSS provides additional ordering rules:

- Priority is given to families with a child with exceptional needs.
- If still tied, priority is given to families with a primary home language other than English.
- If still tied, the family longest on the waiting list is admitted first.[6]

Family Fees

Both the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) require that families receiving subsidized child care services pay a monthly family fee based on income, family size, and the number of hours of care certified. However, both systems also include specific exceptions and protections that limit fees for certain families. The family fee structure outlined in Table 1 below is intended to ensure that families contribute toward the cost of care in proportion to their ability to pay, while protecting low-income families from excessive fees.[7,8]

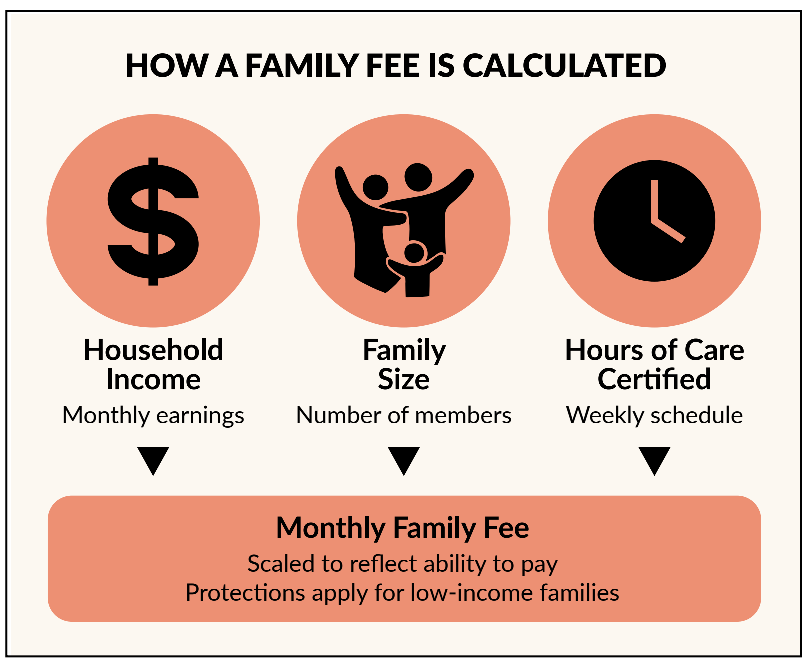


Table 1. Family Fee Structure in CDE and CDSS Subsidized Child Care Programs (FY 2025–26)

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>CDE Administered Programs</th><th>CDSS Administered Programs</th></tr>
<tr><td>Programs Covered</td><td>California State Preschool Program (CSPP)</td><td>Alternative Payment Programs (CAPP); CalWORKs Stages 1–3; General Child Care (CCTR); Family Child Care Home Education Networks (CFCC); Migrant Child Care (CMIG); Child Care for Children with Severe Disabilities (CHAN)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fee Basis</td><td colspan="2">Adjusted monthly income, family size, and certified hours of need</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fee Assessment Timing</td><td colspan="2">Assessed at initial certification, recertification, or upon voluntary income update</td></tr>
<tr><td>Multiple Children in Care</td><td colspan="2">Only one family fee assessed, based on the child with the highest certified hours</td></tr>
<tr><td>Full-Time vs. Part-Time Fee</td><td>Full-time fee assessed if certified need is 130+ hours/month; part-time fee if under 130 hours/month</td><td>Fee based on certified need (full-time vs. part-time threshold)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Maximum Fee Limit</td><td colspan="2">Family fees may not exceed 1% of adjusted monthly income (statutory cap)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Exemptions</td><td colspan="2">Families below 75% of the State Median Income (SMI) are exempt from paying a family fee</td></tr>
<tr><td>Protective Services / At-Risk Families may be exempt from fees for up to 12 months if required by the service plan

Families whose children are enrolled in part-day CSPP are not assessed a family fee</td><td>CalWORKs Cash Aid Families

Protective services families prioritized; fee exemptions may apply consistent with statutory requirements

Family receiving care through the Child Care and Development Services for Children with Special Needs (CHAN) program

Family enrolled in the Federal-Based Migrant Program

Families may be eligible for an exemption to family fees for 12 months if they are (1) a family with children who have been identified as, at risk of being, abused, neglected, or exploited when the referral indicates that the fee is waived, and/or (2) a family with children who are receiving Child Protective Services</td></tr>
</table>

Family Fees: Family of 4 Analysis

Family fee amounts are consistent across both CDE and CDSS-administered programs for a given income level and family size. The primary difference is the range of income over which fees are assessed: CDSS programs assess fees only up to 85% of State Median Income (SMI), while CDE programs extend to 100% SMI (see Table 2).[9]

Table 2. Comparison of Monthly Family Fees and Eligibility Ranges for a Family of Four under CDE and CDSS Subsidized Child Care Programs (FY 2025–26)

SMI Rank	Monthly Income	Full-Time Fee	Part-Time Fee	Applies To
75%	$7,959	$60.50	$30.25	CDE + CDSS
80%	$8,489	$64.50	$32.25	CDE + CDSS
85%	$9,020	$68.60	$34.30	CDE + CDSS
90%	$9,550	$72.60	$36.30	CDE only
95%	$10,081	$76.60	$38.30	CDE only
100%	$10,612	$80.70	$40.35	CDE only

As shown above, families at 75%-85% of SMI would pay similar fees under either ranking system. While 85% SMI represents the typical entry threshold for CDSS-administered programs, families may continue receiving services until a required income recertification or reported income change triggers a reassessment of eligibility. As a result, some families above 85% SMI may remain enrolled in CDSS programs and subject to those fee policies. However, families newly entering the system at income levels above 85% SMI are generally only eligible for CDE-administered programs and therefore subject to family fees within that system.[10,11]

OVERLAY: SUBSIDY SYSTEM VS. COST OF LIVING

While the CDE and CDSS ranking systems determine eligibility and enrollment priority based on a percentage of State Median Income (SMI), these thresholds are statewide measures that do not account for local variations in cost of living. To understand how these ranking thresholds align with economic realities in Sonoma County, this analysis compares various wage estimates drawn from the MIT Living Wage Calculator for Sonoma County, and income rank figures drawn from the CDSS Income Ranking Table for Fiscal Year 2025-26.[12,13]

The MIT Living Wage Calculator estimates the hourly wage required for households to meet basic expenses, including housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, and taxes. When converted to monthly income and aligned with the closest CDE and CDSS income ranks for a family of four, important patterns emerge across three income benchmarks: living wage, poverty wage, and minimum wage (Table 3).

For a single parent with three children, the MIT living wage estimate is approximately $14,873.60 per month. This surpasses the income associated with Rank 115 on the CDE/CDSS income ranking table (approximately $12,203 per month). Rank 115 exceeds the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) eligibility ceiling of 100 percent SMI and is well above the CDSS 85 percent SMI ceiling. In contrast, poverty wage and minimum wage levels for this household type align with much lower ranking bands (approximately Ranks 24–26), placing those families firmly within eligibility and high priority for enrollment.

This comparison illustrates that a single-parent household may earn a living wage for Sonoma County yet exceed subsidy eligibility thresholds, while families at poverty or minimum wage levels are clearly prioritized within the ranking structure.

For a two-adult household with one working adult and two children, the MIT living wage estimate is approximately $8,988 per month (assuming the non-working adult provides all childcare at no additional cost), aligning with Rank 84. This falls within CSPP's 100 percent SMI ceiling and within the 85 percent SMI ceiling used for many CDSS-administered programs. As a result, such a household of this size and make up would be eligible for CSPP and CDSS programs. Again, poverty and minimum wage estimates align with much lower ranks (approximately Ranks 26–27), placing those families in the highest priority bands.

For two adults, both working full-time with two children, the MIT living wage estimate is approximately $11,651.20 per month in combined income. The closet CDE and CDSS income rank is 110 at $11,673. This falls within CSPP's extended income ceiling where up to 10% of a CSPP site's slots can be given to families with incomes of 101-115% SMI when available; However, this family's income surpasses CDSS's 85 percent SMI ceiling, indicating ineligibility for CDSS programs from an income perspective. Notably, two adults working full-time at minimum wage align around Rank 51, positioning them well within eligibility and mid-range priority bands. This demonstrates that dual-earner households earning minimum wage remain eligible and likely to be prioritized, while households earning what MIT defines as a living wage in Sonoma County may exceed eligibility limits.

Table 3. Family of 4 Analysis - Affordability and Self-Sufficiency Benchmarks

Family Composition	Estimated Monthly Income		
	Living Wage	Poverty Wage	Minimum Wage
1 Adult, 3 Children	$92.96/hr **Monthly estimate:** $14,873.60	$15.87/hr **Monthly estimate:** $2,539.20	$16.90/hr **Monthly estimate:** $2,704
	Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank: **115** ($12,203)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **24** ($2,547)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **26** ($2,759)
2 Adults (1 working), 2 Children	$56.18/hr **Monthly Estimate:** $8,988.80	$15.87/hr **Monthly Estimate:** $2539.20	$16.90/hr **Monthly estimate:** $2,704
	Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank: **84** ($8,914)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **24** ($2,547)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **26** ($2,759)
2 Adults (both working), 2 Children	$36.41/hr **Monthly Estimate:** $11,651.20	$7.93/hr **Monthly Estimate:** $2,537.60	$16.90/hr **Monthly estimate:** $5,408
	Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank: **110** ($11,673)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **24** ($2,547)	*Closest CDE CDSS Income Rank:* **51** ($5,412)

Across all household compositions examined, several themes emerge.

1. The subsidy ranking system effectively targets families at poverty and minimum wage income levels. These households fall within the lowest ranking bands and are most likely to be prioritized for enrollment when funding is limited. This reflects the system's design to serve families with the greatest economic need.
2. Living wage thresholds in Sonoma County frequently exceed subsidy eligibility ceilings. In practical terms, this means that families may lose eligibility for subsidized child care before reaching a level of income that allows them to meet basic needs without assistance. This dynamic is especially pronounced for single-parent households, whose required living wage income is substantially higher than that of dual-earner households but who are evaluated within the same family-size income band.
3. The CDE and CDSS ranking tables account for family size but not household composition. A family of four with one earner is assessed within the same ranking band as a family of four with two earners, even though the financial pressures and income dynamics differ significantly. As noted in the comparison analysis, this structure can disadvantage single-parent families, who may reach or exceed eligibility ceilings while still falling short of self-sufficiency.

Taken together, this comparison highlights a structural distinction between a statewide income allocation framework and a county-specific cost-of-living reality. The CDE and CDSS ranking systems are designed to equitably distribute limited public resources across California. They are not intended to reflect local self-sufficiency benchmarks. In a high-cost county such as Sonoma, however, this distinction becomes particularly visible: families may be income-eligible yet not economically stable, or economically stable by statewide measures yet ineligible for assistance despite continued affordability challenges.

III. The Existing Subsidy Landscape in Sonoma County

Before describing the subsidy funding landscape in Sonoma County, it is important to understand how its two Resource and Referral (R&R) agencies structure access to ECE. R&R agencies are publicly funded organizations that serve as the primary entry point for families, helping them find child care, navigate options, and connect to available subsidy programs. In Sonoma, this role is carried out by 4Cs Sonoma County, which serves most of the county, and River to Coast Children's Services, which serves West Sonoma County, including coastal and Russian River communities. Uniquely, both agencies also operate as Alternative Payment (AP) agencies, meaning they not only provide referrals and support but also determine eligibility for subsidies, authorize care, and issue payments to providers.

SONOMA COUNTY'S RESOURCE AND REFERRAL AGENCIES

4Cs	RCCS
4Cs Sonoma County	**River to Coast Children's Services**
Serves most of Sonoma County	Serves Western Sonoma County, coastal & Russian River

Because these functions are administered through two agencies with distinct contracts and geographic service areas, there is no single, centralized list of families eligible for or receiving subsidized care. Instead, each agency maintains its own caseload, funding allocations, and waitlists, shaped by its specific contracts and the communities it serves. This structure allows for place-based responsiveness, but also introduces fragmentation in how families are identified, prioritized, and served across the county.

An additional challenge in Sonoma County's subsidy system is the imbalance in Alternative Payment (AP) contract allocations relative to the populations served by each agency. While River to Coast Children's Services serves a smaller, more geographically defined portion of West Sonoma County, its subsidy contract is more proportionate to local demand. In contrast, 4Cs, which serves the majority of the county's population, operates with a contract that is not sufficient to meet the demand of even its most needy families.

This imbalance has resulted in significant disparities in access to subsidized care across the county. In the River to Coast service area, eligible families are able to access subsidies without a waitlist, including those across all CDSS priority ranks to maximum eligibility. Meanwhile, in the 4Cs service area, demand far exceeds available funding, and even families with the highest levels of need and priority ranking are often unable to be served (including priority rank of 1). This creates a geographically driven inequity, where a family's access to subsidized child care is influenced not only by eligibility and need, but by where they live within the county.

Understanding this dynamic is essential context for the sections that follow, and for the design of a family scholarship model, which will need to align with or bridge across these existing administrative systems to ensure equitable access for families countywide.

OVERVIEW OF ECE SUBSIDY TYPES

The early care and education (ECE) subsidy system in Sonoma County includes multiple state and federally funded programs that together support access to child care for families with low and moderate incomes. In addition, child care subsidies in Sonoma County flow through three primary channels: the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the California Department of Education (CDE), and federal programs administered directly by local agencies. Each of these, and corresponding ECE subsidy funding streams, is described in this section.

CDSS-Administered Programs

There are nine subsidy program types operating under CDSS contracts in Sonoma County. They fall into two categories:

1. Child Care Access and Subsidy Programs: These are the programs that directly pay for child care slots for eligible families (Table 4).
2. Systems Building and Planning Programs: These are programs that play an important role in supporting families' ability to find care, strengthening provider capacity, and coordinating countywide planning efforts; however, these programs do not directly fund child care slots (Table 5).

Table 4. CDSS Child Care Access and Subsidy Programs Overview[14]

California Alternative Payment Program (CAPP)	A voucher-based program for low-income working families. Families choose their own licensed or license-exempt provider, and the Alternative Payment (AP) agency manages the eligibility and payment process.
CalWORKs Child Care Programs	Provides subsidized child care services to current and former CalWORKs families. Families can choose licensed or license-exempt providers, including family child care homes or centers. Stages 1 and 2 are entitlements, while Stage 3 is limited by funding availability.
General Child Care and Development (CCTR)	CDSS directly contracts with center-based and licensed family child care providers to support working families eligible for subsidized care. CCTR contractors operate licensed programs themselves and enroll eligible families into available slots.
Family Child Care Home Education Network (CFCC)	A coordinated network of licensed family child care homes, typically administered by a nonprofit organization. The administering agency provides oversight, coaching, and quality supports, and participating family child care providers (FCC) can serve eligible children using subsidized funding.
Emergency Child Care Bridge Program	Provides immediate time-limited vouchers for child care for children entering foster care, supporting placement stability and caregiver employment. Administered by Sonoma County Child Welfare in partnership with 4C's.
Migrant Alternative Payment Program (CMAP)	Provides portable child care vouchers to eligible migrant families, allowing them to access care across locations as they move for agricultural work in California's central valley. The program serves children from birth through age 12 (and older children with exceptional needs). Note: Not leveraged in Sonoma County

Table 5. Systems Building and Planning Programs Overview[15]

Child Care Initiative Project (CCIP)	Recruits and supports home-based providers to help license-exempt providers become licensed, expanding the pool of available subsidized care options.
California Health & Safety Training Activities (CHST)	The program funds required preventive health and safety training for child care providers.
California Resource & Referral Program (CRRP)	Ensures families can find and navigate available care options. It maintains the provider database and provides free referrals to all families regardless of income.
Local Childcare & Development Planning Council (CLPC)	Funds the county's Local Planning Council, which conducts needs assessments and coordinates system-level planning. In Sonoma County, this contract is held by the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE).

For additional details about each program's purpose, eligibility requirements, funding availability, and funding allocations by fiscal year and contractor, see Appendix A, the *Sonoma County Subsidy Landscape Table.*

CDE-Administered Programs

Programs administered by the California Department of Education (CDE) play a complementary role in supporting access to early learning and care in Sonoma County. These programs include both direct-service preschool programs that provide subsidized early education slots for eligible children, as well as supplemental early learning program funding streams that support expanded learning opportunities and early learning access within the Transitional Kindergarten –12 system (Table 6).

Table 6. CDE-Administered Early Learning and Education Programs Overview

Direct Service Subsidy Programs	
California State Preschool Program (CSPP)	Provides part-day and full-day subsidized preschool services to support school readiness and early development for children ages 3-4.[16] The program offers a curriculum that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.
Supplemental Early Learning Programs & Funding	
Expanded Learning Opportunity Grants (ELO-P)	Provides state funding to local educational agencies to offer before-school, after-school, summer, and intersession enrichment programs for students in transitional kindergarten through sixth grade.[17] The program is designed to support students' academic, social, emotional, and physical development through learning experiences that complement, but do not duplicate, the regular school day. There is a focus on local educational agencies (LEAs) with the highest concentration of targeted disadvantaged students (English learners and students categorically eligible for free or reduced-price meals).
Title I, Part A Preschool Programs	Federal funding is provided to local educational agencies (LEAs) through Title I, Part A allocations. LEAs may reserve a portion of their Title I funds to operate preschool programs or support early learning services for eligible children (optional, not required).[18]
Inclusive Early Education and Expansion Program (IEEEP) Grant	The grant supports increased access to inclusive early care and education programs for children with disabilities.[19] Funds are awarded to LEAs for adaptive and universally designed facility renovations, adaptive equipment, and professional development.

For additional details about each program's purpose, eligibility requirements, funding availability, and funding allocations by fiscal year and contractor, see Appendix A, the *Sonoma County Subsidy Landscape Table.*

Federal-Directly Administered Programs

Federally administered early learning programs in Sonoma County's early care and education (ECE) system are funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and administered by local agencies. These direct service programs are designed to support children and families with the highest levels of need (Table 7).

Table 7. Federally Administered Early Learning and Education Programs Overview

Head Start (HS)	Supports school readiness and healthy development for children ages 3-5 through early education, health, nutrition, mental health, and parent engagement.[20] Designed with a focus on whole-child and family outcomes. Head Start eligible participants include children whose families meet the federal low-income guidelines, children who have special needs, and children who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program public assistance services. Eligible participants also include children who are in the foster care system or experiencing homelessness.
Early Head Start (EHS)	Provides services similar to those of Head Start programs, but tailored to the unique needs of infants and toddlers and/or expectant moms.[21] Offered in either a center-based option or a home-based option. EHS programs promote the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of infants and toddlers through safe and developmentally enriching caregiving.
Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP)	Provides federal funding to expand access to high-quality early learning for infants and toddlers from low-income families through partnerships with existing child care providers.[22] The program enhances participating providers by aligning them with Early Head Start standards. The program is available in nine rural counties of Northern California. Note: Not available in Sonoma County.

For additional details about each program's purpose, eligibility requirements, funding availability, and funding allocations by fiscal year and contractor, see Appendix A, the *Sonoma County Subsidy Landscape Table.*

SUBSIDY CONTRACTS, ADMINISTRATION, AND FUNDING DISTRIBUTION

Child care subsidy programs in Sonoma County are administered through a network of contracted agencies, with responsibilities distributed based on geographic coverage and program type. The structure of contracts reflects not only funding allocations, but also the role each agency plays in serving families across the county.

CDSS Contractors and Administration

As shown in Table 8, CDSS funding in Sonoma County is concentrated among a small number of lead contractors, particularly 4Cs Sonoma County and River to Coast Children's Services. This concentration reflects the county's administrative structure, in which these two agencies serve as the designated Resource and Referral (R&R) and Alternative Payment (AP) agencies responsible for managing subsidy access within their respective service areas.

4Cs Sonoma County holds the majority of contracts and funding, which is expected, given that its service area covers most of the county's population, excluding the majority of West Sonoma County.[23] River to Coast Children's Services, which serves West Sonoma County, holds a smaller but regionally aligned share of funding based on its more limited geographic coverage.

However, despite this concentration of funding, available resources remain insufficient to meet demand within the 4Cs service area. Even among families with the highest levels of need, many eligible children are not able to access subsidized care. As of March 2026, 1,109 children ages 0-4 were on the 4Cs eligibility list awaiting care (see Section III: Demand and Unmet Need for additional detail).

In addition, beyond these lead agencies, a broad set of smaller contractors deliver direct-service programs, particularly through CCTR contracts.

Table 8. CDSS Subsidy Contracts by Contractor, Program Type, and Maximum Reimbursable Amount (FY 2025–26; CAPP FY 2025–27)[24]

Contractor	**Contracts** FY 25-26 Unless Noted	**Total Allocation ($)** Maximum Reimbursable Amount
4Cs Sonoma County	CAPP (FY 25–27)	$19,586,444.00
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$2,495,005.00
	CalWORKS Stage3	$2,868,126.00
	CCTR	$812,052.00
	CRRP	$381,476.00
	CCIP	$61,832.00
	CHST	$17,175.00
River to Coast Children's Services	CAPP (FY 25–27)	$2,298,400.00
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$103,180.00
	CalWORKs Stage 3	$41,546.00
	CRRP	$239,122.00
	CCIP	$37,097.00
	CHST	$1,636.00
Sonoma County Human Services Department	CalWORKs Stage 1	$1,430,000
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$1,326,126.00
	California Foster Bridge: The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program	$570,821

Contractor	Contracts	Total Allocation ($) Maximum Reimbursable Amount
Children & Families Circle of Sonoma County	CFCC	$570,821
Extended Child Care Coalition of Sonoma County	CCTR	$975,474
Rise & Shine Child Care Centers & Family Services	CCTR	$966,925
Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District	CCTR	$861,072
Sonoma CAN (Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County)	CCTR	$663,200
Sonoma County Junior College District	CCTR	$546,714
YWCA of Sonoma County	CCTR	$346,462
Healdsburg Unified School District	CCTR	$291,927
Associated Students - California State University Sonoma	CCTR	$259,393
Sonoma County Office of Education	CLPC	$142,202

Note: While this table presents maximum reimbursable amounts (allocations), detailed expenditure data by contractor and program is provided in Appendix B: CDSS Program and Contractor Expenditures.

CDSS Funding Allocation Patterns

According to data provided by CDSS that outline ECE subsidies and contract allocations spanning fiscal years 2023-2026, Sonoma County's child care subsidy system is heavily weighted toward voucher-based funding. CAPP accounts for approximately 61% of CDSS contract allocations, and when combined with CalWORKs Stages 2 and 3, voucher-based programs represent roughly 75% of total CDSS funding (Table 9).

Table 9. Total Maximum Reimbursable Amount (Program Allocations) by Program Type and Fiscal Year[25]

Program	FY 2023–24	FY 2024–25	FY 2025–26	3-Year Total
CAPP (Alt. Payment)	$23,959,784	$23,210,970	$23,210,970[26]	$70,381,724
CCTR (General Child Care)	$3,441,182	$5,019,417	$5,723,219	$14,183,818
Stage 3 (CalWORKs)	$3,582,731	$3,005,850	$2,909,672	$9,498,253
CFCC (Family Child Care Networks)	$2,962,575	$2,977,656	$2,977,656	$8,917,887
Stage 2 (CalWORKs)	$1,856,921	$2,411,724	$2,598,185	$6,866,830
Stage 1 (CalWORKs)	$1,386,205	$1,584,751	$1,430,000	$4,400,956
CRRP (Resource & Referral)	$614,600	$620,598	$620,598	$1,855,796
California Foster Bridge: The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program	$776,155	$238,919	$570,821	$1,585,895

Note: While this table presents maximum reimbursable amounts (allocations), detailed expenditure data by program is provided in Appendix B: CDSS Program and Contractor Expenditures.

Direct-service programs such as CCTR account for a smaller but growing share of funding. Over the past three years, CCTR allocations have increased significantly, from approximately $3.44 million in FY 2023-24 to $5.72 million in FY 2025-26.[27] This suggests that targeted expansion of contracted care capacity through recent CCTR expansion request for application processes have been successful. In contrast, Family Child Care Home Education Network (CFCC) funding has remained relatively stable over time, indicating consistent investment in home-based care networks.

CDE Contractors and Administration

CDE-administered programs play a complementary but distinct role in Sonoma County's early learning system, with a primary focus on preschool-aged children and school-based early learning opportunities. Unlike CDSS programs, which are largely administered through centralized Alternative Payment agencies, CDE funding is distributed across a wide network of local education agencies (LEAs), including school districts, higher education institutions, and nonprofit providers.

This structure reflects the integration of early learning within the broader TK–12 education system, particularly through the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten. In addition, supplemental funding streams, such as the Expanded Learning Opportunity Program (ELO-P), Title I, Part A preschool funds and Inclusive Early Education and Expansion Program (IEEEP) further extend resources across a large number of LEAs, supporting early learning and enrichment opportunities.

As a result, the CDE contractor landscape is characterized by broad distribution across many entities, rather than concentration among a small number of lead agencies.

In Sonoma County, a substantial number of LEAs hold contracts or receive funding through CDE-administered programs, including:

- California State Preschool Program (CSPP): 12 contractors
- Expanded Learning Opportunity Program (ELO-P): approximately 66 contractors
- Title I, Part A Preschool Funds: approximately 42 contractors

Inclusive Early Education and Expansion Program (IEEEP) Grant: 1 contractor (Sonoma County Office of Education)

For a complete list of CDE-funded contractors and their FY 2025–26 allocations, see *Appendix A: Sonoma County Subsidy Landscape Table.*

Table 10. California State Preschool Program (CSPP) Contractors and Allocations, Sonoma County (FY 2025-2026)

Contractor	Contracts	Total Allocation ($) Maximum Reimbursable Amount
Associated Students - California State University Sonoma	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$426,830
Bellevue Union Elementary School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$2,035,145
Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$7,582,279
Healdsburg Unified School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$1,043,744
Old Adobe Union School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$227,279
Roseland School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$1,305,528
Santa Rosa Elementary School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$994,800
Sonoma County Junior College District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$661,991
Sonoma Valley Unified School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$444,051
West Santa Rosa Local Council Agency Incorporated	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$676,254
Windsor Unified School District	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$3,295,767
Young Women's Christian Association Of Sonoma County	California State Preschool (CSPP)	$1,289,878

Federal-Directly Administered Contractors and Administration

Federally funded early learning programs in Sonoma County provide comprehensive, direct-service supports to children and families with the highest levels of need. In contrast to the more distributed contractor landscapes seen in CDSS and CDE programs, federal early learning funding in Sonoma County is centralized. A single primary grantee, Sonoma CAN (Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County), is responsible for administering Head Start and Early Head Start services across the county. Sonoma CAN operates programs across multiple sites throughout the county (Table 11).

Table 11. Federally Funded Early Learning Contracts (Head Start and Early Head Start), Sonoma County (FY 2026)

Contractor	Contracts	Total Allocation ($) (Maximum Reimbursable Amount in FY 2026)
Sonoma CAN (Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County)	Head Start & Early Head Start	$7,695,888

EXPANSION FUNDING AND SYSTEM GROWTH

Opportunities to expand subsidized child care capacity in Sonoma County are largely determined by state and federal funding decisions and occur through a combination of competitive and administrative mechanisms. Unlike ongoing program funding, which is allocated annually through contracts or formulas, expansion funding is typically time-limited, program-specific, and dependent on state-level priorities.

Historically, expansion funding has been distributed through competitive processes, such as the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) Expansion Request for Applications (RFA) released in FY 2024–25, which provided approximately $32.7 million in statewide funding to increase preschool capacity through new or expanded contracts.[28] Other programs, including the Child Care Initiative Project (CCIP) and General Child Care (CCTR), have also received expansion funding through periodic RFAs or targeted investments, including federal relief funding during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

More recently, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has introduced the Continued and Expansion Funding Application (CEFA), a streamlined process that will be implemented for the first time in fiscal year 2026-2027. It allows existing contractors to both renew funding and express interest in expansion funding through a single application. Under this approach, expansion is not offered through a standalone competitive RFA for all programs, but instead is integrated into the annual contract renewal process and is subject to the availability of funds and contractor eligibility criteria. Contractors must proactively indicate interest in expansion, and funding is only awarded to those in good standing and with demonstrated capacity to expand services.[29]

While this shift may reduce administrative burden and expedite funding distribution for existing contractors, it also reinforces a system in which expansion opportunities are limited to current contract holders and contingent on state-level funding availability rather than local demand.

HOW SUBSIDY EXPANSION WORKS

Competitive Request for Applications (RFA)
Historically

- Standalone competitive process
- Open to new and existing contractors
- Time-limited and program-specific
- Tied to state funding cycles

Continued and Expansion Funding Application (CEFA)
Starting FY 2026-27

- Integrated into annual renewal
- Existing contractors only
- Requires good standing and capacity
- Subject to fund availibility

Overall, expansion opportunities remain infrequent, fragmented across programs, and not consistently aligned with local needs. While recent shifts, such as the CEFA, introduce more streamlined administrative pathways for some programs, they do not fundamentally address the broader structural limitations that limit Sonoma County stakeholders' ability to strategically grow subsidized child care capacity in response to community demand.

FLEXIBILITY AND REDISTRIBUTION OF SUBSIDY FUNDING

In the absence of consistent expansion opportunities, the primary mechanism to adjust funding within California's subsidized child care system is the Voluntary and Temporary Transfer (VTT) process. VTT is intended to promote full use of available funding by redistributing resources between contractors within the same fiscal year. Under California Education Code, funds may be transferred between agencies with the same contract type when one contractor is projected to over-earn, meaning they are serving more children than funded, and another is projected to under-earn, unable to fully expend its allocation.[30, 31]

Eligible programs include contract types such as Alternative Payment Program (CAPP), General Child Care (CCTR), and Family Child Care Home Education Networks (CFCC). However, transfers are limited to like contract types, which constrains the system's ability to respond to local need across programs.

The VTT process involves coordination between contractors, Local Planning Councils (LPCs), and state agencies. Contractors must identify as over- or under-earners and indicate willingness to release or receive funds. LPCs facilitate coordination and documentation, but final approval rests with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) or the California Department of Education (CDE), whichever department holds the contract type in question.

Local stakeholder input gathered by VIVA as part of this landscape research in Sonoma County highlighted structural challenges in how subsidy funding is allocated and accessed. Current requirements to demonstrate over-enrollment (over-earning) in order to request additional funds place contractors in a difficult position. On one hand, agencies are strongly discouraged from enrolling beyond the capacity of their existing contracts due to financial and compliance risks. On the other hand, they must demonstrate unmet demand, often through over-enrollment, to justify additional funding.

This creates a double-edged dynamic in which agencies are incentivized to take on risk in order to show need, while lacking assurance that those additional services will be reimbursed. This tension is especially pronounced for 4C's, where demand for CAPP routinely exceeds available slots, including for the highest need families. In practice, some agencies may operate beyond their funded capacity without a guarantee of reimbursement, while others retain unspent funds, pointing to inefficiencies in how funding is aligned with actual community needs.

These challenges were further exacerbated by funding fluctuations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholder input noted that Federal relief funds were not always aligned with local demand, resulting in uneven distribution among contractors. Although VTT is intended to address these imbalances, stakeholder input indicated it has not functioned as a timely or reliable mechanism for redistribution. This was noted as true even when local partners were willing to collaborate and transfer funds.

Overall, while VTT provides a formal pathway to reallocate funding, structural constraints, including limited flexibility across contract types, risk associated with over-enrollment requirements, and reliance on state approval, limit its effectiveness. As a result, available funding does not consistently reach the agencies and communities with the greatest need in Sonoma County.

III. Demand and Unmet Need

To understand how Sonoma County's subsidized child care system is functioning in practice, this section examines patterns of demand and unmet need using data from local Child Care Eligibility Lists (CELs). In Sonoma County, there is no single, centralized eligibility list. Instead, three entities, 4Cs, The Children and Families Circle, and River to Coast Children's Services, each maintain their own lists of families in their service areas seeking subsidized child care, reflecting the county's fragmented administrative structure.

Historically, California supported a more centralized eligibility list as a state-funded activity. From 2005 - 2010 the state appropriated funding for the administration of CELs in all 58 counties in California; however, this funding was discontinued in the Budget Act of 2011. Since that time, eligibility lists have been maintained locally by Resource and Referral and Alternative Payment agencies, resulting in multiple, non-integrated systems across counties in California, including Sonoma County.[32]

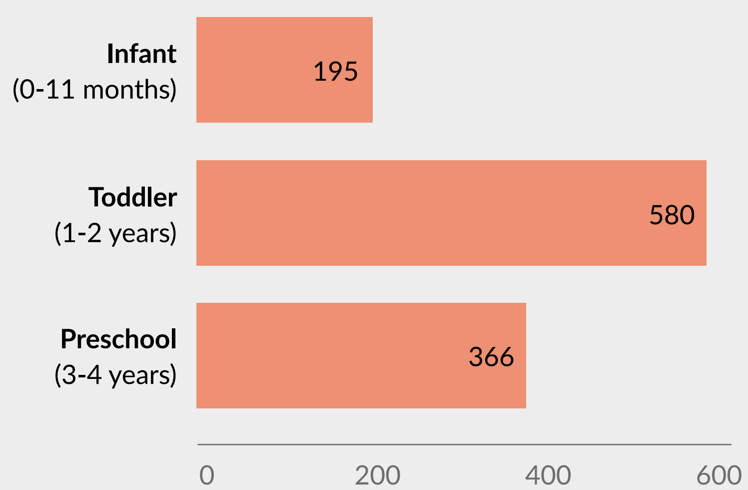
The data analyzed in this section includes 1,141 children ages 0-4 who are waiting for subsidized child care while on an eligibility list as of March 2026. The data is drawn from the eligibility list maintained by 4Cs (n=1,109 children) and The Children and Families Circle (n=32).[33]

KEY LEARNINGS

1. Infants and toddlers represent the largest and most acute share of unmet need, yet remain the hardest age group to serve within the existing subsidy system.

Across Sonoma County, the greatest unmet need for subsidized child care is concentrated among the youngest children. Of the 1,141 children on eligibility lists, 67% are under the age of three. Toddlers ages 1-2 represent the largest group (50.8%, 580 toddlers), while infants ages 0-11 months account for an additional 17% (195 infants), comprising a substantial share of the remaining demand.

AGE OF CHILDREN ON WAITLIST



Note: N = 1141 children

2. Unmet need is concentrated in central Sonoma County, where a structural imbalance in contract funding relative to population has created a persistent access gap that affects families with the highest-priority need rankings.

Demand for subsidized child care is concentrated in the central portion of Sonoma County, particularly in and around Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park. Zip code 95407 (South Santa Rosa) has the highest number of children on the waitlist, followed by 95403 (North Santa Rosa), 95401(Northwestern Santa Rosa), 94928 (Rohnert Park), and 95404 (Eastern Santa Rosa).

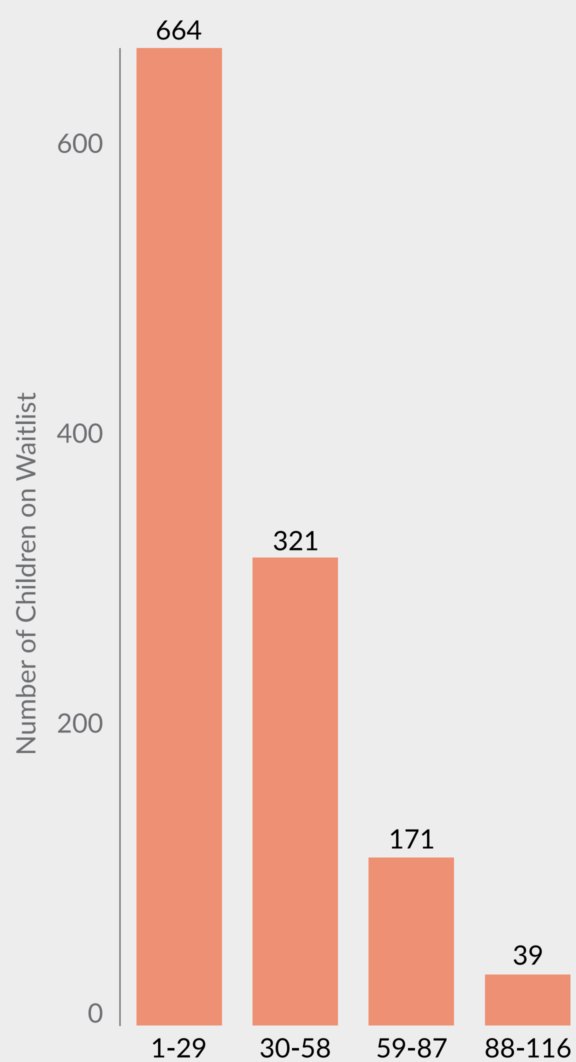
Priority rankings provide additional insight into how need is distributed geographically. As described earlier, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) assigns each family a numerical rank based on income and family circumstances, with lower ranks indicating higher priority. More than half of children on the waitlist (approximately 58%) fall within the highest priority range (Rank 1–29), and an additional 28% fall within the next highest range (Ranks 30–58). This means that the vast majority of children on the waitlist are already classified as high-need under the state's prioritization system.

Among the 664 children in the highest priority group (Ranks 1–29), infants and toddlers make up a significant share of demand. Approximately 17% are infants (n=114), 51% are toddlers (n=341), and 31% are preschoolers (n=209). This distribution underscores the particularly strong demand for infant and toddler care among families with the highest levels of need.

The geographic spread of the eligibility list is further visualized through a public data dashboard available via Tableau: [Sonoma County Child Care Waitlist Data Dashboard](). The dashboard highlights a notable geographic gap in demand: families in West County, an area within River to Coast Children's Services' (RCCS) service region, are largely absent from the waitlist data (Figure 1).

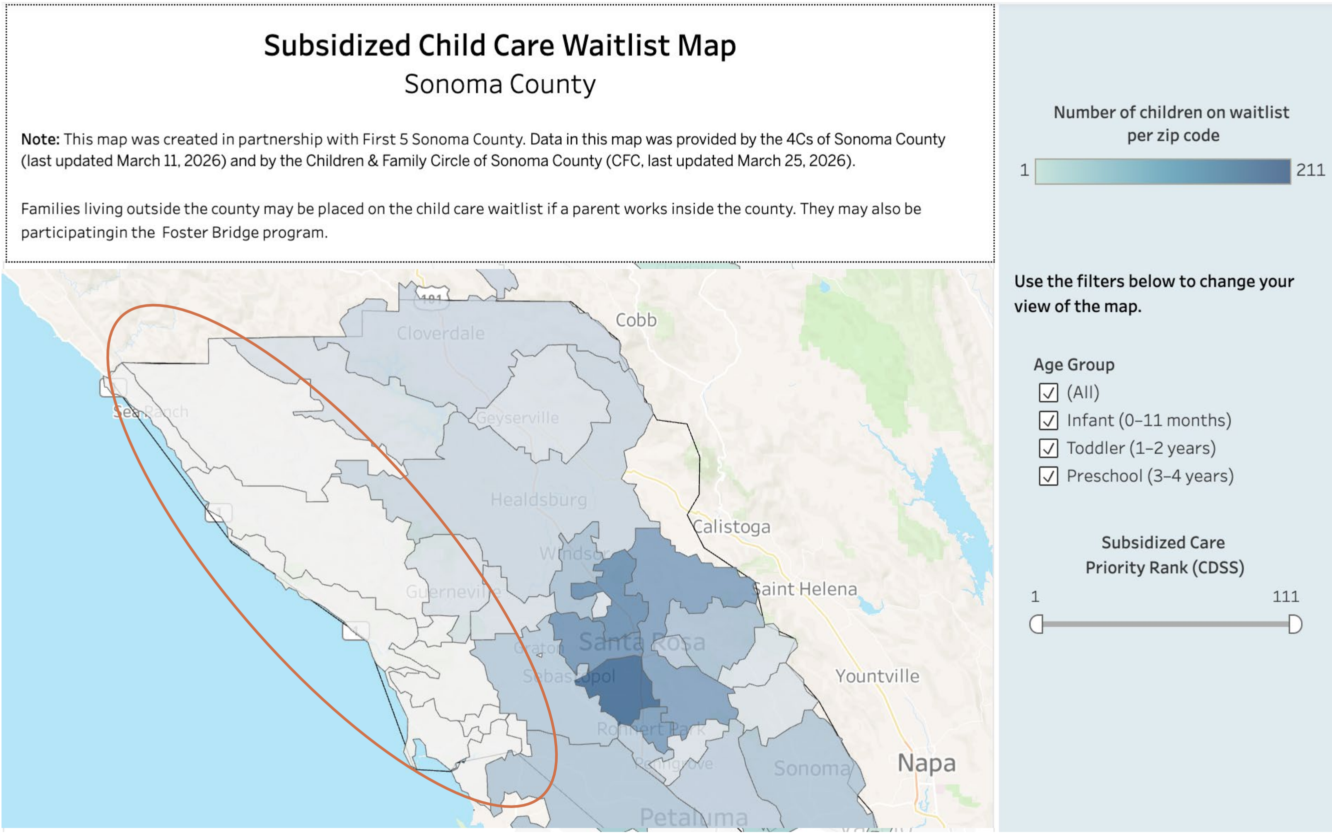
This absence reflects the operational status of River to Coast Children's Services (RCCS), which serves West County and currently has no waitlist due to sufficient funding. Families are assigned directly to a case manager upon submitting their CEL application.

PRIORITY RANK
(1+highest need)



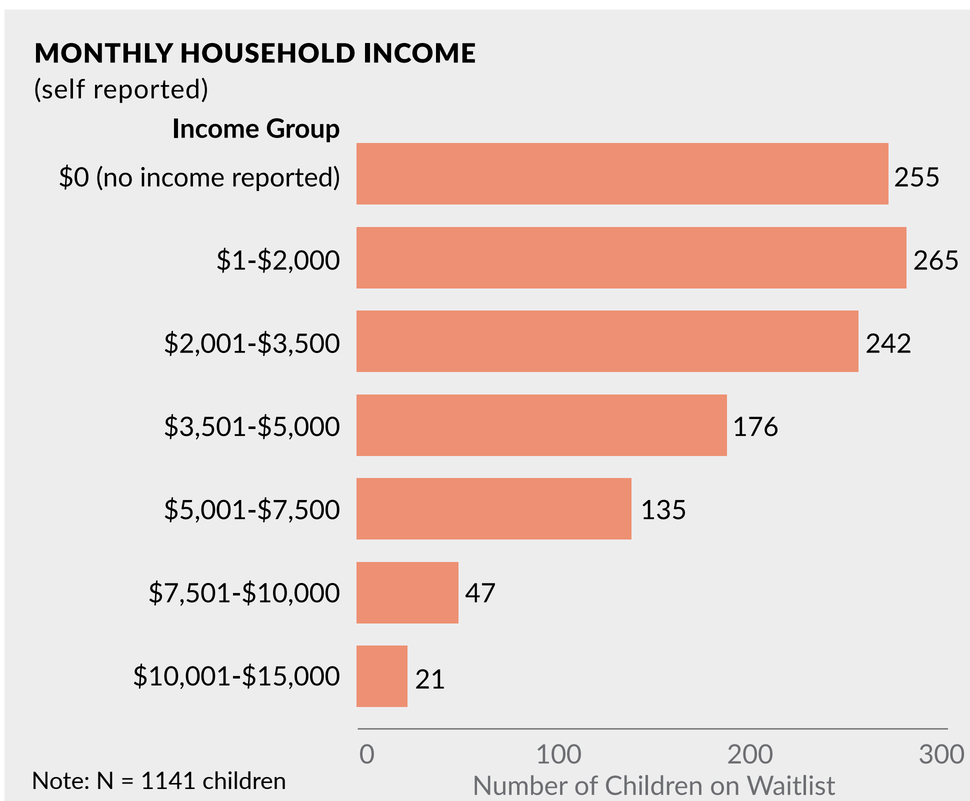
Note: N = 1141 children

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Subsidized Child Care Waitlist by Zip Code, Sonoma County (March 2026)



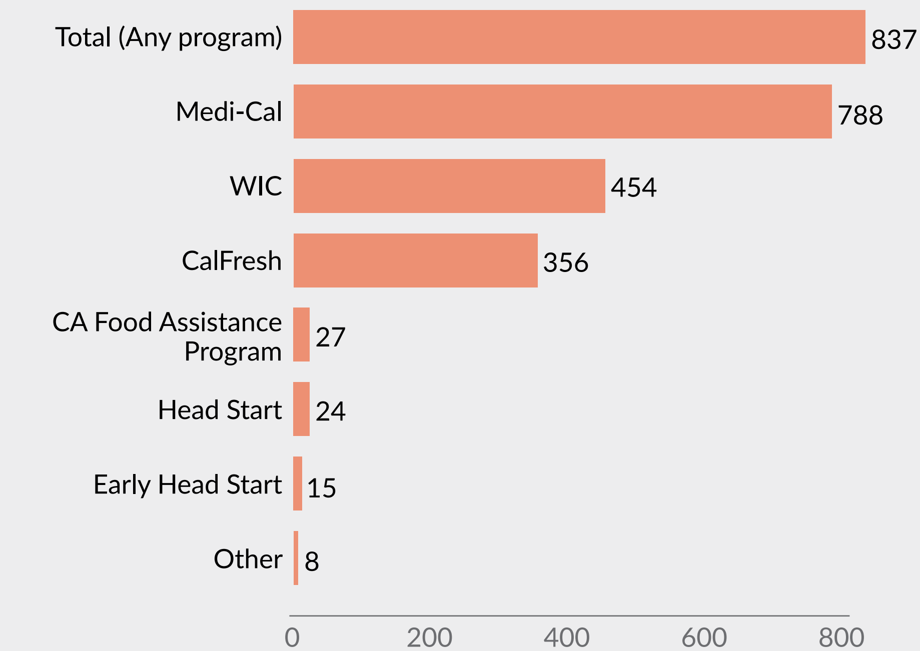
3. Families on the waitlist face deep and compounding financial vulnerability that goes well beyond income eligibility thresholds, pointing to the limits of what the subsidy system alone can address.

Families on the local waitlists face significant financial constraints. The median monthly household income across the dataset is approximately $2,464, and a substantial share of families report no monthly income.



In addition, 73.4% of families (n=837) on the waitlists are enrolled in at least one means-tested government program, with high participation in Medi-Cal, WIC, and CalFresh, highlighting the high level of financial vulnerability and need among applicants. In addition, many families are enrolled in multiple programs simultaneously, with 457 families enrolled in two or more programs representing 40.1% of all families, indicating layered economic hardship and reliance on multiple systems to meet basic needs.

PARTICIPATION IN MEANS TESTED GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS



Note: N = 837 children

4. Child care access is a workforce participation issue. The overwhelming majority of families seeking subsidized care need it in order to work or actively seek work.

The majority of applications cite needs directly related to employment, indicating that childcare is a critical support for parents in the workforce or actively seeking work. Working/Employed is the dominant need: 765 families cited the need for childcare due to the applying parent/guardian being employed or self-employed. Job seekers are the second-largest group, with 385 applications citing 'Seeking Employment' as a need, highlighting the link between childcare access and a parent/guardian's ability to search for and secure a job. Other drivers of need include academic and social services, with 120 applications linked to parents/guardians 'Attending School' and 88 applications citing 'Referred by a Social Worker'.

IV. Scholarship Models: Local & National

This section provides an overview of family scholarship models designed to expand access to early care and education, including both a prior locally implemented model in Sonoma County and select examples from across the country. Together, these examples show different approaches to structuring publicly funded scholarships, including variations in eligibility, funding mechanisms, provider participation, and family experience. Reviewing these models offers insight into key design features, trade-offs, and implementation considerations that may inform the development of a future scholarship model in Sonoma County.

SONOMA COUNTY EARLY LEARNING SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Value in Preschool (VIP) Family Scholarship, later renamed the Early Learning Scholarship (ELS) Program, was a locally designed early care and education (ECE) scholarship initiative administered by Sonoma County's Community Child Care Council (4Cs) and funded primarily by First 5 Sonoma County. Operating from 2011 through 2019, the program was developed to address a persistent gap in the early learning system: over time, it aimed to reach at-risk children who needed high-quality preschool but could not access existing subsidized programs due to fully utilized funding or limited local availability.[34]

The program functioned as a flexible, locally controlled solution within Sonoma County's mixed-delivery system. It was designed to complement existing state and federally funded programs, such as Head Start, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), and voucher-based subsidies, by serving families who remained on eligibility lists after those programs had completed enrollment.

The VIP/ELS model sought to expand access to high-quality preschool, strengthen parent engagement, and incentivize providers to participate in quality improvement efforts. Over time, the program evolved from a targeted initiative serving specific high-need communities into a countywide model aligned with Sonoma County's broader Quality Counts system.

Program Design and Target Population

Eligibility was determined using the 4Cs Child Care Eligibility List (CEL), which prioritizes families based on risk factors and income, including children involved with Child Protective Services, families at risk of abuse or neglect, and those with the lowest incomes relative to family size. In addition, enrollment occurred only after Head Start and CSPP programs had completed their enrollment cycles, reinforcing the program's role as a "gap-filler" within the broader early learning system.

Eligibility was based on CSPP income thresholds, which were selected because they allowed for a broader range of families to qualify. In some cases, families up to 15% above income limits could be enrolled if no other eligible families were available. Eligibility also determined the type of care supported: part-day care required only income eligibility, while full-day care required both income eligibility and a demonstrated need, such as employment or participation in education.

The program initially focused on 4-year-olds in the year prior to kindergarten entry, with access later expanded to 3-year-olds. It began in high-need school attendance areas in Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park and later expanded to serve families in Petaluma in 2013, and in 2015-2016, the program was available to families countywide. While this expansion increased access, it also introduced trade-offs in how limited scholarship resources were distributed across regions.

On average, the program served approximately 40-45 children annually, reaching a total of 368 children over its duration.

Scholarship Structure and Family Experience

The VIP/ELS model provided flat-rate scholarships to support participation in high-quality preschool programs:

- Part-day scholarships of up to $5,000 per year (later increased to $6,000 in FY 18-19 due to increased provider rates)
- Full-day scholarships of up to $10,000 per year (later increased to $12,000 in FY 18-19 due to increased provider rates)

Scholarships were paid directly to providers based on their actual tuition rates, up to the maximum amount. Families were responsible for any remaining costs if tuition exceeded the scholarship value.

The program also offered flexibility in care arrangements. Unlike state-funded programs with requirements on hours of care, VIP/ELS allowed families and providers to determine schedules based on eligibility (part-day or full-day) and individual needs. This reduced administrative burden and made participation more accessible to families.

A defining feature of the model was its emphasis on parent engagement. Upon enrollment, families were expected to actively participate in their child's early learning experience, including attending workshops offered by 4Cs, reading to their children daily, and volunteering in their child's ECE program. This component reinforced the program's focus on school readiness and long-term family involvement in education.

Provider Participation and Quality Approach

The program operated within a mixed-delivery system that included both licensed child care centers and family child care homes, with approximately 20-30 qualified providers (centers and family child care homes) participating at its peak. Participation in the program was contingent on meeting defined quality standards. In the initial VIP model, providers were qualified at one of two levels:

- "Gold," indicating accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), or
- "Silver," indicating strong performance on recognized quality assessment tools, including the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

As the program evolved into ELS and aligned with Sonoma County's Quality Counts system, quality requirements shifted to participation in the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) — a structured framework used statewide to assess and improve the quality of early care and education programs — and achievement of a Tier 4 or Tier 5 rating on the quality matrix. This alignment strengthened the connection between scholarship funding and broader system-level quality improvement efforts.

Participation was often limited by the rigor of quality expectations and the structure of the program. Providers were required to meet quality standards regardless of tenure, and enrollment of scholarship children depended on parent choice. In some cases, providers were hesitant to participate if they anticipated enrolling only a small number of scholarship children relative to the effort required to meet program standards. Geographic variation in provider participation also influenced program access. For example, limited engagement from private preschool providers in Petaluma, who did not see a need to participate in quality initiatives because their enrollment was full, and attracting parents was not an issue, constrained the number of options available to families despite demonstrated need.

HOW QUALITY STANDARDS EVOLVED

INITIAL VIP MODEL

Gold and Silver Quality Tiers

- Gold: NAEYC or NAFCC accreditation required
- Silver: Strong scores on ERS and CLASS assessments

PROGRAM EVOLUTION (ELS)

Alignment with Quality Counts QRIS

- Participation in the statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System required
- Tier 4 or Tier 5 rating on the quality matrix required

IMPACT

Strengthened Quality but Narrowed the Provider Pool

- Linked scholarship funding to system-level quality improvement
- High standards limited participation, especially in some

20-30

Qualified providers participating at program peak

Administration and Funding

The VIP/ELS program was administered by 4Cs and funded primarily by First 5 Sonoma County, with annual investments ranging from $263,997 in FY 2012-2013 to $400,00 in FY 2018-2019. A fund was also established through the Community Foundation of Sonoma County to attract additional contributions from local businesses and other partners, though external funding received was $2,000, and the funds remained with the Community Foundation.

Program operations were loosely modeled on state subsidy systems to ensure consistency and accountability, including the use of notices of action, child care certificates, program handbooks, and attendance forms. However, these processes were scaled back to reduce administrative burden and increase flexibility for families and providers.

The scholarship program was supported by a small staff, with approximately 1.38 full-time equivalent positions dedicated to implementation. Staff worked closely with other 4Cs programs and with Quality Counts coaches, sometimes serving in dual roles to support both quality improvement and scholarship administration.

Outcomes and Impact

The First 5 Sonoma County Grantee Outcomes Report for the Early Learning Scholarship Program documents strong outcomes across several key areas in the VIP/ELS program's final program year.

1. Quality Standards: Participating providers consistently met high-quality standards, with 94% (62 of 66 providers) achieving target scores on the Environment Rating Scale. The program also supported provider advancement, including increased rates of NAEYC/NAFCC accreditation. Three providers became NAEYC accredited, exceeding the program's target of two providers receiving accreditation.

2. Number of Children Receiving ECE Scholarships: Scholarship targets were exceeded, with 47 scholarships paid in FY 18-19 school year, exceed target of 36 scholarships.

3. Parent Engagement: All participating parents demonstrated knowledge of strategies to support their child's transition to kindergarten, exceeding the program's target of 80% of parents.

More broadly, the program contributed to increased access to high-quality preschool, strengthened provider quality across the county, and supported improved school readiness for participating children.

Key Strengths and Considerations

The VIP/ELS model offers several important insights for future scholarship design. Its role as a gap-filling strategy ensured that resources were directed toward families not served by existing programs. The use of flexible, locally controlled funding allowed for responsiveness to community needs, while market-rate reimbursement supported provider participation and expanded family choice. The program's strong parent engagement component further reinforced its focus on long-term outcomes for children and families.

At the same time, several challenges emerged. The program relied heavily on a single funding source, limiting its long-term sustainability and scalability. Provider participation varied across regions, affecting equitable access for families. The expansion to a countywide model introduced trade-offs in resource distribution, and administrative costs increased over time relative to available funding.

NATIONAL EXAMPLES OF PUBLICLY FUNDED EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP MODELS

Across the country, several jurisdictions have developed publicly funded scholarship models to expand access to early child care and education. These models often operate alongside state subsidy systems and are designed to address persistent gaps in eligibility, affordability, or supply. The examples below were selected for the relevant lessons they offer on:

1. Building a provider pipeline
2. Connecting quality improvement with expanded child care capacity
3. Structuring family access to care

Overview of Program Models

The case studies in this section reflect programs that generally operate under one of two structural approaches (or a hybrid of both):

- *A contracted model*, in which a lead agency such as a county, state, or organization contracts directly with an approved set of child care providers and manages both the application process and payments. Families enroll from within that pre-approved network.
- *A broker model*, in which an intermediary such as a resource and referral agency manages the application process, coordinates funding, and pays providers on the family's behalf. Families choose their preferred provider, which may be from an approved network or of their own selection. This is how California's child care voucher system works.

In a contracted model, the administering agency does the work of vetting and approving a network of providers upfront, giving the program greater control over quality and consistency. Every provider in the network has gone through a review process, so families can trust that any option they choose meets a baseline standard. The tradeoff is that building and maintaining that network takes time and infrastructure, and the pipeline only grows as fast as providers can move through the approval process. Models in New Orleans, and Multnomah County all operate this way, with varying degrees of quality gatekeeping and direct agency oversight.

In a broker model, the scholarship follows the family to their preferred provider, which may be any licensed provider or drawn from a set of pre-vetted sites or homes depending on the program. This offers greater flexibility and a faster path to launch since the scholarship program may not be building a vetted network from scratch. The tradeoff is that quality assurance is harder to guarantee consistently, and there is less control over which providers are participating. Denver and New Mexico operate closer to this managed voucher approach.

Hybrid models attempt to balance both, often pairing centralized enrollment with a curated provider network. San Francisco is an example of this, where families choose freely among a large pool of validated providers who must first meet local quality standards.

The structure a county chooses has significant downstream effects on how quickly a pipeline can be built, how families access care, and what administrative infrastructure is required to sustain the program

Case Study 1: San Francisco, California - Early Learning for All (ELFA)

San Francisco's Early Learning for All (ELFA) program is administered by the Department of Early Childhood (DEC), established in 2022 through the merger of First 5 San Francisco and the Office of Early Care and Education. ELFA was designed to address three gaps in California's childcare system: the income cliff that caused families earning slightly too much for state subsidies to lose all support; state reimbursement rates that do not cover providers' true costs; and the gap in infant-toddler care for working families. In FY 2024-25, DEC invested approximately $149 million in family scholarships and $58.6 million in early educator compensation, serving more than 10,000 children across 543 providers.[35]

ELFA operates as a quality-validated contracted model with family choice. Providers must be validated against San Francisco's local quality framework, developed by DEC, before they can accept scholarship families. Once validated, providers receive high reimbursement rates that are intentionally set to cover the true cost of quality care, including competitive educator wages. Families have full choice among all 543 validated providers (174 Centers and 369 FCCs), and the scholarship follows the child even if families change providers, as long as the new provider is part of the validated network.

In addition, ELFA operates alongside two major workforce compensation programs that supported 3,175 educators in FY 2024-25 with a combined investment of $58.6 million. The Compensation and Retention Educator Stipends (CARES) 3.0 program provides individual stipends to educators working in city-funded child care programs. The Early Educator Support and Salary Grant (EESSG) provides ongoing wage supplements paid directly to child care programs based on the percentage of low-income children they serve. While not contractually tied to the ELFA scholarships, these investments function together: high scholarship rates stabilize programs financially, while wage initiatives support recruitment and retention, particularly in high-need settings.[36, 37]

Program Snapshot

Table 12. Scholarship Details: Early Learning for All

Ages & Income	• Ages 0-5[38,39] • Tier 1 (0-110% Area Median Income (AMI)): 100% free. • Tier 2 (111-150% AMI): 100% tuition credit as of Jan 2026. Jan 2026 expansion: up to $230K (100% free), up to $310K (50% subsidy) for a family of four.
Priority Populations	• Category 1: homelessness, foster care, special needs, protective services, low-income working families (30-day provisional enrollment). • Category 2: all other income-eligible families **Note:** Undocumented families are fully eligible. DEC protects data privacy (no ICE/IRS sharing beyond legal requirements)
State Subsidy Alignment	• ELFA eligibility extends significantly higher than California subsidies (which usually cap out at 85% state median income) • ELFA operates alongside state programs, with DEC combining Proposition C, federal Head Start, and California Title V funding • ELFA's extended eligibility (up to 150% AMI) ensures families can still access support when they exceed state subsidy income limits
Award Amounts	Maximum subsidy amounts: • Infant: $3,027/month ($36,324/year) • Toddler: $2,306/month ($27,672/year) • Preschool: $2,115/month ($25,380/year)
Duration & Continuity	• Continuous eligibility without periodic recertification. Eligibility remains until the child ages out or family circumstances change significantly

Allowable Uses	• Tuition for licensed child care and preschool programs meeting ELFA quality validation • Covers full-time or part-time care, including extended hours when offered
Provider Types	Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes
Provider Participation & Quality Incentive	• Only ELFA-validated providers (including for profit and nonprofit) can accept scholarships, which ensures families have access to quality environments. • San Francisco developed its own quality framework aligned with local priorities • High ELFA reimbursement rates enable providers pay educators competitive wages, meet quality standards, and maintain financially stable operations
Family Choice	• Families have full choice among 543 validated family child care home and center providers citywide. This includes 174 centers and 369 FCCs. • The scholarship follows the child even if families change providers, as long as the new provider is part of the validated network.
Administration	DEC administers ELFA through three community-based enrollment partners, offering phone, online, and in-person applications with multilingual support.
Payment Flow	• For Tier 1 families, DEC pays providers directly • For Tier 2, families receive a monthly credit, though most providers simply accept DEC's payment as full tuition.

Case Study 2: New Orleans, Louisiana - City Seats

New Orleans' City Seats program launched in 2018 as an initial public investment to address a persistent gap in access to high-quality infant and toddler care. At the time, less than 25% of low-income children in Orleans Parish had access to publicly funded early childhood education programs. City Seats was designed both to expand access and to demonstrate the value of sustained local investment, ultimately laying the groundwork for a 20-year voter-approved Early Childhood Education Millage, passed in April 2022.[40] It is one of the few locally funded programs in the country specifically designed around infants and toddlers.

The program operates as a contracted model. Agenda for Children, a nonprofit intermediary, administers the program through contracts with 41 approved early care and education centers across the city. New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS) manages the centralized application and enrollment process. Providers must apply and meet a meaningful quality bar before being approved to participate. This creates a consistent floor of quality across the network but also means the pipeline grows only as fast as providers can meet the standards. In addition to tuition support, City Seats funds wraparound services, including infant and early childhood mental health consultation, medical care coordination, developmental screenings, and ongoing coaching for educators. This is a design choice that treats family support as integral to the model rather than supplemental.[41]

In addition to City Seats, early childhood educators in Orleans Parish can also participate in an unaffiliated workforce compensation program. In 2022, the City of New Orleans Mayor's Office of Youth and Families committed $2.4 million, supplemented by state funds, to pilot a multi-year Wage Enhancement Program aimed at improving early childhood educator recruitment and retention. During the 2023-24 academic year, Agenda for Children distributed wage enhancements to 1,185 educators across 116 early learning programs in Orleans Parish. Individual educators were eligible to receive up to $3,000, with total disbursements reaching approximately $2.6 million. Eligible participants in the program include, but are not limited to, educators at programs participating in City Seats.[42]

Program Snapshot

Table 13. Scholarship Details: City Seats

Ages & Income	• Ages 6 weeks - 3 years old (must be under 4 years old as of September 30) • Income limit: 200% Federal Poverty Line ($66,000 for a family of 4)
Priority Populations	• Children with an identified disability as documented by an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individual Education Plan (IEP) • Children who have a sibling already in the City Seats program at that center • Children who are homeless or are in foster care.
State Subsidy Alignment	• Since City Seats offers free child care, there is no need for those who participate in City Seats to leverage state child care subsidies • Those who are not selected or do not qualify for City Seats may receive state child care subsidies, as income eligibility differs slightly for the Child Care Assistance Program.
Award Amounts	Full coverage of child care tuition and select wraparound services[43]
Duration & Continuity	Once a family has completed the annual enrollment process through New Orleans Public Schools one time, they have the ability for their child to continue in the program until the child ages out
Allowable Uses	Fully funded seats in a participating program, including programs located in a school, early learning center, or Head Start
Provider Types	Child Care Centers
Provider Participation & Quality Incentive	To offer seats, centers must apply and will only be selected if they meet the following requirements: • Be a Type III early learning center with an overall Performance Profile rating of Proficient or Excellent (2019–2020), with priority given to higher-scoring programs. • Demonstrate consistently strong CLASS scores over the past two years and commit to ongoing coaching and professional development.[44] • Show active participation in required New Orleans Early Education Network (NOEEN) activities (e.g., CLASS observations, child counts, GOLD checkpoints, EnrollNOLA). • Use Tier 1 high-quality curricula staffed by qualified educators. • Operate at least one classroom serving children 15 months or younger. Selected centers receive coaching and wraparound service supports for providers.
Administration	• Agenda for Children administers the program through contracts with 41 early care and education centers. • New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS) manages the centralized application and enrollment process.
Payment Flow	Tuition support is paid directly to the provider.

Case Study 3: Denver, Colorado - Denver Preschool Program

The Denver Preschool Program (DPP), launched in 2006 through a voter-approved sales tax initiative, is one of the longest-running locally funded early childhood programs in the country. It was established in response to persistent gaps in access to quality preschool and has been reauthorized by Denver voters twice in 2014 and again permanently in 2023, reflecting strong and sustained public confidence in the program. DPP is administered as an independent community organization, overseen by the City of Denver's Office of Children's Affairs, and also serves as the Local Coordinating Organization for Colorado's statewide Universal Preschool Program (UPK).[45]

What distinguishes Denver's approach is its universal eligibility framework. All families in Denver, regardless of income or immigration status, can access tuition credits on a sliding scale. Lower-income families can stack an additional DPP Scholarship on top of their tuition credit to cover up to 100% of costs. This two-layered structure allows the program to serve a broad constituency while still concentrating the deepest support on families with the greatest need. Families choose their provider from among 281 participating DPP-approved child care centers and family child care homes.[46,47]

The DPP is administered alongside two workforce compensation programs that are unaffiliated with DPP. Through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) is using Child Care Development Fund resources to pilot a two-year livable wage initiative for early educators serving children from birth through age five. Eligible programs are licensed child care centers with Colorado Shines ratings of 3-5, where at least 40% of enrolled children receive CCCAP subsidies. The pilot supports lead teachers, co-teachers, and classroom aides working a minimum of 16 hours per week in infant, toddler, or preschool classrooms. Participating programs were selected through a one-time lottery among those meeting eligibility criteria.[48] The Thriving Providers Project was launched in Colorado in 2022 as part of Home Grown's national effort, in which selected home-based child care providers receive direct cash payments for 1 year or longer. Participating providers also receive peer and professional support. The project aims to assess the impact of stable funding on the availability and quality of care offered to children and families.[49]

Despite the Denver Preschool Program's success, a 2019 audit by the Denver City Auditor's Office offers an important caution. DPP accumulated over $20 million in unspent tax revenue without a formal reserve plan, administrative spending outpaced programmatic spending, and board oversight was found to be insufficient. For Sonoma County, this underscores the importance of establishing clear spending floors, transparent reserve policies, and strong governance structures from the outset.[50]

Program Snapshot

Table 14: Scholarship Details: Denver Preschool Program

Ages & Income[51]	**For Denver Preschool Program Tuition Credits:** • All children turning 4 on or before October 1st • Children in their last year of preschool who do not meet the 4-year-old age requirement but have a written acknowledgment signed by the parent and the preschool Director/Principal • Children turning 3 by October 1. **For DPP Scholarship:** • Make less than $51,000 per year for a family of 4 • Children in their last year of preschool
Priority Populations	Denver Preschool Program tuition assistance is available to ALL families, regardless of income or immigration status, who live within the City and County of Denver.
State Subsidy Alignment	• Colorado Universal Preschool (UPK) is a state-funded program that provides up to 15 hours per week of free, high-quality preschool for children in their year before kindergarten. Colorado Universal Preschool assistance can be paired with Denver Preschool Program tuition credits. • In addition, families can pair child care assistance subsidies administered through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) with Denver Preschool Program tuition credits and scholarship funds to fill gaps and meet family needs **Note:** Participation in the federal Head Start programs disqualifies families with 3-year-olds from receiving tuition credits and all families from receiving the Denver Preschool Program Scholarship
Provider Types	Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes
Administration	Tuition credits and scholarships are administered directly by DPP.
Payment Flow	Tuition support is paid directly to the provider. This is the same as Colorado UPK.

Case Study 4: Multnomah County, Oregon - Preschool for All (PFA)

Multnomah County's Preschool for All (PFA) program offers free, high-quality preschool to 3- and 4-year-old children across the county, including Portland. PFA launched in 2021 following the passage of a voter-approved personal income tax measure (individuals earning over $125,000; joint filers over $200,00). Today, PFA operates through a mixed-delivery system that includes center-based programs, home-based family child care (FCC) providers, school-based classrooms, and Head Start programs.[52] In the 2024-2025 school year, 80 providers served 2,225 children at 133 locations through the PFA program. In 2025-26, PFA grew to fund 3,800 preschool slots.[53]

Multnomah County, Oregon, took a fundamentally different approach from the contracted models above. In an effort to build a pipeline of providers capable of meeting quality standards, particularly for home-based providers, PFA developed a two-track approach.

A Pathways Program for providers not yet meeting requirements, offering structured coaching and milestone support from Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) coordinators so they can work toward full readiness. Providers enter in groups with a relatively accessible entry requirement, licensed and in good standing. Then, providers participate in a structured two-year development program that includes coaching and professional development. In exchange for this investment, providers commit to serving a minimum number of children.

And a Community Preschool Expansion Program (CPEP), which supports organizations interested in creating entirely new preschool programs through training, peer networks, and technical assistance. Providers who score 70% or higher on a program application become qualified for five years and are eligible for annual slot consideration.[54]

The PFA model enables Multnomah County to build provider capacity and ensure child care providers offer slots to families.

PFA also mandates workforce compensation requirements embedded directly into provider contracts. Providers participating in PFA must meet minimum salary floors for all teaching staff in PFA-funded classrooms. For lead teachers with a bachelor's degree, the minimum wage is $29.42/hour, with a program target of $39.23/hour, significantly above the Portland metro median of under $18/hour for preschool teachers.[55] Participating providers are also expected to offer benefits comparable to K-12 employment, including health insurance, retirement contributions, and paid time off. These requirements apply equally to home-based FCC providers and center-based programs. In addition, in FY 2024-25, the county invested $8 million in workforce development supports, including college navigators, scholarship programs, coaching, and professional development. Also, additional stabilization funds are available to sites providing infant and toddler care for children ages 0 to 3, reflecting recognition that the infant-toddler workforce faces distinct challenges and that the sector requires supplemental investment to remain viable.[56,57]

Program Snapshotw

Table 15: Scholarship Details: Preschool for All (PFA)

Duration & Continuity	Designed as a multi-year expansion to universal access by 2030,
Allowable Uses	Covers full preschool costs for families; funding supports instruction, staffing, and inclusive/culturally responsive services delivered by providers.
Provider Types	Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes
Provider Participation & Quality Incentive	• Providers must: Hold an active child care license; Demonstrate at least three years of operating experience; Pass a competitive application scoring process (minimum 70%) • Qualified providers remain eligible for five years, creating stability and reducing administrative burden • If a provider wants to join PFA but does not meet alrequirements they can join the Pathways Program. If a community-based organization would like to offer preschool, the Community Preschool Expansion Program (CPEP) will support the organization to create a new preschool program.
Administration	Administered by Multnomah County Department of Human Services.
Payment Flow	Public funds (via a local income tax on high earners) are paid directly to providers to deliver free preschool slots to families.
Ages & Income[58]	Serves children ages 3–4 by September 1 of the program year; no income eligibility requirement (universal access model).

Priority Populations	Children who currently have the least access to high-quality early learning experiences are prioritized in our outreach. Children whose families experience barriers accessing preschool include: Black, Brown, Native American Indigenous, and all Children of Color; Children who speak languages other than English; Children with developmental delays and disabilities; Children in or at risk of placement in foster care; Children from families with low incomes; and Children experiencing homelessness.
State Subsidy Alignment	Operates alongside state subsidies like Head Start and Preschool Promise for low-income families.
Award Amounts	Funding amounts for the 2024-2025 program year: • School-year/school-day slots are funded at $16,536 per child per year. Sites must offer a minimum of 6 hours per day and 900 program hours for the year. • Full-year/full-day slots are funded at $23,592 per child/per year. Sites must offer a minimum of 10 hours per day with up to four full weeks off (Monday-Friday) during the calendar year.

Case Study 5: New Mexico Child Care Assistance Program

New Mexico's Child Care Assistance (CCA) program was developed in response to longstanding gaps in access to affordable, high-quality early care and education, particularly for low-income and working families. The program provides subsidized, and as of November 2025, fully no-cost, child care to qualifying New Mexico families with children under age 13. Families apply through the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD), which administers the program statewide. Child care benefits are paid directly to ECECD-approved licensed or registered providers, and families may choose any participating provider. In Fiscal Year 2024, the CCA program served approximately 27,000 children statewide.[59,60]

Between 2020 and 2024, a surge in oil and gas production and rising prices generated substantial new revenue for New Mexico, enabling increases in early childhood funding. The state draws on two primary permanent funds: the Land Grant Permanent Fund, which contributes roughly $248 million annually, and an Early Childhood Trust Fund, which provides about $500 million per year. Together, these funds are expected to generate approximately $700 million for early childhood programs in fiscal year 2026. In addition, New Mexico receives about $90 million in federal funding and supplements this with state general funds, bringing total early childhood investment to nearly $1 billion annually.[61]

In addition to the CCA program, ECECD administers a standalone Wage Supplement Program designed to support early childhood educator recruitment and retention. The program provides education-based supplemental pay to educators working with children from birth to age five in licensed or registered programs, Head Start, and New Mexico PreK settings who earn less than $18 per hour and hold at least three credit hours in Early Childhood Education or a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The program includes 10 levels, with payment amounts increasing with each level of education. Payments are distributed twice yearly, in January and June. In Fiscal Year 2024, ECECD awarded 166 wage supplements to child care professionals and 123 bilingual incentive payments, with an additional one-time $1,500 payment available for bilingual-certified educators.[62,63]

New Mexico shows that it's possible to build a child care system that works more like a large-scale scholarship program for families. New Mexico sets payment rates based on the actual cost of running a quality program. This helps make it financially possible for providers to accept subsidies, which is a major challenge in many places. In addition, Instead of creating a separate quality program, New Mexico builds incentives directly into how providers are paid. Programs that meet higher quality standards receive higher payments.

Program Snapshot

Table 16: Scholarship Details: New Mexico Child Care Assistance Program[64, 65]

Ages & Income	• Children under age 13 (up to age 18 for children with special needs or disabilities). • As of November 2025: no income limit; available to all working or school-attending families regardless of income or immigration status.
Priority Populations	• Children with special needs or disabilities; Children experiencing homelessness (including those temporarily sharing housing, in shelters, or awaiting foster care placement); Teen parents; Grandparents raising grandchildren; Families with substance-exposed infants; Families involved with child welfare agencies (these families are exempt from work/school participation requirements) • Despite the identification of priority populations, as of November 1st, 2025, all families, regardless of income, are eligible to participate.
State Subsidy Alignment	The CCA program is the state subsidy; it operates as New Mexico's primary mechanism for subsidized child care
Award Amounts	• Full coverage of licensed child care tuition; co-payments are currently waived indefinitely for all families. The average annual benefit represents approximately $12,000 in child care cost savings per child per year.
Duration & Continuity	• Families redetermine eligibility periodically through ECECD; once enrolled in a participating program, children may continue until they age out of eligibility • Provider changes are permitted within the network of ECECD-approved providers
Allowable Uses	Licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, NM PreK and Early PreK programs in community-based settings, and tribal child care programs.
Provider Types	Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes
Provider Participation & Quality Incentive	• Providers must be licensed or registered through ECECD and achieve a 2-star rating in the Professional Development Information System (PDIS) to accept CCA payments. • Quality is incentivized through the state's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System, FOCUS (Furthering Opportunities, Children, and Us, Stars), a five-star framework assessing programs on five essential elements of quality: full participation of each child; health promotion and developmental screenings; professional qualifications; ratios and group size; and continuous quality improvement. • Programs that achieve higher FOCUS star levels receive incrementally higher per-child reimbursement rates. Two-Star serves as the entry level; programs are expected to advance from 2-Star to 3-Star within 24 months of participation. ECECD provides free technical assistance, coaching, and professional development supports throughout the FOCUS process. Additionally, providers that pay all entry-level staff a minimum wage floor of $18 per hour are eligible for enhanced reimbursement rates, directly linking workforce compensation to provider financial sustainability.
Administration	The New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) administers the program statewide through field offices and an online application portal.
Payment Flow	Benefits are paid directly to the participating provider on behalf of the family; families do not handle subsidy funds directly.

WHAT THESE MODELS TELL US: CROSS-MODEL DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Taken together, these five programs reveal a consistent set of design tensions that Sonoma County will need to navigate as it develops a Family ECE Scholarship Model.

- **Targeted versus universal eligibility.** Programs like City Seats and the VIP/ELS model concentrated resources on the highest-need families, ensuring depth of support but limiting reach. Denver and Multnomah County extended eligibility universally, trading depth for breadth and broader political support. San Francisco's tiered model offers a middle path with full coverage for the lowest-income families and partial support extending up the income scale. For Sonoma County, where families above state subsidy ceilings represent a documented and significant gap, this design question is especially important.

- **Contracted model versus broker model.** City Seats and Multnomah County contract directly with approved providers, giving administrators more control over quality and distribution. Denver and New Mexico operate more like managed voucher systems, offering broader choice among any qualifying provider. San Francisco sits in between: families choose freely among 543 validated providers, but providers must meet local quality standards first. Sonoma County's existing R&R and Alternative Payment infrastructure may be best suited to a broker or hybrid model. However, given current provider supply constraints in Sonoma County, active network-building would likely be needed to ensure families have meaningful options.

- **Quality screened entry model versus quality building pathway.** All five programs link funding to quality, but the structure differs. City Seats in New Orleans and San Francisco require providers to demonstrate quality before participating, ensuring a floor of quality but constraining the provider pipeline. Multnomah County's Pathways Program takes a more developmental approach. Providers enter at a lower threshold and work toward full qualification over two years with coaching support. New Mexico similarly maintains a quality bar, requiring a 2-star rating, but pairs it with structured support and reimbursement incentives to provider capacity over time. Where Sonoma County's provider supply remains constrained, a quality building pathway may be more effective at growing a qualified network than a strict entry bar.

- **Workforce investment.** In each scholarship model jurisdiction, programs operate alongside a workforce compensation strategy, though the approaches vary. San Francisco's CARES wage supplements and New Mexico's Child Care Assistance Program build compensation into their reimbursement structures by setting rates based on the true cost of quality care, so providers receive rates that reflect the actual cost of delivering quality care. Multnomah County's Preschool for All embeds minimum salary floors into provider contracts, requiring participating providers to meet defined wage thresholds for child care staff. New Orleans' Wage Enhancement Program and Denver's Workforce Stipend Grants provide stipends to child care staff.

- **The importance of sustained, locally controlled funding.** Each program reviewed was enabled by a dedicated, locally controlled revenue stream: voter-approved tax measures in Denver, New Orleans, and Multnomah County; permanent fund distributions in New Mexico and Proposition C funds in San Francisco. In each case, predictable multi-year funding allowed programs to build provider relationships, invest in infrastructure, and sustain family enrollment in ways that grant funding cannot. Measure I places Sonoma County in that same position, and the design choices ahead should reflect the expectation that this funding will endure and that the scholarship model can grow and improve over time.

A key consideration underlying each scholarship model's design is the relationship between total scholarship funding and the population intended to be served. The depth of financial support, extent of family eligibility, and structure of child care provider participation are all decisions driven by this relationship. Programs with larger and more stable funding sources, like San Francisco and New Mexico, have been able to extend eligibility broadly while maintaining meaningful award amounts. Those with more constrained resources have concentrated support on the highest-need families to ensure impact. For Sonoma County, available funding is an important starting point, as it will shape who can be served, how much support families receive, and what can realistically be sustained over time

V. Conclusion

This landscape assessment documents both the contours of Sonoma County's existing child care system and the persistent gaps it leaves behind. Four cross-cutting themes define the challenge and the opportunity ahead.

1. **Demand is significant, concentrated, and urgent.** As of March 2026, 1,141 children ages 0-4 are waiting for subsidized care. Nearly 67 percent are infants and toddlers — the youngest, most costly children to serve, and those for whom supply is most constrained. Close to 60 percent fall within the highest-need priority bands under the state's ranking system. These are families experiencing poverty, housing instability, and child welfare involvement, the very families the child care subsidy system is designed to serve first. Yet demand in the 4Cs service area far exceeds available capacity, even for families at the highest priority ranks. The median monthly income among waiting families is approximately $2,464, and 73 percent are enrolled in at least one means-tested program.

2. **The existing subsidy infrastructure is structurally constrained.** The ECE subsidy landscape spans three funding systems, including CDSS, CDE, and federally administered programs. Each has distinct rules and administrative requirements. Approximately 75 percent of CDSS funding flows through vouchers, and the mechanisms for expanding capacity are infrequent, competitive, and state-controlled. Thus, local stakeholders have limited ability to direct resources strategically in response to documented community needs.

3. **A structural mismatch between state income thresholds and local cost of living creates a persistent affordability gap.** As the income analysis in their report illustrates, whether a household earning a living wage in Sonoma County qualifies for subsidized care depends significantly on household composition. Single-parent households and dual-earner households are particularly likely to exceed CDE and CDSS eligibility ceilings before reaching a level of income that covers basic needs. These families may earn too much to qualify for state subsidies yet still be unable to absorb the full cost of market-rate care.

4. **Geography shapes access in ways not always visible in statewide data.** The River to Coast service area has exhausted its eligibility list; the 4Cs area has more than a thousand children waiting. Where a family lives and works within the county determines their timely access to care as much as their income or documented need does.

Against this backdrop, Sonoma County's own history with the VIP/ELS scholarship program and national models, including San Francisco's ELFA, New Orleans' City Seats, Denver's Preschool Program, Multnomah County's Preschool for All, and New Mexico's CCAP, collectively illustrate both the promise of locally designed scholarships and the design choices that determine their reach and sustainability.

The passage of Measure I, generating approximately $30 million annually in dedicated local funding, represents a rare opportunity to design a scholarship model unconstrained by the eligibility rules and income ceilings of state programs. A well-designed Family ECE Scholarship Model can serve families at the upper end of subsidy eligibility and potentially just beyond it, address the acute shortage of infant and toddler care, close geographic equity gaps, and support provider stability and workforce investment. This landscape assessment provides the foundation for those decisions.

APPENDIX

The appendix includes supplemental materials that provide additional context and detail to support the findings of this assessment. It is organized as follows:

A. **Sonoma County Subsidy Landscape Table:** Provides a comprehensive inventory of early care and education subsidy funding streams in Sonoma County, including details on program intent, eligibility, availability, contract amounts, and administration. It serves as a technical reference to support the landscape analysis and document the structure and distribution of subsidy funding across the county

B. **CDSS Program & Contractor Expenditures:** This appendix provides detailed information on CDSS subsidy funding in Sonoma County, including maximum reimbursable amounts (allocations) and expenditures by contractor, program type, and fiscal year. These tables offer additional insight into spending patterns and the extent to which available funds are expended across the system.

APPENDIX A - SUBSIDY LANDSCAPE TABLE

The Sonoma County Early Care and Education (ECE) Subsidy Landscape Table was developed as part of the Family ECE Scholarship Model Project led by First 5 Sonoma County.

This document brings together information on key state and federal child care funding streams currently operating in Sonoma County. It centralizes program-level details, including purpose, eligibility, availability, and local funding distribution, to provide a clear and accessible view of how the existing subsidy system functions. Content was compiled through desk research of publicly available materials from the California Department of Education (CDE), California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and federal sources, as well as through engagement with local child care system partners and review of Sonoma County-specific funding data.

Note: The following state-funded programs are not included in this table because there are currently no active provider contracts in Sonoma County: Migrant Alternative Payment Program (CMAP), Migrant Child Care and Development (CMIG), and Children with Severe Disabilities (CHAN).

View the document here: Sonoma County ECE Subsidy Landscape Table

APPENDIX B - CDSS PROGRAM & CONTRACTOR EXPENDITURES

Table B1. CDSS Subsidy Contracts by Contractor, Program Type, Maximum Reimbursable and Expended Amounts (FY 2025–26; CAPP FY 2025–27)[66]

Contractor	**Contracts**	**Total Allocation ($)** *Maximum Reimbursable Amount*	**Expended** Amount Paid Year to Date (Reported February 2026)
4Cs Sonoma County	CAPP (FY 25–27)	$19,586,444.00	$9,624,470.00
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$2,495,005.00	$1,133,380.00
	CalWORKs Stage3	$2,868,126.00	$1,470,962.00
	CCTR	$812,052.00	$473,426.00
	CRRP	$381,476.00	$222,401.00
	CCIP	$61,832.00	$15,458.00
	CHST	$17,175.00	$4,294.00
River to Coast Children's Services	CAPP (FY 25–27)	$2,298,400.00	$744,790.00
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$103,180.00	$26,160.00
	CalWORKs Stage3	$41,546.00	$18,739.00
	CRRP	$239,122.00	$99,475.00
	CCIP	$37,097.00	$9,274.00
	CHST	$1,636.00	$409.00
Sonoma County Human Services Dept	CalWORKs Stage 1	$1,430,000	N/A
	CalWORKs Stage 2	$1,326,126.00	$428,818.00
	California Foster Bridge: The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program	$570,821	N/A
Children & Families Circle of Sonoma County	CFCC	$1,309,781	$701,192.00
Extended Child Care Coalition of Sonoma County	CCTR	$975,474	$405,797.00
Rise & Shine CCC & Family Services	CCTR	$966,925	$315,792.00
Cotati-Rohnert Park USD	CCTR	$861,072	$420,956.00

Sonoma CAN (Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County)	CCTR	$663,200	$0.00
Sonoma County Junior College District	CCTR	$546,714	$318,734.00
YWCA of Sonoma County	CCTR	$346,462	$201,987.00
Healdsburg USD	CCTR	$291,927	$170,193.00
Associated Students - California State University Sonoma	CCTR	$259,393	$151,226.00
Sonoma County Office of Education	CLPC	$142,202	$32,426.00

Table B2. Total Maximum Reimbursable Amount and Expended Amounts by Program Type and Fiscal Year[67]

Program	FY 2023–24 MRA	**FY 2023–24 Expended**	**FY 2024–25 MRA**	**FY 2024–25 Expended**	**FY 2025–26 MRA**	**FY 2025–26 Expended**[68]
CAPP (Alt. Payment)[69]	$23,959,784 (FY2023-25)	$21,366,419 (FY2023-25)	$23,210,970 (FY2024-26)	$20,793,411 (FY2024-26)	$23,210,970 (FY2025-27)	$10,798,078 (FY2025-27)
CCTR (General Child Care)	$3,441,182	$2,187,407	$5,019,417	$3,998,822	$5,723,219	$2,458,111
Stage 3 (CalWORKs)	$3,582,731	$3,035,167	$3,005,850	$2,697,831	$2,909,672	$1,489,701
CFCC (Family Child Care Networks)	$2,962,575	$2,689,544	$2,977,656	$2,923,590	$2,977,656	$1,572,164
Stage 2 (CalWORKs)	$1,856,921	$1,228,565	$2,411,724	$1,745,948	$2,598,185	$1,159,540
Stage 1 (CalWORKs)[70]	$1,386,205	–	$1,584,751	–	$1,430,000	–
CRRP (Resource & Referral)	$614,600	$614,600	$620,598	$618,864	$620,598	$321,876
California Foster Bridge: The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program[71]	$776,155	–	$238,919	–	$570,821	–
CLPC (Local Planning Council)	$142,097	$124,833.00	$142,202	$128,372.00	$142,202	$32,426.00
CCIP (Child Care Initiative)	$98,929	$98,871	$98,929	$74,202	$98,929	$24,732
CHST (Health & Safety Training)	$18,811	$18,811	$18,811	$18,722	$18,811	$4,703

ENDNOTES

1 Applies to the following programs: California State Preschool Program, General Child Care and Development Program, Migrant Child Care and Development Program, Migrant Alternative Payment Program, Alternative Payment Program (CAPP), and CalWORKs Child Care. The following programs do not require a demonstrated need: Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children, California State Program for Severely Disabled Children, Head Start, and Early Head Start. Source: Child Care Subsidy Programs, My Child Care Plan.

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24 Data generated from CDSS contractor data request delivered February 2026.

25 Data generated from CDSS contractor data request delivered February 2026.

26 CAPP contracts are 2-year awards rather than annual awards. The full MRA for each contract is shown in the fiscal year the contract begins (i.e, FY2023-2025, FY2024-2026, FY2025-2027).

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34 The following section draws primarily from two internal sources: an executive director memorandum prepared by the Community Child Care Council (4Cs) of Sonoma County, and the First 5 Sonoma County Grantee Outcomes Report for the Early Learning Scholarship Program. Unless otherwise noted, all program details, figures, and outcomes described in this section are derived from these documents.

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66 Data generated from CDSS contractor data request delivered February 2026.

67 Data generated from CDSS contractor data request delivered February 2026.

68 The expended amounts listed in FY2025-26 column reflect the amount CDSS has paid year to date at the time data was delivered to VIVA Social Impact Partners February 2026.

69 CAPP contracts are 2-year awards rather than annual awards. The full MRA for each contract is shown in the fiscal year the contract begins (i.e., FY2023-2025, FY2024-2026, FY2025-2027).

70 Sonoma County Child Welfare provided only allocations for CalWORKs Stage 1.

71 Only allocation amounts are known for the California Foster Bridge: The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program. CDSS did not release expenditure data

VIVA social impact partners