

NEWS RELEASE | **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | September 17, 2020

CORRECTION on page 2: Individuals can care for up to five children, including their own children or children who are related to them, without a license.

ND Department of Human Services highlights child care options as families navigate COVID-19 and school

BISMARCK, N.D. – With the mix of in-person and online public schooling happening in communities across North Dakota, families want to understand their options for safe, quality child care, especially for their school-age children. The North Dakota Department of Human Services, the state agency responsible for child care licensing, quality, and resource and referral, is sharing information with families about how to make safe choices.

"We know working families are making difficult decisions to balance their children's care and education needs with their own responsibilities," said department Executive Director Chris Jones. "We want to support parents in finding safe, affordable solutions, and want to help people understand more about how they can find quality child care options, even during the pandemic."

There are about 1,600 licensed and self-declared child care providers serving children ages 0-12 in communities across North Dakota. During the pandemic, the state has provided modified operating practices for child care providers licensed or certified by the department to help them operate as safely as possible and to protect the health and well-being of children, families and staff. Child care providers have altered group sizes, screening protocols and group play, meals and transportation practices.

"Health and hygiene standards are always high in child care settings," noted Carmen Traeholt, statewide manager for Early Childhood Services. "During the pandemic, we've seen our licensed providers go the extra mile to help create safe spaces for kids and families."

The state's Child Care Emergency Operating Grant has helped over 800 providers, large and small, navigate the ups and downs of attendance, additional health and safety practices and staffing challenges. Through Sept. 1, 2020, North Dakota policymakers have invested more than \$30 million to help sustain the child care sector.

Licensed providers have access to training in child development and quality care and must meet minimum standards for facility size, first aid training, safety features, cleanliness, staff qualifications, including training and background checks, and staff-to-child ratios. They can also participate in the United States Department of Agriculture's Food Program and the Child Care Assistance Program and are monitored to ensure they continue to meet licensing requirements.

To become a licensed child care provider, individuals can contact their local human service zone office. Contact information is online at www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/countysocialserv.

Other care options during COVID

In addition to licensed child care programs, parents have other options, including when an employer offers child care for employees' children at the worksite (up to 10 children) and when a school district provides child care in one of its facilities using school staff. In addition, individuals can care for up to five children, including their own children or children who are related to them, without a license.

Families who chose to hire a caregiver using an informal care arrangement that regularly brings together children from multiple households should also keep in mind best practices. Depending on the situation, this could include ensuring that caregivers have passed a background check for criminal or child abuse history and have completed safety training such as CPR, first aid, and safe sleep for infants.

The state child protection program has developed guidelines to help parents make supervision decisions for their children, and that are used by the child protection system to assess the safety of children who are reported to be unsafe due to being unsupervised. The Home Alone guidelines are online at www.nd.gov/dhs/info/pubs/docs/cfs/brochure-home-alone.pdf.

Finding licensed child care

North Dakota has an online resource that gives parents information about child care options in their community. In addition to the website, Child Care Aware staff can provide parents with a customized list of providers that match preferred schedules, location and program options. They can also help parents think about how to interview and evaluate child care programs. Families can access this service at no cost at www.ndchildcare.org and 1-800-997-8515.

Financial assistance with child care costs

"The fact that some schools are using alternate learning models means that many families may be struggling to find and pay for reliable, quality child care when their children are not in a school building," noted Michele Gee, the department's Economic Assistance Division director. "We've tried to add flexibility in the child care assistance program to help families of modest means pay for child care even as schedules fluctuate."

The department has clarified program rules to ensure assistance payments can continue during non-school days that would otherwise have been considered "in-school" times; and has acknowledged the need to support providers temporarily shut down due to COVID-related issues by reimbursing them based on children's enrollment, rather than only attendance.

See child care assistance details at www.nd.gov/dhs/services/financialhelp/childcare.html.

#

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Heather Steffl | 701-328-4933
hsteffl@nd.gov

LuWanna Lawrence | 701-328-1892
lklawrence@nd.gov