



# Early Care and Education Annual Report

FFY 2023 and 2024

Required by:  
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Submitted by:  
Maine Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of Child and Family Services

## INTRODUCTION

The Office of Child and Family Services' (OCFS) Early Care and Education Division supports efforts to enhance the accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care available to Maine's families. Throughout 2023 and 2024, OCFS has continued efforts to expand the capacity of early childhood services in Maine. These efforts have a direct and positive impact for children, families, and the entire State, allowing parents to go to work confident in the knowledge that their children are well cared for and supported in their development and learning. While 2023 was marked by continued investment in Maine's early care and education system, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, which was the impetus for many initiatives, ended in September of 2023. In response, Maine reinforced its commitment to supporting early childhood educators and delivery of the highest quality of care through an overhaul to the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), enhanced professional development opportunities, and the expansion of responsive services such as Help Me Grow Maine to help children and families thrive. In addition, OCFS partnered with the Legislature and the Governor's Office to establish the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplements, creating a tiered system for payments based on the education and experience of individual educators.

During 2024, OCFS completed the federally required market rate analysis for the Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP) and issued new state rates in July 2024. This was followed in September 2024 by the completion of a new cost estimation tool, developed to model the actual cost of providing early care and education services in Maine. This cost modeling tool will inform future fiscal and programmatic decision making related to child care programming, and resources for early childhood educators and families. OCFS has also focused on continuing to support child care programs and educators through statewide expansion of the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP) statewide and the continuation of the Child Care Infrastructure Grants to support new and expanding programs.

## INCREASING ACCESS TO SERVICES, CARE, AND EDUCATION

### Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP)

Legislation passed in 2023 resulted in several changes to Maine's child care subsidy program, including the name, with the program now known as the Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP). In addition, legislation directed OCFS to increase eligibility for CCAP to include those whose income is at 85-125% of the State Median Income (SMI) and ensure that eligibility determinations are made within 15 days of receiving a properly completed application. OCFS implemented the changes over the past year, including new CCAP rules finalized in July 2024.

With the remaining ARPA funds that OCFS distributed in 2023 several projects were supported through CCAP:

- Waived parent fees for families at or below 60% of the State Median Income. OCFS supported 2,251 families and 3,632 children, spending a total of \$3,361,014.
- Reimbursed child care providers in the subsidy program based on enrollment of children, not attendance. 1,176 providers benefitted from this initiative, receiving a total of \$10,356,195.

- Translated subsidy program materials for families and providers. Documents translated included the subsidy rules, provider agreements, family applications, posters and flyers, the Child Care Licensing Rules, and a subsidy and TANF resource. Documents were translated into Arabic, French, Haitian Creole, Khmer, Lingala, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.
- Distributed stipends of \$500 per child receiving subsidy to child care providers. 822 providers and 7,371 children benefitted from these payments, totaling \$3,685,500.
- Distributed one-time stipends of \$2,000 to newly licensed family child care providers and \$10,000 to newly licensed child care facilities.
  - 76 new family child care programs received this award as part of opening their programs. \$152,000 was spent on this initiative.
  - 35 new child care facilities received this award as part of opening their programs. \$350,000 was spent on this initiative.
- OCFS increased the child care quality payments to support an increase in high-quality programs. These payment “bumps” increased the amount paid through the subsidy program. \$2,147,237 was spent on this initiative with 617 providers benefitting.

The following tables provide some details of the children and providers supported by CCAP.

### Number of Providers Serving Children in CCAP, FFY 24

Child Care Providers with Open CCAP Authorization

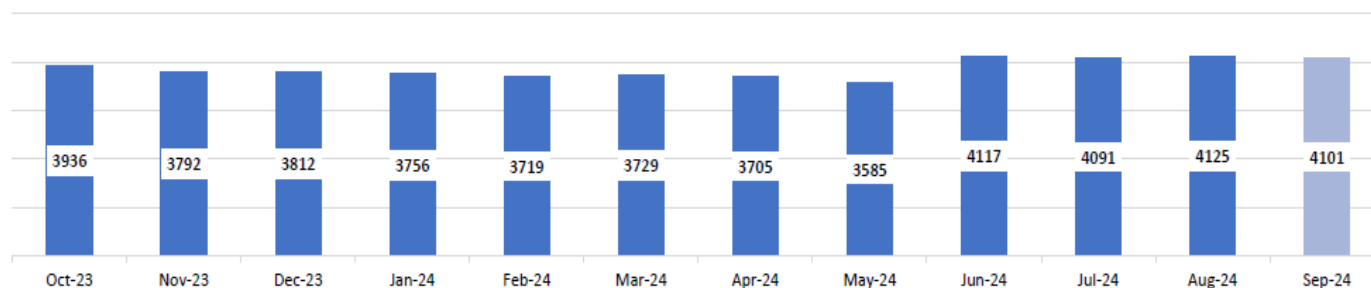
(Point in Time)												
County	Oct-23	Nov-23	Dec-23	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24
Androscoggin	105	97	101	99	89	97	89	89	98	94	100	105
Aroostook	33	38	36	38	37	39	36	36	36	36	38	38
Cumberland	154	153	151	149	146	148	148	148	144	143	154	164
Franklin	21	21	21	21	19	21	19	19	22	21	22	23
Hancock	21	24	24	23	22	23	24	24	24	26	25	27
Kennebec	86	88	86	82	82	84	81	81	84	76	79	77
Knox	29	30	30	29	29	26	28	28	25	21	29	30
Lincoln	17	18	19	18	18	20	20	20	21	20	21	22
Oxford	26	24	24	22	23	24	25	25	25	27	28	30
Penobscot	68	68	67	68	69	67	71	71	67	64	74	78
Piscataquis	9	8	9	9	10	10	10	10	13	11	11	13
Sagadahoc	21	22	23	21	19	20	21	21	20	22	25	23
Somerset	30	26	25	26	23	23	25	25	23	22	24	23
Waldo	19	18	18	18	16	18	18	18	19	17	17	19
Washington	16	16	15	15	15	14	14	14	13	12	14	11
York	89	88	88	84	88	84	90	90	84	77	89	86
Statewide	744	739	737	722	705	718	719	719	718	689	750	769

### Distribution of CCAP Among Age Groups

By Age Group  
(FFY24)

Age Group	Oct-23	Nov-23	Dec-23	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24
Infant	5%	5%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	4%
Toddler	21%	22%	23%	23%	23%	23%	22%	22%	21%	21%	21%	22%
Preschool	29%	30%	31%	32%	33%	34%	36%	36%	35%	36%	26%	28%
School Age	45%	43%	42%	41%	40%	38%	38%	38%	39%	38%	48%	46%

## Number of Children Served by CCAP



Over the past year, OCFS has evaluated CCAP with a focus on increasing enrollment and reducing barriers for families and child care providers. As part of this work OCFS contracted with the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE) to create a cost model to identify the true cost of care for different types of child care programs across the state. Stakeholder engagement was a key part of CELFE's work to both evaluate barriers and identify solutions. Engagement included:

- Collecting information from child care providers in the 2024 Market Rate Survey.
- Meeting monthly over the past two years with the ECE Collaboratory and relied on the group as an advisor and liaison to the early care and education sector. The Collaboratory is a group of representatives including child care directors and owners, leaders of professional associations, staff from state offices, and early care and education advocates. CELFE met with the ECE Business Collaboratory nine times over 12 months.
- Hosting listening sessions to learn more about the context around staffing patterns, program operating costs, and salaries for program staff directly from child care providers. In total, CELFE held six listening sessions with over sixty participants.
- Convening a child care provider focus group to inform people about the implementation of a new CCAP payment structure through the Baxter Child Care Management System
- Identifying the most common barriers for families from their communication with OCFS staff in the Child Care Affordability Program.

Through this engagement several key barriers were identified. Child care providers shared that the reimbursement-based payment structure for CCAP, particularly payments based on attendance, was a significant barrier. Providers noted that these payment practices represent a significant difference from the payment structure for CCAP families who pay prospectively for care, regardless of the number of planned or unexpected absences, which ensures providers can meet their fixed costs including, rent, utilities, and staffing. These findings align with national data and information shared by the Administration for Children and Families in the new federal 2024 CCDF Rule that requires all states to change payment practices to pay prospectively by enrollment.

Among families the biggest barriers identified related to the work required to apply for CCAP (including gathering and submitting all documents necessary to make an eligibility determination), a lack of understanding about CCAP and the possibility that the family may qualify for the program, and the cost of

copays under the CCAP program. The issue of families being unaware of CCAP was highlighted during the 2024 rollout of the Child Care Employment Award, when 65% of those who qualified for the program were found to qualify for CCAP (and thus could have applied and received CCAP before the employment award existed).

Copays are an issue also identified by the new federal 2024 CCDF rule which requires subsidy programs to cap copays at 7% of household income. An analysis of CCAP found that more than 85% of families in CCAP had copays that were more than 7% of their annual household income, and many had copays as high as 10% of household income. This will be addressed through a new cap on co-pays in forthcoming CCAP rules that will cap copays at 7% of income for families at or below 85% of the State Median Income (SMI) and at 10% for those families at 85% to 125% of the SMI. Families below 30% of SMI will not have a copayment at all.

Child Care Licensing

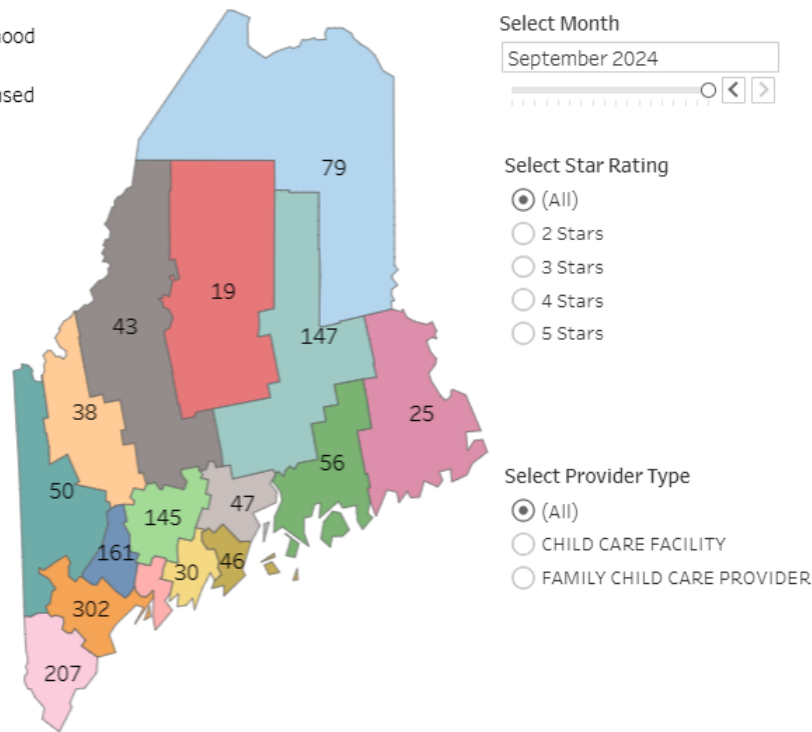
OCFS’ Child Care Licensing team continues to work to support new programs being established through the Infrastructure Grants, as well as conducting inspections and investigations with existing programs to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. Below is data on the number of licensed child care providers statewide at the end of FFY2024.

**Licensed Providers**

The goal of the Department is to provide early childhood education services in a safe, healthy and secure environment. This report shows the number of licensed providers by type, Rising Star rating and county.

Point in Time Data

State Totals		
Star Rating	CHILD CARE FACILITY	FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDER
2 Stars	530	576
3 Stars	62	32
4 Stars	48	42
5 Stars	134	8
Grand Total	774	658



Child Care Infrastructure Grants

Governor Mills designated \$15 million of federal funding in the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan to establish a program that provides Infrastructure Grants to current child care programs to expand capacity, as well as to individuals seeking to establish a new child care program. Examples of allowable uses of the funding

include purchase or renovation of a building, construction or renovation of a space, purchasing educational materials and furniture, and creating outdoor learning spaces.

Over \$14 million of this funding has been awarded through 258 individual awards that are expected to create 6,174 licensed child care slots among both center-based and family child care providers.

### Child Care Infrastructure Grants-September 2024

Category	Total Number of Awards	Total Amount Awarded	Number of Slots Added (Anticipated*)	Avg Cost Per Slot By Category
Family Start Up	106	\$965,900.00	1095	\$882.10
Family Growth	5	\$20,000.00	20	\$1,000.00
Facility Expansion - Renovation	30	\$745,200.00	769	\$969.05
Facility Expansion – New Construct	26	\$5,608,600.00	883	\$6,351.76
Facility Start Up - Renovation	73	\$3,582,900.00	2553	\$1,403.41
Facility Start Up – New Construct	16	\$3,305,300.00	786	\$4,205.22
Facility Acquisition	2	\$50,000.00	68	\$735.29
Totals	258	\$14,277,900.00	6174	\$2,312.59

**Above:** This chart shows award categories, total number of awards in each category, total award amount in each category, number of anticipated child care slot increases, and average cost per slot in each category.

**Below:** This chart shows total Infrastructure Grant amounts by County, anticipated increase in child care slots by county, and number of awards by county.

Total	Anticipated Slots	County	Number of Awards
\$1,143,400.00	563	Androscoggin	30
\$813,500.00	345	Aroostook	15
\$2,792,100.00	1574	Cumberland	53
\$737,900.00	193	Franklin	8
\$789,000.00	148	Hancock	7
\$1,494,900.00	740	Kennebec	35
\$234,100.00	88	Knox	6
\$425,500.00	66	Lincoln	4
\$844,500.00	349	Oxford	14
\$1,236,500.00	553	Penobscot	23
\$554,700.00	146	Piscataquis	6
\$344,600.00	73	Sagadahoc	6
\$524,000.00	305	Somerset	7
\$34,000.00	46	Waldo	4
\$674,100.00	134	Washington	6
\$1,635,100.00	851	York	34
\$14,277,900.00	6174		258

### Support for Head Start

Head Start programs support children's growth from birth to age 5 through services centered on early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Head Start staff actively engage parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as key to strong child outcomes. Maine contracts with 11 Head Start grantees with state funds supporting increased access to Early Head Start for infants and toddlers. 2023 legislation included additional state funding (\$3,600,000) for Head Start providers and an increase in Head Start eligibility for families whose income is up to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. OCFS completed contract amendments to incorporate this change and the additional funding in November 2023. In 2024, Maine Head Start programs leveraged state funds to support 696 children and families in a variety of ways including staff for additional classrooms and program improvements.



### ECCP – Early Childhood Consultation Partnership

ECCP is an infant and early childhood mental health consultation program that helps child care providers, educators, and caregivers of young children build an understanding of the social-emotional needs of young children and develop the skills to meet those needs. The program is designed to expand the skills of educators and caregivers to effectively and proactively address challenges that might otherwise jeopardize a child's ability to participate in an early care and education setting. Services are available to licensed child care providers including Head Start programs, public pre-k programs, public elementary schools, and out-of-school time programs that serve children ages 0-8 years old.

The program was established in Maine following the passage of Public Law 2019, Ch. 481, *An Act to Promote Social and Emotional Learning and Development for Young Children*, which required the Department to develop and implement an early childhood mental health consultation program. In response, OCFS selected ECCP, an evidence-based model used successfully in Connecticut for over 20 years. Implementation began in January 2021 with five initial pilot sites, expanding to eight pilot sites in May 2021. The model incorporates both proactive training for child care staff to develop skills and tools to understand and meet the social-emotional needs of young children and child-specific services to address behavioral concerns of individual children with the goal of reducing the incidences of children being expelled from their child care program.

Following the successful pilot, the Department was directed to expand early childhood mental health consultation statewide through passage of Public Law 2021, Ch. 679, *An Act to Expand the Statewide Voluntary Early Childhood Consultation Program*. Expansion efforts began in January 2023. In order to effectively scale the program, OCFS invested in building program infrastructure by creating and hiring two additional positions to support implementation. The Department contracted with three local mental health agencies - Community Care, Community Health & Counseling Services, and Sunrise Opportunities - to provide local services and staff consultant positions with services now available statewide.

Within child-specific services, ECCP® uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool to observe interactions and climate during a classroom consultation. The CLASS tool is a research-based tool for measuring, evaluating, and monitoring change in teacher-student interactions. CLASS tool results help to



inform how ECCP® consultants work with teachers and staff to achieve high quality interactions, which lead to improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for children. The tool is utilized as part of the assessment and administered a second time after completion of the ECCP® consultation service with 80% of classrooms served by ECCP improving in one or more dimensions of the CLASS Tool.

ECCP® also uses normed and validated assessment tools, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) completed by parents and the Caregiver-Teacher Report Form (C-TRF) completed by the teacher, to measure each party's observation of a child's behavior and mental health. Information obtained is used to develop an action plan, which outlines consultation goals and strategies for the child, parent/guardian, and teaching staff. CBCL and C-TRF are administered at the beginning of the service and at the end of the service. In the CBCL, 60% of children who participated in child-specific ECCP services had a significant improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. In the C-TRF, 40% of the children had a significant improvement from the pre-test to the post-test.

### January – September 2024 ECCP Data



A total of 1,178 children were served with 43 of those children having child welfare involvement

- 1,025 children were served in child care centers
- 82 children were served in family child care programs
- 71 children were served through stand-alone child-specific services



Classroom and community training sessions were provided to 57 child care classrooms

- 614 educators participated in the training



Data regarding children who remained safely enrolled in the program was measured at set intervals following service completion

- 100% of the children were retained at the completion of services
- 100% of the children were retained at the 1-month follow-up
- 97.7% of children were retained at the 6-month follow-up

## MAXIMIZING PARENT AND FAMILY KNOWLEDGE AND EMPOWERMENT

### Help Me Grow Maine

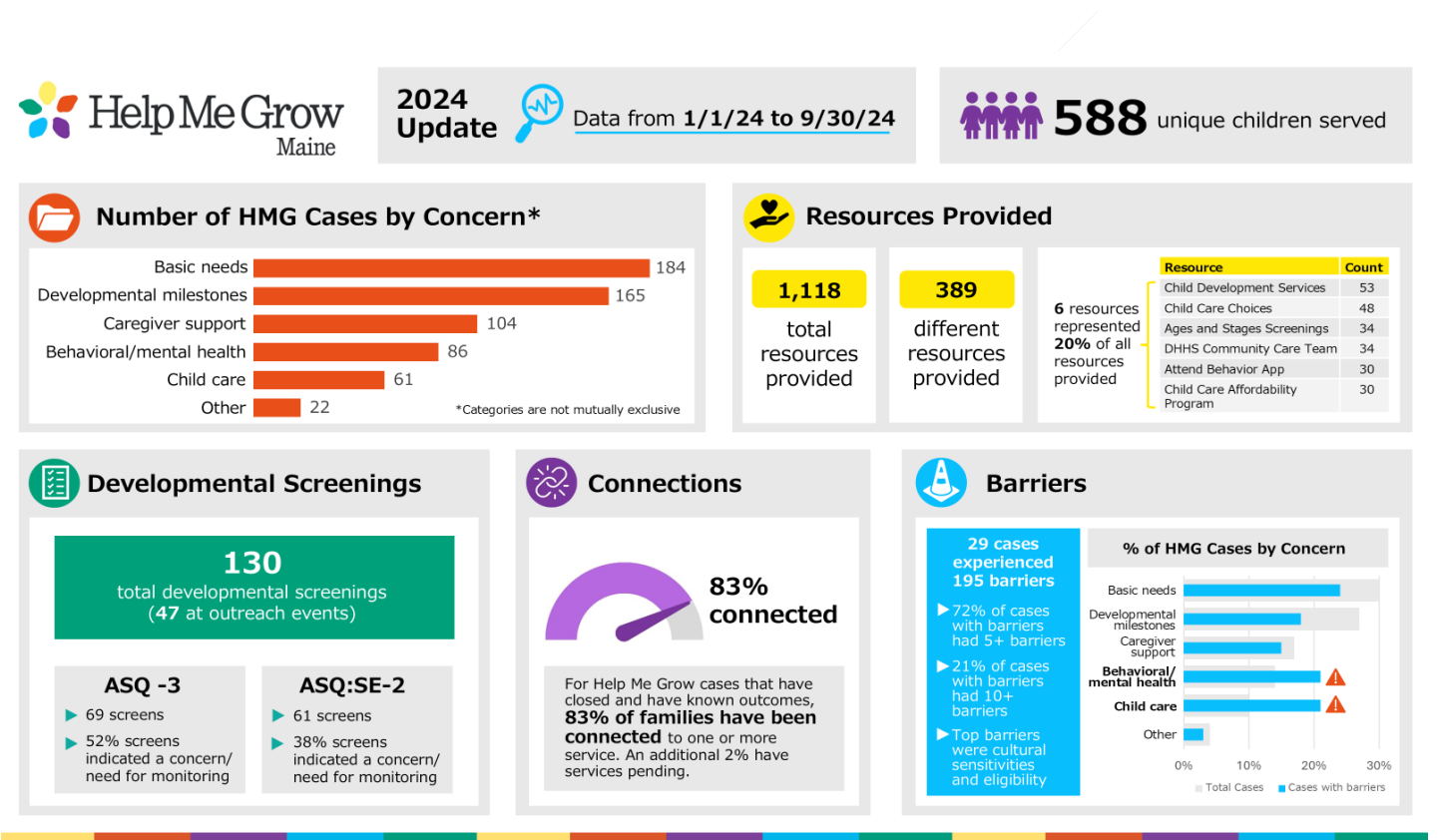
Help Me Grow (HMG) is a free informational service linking families and professionals to information about child development, pregnancy, and community resources for children and families. The intent of the program is to strengthen knowledge of the services available for children and families and build connections between families and service providers as well as amongst service providers to ensure an accessible and interconnected system. HMG also offers developmental screenings to help parents better understand their children's developmental milestones. Parents can utilize free screening resources and if those tools indicate areas of concern, they can use the information to speak with their child's primary care provider. HMG has



also dedicated significant resources to engaging communities and bringing them together to provide support for children and families.

HMG organized its first community event, “Build and Bloom” in Waterville in June 2023. Every parent who completed a survey agreed the event increased their awareness of community resources available to their family and 89% of respondents agreed the event helped them understand how playing with their child supports their development. HMG has also partnered with the Department of Transportation to provide car seat training to community-based organizations to help alleviate the barrier of accessing the resources to ensure safe transportation of children. HMG now offers car seat distribution to income-eligible families in every county, and car seat inspections for any family residing in Maine.

January – September 2024 Help Me Grow Data



To address the gaps and barriers in connecting New Mainer communities with services and support, HMG established a position known as the HMG Cultural Broker and established “The Cultural Brokering Taskforce.” The Taskforce includes community leaders, spiritual leaders, medical providers, and community experts. The Taskforce focused on topics such as prenatal care, post-natal care, and developmental delays, and explored how these topics are typically discussed in the New Mainer communities. The Taskforce also discussed strategies for delivering accurate information and resources to children and families. The HMG Cultural Broker facilitates the Taskforce which has produced three videos, each five minutes long, that provide essential, evidence-based information related to prenatal care, post-natal care, and child

development. These videos are available in ten languages and aim to support parents and caregivers by offering insights into practices that support healthy development. In 2024, HMG began utilizing ReachMyTeach (RMT) to communicate with caregivers in their preferred languages. RMT uses software to automatically translate a message into a caregiver's language of choice, and send the message via text, email, or WhatsApp. RMT can also translate PDF documents into a caregiver's preferred language.

In response to waitlists, which were identified as an overwhelming barrier for families in accessing in-home services, OCFS partnered with Seattle Children's Hospital to provide the Attend Behavior App to caregivers experiencing a waitlist for services. Attend Behavior is a mobile app that provides parents with evidence-based parenting strategies, as well as providing them feedback based on information regarding their child's behavior they track in the app. Given waitlists for mental and behavioral health services as well as services within Maine's Children's Developmental Services (CDS), Help Me Grow Maine has collaborated with and provided input to the Office of MaineCare Services regarding a new school-based policy.

### Parent Ambassador Programs

Maine State Parent Ambassadors (MSPA) is a 12-month intensive parent empowerment and advocacy training provided through Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) and Educare Central Maine.



In 2023, OCFS contracted with KVCAP/Educare to expand the Parent Ambassador Program, engaging more parents from across the state and whose children attend different types of early care and education programs, from family child care to child care centers, to Head Starts. Participants engage in training, attend conferences, testify on bills before the

Legislature engage in other advocacy efforts, and participate in community events. In 2024, with the support of the Preschool Development Grant, the program was expanded to include a second cohort located in Lewiston-Auburn.

There has been a concerted effort to expand the reach of the program among New Mainer communities. This led to a partnership with Portland Empowered to pilot a trusted



messenger training for immigrant parents with young children. One group of parent leaders attended 24 hours of training to learn about resources, child development, child welfare, and school transitions and those



parent leaders have since led two community meetings in several languages for their fellow parents and community members. As the program grows and the alumni network expands, the goal is to engage with alumni to support additional families within their own communities.

## RECRUITING, PREPARING, AND RETAINING A STRONG, DIVERSE WORKFORCE

### Salary Supplement System

During the pandemic, ARPA funding was utilized to provide salary supplements for the early childhood workforce in licensed child care programs. This took the form of \$200 monthly stipends for each staff working directly with children provided via the Child Care Stabilization Grants. In the Governor's 2022-2023 Supplemental Budget, \$12 million (annualized to \$15.9 million), was included to establish a state source of funding for the program as ARPA funding came to an end. With this funding, the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement program was officially established. The biennial state budget, passed in 2023, increased the funding for the salary supplements to \$30 million annually and required the implementation of a tiered system for stipends with increased payments as staff ascend Maine's early childhood career lattice, advancing their education and gaining experience.

Stipend Tier	ECE Workforce Registry Levels
<b>Tier 1</b>	Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4
<b>Tier 2</b>	Levels 5 and 6
<b>Tier 3</b>	Levels 7 and 8

The rules for the tiered Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplements became effective in December 2023. Through the course of implementation, OCFS tracked the utilization of the program at each tier, noting growth among those at higher registry levels, indicative of the program incentivizing those with higher registry levels to take child care jobs and those already in jobs to move up the career lattice through recognized trainings. This led to an adjustment to the tiered payments made in July 2024 based on available funding. Tier 1 went from \$275 to \$240, Tier 2 from \$415 to \$360, and Tier 3 was adjusted from \$625 to \$540.

### **January – September 2024 Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplements Data**

- \$22,157,735 distributed
- Total number of wage supplement awards: 66,952
- Average number of wage supplements per month: 7,439
- 68% of staff retained

### Child Care Employment Award Pilot

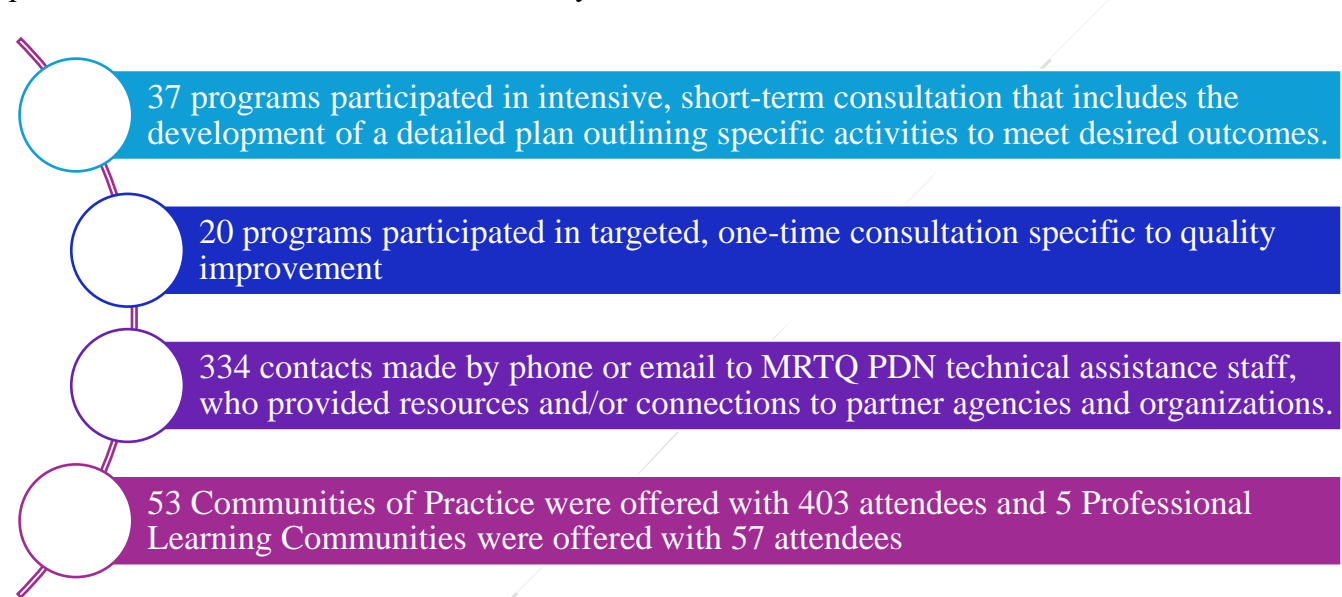
The Child Care Employment Award is a pilot program designed to provide a workplace benefit for staff working in licensed child care programs. The Child Care Employment Award works in tandem with the Child Care Affordability Program to support access to affordable child care. All staff in licensed child care programs are eligible to apply and receive financial assistance to cover the cost of child care for their children. The program is funded with \$2.5 million in state general funds. Starting July 1, 2024, when the pilot started, families applied to CCAP first and if eligible, the employment award covered their parent fee.

If child care staff applied and were not eligible for CCAP, the award payments cover about half of their child care tuition. Awards were provided to help fund care for 512 children of 284 child care staff.

#### Early Care and Education Training & Technical Assistance

Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ) serves as the professional development network for early childhood and out-of-school time professionals as they seek to expand their expertise and ability to provide high-quality care. Over the last two years, MRTQ has completed training that included 19,527 educators, with many completing multiple trainings. This included 113 facilitated training courses, training regarding the Maine Early Learning and Development Standards (MELDS) for both infants and toddlers, and preschoolers, on-demand trainings, and updates for providers related to licensing rules.

Staff at MRTQ provide onsite and virtual consultation for providers and facilitate peer-to-peer networks related to quality early childhood practices. The data below demonstrates the strong participation of providers in these services over the last two years.



MRTQ also awards credentials to early care and education providers who complete specialized training programs in specific areas of practice. Over the last year, MRTQ awarded 13 Child Care Director credentials, 1 Family Child Care credential, 15 Infant and Toddler credentials, 1 Inclusion credential, and 4 Technical Assistance credentials. In fiscal year 2024, MRTQ also awarded 60 Certified Early Childhood Assistant (CECA) credentials to graduating high school students who completed Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and met testing and portfolio requirements. This represented a 36% increase in applicants from fiscal year 2023.

### *Rising Stars for ME*

Rising Stars for ME is Maine's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) which is designed to increase awareness of the basic standards of early care and education, recognize and support early care and education programs in providing care above and beyond the basic standards, educate the community about the benefits of higher quality care, and provide the community with identifiable standards of quality among programs.



Updated rules for the program were promulgated in February 2023 with the program transitioning to the new standards in March 2023. The rules also established the formal program named Rising Stars for ME as the program was formerly known as QRIS. Providers were given until November 2023 to meet the new standards to maintain their Star rating and were provided extensive technical assistance to support this transition. Significant support for providers related to these standards and their ability to increase their star rating is available through [OCFS](#) while the [childcarechoices.me](https://childcarechoices.me) website provides information and resources on licensed child care providers and the importance of high-quality early care and education.

The transition to Rising Stars for ME was made after extensive work with stakeholders including providers, families, and partner agencies. Their feedback provided critical information to the Department to ensure the effectiveness of the new system, including the ability of providers to successfully utilize the system to increase the quality of care and early learning available to children and families.

## **STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND COORDINATION**

### *Preschool Development Grant (PDG)*

Maine is the recipient of a federal grant to improve the early child care and education mixed delivery system to support the Governor's Children's Cabinet goal that all Maine children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed. The State's major goals under the grant include:

- Determining access to and the quality of the current state of early care and education programming for Maine families by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment.
- Developing a strategic plan to address gaps in the birth to age 5 mixed delivery system.
- Maximizing parental knowledge and choice.
- Sharing evidence-based practices.
- Improving the overall quality of programming for children birth to age five.

In 2024, Maine finished an early care and education needs assessment and started updating the state's PDG Strategic Plan. PDG funded work includes an evaluation of the Early Childhood Workforce Salary Supplement program as well as the development of an integrated data system to track outcomes for children across early childhood and into their school years.



## First4ME

The First4ME Early Care and Education Pilot project was established under the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child and Family Services to provide funding to pilot sites to create opportunities and improve social, emotional, educational, and health outcomes for children under 6 years of age and their families. The project is delivered through a holistic, two generation approach that integrates comprehensive resources and services into traditional child care centers and family child care settings. The project is focused on improving outcomes for children, families, and early childhood educators. First4ME continues to progress through its three-year pilot phase which began in August of 2023 and will conclude in July of 2026.



First4ME has four primary goals:

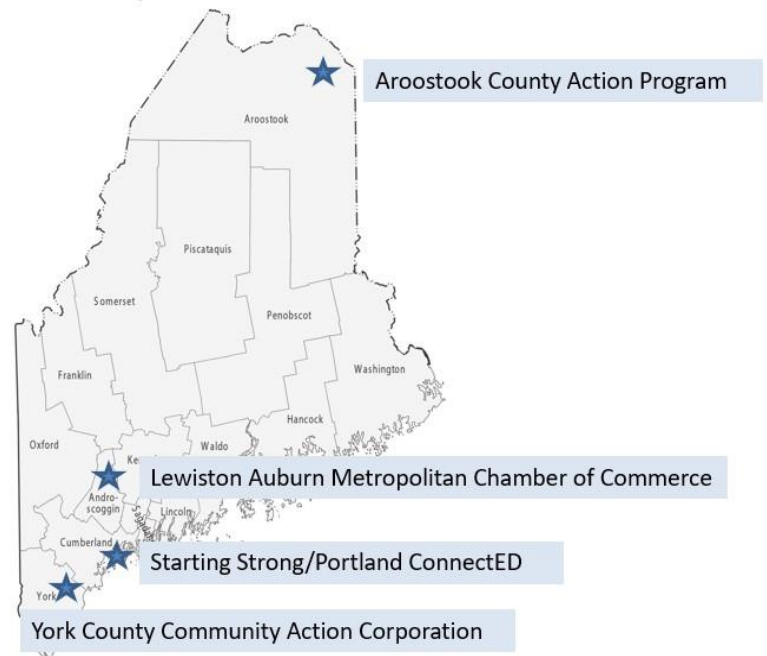
- Increase high-quality care and education across the mixed delivery system (including family child care, child care center, Head Start programs, and school districts).
- Develop a coordinated system of support for families, child care providers, schools, and communities.
- Strengthen consistent continuity of care for children, birth to school age.
- Increase successful early learning transition for children up to kindergarten entry, regardless of risk factors.

Currently, First4ME is in four counties with four nonprofits selected as the pilot sites through a competitive bid process. Each pilot site has a local coalition for community engagement as well as staff who provide intensive support to child care providers, increase access to comprehensive services for families, facilitate communication between schools and providers, and coordinate system alignment and community collaboration. The First4ME pilot sites also provide early screening and intervention.

These providers within the pilot sites are supporting 18 child care providers, partnering with seven school districts, eight School Administrative Units (SAUs), and serving 576 children. In 2023 and 2024, these organizations developed their programs, hired staff, onboarded providers, served families, and established baseline data.

First4ME is funded with federal Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). This funding supports:

- Core child care services for eligible children, such as those qualifying for the Child Care Affordability Program or meeting “at risk” criteria.



- Quality improvements such as developmental screenings, curriculum materials, classroom supplies and equipment, training and education for teachers and staff, enhanced pay for teachers and staff; increased staffing, and minor facility renovations.
- Services for First4ME eligible children and their families, including salaries and benefits for family support workers, external referrals to health and mental health providers, and home visits.

The First4ME program utilizes the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)® to collect child care quality assessment and monitoring data. Pilot sites are also utilizing the Teaching Strategies Gold® assessment tool to help track the development and learning by children involved in the pilot site programs. This tool tracks a child's progress related to 38 early learning and development objectives.

While the program is relatively young, communities and providers have started to report positive feedback. Providers have reported that First4ME funding has supported them in completing repairs and purchasing new supplies. One provider has been able to purchase higher quality outdoor equipment and weather-appropriate clothing for all the children in their program in order to increase daily outdoor time and remove barriers for families who struggle to obtain these items. Providers have also expressed a deep appreciation for the coaching support they have received, which has helped them better understand licensing standards, increase training opportunities for staff, etc. The pilot sites are also reporting the significant benefits of layered community work. In one region the layered work is reportedly strengthening community relationships which has the direct benefit of improving the process of transitioning to pre-k or kindergarten for children and families.

An evaluation of the pilot and its impact on children, families, child care providers, and schools is being conducted. The evaluation, which is being conducted by an interdisciplinary research team at the University of Maine, will inform future decisions regarding the program with consideration for sustainability of the First4ME program and possible expansion to other communities interested in implementing this framework.

## CONCLUSION

Early care and education programs serve a vitally important role in supporting children, families, and the Maine economy. The Department of Health and Human Services is committed to exploring new and innovative opportunities to support child care staff within available resources to ensure families have access to the highest quality care and learning. OCFS leadership and staff are grateful for the dedication of early childhood professionals who have committed their careers to this work.