

March 1999

Children's Home
Society of Minnesota
Client Focus Group
Report

**CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY OF MINNESOTA
CLIENT FOCUS GROUP PROJECT**

**Parents' Views on Child Care
and Child Care Assistance
in the First Year of Statewide Welfare Reform**

Prepared by:

Ellen Shelton, M.A.
Research Associate

with assistance from:

Corinna A. Roy, M.A.
Research Associate

and

Karen Ulstad, B.A.
Data Collection Associate

Wilder Research Center
1295 Bandana Boulevard North, Suite 210
St. Paul, MN 55108
Telephone: 651-647-4600
Fax: 651-647-4623
Ecs@wilder.org

March, 1999

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study represents the combined efforts of many different people. The author wishes to thank the following people who made this report possible.

The State of Minnesota, Department of Children, Families and Learning provided funding for the study through a grant to the Children's Home Society of Minnesota.

Jackie Olafson of Children's Home Society helped conceive the project, wrote the grant for its funding, and oversaw its implementation. Judy Burns handled all the arrangements: she convened an advisory group to help prepare the questions for the participants, coordinated logistical arrangements for the focus groups, and handled questions about the project from Wilder Research Center staff as well as from Children's Home Society staff. Advisory group members, who helped to develop the questions for the focus groups, were: Judy Davis, Nikki Muelken, ZoeAnn Wignall, and Karen Svendsen (staff), Shani Green (parent), Chris Schultz and Cheryl Dickhausen (RAP Head Start), and Linda Donahue (Dakota CAP Head Start). The seven Children's Home Society center directors, who helped recruit parents to participate and helped make meal and room arrangements, were Nikki Muelken, Zebune Jayatilaka, Karen Svendsen, Judy Davis, Barb Mathias, Carol Brennan, and Lynn Heibel.

Many staff members at Wilder Research Center also contributed to the study. Greg Owen handled initial arrangements for the project and consulted on project management. Ronnie Higgins and Corinna Roy consulted on focus group facilitation. Corinna Roy also conducted two focus groups and recorded for three others. Karen Ulstad recorded for 10 focus groups. Ginger Hope, Greg Owen, Corinna Roy, and Karen Ulstad provided helpful critiques of the report. Other Wilder Research Center staff who contributed to the project are: Alice Connors, Marilyn Conrad, Caroline Danielson, Louann Graham, June Heineman, and Garrett Sandquist.

These acknowledgements would not be complete, and the study would not have been possible, without the thoughtful participation of the 111 parents who attended the 15 focus groups. We deeply appreciate their willingness to take time during their already long days to share the experiences that are reported here.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) took effect in January 1998, as Minnesota's state program under the new federal welfare reform policies. MFIP provides new opportunities for families, and at the same time places new demands on them. This research project explores how these changes affect parents and their children, and how the child care system in Minnesota can respond to parent needs. The study's goal is to understand what services are needed to help families become and remain self-sufficient, and to help remove barriers to accessing quality care for Minnesota's children. For this purpose, Children's Home Society of Minnesota arranged to listen to what parents have to say about how the system currently works.

Participants in the study represent the following child care subsidy programs:

- MFIP Child Care Assistance, for qualified¹ parents receiving MFIP;
- Transition Year Child Care Assistance, for certain parents² in their first year after leaving MFIP;
- Basic Sliding Fee Child Care program, for parents whose gross monthly income is below 75 percent of state median income who are working, looking for work, or in school; and
- Children's Home Society Child Care Scholarship program, a privately funded program providing temporary assistance for child care so parents can concentrate on becoming more economically self-sufficient.

The project was initiated by Children's Home Society of Minnesota, which is the largest non-profit provider of child care in Minnesota, operating 19 child care centers serving over 2,500 children in the inner cities, suburbs, and greater Minnesota.

METHOD

The study was carried out by research staff at Wilder Research Center, who conducted a series of focus groups during 1998 with parents of children in Children's Home Society child care centers. All but two participants were receiving some form of child care subsidy.

Seven groups met during May and June when counties and welfare recipients were still making the transition to the new MFIP rules. A follow-up round of six groups, with different participants, met in October and November after recipients and workers had more time to adjust to the new system. In addition, two groups were held in November at crisis nurseries administered by Children's Home Society. The results of those groups are reported separately.

¹ MFIP child care assistance may be available for parents engaged in approved MFIP work activities. For some participants this may involve attending school.

² Transition Year child care is available to parents who have left MFIP due to earned income or child support; have received MFIP in three out of the last six months; and work at least 20 hours per week and earn at least minimum wage.

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

Parents were asked what makes it easier and harder for them to find child care and assistance to help pay for it. The groups indicated the most important considerations out of all those raised. They then discussed how these most important issues affect them and their ability to care for their children; what aspects of positive features are most important to preserve from change, and what might be done to improve the negative ones. Finally, parents were asked how their children were doing, and to describe what factors affect their well-being.

This report presents the findings from the 13 focus groups held at regular child care centers. It describes the principal barriers and sources of stress that make it harder for parents to care for their children, and the principal supports that help. It also summarizes parents' recommendations for how child care providers and the child care assistance system could be more helpful.

FINDINGS

Parents' comments were very similar in the two rounds of focus groups. With few exceptions, the same points raised in the spring were raised again by a different set of parents in the fall.

The following themes emerged consistently from a significant number of parents and a large number of the groups:

1. Value and Benefit of Child Care Assistance Programs

- Parents deeply appreciate the availability of child care assistance. Most parents say it is essential, and they would not be able to manage without it.
- Many parents have received helpful information from AFDC, MFIP, or Child Care Resource and Referral workers.

2. Drawbacks and Limitations Identified

- Parents are unhappy with funding policies that force them to go on welfare and take the entire MFIP package when the only assistance they really need is for child care. Many parents, especially in the most recent groups, report having to go on welfare because Basic Sliding Fee child care assistance was unavailable.
- Workers' case loads are so large that they have no time to talk to their clients or to understand their situations. (This includes not only workers associated with the welfare system, but also workers in child care resource and referral agencies.)
- The system's rules are uncertain and confusing, and they change frequently. Against expectations, this theme was just as common in the latest groups as in the earlier ones.
- Besides the general concern that the system allows them too little income to meet their needs, parents identified other specific concerns about financial rules:
 - Monthly child care assistance amounts are based on a fictional annualization of actual monthly income. This amplifies any existing fluctuations in family finances and makes it harder for parents to budget.

- Parents receiving more than one kind of subsidy (such as child care and housing) find the income rules for the different programs sometimes conflict.
- Basing assistance on gross income fails to recognize families' expenses, which vary based on many more considerations than just family size.
- Too little child care is available during non-standard hours (evenings, weekends, and overnight).
- Drop-in care is important but unavailable.
- Crisis nurseries serve a need not met elsewhere, for parents whose needs are great, or whose situations are not settled.

3. Other Supports and Barriers Identified

- After the child care subsidy, child care providers are the second-most important source of help and support for these parents.
- Transportation and housing problems are common. Both interfere not only with parents' ability to work or go to school, but also with their ability to care for their children.

4. How Children are Affected

- Parents report that the stress of their lives makes them less patient and responsive to their children.
- Helping to cushion the negative effects of the parents' stressful lives, parents report their children's experiences in child care are very positive because of the quality of the care they receive at Children's Home Society.

Each of these themes and suggestions is discussed in more detail in the report, including information provided by the parents on how they and their children are affected.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents were pleased to be asked to participate in the focus groups. They appreciated that people with the authority to make decisions about child care and the child care assistance system were interested in hearing their opinions, and they were thoughtful in providing them. Assured that there would be no repercussions for speaking frankly, they shared their experiences and opinions freely.

Although they had many complaints to air about the welfare and child care assistance systems, they also showed much understanding of the difficulties involved in managing such complex systems. Many parents made an effort to make it clear that they understand that workers have large case loads, and that rules and paperwork are intended to prevent abuse of the system. However, they wanted those responsible to understand how these conditions make their lives more difficult and stressful.

This study was conducted to understand how child care providers and the child care assistance system can help parents be successful in combining the two roles that the new welfare system expects of parents: to work and to be responsible for the rearing and nurturing of their children.

Based on participants' descriptions of their situations, the most important change needed is to fund child care assistance as a free-standing program separate from welfare (i.e., Basic Sliding Fee), for parents who need help paying for child care but don't need the whole welfare package.

Parents are unhappy with funding rules that force them to go on welfare and take the entire MFIP package when the only assistance they really need is for child care costs.

Besides this most important change, the actions listed on the following page are suggested as those that would make the most difference for parents.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

Availability of funding

- Whatever else may be changed, keep child care assistance available.
- Fund Basic Sliding Fee for parents who don't need or want the whole welfare package.

Customer relations

- Reduce case workers' case loads.
- Reduce the number of different case workers parents must deal with. If this is not done, then improve the communication between case workers.
- Reduce case worker turnover.
- Give case workers more training in the rules, and in explaining them to parents who may have learning or attention disorders.
- Don't apply harsh penalties for simple misunderstandings.
- Ensure that parents are not penalized for the system's mistakes or slowness.

Income and co-pay rules

- Make eligibility and funding rules more flexible so that:
 - Children can continue in one child care setting uninterrupted when their parents' eligibility status changes.
 - Part-time child care can be covered for those who don't need it full-time.
- Find ways to average monthly payments over a longer period for those whose income fluctuates. For parents with regular bi-weekly pay, end the practice of annualizing based on monthly rates.
- Evaluate how child care co-pays, subsidized rents, and the MFIP earnings disregards interact, and redesign them as needed so that minor raises in earned income do not cause major increases in family expenses.
- Calculate co-pay amounts based on net income instead of gross to more accurately adjust for families' actual expenses.

Child Care Availability, Flexibility, and Quality

- Have more child care centers open until 9 or 10 o'clock in the evenings (top priority). Weekend and overnight care are also needed, but not as widely.
- Ensure that high quality child care is available. Monitor the quality of care and ensure that low quality child care is shut down.
- Ensure that child care providers are knowledgeable about the assistance system and about various support services available to parents. Child care providers can help immeasurably by understanding low-income parents' difficulties, being flexible, and knowing where parents can go for help when emergencies arise.
- Increase the capacity of the crisis nurseries to serve more families, and maintain close cooperation between crisis nurseries and regular child care providers.
- Increase the supply of drop-in care for parents whose child care needs are irregular or who are required to participate in work activities before they have had time to make regular arrangements.

Other Important Considerations

- Educate employers about parents' need to be able to stay home from work to take care of children when children are sick.
- Increase the availability of transportation assistance.
- Allow more time for transportation when determining the hours of child care to be subsidized.
- Increase the availability of affordable housing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Executive Summary	ii
Method	1
Child Care Assistance Programs	2
Characteristics of the Parents Interviewed	2
Findings	3
Value and Benefit of Child Care Assistance Programs.....	3
Drawbacks and Limitations Identified	4
Other Supports and Barriers Identified	11
How Children are Affected	13
Parents' Suggestions for Change or Continuation.....	15
Other Themes Important to Some Parents	17
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	18
Suggestions for Change.....	20
Child Care Assistance System.....	20
Appendix A: Self-Reported Demographic Data on Participants	21

Parents' Views on Child Care and Child Care Assistance in the First Year of Statewide Welfare Reform

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) took effect in January 1998, as Minnesota's state program under the new federal welfare reform policies. MFIP provides new opportunities for families, and at the same time places new demands on them. This research project explores how these changes affect parents and their children, and how the child care system in Minnesota can respond to parent needs. Its ultimate goal is to understand what services are needed to help families become and remain self-sufficient, and to help remove barriers to accessing quality care for Minnesota's children. For this purpose, Children's Home Society of Minnesota arranged to listen to what parents have to say about how the system currently works.

This report presents the findings from that project, in the themes that were raised consistently by more than a few parents, in at least half of all the groups, across the full time period. It is organized in terms of factors that help parents to work or go to school and simultaneously be good parents to their children, and factors that make it harder. At the end are the parents' top recommendations for ways to make things better.

METHOD

Children's Home Society designed the project and secured funding for it from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. To ensure objectivity, Children's Home Society contracted with Wilder Research Center to conduct the study.

The study comprised two rounds of focus groups of parents of children in child care centers operated by Children's Home Society. Center directors recruited participants from among parents who receive some form of child care assistance, from any source. Children's Home Society provided participants with lunch or dinner, depending on the time of day, child care, and a \$10 gift certificate for Target Department Stores.

The first round of groups was conducted in May and June 1998 at seven Children's Home Society child care centers. Four are in St. Paul and Minneapolis, two are in Twin Cities suburbs, and one is in Rochester. The second round was conducted six months later, in October and November 1998. The second round included six of the seven centers included earlier (the Rochester group was cancelled due to a lack of participants). In addition, in mid-November, focus groups were held at Dakota and Ramsey County crisis nurseries, also operated by Children's Home Society. The findings from the crisis nursery groups are reported separately.

Group size in the spring sessions ranged from 5 to 13 participants. A total of 61 parents attended, including one two-parent couple. Fall sessions ranged from two to 10 participants. A total of 39 parents attended the regular center groups, including two two-parent couples.

Wilder Research Center staff facilitated the focus groups. All sessions were recorded, with the permission of the participants, on the understanding that no individually identifiable information would be shared. At the end of each session, each participant was asked to complete a brief demographic survey. A summary of the responses to the survey is attached to this report as Appendix A.

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

The major types of child care assistance for parents are:

- *MFIP Child Care Assistance*, for parents receiving MFIP who are working, looking for work, or participating in activities in an approved employment plan;
- *Transition Year Child Care Assistance*, for parents who were on MFIP for at least three of the last six months, lost MFIP eligibility due to increased earnings or child support income, and work 20 or more hours per week earning at least a minimum wage;
- *Basic Sliding Fee Child Care program*, for parents whose gross monthly income is below 75 percent of state median income (around \$30,000 for a family of 3 in 1997) who are working, looking for work, or in school; and
- Children's Home Society Child Care Scholarship program, a privately funded program providing temporary assistance for child care so parents can concentrate on becoming more economically self-sufficient.

Only a few participants were receiving child care assistance through any other programs. These included: adoption assistance, Supplemental Security Income, a transitional housing program, and special needs foster care.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARENTS INTERVIEWED

Between May and November 1998, a total of 100 parents from 97 households participated in focus group interviews held at the Children's Home Society child care centers attended by their children. Fifty-one of them receive assistance through MFIP, and the others through Transition Year, Basic Sliding Fee, Children's Home Society scholarships, or other sources. Four parents are combining more than one type of assistance.

Slightly over half of the parents (56) live in Ramsey County. Fifteen live in Hennepin County, and the others live in Dakota, Olmsted, Washington, Anoka, and Mower Counties. Reflecting the school- and college-based locations of several of the participating child care centers, over half of the parents (54%) are in school while their children are in care. Almost all of the others are working. Eight are doing both.

Half of the parents are the only adult who regularly parents their child or children. The rest regularly share parenting responsibilities, most in two-parents households (27%). Two participants are grandparents responsible for the care of children due to their parents' incapacity.

The majority of families have one or two children (43% and 28%, respectively). Eleven families have three children, 13 have four children, and two have five or six. All but one of the families have preschool children. Children's ages at the time of the interviews ranged from under 1 year to 20; nearly two-thirds of all children are preschool age.

Only one-third of the parents are using the Children's Home Society center as their only child care arrangement. Slightly under one-half are combining that center with one other arrangement, and 16 are combining it with two or more other arrangements.

In brief, the typical respondent is a Caucasian woman, age 25, with one child between the ages of two and five. She had her first child at the age of 22. She is a single parent on MFIP, living in Ramsey County, and currently attending school. In addition to her child care arrangement at Children's Home Society, she is also relying on a family member to help provide child care.

This report describes the responses of all parents interviewed at regular child care centers in the spring and fall. These parents are considered by the center directors to be typical of child care assistance recipients in their centers, except that they tend to be the ones who are doing the best at coping with the stresses in their lives, and they don't include those with limited English skills.

FINDINGS

Nearly a year into welfare reform, these low-income families reported being under significant stress. Most parents cited multiple sources of stress, including personal and economic. Most also shared insights into the sources of support that make it possible for them to keep going in the face of obstacles.

It has been known for some time that children from economically stressed families realize the greatest benefit from high quality child care, and the greatest harm from low quality care. A more recent strand of research shows that the quality of child care also has greater importance for children from *psychologically* stressed families. High quality of child care is important and beneficial to all children. However, children from psychologically stressed families have the most to gain from high quality care, and the most to lose from low quality.³

This study suggests that many of the low-income families who qualify for child care assistance are both economically and psychologically stressed. The focus groups have yielded vivid descriptions of the most common stressors. They also provide important insights into what helps families to counteract the stress and give their children the quality and stability of care they need.

VALUE AND BENEFIT OF CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

The child care and public assistance systems provide important support to low-income parents. Parents report child care assistance is essential to their ability to raise their children, and that they would be unable to manage without it.

The parents who participated in the focus groups were all receiving some form of child care assistance, except for one. One of the strongest themes to come from the series of groups was the importance of this assistance. Also, despite their many complaints about the assistance system, parents also identified it as a source of helpful information.

Another support frequently mentioned is the "wraparound" arrangement that links Head Start with full-day child care. Parents express high regard for the quality of the Head Start curriculum that they experience in the Children's Home Society context.

³ Zaslow, Martha J. 1991. "Variation in child care quality and its implications for children." *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 125-138.

Parents deeply appreciate the availability of child care assistance, and say they would not be able to manage without it.

In most groups, parents identified child care assistance as the most important type of assistance they receive, including cash assistance. Most parents in the groups want to work and become self-sufficient. Given the high cost of child care, and the low wages available to them at their current skill and experience levels, they would not be able to work without the subsidy. Those who are going to school expect to earn self-supporting wages when they are done, but would be unable to go to school without the child care assistance.

The importance of child care assistance is emphasized by parents on all types of child care assistance programs (though by a higher proportion on Basic Sliding Fee), and includes all types of family structures.

✘ “I am just making enough to pay my bills. If it wasn't for the county paying my day care I couldn't work. I am just making either the bills or the day care, you don't make enough to do both.”

– Parent at City View center (Ramsey County resident)

✘ “[Under AFDC rules] I had found a job and I was trying to get childcare, but I couldn't get it because my worker kept saying, ‘Well, you have to pay half of this and half of that.’ It would have been a waste of time to work because all my money would go to day care.”

– Parent at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County resident)

Many parents have received helpful information from AFDC, MFIP, or Child Care Resource and Referral workers.

When parents are asked how they made the connection to the child care or the subsidy they needed, three primary sources come in about even: county workers, child care center staff and parents' own informal networks of family and friends.

✘ “[My job counselor] had me call numbers for the day care assistance program. She had me call them in her office, and what to say and how to word it, so she was very helpful.”

– Parent at Mounds View center (Anoka County resident)

DRAWBACKS AND LIMITATIONS IDENTIFIED

The stressors most frequently mentioned by parents are those caused by the system charged with helping them. Parents do not understand why they are forced to go on welfare and receive the whole assistance package that goes with it, when the only help they really need is for child care costs. Along with this complaint is the frequent mention of the waiting lists for the Basic Sliding Fee program. Many families were obliged (or advised) to go on welfare when the lack of funding for Basic Sliding Fee made it impossible to get assistance for only child care.

Other problems relate to case workers, and especially the slowness, unavailability, and errors related to their high case loads; to the nature and amount of paperwork required; and to the rules concerning income limits and “disregards” (sources of income not counted against eligibility).

Parents also mentioned experiences with rules that are narrow, rigid, or based on assumptions that don't fit individual cases, so that people needing help fall between the cracks and fail to qualify, or the assistance they receive does not fit what they need. In one instance, the parents were told they could not get help paying for child care for their son, because they (the parents) were not on his grant. In another, a parent's work schedule had all her work hours in just four days, so she had Friday off. However, she was obliged to send her child to child care on Fridays instead of spending the time together, because otherwise the county would make her pay for the unused time.

Parents are unhappy with funding rules that force them to go on welfare and take the entire MFIP package when the only assistance they really need is for child care costs.

In both rounds of focus groups, some parents told of having to go on welfare when the only assistance they needed was for child care. However, in the earlier groups there were also many parents with a different kind of history: They had been worried when they were first looking for child care, because they had been told about the long waiting list for child care assistance, but then they would add, “But then I was really lucky because I was able to get on it right away” – referring to the time when the Basic Sliding Fee program received enough additional funding to serve all the people on the waiting list.

The fall focus groups were held at a time when the waiting lists were back up to around 6,000 families in the state. One parent in the fall (an MFIP participant) reported that she had not been permitted to even sign up for the waiting list because it was too long and it wasn't moving. This difference in the availability of the Basic Sliding Fee program may explain the significant difference in the types of assistance for parents in the two rounds of focus groups. In the spring, with parents who had been able to get off the waiting list, 41.7 percent of the parents in the groups were receiving their child care assistance while on welfare and 23.3 percent were receiving Basic Sliding Fee. The fall groups had many more on welfare (70.3%) and fewer on Basic Sliding Fee (10.8%).

✘ “I was forced to quit my job and go on welfare to get the day care. I was working part-time and going to school full-time, and I was told by a worker at Ramsey County, if I wanted to get day care help ... I had to quit my job. I had a job making more money, but I still didn't get that much help ... so I had to quit, so my life is not better, but I get more day care help. ... I make \$3.00 less an hour and now I get more help with day care.”

– Parent at City View center (Ramsey County resident)

✘ “You don't just get the help you need, it's the whole package you have to take.”
“That's right. You should be able to just get what you need.”
“Child care is the most important piece.”

– Parents at Cedar Riverside center (Hennepin County residents)

✘ “Even if you don’t get financial aid, you should be able to get day care, I think. I really do. Because day care is expensive.”

“If I could just get the day care part for that one child [of her two] I would be OK. If they could work on a new program or something like that, that would be great. Because then too, they’re not forking out as much money.”

– Parents at Dakota County Technical College center

✘ “A lot of the problem with the sliding fee is, ... there is only a certain amount of people who are allowed in on that program. I don’t know how I got in. [Before I got on Basic Sliding Fee] I was getting ready to place her in an in-home day care facility where they smoked. They had a dog, and it was a husband and wife who both watched the children. I just did not feel good, and the entire time I was there with them I didn’t feel right, but I was getting ready to put her there because I didn’t know what else to do.”

– Parent at Rochester center (Olmsted County resident)

Overburdened case workers and constant, high-stakes paperwork are a combination that results in frequent frustrations and errors.

Most parents are aware that county workers have high caseloads. In most groups, at least one participant, after recounting stories of frustration, nevertheless came to workers' defense and pointed out the impossible demands on them. However, many parents are very bitter about the unnecessary hardships the system causes them. They mention, over and over again, in all counties, the difficulty of even contacting case workers; the slowness with which paperwork is processed (despite the very short time that parents are sometimes given to do their paperwork); the fact that they have multiple caseworkers, each requiring his or her own set of paperwork, which the case workers never seem to share with each other.

These stories come not only from MFIP participants but also from those receiving Transition Year and Basic Sliding Fee funding.

Paperwork is redundant, slow, lost or mishandled by the system.

Parents recount similar stories in all counties: (1) They have very short time limits to do their paperwork, and are penalized if they go beyond the limits; but case workers do not in turn handle the paperwork on time, and when case workers make mistakes or are slow, it is once again the parents who are harmed. (2) Parents have multiple caseworkers who either require the same paperwork as each other, or are supposed to pass along the paperwork to each other and fail to do so in a timely way. (3) The county or Child Care Resource and Referral agency loses paperwork. (4) When there is a problem with paperwork, it can't be solved over the phone, so the parent has to take time away from school or work to go to one or more offices to straighten it out.

It is important to note that these stories are not universal. There are also parents – also in all counties – whose caseworkers are very helpful.

✦ “I get this a lot, I get my household report form around the 8th, and she wants me to return it on the 8th. Then she will send me another letter saying, "You turned your paper in late, so you will not be getting money for the following month, so then - Every month, I have to go downtown St. Paul for the same exact reason. I have my rent vendor-paid and she doesn't pay my rent every month for the same exact reason. She doesn't pay my rent exactly on the 1st, she'll pay on the 3rd or the 4th and then I get threatened to be kicked out because of that. They say, 'Well, you haven't had your rent vendor-paid, did you stop your vendor payment?' Then I have to call her, and of course she is never at her desk. I have to call and leave 10 messages and then I have to tell her a couple of times, 'Will you please vendor-pay my rent?'"

– Parent at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County resident)

✦ “I have been here two months, and this day care center has not received anything yet because of the paperwork. I am calling constantly. I am calling [first name] who is down at the county and I am calling [second name] over here on Sidney, and I just got another one from [third name] that works with [second name]. I got one paper from [second name] and the same exact paper from [fourth name]. I had to print them both and sign both of them today, so now tomorrow I get to go over to Sidney and drop one off, and I've got to go down there [the county] and drop one off. That's why I am saying you've got the running around. And when they close at 5 o'clock and you get off at 5:30, you know? And the traffic.”

– Parent at City View center (Ramsey County resident)

✦ “We had to hand in our paperwork several times.”

“We were going to send ours by Federal Express.”

– Parents at Mounds View center (Anoka County residents)

✦ “Even if you do your paperwork on time, they don't do it. I turn it in the next day, but she doesn't start processing it until the end of the month, and then if there is a problem your benefits will be late, because you have go downtown getting papers or whatever she needs to turn back in.”

– Parent at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County resident)

There are too many different workers and they are very hard to reach.

Most MFIP parents answer to three different workers: a financial worker, a job counselor and a child care worker. Some also have child support or child protection workers. Parents do not perceive that these workers communicate with each other. Sometimes workers are supposed to pass paperwork along from one to another; in other cases they require entirely separate sets of paperwork. Sometimes they aren't located anywhere near each other. Sometimes they give conflicting advice or interpretation of rules. According to parents, there is also high turnover either of the workers themselves, or of the assignment of cases to workers. In general, parents report that their workers do not know them at all. Parents whose workers do know them are happy to have it that way.

Parents report that each of these workers is exceedingly busy, and parents have trouble reaching them to ask questions or clear up problems. A large number of parents complain that their workers are rude or disrespectful. Calling their supervisors usually helps but not always.

- ✘ “I have about four or five different workers now. I don't know who is who and who needs to know what, so I tell them all. I tell every single one, I tell them the whole thing.”
 - Parent at Dakota County Technical College center (who applied in August and was still waiting at the end of October to hear if her grant was approved)

- ✘ “Another problem with having so many workers is, all those workers have answering machines.”
 - “They [county workers] don't call you back until three or four hours later.”
 - “Then they don't know who you are.”
 - “Or they don't call you back at all.”
 - “But if *you* don't call *them*, they cut off your day care.”
 - Parents at Hubbs Center (Ramsey County residents)

- ✘ “I don't really talk to my worker that much, because I spend most of my time talking on her voice mail. ... She never calls me back, but she is there. Then I have problems with her. She pays the wrong people. I owe money now, because she paid the wrong person and I can't get it paid. I have to pay it myself.”
 - [Facilitator:] “You can't get that straightened out?”
 - “No, because she already paid somebody and she said they can't pay two people at once.”
 - Parent at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County resident)

The system's rules are uncertain and confusing, and they change frequently.

Parents expressed great frustration with not being sure what the rules are. The rules change depending on who asks, when they ask, and whom they ask. In addition, there are too many rules to keep track of – far too many to absorb in the brief contacts they have with their workers. Even parents who are pretty sure they know the rules worry that they may be penalized for failing to follow a worker's incorrect instructions. As a result, parents are frequently confused and occasionally insecure or suspicious. Some give up entirely on trying to get guidance from the system, choosing instead to do what they think makes sense and hope for the best. These experiences cross all types of assistance programs and counties. Against expectations, this theme was just as common in the latest groups as in the earlier ones.

- ✘ “You ask one person, ‘Is it OK if I do this?’ You explain the whole situation. ‘Yeah, that's fine.’ Call the next person, ‘Oh, no, you do that, you're getting kicked off the system.’”
 - “They need to write everything down. You [can] swear up and down that you told them that, and you know you told them that, and they say you didn't tell them that, and they're going to penalize you. So then you're stuck.”
 - “I have had nights where I have cried because I'm thinking, ‘I know I told them.’”
 - Parents at Dakota County Technical College center

- ✘ “It was hard [to find child care] because my worker was frustrating me. It was almost like she told me I needed to use home day care. She was pressuring me.”
 - Parent at Cedar Riverside center (Hennepin County resident)

Parents find it difficult to meet immediate needs on the income the system allows them. They feel the rules prevent them from getting their finances stable enough to get out of the system.

All but one of the focus groups brought up the theme that the income rules are not reasonable or realistic. Parents frequently referred to difficulties meeting their and their children's basic needs, ranging from housing to transportation to winter clothing. Many parents feel that the use of gross income, rather than net, to determine eligibility and co-pay amounts is unfair and unrealistic. They state that net income would better recognize the amount of their income that they actually have available to spend after expenses such as housing, child support, tuition, and so on.

✦ “I have always, always thought it was ludicrous to base all of these programs on your gross income. I'm sorry, you don't get the gross. You get the net. ...”

“They give you one-third disregard, but it is not comparable to what they are pulling out in taxes. You should be considered on your net income, what you actually hold in your hand and have to spend on that family.”

– Parents at Mounds View center (Ramsey County residents)

Monthly adjustments. Many of the parents in the spring (but fewer in the fall) spoke of how the income rules undercut their efforts to budget carefully. Assistance policy calculates monthly subsidy amounts based on a fictional annualization of a month's actual income. Many low-income families' incomes tend to be somewhat erratic, due to seasonal or sporadic employment, fluctuating overtime, or even simply bi-weekly paychecks that come three times in a few months out of every year. The assistance rules exaggerate this variation.

The intention of the policy is to give more assistance when income is lower, and less when income is higher. However, this is done by making adjustments in the following month, so the timing of the adjustment does not coincide with the need. In the case of bi-weekly paychecks, a regular income is made irregular by this monthly budgeting. In the case of erratic employment or hours, a month with high income may be followed by another with unusually low income, so the family is required to make a repayment for the earlier month at the same time that their income for the current month is less than usual.

Several parents, in different groups, commented that they need and want to learn to budget better. Some of them pointed out that constant swings in income and assistance, which to them seem unpredictable, makes it harder to learn that skill.

✦ “My hours change all the time. I am on a job where there are layoffs, I work seasonal, so it is inevitable for me to be laid off every now and then. But they can't do that, they want to annualize. OK, so you are working forty hours this week and 32 hours the next week, and they don't give me any time off for those weeks or months during the year that I am not working because I am laid off and can't find any jobs.”

– Parent at City View center (St. Paul)

Multiple subsidies. Parents who receive more than one kind of subsidy (such as child care and housing) find the income rules for the different programs sometimes conflict.

Several parents reported that their child care assistance, which only paid for part of their child care costs, was nevertheless considered extra income for the purpose of calculating the share of rent they owed. For example, a parent receiving rent assistance started going to school and placed her child in child care for the first time. She began receiving assistance to pay for a part of this new expense. Although her expenses for child care increased by more than the amount of her subsidy, her rental assistance held that her income had increased and therefore raised her rent.

✦ “The more you make, the harder it is to budget, because your income changes. If you make more money, they take more.”

“I have an interesting thing that just happened to me. I am making nothing, I do not have a job, I am in school and I am not earning anything. This is what happened: This semester I started coming to school here and I didn't have the child care money, so I applied for child care assistance. Well, now I am getting it, and my rent goes up. I don't have any more money coming in, it is just the money I am getting from MFIP, and my rent goes up.”

– Parents at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County residents)

These income-related issues are raised by parents in all types of assistance programs, including those receiving help from multiple sources. Parents reporting these issues have on average somewhat fewer children than most of the parents in the groups.

Too little child care is available during non-standard hours (evenings, weekends and on an irregular or drop-in basis).

Younger parents and those with lower education or skills may have few options for first jobs other than the less desirable second and third shifts, or jobs with rotating shifts. Other parents may need to take night jobs for the slightly higher pay they sometimes offer. Drop-in care is important for those who are not yet working but are looking for a job, or taking care of more fundamental job readiness issues such as chemical dependency treatment or looking for housing.

Focus group results seem to indicate that some progress has been made in the last six months to make more irregular-hour care available. Parents interviewed in the fall, while tending to identify this as a high-priority issue, did not rate it quite so high as did the parents in the spring groups. It is also possible that the difference simply reflects the fact that the fall groups had a slightly greater proportion of parents in school rather than work, and whose hours are therefore mainly during the regular work week.

Many of the parents raising this theme are combining multiple child care arrangements to cover their child care needs. In addition, even parents not currently using evening or weekend care frequently indicated that they would do so if there were a child care facility available that they trusted.

✦ “I was working full time, and I just had to quit my profession. I was at it for ten years, and because I was working days, evenings and weekends, it didn't work for me [with young children]. ... It is really sad when you have to quit what you like and have been doing for so long.”

– Parent at City View center (Ramsey County resident)

OTHER SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS IDENTIFIED

Besides the supports provided by the assistance system, parents receive important support from child care providers to help them manage their dual tasks of working (or going to school) and parenting.

Parents also mentioned a variety of barriers that confront most low-income families, and especially those with young children. Chief among these are difficulties with transportation and the shortage of affordable housing.

Other non-system barriers frequently mentioned include shortages of child care even during regular hours, especially for school-age children, infants, and families with more than one child; and concerns about too little time to check the quality or safety of a child care setting.

Child care providers are parents' second-most mentioned source of help and support.

Parents express nearly universal appreciation for the help and support they receive from Children's Home Society staff. Besides helping them get signed up for child care itself, Children's Home Society staff are a vital source of information about child care assistance and frequently help parents navigate the system. Parents are grateful for providers who do not look down on them or refuse to accept their children because they are on assistance. They are deeply appreciative for the patience that Children's Home Society staff members have shown them when their payments have been late because of slow or mistaken processing by the system.

Parents also cite a wide variety of examples of the excellence of Children's Home Society staff as teachers for their children. This theme is discussed more below, but it also fits in this section to the degree that providers support the parents in their parenting roles. They do this by understanding and responding to parents' anxieties about leaving their children; by answering parents' questions about their children's behavior and helping them to understand the stages of child development; and by establishing trust and excellent communication.

Child care center staff are also psychologically supportive of parents in other ways. Examples mentioned in the focus groups included showing interest in the parent's well-being, taking time to talk about personal concerns, and helping parents find needed resources such as winter clothing. Parents at regular centers had received such help, and were appreciative of it. The crisis nurseries clearly give extra emphasis to the importance of such help, and it is cited even more frequently among parents in those groups.

Parents who express appreciation for the Children's Home Society centers and staff have a full range of experience with other kinds of child care, from none to multiple arrangements. They

include all family sizes, ages, and structures, and are receiving the full range of types of assistance.

✦ “I think the center is great, too, because [staff person’s name] knows about all the stuff that goes on with the rules and stuff. You go to a lot of day care centers and they don’t want to accept you for nothing, if you are on assistance they don’t want you. She’s let me in here not even knowing if I’ve had assistance or not.”

“She doesn’t judge people.”

– Parents at Dakota County Technical College center

✦ “[I get good advice from (staff person’s name)], she’s right on top of things.”

“She is understanding.”

“She informs you a lot about your child if they have a good day, a bad day, the things they have done different, what helps them in the classroom.”

“She gives you advice about your options.”

“I think she is really interested in us as individuals.”

– Parents at City View center

Informal networks are an important source of information and mutual support for parents who have family and friends to rely on.

Family and friends are one of the top three sources of information on child care providers and child care assistance. In addition, they are important guides to needed services (such as transitional housing or crisis nursery). Parents frequently mention relying on family or friends for vital help with basic family needs, such as child care (in addition to that provided by Children’s Home Society), emergency housing, or picking up children from child care when the parent does not have transportation.

Parents citing informal networks are of all family sizes, ages, and structures. They are on all types of assistance. It appears that Caucasian parents are more likely to find the formal system (the county and other official sources) helpful, while parents of color are more likely to report being helped by informal networks of support. Child care staff are perceived as helpful by all groups.

Crisis nurseries have been important in filling child care needs that the regular child care and assistance systems aren’t flexible enough to meet.

Several parents told of being helped by crisis nurseries when their funding approval was delayed, or they had to start work activities before they had had time to find regular child care, or when their child care needs were too irregular to be handled by a regular provider.

Transportation and housing problems are common, and interfere both with parents’ ability to work or go to school and with their ability to care for their children.

Transportation emerged as a problem in both city and suburban groups, in both spring and fall. There are a variety of problems. Child care assistance rules allow a parent half an hour to get from school or work to the child care location, and calculates the hours that will be subsidized

accordingly. In the city, parents report that it is very difficult to get from their school or work in half an hour, especially if they have to change buses. Also, reimbursement for transportation expenses varies widely, even among parents from the same county in the same group. Many parents who have to take more than one small child on a bus, especially if one is an infant, report that the experience is stressful for both their children and themselves.

Outside the city, parents report that buses simply do not run at the times and on the routes that they need.

The parents reporting problems with transportation tend to be going to school rather than working, and to be slightly younger than the average participant. In the later groups, they were all receiving their assistance from MFIP rather than from Basic Sliding Fee.

✦ “I have a baby and a 3-year-old. And it's extremely hard for me to get on the bus – two buses – I have a diaper bag, a stroller, my school bag, and my son has a backpack. And sometimes it's just too much.”

– Parent at St. Paul Technical College (Ramsey County resident)

Housing is a problem for many parents, and for more parents in the later groups than in the earlier ones. A few of the parents were or had recently been homeless – that is, they were living in shelters, or doubling up temporarily with family or friends, or were otherwise without permanent shelter. Some were living in transitional housing, which involves providing not only safe and affordable housing but also services to help families re-establish the stability to be able to keep from becoming homeless again. Many were living in subsidized housing, and others were on long waiting lists. They reported very high rents, especially compared to the jobs available to them.

Parents with housing problems, like parents with transportation problems, tend to be on MFIP, going to school, and to have been relatively young when they had their first child. Housing problems interfere not only with basic everyday life but also with parents' ability to care for their children. A parent in transitional housing said she couldn't possibly ask a friend or relative to come to her house to watch her children there. Homeless parents need child care on unpredictable schedules while they look for housing.

HOW CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED

Parents frequently cite both the negative effects of stress on their children (usually indirectly, through the parents' stress), and the positive effects of a high quality child care setting. Some parents are concerned that they spend so much time working and/or in school that they have little time to see their children. Others feel that working, and especially going to school and studying and doing homework, makes them good role models for their children.

Also frequently mentioned, though more often in the earlier sessions when MFIP rules were newer, is the decreased time parents have available to see their children. Some parents feel they are in a double bind: If they do not work, they feel that other people consider them bad parents for failing to support their children; if they do work, other people consider them bad parents for neglecting their children. Parents of school-age children were especially concerned about this

just before the summer, when they urgently wanted options for ensuring that their older children would be spending their time productively and with supervision.

Parents report that the stress of their lives makes them less patient and responsive to their children.

Parents are doing their best to shield their children from the uncertainties and stress they are feeling themselves. Most report that they are doing reasonably well, but many report that the stress still comes out. Usually, this happens when the parents' fatigue and frustration affects their patience and responsiveness with their children.

Parents raising this concern tend to be slightly older than average. They are on all types of assistance. They are more likely to be single parents, but no more likely to have large families.

- ✘ “When mom is stressed out, the kids are stressed out.”
“When I am having a bad day it is like they are having a bad day too.”
“They pick up on it.”
– Parents at City View center.

- ✘ “You are stressed out as a parent, because you are not having the money to provide for them.”
“They can feel your stress.”
“Then you have stress on the parent from the counselor, and then the kids get on your nerves and add more stress to it.”
[Facilitator:] “I see a lot of heads nodding on that one.”
– Parents at St. Paul Technical College center

Parents believe their children's experience at Children's Home Society is very positive because of the quality of the care.

Parents report that their children like being in the child care center, and that they benefit from the personal attention from well-qualified teachers, from the learning experiences, from the structure and routine of the day and week, and from the opportunities to make and play with friends.

While most of the parents have prior experience with child care of various types, about a third have not, and many of these are reluctant to trust their children to the care of strangers. Some parents expressed much more confidence in the safety and reliability of a center, compared to a home day care setting.

Parents who are on MFIP, and those who had their first child while very young, are more likely to mention the importance of children's learning experiences in child care. Otherwise, appreciation for the value of high quality care and for specific aspects of quality crosses parental characteristics. A wide variety of parents mention quality in general, and specific attributes of quality such as children's socialization, the structure and routine, and the quality and experience of the staff.

- ✦ [Facilitator:] “What is it that parents like you really look for in a center?”
 - “The longevity of the teachers that are here. They have all been here for like 16, 14, 12 years. You know they enjoy their job, they want to be here.”
 - “You don't get the sense that they are stressed out from the kids at the end of the day.”
 - “You know your child is getting more attention.”
 - “They have a daily plan and it is written down on the board so the parents can see it.”
 - Parents at Mounds View center
- ✦ “[I] Do not want to settle for lesser quality child care just because of not being able to afford to stay [home].”
 - Parent at Cedar Riverside center, response to written question, "What else do you want us to know about the child care system?"
- ✦ “If you're happy with where they're at and the quality and the affordability, then, you know, it just makes it all around better for the kid.”
 - Parent at Dakota County Technical College

PARENTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE OR CONTINUATION

Parents did not just complain. They also offered suggestions for ways to reduce the barriers and build on the supports.

Whatever else may be changed, parents need child care assistance to remain available.

When asked to identify what topics raised in discussion were most important – either as positive features to preserve, or as problems to address – parents frequently chose the availability of child care assistance, no matter how many problems they had just identified with how it operates.

Make sure that high quality child care is available.

Both among parents with previous child care arrangements and those for whom Children’s Home Society is their first child care provider, parents appreciate the quality of the care and recognize its importance to their children's well-being. Aspects of quality that parents identified include an educational curriculum, experienced, stable and caring staff, high health and safety standards, nutritious meals, an established routine, and opportunities for making and playing with friends and vigorous physical activity.

Besides the quality of the care for the children, parents stress the importance of staff who understand parents' complex, stressful lives, and provide both sympathy and a canny knowledge of the system and of what help is available.

- ✦ “The key to a successful child care system is understanding. ... I think if child care facilities molded themselves in their image [Children's Home Society] it would be helpful and successful. There are a lot of piss-poor facilities and some very good ones as well. There should be a system of getting rid of the bad ones and instilling more of the good ones. If more child care agencies assisted people as C.H. does then a lot would be achieved.”
 - Parent at Ramsey County Crisis Nursery, response to written question, "What else do you want us to know about the child care system?"

Offer care in the evenings and on weekends.

Parents were strongly supportive of extended hours for child care centers. Many parents are currently working or going to school in the evenings and would gladly trade their informal arrangements for center care. (Many parents expressed a strong preference for center care, which they consider to be better and more trustworthy.) Still more parents would change their current jobs for better ones if they had evening and weekend care available. Some parents who are in school could finish sooner if they could take evening classes.

☒ “They should have hours for the people that do evening classes.”

“They do have a lot of people doing evening classes.”

[Facilitator:] “How many people would use the center here if it were open in the evenings? I see six of you (out of a group of ten) say yes.”

“I have to make one of my family stay home and watch him.”

“I am like her, I make people stay at home and watch my kids.”

“I don’t have a choice, I don’t have anybody to watch my kids besides their day care.”

– Parents at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County residents)

Make eligibility rules more flexible so fewer needy parents with unusual circumstances fail to qualify.

Currently, the child care assistance system includes a number of separate programs with different funding, eligibility criteria, and administrative auspices. Eligibility rules that are drafted to work for most families may be unable to accommodate those whose circumstances don't fit the assumptions of the program. The more separate programs, the more likely there will be gaps between them. Many of the groups included parents who had been ineligible for assistance, despite having incomes as low as others who qualified, because of some unusual quirk.

One example is a family in which the mother and younger child were on MFIP but the older child was not because of the specifics of a court's custody determination. The mother could not receive child care assistance for the older child because the child was not on MFIP. The mother was also unable to obtain child care assistance for the child from other sources because Basic Sliding Fee and her technical college's post-secondary child care grants could not be given to *parents* on MFIP.

Parents recommend that program rules be flexible enough to accommodate more of the unusual cases.

Reduce the number of parents per case worker.

Parents know that case workers have high case loads. They also feel that workers need to have an opportunity to get to know parents' situations. If workers had fewer families to deal with they might have more opportunity to answer or return phone calls, and handle paperwork more quickly and accurately.

This recommendation applied mainly to MFIP workers, but was endorsed also by parents who worked with overburdened child care resource and referral agencies.

✦ [Facilitator:] “Any suggestions on how the situation with workers might work better for you?”

“When they are new, they should take some time to look and see what is going on with the person before they call you and start yelling on the answering machines saying you didn't tell them this.”

“If you turn your forms in on the 8th, they have all that time during the month to send it back because it isn't right, instead of telling you on the 24th or 25th.”

“We do our part; they take their time with their part.”

– Parents at St. Paul Technical College center (Ramsey County residents)

OTHER THEMES IMPORTANT TO SOME PARENTS

So far this report has mentioned only the themes that were raised both by a significant number of parents and in a significant number of groups. There were other themes that were not mentioned as frequently or consistently, but that still recurred across groups, or came up as a very high concern in at least one group. These are briefly discussed below.

Parents feel it is unfair to require them to reimburse the assistance program for the cost of child care they did not use because of circumstances beyond their control.

Most parents' child care assistance is conditioned on the presumption that they will need it and use it full-time, on a regular basis. This assumption doesn't always fit well with work that low-income parents are able to find. Parents may also run into problems with the number of allowable absences if their children are sick or if they have their child home with them for a week while their (the parent's) school is on vacation. Yet if parents don't send their children, they are penalized for the cost of the time missed. This means they are required to reimburse the county for the cost of the care they did not use.

The penalty causes hardship because they have little or no money available to pay it, especially if the reason for not using the child care was because they were laid off or had their work hours reduced. The rule creates an incentive to send the child whether or not they need to, just to maintain their attendance. This is something most of them don't want to have to do, especially because they usually have so little time to spend with their child that they would welcome the chance to stay home with them for once.

✦ “They [the funding policies] expect my son to be here so many hours, because they are paying for those hours. Often I am working evening hours, so even though my son comes here ... between 9 and 10 in the morning, ... he hasn't seen me because I am not actually going to work until 1 or 2, and I don't get home until 10 at night, and he is in bed. So he gets to see very little of me.”

– Parent at Mounds View center

Parents in Ramsey County do not like having to receive and deliver the subsidy check.

Unlike most other counties, Ramsey County sends the child care subsidy checks to parents for them to pay their providers. Not one parent spoke up to support this policy. They would prefer to have the assistance vendor-paid. For some the reason is to cut down on the temptation to spend it, but for many the reason is the extra hassle of cashing or depositing it and passing it along. They report that their lives are already complicated enough without adding more for them to worry about.

☒ “Why can’t the county just pay the day care directly?”

[Facilitator:] “Why is that a problem?”

“Temptation.”

“Mine is more the running around. You’ve got to go to the bank and cash it, or I deposit it in my checking account, but I have to come back and write a check. There are extra steps. Just send it direct.”

– Parents at City View center (Ramsey County residents)

Parents are grateful for child care centers that are conveniently located.

Parents express appreciation for child care centers that are located near where parents live (as in Cedar Riverside), on major bus routes, or where they work or go to school. Given the number of parents for whom transportation is a significant barrier, it is important not to have to add any extra trips to their days.

Parents are grateful for centers that combine different types and ages of care, allowing them to keep one child in the same place all day, or to keep siblings together.

This is especially true of Head Start programs, which are part-day, that have been combined with a “wrap-around” component into a single, full-day arrangement. It also applies to centers that offer infant care and/or school-age care.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents were pleased to be asked to participate in the focus groups. They appreciated that people with the authority to make decisions about child care and the child care assistance system were interested in hearing their opinions, and they were thoughtful in providing them. Assured that there would be no repercussions for speaking frankly, they shared their experiences and opinions freely.

Although they had many complaints to air about the welfare and child care assistance systems, they also showed much understanding of the difficulties involved in managing such complex systems. Many parents made an effort to make it clear that they understand that workers have large case loads, and that rules and paperwork are intended to prevent abuse of the system. However, they wanted those responsible to understand how these conditions make their lives more difficult and stressful.

This study was conducted to understand how child care providers and the child care assistance system can help parents be successful in combining the two roles that the new welfare system expects of parents: to work and to be responsible for the rearing and nurturing of their children.

Based on participants' descriptions of their situations, the most important change needed is to fund child care assistance as a free-standing program separate from welfare (i.e., Basic Sliding Fee), for parents who need help paying for child care but don't need the whole welfare package.

Parents are unhappy with funding rules that force them to go on welfare and take the entire MFIP package when the only assistance they really need is for child care costs.

Besides this most important change, the actions listed on the following page are suggested as those that would make the most difference for parents.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

Availability of funding

- Whatever else may be changed, keep child care assistance available.
- Fund Basic Sliding Fee for parents who don't need or want the whole welfare package.

Customer relations

- Reduce case workers' case loads.
- Reduce the number of different case workers parents must deal with. If this is not done, then improve the communication between case workers.
- Reduce case worker turnover.
- Give case workers more training in the rules, and in explaining them to parents who may have learning or attention disorders.
- Don't apply harsh penalties for simple misunderstandings.
- Ensure that parents are not penalized for the system's mistakes or slowness.

Income and co-pay rules

- Make eligibility and funding rules more flexible so that:
 - Children can continue in one child care setting uninterrupted when their parents' eligibility status changes.
 - Part-time child care can be covered for those who don't need it full-time.
- Find ways to average monthly payments over a longer period for those whose income fluctuates. For parents with regular bi-weekly pay, end the practice of annualizing based on monthly rates.
- Evaluate how child care co-pays, subsidized rents, and the MFIP earnings disregards interact, and redesign them as needed so that minor raises in earned income do not cause major increases in family expenses.
- Calculate co-pay amounts based on net income instead of gross to more accurately adjust for families' actual expenses.

Child Care Availability, Flexibility, and Quality

- Have more child care centers open until 9 or 10 o'clock in the evenings (top priority). Weekend and overnight care are also needed, but not as widely.
- Ensure that high quality child care is available. Monitor the quality of care and ensure that low quality child care is shut down.
- Ensure that child care providers are knowledgeable about the assistance system and about various support services available to parents. Child care providers can help immeasurably by understanding low-income parents' difficulties, being flexible, and knowing where parents can go for help when emergencies arise.
- Increase the capacity of the crisis nurseries to serve more families, and maintain close cooperation between crisis nurseries and regular child care providers.
- Increase the supply of drop-in care for parents whose child care needs are irregular or who are required to participate in work activities before they have had time to make regular arrangements.

Other Important Considerations

- Educate employers about parents' need to be able to stay home from work to take care of children when children are sick.
- Increase the availability of transportation assistance.
- Allow more time for transportation when determining the hours of child care to be subsidized.
- Increase the availability of affordable housing.

APPENDIX A: Self-Reported Demographic Data on Participants

Self-Reported Demographic Data on Participants

The tables below show the responses of participants to questions on a written demographic survey given to them at the end of each group. Data is missing on some participants either because they left the group early or because they left certain questions blank. In some cases interviewers have filled in data based on information given during the groups (for instance, number and ages of children, or county of residence). In a few groups, two parents from one household attended together. They were asked to complete one demographic form, and their responses are reported below as those of one parent.

Number of children

Forty-four percent of participants had only one child. Just over one-quarter had more than two.

Number of Children Per Household	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
One	43	44.3
Two	28	28.9
Three	11	11.3
Four	13	13.4
Five or six	2	2.1
<i>Total</i>	97	100

Age and grade levels of children

Almost all parents had preschool children. Most of the school-age children were in elementary school.

Number of Children, by Age Groups	Number of Children	Percent of Children
0 - 1 years	27	13.8
2 - 3 years	50	25.5
4 - 5 years	47	24.0
6 - 12 years	46	23.5
13 - 17 years	22	11.2
18 - 22 years	4	2.0
<i>Total</i>	196	100

Number of Parents with Children in Each Grade Group*	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
Preschool (ages 0-5)	91	93.8
Kindergarten	13	13.4
Elementary (grades 1-5)	24	24.7
Secondary (grades 6-12)	16	16.5
Out of school / college / grown	2	2.1

* The numbers total more than the number of participants because some parents have children in more than one grade group.

Types of child care assistance

Just over half the parents in the focus groups were receiving child care assistance as current welfare recipients (AFDC or MFIP). Slightly under one-fifth were receiving help through the Basic Sliding Fee program. A few are receiving help through Transition Year, Children's Home Society scholarships, or other sources (e.g. Supplemental Security Income, adoption assistance, college grant).

Four parents are combining two different forms of assistance (for example, Section 8 and MFIP, or MFIP and scholarship).

Type of Child Care Assistance*	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
MFIP/AFDC	51	52.6
Transition Year	12	12.4
Basic Sliding Fee	18	18.6
Children's Home Society Scholarship	10	10.3
Other	7	7.2
(not indicated)	7	7.2

* The numbers total more than the number of participants because some parents receive more than one type of assistance.

Parents' activities while children are in care

Most groups included a mixture of working parents and parents in school, but most groups were dominated by one of these categories. Slightly over half were in school, and nearly two in five were working. Around 8 percent reported combining more than one of the activities.

Parents' Activities While Children are in Care*	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
In school	52	53.6
Working	38	39.2
Looking for work	8	8.2
(not indicated)	3	3.1

* The numbers total more than the number of participants because some parents are combining school with work or job search.

Parenting arrangements

Almost exactly half of the parents were the sole adult providing parenting on a regular basis. Just over a quarter were in two-parent families (all in one household). The remainder were divided between other kinds of parenting arrangements: two parents in two separate households, or one parent and another non-parent adult (grandmother, aunt, etc.). Half of the parents reported that they have another adult with whom they regularly shared parenting responsibilities.

Parenting Arrangements	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
One parent only	49	50.5
Two parents, one household	26	26.8
Two parents, two households	11	11.3
One parent and another non-parent adult	8	8.2
(not indicated)	3	3.1
<i>Total</i>	97	100

Experience with the welfare system

Ninety participants provided information on their experience with welfare. Fifty-five of these (57%) were on welfare. Thirty-five (36%) were not on welfare, of whom slightly under half had never been on.

This pattern changed between spring and fall groups. In the spring, 54.6 percent were on welfare, while by the fall the percent had risen to 70.6 percent on welfare.

Welfare Experience*	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
MFIP now, and AFDC in the past	45	46.4
MFIP now, never on AFDC	6	6.2
AFDC now, not moved into MFIP yet	4	4.1
On AFDC in the past, but not now	20	20.6
Never on MFIP or AFDC	15	15.5
(not indicated)	7	7.2
<i>Total</i>	97	100

County of Residence

The majority of participants lived in Ramsey County. The rest were from Hennepin County, Dakota County, Olmsted and Washington Counties, Anoka County, and Mower County (in order of frequency).

County of Residence	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
Anoka County	2	2.1
Dakota County	12	12.4
Hennepin County	15	15.5
Mower County	1	1.0
Olmsted County	4	4.1
Ramsey County	56	57.7
Washington County	4	4.1
(not indicated)	3	3.1
<i>Total</i>	97	100

Experience with other kinds of child care

Almost two-thirds of the parents were combining different forms of child care to cover their needs. In addition to their Children's Home Society care, the same children and/or other children in their families were also being cared for in a variety of formal and informal arrangements. The most common other type of care was from family members (other than spouse or partner). This was followed by other child care centers and neighbors or friends.

Sixteen parents (one in six) were combining three or more kinds of child care.

Most families had also had experiences with at least one other care arrangement in the past. Three-quarters had used at least one other type of arrangement, and slightly over one-quarter had used between two and five other kinds.

Arrangements Besides Children's Home Society*	Now		In the Past	
	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
Other center(s)	17	17.5	18	18.6
Licensed family day care	7	7.2	18	18.6
Neighbor, friend, etc.	16	16.5	21	21.6
Spouse/partner	11	11.3	15	15.5
Other family member	25	25.8	33	34.0
Older sibling**	8	8.2	5	5.2
Child cares for self	3	3.1	1	1.0
No other arrangement	32	33.0	25	25.8
(not indicated)	3	3.1	3	3.1

* The numbers total more than the number of participants because some parents have multiple arrangements.

** Answers are not reliable. A few parents (e.g. parents with only children) appear to have interpreted this as meaning their own older siblings, instead of the child's older sibling as intended.

Number of Types of Care (besides Children's Home Society)	Now		In the Past	
	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
No others	32	33.0	25	25.8
One other type	46	47.4	43	44.3
Two other types	10	10.3	15	15.5
Three other types	5	5.2	7	7.2
Four other types	1	1.0	4	4.1
(not indicated)	3	3.1	3	3.1
<i>Total</i>	97	100	97	100

Age, sex, and race of parents participating

Of 88 parents reporting their date of birth, the age range at the time of interviews was from 17 to 45 (average 25.3 years). Their age when they had their first child ranges from 14 to 35 (average 22.2).

Ninety-five participants were female and five were male.

Participants were asked to indicate their own ethnicity. Caucasian parents were two-fifths of the total. Black parents were 29 percent of the total. Other reported themselves as Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or mixed ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Number of Parents	Percent of Parents
Caucasian	39	40.2
Black	28	28.9
Asian	3	3.1
Hispanic	3	3.1
Native American	1	1.0
Mixed	4	4.1
(not indicated)	19	19.6
<i>Total</i>	97	100

Note: The three two-parent couples completed one demographic survey form, and are represented above as one parent.