

Project Update: Iowa Child Care Shared Services

JULY 2023

Background: Early Childhood Iowa, which is now under the umbrella of the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and HHS are implementing a multi-phase Shared Services project with assistance from [Opportunities Exchange](#) (OppEx). This collaboration is in response to the [Governor's Child Care Task Force Report \(November 2021\)](#).

The multi-phase Shared Services project includes:

- Funding providers' monthly child care management system (CCMS) software subscription fees for either brightwheel or Playground;
- Financial management consulting/coaching to help providers use data collected in the CCMS system to monitor and manage their programs;
- Technology grants to support providers' implementation of Playground or brightwheel;
- Building 'data bridges' to connect CCMS data to KinderTrack (KT) and other data systems through an Operational Data Store (ODS); and
- Funding two Shared Services Alliances.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

Child Care Management System (CCMS) Software and Financial Management Consulting/Coaching

On October 1, 2022, Early Childhood Iowa and HHS launched a strategy to help providers improve child care business operations. The strategy pairs financial management coaching through the Child Care Collaborative of Iowa and the use of one of the state-funded CCMS software vendors, Playground or brightwheel. CCMS software that uses modern technology and automation with features that meet the full array of child care business operational needs:

- Saves providers' time spent on administrative tasks and reduces overhead costs
- Increases providers' cash flow through managing critical business metrics such as collections and enrollment
- Offers a way for providers to easily analyze and measure program level data to make informed decisions
- Strengthens family engagement with more frequent, detailed communication

Hundreds of Iowa child care providers, both small and large, child development homes and child care centers, have taken advantage of financial management coaching and the state-funded monthly software subscription fees for either brightwheel or Playground. The State originally promised to pay for monthly subscription fees for 12 months. The State is paying for monthly CCMS software subscription fees through September 2024.

Why is HHS pairing CCMS software with a financial management coach? The coach not only helps providers in learning to use the software system, but also in analyzing the data in the system to improve business and human resources practices. The coach supports providers for a full year to identify and realize business goals around budgeting, cash flow, financial reporting, marketing, profitability, staff compensation, growth, debt, and other key metrics.

Connect with a financial management coach at the Child Care Collaborative of Iowa [here](#) to learn more about this amazing opportunity. Staff will share a CCMS Selection tool and help schedule a demo with Playground and brightwheel to compare features offered in each CCMS product.

Technology Grants

When we launched the state-funded monthly CCMS subscription fees strategy, we offered providers a technology grant for up to \$1,000 to help support the implementation of brightwheel or Playground. We are excited to share that providers that fully expended the \$1,000 grant may be eligible for a Phase 2 Technology Grant. Contact your financial management consultant to learn more.

For providers just signing up for a Playground or brightwheel subscription, a financial management consultant will help providers assess technology needs to implement the CCMS in their program and determine the provider's maximum Technology Grant amount.

Direct Data Bridge Connection to KinderTrack (KT)

In February, we launched a data bridge between Playground and brightwheel and Iowa's child care subsidy data system, KinderTrack (KT). This data bridge decreases child care providers' time spent on administrative tasks and repetitive work in submitting child time and attendance data to receive reimbursement for children/families receiving Child Care Assistance (CCA). In addition, the provider's CCMS payment records are automatically updated each time the state issues a CCA payment. When talking with child care providers about the connection to KT, they are bursting with excitement about how easy the process is and how much time they are saving each month.

Building New Data Bridges Through an Operational Data Store (ODS)

The next phase of creating connections between data systems (data bridges) is underway. We need real-time information about the availability of child care by child age categories to support families and empower data driven decision-making. We are working with Iowa State University and their contractor, Resultant, to build an Operational Data Store (ODS). Iowa State University will maintain the ODS. The ODS is a secure, centralized data exchange that moves specific data in and out of multiple sources to provide comprehensive data that will help drive decision-making. We anticipate rolling out this phase of the ODS project by 2024. More information is available about the ODS [here](#).

We have also been meeting with state-level Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) staff at the Iowa Department of Education to explore possible opportunities related to food program data.

Shared Services Alliances (SSA)

Lutheran Services in Iowa (LSI) in Polk, Woodbury, Plymouth Counties and 4Cs of Johnson County continue to develop the services offered through their Shared Services Alliance and growing their membership. LSI's SSA membership focuses on immigrant and refugee child development home providers. 4Cs membership includes both child care centers and child development homes in Johnson County. For more information, contact [LSI](#) or [4Cs](#).

We are excited about the benefits providers are receiving from implementing a CCMS and the ongoing work moving forward to support child care businesses in Iowa. We will continue to share updates as our Shared Service Project progresses.