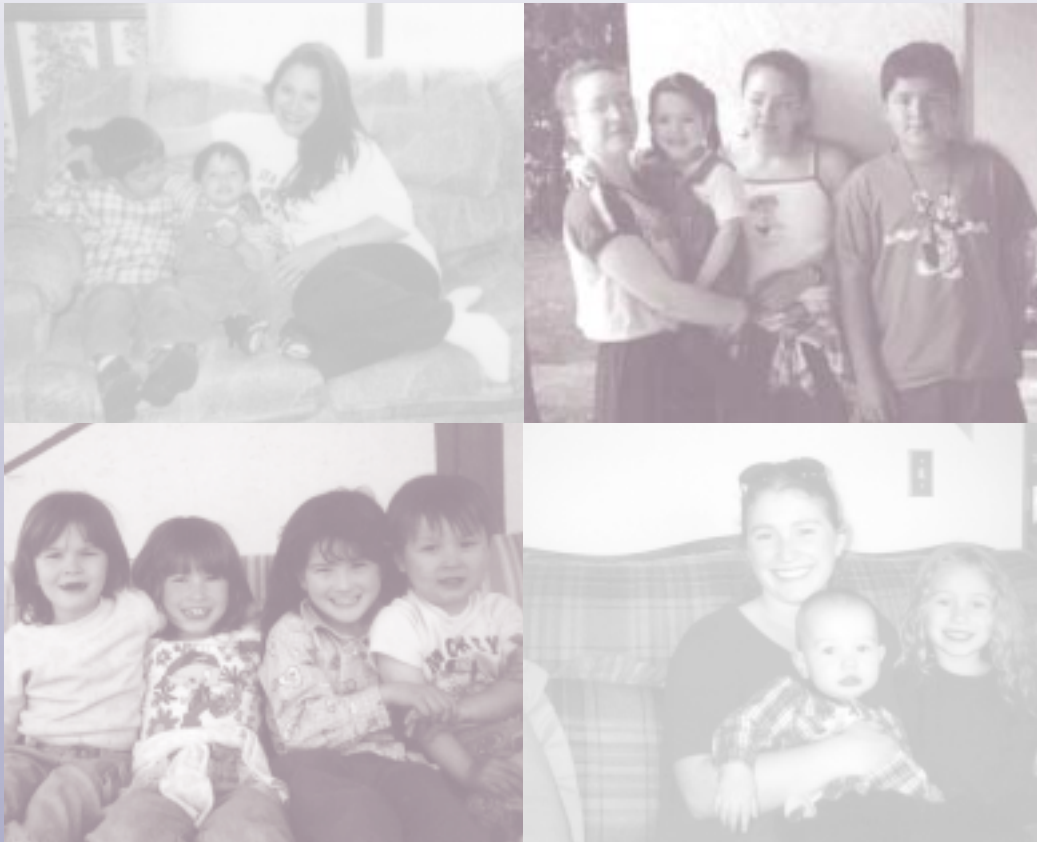


NATIONAL BREAKING BARRIERS SERIES



LEFT ALONE:

State Barriers Prevent Idaho Parents from
Accessing Child Care Program



IDAHO COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK
NORTHWEST FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

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Through education, organizing, and citizen action, the Network promotes justice, diversity, and equal rights.

For more information, call 208.344.5738 or e-mail iwnissue@micron.net.

Or, visit <http://networkwomen.org>.

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State Barriers Prevent Idaho Parents from Accessing Child Care Program

By Carson Strege-Flora

The National Breaking Barriers Series: No. 4

Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN)
Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO)
June 2000

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Executive Summary

“After the Idaho Women’s Network told me about Idaho’s child care program, I went to the welfare office to get an application. I filled out an application in Spanish and gave it to the front desk worker who started asking me questions. I understand very little English and couldn’t answer her. There was no one to help me. They said they would send someone to my house, but they never did and I kept calling and calling to find out what was going on. They never called me back. I went in a few weeks later and they told me that I couldn’t get child care help for another 30 days. I don’t know what is going on.”

— Sandra Espinoza; Boise, Idaho.

Unfortunately, stories like Sandra’s are common in Idaho. While more than 40,000 Idaho children are eligible for child care subsidies, thousands of families are missing out. Idaho’s Department of Health and Welfare (DHW), which is responsible for enrolling families in the state’s child care program, has erected barriers to enrollment so numerous and high that five out of six eligible children are not receiving needed child care subsidies.¹ By using an enrollment process that is inconsistent and confusing, failing to inform applicants about their rights, providing misinformation to applicants, and discriminating against Latino applicants, DHW delays and prevents parents from accessing child care benefits. On top of these problems, DHW has neglected to take even the most basic steps to inform potentially eligible families about the existence of a state child care program.

DHW’s failure to provide access to affordable child care not only hurts Idaho families, but Idaho’s economy as well. Parents cannot seek or maintain employment unless they can locate child care for their children. Parents without child care subsidies are less likely to work and have lower earning rates than parents with child care subsidies.² They are more likely to be late or miss work completely due to breakdowns in child care arrangements.³ Without subsidies, low-income families may be forced to rely on mediocre or poor child care arrangements. Children who do not receive quality child care develop weaker language skills and are less prepared for school than children who receive quality care.⁴

The Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) undertook this study to understand why so many eligible families are going without needed child care subsidies. ICAN, with assistance from the Idaho Women’s Network, identified 25 low-income parents who needed child care assistance to seek or maintain employment. ICAN tracked their experiences as they attempted to apply for child care subsidies at local DHW offices.

The study found that DHW’s enrollment process delays and prevents families from accessing vital child care subsidies. The report found that DHW has erected the following barriers that obstruct families from getting the help they need:

- DHW discriminates against Latinos and limited-English speakers.
- DHW provides parents false information to discourage them from applying.
- DHW fails to counsel applicants about their rights and the resources available to them.

- DHW's application process is confusing, inconsistent, and unnecessarily burdensome.
- DHW fails to engage in adequate outreach activities.
- DHW provides disrespectful and inadequate service to applicants.

This report also proposes concrete steps that DHW should immediately take to correct the problems in its enrollment system. These steps, fully described in Section Five of the report, include:

- Reducing the burdens on parents seeking child care by eliminating unnecessary requirements and simplifying the application process;
- Providing adequate service to all applicants, regardless of race or language;
- Providing training to DHW workers to ensure clients receive all necessary information and are treated with dignity and respect;
- Informing Idaho parents about the opportunity to receive child care subsidies.

Introduction

Five out of six Idaho children eligible for child care subsidies are not receiving help.⁵ This means that many low-income parents can't seek or maintain employment due to a lack of affordable child care, an expense that is often the second or third largest item in a low-income family's budget.⁶ And some parents are forced to place their children in mediocre or poor child care environments because they cannot afford quality care.

In Idaho, the need for affordable, quality child care is significant. Nearly two-thirds of Idaho mothers with children younger than six years of age are in the labor force. And more than three-quarters of mothers with minor children over the age of six are in the labor force.⁷

The problem isn't lack of funding for subsidized child care. Idaho can access millions in federal funds available to help states subsidize child care for families. Yet, despite the need for subsidized child care, a 1999 audit report showed that the Department of Health and Welfare (DHW), the agency responsible for administering Idaho's child care program, turned back \$2.5 million in child care funds it did not spend during 1997 and 1998.⁸

The problem is that DHW is failing to provide eligible families with the child care benefits they need. By discriminating against Latinos and limited-English speakers, providing false information to parents, failing to counsel applicants about their rights, and neglecting to inform Idaho families about the child care program, DHW is delaying, discouraging, and preventing applicants from accessing the state's child care program. While 40,200 children are eligible for child care subsidies, DHW's average monthly caseload during 1999 was only 6,740 children.⁹

The benefits of subsidized child care programs are clear. Parents who receive child care subsidies have higher employment rates and earning rates than parents without child care subsidies.¹⁰ They are also less likely to be late for work or miss work completely due to breakdowns in child care arrangements.¹¹

To determine why so many families are missing out on vital child care benefits, the Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) examined the experiences of 25 child care applicants by systematically interviewing them in accordance to a protocol developed for the study. The study found that the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) has erected barriers to enrollment so numerous and high that many parents are prevented from completing the enrollment process.

Section Three of this report describes the key findings of the study. Section Four outlines in detail six barriers to enrollment erected by DHW, including some that appear to be illegal. Section Five provides concrete solutions DHW can take to eliminate the barriers identified in this report.

Key Findings

This study found the following barriers to enrollment at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) offices in Burley, Caldwell, Homedale, Nampa, and Boise. These barriers unnecessarily delay, discourage, or prevent applicants from accessing Idaho's child care program.

Barrier One: *DHW discriminates against Latinos and limited-English speakers.*

Some limited-English speaking applicants were given applications in English and not provided with needed — and legally required — translation assistance. Limited-English speakers waited four times longer than English speakers to be helped at DHW offices. DHW allowed all white applicants to apply, but prevented half of the Latino applicants from applying for the child care program.

Barrier Two: *DHW gives parents false information to discourage them from applying.*

One out of four applicants in this study were given false information about eligibility requirements and prevented from applying for Idaho's child care program. Some applicants were wrongly told that they needed to be employed in order to access the child care program; others were told that they had to select a child care provider before they could apply for the program. One applicant was even told that no state child care program existed.

Barrier Three: *DHW fails to counsel applicants about their rights and the resources available to them.*

Only six percent of applicants were told about the Resource and Referral agencies that can help them locate a quality child care provider. Only 22 percent of applicants were told that they could select their own child care provider, as long as the provider met DHW requirements. Only 12 percent of applicants were informed how to appeal a decision.

Barrier Four: *DHW's application process is confusing, inconsistent, and unnecessarily burdensome.*

DHW explained the child care process to only one-third of applicants. Only one out of four applicants were informed of the required verification documents necessary to complete their application. DHW offices have no consistent interview policy in place, some applicants are required to have an interview while others are not. The most common complaint from applicants was that they did not understand the application process.

Barrier Five: *DHW fails to engage in adequate outreach activities.*

More than three out of four applicants learned about the child care program from Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) or the Idaho Women's Network. Despite the fact that 48 percent of applicants in this study were receiving another support program administered by DHW, only two applicants learned of the child care program from DHW.

Barrier Six: *DHW provides disrespectful and inadequate service to applicants.*

Four out of every five applicants felt they were treated disrespectfully by DHW staff. Most applicants felt that DHW staff was unhelpful and impatient.

Barrier 1: DHW discriminates against Latinos and limited-English speakers.

Findings:

- DHW prevented half of the Latino applicants in this study from applying for child care. All white applicants were permitted to apply.
- Spanish-speaking applicants waited four times longer than English-speaking applicants to be assisted at DHW offices.
- None of the Spanish-speaking applicants saw directional signs, posters, or brochures in Spanish at DHW offices.
- 40 percent of Spanish-speaking applicants were not provided with an application in Spanish.
- 20 percent of Spanish-speaking applicants did not receive help from a DHW worker in Spanish.

Non-English speakers and Latinos have the same right to access Idaho's child care program as white or English-speaking applicants. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) prohibits agencies and entities receiving financial assistance (like the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from discriminating against applicants because of their race, color or national origin. In addition, the OCR requires HHS-funded agencies to make reasonable efforts to provide services and information in languages other than English.¹² This is to ensure that people of all races and limited-English speakers are adequately informed and can effectively participate and benefit from support programs.

DHW's practice of diverting some Latino applicants while allowing whites to apply for the child care program clearly violates the spirit of the 1964 Civil Rights Act the OCR enforces. In addition, DHW has failed to provide adequate assistance to all limited-English applicants. DHW can meet its obligation to treat limited-English speakers and English speakers equally by providing translators, translated materials, or other services that ensure limited-English speakers can access services.

"No one at DHW could help me in my language. I needed an application in Spanish but they gave me one in English. They told me they would call me to set up an interview, but they never did."

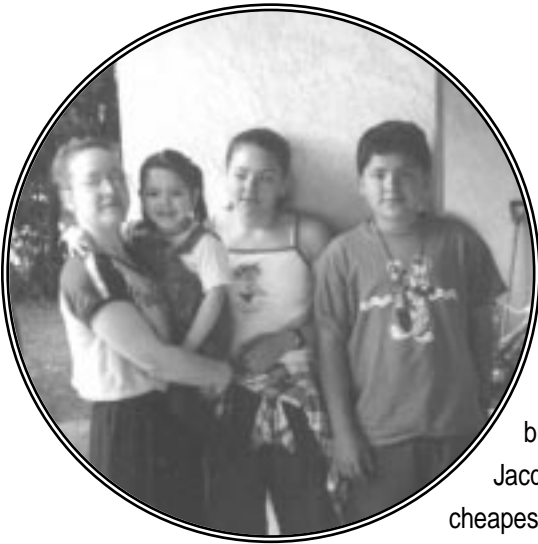
— Sandra Espinoza;
Boise

"The application they gave me [in English] was hard for me to understand."

— Guadalupe
Aragon, Nampa

"The receptionist walked away while I was talking to her, leaving me at the front desk for ten minutes. When she came back, she had forgotten what I wanted. I had to ask again for the child care application and then she gave me one in English [instead of in my language, Spanish]."

— name withheld,
Caldwell



Sandra Espinoza Boise, Idaho

A couple of years ago, my husband left me. Since then, I've had to fend for myself and my three children. I have a job at Republic Packaging as a factory worker. I also clean their offices to try to make some additional money. I make about \$1,440 every month. With three kids, that doesn't go far. I have no money left after paying for rent, food, and clothes.

The two older kids are in school and can take care of themselves but I have no family in the area that can take care of my youngest, Jacquelyn, while I'm working. I've been looking for a baby sitter but the cheapest one I can find charges \$20 to \$25 a week. I can't afford this.

I found out from the Idaho Women's Network that Idaho had a child care program.

So I went over to the Boise welfare office to apply. After I filled out the Spanish application, the worker started asking me questions but I understand very little English. No one there spoke Spanish, so they said that they'd send over someone who spoke Spanish in two days. I wasn't sure why they needed to visit, and they weren't able to explain it to me because of the language.

Well, the worker never came over. I tried calling and left lots of messages but no one got back to me. Since no one called me back, I had to take another day off of work to go to the office to see what was going on. When I got there, a caseworker said "Oh yeah...right." No explanation, no nothing. Then she said, "We talked to Jose [a caseworker with the Department of Health and Welfare] and he said that you can't get child care assistance for another 30 days."

I asked the worker why, but she didn't know and neither did anyone else in the office. Then I asked if I still needed to be interviewed and she said no. She didn't even tell me why they changed their minds about the interview.

They never even told me about other programs that could help keep my daughter healthy, like CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program). I learned about that program from the Idaho Women's Network too. It's like they don't even care about me or my daughter.

Barrier 2: DHW gives parents false information to discourage them from applying.

Findings:

- DHW told 24 percent of applicants (all Latino) that they could not apply for child care or access child care benefits.
- DHW told 12 percent of applicants that they were not eligible for child care benefits because they were not employed. Idaho state law does not require applicants to be employed in order to receive child care benefits if they are engaged in other qualifying activities.
- DHW refused to provide child care applications to 8 percent of applicants because the applicants had not yet located child care providers. Idaho state law does not require applicants to locate a child care provider before applying for the child care program.
- One Latino applicant was told that no state child care program existed and that she should contact WICAP — the Western Idaho Community Action Program — to access child care.

Idaho law does not require child care applicants to be currently employed in order to receive benefits. Instead, parents who are seeking employment or engaged in qualifying training or educational activities can qualify for child care under state law.¹³ In addition, there is no requirement that applicants must select a child care provider before they apply for benefits.

While parents must choose an approved child care provider in order to use their child care benefits, they can do so during the application process.

Applicants for Idaho's child care program are not experts on eligibility rules or the enrollment process and need help understanding the application process. Because of this lack of understanding, applicants readily believe what DHW workers tell them. When welfare offices engage in diversionary practices, like telling applicants they must be currently employed or must already have a child care provider before applying for the child care program, they are wrongly preventing applicants from applying for the child care program.

"I was told that I couldn't fill out an application for child care until I started working. I explained that I needed to have child care while I was looking for work. My caseworker still said that I couldn't fill out an application and that I should call him when I start working again."

— Martha Lopez,
Boise

"They told me I couldn't get child care until I found a job."

— Irma Larios;
Burley

"When I applied for child care, the receptionist started to fill out the application for me. Then she asked me if my husband and I were employed. I told her that we're both looking for work right now. She told me to come back when we were both employed."

— Maria [last name withheld], Burely



Martha Lopez Boise, Idaho

I'm married and I have a 3-year-old son, Enrique. When we moved to Boise, I started working with WBW, a cleaning service responsible for cleaning the state capitol.

Problems started happening for us in February when I got laid off from work. My husband's salary isn't enough to keep our family going. He works at Plum Creek in Meridian, but only makes \$6.98 an hour.

We're living with a friend right now and we can't save enough money to be able to pay for rent and a security deposit. We have to make more money, which means I need to work. But who will look after Enrique? I need child care if I'm going to work.

I first heard about the child care program when Lolita [from Idaho Women's Network] came over to my house. I went down to the office, got an application and, when I turned it in, they told me to come back for an interview.

My husband and I went down together for the appointment. I told them about the tough situation my family was in and that I needed child care so that I could work. They told me that I couldn't qualify for child care because I wasn't working! They even told me that I should just wait to see if WBW, the cleaning service that I was laid off from, called me to work. They said if that happened, then they would see what they could do. They told me not to fill out the application unless my boss from WBW called me back to work.

My family is totally caught in a bind. I can't work because I need to take care of Enrique. He's three. I can't leave him alone. My husband works long hours, and I have no family in the area. I have no one to help out with him.

When Lolita explained to me that state law says that if I'm looking for work, I do qualify for child care, I was shocked. It seems like the case workers don't even understand the law for these programs. It stinks because my family is hurting because some caseworker didn't do their homework. Or, maybe they don't really want to help us.

Barrier 3: Workers fail to counsel applicants about their rights and the resources available to them

Findings:

- 94 percent of applicants were not referred to a Resource and Referral agency for help in finding a child care provider.
- 78 percent of applicants were not told that they could select and register their own child care provider with the state and could pay that provider with their child care benefits.
- 88 percent of applicants were not provided with required information about child care.
- 73 percent of applicants were not told that their benefits would begin on the first day of the month that they filed the application.
- 88 percent of applicants were not told about their right to appeal, or to appeal a delay in a decision.
- 88 percent of applicants were not provided with the rates DHW would pay a child care provider.
- 50 percent of applicants were not told that the information on their application was confidential.

In order to benefit from Idaho's child care program, parents must understand their rights and be able to access the resources available to them. The Idaho state plan promises that DHW will provide applicants with child care educational materials; yet few applicants received this information.¹⁴ In addition, DHW failed to inform families about the Resource and Referral agencies that can educate them about quality child care choices and help them find an appropriate child care provider. If applicants do not understand how to appeal decisions about their case, wrongly denied applicants may never get the services they are eligible for. Parents need to know the possible value of their benefits (the hourly rate DHW will pay for a child care provider) in order to select an affordable child care provider. Parents need this vital information to complete the child care enrollment process and select an appropriate child care provider.

"I didn't know until IWN [the Idaho Women's Network] told me that I could pick my own babysitter."

— Angelic Ortiz,
Boise

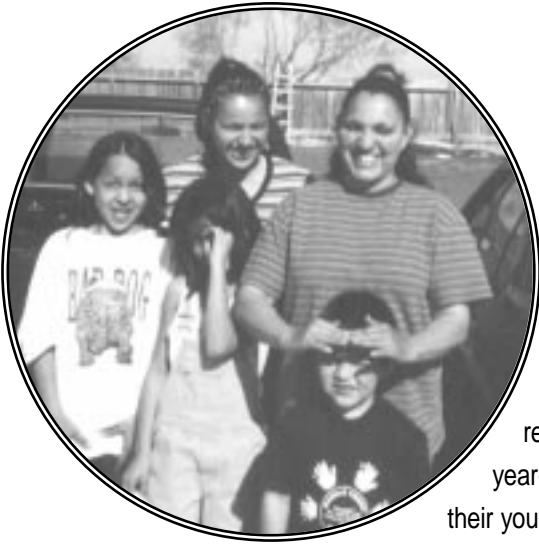
"When I asked if I could get child care benefits while I was looking for a job, my caseworker wouldn't answer the question. She just changed the subject."

— Misty [last name withheld], Caldwell

"It's confusing applying for child care. Nobody [at DHW] says a word. I just stand there in the middle of their mess. I was just about ready to give up. They never called me and then I received my approval letter out of the blue."

I need more information so I can plan what to do with my kids."

— Name Withheld,
Boise



Yolanda Diaz Caldwell, Idaho

Together, my husband and I work three jobs but we still don't earn enough to support our family. My husband works 40 hours a week and I work 38 hours a week, including weekends. We're in desperate need of child care for our younger children.

Previously I was receiving help with child care through the WICAP program, where I am also employed. But after getting a raise to \$8.33 an hour I was told my income was too high to continue to receive child care benefits. I then had to devise a plan where my 14-year-old daughter Claudia and 12-year-old daughter Maricela took care of their younger brothers and sisters, nine-year-old Natasha, four-year old Juan, and my baby Yesenia, while I was at work. This of course is not an ideal situation, kids watching kids. I worry about them a lot.

In April, Matt of ICAN knocked on my door and told me that the state had a child care program that could help us. I was excited to learn about this program and it seemed that our income fit in the income guidelines and we could qualify for the program.

On April 7, I went into the Caldwell Department of Health and Welfare office to get an Idaho child care program application. I left the office with nothing. I was confused and had no idea what to do next.

When I went to the office, I was able to go right up to the receptionist without having to wait in line. I asked the receptionist for a child care application. The receptionist told me to get a WICAP application off the back wall of the office. I then told her that I was not looking for a WICAP application but that I wanted an application for the state child care program. She told me that the only child care program available was the WICAP program.

It seems to me that the receptionist was not properly trained and that she really did not know that the Idaho Child Care Program even existed. It is just so frustrating! I wonder how many other families are going without the help they need because of the lack of knowledge within the Department of Health and Welfare.

Barrier 4: DHW's application process is confusing, inconsistent, and unnecessarily burdensome.

Findings:

- Only 34 percent of applicants had the child care application process explained to them.
- Only 25 percent of applicants were told what verification documents they needed to provide.
- 60 percent of applicants were not asked if they had any questions about the application process.
- DHW arbitrarily required some applicants to attend interviews, while other applicants did not have to attend interviews.
- 88 percent of applicants were not offered any help obtaining verification documents.
- Only 23 percent of applicants were encouraged to complete and submit their application immediately.

Instead of offering assistance to child care applicants who may not understand how to apply, DHW withholds critical information that could enable applicants to quickly and efficiently complete the application process. DHW should explain to applicants what documents they need to provide with their child care application so applicants can avoid making repeated, unnecessary trips to DHW offices. DHW should urge applicants to submit their applications as soon as possible to start the enrollment process and decrease the time applicants must wait to receive child care assistance. Providing applicants with the basic information they need to complete the enrollment process will make the process more efficient for child care applicants and DHW staff.

For no apparent reason, some applicants are required to attend interviews while others are not. Some applicants are given scheduled interview times while others are interviewed on the spot. No DHW offices scheduled interviews for applicants when they obtained application forms, instead requiring applicants to make another trip to the welfare office to return their application and schedule an interview. Without a consistent interview policy, applicants do not know what to expect and are treated arbitrarily by DHW staff.

"I called my caseworker three times and left messages but I never got a call back."

— Tabitha Hardy,
Boise

"I wish my caseworker would explain more things to me."

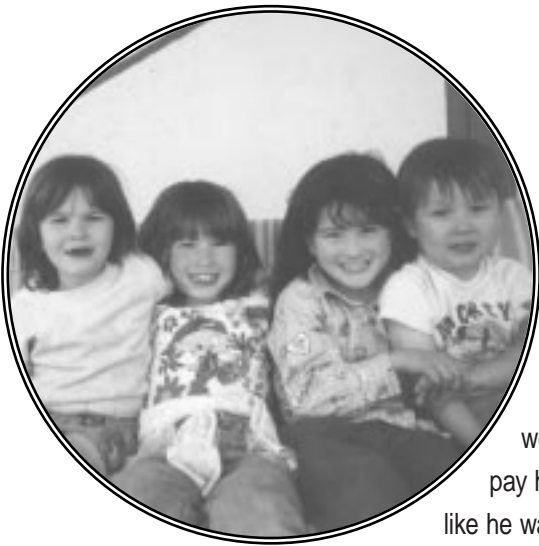
— Angelica Ortiz,
Homedale

"The receptionist just handed me the child care application without saying anything."

— Idalia [last name withheld], Burley

"I had to call them to find out what to do next. When I called, they said I had to come in for an interview next week. No one ever told me about that when I turned in my application."

— Christy
Sonnenberg, Boise



Name withheld Boise, Idaho

I am a single dad raising four children on my own. I work more than full time for a building contractor and make about \$11 an hour. When my wife left me, I had to find place for my kids to stay while I was working. I didn't have a lot of time to look, so I'm paying \$1,200 a month for child care. That leaves me with very little money to support my family.

I owe \$1,300 to the daycare. If I don't pay my daycare they won't let me take my kids there and if my kids can't go to child care, I can't go to work. My employer paid the child care bill with the agreement that I would pay him back. When I offered to pay him back he wouldn't take my money. It's like he wants me to owe him money so he can make me work more. This causes

a problem with child care because for every hour over 40 a week that my kids are in the daycare, I have to pay \$20 an hour. This is \$9 more than I make an hour.

I didn't know Idaho had a child care program for families like mine. My family advocate at Head Start, Judy, encouraged me to apply. Judy went with me to the welfare office and we waited 45 minutes just to get an application. Judy talked to the front desk worker and explained my situation. Judy told them that I needed help immediately. I filled out the application with the assistance of Judy and she dropped the application off at the office the next day and got an appointment for an interview for me. I would not have been able to do any of this without Judy's help.

I had to take off work again to go to the interview. I waited about ten minutes and when I got in with the DHW worker she told us that we made our appointment with the wrong person because procedure had changed. She told me that she was no longer doing child care interviews and that she would interview me if I wanted, but that I would have to come back for another interview later.

I had already missed work so I needed to get back. Why would I want to interview with someone and then just have to come back again? I was told that someone would call me to set up another interview so Judy and I left with more verification forms to fill out. Days went by and I had not heard anything so Judy went in to DHW to find out what was going on. She was told that my caseworker would be sending me a letter.

I had turned in my application weeks ago and I really needed to figure out what was going on so I could start planning. I was scared to call because of my English and I never feel right talking to them. If I just knew what the next step was then I could do what they needed me to do, but no one is telling me anything.

I finally did call to ask what was going on and the DHW worker told me that I was not even in the system so he suggested I go into the office. I was so discouraged then and there was no way I was going into the office. The very next day I got an approval letter on April 21, 25 days after I first went in there. Why didn't they tell me what was going on?

Barrier 5: DHW fails to engage in adequate outreach activities

Findings:

- 84 percent of applicants learned about the child care program from Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) or Idaho Women’s Network (IWN), not through DHW efforts.
- 84 percent of applicants did not see any information about the child care program in DHW offices.
- Although 48 percent of child care applicants were already participating in a support program administered by DHW (like Food Stamps, CHIP, or Medicaid), only two of them learned about the child care program from the department.
- 70 percent of applicants were not told about other programs for which they might be eligible (like CHIP, Food Stamps, or other programs).

Outreach activities are critical to ensure that eligible families know about Idaho’s child care program. If families are not aware that these programs exist, they cannot access or benefit from them. Numerous successful outreach models exist from which Idaho can draw. Idaho can use its TANF surplus fund (valued at \$37 million in fiscal year 1999) to fund child care outreach activities for low-income families.¹⁵ However, DHW is failing to engage in the most basic and inexpensive type of outreach activity: informing families who are already receiving some type of assistance about the child care program. Families who are already receiving one type of assistance — like Medicaid or Food Stamps — are likely to be income eligible for Idaho’s child care program. Yet, DHW does not inform them about the child care program and how it can help their families.

“I felt like the receptionist didn’t even know the program existed.”

— Yolanda Diaz,
Caldwell

“I’ve been paying \$1200 a month for child care for the last several months. I had no idea that Idaho had an affordable child care program for me until my Head Start family advocate told me about it.”

— Name withheld,
Boise



Irma Larios Burley, Idaho

My name is Irma Larios. I am the mother of four children and I am expecting my fifth child. My husband works at the Sugar Plant as a laborer. He works full time and comes home tired every day but still his paycheck does not reach far enough to cover our family's expense. I stay at home to care for our kids. I am very concerned about leaving my kids with other people, but I realize that I must take this risk to get a job. Otherwise, my family won't survive.

I have been to the local welfare office before to apply for health care services my kids. I have been in touch with them as they review my case each year. They have never told me about food stamps that could help us eat or child care that could allow me to find a job. I only heard about these programs when I was talking with a woman from the Idaho Community Action Network.

I feel that the Department of Health and Welfare should let families like mine know about services that would help them. This is especially true when families have kids with disabilities — my youngest son has chronic asthma. I think they should give us a flyer telling us about these programs, even sit down and talk with us about them.

Barrier 6: DHW provides disrespectful and inadequate service to applicants

Findings:

- 80 percent of applicants felt they were not treated with respect at DHW offices.
- On average, applicants rated the helpfulness of DHW staff as “not helpful.”
- On average, applicants rated the patience of the person who interviewed them as “not very patient.”

Applicants form many of their opinions and attitudes about support programs from their interactions with DHW workers. Negative experiences sour applicants and can discourage them from completing the lengthy enrollment process. Poor treatment also can deter applicants from fully understanding the application process, creating more confusion and problems for the applicant. Applying for public assistance programs can be a disheartening experience for some applicants; disrespectful treatment and inadequate service only compounds the problem.

“My caseworker told me she wouldn’t allow me to ‘live off the system.’ I have always worked and supported my family except for when I was attending college. She made me feel low and dirty. I left the office crying.”

— Jessie Tunney,
Nampa

“When I gave my application to DHW on Wednesday, the front desk lady said my caseworker would call me on Monday. I never heard from my caseworker, so I called her later in the week. When she got on the phone she sounded mean and said that she had other things to do besides deal with me.”

— Christy
Sonnenberg, Boise

“My caseworker was rude. I feel like they look down their nose at me.”

— Nicole [last name withheld], Nampa

“[DHW workers] are supposed to be there to help people, but [my caseworker] just wants you to get out of there.”

— Gaynol Moralez,
Nampa



Francisca Barajas Burley, Idaho

My name is Fancisca Barajas and I am the mother of six children. My partner works while I take care of the children. He only makes \$6 an hour as a farmworker. That is not enough to support a family of eight. There are times when we don't have enough food on the table to go around. My partner and I decided that I should look for work so that we can build a better life for our family. Our only concern is the children — they need to be watched over to grow up safe, happy, and healthy.

A person from Idaho Community Action Network informed me about child care benefits that we could get thorough the Department of Health and Welfare. I went in to the office to apply for child care and the receptionist was not helpful, in fact she was rude to me.

When I was asking for the application the receptionist ignored me and walked away. She left the area and me standing there for about ten minutes. When she returned she didn't ask if she could help me or say anything. I spoke up again and asked for a child care application. She knew I didn't speak English and she still handed me a form in English. She didn't offer to help me or offer help with the translation. The receptionist herself spoke Spanish and could have easily helped me. I felt discouraged and intimidated. I was afraid to ask for any more help. This experience was so humiliating that I thought about just giving up and leaving.

Then the ICAN staff member stopped by my house. She offered to help me fill out the application and encouraged me to continue with the process. I followed through and submitted my application with her help.

I am also worried because three of my six children are not citizens. At best the Department will help me with funds for the other three. I don't know how I will patch things together so that the kids are safe and I can find work. I am working on doing the paperwork so that all my children will be residents and maybe someday citizens. But today my family needs both of us to work so that all of the children have a home and food and the care they deserve.

Solutions

The Department of Health and Welfare can eliminate the barriers documented in this report by implementing structural changes, improving the standard practices of local DHW office, and investing in training of DHW workers.

The Idaho Community Action Network calls on DHW to adopt the following solutions:

Reduce the burdens on parents seeking child care:

- Extend and advertise DHW office hours so working applicants do not have to miss work to apply;
- Respond to applicant requests for information within 24 hours;
- Write client notices in a clear and understandable manner;
- Adopt an expedited service procedure for parents who need child care immediately;
- Establish a toll-free number that provides information about Idaho's child care program;
- Allow parents to mail in their applications and request applications over the phone;
- Eliminate interviews. In cases where this is not possible, use phone interviews;
- Refer parents to organizations that can help them locate quality child care providers;
- Allow parents to self-verify required information;
- Permit parents to apply at the DHW office most convenient for them;
- Inform applicants that participation in the child support program is not required to receive benefits.

Provide adequate service to all applicants, regardless of race or language:

- Provide translator services for limited-English speakers in a timely manner;
- Regularly and systematically monitor DHW offices and enrollment statistics to ensure racial discrimination is not occurring. Report results regularly to the public.

Provide training to DHW workers to ensure clients receive all necessary information and are treated with dignity and respect:

- Provide customer service training to DHW workers;
- Provide DHW workers with training on Idaho's child care program rules;
- Inform all applicants about their rights and responsibilities in both verbal and written form;
- Train DHW workers to inform all applicants about other assistance programs available to them.

Inform Idaho parents about the opportunity to receive child care subsidies:

- Place DHW workers at schools and health clinics to reach families outside of DHW offices;
- Develop informational flyers in English and Spanish that include the program guidelines and information about how to contact DHW to apply;
- Implement a statewide outreach campaign that includes both the use of traditional media and neighborhood-based outreach strategies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) is delaying, discouraging, and preventing families from applying for needed child care services. DHW discriminates against Latinos and limited-English speakers by giving them misinformation about the program and providing woefully inadequate translation assistance. The application process used by DHW is confusing, inconsistent, and needlessly burdensome. Applicants must repeatedly contact DHW offices for information about what to do and must run a world-class obstacle course to obtain child care benefits.

The end result is that five out of six eligible children in Idaho are going without needed child care subsidies. This means that parents are missing out on vital benefits that can help them seek and maintain employment. If no affordable child care is available, parents have to make difficult choices about where to leave their children while they work or look for work. Often, the only choice is mediocre or poor child care environments that can have a lasting negative effect on a child's intellectual growth and development.

DHW can take steps to correct the problems in its enrollment system. These steps include:

- Reducing the burdens on parents seeking child care by eliminating unnecessary requirements and simplifying the application process;
- Providing adequate service to all applicants, regardless of race or language;
- Providing training to DHW workers to ensure clients receive all necessary information and are treated with dignity and respect;
- Informing Idaho parents about the opportunity to receive child care subsidies.

Research Methods

Left Alone: State Barriers Prevent Idaho Parents from Accessing Child Care Program is based on data collected during April 2000 by Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Idaho Women's Network (IWN), and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO). The objective of this study is to identify policies and practices that delay or impede applicants from obtaining child care benefits for their children.

Data were gathered from 25 parents identified by ICAN and IWN through door-to-door outreach. Study participants applied at the Burley, Nampa, Caldwell, Homedale, and Boise Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) offices. Researcher intervention in the application process was limited to providing rides to DHW offices and translation service when DHW was unable to provide the service.

Applicants were interviewed twice in accordance with the protocol developed for this project. The first interview occurred after applicants obtained an application. The second interview occurred after applicants submitted their applications or completed a DHW interview. Applicants also shared the experiences in narrative form during their interviews with researchers. Some applicants requested that their names be withheld from the report. In addition, researchers looked for posted and written information at each public assistance office visited by an applicant.

Endnotes

1 1998 Eligibility and enrollment data from "Access to Child Care for Low-Income Working Families," Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., n.d.

2 "Access to Child Care for Low-Income Working Families," Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., n.d. <<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/program/ccb/reports/ccreport.htm>>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Gina Adams and Karen Schulman, "Idaho: Child Care Challenges," Children's Defense Fund, Washington, D.C., May 1998.

8 Bob Fick, Idaho Statesmen, "Child care aid goes unused, report says," October 28, 1999.

9 Eligibility estimate from "Access to Child Care for Low-Income Working Families," Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., n.d. <<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/program/ccb/reports/ccreport.htm>>. 1999 state enrollment data "Facts, Figures and Trends: 1999-2000," Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Boise, Idaho, n.d.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 "Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination — Persons with Limited-English Proficiency," Guidance Memorandum, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights, Washington, D.C., January 29, 1998.

13 Idaho Department of Health and Welfare Administrative Rule 16.06.12-108.

14 Idaho State Plan, Child Care and Development Fund Services (for the period 10/1/99 to 9/31/01), Section 5.6.

15 "Poverty Amidst Plenty: Amount of Unspent Federal Anti-poverty Funds Grows Despite Persistent Need," National Campaign for Jobs and Income, February.

This report is part of the *National Breaking Barriers Series* of the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support.

National Breaking Barriers Series

- No 1: Access Denied: Federal Neglect Gives Rise to State Lawlessness; Families Denied Access to Medicaid, Food Stamps, CHIP, and Child Care
- No 2: Hunger Pangs: Oregon Food Stamp Program Fails to Deliver
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Northwest Federation of Community Organizations

1905 South Jackson Street
Seattle, WA 98144
206.568.5400
lbell@nwfco.org
www.nwfco.org

Organizations releasing this report:

Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) serves as a powerful, consolidated voice for Idaho's poor, with chapters and membership clusters in six Idaho communities, including the state's three largest cities and numerous rural towns. Through ICAN, low-income Idaho families have a voice in the decisions that impact their lives. In addition to its direct action work, ICAN runs a statewide, volunteer-driven food program that helps low-income families supplement their monthly budgets. ICAN's community organizing model integrates the provision of food with training, leadership development, and action on issues.

Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) is a regional federation of five statewide, community-based social and economic justice organizations located in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington: Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Montana People's Action (MPA), Oregon Action (OA), Washington Citizen Action (WCA), and Coalition of Montanans Concerned with Disabilities (CMCD). Collectively, these organizations engage in community organizing and coalition building in fourteen rural and major metropolitan areas, including the Northwest's largest cities (Seattle and Portland) and the largest cities in Montana and Idaho.

Idaho Community Action Network

1311 W. Jefferson
Boise, ID 83702
208.385.9146 voice
208.336.0997 fax
www.seanet.com/~nwfco/Idaho/icn.htm
kborden@micron.net

Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO)

1905 South Jackson Street
Seattle, WA 98144
206.568.5400 voice
206.568.5444 fax
lbell@nwfco.org
www.nwfco.org