

Underutilization of the Child Care Assistance Program: A Case Study of Communication Challenges

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Introduction

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a federally funded program that subsidizes child care for low-income families while parents are either working or attending school. While this program assists many families in Louisiana, a persistent underutilization problem has been identified reflecting families who apply for the program, are deemed eligible, but do not utilize the funds that have been set aside for their use. Seeking to improve utilization among those applying for the program, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) sought to explore potential barriers for those accepted into the program, but not utilizing the available funds. To better understand underutilization of the CCAP program, LDOE engaged the Kathleen Blanco Public Policy Center at UL and LSU Economics & Policy Research Group.

The first phase of the research was a broad-based survey with those identified by LDOE as underutilizing the program. The survey identified a number of reasons for CCAP underutilization, with the most common reason cited as the household no longer needed it, often due to the eligible child reaching schooling age, or availability of other care. However, multiple families noted communication as a common concern.

In order to develop a better understanding of communication concerns expressed in the initial survey, seven CCAP clients were called for follow-up in-depth interviews. Clients were asked several questions related to how they received and sought out information about and from the CCAP program, communication with caseworkers, more efficient ways to receive information about the CCAP programs, and whether the information provided by the program was beneficial to their maneuvering of the program.

Overall, there seemed to be three prevailing themes indicated by the clients contacted for follow-up interviews: clients found that receiving updates and information through multiple formats (mail and email) would be helpful, they showed interest in the possibility of an app that might make checking their account for updates more feasible using a commonly-used modern communication tool, and they thought a comprehensive list of childcare learning centers accepting CCAP would be useful for those utilizing the program.

Receiving Updates and Information

Three of the seven clients called regarding communication concerns indicated that receiving updates and information about the CCAP program through multiple formats, more specifically mail and email, would be helpful in keeping them well-informed about their cases and the program in general. Currently, all (7) of the clients indicated that they primarily received updates and information about the CCAP program through the mail, and some seemed to be unaware of email notifications being an option. Email seemed to be a popular avenue for efficient communication as some of the clients indicated that they check their email daily for work anyway. Some (2) clients said that receiving text alerts would also be helpful for them because they always have their phones on them.

Most (6) of these clients preferred to call or use the internet when seeking out additional information. When asked about getting in contact with their case workers, one client said, *"...that's usually not hard. You call and you leave a message to tell them that you need to speak with them, and they usually call you back within the next 24 hours."* However, some (2) clients indicated some difficulties getting in touch with their case workers or trying to reach

their case workers and finding out that their case has been switched to someone else. One client suggested, to avoid long wait times when trying to contact case workers, either email access to case workers or implementing a system, where instead of waiting on hold, you can be called back when it's your turn.

Some clients (2), indicating either having had a bad experience with unpleasant case workers over the phone or enduring lengthy wait times, expressed a preference to contact CCAP through their childcare providers. *"A lot of times my childcare provider will call and email, you know...on my behalf. Because, you know, sometimes they got to them faster than we did."* Overall, communication between clients and case workers was not a common issue across the follow-up sample. The primary concern pertained to the methods of communication from both CCAP and the daycare providers, such as: spots open, which daycares accept CCAP, and updates via multiple forms of communication.

Comprehensive List of CCAP-funded Childcare Learning Centers

One common piece of information sought out by CCAP clients where communication can be a problem involves identifying which childcare centers in their area are both accepting CCAP and have open spaces. All (7) of the clients emphasized the benefits of having a comprehensive list of childcare learning facilities accepting CCAP, and most suggested that this information be available in multiple formats to better accommodate more CCAP clients. Examples of formats that could be helpful include an online map, list of centers organized by city, or a pamphlet/brochure for a particular area. When asked how a comprehensive list of

local childcare facilities accepting CCAP clients might have been helpful, one client requested an expansion of information to also include more information about CCAP-funded summer camps.

“Well that definitely would have been helpful. Like last summer, when I was eligible and I was told over the phone that there were summer camps that accepted assistance, but I went on the website and I could not – it just seemed to be about school. I could not figure out how to utilize summer camp, so I paid out of pocket. I mean, I ended up using most of my tax return money to pay for summer camp. So, having – on a website the specific programs that accept it would have been helpful because I couldn’t figure it out. You know, there wasn’t enough time. It wasn’t that user friendly for that. So, I think it would definitely be helpful to have a list of daycare centers and, you know, summer camps that you can use the assistance with.”

Clients (2) also pointed out the importance of keeping information regarding CCAP-funded childcare learning centers up to date. However, in order for CCAP to keep their website updated, a good flow of information between CCAP and the daycares would need to be established. Thus, one suggestion is to create daycare provider accounts for the CCAP portal and providing the option for daycares to regularly update their openings. To ensure this portal had reliable data, daycares can be offered the option to opt in to realtime updates with the default listing notated with “call facility for more information.” Daycare centers who either fail to regularly update and/or receive complaints about their information being incorrect can revert to the default notation of “call facility for more information.”

Unfortunately, a comprehensive list of CCAP-funded childcare facilities is not helpful if all of the centers are at capacity. Perhaps, another way to address this concern is by monitoring openings and evaluating whether there are enough CCAP-funded childcare facilities available to clients, in each area. Clients who did not hear about CCAP through a previously established childcare provider or did not have personal connections to a CCAP-funded childcare facility, expressed more difficulty in finding childcare facilities for their child(ren) once accepted into the CCAP program.

Utilization of a CCAP App

Clients (5) also indicated that a CCAP app accessible on their smart phones would be helpful and an option that clients stated they would check frequently. Many of these clients referenced the app utilized in SNAP cases, which is also a part of the Café portal. In reference to how likely a CCAP app would be checked, one client said she would check it *“probably all the time”* and that even though redetermination does not happen often, *“I’ll get on [Louisiana Believe portal] and check on there and check my balance, how much daycare’s being billed and how much they’re charging per month. I would use it [the CCAP app]. I use the other little app that I downloaded for my SNAP benefits, and I use it pretty often.”* A suggestion might be to either incorporate the CCAP program into the already established SNAP app, or to utilize a similar format in creating an individual app just for CCAP clients. It is worth noting that even if information doesn’t change frequently for some clients, many of these families place a high level of importance of this social safety net and the ability to check the status of their benefits may increase engagement with the program, which could in turn improve communication across the board as clients might anticipate earlier when program-related issues may arise.

Utilization of an app for CCAP clients might create a more accessible atmosphere for redeterminations and uploading various documents. While not everyone has access to a computer with internet or a fax machine to turn in certain documents, many people have access to smart phones, in some capacity. Creating a platform where clients could access their accounts, receive information and potentially get in touch with their case workers could provide another avenue for communication and might have a positive impact on the frequency of clients calling LDOE with questions about CCAP and reduction in underutilization.

Summary:

- Clients expressed a desire for additional communication channels to ensure access to their preferred mode of communication.
- Receiving regular updates and information regarding CCAP through multiple formats, such as both mail and email, would be beneficial to clients when trying to stay informed about their accounts.
- Clients would find a comprehensive list of childcare facilities accepting CCAP clients in their areas helpful in multiple formats (e.g. online map, list by city or pamphlet/brochure). Clients would find this information particularly useful if regularly updated and information about open spots was provided.
- Primary communication concerns pertained to availability of information (e.g. openings, daycares accepting CCAP, access to more modes of communication), from both CCAP and childcare learning centers.

Appendix

CCAP Questions:

Script:

Hello, my name is _____, and I am calling from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. You recently completed a survey about the childcare assistance program conducted by the department of education, and they have asked us to conduct follow up research to get more information about some of your concerns to improve the program. While the call will be recorded, any information provided in this call will remain anonymous. We expect this questionnaire to take about 10-15 minutes to complete and is voluntary, so you may choose to stop participating at any time. If you have questions about the questionnaire, you may contact Stephen Barnes at 337-482-5014 or the IRB at irb@louisiana.edu. Can you verify that you are at least 18 years of age before we begin?

Theme 1: Communication Improvement

1. How did you first learn about CCAP?
2. How old was your child when you first heard about CCAP?
3. How do you typically receive information/updates about CCAP? (ex. Mail from LDOE, email from LDOE, phone call from LDOE, from your childcare provider, lead agency, resource and referral agency, other?)
 - a. What types of devices or resources do you use to seek out this information? (e.g. phone, tablet, personal or public computer, ask friends)
 - b. When thinking about other public programs that you might have explored, what approaches would you naturally take to seek out more information about the program? Call for assistance? Online research—if so what type of devices (phone, tablet, computer)? Ask friends?
4. If you have a question about CCAP, how do you reach out for more information? (ex. Call the LDOE call center, emailing LDECCAP@la.gov, Louisiana Believe website, through your childcare provider, social media?)
5. If you needed assistance applying for CCAP, finding a center, or using the CCAP finder image machine, how would you try to get help?
6. Can you tell me how communication between CCAP and the clients can be improved?
 - a. Online format? Phone calls for updates and reminders every so often?
 - b. What would be the easiest way for you to receive CCAP updates?
7. If a CCAP app were available, how often would you check the app for updates?
8. How did you first learn about CCAP?
9. How old was your child when you first heard about CCAP?
10. How long did it take for you to find a childcare provider and for your child to be enrolled?
 - a. Did you use louisianaschools.com?
11. How might you utilize a comprehensive list of local childcare facilities that accept CCAP clients?
 - a. What format would be most helpful? (e.g. online map, list by city, printed list)
12. Can you tell me more about your ability/inability to reach your CCAP case worker?