

The Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Increasing Accessibility for Families and Early Care and Education Programs

Minnesota Department of Human Services
Children and Family Services Administration

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Legislative Report

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Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 3.197, requires the disclosure of the cost to prepare this report.

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I. Executive Summary

In 2014, the Minnesota Legislature passed legislation that required the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) to:

1. Assess the level of access to Parent Aware for families and early care and education programs
2. Make recommendations for increasing access to Parent Aware
3. Set benchmarks for increasing access to Parent Aware-rated programs for families.

Parent Aware rates the quality of early care and education programs. The ratings help families make informed choices, and provide a framework for other initiatives in Minnesota aimed at helping low-income families afford high quality child care and early education programs. Specifically, Parent Aware ratings are the foundation for the Child Care Assistance Program's higher reimbursement rates for child care programs with Three and Four-Star Parent Aware ratings, and for the Early Learning Scholarship Program offered through the Minnesota Department of Education.

This report describes Minnesota's progress toward increasing the number of Parent Aware participating programs, and offers strategies for overcoming barriers to growth. Parent Aware expanded to offer Parent Aware ratings in all 87 counties and tribal communities in Minnesota on January 1, 2015. Currently, 45 percent of licensed child care centers and early education programs, and 10 percent of family child care providers are rated. The department estimates the percent of rated programs by 2019 could reach 72 percent of licensed centers and 35 percent of licensed family child care providers, if the current pattern of participation continues. Strategies identified with the help of stakeholders, and tested with child care program and family focus groups, offered in this report could help Minnesota achieve these Parent Aware participation levels.

The department also examined the level of access families receiving child care assistance currently have to Parent Aware participating programs. As of June 2014, the department found that 34 percent of children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance statewide are already

enrolled in a Parent Aware participating child care program. Through consultation with stakeholders, the department established a statewide goal of 65 percent of children receiving child care assistance ages birth – 5 and not yet in kindergarten in Parent Aware participating child care programs by the end of State Fiscal Year 2019. Two counties, Anoka and Itasca, have already met this goal.

The department makes the following recommendations to address accessibility to Parent Aware for early care and education programs and access to Parent Aware participating programs for families receiving child care assistance:

- A. Establish benchmarks for achieving maximum participation in Parent Aware participating programs by children receiving child care assistance ages birth – 5 and not yet in kindergarten, and begin to track these benchmarks on an annual basis. The recommended benchmarks are below:

| Benchmarks | Baseline as of June 30, 2014 | June 30, 2015 | June 30, 2017 | June 30, 2019 |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Percent of children receiving child care assistance ages 0 - 5 and not yet in kindergarten in Parent Aware participating centers and family child care programs ¹ | 34% | 39 - 45% | 51 - 57% | 58 – 64% |

- B. Target outreach, recruitment, and any incentives and supports for participation in Parent Aware to child care programs:

- 1) Serving high numbers of children ages birth – five receiving child care assistance
- 2) Located in counties projected to have low Parent Aware accessibility levels
- 3) Located in diverse communities

- C. If children receiving child care assistance are required to use a Parent Aware rated program in the future, allow a waiver option to comply with federal requirements.

¹ Parent Aware participating centers and family child care homes includes both DHS and tribally licensed programs of the following types: child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based preschool programs.

II. Legislation

2014 Laws of Minnesota, chapter 312, article 25, section 32.

Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System Accessibility Report.

Recommendations. The commissioner of human services, in consultation with representatives from the child care and early childhood advocacy community, child care provider organizations, child care providers, organizations administering Parent Aware, the Departments of Education and Health, counties, and parents, shall make recommendations to the members of the legislative committees having jurisdiction over health and human services provisions and funding on increasing statewide accessibility for child care providers to the Parent Aware quality rating and improvement system and for increasing access to Parent Aware-rated programs for families with children. The recommendations must address the following factors impacting accessibility:

- (1) availability of rated and nonrated programs by child care provider type, within rural and underserved areas, and for different cultural and non-English-speaking groups;
- (2) time and resources necessary for child care providers to participate in Parent Aware at various rating levels, including cultural and linguistic considerations;
- (3) federal child care development fund regulations; and
- (4) other factors as determined by the commissioner.

Report. By February 15, 2015, the commissioner of human services shall report to the legislative committees with jurisdiction over the child care assistance programs and the Parent Aware quality rating and improvement system with recommendations to increase access for families and child care providers to Parent Aware, including benchmarks for achieving the maximum participation in Parent Aware-rated child care programs by families receiving child care assistance.

Effective date. This section is effective the day following final enactment.

III. Introduction

Decades of research show that children who participate in high quality early care and education are more likely to experience school success and positive life-long outcomes. Because children in underserved communities are less likely to have access to these high quality early learning opportunities, they are less likely to start kindergarten ready to succeed. For this reason, the lack of high quality early care and education has been identified as a contributing factor to Minnesota's persistent achievement gap.

There are several challenges that must be overcome in order to increase access to high quality early childhood settings for children in underserved communities. Specifically, families' ability to access high quality programs is limited by the:

- Availability of high quality programs
- Availability of reliable information about quality that allows families to identify and choose high quality child care and early education programs
- Price of high quality care and education, which often exceeds what families are able to pay.

To address this problem, Minnesota, like many other states, created a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Quality Rating and Improvement Systems help families find high quality programs by offering a rating service that measures whether or not programs have implemented best practices, and make that information available to families on a website. The system also provides support to early care and education programs to help implement best practices. Minnesota's QRIS is known as Parent Aware.

Parent Aware provides a framework for other initiatives aimed at helping low-income families be able to afford high quality early care and education. Parent Aware is the foundation of the Child Care Assistance Program's higher reimbursement rates for Three and Four-Star programs,

and the Minnesota Department of Education’s Early Learning Scholarships. However, access to Parent Aware and Parent Aware participating programs² is not yet consistently available statewide. This report explores:

- Barriers to early care and education programs to participating in Parent Aware
- Barriers to accessing Parent Aware participating programs for families receiving subsidies through the Child Care Assistance Program
- Offers recommendations for improving access to Parent Aware.

IV. Report Process

This report is submitted to the Minnesota Legislature pursuant to 2014 Laws of Minnesota, chapter 312, article 25, section 32. The law directs the commissioner of the department to develop recommendations to increase statewide accessibility to the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System for child care programs, and to Parent Aware programs for families with children. The commissioner was asked to address geographic distribution of programs, cultural and linguistic considerations, as well as time and resources needed for programs to participate, and include benchmarks for achieving maximum participation in Parent Aware programs by families receiving child care assistance.

The process for assessing access to Parent Aware and developing recommendations for this report was completed in the following phases:

- Phase I: Feedback from stakeholders
- Phase II: Developing policy and cost options
- Phase III: Analysis of data on access to Parent Aware participating programs for children receiving child care assistance.

² “Participating programs” are programs that have signed a Parent Aware participation agreement, committing to become rated through Parent Aware. These programs may have already achieved a Parent Aware rating, or may be in the process of working toward a rating.

Phase I: Feedback from stakeholders

The Minnesota Department of Human Services obtained feedback from stakeholders through the following methods:

- Consultation with stakeholder groups
- Consultation with other state agencies
- Focus groups with families and child care programs
- Survey data from child care programs.

Consultation with stakeholder groups

Consultation with stakeholders began prior to passage of the 2014 law, with a first meeting in November 2013. In early 2014, department staff met regularly with stakeholder groups listed in Appendix A to explore issues surrounding access for families and child care programs to Parent Aware. The passage of 2014 Laws of Minnesota, chapter 312, article 25, section 32 further shaped the scope of this exploration and delineated stakeholder groups to be consulted in preparing recommendations to the Legislature. Stakeholders were consulted to provide feedback on the proposed methodology for analysis, and the policy and cost options for Parent Aware through a series of meetings between July and December 2014.

Consultation with other state agencies

Consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Education and Health occurred through cross-agency meetings of Office of Early Learning leadership and staff, and review of the draft of this legislative report.

Focus groups with families and child care programs

Two focus groups, described in Appendix B, were conducted with child care programs and families to obtain feedback on barriers to access, and the policy and cost options for Parent Aware.

Survey data from the Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware survey

The “Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware”³ survey, conducted in Spring 2014, collected data about the experiences of child care programs participating in Parent Aware, as well as those not yet enrolled in Parent Aware. These data were used to gain insights into child care programs’ reasons for participating in Parent Aware, and identify concerns about participation.

Phase II: Developing policy and cost options

During this phase, the department developed options for estimating the cost to expand Parent Aware between State Fiscal Years 2015 - 2019 so that the number of quality early care and education programs is sufficient to serve a greater percentage of children receiving child care assistance. Data regarding cost factors, such as estimated numbers of child care programs participating by year, numbers of state and local staff needed to support child care programs and administer the rating process, and the types of supports for child care program services to include in these models, were established.

The stakeholder groups listed in Appendix A were consulted during the development of options. This phase occurred from June through August 2014.

Phase III: Analysis of data on access to Parent Aware participating programs for children receiving child care assistance

With input from stakeholders, the department designed an approach for assessing the current percentage of children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance enrolled in Parent Aware-participating programs, and projections for future participation. The analysis was shared with stakeholders in December 2014, and used to develop benchmark recommendations in this report.

Data for this analysis was provided from the following two sources at the department:

- Child Care Assistance Program statewide electronic eligibility and payment system

³ Child Trends. (September 2014). Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Child Trends. Retrieved from: the Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) website.

- Parent Aware data system for processing and issuing ratings.

V. Background

To understand the analysis and recommendations in this report, background is provided on the following topics:

- Parent Aware
- Efforts to help low-income families access high quality child care and early education
- Child Care Development Fund regulations
- Parent Aware child care and early education program participation and geographic distribution.

Parent Aware

Parent Aware is a system for improving and rating the quality of early care and education programs and providing that information to parents in an easy-to-use format. Parent Aware rates programs on a scale of one to four stars, and provides these ratings on a statewide search engine at parentaware.org. Early care and education programs eligible to participate in Parent Aware include licensed child care centers and family child care providers, Head Start programs and school-based pre-kindergarten programs.

In 2012, with funding from a \$45 million federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant, Parent Aware began a four-year statewide roll out as Minnesota’s framework for quality early care and education. Minnesota now has a system that:

- Establishes a single, shared definition of quality
- Establishes a reliable tool for measuring quality
- Provides supports to programs to increase their quality
- Shares information about the quality of programs with parents to empower them to make the best possible choice for their child.

Parent Aware is led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services in coordination with the Minnesota Departments of Education and Health through the Minnesota Office of Early Learning. Child Care Aware of Minnesota works in local communities to share ratings with parents and prepare early care and education programs for the rating process.

Parent Aware is designed to achieve the following goals:

- Promote accountability for public and private investments by using program quality indicators linked to school readiness
- Increase the number of high-quality programs, thereby ensuring that more children are ready for kindergarten
- Provide parents with understandable consumer information about program quality so that they can choose the best option for their children.

Parent Aware Rating Tool

In 2009, the State was directed by the Legislature to develop a set of best practices, also known as program standards, for early care and education programs. These best practices were designed to encourage early educators to be intentional and think proactively about how to help children gain the skills and abilities needed to perform at age level or higher. This set of best practices is also known as the Parent Aware Rating Tool.

The Parent Aware Rating Tool measures whether programs meet standards in the areas of:

- Physical health and well-being
- Teaching and relationships
- Assessment of child progress
- Teacher training and education

Two rating pathways are available. They are:

- 1) Full Rating Process
- 2) Accelerated Pathway to Rating

The Full Rating Process requires programs to meet indicators that measure how they are implementing best practices. The Accelerated Pathway to Rating allows accredited child care, Head Start and Public School Pre-Kindergarten programs to use a streamlined process to earn a Four-Star rating. The accelerated process is available because the requirements of accreditation, Head Start and Public School Pre-Kindergarten programs mirror those of the Full Rating Process, with many of the indicators already being demonstrated by these programs. Programs rated using the Accelerated Pathway to Rating process are required to use a curriculum aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, and an approved assessment tool, and have lead teachers who have attended training on using curriculum and assessment.

Early Learning Scholarships

Minnesota's Early Learning Scholarships [Minn. Stat. 124D.165] provide financial assistance for eligible families to enroll in high quality early care and education programs participating in Parent Aware. Priority for scholarships is given based on family income, geographic location, and whether a child's family is on a waiting list for a publicly funded program providing early care and education services. Early Learning Scholarships are currently available in 44 counties across Minnesota.

Child Care Assistance Program

The Child Care Assistance Program [Minn. Stat. 119B.03 and 119B.05] helps families with low incomes pay for child care so they can pursue employment, or education leading to employment, and children are well cared for and prepared for school.

The state fully funds child care assistance for families who participate in, or have recently moved off of, the Minnesota Family Investment Program and the Diversionary Work Program. Basic Sliding Fee child care assists families with low incomes who are not participating in either program. Basic Sliding Fee child care is not fully funded; some counties have waiting lists for the program. As of November 2014, there were 6,157 families on the waiting list for Basic Sliding Fee child care.

Recent policy changes have expanded ways the Child Care Assistance Program can help families receiving child care assistance access high quality programs, including:

- Higher rates for quality. Effective March 3, 2014, highly rated licensed family child care providers and child care centers are eligible for higher reimbursement rates for quality. Programs with a Three-Star Parent Aware rating are eligible for up to 15 percent above the standard maximum rate, not to exceed the provider charge. Programs with a Four-Star Parent Aware rating are eligible for up to 20 percent above the standard maximum rate, not to exceed the provider charge.
- Weekly authorization for families enrolled in high quality programs. Effective August 4, 2014, some young children can be authorized for more hours of care if they attend a Three- or Four-Star Parent Aware Rated Program. Programs can be paid up to the applicable weekly maximum rate, not to exceed the provider charge.

Federal Child Care Development Fund

The federal Child Care Development Fund was established by Congress to increase availability, affordability and quality of child care services. The Child Care Development Block Grant Act, the law that provides statutory authority for states to carry out the activities of the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), was recently reauthorized by Congress and signed into law by the president on November 19, 2014. The changes include updates to the program's purpose, health and safety requirements, parent education activities, eligibility policies for children receiving child care assistance, and activities to improve the quality of child care.

Before the reauthorization, states were encouraged to use child care assistance funds to help low-income families pay for high quality programs. Changes to the Child Care Development Block Grant Act strengthen this encouragement, and take it one step further by requiring states to develop strategies to increase both the supply and quality of services for children in underserved areas. In addition, it did not remove the requirement that states ensure families receiving child care assistance are allowed to choose a child care program that meets their needs among a variety of types of programs.

A policy interpretation memo was provided by the U.S. Office of Child Care, dated January 5, 2011, to help states with quality rating and improvement systems navigate the CCDF parental choice provisions, and the desire to promote use of high quality programs by families receiving child care assistance. According to the memo, states are allowed to require families receiving child care subsidies to choose a high quality program, as long as families receiving subsidies continue to have access to programs across all types of care.

States that choose to require families receiving child care assistance to use a high quality program are asked to demonstrate that care is accessible by program type by assessing availability of rated care in the state, and provide an assessment to the Office of Child Care on a regular basis. In addition, the state must allow families to continue to choose a program type excluded from participation in the quality rating and improvement system.

One way states can address these federal requirements is by allowing a waiver from choosing a rated program if a parent cannot find or has limited access to Parent Aware rated programs. For example, it is often challenging for families needing care at night or on weekends, referred to as non-standard hour care, to find a program participating in Parent Aware. A waiver could allow families needing care during non-standard hours to use a program that is not participating in Parent Aware.

Below are examples of circumstances when it may be necessary for families to have the option of requesting a waiver in order to choose a non-rated Parent Aware program:

- Family chooses to use a legally non-licensed caregiver, typically a relative, friend or neighbor
- Family requires non-standard hour care due to parents' work schedules
- Family has been using a non-rated program and wishes to continue to use this program
- Family is not able to find a rated program
- Family is not able to find a rated program with space available to serve all children in their family
- Child is school-age, or has a sibling who is school-age
- Child has a disability.

Early Care and Education Program Participation in Parent Aware

Parent Aware has expanded rapidly since 2012, when Minnesota received the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant. In 2012, Parent Aware continued offering a rating process in the counties where Parent Aware had been piloted previously. In each subsequent year, counties were added where Parent Aware would be available, with 29 counties in 2013, 53 in 2014 and 87 in 2015. Tribal communities were added early, with all 11 Minnesota tribes added in 2014 or before. In addition, an accelerated rating process has been available to many programs statewide since 2012.

Growth in participation

Program participation has also grown. Currently, 10 percent of licensed family child care providers are participating in Parent Aware, and 45 percent of licensed child care centers are participating. In total, there are 1,892 Parent Aware rated programs statewide, and another 568 programs committed to earning a rating in the next year.

Table 1. Number of Parent Aware Rated Programs/Sites⁴

| Program types | Rated as of 12/31/2012 | Rated as of 12/31/2013 | Rated as of 12/31/2014 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| School-based Pre-K | 126 | 496 | 603 |
| Head Start and Early Head Start | 225 | 258 | 257 |
| IDEA Programs | 0 | 2 | 37 |
| Accredited Child Care Centers | 91 | 249 | 278 |
| Accredited Family Child Care | 15 | 18 | 15 |
| Non-Accredited Child Care Centers | 16 | 66 | 128 |
| Non-Accredited Family Child Care | 56 | 233 | 574 |
| Total | 529 | 1,322 | 1,892 |

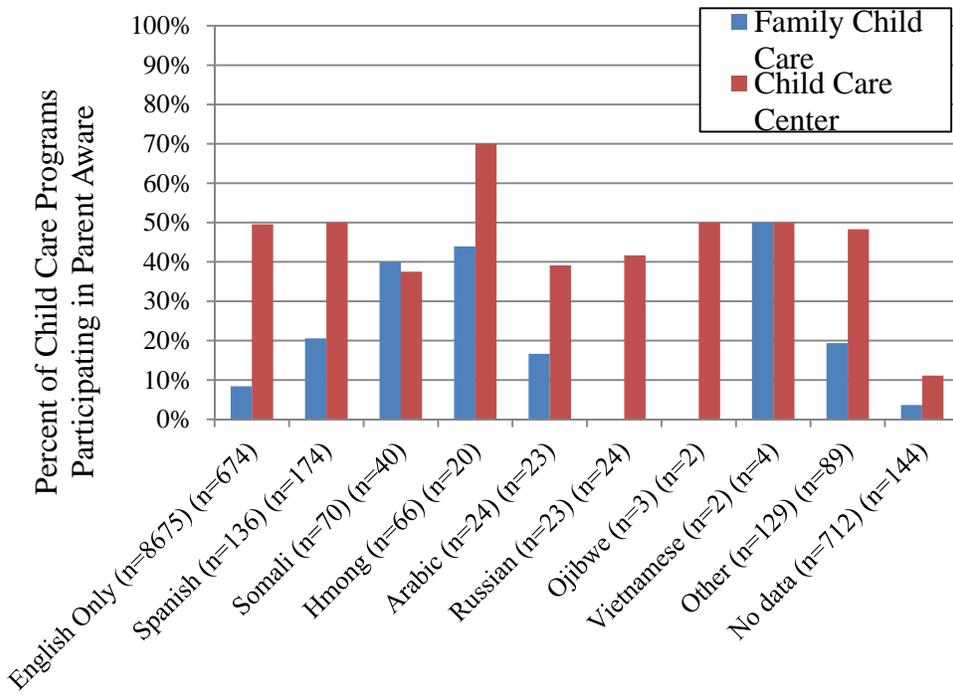
⁴ The source of data for Table 1 is Develop: Minnesota’s Quality Improvement and Registry Tool, a data system operated by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

Participation among Non-English Speaking Child Care Programs

Although the great majority of family child care providers in Minnesota report speaking only English, participation in Parent Aware is not limited to English-speaking programs. Family child care providers who speak languages other than English are more likely to participate in Parent Aware than English speaking providers, with 25 percent of family child care providers participating in Parent Aware, compared to 8 percent who speak English only.

Parent Aware has had strong success recruiting Hmong and Somali licensed family child care providers, with more than 40 percent of Hmong family child care providers and 40 percent of Somali family child care providers participating in Parent Aware. Spanish speaking family child care providers have also begun participating in Parent Aware, though to a lesser extent compared to Hmong and Somali family child care providers, with 20 percent of Spanish speaking providers participating in Parent Aware.

Figure 1. Percent of Minnesota Licensed Child Care Programs Participating in Parent Aware, by Language Spoken and Program Type⁵



Child care centers with staff who speak languages other than English are equally likely to participate in Parent Aware as child care centers with staff who speak only English (48 percent compared to 50 percent).

Participation across different geographic areas

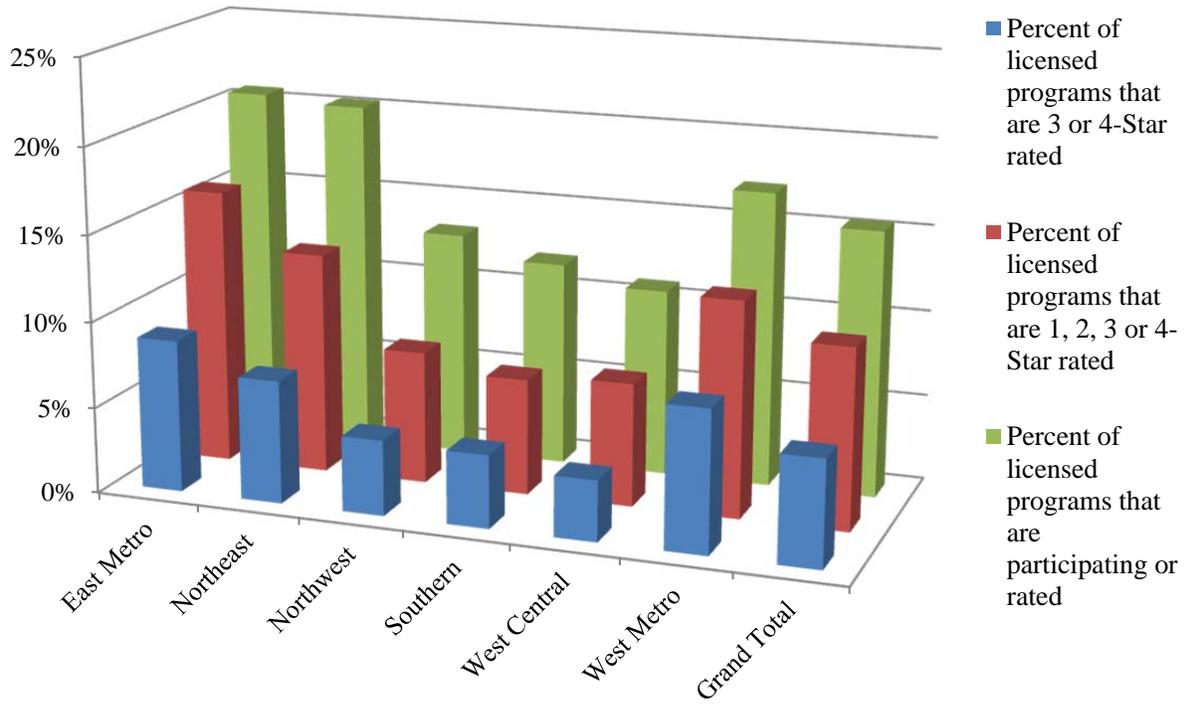
Participation of child care programs in Parent Aware varies in Minnesota by geographic area. In order to assess the level of variation, data on location by Child Care Aware System Districts was used (see Appendix D for a map of Child Care Aware System Districts). As shown in Figure 2

⁵ The source of data for Figure 1 is NACCRRAware, a database run by the Child Care Aware of Minnesota System. Participation is defined as programs that are either rated or have signed participation agreements to pursue a full rating. In an annual survey of licensed child care programs, family child care providers were asked “What languages do you or your helper speak fluently?” The question allows providers to select multiple languages. For each language, the first n is the total number of family child care providers in the state that identified themselves as speaking that language, and the second n is the total number of child care centers in the state that identified themselves as speaking that language.

and Table 2, programs located in the East Metro and Northeast Districts are currently participating in Parent Aware in the highest levels, with 21 percent of child care programs participating in Parent Aware in the East Metro District and 20 percent of child care programs participating in the Northeast District. Programs located in the Southern and West Central Districts are participating in the lowest levels, with 12 percent of child care programs participating in the Southern District, and 11 percent of child care programs participating in the West Central District. Similarly, East Metro and Northeast Districts have the highest percentages of rated and highly-rated programs, with Southern and West Central Districts having the lowest percentages of rated and highly rated programs.

Variation in participation by geographic area may be related to the mix of program types in the District. Center-based programs participate in Parent Aware at a higher rate than family child care programs. Therefore, Districts with higher numbers of centers are more likely to have a higher participation rate. Participation may also be related to variation in local investment or the existence of a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant Transformation Zone in the District.

Figure 2. Percent of Child Care Programs by Participation or Rating Level and Child Care Aware System District⁶



⁶ The source of data for Figure 2 is Develop: Minnesota's Quality Improvement and Registry Tool, a data system operated by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Participation is defined as programs that are either rated or have signed participation agreements to pursue a full rating.

Table 2. Percent of Child Care Programs by Participation or Rating Level and Child Care Aware System District⁷

| District | Percent of licensed programs that are 3 or 4-Star rated | Percent of licensed programs that are 1, 2, 3 or 4-Star rated | Percent of licensed programs that are participating or rated |
|-----------------|--|--|---|
| East Metro | 9% | 16% | 21% |
| Northeast | 7% | 13% | 20% |
| Northwest | 4% | 8% | 13% |
| Southern | 4% | 7% | 12% |
| West Central | 4% | 7% | 11% |
| West Metro | 8% | 12% | 17% |
| Grand Total | 6% | 10% | 15% |

VI. Assessment of Access for Families and Child Care Programs: Findings

Stakeholder input: Barriers and strategies

Stakeholders helped the department better understand barriers to participating in Parent Aware for child care programs, and barriers to selecting care in a Parent Aware rated or participating program for families. This feedback was used to identify effective strategies to overcoming those barriers.

Feedback from stakeholder meetings

The following barriers for child care programs and families, and suggested strategies emerged from meetings with key stakeholders:

1. Barrier: Programs operating at higher levels of quality incur costs for maintaining that quality, especially when serving children with high needs.

⁷ The source of data for Table 2 is Develop: Minnesota’s Quality Improvement and Registry Tool, a data system operated by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Participation is defined as programs that are either rated or have signed participation agreements to pursue a full rating.

Suggested strategies:

- Provide financial incentives and supports to programs achieving four stars to help them maintain quality.
 - Target incentives to programs serving children receiving child care assistance.
 - Consider tax incentives as an alternative to financial incentives. For example, tax incentives could be made available to parents, child care center staff, family child care providers, and business tax credits for early care and education programs.
2. Barrier: Current incentives and supports do not provide enough flexibility for child care programs.

Suggested strategy:

- Allow programs to spend their quality improvement supports over a longer period of time. Programs currently must spend their quality improvement supports within three months.
 - Offer a menu of incentives or supports to provide needed flexibility for child care programs to choose the incentive or support that best meets its needs. Examples of options:
 - Financial incentives for programs to pay for needed program quality improvements, such as purchasing a curriculum or providing training for staff.
 - Teacher retention bonuses, to encourage teachers with credentials to stay in the early childhood field.
 - Business supports.
 - Supports for serving children with special needs.
 - Supports for becoming accredited.
3. Barrier: Rating systems can be intimidating to programs, especially if it is believed their programs will not achieve four stars the first time rated.

Suggested strategies:

- Set benchmarks for Parent Aware “participating” programs, not just “rated” programs, to encourage and emphasize to the department and local Parent Aware implementation partners the importance of programs joining Parent Aware, and starting the quality improvement process

- Provide higher child care assistance payment rates for One- and Two-Star rated programs, in addition to Three- and Four-Star programs.

4. Barrier: Programs from diverse communities, particularly family child care providers, need more time and specialized supports to help them access Parent Aware.

Suggested strategies include providing:

- Language interpreters and translated materials to improve access for programs with staff who speak languages other than English
- A community of learning approach for programs that need more time, allowing programs to work toward a Parent Aware rating over 12 months with a coach who understands and is responsive to their unique needs.

5. Barrier: There are perceived inequities between child care centers that are required to have an on-site observation as part of the rating process, and family child care providers and programs that are eligible for an accelerated rating pathway whose ratings do not include observation. Some child care center directors have shared that they believe all programs should be held to the same standard as they are, and some family child care providers feel the rating process currently withholds an important source of feedback that could help them improve their practices.

Suggested strategy:

- Require observation for all types of programs participating in Parent Aware.

6. Barrier: Lack of access to Parent Aware rated programs is especially problematic in rural areas where there may be long distances to the nearest Parent Aware rated program, and barriers to transportation for families.

Suggested strategies:

- If the law is changed to require families receiving child care assistance to attend a Parent Aware rated program, allow a waiver for families who are not able to find a rated program
- Provide targeted outreach and incentives to participate in Parent Aware to programs in rural areas
- Work with rural communities to increase the number of spaces available for children to attend early care and education

- Increase access to transportation to help families access early care and education opportunities for their children

7. Barrier: Non-standard hour care is difficult to obtain for families receiving child care assistance, and access to non-standard hour care in a Parent Aware rated program is extremely difficult to find.

Suggested strategies:

- Provide an incentive to participate in Parent Aware to child care programs offering non-standard hour care
- If the law is changed to require families receiving child care assistance to attend a Parent Aware participating program, allow a waiver for families who need non-standard hour care.

8. Barrier: Families need to continue to have choices among program types. The number of licensed family child care providers has been trending downward in recent years, reducing availability to this type of care for Minnesota families.

Suggested strategy:

- Ensure Parent Aware materials and policies are sensitive to the unique needs of different types of programs, and continue to encourage programs of all types to participate in Parent Aware.

Child Care and Family Focus Groups

Using questions designed for each audience, input from child care programs and parents was sought regarding the proposed strategies. See appendix B for the complete summary of findings from the child care and family focus groups.

The following themes emerged from the child care focus group session:

- Child care programs from diverse communities found the idea of Parent Aware providing specialized coaching and more time to go through the rating process to be motivating.
- Programs serving large numbers of children receiving child care assistance, particularly child care centers with a mission to serve at-risk children, found the higher rates for higher quality to be the most motivating incentive.

- Programs serving few children receiving child care assistance, or that did not feel comfortable raising their rates high enough to benefit from the higher rates for higher quality, preferred the idea of providing a teacher bonus to teachers in programs participating in Parent Aware. This was especially true for family child care providers participating in the focus group.
- Programs found Parent Aware to be very beneficial to their professional development and personal growth.
- Some focus group participants believed Parent Aware would be required in the future, and joined Parent Aware in anticipation of this possibility.

The following themes emerged from the parent focus group session:

- Parent Aware provides credibility for child care programs, similar to accreditation.
- Funding for enrichment activities and materials was noted as important for early care and education programs to improve quality levels, and things that parents believed would motivate them to choose a Parent Aware participating program.
- Costs to obtain training and professional development were acknowledged as prohibitive, especially for smaller programs. Parent focus group participants shared their support for making training and webinars accessible to early care and education programs to improve quality levels.
- Participants shared that it would not improve the likelihood that they would choose a Parent Aware participating program if they knew the program received increased incentives, expert observation or coaching.
- The need for strategies and incentives to keep people in the field of early care and education was recognized by participants. Some shared that offering teachers a retention bonus would not increase the likelihood they would use Parent Aware information when selecting child care. However, some participants shared that teacher retention bonuses would be very beneficial, especially for family child care providers and programs in greater Minnesota.
- Participants believed requiring early care and education programs to participate in Parent Aware would be an effective approach for increasing participation.

Provider Perceptions Survey

The “Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware”⁸ survey was conducted in Spring 2014 by Child Trends, Minnesota’s Parent Aware evaluator, as part of evaluation activities. Different types of programs (including those who work in child care centers, family child care programs, Head Start, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs) were surveyed to understand their experiences and perceptions of Parent Aware. This report highlights trends included in the report about motivations and concerns related to participating in Parent Aware. The full “Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware” report also notes if and how perceptions of Parent Aware differ by program type, though these details are not provided in this short summary.

The top reasons programs reported for participating in Parent Aware include:

- To access Early Learning Scholarships
- It is important for my professional development/professionalism
- To be part of a cutting-edge early childhood initiative
- To access higher child care assistance reimbursement rates
- To better attract families to my program
- Access to pre-rating support dollars
- Access to free or low-cost training.

Programs eligible for supports said the most helpful supports offered by Parent Aware include:

- Access to a quality coach to help navigate the rating process
- Free or low-cost training
- CLASS coach, to help the program score higher when the program is observed by an expert observer from the University of Minnesota
- Financial supports needed to purchase or upgrade equipment and materials, and pay for additional training and coaching.

⁸ Child Trends. (September 2014). “Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware”. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Child Trends. Retrieved from: [the Parent Aware for School Readiness \(PASR\) website](#).

Programs shared concerns about Parent Aware, including:

- Access to training that meets the unique needs of participating programs. Ideas for addressing this concern offered in the report include:
 - Lessen training requirements.
 - Offer a variety of trainings in more locations.
 - Offer more training that is geared to both new and experienced teachers and providers.
 - Count training that has taken place more than five years ago.
- The rating process can be challenging and confusing. Ideas for addressing this concern offered in the report:
 - Simplify and clarify the rating process.
 - Offer clear, uniform communication to support programs as they navigate the rating process.
 - Offer peer mentoring to improve participating programs' success and satisfaction with the rating process.

Policy and Cost Options to Address Accessibility

Based on input from the stakeholder meetings, the department developed four policy options, calculated implementation costs where certain aspects of a quality rating and improvement system are emphasized, and developed considerations about ways to improve accessibility to Parent Aware participating programs for families receiving child care assistance.

1. Option: "Current" approach

This option continues the Parent Aware rating process, supports and infrastructure as currently implemented. It also assumes an increase in the numbers of programs participating in Parent Aware each year, and continues all supports and incentives provided currently through the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant and funding for marketing, evaluation, and accreditation facilitation supports. The rate of increase in program participation is based on the number of eligible programs, and the pattern of participation seen to date for a county and program type. This is the least expensive approach explored with the stakeholder group.

Table 3. Estimated cost for “current approach” option

| Estimated cost by fiscal year | FY 16 | FY 17 | FY 18 | FY19 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Total | \$8,618,000 | \$10,141,000 | \$11,276,000 | \$12,769,000 |

2. Option: “Diverse communities” approach

This approach includes all aspects of the “current” approach, while adding specialized services for programs in diverse communities. A “diverse community” includes early educators from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as different faiths, abilities and education levels. The approach allows programs to participate in a 12-month Learning Community tailored to meet their needs, including a coach that speaks their language, if their staff speak a language other than English, attends trainings with the group, and works individually with each participant between trainings. Additional language supports would be available, as well as forms and resources translated into the top four languages spoken in Minnesota. It would provide targeted supports to alleviate barriers to participation in Parent Aware for programs in diverse communities. This approach increases the likelihood of reaching goals for the number of programs participating in Parent Aware because it addresses specific barriers to participation for programs in diverse communities. This approach is more costly than the “current” approach, but less expensive than the other two approaches.

Table 4. Estimated cost for “diverse communities approach” option

| Estimated cost by fiscal year | FY 16 | FY 17 | FY 18 | FY19 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Total | \$9,246,000 | \$11,356,000 | \$13,024,000 | \$15,020,000 |

3. Option: “Observations” approach

This approach includes all aspects of the “current” approach, while adding funding to include on-site observation and coaching as part of the Parent Aware process for infants and toddlers in center-based settings, and in family child care settings. Currently, only teachers in classrooms serving preschool-aged children are observed when seeking a Parent Aware rating.

On-site observation uses a research-based, valid and reliable instrument for gathering information about a program’s quality and provides specific, concrete feedback for programs. In Parent Aware, the instrument currently used is the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System™ (CLASS™) observation tool. This tool provides information about a provider’s or teacher’s interactions with the children in their setting, including warmth and responsiveness, and practices that build children’s critical thinking skills. Including observation provides a higher level of rigor to the rating process.

It is unclear how this approach may impact accessibility to Parent Aware. It may encourage more programs to participate because it may be felt the process more effectively captures real quality levels. Conversely, the experience of an on-site observer watching staff interactions with children may deter some programs from participating. However, while the impact on Parent Aware participation is uncertain, research shows that use of CLASS™ observation, combined with coaching, makes a difference for children’s school readiness outcomes.⁹

This approach is the second most costly approach explored by the stakeholder group.

Table 5. Estimated cost for “observations approach” option

| Estimated cost by fiscal year | FY 16 | FY 17 | FY 18 | FY19 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Total | \$10,490,000 | \$13,107,000 | \$14,137,000 | \$16,210,000 |

4. Option: “Incentives” approach

This approach includes all aspects of the “current” approach, while adding funding to include higher quality improvement grants for programs registered to serve children receiving child care assistance, program incentives for Four-Star rated programs to maintain ratings, and bonuses for teachers working in Four-Star rated centers and family child care homes to encourage retention in the early childhood field. This approach could provide a strong motivation for programs and

⁹ Mashburn, A. J., Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., Downer, J. T., Barbarin, O. A., Bryant, D., et al. (2008). Measures of classroom quality in prekindergarten and children's development of academic, language, and social skills. *Child Development*, 79(3), 732-749.

teachers to participate in the Parent Aware program, and work toward a Four-Star rating. It could increase program participation in Parent Aware, and therefore, result in increased access to Parent Aware programs for children in families receiving child care assistance. It is the most expensive approach described in this report.

Table 6. Estimated cost for “incentives approach” option

| Estimated cost by fiscal year | FY 16 | FY 17 | FY 18 | FY19 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Total | \$23,251,000 | \$30,897,000 | \$37,067,000 | \$42,736,000 |

Analysis of Access for Families and Child Care Programs to Parent Aware

With input from stakeholders, the department designed an approach to assessing the current percentage of children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance enrolled in Parent Aware participating¹⁰ programs and projections for future participation. Because programs that serve school-age children are not eligible to participate in Parent Aware, school-age children were not included in this analysis.

Data for this analysis were provided from:

- Child Care Assistance Program: Minnesota’s statewide electronic eligibility and payment system
- Parent Aware: Data system for processing and issuing ratings.

The data included the number of:

- Parent Aware rated or participating child care centers and family child care homes
- Parent Aware rated or participating centers and family child care homes receiving child care assistance

¹⁰ “Participating programs” are programs that have signed a Parent Aware participation agreement, committing to become rated through Parent Aware. These programs may have already achieved a Parent Aware rating, or may be in the process of working toward a rating.

- Children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance and enrolled in Parent Aware rated or participating child care centers and family child care homes
- Children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance.

Data was pulled for the following three dates:¹¹

- June 30, 2013
- December 31, 2013
- June 30, 2014.

Current access to Parent Aware participating programs

The department calculated the percentage of children receiving Child Care Assistance ages birth – 5 enrolled in Parent Aware participating programs during June 2013, December 2013 and June 2014, statewide and by county, as shown in Table 2. This analysis established a statewide baseline of 34 percent of children ages birth – 5 and not yet in kindergarten receiving child care assistance and enrolled in Parent Aware participating programs.

Table 7. Percent of Children Ages Birth – 5 and not yet in kindergarten receiving Child Care Assistance Enrolled in Parent Aware Participating Programs

| Program type¹² | June 30, 2013 | December 31, 2013 | June 30, 2014 |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Licensed centers | 35% | 40% | 43% |
| Licensed family child care | 3% | 6% | 10% |
| All program types | 24% | 30% | 34% |

As shown in Table 3, the county level analysis revealed strong participation of children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance in Parent Aware participating programs in some counties, with room for growth in many counties, particularly those where the full rating option

¹¹ Monthly enrollment of children receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware rated programs was measured two months prior to each Parent Aware reporting period to allow sufficient time for provider bills and payments to be submitted and captured in the Child Care Assistance data system.

¹² Parent Aware participating centers and family child care homes include both department and tribally licensed programs of the following types: Child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based preschool programs.

was not yet available. See Appendix C for a full listing of counties by percent of children enrolled in Parent Aware participating programs as of June 30, 2014.

Table 8. Number of Counties by Percent of Children Receiving Child Care Assistance Ages Birth – 5 Enrolled in Parent Aware Participating Programs in June 2014

| Access level in county, relative to statewide goal and baseline | Number of counties |
|--|---------------------------|
| Meets or exceeds goal of 65% | 2 |
| At or above statewide baseline of 34% | 15 |
| Between 10% and 33% | 24 |
| Below 10% | 46 |

Future estimates of access to Parent Aware participating programs

The department estimated future growth in the numbers of programs participating in or rated by Parent Aware. The projected numbers of rated and participating programs for State Fiscal Years 2015 - 2019 are based on the number of eligible programs, and the pattern of participation seen to date for each program type and county.¹³

¹³ The department anticipates 4 percent of eligible child care programs to newly join Parent Aware in each biannual cohort until a saturation point is reached, at which new participants will begin to taper off. Because centers are joining at a faster rate, the department projects the rate of new center participants to slowly decrease beginning in 2017. In contrast, the rate of new family child care provider participants is projected to continue at 4 percent per cohort through 2019. Because most Head Start and school-based programs have already joined, the department projects participation levels to remain stable for those program types.

Table 9. Projected Parent Aware Program Participation Rates by State Fiscal Year

| Program type: | Estimated total programs eligible to participate in Parent Aware¹⁴ | SFY15 | SFY16 | SFY17 | SFY18 | SFY19 |
|---|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Centers (includes all department and tribally licensed centers, licensed Head Start, and licensed school-based pre-kindergarten programs) | 1,638 | 47% | 57% | 65% | 70% | 72% |
| Department and tribally licensed family child care | 9,732 | 13% | 19% | 25% | 31% | 35% |
| Percentage of licensed centers and family child care programs participating in Parent Aware by fiscal year | 11,370 | 14% | 21% | 28% | 34% | 38% |

The department also estimated the percentages of children ages birth – 5 and not yet enrolled in kindergarten receiving child care assistance that would be enrolled in Parent Aware participating or rated programs through June 30, 2019, the last day of State Fiscal Year 2019. The projection model depended heavily on estimates of the anticipated average number of children enrolled per Parent Aware program, and the estimated percentage of programs receiving child care assistance.

Because Parent Aware was not yet rolled out statewide as of June 30, 2014, there is not yet sufficient data to accurately predict whether or not the average number of children ages birth – 5 receiving child care assistance enrolled in a Parent Aware program is likely to be higher than the current statewide average. Similarly, there is not sufficient data to accurately predict the

¹⁴ The number of centers and family child care homes licensed by the Minnesota Department of Human Services as of January 6, 2015 was used as the denominator for calculating percentages by fiscal year. It does not include tribally-licensed programs. The number of licensed programs by type in Minnesota may change in the future; however, projections of future numbers of licensed programs by type were not attempted for purposes of this analysis.

percentage of programs in Parent Aware likely to have children receiving child care assistance. Therefore, the department used existing data to run four different estimates, based on assumptions that programs in Parent Aware would be more or less likely to enroll children receiving child care assistance. Table 5 shows statewide ranges established and used to develop recommended benchmarks provided in the recommendations for this report.

Table 10. Ranges of Possible Percentages of Children Receiving Child Care Assistance Ages Birth – 5 and Not Yet in Kindergarten in Parent Aware Participating Centers and Family Child Care Homes

| Ranges as of | June 30, 2015 | June 30, 2017 | June 30, 2019 |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Percent of children receiving child care assistance ages birth - 5 and not yet in kindergarten in Parent Aware participating centers and family child care programs ¹⁵ | 39 – 45% | 51 – 57% | 58– 64% |

The percentage of children ages 0 – 5 and not yet in kindergarten enrolled in Parent Aware programs was also projected by county through June 30, 2019. The county level projections provided a way to assess the county characteristics most likely to result in low accessibility levels.

Counties projected to have low accessibility levels were more likely to be rural or micropolitan.¹⁶ In addition, counties where the full rating option for Parent Aware was not available until 2014 or 2015 were more likely to have fewer numbers of children enrolled in Parent Aware programs by 2019.

¹⁵ Parent Aware participating centers and family child care homes include both department and tribally licensed programs of the following types: Child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based preschool programs.

¹⁶ Micropolitan counties are those with at least one city with a population of between 10,000 and 49,999.

VII. Recommendations

The department makes the following recommendations to address accessibility to Parent Aware for early care and education programs, and access to Parent Aware rated programs for families receiving child care assistance:

A. Establish the following benchmarks for achieving maximum participation in Parent Aware participating programs by families receiving child care assistance, and track these benchmarks on an annual basis.

Recognizing the need to allow parent choice for families receiving child care assistance, the department does not anticipate serving 100 percent of children receiving child care assistance in Parent Aware participating programs. Once a strong level of accessibility to Parent Aware rated programs is established statewide, the department estimates approximately 65 percent of children ages birth – 5 could be served in a Parent Aware participating program. This estimate is based on the following assumptions:

- Currently, approximately 4 percent of children receiving child care assistance are served by a legally non-licensed relative, friend or neighbor caregiver.
- Currently, approximately 10 percent of children receiving child care assistance require care during non-standard hours.
- An estimated additional 20 percent of children would use a non-Parent Aware participating program for other reasons. These reasons may include those listed in background section of this report.

Parent Aware is growing rapidly, and if one or more of the policy and cost options described in this report are carried out, the department anticipates reaching a higher level of statewide accessibility to Parent Aware programs statewide by Fiscal Year 2019. However, the department anticipates that there will continue to be gaps in accessibility in some counties. Given this context, the department recommends the following benchmarks for tracking progress in achieving maximum participation.

Table 11. Statewide Benchmarks for Achieving Maximum Participation of Children Receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware Programs

| Benchmarks | Baseline as of: June 30, 2014 | June 30, 2015 | June 30, 2017 | June 30, 2019 |
|--|--|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Percent of children receiving child care assistance ages birth – 5 and not yet in kindergarten, in Parent Aware participating centers and family child care programs ¹⁷ | 34% | 39 – 45% | 51 – 57% | – 64% |

B. Target outreach, recruitment and any incentives and supports for participating in Parent Aware to programs:

- 1) Serving high numbers of children birth – 5 receiving child care assistance**
- 2) Located in counties projected to have low Parent Aware accessibility levels**
- 3) Located in diverse communities**

Currently, the counties projected to have low accessibility levels by the end of State Fiscal Year 2019 are in rural or micropolitan counties, mostly in difficult to serve places where access to the Internet and conveniently located in-person training opportunities may also be low. In addition, some counties projected to have low accessibility may lack an adequate supply of early care and education programs to meet the needs of families, regardless of whether programs are Parent Aware rated or not.

Programs from diverse communities have also indicated a need for more time to prepare for and document how they meet quality standards and an interest in participating in a community of

¹⁷ Parent Aware participating centers and family child care homes includes both DHS and tribally licensed programs of the following types: child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based preschool programs.

practice with other programs in their community. For non-English speaking programs, coaches that speak their language and training in their language would help increase the number of participating programs in diverse communities.

The department, working with Parent Aware partners, could learn from innovative approaches already underway by many of the Minnesota Investment Foundations and private foundations to serve programs in rural and micropolitan counties, as well as diverse communities, in order to boost access to Parent Aware participating programs consistently throughout Minnesota. If children receiving child care assistance are required to use a Parent Aware rated program in the future, allow a waiver option

C. If children receiving child care assistance are required to use a Parent Aware rated program in the future, allow a waiver option

As noted in the background section of this report, federal regulations governing the Child Care Development Fund require states to allow families receiving child care assistance choices of different types of early care and education programs. Therefore, if state law were changed to require families receiving child care assistance to choose a Parent Aware rated program in the future, the department recommends the law include a waiver option that would allow families, under certain circumstances, to choose a program that is not Parent Aware rated. Allowing this option would ensure full compliance with federal requirements. A waiver option should be simple for families to understand and straight-forward to implement administratively.

VIII. Appendices

- A. List of stakeholders participating in stakeholder group meetings
- B. Focus group process and summary of findings
- C. Chart listing counties by access level as of June 30, 2014
- D. Map of Child Care Aware Statewide Service Areas

Appendix A. List of stakeholders

| Name | Organization(s)/Representing |
|--------------------|--|
| Sara Benzkofer | Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children and Minnesota School-Age Care Alliance |
| Lea Bloomquist | Hennepin County |
| Liz Dodge | Chisago County |
| Rob Grunewald | Federal Reserve Bank |
| Heidi Hagel-Braid | First Children's Finance |
| Stephanie Hogenson | Children's Defense Fund |
| Melinda Hugdahl | Legal Services Advocacy Project, Legal Aid |
| Nancy Hylden | Faegre Baker Daniels |
| Cisa Keller | Minnesota Child Care Association |
| Kat Kempe | Think Small |
| Ericca Maas | Parent Aware for School Readiness |
| Ann McCully | Child Care Aware of Minnesota Coordinating Office |
| Carol Miller | Hennepin County |
| Lanay Miller | Chisago County |
| Kathleen O'Donnell | Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children and Minnesota School-Age Care Alliance |
| Sandy Pursley | Minnesota Licensed Family Child Care Association |
| Lisa Thompson | American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees |
| Bharti Wahi | Greater Twin Cities United Way |
| Barb Yates | Think Small |
| Naomi Zuk-Fisher | Greater Twin Cities United Way |

Appendix B. Summary of Parent Aware Focus Groups

Prepared: November 12, 2014, by Judy Plante, Management Analysis Division

The department contracted with the Management Analysis Division to conduct two stakeholder focus groups assessing experiences with the Parent Aware program. Two sessions were held, in late October and early November 2014. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their knowledge of Parent Aware, their participation in the program, and how various programmatic aspects might help Parent Aware participants. Summaries of the two groups follow.

Family Stakeholder Group – November 3, 2014

A small group of parents attended the focus group, though the group included diversity of program type used, location, and receipt of Child Care Assistance. While no participants self-identified as having a tribal or cultural program affiliation, one participant described using a rated center that would meet both of those descriptions.

Table 1. Characteristics of parents in focus group, by type of program children attend

| Characteristics | Number of parents |
|---|-------------------|
| Children attend a center-based program | 2 |
| Children attend a family child care program | 2 |
| Total parents attending the focus group | 4 |

Table 2. Characteristics of parents in focus group, by location

| Characteristics | Number of parents |
|---|-------------------|
| Live in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area | 3 |
| Live in greater Minnesota | 1 |
| Total parents attending the focus group | 4 |

Table 3. Characteristics of parents in focus group, by receipt of Child Care Assistance

| Characteristics | Number of parents |
|---|--------------------------|
| Receives Child Care Assistance | 1 |
| Does not receive Child Care Assistance | 3 |
| Total parents attending the focus group | 4 |

Knowledge of Parent Aware

All of the parents generally understood the intent of the rating system. All knew of Parent Aware before participating in the focus group. However, several indicated that it was difficult to find information on Parent Aware, even when actively looking for information on websites. Some thought Parent Aware was equivalent to accreditation.

Participants stated that there is more competition in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, leading to greater participation in Parent Aware (therefore, higher awareness by parents of the rating system). The participant from greater Minnesota suggested that since her area is underserved, there is no competitive advantage for a child care program to participate, as any openings are filled regardless of participation or rating.

Participants observed that having a Parent Aware Four-Star rating provides credibility for early care and education programs.

Expert Observation

When asked if they would be more likely to use Parent Aware rating information when selecting care if they knew that programs were observed by an expert, participants responded it would not increase the likelihood they would use Parent Aware rating information. Generally, this small group believed parents should observe the child care program themselves. Only one thought an outside observer would be helpful, but said parents still need to observe for themselves.

Supports

When asked if they would be more likely to use Parent Aware rating information when selecting child care if they knew that supports such as coaching, retention bonuses, or funding for best practice programming were available, participants responded:

- **Bonuses:** Two participants (both from rated centers) said retention bonuses would not increase the likelihood they would use Parent Aware rating information if teachers received bonuses. These parents expressed concern that bonuses may not be effective in the long run. (It appeared to be unclear, despite repeated clarifications, that these were retention bonuses.) Those in favor of retention bonuses were from family child care and Greater Minnesota. The need for incentives to keep people in the field was clearly recognized by these participants.
- **Coaching:** Participants shared that knowing a program received coaching also would not increase the likelihood they would use Parent Aware rating information. There was a sentiment in the group that center directors were in the best position to coach teachers, but beyond that there was little discussion on this topic.
- **Funding for best practice programming:** Participants shared that the cost to attend training – closing for the training and travel time, travel and lodging costs, fees for the training activity – are prohibitive to smaller programs. In addition, the limits on family child care (caps on number and ages of children in care) mean a limit on income. Funding for enrichment activities, materials, and training for programs were mentioned as funding needs. Alternative delivery mechanisms for in-person training, such as webinars, are difficult in greater Minnesota due to internet speed and timing. Many family child care providers have dial up connections, which will not support webinars. Many webinars are offered during prime daycare hours, rather than evenings. Participants were in favor of attempts to bring best practices to the early care and education programs, especially those that deal with socio-emotional development, school readiness, and approaches to teaching the whole child.

Other advice/suggestions

Participants suggested:

- Requiring Parent Aware for all licensed child care programs in Minnesota
- Public recognition for exceptional programs was suggested
- Invest in early childhood as prevention approach, rather than investing in prison programs later.

Provider Focus Group – October 30, 2014

The focus group participants included representatives of geographic and ethnic diversity, and included recent immigrants to Minnesota. Twelve programs were represented in the focus group, and self-identified as follows:

Table 4. Characteristics of child care programs represented in focus group, by type of program

| Characteristics | Family child care | Child care centers |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|
| Participate in or are rated by Parent Aware | 7 | 3 |
| Serve children receiving child care assistance | 2 | 2 |
| Located in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area | 6 | 3 |
| Located in greater Minnesota | 2 | 0 |
| Culturally diverse | 2 | 0 |
| English learner | 1 | 0 |
| Total programs represented in the focus group | 9 | 3 |

Knowledge of Parent Aware

Participants all knew about Parent Aware, some of them having participated in early pilot projects. They said Parent Aware represents quality, provides a rating system and comparison for parents to use, helps programs become more knowledgeable, and ensures staff are well trained. They acknowledged programs get higher reimbursements based on Parent Aware ratings (if receiving payments through the Child Care Assistance Program), and that Parent Aware is a lot of work.

Participation in Parent Aware

Participants who are in **rated programs** indicated they participate in Parent Aware to improve their programs and have a better quality program for children they serve, including those with special needs. Ratings elevate the stature of those working in the early care and education field, and give recognition for quality care. Parent Aware provides a marketing advantage, and another way to reach parents who are looking for child care. Some participated in Parent Aware to understand what the state means by quality, with the speculation that perhaps this will become a requirement in the future. Access to scholarships, grants and additional funding were cited.

Participants in programs that are **not rated but in the process of becoming rated** indicated they are joining Parent Aware for funding (specifically to address inability to raise rates for years in programs that are 100 percent funded by the Child Care Assistance Program). Also, to become better educated, to attract new parent customers, because this might be mandated in the future, because the rating promotes a professional stance for early educators, and to be competitive in comparison with other programs in the future.

One participant **not currently participating in Parent Aware** did participate in the pilot of Parent Aware, and received a Four-Star rating. However, since that time, she has sought and received national accreditation. She believes that having a Parent Aware rating in addition to the national accreditation is not necessary, and has allowed the Parent Aware rating to expire. She indicated she may rejoin in the future.

Awareness of current incentives

When asked about their awareness of current incentives, and which played a role in their decisions to participate in Parent Aware, participants indicated:

Table 5. Responses to question: “Did the following incentives play a role in your decision to participate in Parent Aware?”

| Incentives | Aware of incentive | Incentive played a role in decision to participate |
|---|---------------------------|---|
| Higher Child Care Assistance rates | 11 | 7 |
| Quality improvement grant of \$500 prior to achieving rating, and \$1,000 grant to move up to Two or Three-Star level | 7 | 2 |
| Coaching | 11 | 1 |

The participants added another incentive that was not prompted by the facilitator. The participants felt strongly that this incentive played a big role in their decisions to participate: “for ourselves, for our programs, for the children”.

Possible future incentives

When asked if the following incentives were available to participate in Parent Aware, would it motivate them to do so, participants indicated:

Table 6. Responses to question: “If the following incentives were available, would it play a role in your decision to participate in Parent Aware?”

| Possible future incentives | Incentive would motivate them to participate |
|--|---|
| Per teacher/provider bonus for agreeing to stay in early childhood for at least two years | 12 |
| Higher levels of financial support for programs to reach higher quality improvement levels | 12 |
| Coaching and technical assistance tailored to meet the needs of diverse communities | 8 |

The coaching and technical assistance tailored to meet the needs of diverse communities option was particularly motivating for the focus group participants who were from diverse communities. Participants also shared that for programs that have difficulty raising their rates high enough to benefit from the higher rates for Three and Four-Star programs through the Child Care Assistance Program, the per teacher/provider bonus would be more motivating for them.

Expert observation

Currently, only child care center classrooms serving preschool-aged children are observed by an expert on child-adult interactions. Participants were asked the following two questions: Would you be more or less likely to participate if your program or setting were observed too? If you are a teacher in a center in preschool classrooms, do you support adding observation for other classrooms and other rated programs?

Participants from programs that achieved a national accreditation felt it would be redundant to require them to receive an observation in order to obtain a Parent Aware rating. However, all agreed that observation in and of itself is beneficial, and all programs should have observation, either through Parent Aware or through accreditation. Those that had been observed through Parent Aware thought it was helpful. The suggestion was that the coaches who are already familiar with the programs should be the observers (rather than an additional third party), and that the observers need to be knowledgeable about child development. The purpose of the observation should be for improvement purposes, not as part of the rating process.

Child Care Assistance Program

Eight of the participants serve families receiving child care assistance; reasons why included the economy, the value that all children deserve quality care, and specific program missions to serve children in poverty and address the achievement gap. Two participants did not serve families receiving child care assistance, stating their programs just don't get families participating in this program. Two participants did not respond.

When asked if they would be more likely to serve children receiving child care assistance if the reimbursement rates at each star level were higher, 11 indicated they would. Participants suggested that the question be rephrased to ask "Would we be more likely to remain in business if Child Care Assistance rates were higher?" One participant shared that she was not able to raise her rates high enough to benefit from the higher reimbursement rates for higher quality through Child Care Assistance.

Other concerns, comments and advice

Some participants shared concerns about what counts for **training and education** required by Parent Aware. Several specific examples:

- A family child care provider with a four-year degree in early childhood is told that since it did not occur within the past six – 12 months, she must take child development classes.
- A family child care provider with a Child Development Associate who graduated from high school in another country is asked to provide a copy of a high school diploma, but cannot do so because of social disruption in her country of origin. Her Child Development Associate degree does not count in place of a high school diploma.
- A family child care provider discussed hiring a very part time employee to provide coverage while she did enrichment activities with some of the children in her care. That part-time person is required by Parent Aware to have all of the training that she has.
- The training required for center staff is costly and it is hard to come up with the funds needed for training, even if training costs will ultimately be reimbursed. Cash flow is tight for nonprofits and family child care providers.

Some participants shared frustrations related to the **application and renewal process**. These include:

- Parent Aware indicators are sometimes updated. When this happens, programs must change to meet the new requirements, which can be frustrating.
- The Parent Aware rating process requires programs to submit copies of documents as evidence they are meeting an indicator. Sometimes the same documents are evidence for multiple indicators. The current process requires copies of those documents to appear in more than one place. The process would be easier for programs if the process allowed them to reference a document inserted for another indicator as evidence of other indicators in the process.
- Participants felt that accreditation was as strong as or stronger than a Four-Star Parent Aware rating; therefore, accredited programs should be able to receive an automatic Four-Star rating.
- Currently, programs that achieve a Four-Star rating are not eligible for funding to help them improve their quality level, while programs that achieve a Three-Star rating are

eligible for \$1,000 to help move up to a Four-Star rating. Participants voiced concern that this encouraged programs to try for a Three-Star rating even if they could be rated at four stars so that they qualify for these funds. This issue could be resolved by providing bonuses to programs with Four-Star ratings.

Other issues, comments and suggestions:

- Parent Aware should provide bonuses for Four-Star programs to keep them in business
- Parent Aware helps us as a profession
- Extra funds have helped us provide better programming for children
- Provide scholarships for younger children too.

Appendix C. Counties by Percent of Children Receiving Child Care Assistance Ages Birth – 5 and Not Yet in Kindergarten Enrolled in Parent Aware Participating Programs as of June 30, 2014

Table 1. Counties meeting goal of 65% or higher

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014¹⁸ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Anoka | Metropolitan | 2013 | 66% | 1,000 |
| Itasca | Rural | 2012 | 71% | 85 |

Table 2. Counties at or above baseline of 34%, but below goal of 65%

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014¹⁹ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Carlton | Metropolitan | 2014 | 49% | 111 |
| Carver | Metropolitan | 2015 | 59% | 105 |
| Chippewa | Rural | 2013 | 57% | 23 |
| Chisago | Metropolitan | 2015 | 34% | 76 |
| Dakota | Metropolitan | 2013 | 58% | 1,064 |
| Hennepin | Metropolitan | 2012 | 35% | 5,598 |
| Mahnomen | Rural | 2012 | 50% | 22 |
| Meeker | Rural | 2013 | 42% | 26 |
| Nobles | Micropolitan | 2013 | 56% | 45 |
| Olmsted | Metropolitan | 2013 | 43% | 766 |
| Polk | Metropolitan | 2013 | 38% | 86 |
| Ramsey | Metropolitan | 2012 | 46% | 2,502 |
| Red Lake | Rural | 2014 | 50% | 8 |

¹⁸ Monthly enrollment of children receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware rated programs was measured two months prior to June 2014 to allow sufficient time for provider bills and payments to be submitted and captured in the Child Care Assistance Program data system.

¹⁹ Monthly enrollment of children receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware rated programs was measured two months prior to June 2014 to allow sufficient time for provider bills and payments to be submitted and captured in the Child Care Assistance Program data system.

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014¹⁹ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Scott | Metropolitan | 2013 | 54% | 241 |
| Washington | Metropolitan | 2014 | 55% | 352 |

Table 3. Counties between 10% and 33%

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014²⁰ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Aitkin | Rural | 2015 | 10% | 48 |
| Benton | Metropolitan | 2014 | 10% | 83 |
| Brown | Micropolitan | 2014 | 23% | 93 |
| Cass | Micropolitan | 2013 | 21% | 107 |
| Clearwater | Rural | 2012 | 23% | 31 |
| Crow Wing | Micropolitan | 2014 | 11% | 311 |
| Faribault | Rural | 2015 | 26% | 34 |
| Goodhue | Micropolitan | 2015 | 16% | 97 |
| Isanti | Metropolitan | 2014 | 26% | 76 |
| Kandiyohi | Micropolitan | 2014 | 17% | 110 |
| Lyon | Micropolitan | 2014 | 15% | 139 |
| Mille Lacs | Rural | 2014 | 30% | 71 |
| Morrison | Rural | 2014 | 25% | 56 |
| Nicollet | Metropolitan | 2012 | 14% | 127 |
| Norman | Rural | 2014 | 14% | 22 |
| Pine | Rural | 2013 | 30% | 67 |
| St. Louis | Metropolitan | 2015 | 30% | 712 |
| Stearns | Metropolitan | 2013 | 22% | 593 |
| Steele | Micropolitan | 2015 | 14% | 191 |
| Wabasha | Metropolitan | 2015 | 18% | 34 |
| Wadena | Rural | 2013 | 29% | 56 |
| Watonwan | Rural | 2013 | 19% | 37 |

²⁰ Monthly enrollment of children receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware rated programs was measured two months prior to June 2014 to allow sufficient time for provider bills and payments to be submitted and captured in the Child Care Assistance Program data system.

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014²⁰ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Wilkin | Micropolitan | 2015 | 12% | 17 |
| Wright | Metropolitan | 2014 | 15% | 136 |

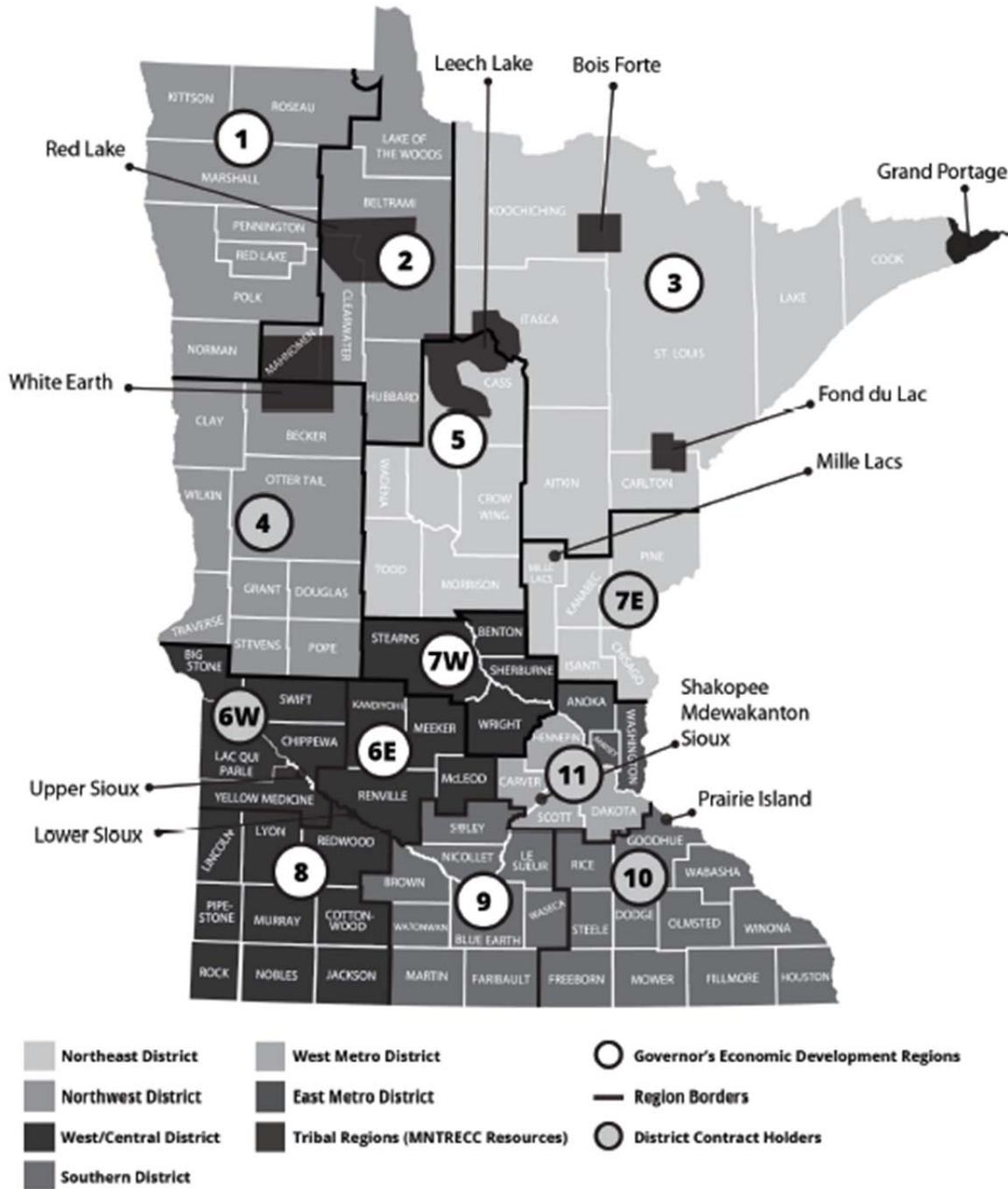
Table 4. Counties below 10%

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014²¹ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Becker | Rural | 2012 | 8% | 88 |
| Beltrami | Micropolitan | 2014 | 1% | 195 |
| Big Stone | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 13 |
| Blue Earth | Metropolitan | 2012 | 5% | 267 |
| Clay | Metropolitan | 2015 | 9% | 207 |
| Cook | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 8 |
| Cottonwood | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 26 |
| Dodge | Metropolitan | 2015 | 0% | 65 |
| Douglas | Micropolitan | 2014 | 4% | 149 |
| Fillmore | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 35 |
| Freeborn | Micropolitan | 2015 | 0% | 110 |
| Grant | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 8 |
| Houston | Metropolitan | 2015 | 0% | 50 |
| Hubbard | Rural | 2015 | 6% | 93 |
| Jackson | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 42 |
| Kanabec | Rural | 2015 | 4% | 28 |
| Kittson | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 6 or fewer |
| Koochiching | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 59 |
| Lac qui Parle | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 6 or fewer |
| Lake | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 23 |
| Lake of the Woods | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 6 or fewer |

²¹ Monthly enrollment of children receiving Child Care Assistance in Parent Aware rated programs was measured two months prior to June 2014 to allow sufficient time for provider bills and payments to be submitted and captured in the Child Care Assistance Program data system.

| County name | County type | Year full rating process became available in county | Percent children birth – 5 in Parent Aware program as of June 30, 2014 | Number of children receiving child care assistance in June 2014²¹ |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|---|
| Le Sueur | Rural | 2015 | 3% | 34 |
| Lincoln | Rural | 2014 | 0% | 6 or fewer |
| Marshall | Rural | 2014 | 0% | 10 |
| Martin | Micropolitan | 2015 | 0% | 102 |
| McLeod | Micropolitan | 2015 | 0% | 74 |
| Mower | Micropolitan | 2014 | 1% | 143 |
| Murray | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 9 |
| Otter Tail | Micropolitan | 2014 | 3% | 91 |
| Pennington | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 26 |
| Pipestone | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 47 |
| Pope | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 17 |
| Redwood | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 30 |
| Renville | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 30 |
| Rice | Micropolitan | 2014 | 4% | 126 |
| Rock | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 22 |
| Roseau | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 23 |
| Sherburne | Metropolitan | 2013 | 0% | 104 |
| Sibley | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 22 |
| Stevens | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 32 |
| Swift | Rural | 2014 | 0% | 30 |
| Todd | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 22 |
| Traverse | Rural | 2015 | 0% | 12 |

APPENDIX D. Map of Child Care Aware Statewide Service Areas²²



²² This map was updated by the Child Care Aware System in November 2014. Child Care Aware agencies help Minnesota families find quality child care and support professional growth of child care professionals. Local services are delivered by an agency in each region, and some services are coordinated across multiple regions by one agency in each district.