Child Care Operations During Vermont’s COVID-19 Response - UPDATED

On Monday, April 27, the secretary of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, which oversees child care in the state, announced during a press conference that child care programs will likely be allowed to reopen to non-essential workers sometime in June. This is still preliminary information—the state is working to develop concrete information to share with child care programs and families—and is dependent on Vermont continuing to meet certain milestones related to reduced cases of COVID-19.

Vermont Governor Phil Scott initially ordered all child care programs not providing care for the children of essential workers or other qualifying families to close on March 18, 2020 and remain closed through April 5, 2020. On March 27, 2020, Governor Scott issued a new executive order directing schools to remain dismissed through the end of the 2019–2020 school year and extended the closure period for child care programs until further notice. The governor’s executive order acknowledges that child care is critical to both Vermont’s COVID-19 response and the state’s economy, and the state is working to ensure that Vermont’s early care and education system remains supported through the extended closure period.

During the closure period, child care programs that are able are asked to provide emergency child care to essential workers. All other child care programs should remain closed.

If you are immunocompromised, reside with someone who is compromised, are over 60 years of age, pregnant, the parent of an infant, or have other mental health or medical needs that could be impacted by COVID-19, you are encouraged not to work. It is important to protect your health and the health of your family.

While no solutions are the perfect fit for all programs, there are a number of different options available to child care programs regarding how to handle business operations during this time. This document contains a summary of information and resources to help you navigate the COVID-19 closure and emergency child care period, including an overview of different child care business operation options that may help you sustain your business during this time. This document is not intended to be a substitute for reviewing the guidance provided by the state. It will be updated on a regular basis as new guidance and resources are developed. See the next page for a table of contents to help you navigate to the information you’re seeking.
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FAQ for all Child Care Programs
The Child Development Division (CDD) has updated its Frequently Asked Questions document for all child care programs. The updated document includes answers to questions about opening or closing a program during the COVID-19 crisis, child care licensing, professional development, and much, much more.

Information for Child Care Programs Remaining Open (Emergency Child Care Providers)
The state of Vermont has updated its guidance document for child care programs and schools that are providing emergency child care for essential personnel. One main update is that parents/guardians are able to self-assess whether they qualify as essential personnel. CDD recommends that priority be given to children with parents or guardians who are health care workers, first responders, and government employees who are helping to coordinate the COVID-19 response.

Health & Safety Information
The Vermont Department of Health has released updated guidance for child care programs and schools providing emergency child care for essential personnel. It includes clarification on group sizes, how to screen children and families for symptoms of COVID-19, and specific requirements for caring for children in emergency child care settings.

Let’s Grow Kids also worked with the Vermont Department of Health and CDD to host a webinar on health and safety practices for programs providing emergency child care. You can watch a recording of the webinar here.

Attendance and Enrollment
During the emergency child care provision period, programs are allowed to enroll new children using a modified enrollment procedure. More information on the modified enrollment process is available from CDD through the licensor-on-duty hotline (802-241-0837).

Supplemental Payments
Child care programs that provide emergency child care for essential workers will receive a $125 supplemental payment per child, per week during the emergency child care period. This does not need to be applied to tuition. More information is available from CDD’s guidance document and its updated FAQ document.

Resources for programs providing emergency school-age child care
Vermont Afterschool has a toolkit available for child care programs and schools offering child care for school-age children of essential personnel.
Program Closure Information & Resources
This section provides more information on how to develop a closure strategy, how to track important information during the closure period, and resources that may provide assistance with operating costs, utilities, and mortgage or rent payments.

Determining an Operations Strategy for the Closure Period
Based on the state’s Child Care Stabilization Payments Program, child care programs have a variety of options available to them regarding how to manage operations during the extended closure periods. Programs across the state are assessing their individual situations and considering the needs of their families, staff, and community. Some considerations include:

- Program policies—current and potential temporary adjustments
- Fiscal implications for the program
- Financial implications for families
- If your program serves families of essential employees.

It is important to notify your families of the closure, your general operations plan, and your policies regarding payments during the closure period. It is also important to keep families up to date on any changes in policies or plans.

Business Practices During the Closure Period
During the closure period, it’s important to continue to actively manage your program. If your program is not providing emergency child care, you have several options, including, but not limited to:

- Participating in Vermont’s Child Care Stabilization Payment Program. This program asks child care programs to continue to pay their staff during the closure period. The state will cover 50% of any enrolled child’s regular tuition or co-payment, and programs may ask families to pay up to the remaining 50%. More information is available in the Stabilization Payment Program section of this document.
- Furlough staff during the closure period.
- Lay off staff during the closure period.
- Not participate in the Stabilization Payment Program but continue to pay staff during the closure period.

More information and resources are available through SharedServicesVT.org and from this resource created by Gallagher, Flynn, & Company LLC, and through LGK’s child care COVID-19 business operations webinars to help you determine your program’s strategy or make changes to your strategy.

Once you determine how your program will move forward (or how you will make changes to your plan), remember to:

- Document all revenue losses, such as lost tuition, and all continued expenses, such as rent/mortgage, utilities, insurance, wages and benefits, etc. Documentation is important when applying for state and federal emergency funding support programs.
- Communicate with families—provide clear information in a format that works for the families you serve.
- Support for staff—maintain regular scheduled communication, provide clarity on program status, and share resources.
Utility & Rent/Mortgage/Lease Supports
Some utility companies, mortgage lenders, and landlords have put emergency measures into place to businesses and families during the pandemic.

- **Utilities**
  - A number of Vermont utility providers will not pursue disconnections during Vermont’s COVID-19 response period. If you are concerned about your ability to continue to pay your utility bill, please contact your utility provider(s) to discuss your options.

- **Mortgage and Rent/Lease Payments**
  - Contact your lender or landlord immediately regarding your situation. Some programs have had success requesting payments be waived or reduced, or structuring an alternative payment plan.
  - Additional support may be available through the National Housing Conference.
  - See the Payment Protection Program Loans information in this document for more details on forgivable loan options that can help you make your mortgage, rent, or lease payments.

Supports for Staff
If you are unable to continue to pay your staff through the Vermont Child Care Stabilization Payment Program and/or through the Paycheck Protection Program, the CARES Act has expanded unemployment benefits for workers laid off due to the COVID-19 emergency. The Bipartisan Policy Center put together this resource specifically on expanded unemployment insurance for early childhood educators.

More information on resources that can support your staff during the closure period can be found in our “Information for Families” handout.

Financial Supports
COVID-19 Child Care Stabilization Payments for Private Tuition
The state of Vermont created a program to help child care programs whose families are unable to pay their regular tuition during the COVID-19 response period.

During the initial closure period from March 18, 2020 through April 5, 2020, the state of Vermont will cover regular tuition not paid to a child care program on behalf of a family. To receive these payments, child care programs must:

- Request families to pay their full, regular tuition or CCFAP co-pay;
- Pay all of the program staff their full salary--for registered family child care homes, this is the owner/provider;
- Provide required information to CDD for processing of payments; and
- Maintain a slot for the child of the enrolled family regardless of whether the payment comes from the state or the family.

During the extended closure period, beginning on April 6, 2020, the state of Vermont will cover half of any regular tuition on behalf of a family. To receive these payments, child care programs must:
• Ensure slots are maintained for children of families who pay at least 50% of their regular tuition and/or co-pay;
• Pay all program staff full salary; and
• Provide required information to CDD for processing of payments.

If a family is unable to pay 50% of their regular tuition or co-pay, programs may negotiate with families to pay less than 50% to hold their spot. If your program allows a family to pay less than 50% of their regular tuition or co-payment, the state will still only reimburse 50%. If you are unable to provide a scholarship or other financial support to a family, you may want to share information about Vermont’s Child Care Financial Assistance Program with them. A family may be eligible for up to 12 weeks of child care financial assistance while searching for work and support them in paying to hold their spot during the closure period.

If a family is unable to pay their share of their tuition or chooses not to continue making payments and unenrolls their child during the extended closure period, a child care program may request 100% of the tuition (up to $360 per week) be covered through the Stabilization Payment Program. The child care program must certify that the family has unenrolled and no longer has a slot in the program. Families may be added to the program’s waitlist for a slot when normal operations resume.

To receive reimbursement, child care programs need to provide CDD with a copy of the message or letter sent to all families requesting tuition payments during the closure period; a copy of the program’s tuition structure or rates; and a completed invoice form.

To help you share information about the stabilization program with your families, Ken Schatz, commissioner of the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and Steven Berbeco, deputy commissioner of the DCF CDD, have written an explanation letter to families. Click here and here to view sample letters that you can modify and share with your families to accompany the DCF letter.

For more information, review CDD’s guidance document, frequently asked questions for the program, and its updated FAQ document on financial support options for child care programs and families. Additional questions can be sent to katie.lavallee@vermont.gov. If you have specific questions about stabilization program payments, please contact Sarah Truckle at 802-241-0673 or Sarah.Truckle@vermont.gov.

Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) Payments
As of March 16, 2020, CCFAP payments will continue during the closure period and will be based on children enrolled to attend and not on actual attendance. Please refer to the special closure period guidance manual for how to submit CCFAP attendance for child absences related to COVID-19. You can also review CDD’s updated FAQ document.

Act 166 – Universal Pre-K Tuition Payments
During the closure period, programs will continue to receive Act 166 UPK tuition payments for children who are enrolled in the program. The Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services issued initial guidance on March 24, 2020 on how this works for early care and
education programs that remain closed during the closure period and those that are open to provide emergency child care for essential workers. Updated guidance was issued on April 13, 2020 with more information on continuation of payments based on enrollment vs attendance and continuity of learning for pre-K students for the remainder of the 2019–2020 academic year.

VSECU Member Emergency Loans
Let’s Grow Kids, in partnership with the Vermont Community Foundation and the Vermont State Employees Credit Union (VSECU), has established a loan fund for early childhood educators to access during this time of financial uncertainty. The Vermont Community Foundation has supported VSECU in expanding its Member Emergency Loan program to all Vermonters who have or will experience a disruption to their income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and don’t have the financial capacity to care for themselves or their families.

Let’s Grow Kids is expanding this investment to include funds specifically reserved for early educators working in regulated child care programs with children ages birth to five who have experienced a disruption to their household income. Additionally, Let’s Grow Kids is offering to cover the following expenses for qualified early educators: the $25 membership fee for non-VSECU members and a borrower’s first loan payment.

For specific details on the loan program, including how to find out if you qualify, please visit VSECU’s Member Emergency Loan web page or call 802-371-5162 to speak with a VSECU member service consultant.

To be eligible for the program, you will need to demonstrate proof of employment with a regulated child care provider for children ages birth to five, including a letter from your employer and the program’s BFIS Provider ID, which can be found by searching the BFIS Provider Directory by Provider Name.

Small Business Administration Paycheck Protection Program Loans
The Paycheck Protection Program is designed to help small businesses keep their workers on the payroll during the COVID-19 emergency response. Congress has just approved additional funding for the program.

When additional funding is made available, programs can apply through any existing SBA 7(a) lender or through any federally insured depository institution, federally insured credit union, and Farm Credit System institution that is participating.

Small Business Administration Economic Injury Disaster Loans
For programs in need of immediate financial assistance, the Small Business Administration’s Economic Injury Disaster Loans offers up to $2 million in assistance for a small business. To learn more about the process for accessing the SBA’s COVID-19 disaster relief lending program, visit https://www.sba.gov/disaster-assistance/coronavirus-covid-19, call 1-800-659-2955 or email disastercustomerservice@sba.gov.

More information on Small Business Administration loan options and other national supports for child care and early education programs is available through this resource from the Center
for Law and Social Policy and through [this podcast](#) from the Center for Economic Development for center-based child care programs and [this podcast](#) from CED for home-based child care programs.

**Engaging with Families During the Closure Period**

During the closure period, you can continue to be a resource to your families to help them navigate family challenges, provide resources and information, and support the continued healthy development of the children who attend your program.

- During the closure period, it’s still possible to apply the principles of the Strengthening Families Framework. In times of uncertainty, the teacher/program and parent relations are vital in preventing child abuse and neglect. Check in with families; offer concrete supports such as [information on resources](#) from DCF, child development and [parent resources](#); share ideas for building social connections while physically distancing; and monitor and promote parent resilience.
- Continue to communicate with families
  - Encourage two-way communication with families
    - Ask families to share something from their day and support families in understanding what children need and how to maintain their child’s relationship with their teacher during the closure period.
    - Respond with resources or suggested activities.
  - Choose at least one social media format to use to be in touch with families each day
    - Instagram, Facebook (create a private page for only your families), YouTube, Zoom, or email
    - Use your social media to share information on things to explore each day
    - Share videos of staff reading stories or set up a regularly-scheduled virtual story/circle/music and movement time(s) so that children can remain connected to their teachers and help families have a few minutes to take a breath.
    - Social media examples from other child care programs:
      - Pine Forest Story Time
      - Montpelier Children’s House Morning Meeting
      - Little Red House is using 30-minute videos
      - Burlington Children’s Space has created a private Facebook group to share activities
  - Let parents/guardians know that you can still be a resource during the closure period. Let them know they can ask questions about their children’s behavior, ways to help children pursue interest areas, etc. Some key topics to flag for families include:
    - Adjusting to new routines
    - New behaviors never encountered before as children adjust to new situations and experience powerful emotions.
- Additional resources for engaging with families and remote teaching are available through [Shared Services VT](#).
Learn & Connect with Other Early Childhood Educators

During our state and nation’s response to COVID-19, there are many groups working to support child care programs and early childhood educators through webinars, resources, and new peer networks.

- Join the Strengthening Families National Network Facebook group to connect with others in the field, share how your program is adapting to these times, and find out what others are doing to support children and families.
- Shared Services VT regularly updates its list of professional development opportunities (including many free options).

Ongoing Supports

Whether your program has shifted to remote operations or is providing emergency child care for essential personnel, you still have access to many supports and resources in Vermont’s early care and education system.

Northern Lights
You can still reach out to your Northern Lights at CCV resource advisor with questions about professional development.

Children’s Integrated Services
CIS continues to be a valuable resource for your program and families during the closure period. Click here to find out how to contact your CIS team coordinator. DCF also has specific COVID-19 information for child care CIS services providers.

STARS
The STARS office is still conducting work as they are able, but they have made adjustments during the COVID-19 response. The team has suspended due date requirements for both programs that are open to provide emergency child care for essential personnel and programs that have closed. The STARS office has also suspended program assessments until after normal day-to-day program operations have resumed. While the STARS team won’t conduct any assessments during the COVID-19 response, you may still request to have an assessment scheduled once normal operations resume.
Frequently Asked Questions

CDD has updated its frequently asked questions resource to help answer questions submitted by early childhood educators and child care programs.

Help & Support

If you have a question that is not addressed on this page, please contact the LGK team at info@letsgrowkids.org and we will help to connect you to the best resource or try to update this page with new content that addresses your question.