

Pa. agency offers more food aid to low-income children

By Curtis Skinner, Inquirer Staff Writer | POSTED: JUNE 25, 2013

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has changed course on a decade-old policy that kept millions of dollars in federal food subsidies from low-income children who are in child care with relatives and neighbors.

Advocates estimate as many as 38,000 of the state's neediest children could benefit from the recent changes to the federal Children and Adult Care Food Program.

Starting next month, relatives and neighbors providing state-approved child-care services to low-income children will be able to apply for the aid. An Education Department official estimated the program could bring in \$3 million more each month for the state's child-care system, depending on how many providers sign up.

Qualifying relatives or neighbors would receive an average of \$1,000 a year per child. Call 1-855-252-6325 for more information.

The program has long been open only to licensed child-care operators - such as family day-care homes and child-care centers. But after years of lobbying from child-health advocates, the program will be expanded for the first time in more than a decade.

"We see this as an important program because it would give kids of low income access to nutrition to healthy food," said Kate Scully, policy analyst at the Center for Hunger Free Communities at Drexel University.

Extending the program will improve the nutrition and health of these low-income children. A policy brief by the nonpartisan research center Children's HealthWatch, in 2010 showed that children participating in the federal program were far less likely to be in fair or poor health or to be hospitalized and were more likely to have a healthy height and weight.

Relatives and neighbors are already the lowest-paid providers of child care, advocates say.

"We, as advocates, made the case on policy grounds that it makes no sense, that it deprived kids of good nutrition," said Jonathan Stein, general counsel at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia.

Asked why the state hadn't already authorized providing the aid for relatives and neighbors, department spokesman Timothy Eller said a pilot program was started more than a decade ago but was cancelled due to "concerns related to health, safety, and sanitation standards." Providers will have to apply through a sponsor. The state will start accepting applications July 1 and reimbursements can begin Oct. 1, the start of the federal fiscal year.