



A&M EDUCATION

# Waitlist Implementation for State Benefit Programs

## *Lessons From Early Learning and Child Care*

As states strive to enhance access to affordable early learning and child care and contemplate the implementation of universal pre-kindergarten, a troubling trend has emerged — the rise of waitlists. These lists represent more than just an unfortunate enrollment step; they are a stark reminder of the systemic gaps in child care availability and funding. They've become increasingly necessary to manage demand for affordable and accessible child care. When faced with the decision to implement a waitlist to address limited resources in the early childhood education space, it is important for states to consider how to thoughtfully and equitably introduce and manage them. This effort isn't trivial, and the consequences of poor implementation can be obvious and painful — inequitable program practices, families without care, angry constituents, frustrated agency support staff — just to name a few.

Below are some practical steps, informed by our hands-on experience as well as research across states, that may improve the success of a state's waitlist implementation. Together, these actions help support families, providers and partners in understanding the need for a waitlist, how it will impact them, and what role they can play in continuing to connect families to services.

### Practical Steps for Thoughtful Waitlist Rollout

**Understanding Supply, Demand and the Bigger Plan** – Planning waitlist implementation starts with understanding the gap in what is required to adequately serve demand. Leaders should clearly identify what lies ahead, as implementation should occur within the context of a broader plan and timeline aimed at eliminating the waitlist. Begin this process by asking a series of strategic and operational questions such as: Are there specific age-categories in higher demand than others? How does this correlate to the state's supply of available child care? How are these market changes different from what had been planned? The answers may point to trends or practices that could take some time to address. Ideally, parallel activities are or can take place to grow supply or motivate providers to increase access. In the meantime, a sense of the waitlist's expected duration will inform planning and initial messaging to providers and families.

State leaders may also note that the use of waitlists is not unique to early learning and child care programs. Benefit programs are routinely changed and funding is regularly adjusted in programs ranging from special education and K12 wraparound services to affordable housing. Factors such as seasonal fluctuations in demand, regional employment growth, emergency events — all can trigger a demand/supply imbalance. Any program leader looking to introduce or change a waitlist approach would benefit from insight on implementation.

By capably managing access for limited supply at the state level, lead agencies can model best practices to minimize inequitable, individualized waitlist practices at the provider level.

**Operations** – Establishing a sound strategy and operational foundation for launching and managing a program waitlist is critical to success. From policy formulation and process design to rollout and monitoring, a designated leader or working group should map out the different user experiences and identify impacted policies, processes, systems, tools and data to implement the waitlist. The closer a state is to needing the waitlist, the faster the working group must progress through these steps.

- Regularly convene interagency representatives such as programs, IT, field operations, etc., to design the waitlist's functionality, considering rules such as how families get added, how the waitlist moves, what exceptions there may be, etc.
- Map out the family, provider and agency field staff “journey” to navigate the waitlist and identify all the operational elements that need to be addressed to support the target user experience. States will likely identify required updates to processes (e.g., managing the waitlist, intake of waitlist feedback); tools and systems (e.g., updating online applications); roles and responsibilities (e.g., monitoring and reporting waitlist performance); and data (e.g., average waiting time).
- Develop a work plan with assigned resources and make necessary operational changes (and set contingency plans).
- Train eligibility workers on waitlist functionality and equip all customer-facing/call center staff with talking points to explain the waitlist to families and direct them to other affordable child care programs offered in the applicants' community.
- Establish key indicators, a performance baseline, and reporting to monitor for issues and inform continuous improvement.

**Partner Alignment** – Implementing a waitlist has implications for a state's full early learning and care ecosystem, so it's critical to bring partners, including providers, CCR&Rs, hubs and local agencies, along with you in the change. By managing access for limited supply at the state level, lead agencies can model best practices to minimize inequitable, individualized waitlist practices at the provider level, which are often unregulated and misaligned with broader system goals for ensuring equitable access to care for all families. Educating partners about the prioritization of families on the waitlist is key: A successful change management strategy will empower partners to help you manage the waitlist more effectively.

- Socialize the need for a waitlist and plans for waitlist implementation with trusted partners throughout the early learning ecosystem to build a sense of partnership before public announcement.
- Reach out to and coordinate with alternative care providers such as Head Start or early pre-K with local education agencies, as they may be a more appropriate option for families and/or may need to prepare for new inquiries that will be coming their way.
- Prepare talking points, FAQs and resources for partners to equip them to support families in understanding the need for a waitlist and how it will function. Equip all provider touch points within the agency with these same resources so they are ready to take questions from providers.
- Check in with partners throughout the state before and after the waitlist is implemented to identify and address pain points, modify communications to meet the needs of families, and provide targeted support.



**Family Engagement and Supports** – Distributing clear, timely and consistent communications about the waitlist is essential to orient a diverse set of stakeholders to how the waitlist works and why it exists. Establishing a successful family engagement plan includes developing key messages and distributing tailored communications to core audiences with enough time for communities and families to respond.

- Conduct a strategic communications session with agency leadership and key interagency partners to establish consistent key messages and identify necessary communications to support waitlist implementation.
- Tailor communications to key audiences. Focus on appropriate reading level, translation and other accessibility requirements.
- Create a webpage with FAQs for families, information on how to join the waitlist, and connections to other early learning and child care programs they could be eligible for. Create a way to collect feedback from families and eligibility staff to provide input on what’s going well and what’s not working.
- Issue public announcement about the waitlist with enough lead time to allow families to apply before the waitlist goes into effect, and state criteria for prioritization on the waitlist. Provide positive updates, highlighting successes and also, if needed, improvement plans.
- Identify alternative, culturally-responsive supports for families that are not immediately eligible for services. Communicate the availability of these resources and the benefits of participation.

**Impact Analysis**

Impact on families will vary; however, it should not be a surprise. If the data is available, run an analysis in parallel to waitlist design to identify how rules impact your target users, noting particularly problematic cases that might need special consideration, such as families who are out of work and waiting on placement.

**How A&M Can Help**

Whether your state is preparing for seasonal growth (e.g., summer school break) or unexpectedly facing a coming mismatch of supply and demand, there’s a good chance an agency team will have to manage the design and implementation of a waitlist. The waitlist should be treated as a service to be managed with care, so that funds continue to be directed to support child care for families most in need.

A&M has assisted states and localities to successfully design and implement waitlists in consideration of complex agency, partner and family needs. We are able to draw on our experience in process design, change management, strategic communications and executive governance in the public sector to support states in delivering service in a challenging environment. We would be pleased to assist your state.

**Key Contacts:**



**Erin Kenny**  
Managing Director  
Seattle, Washington  
  
+1 206 664 9000  
[ekenny@alvarezandmarsal.com](mailto:ekenny@alvarezandmarsal.com)



**Ann Volk**  
Senior Director  
San Francisco, California  
  
+1 415 481 1484  
[avolk@alvarezandmarsal.com](mailto:avolk@alvarezandmarsal.com)



**Caitlin Molina**  
Senior Director  
New York, NY  
  
+1 401 585 5499  
[cmolina@alvarezandmarsal.com](mailto:cmolina@alvarezandmarsal.com)

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