A photograph of a smiling woman with dark, curly hair hugging a young child with curly hair. They are outdoors in a grassy field with trees in the background. The woman is wearing a brown top, and the child is wearing a light blue shirt.

Focus Group Findings: Improving California Work
Opportunity and responsibility to Kids
(CalWORKs) Child Care

August 27, 2025

CDSS
CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES



Agenda

- Overview of CalWORKs Child Care and Consolidation Project
- Focus Group Findings
- Early Childhood Policy Council (ECPC) Panel Discussion
- Focus Group Recommendations
- ECPC Panel Discussion



CalWORKs Child Care

- Supportive service of the CalWORKs program
- In FY 2023-24, 138,751 children received CalWORKs Child Care in California
- Operated in all 58 counties



CalWORKs Child Care Access

“...just knowing I have that in place, a system in place where you know I can work a full-time job. I can go to school. You know...my family pay may fluctuate depending on income, but just knowing that I have that, and I don't have to pay full price for child care.”

“I don't think that I could be doing school and working if I didn't have this assistance to help pay for child care.”

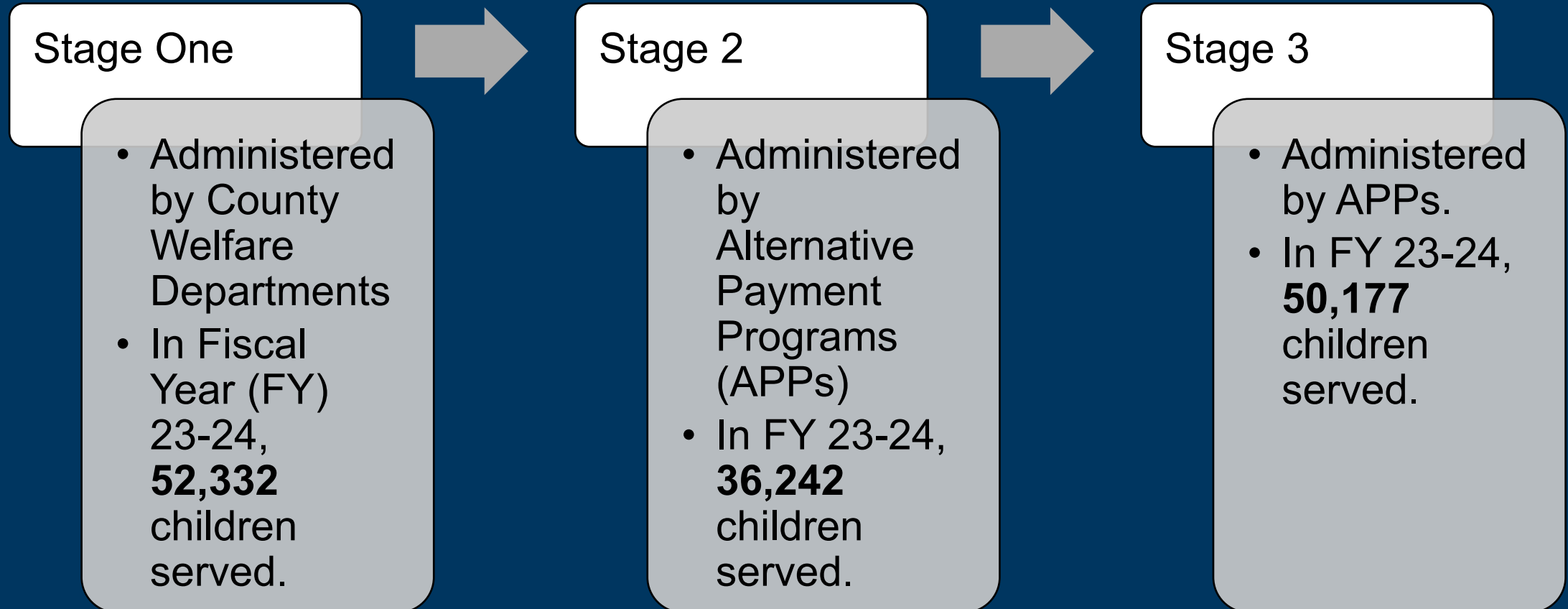
“I'm grateful that there [are] quite a few providers to choose from. I'm also grateful that some of the nicer centers accept the vouchers.”



Project History

- The Master Plan for Early Learning and Care (MPELC) recommends consolidating the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) Child Care stages.
- Consolidation of the CalWORKs Child Care Stages was one objective in the transition of child care programs to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

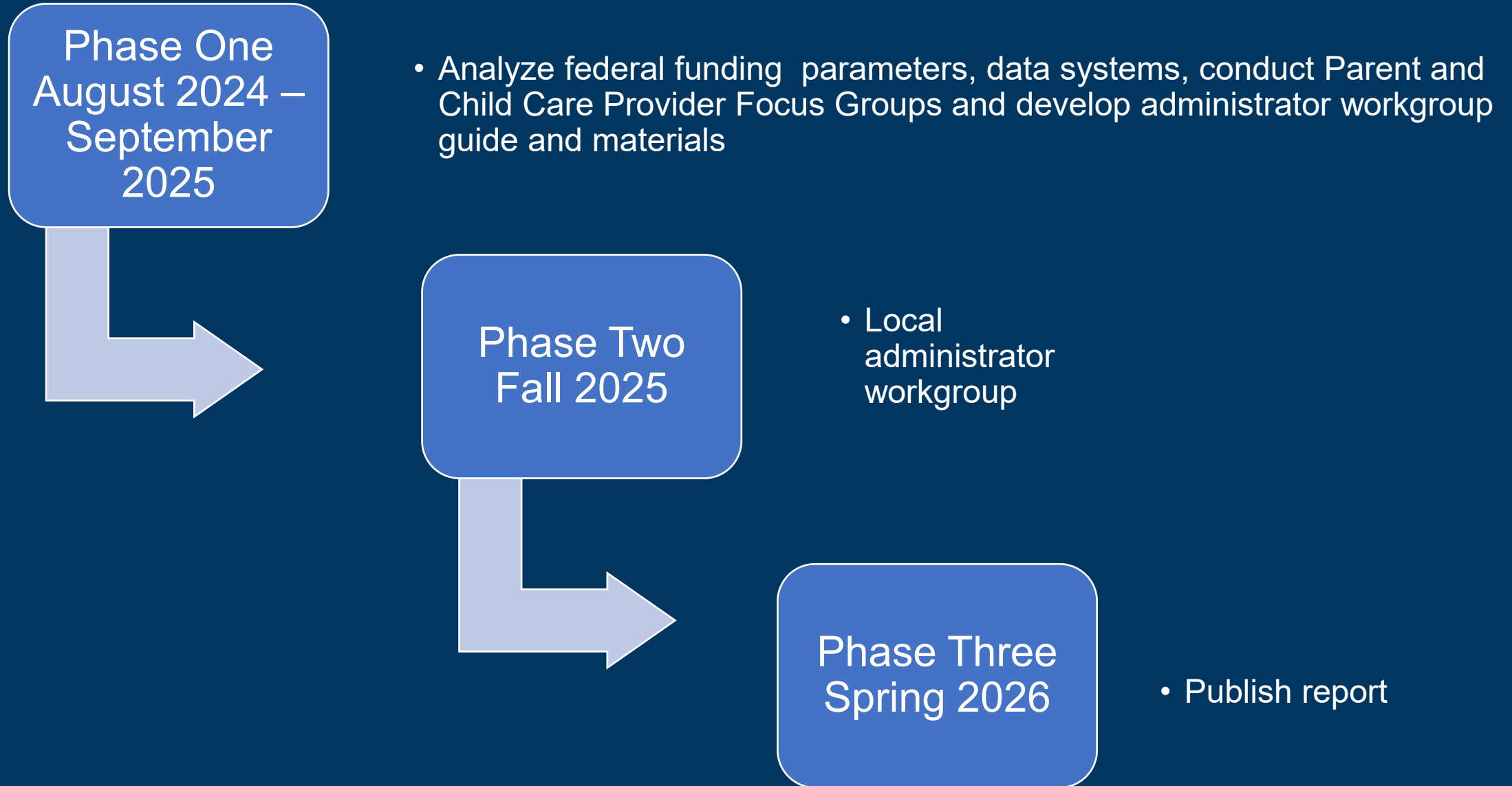
CalWORKs Child Care Stages



Examples of County Definitions of Stability

- **Alameda-** When the previously aided adult is no longer receiving CalWORKs cash assistance for at least 6 months.
- **Butte-** Meeting Welfare-to-Work program participation requirements in a work or training related program and making satisfactory progress for three consecutive months
- **Calaveras-** Three months with the same employer

Project Timeline



Family and Child Care Provider Focus Groups

- Conducted by WestED in May and June
- Advertisements sent through the Child Care Development Division listserv and shared by APPs and Counties
- 40 participants in 12 family focus groups
- 31 participants in eight child care provider focus groups





Family Focus Group Themes

- Family experiences differed based on the organization that issued the CalWORKs Child Care.
- Families who felt that they could easily connect with their child care coordinator had the most positive programmatic experiences.



Programmatic Challenges

- Information gaps concerning child care options
- Challenges making programmatic changes
- Challenges submitting paperwork
- Unclear understanding of the CalWORKs Child Care stages
- Unclear notices



Child Care Provider Focus Group Themes

- Child care provider experiences varied based on the organization that issued their CalWORKs Child Care subsidy payment
- Focus group members were committed to providing care to CalWORKs Child Care families, but were frustrated by operational barriers in the program.



Payment Issues

- Late or missing payments
- Delayed payments when families move to different agencies
- Outdated payment systems

"New providers don't know they have to chase the county every month. I learned that the hard way."



Unclear Communication

- Providers reported finding out about program changes from families
- Lack of clear communication around CalWORKs Child Care stages

“Nobody explains the difference between Stage One, Two, or Three. You have to figure it out on your own.”

ECPC Panel Discussion: 20 Minutes

As you listen to the findings from the focus groups, which of these experiences resonate with you? Are there other issues that families and child care provider experience with the CalWORKs Child Care program that you want to add?





Child Care Provider Recommendations for Improvement

- System modernization
- Clear onboarding Professional recognition as partners rather than administrative burdens
- Payment transparency
- Improved communication



Family Recommendations for Improvement

- Improved communication
- Individualized support from child care coordinators
- Process improvements
- Resource sharing
- Staff training

ECPC Panel Discussion: 25 Minutes

Did any of the recommendations from the focus groups speak to you? What would your recommendations be as solutions to these problems? How can the CalWORKs Child Care program be improved?



Thank you!

Please visit our CalWORKs
Child Care Consolidation
webpage to learn more about
the project:

CalWORKs Child Care
Consolidation

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