

Procedure for Obtaining An Initial License to Operate a Group Child Care Center

Under s. 48.65, Wis. Stats., programs providing care for 4 or more children under 7 years of age for less than 24 hours a day are required to be licensed through the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Chapter DCF 251 governs child care centers that provide care and supervision to 9 or more children under 7 years of age.

Please read through all licensing requirements below BEFORE you begin the pre-licensing process.

We strongly encourage all resources be accessed electronically. If you obtained a printed version of this inquiry packet and would like to access these resources online, please visit the department's website at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cclicensing/startcc>. If you cannot obtain forms or publications online that are not already included in this packet, please contact the Child Care Information Center at 1-800-362-7353.

PREPARATION

- Determine if you are eligible to operate a Child Care center before beginning any pre-licensing work.**
 - See the Potential Barriers to Obtaining a Child Care Center License ([English](#) / [Spanish](#)) document and [DCF 251.11](#) for basic eligibility requirements for operating a child care business.
 - Minimum eligibility requirements include a discussion of any existing records for the following:
 - Tax delinquency
 - Unemployment insurance contribution delinquency
 - Criminal background checks – check the list of [Barred Offenses for Regulated Child Care](#)
- Determine the community needs for your program of interest.**
 - Gather feedback from community members and local agencies.
 - Contact your local [Child Care Resource and Referral Agency \(CCR&R\)](#) for detailed information.
- Study the Licensing rule book for Group Child Care for details and resources.**
 - Read the [DCF 251 Licensing Rules for Group Child Care Centers with Commentary](#) manual on the DCF website.
 - If you cannot access this online resource, you may contact our Northern Regional Office at (715) 361-7700 for a printed copy of the licensing rules.
 - Review the [Initial Licensing Checklist - Group Child Care Centers](#) to understand requirements and prepare for a pre-licensing technical consultant.

PHYSICAL PREMISES

- Ensure that the building meets the Wisconsin Commercial Building Codes and other applicable licensing regulations.**
 - Obtain a building inspection. See [DCF 251.06 \(1\)](#) for details about inspection requirements. If you are purchasing a previously regulated child care facility, you must complete a new building inspection.
 - See [DCF 251.06](#) for building and room requirements for a licensed group child care center.
 - If your building is not served by a public water system, request a well inspection and water test for lead, bacteria, and nitrates. See [DCF 251.06 \(6\)](#) for details about water system requirements. For more information regarding water tests, visit the [Department of Natural Resources websites](#).
- Read about the [Choose Safe Places](#) program, which offers a free consultation to support child care providers in identifying safe locations for new child care facilities.**
 - Voluntary Property Checklist for Child Care Providers – [English](#) / [Spanish](#)
- Install a vehicle safety alarm that prompts the driver to check for children prior to exiting the vehicle.**
 - Required for vehicles that are owned, leased, or contracted and has a seating capacity of 6 or more passengers (including the driver). See [DCF 251.08 \(8\)](#).
 - Additional information on vehicle safety alarms is available on the department's [Information for Providers](#) webpage (Vehicles), including a computer-based training video.
- Obtain all required liability insurance for the premises.**
 - Liability insurances might also include vehicles and/or pets; see [DCF 251.04 \(2\) \(g\)](#) for more details.
- Obtain appropriate equipment and furnishings for your child care space.**
 - A list of suggested equipment, including the latest news & recalls, is available from the Child Care Information Center's [Resource Materials webpage](#).

BUSINESS MODEL

- Prepare a business plan, including start-up and operating budgets.**
 - Include costs for the necessary permits and operation of your center's building/location.
 - Check with your municipality or local zoning authorities about all needs for a conditional use permit or building plan reviews for any modifications to the building.
 - Review [DCF 251.06](#) for physical premises and building requirements and determine whether you need to make any changes to the building prior to obtaining a license.
- Decide on a legal structure for the business.**
 - Examples: sole proprietorship, cooperative, limited liability company, partnership, corporation, etc.
 - Will it be for profit? Not for profit?
 - Who is financially and legally responsible?
- Develop policies and procedures for your program.**
 - Review the [Policy Checklist – Group Child Care Centers](#) for required and strongly recommended topics to include.
 - The policies and procedures should be detailed for both staff and families to reference.
 - A written contract between the center and parents is recommended.
- Develop orientation plans**
 - For all employees, volunteers, and substitutes, include all items listed in [DCF 251.05 \(4\) \(a\)](#).
 - For all persons transporting children, include all items listed in [DCF 251.08 \(4\) \(b\)](#).
- Consider participating in [Wisconsin Shares](#), Wisconsin's child care subsidy program, and [YoungStar](#), Wisconsin's child care quality rating and improvement system.**
- Contact the [Internal Revenue Service \(IRS\)](#) to obtain a Federal Tax Identification Number (FEIN) for your business.**
- Check with a lawyer, accountant, and/or governmental agency to determine obligations regarding income tax withholding, social security contributions, worker's compensation, and unemployment compensation.**

STAFFING & ADMINISTRATION

- Decide who will assume the responsibilities of administrator and center director.**
 - See section [DCF 251.05](#) and/or 251.094 for definitions, responsibilities, educational qualifications, and experience requirements related to each position.
- All staff must meet minimum educational requirements for child care.**
 - Refer to [DCF 251.05 \(3\)](#) and/or 251.094 for education and experience requirements based on your center and license type.
 - Ensure that enough qualified staff have been hired to meet the required staff-to-child ratios.
 - Visit [Child Care Regulation Information for Providers](#) webpage for training resources, including entry-level requirements for group child care centers, entry-level non-credit courses for child care providers, a list of agencies offering non-credit courses, and entry-level alternatives for child care professionals.
 - Visit the [Wisconsin Registry's website](#) for a list of agencies currently offering non-credit courses.
- Complete all required background checks for employees and household members.**
 - Any person (10 years and older) who works with children or resides in the center will need to complete a Background Check Request (BCR) form ([English](#) / [Hmong](#) / [Spanish](#)).
 - Adults (18 years and older) are also required to complete a fingerprint-based check in addition to the standard name-based background check.
 - Individuals can submit a Background Check Request through the [iChildCare Portal](#) prior to submitting their license application. However, keep in mind that an individual only has 180 days to become active at a regulated child care program in order to maintain eligibility; if that time passes without the initial license being granted, a new background check (with the fee) will need to be completed.
 - Final eligibility must be received for the owner/applicant/licensee and the administrator or director who can supervise staff before a license may be granted.
 - Visit the [Child Care Background Unit \(CBU\) webpage](#) and the [DCF Background Check Checklist](#) for all background check requirements and details or contact the CBU at (608) 422-7400 for questions.

- Obtain a physical exam for each staff member that indicates staff are free from illness detrimental to children, including tuberculosis, and that all are physically able to work with young children. See [DCF 251.05 \(2\) \(a\) 3](#).**
- Obtain any forms needed for the children's and staff's files.**
 - See [Required Items for Group Child Care Centers](#) in Appendix D Resources List of the DCF 251 Commentary Manual.
 - Visit the department's [Child Care Licensing Forms and Publications](#) website for copies of the required and optional forms to complete.

PARTICIPATE IN PRE-LICENSING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- Complete and submit the Group Child Care Business Start-Up Worksheet.**
 - Group Child Care Business Start-Up Worksheet
 - Northern and Southeastern Regions: Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA) – [English](#) | [Spanish](#)
 - Northeastern, Southern, and Western Regions: 4C For Children – [English](#) | [Spanish](#)
 - Note: This is not the official application for a license – the application will be available after completing all pre-licensing requirements with a Pre-Licensing technical consultant.
- Work with a Pre-Licensing technical consultant to prepare for initial licensing.**
 - Pre-Licensing will provide at no cost to you:
 - A dedicated technical consultant assigned to you after submitting the Group Child Care Business Start-Up Worksheet.
 - Limited, pre-licensing technical assistance to prepare for your application for an initial license – includes compliance with rules and completion of all items in the Inquiry Packet.
 - One on-site visit and a possible additional virtual visit to your center prior to submitting the application.
 - The application for initial licensing upon completion of all pre-licensing requirements.
 - Review the [Initial Licensing Checklist](#) with your technical consultant as a preparation guide. If you received a printed copy of this inquiry packet, you will receive the Initial Licensing Checklist from your technical consultant.
 - Note: Your technical consultant is not a DCF licensing specialist and cannot issue the initial license.

SUBMITTING THE APPLICATION

- Complete the pre-licensing application process with your Pre-Licensing child care technical consultant.**
 - After your technical consultant signs the Initial Licensing Checklist, you will have 6 months to submit a completed the application.
 - Your technical consultant will provide you with an Initial License Application – Group Child Care Centers at the conclusion of services.
 - Some items to submit with the application include:
 - [Initial Licensing Checklist - Group Child Care Centers](#) completed by your child care technical consultant after the on-site visit. Complete and sign the Applicant section of the Initial Licensing Checklist not more than 30 days prior to submitting it with the application form.
 - Background Check Request forms for the licensee(s), and for persons aged 10 years or older residing in the center, (these can also be submitted through [iChildCare](#) within the 180 days prior to being granted a license).
 - Required certificates of insurance.
 - Center policies and a completed [Policy Checklist – Group Child Care Centers](#).
 - Building inspection report which indicates the building complies with all applicable Commercial Building Codes.
 - License application fee of \$45.68 which will be applied to your probationary license fee. This application fee is nonrefundable.
 - Any other materials indicated on the last page of the [Initial Licensing Checklist – Group Child Care Centers](#) or the Initial License Application.
 - Note: Any missing application items may prolong the application process.
- Complete the initial licensing onsite visit.**
 - Your regional licensing specialist will contact you to schedule the visit after submitting your application.
 - Ensure at least 60 working days after the submission of application materials as a projected opening date to allow for a completed licensing review.
- Submit the probationary license fee after receiving approval for your application from the licensing specialist.**
 - The department will not issue the probationary license until this fee is received.
 - Below is a breakdown of the fee calculations.
 - Total 2-year fee = \$30.25 base fee + (\$16.94 per child in approved capacity).
 - Probationary fee = ¼ of the total 2-year fee minus (-) the \$45.68 application fee.

The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please contact the Bureau of Early Care Regulation at dcfclicreg@wisconsin.gov or (608) 421-7550. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay Service (WRS) – 711 to contact the department.