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/index.php/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:
    o Tax delinquency
    o Unemployment insurance contribution delinquency
    o 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.
  • Read the Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) brochure.

☐ 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.
  • 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 if serving children under 6 months of age, nitrates. See DCF 251.06 (6) for details about water system requirements. For more information regarding water tests, visit the Department of Natural Resources website.

☐ 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.
  • Helping Child Care Provider Applicant Choose Environmentally Safe Places – English / Spanish
  • 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 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 group child care policy template is available through Supporting Families Together Association for purchase.
  • 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 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) 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 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 – New Providers 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-LICENSE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- Complete and submit the Group Child Care Business Start-Up Worksheet.
  - Group Child Care Business Start-Up Worksheet – English | Spanish
  - Note: This is not the official application for a license – the application will be available after completing all pre-licensing requirements with an SFTA technical consultant.

- Work with a Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) technical consultant to prepare for initial licensing.
  - SFTA 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.
  - Additional visits or services are available from SFTA for a fee.
  - 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 SFTA 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 dcfcclicreg@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.