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YoungStar program improves early childhood education throughout Wisconsin

MADISON – Quality child care and early childhood education are important investments toward helping children succeed in life.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) recently rewarded YoungStar-rated child care programs for making significant improvements in quality in two different ways. First, a celebration to recognize 4 and 5 Star providers was held in Madison at the Crowne Plaza. Second, individual financial awards are now being distributed to programs in the YoungStar quality rating and improvement system for doing the work needed to increase their YoungStar rating. The incentives are funded through the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC) Grant.

“YoungStar is an important program created to help ensure the success of our children in Wisconsin,” said DCF Secretary Eloise Anderson, who spoke at the 2014 Celebration of 4 and 5 Star Programs. “Children, parents, and child care programs all benefit from having higher quality early learning, and thanks to YoungStar we are seeing steady improvement in the quality of care offered in Wisconsin.”

The YoungStar rating system sets a rating for child care programs based on education, learning environment, business practices and the well-being of children. In 2012, the program introduced a tiered payment system for programs that accepted children receiving the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy. Under the tiered system of one through five stars, programs with 5 Star or 4 Star ratings receive bonuses on top of the maximum Wisconsin Shares reimbursement rate. Effective at the end of December 2013, there was a substantial increase to the reimbursement rate for 4 Star programs, from a five-percent to ten-percent bonus.

“The earliest years in a child’s life are the most important time for brain development,” said DCF Administrator of Early Care and Education, Judy Norman-Nunnery. “Research shows that children who receive high-quality care and education are more likely to succeed in school and earn higher incomes when they enter the workforce. They have a strong foundation for success.”

Out of about 4,200 programs statewide, there are 188 who have earned 4 Star ratings and 361 who have earned 5 Star ratings, an increase of close to 60 programs since last year.

“By encouraging child care programs to raise their quality of service, we believe that those who offer the highest quality of education deserve to be rewarded for working hard to achieve higher ratings,” said DCF Secretary Eloise Anderson. “We also recognize centers that improve to the 2 Star and 3 Star ratings, setting a good foundation for enhancing their services.”

Nearly 400 child care programs from around Wisconsin recently received monetary awards as part of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant. DCF distributed award checks to 390 child care programs for increasing the quality of early care and education they provided during 2013, thereby improving their star ratings in any range from the 2 Star to 5 Star levels.

The Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge Grant is an initiative of ten collaborative projects aimed at enhancing early childhood education. Wisconsin was selected to receive \$34 million in federal grant funding for education and early childhood development initiatives. The grant focuses on children between birth and kindergarten. The grant, which is administered across three state agencies: Children and Families, Public Instruction, and Health Services, started in January 2013 and will be active through December 2016.

The awards – with the amounts tiered by program size, star increase and the number of children served in the program – will be used to fund resources for the child care programs.

The Early Learning Challenge Awards will be presented twice during 2014 and once again in 2015. Current awards amount to \$614,000 from the federal government.

Learn more about DCF and the Race to the Top program at: www.dcf.wi.gov/rttt.

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