



# Smart Start Child Care

Ad Hoc Advisory Committee Meeting #25

**March 20, 2026**

## GOALS

- Strengthen connections and build community among committee members
- Share relevant FY 27 budget information and transition updates
- Gather committee perspectives on data gathered from the Smart Start Workforce Grants FY 26 Round 4
- Share updates for the Smart Start Workforce Grant program in FY 27



## AGENDA

- Welcome and introductions
- Illinois Department of Early Childhood Updates
  - FY 2027 Early childhood budget overview
  - Smart Start Child Care budget proposal
  - Upcoming engagement opportunities
- Smart Start Workforce Grants Updates
  - FY 2026 round 4 awards
  - Small group discussion
  - Looking ahead to FY 2027
- Public comment

## Public Comment Instructions

- We set aside dedicated time for public comment at the end of the meeting.
- If you would like to provide public comment, please send a private chat to Karen Bruning. We will take comments in the order Karen receives the names.

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is here



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Build **understanding and alignment** on strategic intent and goals



Provide **input and feedback** throughout the design process



**Review and pressure-test** relevant cost analyses, potential policy options, and administrative options



Surface any **potential risks and opportunities**



Support overall plan development and to **champion it among stakeholder groups**



## Common Themes

- Ad hoc attendees emphasized that maintaining eligibility prioritization for current SSWG grantees in future rounds is important for sustaining trust.
- Underscored a desire to ensure new applicants have opportunity to participate in the program.
- Across the SSWG prioritization scenarios discussed, attendees expressed the least support for a “first come, first served” approach.
- Ad hoc attendees proposed recommendations for SSWG prioritization decisions for future rounds:
  - Conduct an equity impact assessment for each eligibility prioritization scenario to make decisions
  - Seek other revenue sources to expand and maintain the program’s reach
  - Consider a staggered roll-off option for providers currently in the program
  - Change the CCAP threshold or the way it is calculated

## Questions and Concerns

- Ad hoc attendees expressed concerns related to program sustainability, communication, and feedback loops:
  - Wondered about the long-term sustainability of this program and how programs are prepared to sustain wages.
  - Emphasized the importance of communicating any changes to the program structure clearly and early.
  - Asked how Ad Hoc conversations are woven into emerging IDEC transition conversations.
- Attendees also raised questions for future analysis:
  - How does the SSWG program accommodate for inflation in the long term?
  - How far does SSWG funding go in providing livable wages in Chicago compared to collar counties, given the differences in cost of living?
  - How do SSWG wages compare to wages in programs that receive other funding streams?



# Illinois Department of Early Childhood Update

March 2026



# The Governor's Proposed FY27 budget includes nearly \$4.5B in Early Childhood investments

## Investing in What Matters: Early Childhood Development



### SMART START ILLINOIS: Investing in Early Childhood

**Governor's Proposed FY27 Budget for Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC): \$4.424 billion All Funds, \$2.088 billion General Funds**

- Includes the first year of full operational and programmatic funding for IDEC.
- **\$748 million** to maintain investment in the Early Childhood Block Grant funding.
  - Maintains the funding level that has supported the addition of over 11,000 new seats added since 2023.
- **\$200 million** investment for Early Childhood Workforce Compensation Grants.
- Other Early Childhood Investments include:
  - **\$55 million** in additional investment for increased participation in the Child Care Assistance Program, up to 155,000 children.
  - **\$2.3 million** to continue implementation and expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.
    - Today, more than 97,000 children under the age of five are receiving free books in the mail every month, a 59 percent increase since February 2025.
  - **\$15 million** increase for Early Intervention programs to support timely services for families.
- IDEC funding consolidates nearly \$2 billion in FY26 General Funds appropriations for early childhood programs such as the Child Care Assistance, Early Intervention, Home Visiting, and Maternal and Child Health programs, as well as DCFS day care licensing and the ISBE Early Childhood Block Grant.



**Dolly Parton's Imagination Library**  
Coverage Across Illinois



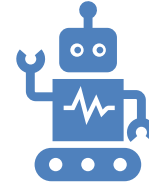
# The Governor's budget proposal maintains current funding levels for the Smart Start Child Care Programs, a total investment of \$212 million.

## Implications for Smart Start Child Care

- The **Smart Start Workforce Grant Program** has experienced tremendous success thanks to the dedication and participation of child care providers across the state. Because of the strong response and high demand for the program, available funding must be carefully evaluated to ensure the program remains sustainable and continues to support the workforce in meaningful ways.
- **Smart Start Quality Support and Smart Start Apprenticeship** will continue with existing participants for State Fiscal Year 2027.



# IDEC Monthly Tech Talks



Our Tech Talks aim to promote transparency in our transformation efforts for early childhood. We seek early and continuous questions and feedback to guide the work and ensure the best results for the Illinois early childhood community.



**Transformation Updates**



**Live Q&A**



**Recorded Demos**



**Progress to Goals**

## IDEC Tech Vision

Deliver secure, modern solutions that improve experiences and access to essential services for families



MAR

Childcare Finder



APR

Grants



MAY

Subsidy



JUN

Licensing



JUL

Data Hub

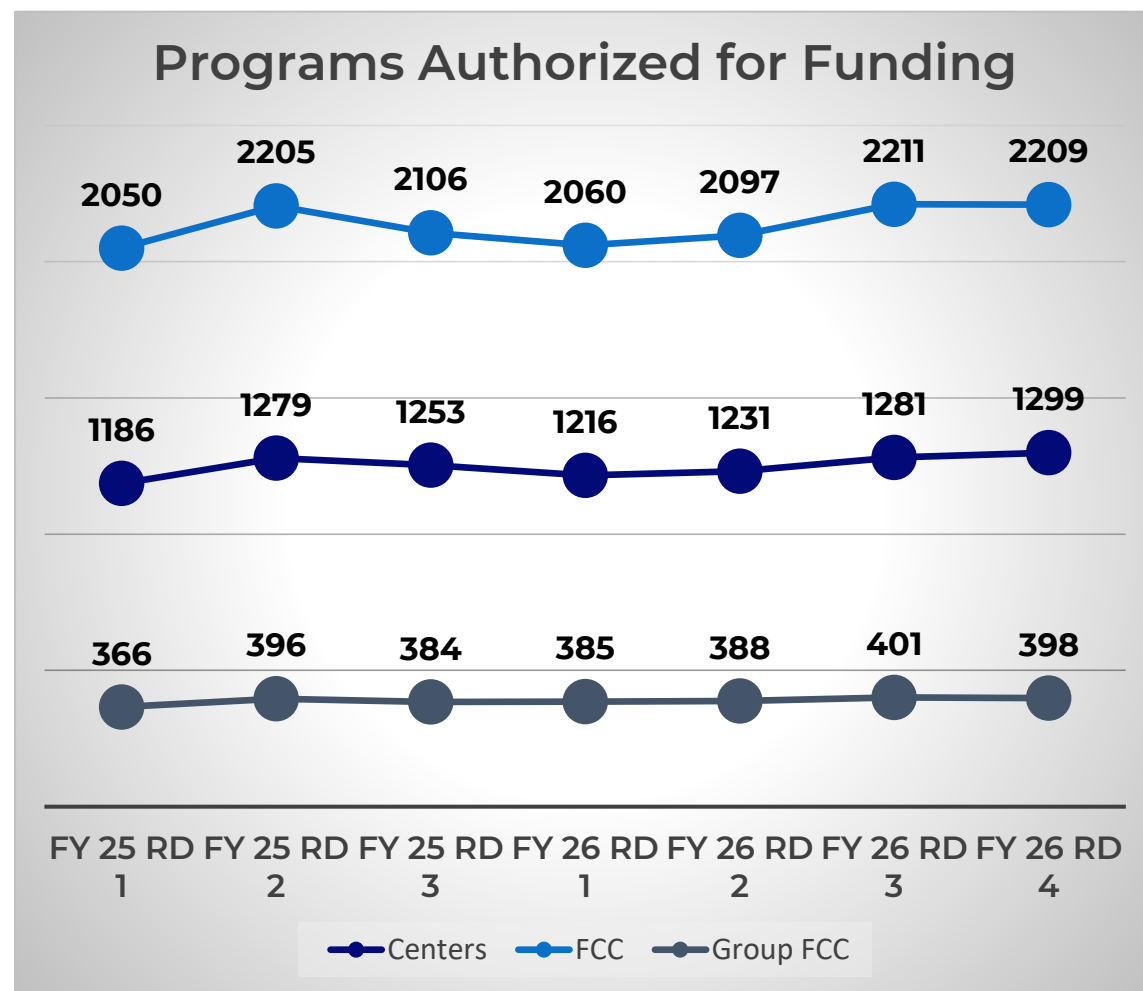
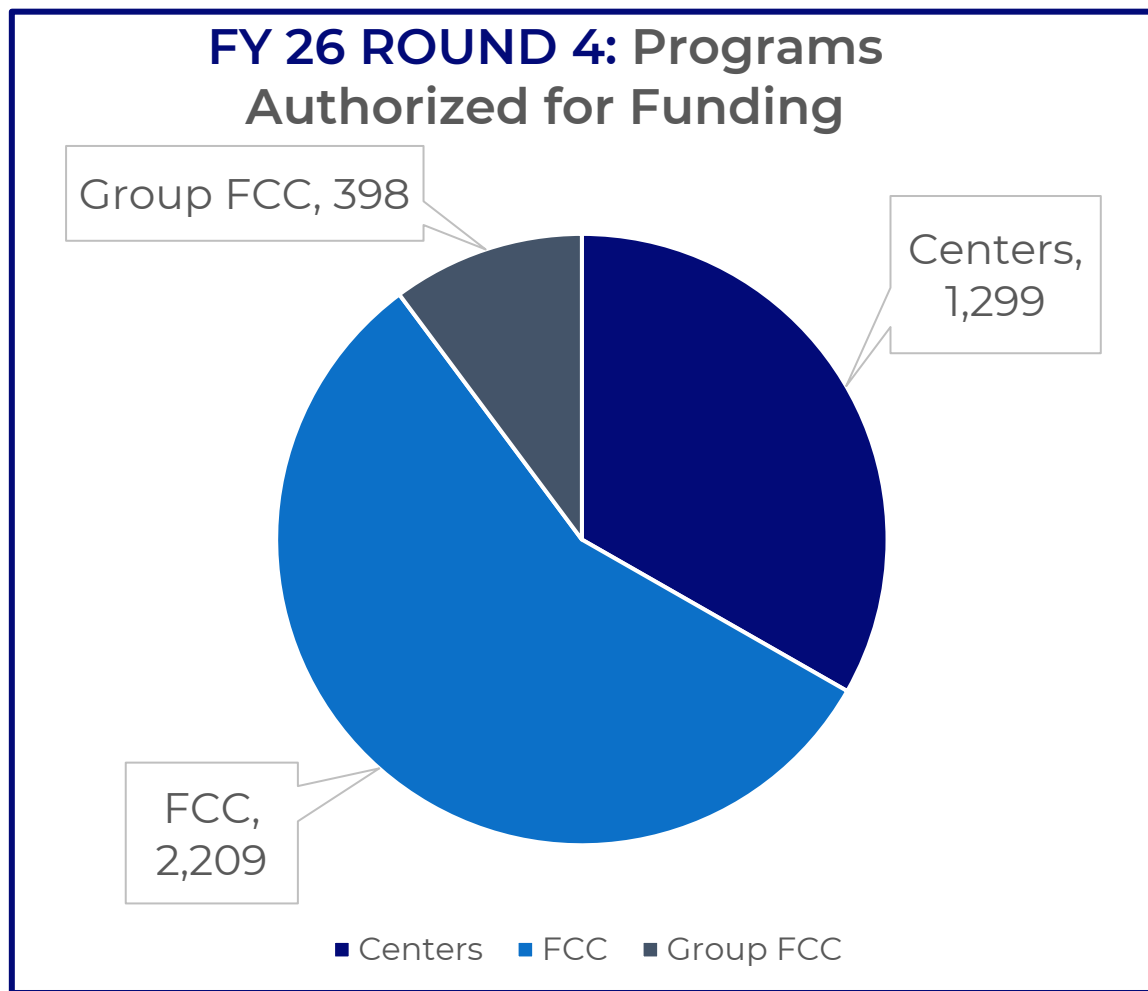
# Smart Start Workforce Grants

Round 4 Award Updates



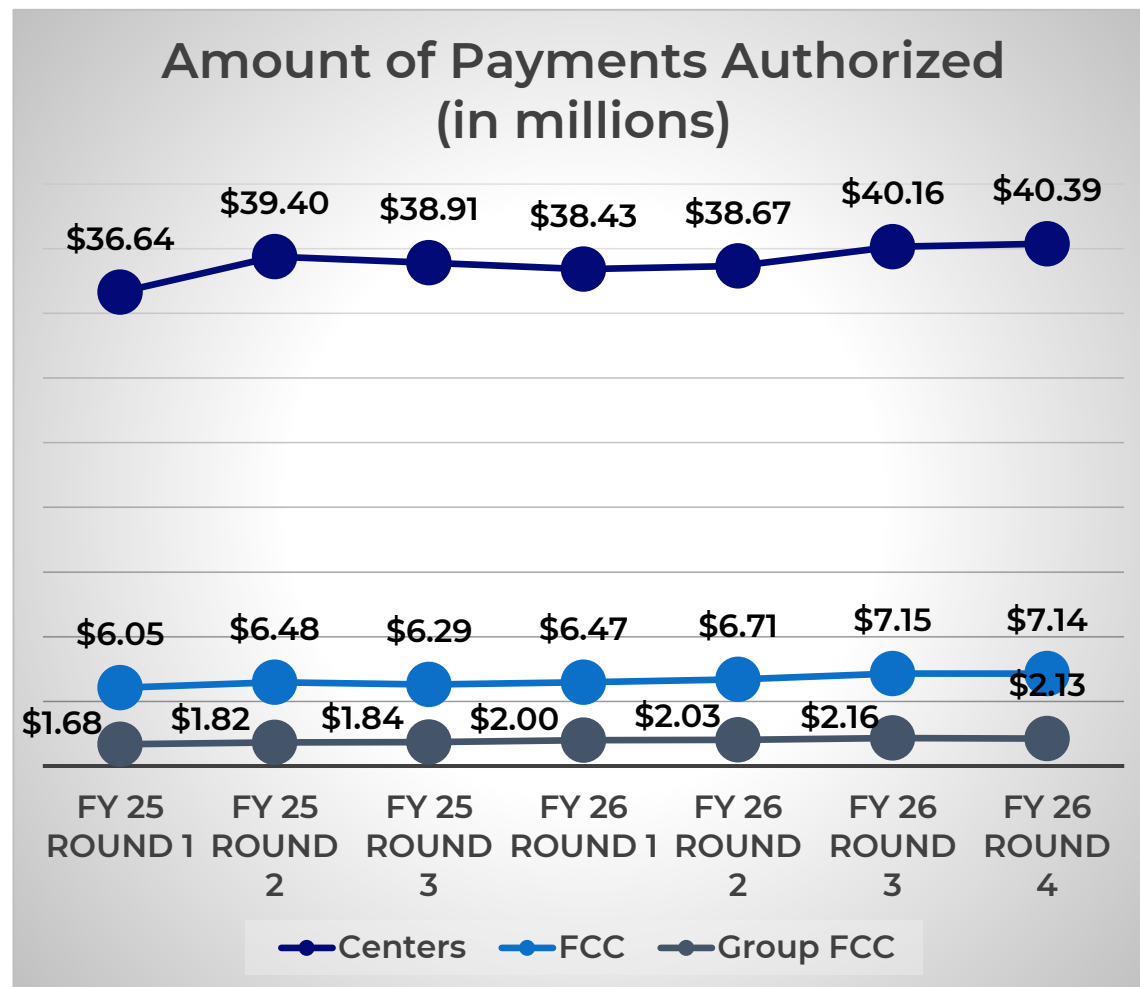
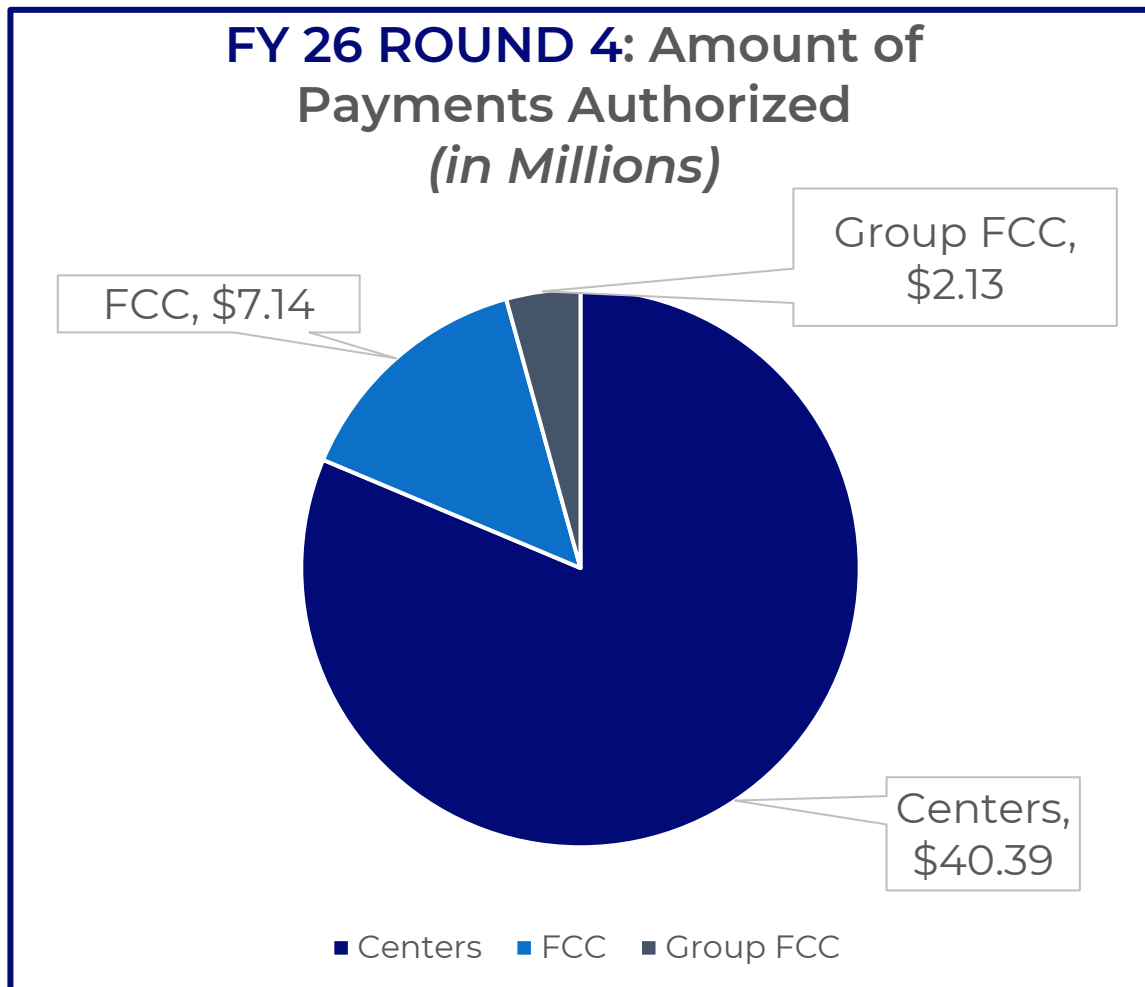
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3,906 programs have been awarded Smart Start Workforce Grants for FY 26 Round 4.



*\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis*

Spending for Smart Start Workforce Grants is above budget of \$48 million, with \$49.66 million awarded in FY 26 Round 4.



\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis

Smart Start Workforce Grants are reaching the majority of eligible providers, but family child care providers have lower uptake rates than centers or group child care.

Program Type	Number of Licensed Programs (as of January 2026)	Estimated Number of Eligible Programs*	Estimated Percent of Eligible Programs*	Number of Programs Authorized for Funding in FY 26 Round 4	Percent of Eligible Programs Authorized for Funding in FY 26 Round 4
Centers	2,542	1,548	61%	1299	84%
Homes	4,756	3,464	73%	2209	64%
Group Homes	711	429	60%	398	93%



\*Percent eligible based on estimate of programs meeting the CCAP enrollment requirement (*highest enrollment in the last 12 months*). Does not consider other eligibility criteria including funding source or classroom enrollment minimums (data not available).

## 204 programs did not renew between Round 3 and 4, but 117 new programs were awarded funding

### 117 new\* programs awarded

- 34 centers
- 72 family child care
- 11 group family child care

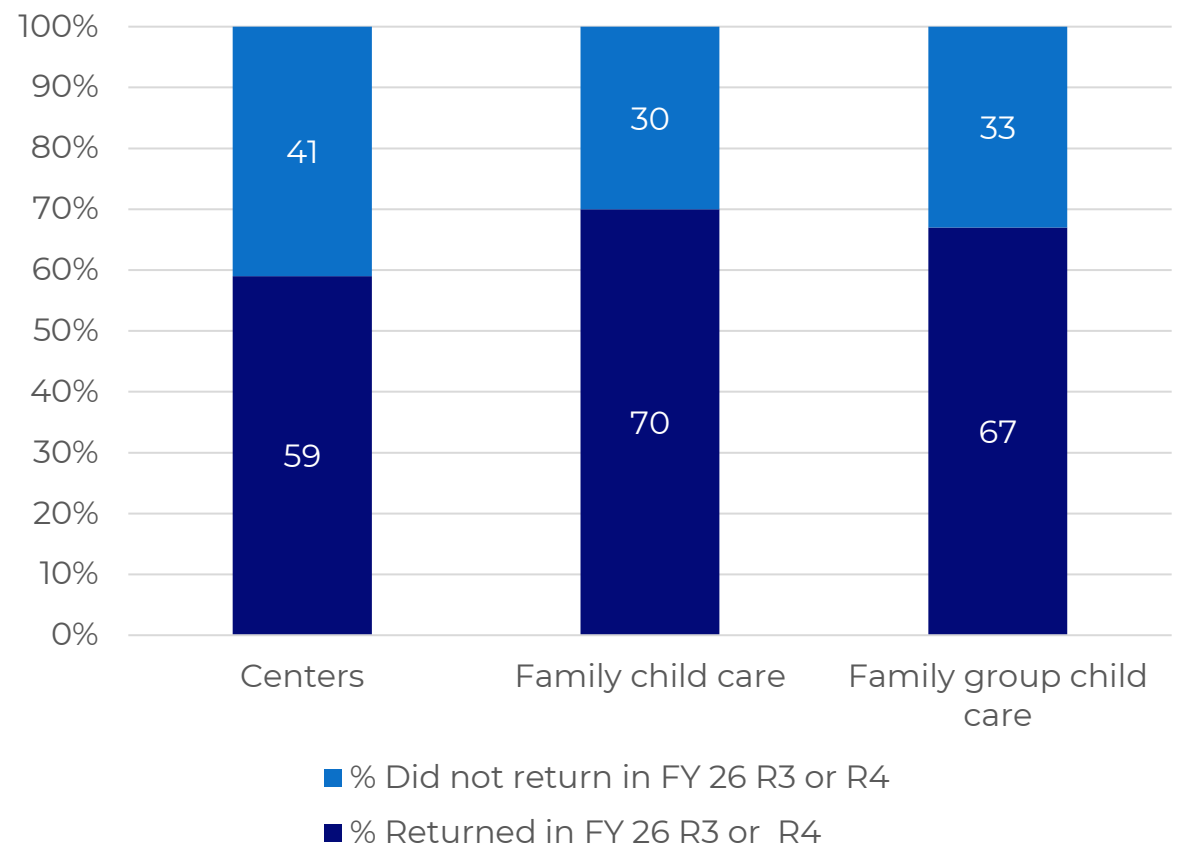
### 3,789 renewal programs

- 1,265 centers
- 2,137 family child care
- 387 group family child care

## Programs who skip one round tend to re-engage within the next round or two

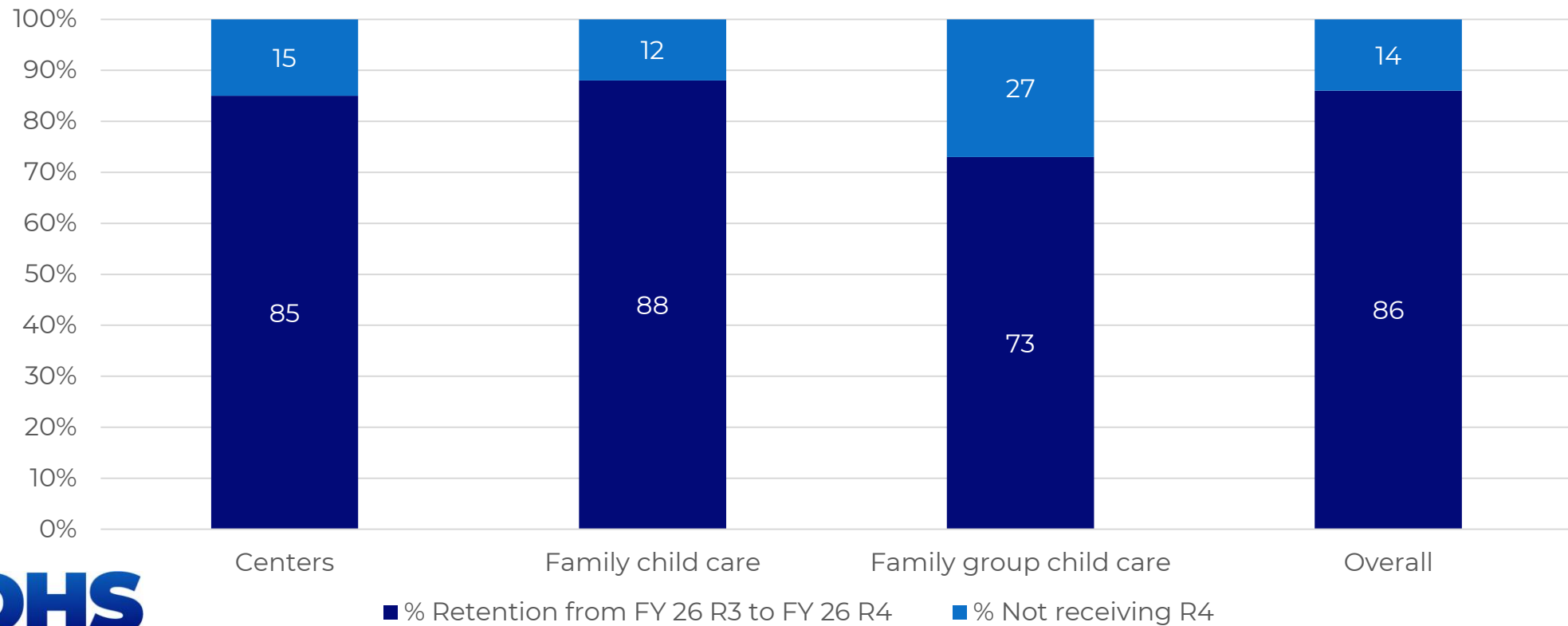
- Of the 237 programs that received FY 26 Round 1 awards but did not return in FY 26 Round 2, **67% (159 programs) returned in either FY 26 Round 3 or FY 26 Round 4**
- **FCCs and FGCCs returned to the program at a faster rate** after missing one round.

Return rates after missing FY 26 R2



## For programs that missed FY 26 Round 2 but returned in FY 26 Round 3, 86% stayed in FY 26 Round 4

Retention between FY 26 R3 & FY 26 R4 after missing FY 26 R2



**About 700 SSWG participants responded to a survey in February 2026, reporting broad use of technical assistance and satisfaction with the available support.**

**Of those who completed the FY 26 Round 4 customer service survey:**

- **60% found the application** to be very easy or easy, with less than 9% saying it was difficult or very difficult.
- Over 65% said **submitting the funding request** was very easy or easy, with less than 7% finding it difficult or very difficult.
- Over 60% of respondents **sought help during the application process**, 50% of those seeking help through their grant specialist or counselor
- Over 80% said **staff always answered their questions** with less than 3% reporting never or rarely
- Over 90% find the **website materials and tip sheets helpful** and are familiar with them

*“I appreciate that the Smart Start Workforce Grant directly supports workforce development and helps reduce financial barriers for both employers and employees. **The application process is clear, and the funding structure makes it easier to invest in training and retention efforts.** It feels like a practical program that creates real impact.” – SSWG Recipient*

**Round 4 feedback indicates high satisfaction with customer service, with responders noting timely and responsive guidance while identifying potential areas for improvement.**

### Highlights:

- Overall **positive tone** with multiple mentions of excellent experiences.
- Many respondents describe staff as **helpful, patient, kind, and knowledgeable**.
- Respondents value the **quick and clear communication** from customer service.
- Several respondents describe the responses as **fast, efficient, and helpful**.
- Some note that **customer service contacts them proactively**, especially when mistakes are made.

### Areas for improvement include:

- **Limited availability** of customer service at all times, with some respondents noting inconsistent access.
- A suggestion for **24-hour live support**, especially during critical periods like grant deadlines.
- Overall, the service is highly rated, but **availability during peak times could be improved**.

## Small Group Discussion

- What are your reactions or questions about the data shared?
- What factors may contribute to why programs did not renew? Or skip a round?
- What other considerations should inform changes or updates to customer service and technical assistance?



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# Smart Start Workforce Grants

Looking ahead to FY 2027



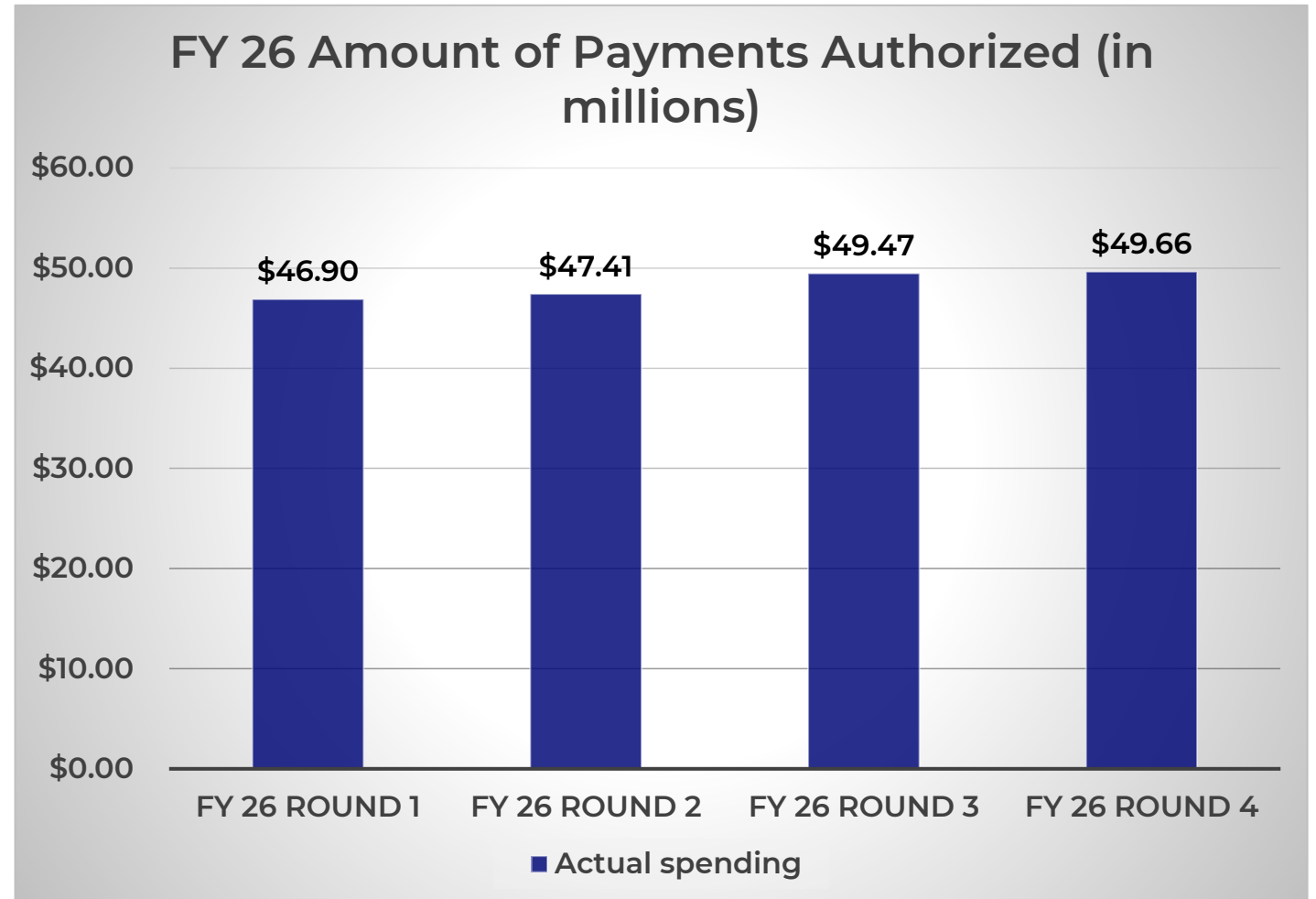
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Across all rounds in FY 26, Smart Start Workforce Grants were awarded to 4,280 unique child care programs at a total cost of \$193.4 million.

Unduplicated count of programs awarded funds in FY 26 through Round 4:

- 1,389 centers
- 2,449 family child care homes
- 442 family child care group homes
- **4,280 total programs**

*\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis*



\*The budgeted amount for grant awards is \$48 million round, or \$192 million over the year.

**Our goal is to maintain a strong and viable program that continues to support early childhood educators while responsibly managing the available funding.**

**Beginning in FY27, programs should plan to operate without limited waivers, which will help us better sustain an equitable SSWG program.**

Program adjustments considered in FY 2027 to help manage demand and support continued access to funding may include:

- Maintaining a waitlist if available funding cannot support additional participating programs.
- Other program refinements as needed to ensure sustainability.

The Smart Start Ad hoc committee informed planning for careful and equitable management of the Smart Start Workforce Grants budget through their discussions in 2025 and 2026.

### Broad feedback from Ad hoc

- Prioritize current SSWG grantees to preserve trust and stability (Apr. 2025, Jan. 2026)
- Maintain ability for new applicants to enter the program (Apr. 2025, Jan. 2026)
- Conduct an equity impact assessment to understand the impact of any changes to inform decision-making (Jan. 2026)

### Additional criteria that will inform planning and decisions:

- Allowed by statute and administrative rule
- Aligned to guiding principles and equity considerations
- Enable the program to stay within budget
- Possible to implement with current technology and systems

## Multiple communication avenues will let providers know about the updates for Smart Start Workforce Grants in FY 27.

- ✓ Updates included and explained in **FY 27 required orientation** and Smart Start Workforce Grants **website**
- ✓ **Email blast to all programs that received a grant** in FY 26 specific to updates
- ✓ **Email blast to all licensed programs** announcing FY 27 **orientation availability** locally and on i-learning
- ✓ **Local experts** prepared to support individual programs as needed
- ✓ **Email blast to all licensed programs** in early April announcing the **availability of the application** in the Director Portal.

## General reminders for FY 2027

### Required Orientation

All programs will be required to take a FY27 orientation to apply. Please pay close attention to emails and check the grants webpage often for orientation release dates.

### Program Guidance

We encourage providers to review the updated guidance when it becomes available. **Please visit the SSWG webpage for additional details and the latest information:**

<https://www.ilgateways.com/smart-start/smart-start-workforce-grants>

## FY 27 Round 1 applications will open on April 1

Fiscal Year 2027 July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027

Application Round	Application Period	Documentation Deadline/ Funding Request	Funding Released:	Funding Use Period:	Quarterly Reporting Deadline:
Round 1	April 1, 2026 – April 30, 2026	May 14, 2026	Two Payments June 2026 & July 2026	July 2026 – September 2026	October 31, 2026
Round 2	July 1, 2026 – July 31, 2026	August 14, 2026	September 2026	October 2026 – December 2026	January 30, 2027
Round 3	October 1, 2026 – October 30, 2026	November 13, 2026	December 2026	January 2027 – March 2027	April 30, 2027
Round 4	January 4, 2027 – January 29, 2027	February 12, 2027	March 2027	April 2027 – June 2027	July 31, 2027



*Notes:*

- *Dates are subject to change – visit <https://www.ilgateways.com/smart-start/smart-start-workforce-grants> for the most up-to-date information throughout the year.*
- *All proposed funding levels are subject to appropriation from the Illinois General Assembly.*



# Public Comment

## FY 26 Meeting dates

- ✓ *Friday, Sept. 5, 2025, 11 AM – 1 PM*
- ✓ *Tuesday, January 27, 6 PM – 8 PM*
- ✓ *Friday, March 20, 2026, 11 AM – 1 PM*
- **Tuesday, May 5, 2026, 6 PM – 8 PM**

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## Next Steps

**Open Survey for Feedback:**

<https://forms.gle/3DPPyPUcPQiTgbwX9>

**We encourage you to lend your voice in transition engagement opportunities across various platforms at IDEC. Sign up for the IDEC newsletter to stay informed at [www.idec.gov](http://www.idec.gov).**



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Thank you!