Trisha, a 25-year-old mother of two, is a Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) welfare-to-work success. Despite her history of chronic mental illness and domestic abuse, she has been successfully employed by one of Hennepin County’s largest retailers, even winning an employee-of-the-month award.

Ironically, Trisha’s accomplishments have resulted in unintended negative consequences for her oldest child. During the holidays, Trisha’s hours of employment were changed to accommodate the busier nights and weekends of the high-volume retail season. Under MFIP rules for childcare reimbursement, Trisha’s one-year-old son, Tyler, was no longer able to attend his favorite childcare center because Trisha, now working primarily evenings and weekends, was ineligible for childcare assistance covering a daytime program. In the evenings and on weekends, various acquaintances cared for Tyler. The consistent and predictable relationships Tyler had developed with his teachers and that had been nurtured each day, 10 hours per day, five days per week, were lost.

When his mother resumed her Monday-through-Friday work schedule after the holidays, Tyler returned to his childcare center much clinger and more withdrawn, unable to trust that these significant relationships would not be lost again. Although most children can weather a brief disruption, Tyler could not. Two months later, in March, Tyler was again withdrawn from childcare when his mother was ordered on bed rest for complications from pregnancy. Because she was unable to work, childcare authorization was terminated. Trisha, with an extremely limited support system, was forced to keep Tyler in his crib for hours during the day as she remained confined to bed.

Tyler is now 23 months old, has mild developmental delays, and presents as a very withdrawn, whiny, anxious child. He has been enrolled in and withdrawn from his childcare center four times during the last nine months, each disruption having occurred because of changes in his mother’s status within the MFIP childcare authorization process. Because of its precarious fiscal status, Tyler’s childcare center can no longer serve families who are ineligible for reimbursements for any period of time, no matter how brief. Unfortunately, when Tyler once again became eligible for childcare, his slot in the toddler classroom had been filled by another child, and Tyler and his mom were forced to look for a new childcare center.

The childcare center’s decision not to provide temporary financial assistance to families such as Trisha and Tyler is the result of legislated decreases in childcare subsidies. Many childcare centers across the state have had to make similar decisions. As eligibility requirements for welfare-to-work families tighten, it has become more difficult for families to obtain consistent childcare funding, and as subsidies for childcare centers have been decreased and frozen, it has become more difficult for centers to cover the lapses in eligibility that result from these tightened requirements. As a result of the instability of the MFIP authorization process, many poor but working families have been forced out of high-quality childcare centers.

The disconnect between MFIP services and requirements—between addressing Tyler’s needs and holding his mother accountable to the requirements of welfare-to-work—is a consistent theme for hundreds of families in Minnesota. This disconnect has also directly influenced the implementation of a University of Minnesota–community research project that was designed to assess the Baby’s Space model for child and family service provision.

Supported by a CURA Faculty Interactive Research Program grant, with additional funding from The Bush Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, and the Irving Harris Foundation, Baby’s Space integrates child and family services for overburdened welfare-to-work families with infants and toddlers into existing Hennepin County Strong Beginnings community-based childcare centers. Parent services in the Baby’s Space model include home visiting, childbirth education and coaching (doula) services, family fun nights, parent education, and videotaping of the parent-child interaction for educational purposes and advocacy. A key foundation of the Strong Beginnings–Baby’s Space Partnership is the belief in the importance of relationship-based work at all levels of the process, from the parent and child to the childcare directors and funders.
The Importance of High-Quality Childcare

Research reported by the National Research Council and the National Institute of Child Health and Development\(^1\) has shown that high-quality childcare centers represent an underutilized avenue to engaging parents in making life choices that ultimately support the healthy development of their children. The parent’s choice to be self-reliant and earning a livable income through employment ultimately supports the healthy development of children. Engaging parents through relationships with the workers in an integrated team approach is more effective in connecting the dots between the parent’s mandated efforts toward self-sufficiency and her children’s early educational opportunities in quality childcare.

Tyler and Trisha’s family profile exemplifies how the integration of parent support services within a childcare center is effective at enhancing parenting skills and knowledge and engaging parents in making life choices to best support their families. The Strong Beginnings–Baby’s Space childcare center was a primary factor in helping this mom expand her parenting skills and increase her understanding of her son’s need to be in quality childcare when she was unable to care for him. The family facilitator who worked with Trisha facilitated her participation in regular prenatal medical appointments; provided childbirth/doula services during her pregnancy and delivery of her second child; and eventually secured her eligibility for adult mental health case management services, something she would not have accomplished on her own.

Still, it is doubtful that Tyler will be ready for kindergarten. Young children need interactions with consistent, predictable, responsive, nurturing caregivers for optimal development to occur; especially for babies and toddlers, it is in everyday moments that learning occurs. Research by the National

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single mothers—off welfare, with little regard for the quality of care children receive. Funding for childcare is determined by the parent’s compliance with a complicated set of requirements for work and school intended to move her toward self-sufficiency. Compliance with the requirements is typically reviewed monthly. If the parent does not meet the eligibility requirements, funding is withdrawn and her child is removed from a developmentally stimulating childcare environment and the important relationships they have established. If a parent is successful at finding employment at a reasonable living wage, the legislated increase in sliding fee co-payments often results in quality childcare becoming unaffordable. As a result, children are frequently moved to unlicensed care.

The following sections consider the effects of the current systems on individual stakeholders.

**Children.** The effect of the complex MFIP authorization processes on children, particularly infants and toddlers, is disruption in caregiving at a time when a child’s day-to-day interactions with caregivers contribute profoundly to early identity formation, emotional and behavioral regulation, and the development of attachment, all of which set the course for the child’s future development. The anxiety created for young children who experience these relationship disruptions contributes to difficulties with emotional and behavioral regulation, making them more challenging for parents, caregivers, and eventually teachers. Unfortunately, by the time a parent becomes eligible for MFIP childcare subsidies again, the childcare center that was so familiar to the child may no longer have a slot available.

**Parents.** The complexity of the initial authorization process presents a barrier for parents, many of whom have no transportation or limited literacy skills. The legislated changes in eligibility for MFIP and for sliding-fee subsidies have resulted in tighter restrictions and a greater burden for qualifying families, many of whom face multiple challenges, including teen parenting, chemical dependency, and mental illness. Most remarkable is that although parents are expected to locate childcare on their own, given only a list of community resources, they are accountable to at least three separate social workers during this process.

Paradoxically, for those who are moving from welfare to work or who work in low-wage jobs, it is the competing goals and strategies of the systems themselves that have created many of the barriers to accessing quality childcare. A parent enrolled in MFIP is required to either attend school, engage in a “job search,” or be employed. The parent must be in contact with three separate social workers—potentially located at three different sites—throughout this process: the community-based employment services provider, the childcare worker, and the financial assistance worker. A fourth worker is assigned if a parent receives child support. Data privacy laws impose limitations on direct communication between these social workers, and there is no forum for them to communicate face-to-face with each other, much less to collaborate together with the parent.

The parent’s responsibility and culpability in creating or contributing to unstable childcare arrangements cannot be ignored. When a parent, for whatever reason, does not submit required paperwork on time or does not comply with elements of an employment plan, the childcare subsidy is stopped. Fairly or not, the child is punished for the sins of the parent. The situation is even more frustrating when one recognizes that the complexity of the process of qualifying for and maintaining childcare authorization is enough to confound even the most well-intentioned parent.

**Childcare Centers.** The complexities of the system with regard to both the initial childcare authorization process and the process of maintaining authorization contribute to childcare centers losing significant revenue as they struggle to serve children and families. The six centers participating in the CAP project reported revenue losses from unreimbursed childcare ranging from $32,000 to $147,000 in 2004 (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare center</th>
<th>Amount of childcare not reimbursed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site One</td>
<td>$39,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Two*</td>
<td>$9,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Three</td>
<td>$110,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Four</td>
<td>$32,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Five</td>
<td>$81,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Six</td>
<td>$147,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$418,753</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Lost revenue for Site Two is significantly lower than that reported for other sites because this site served a much smaller number of children of MFIP participants and because data was available from this site for only eight months of the year.

### The Childcare Authorization Project: Collaborating to Define the Problems and Identify Solutions

In January 2005, an ad hoc committee was formed to identify the steps in the childcare authorization process that are most problematic. The committee was led by a staff member of the University of Minnesota’s Irving B. Harris Center for Infant and Toddler Development and Hennepin County Strong Beginnings planning analyst, and was comprised of directors of several Strong Beginnings—Baby’s Space Partnership sites, Hennepin County contract managers, representatives of Hennepin County childcare assistance, and a City of Minneapolis employment services provider from Jewish Vocational Services. Representatives from other childcare centers and from the Greater Minneapolis Day Care Association have since joined the group, now known as the Childcare Authorization Project (CAP). The CAP participants documented the multiple perspectives of the stakeholders in this authorization process to secure the active involvement of the Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department in redesigning, where feasible, departmental processes that delay or prevent childcare authorization to the most at-risk children in Hennepin County.

Currently, funding for childcare is one of a set of strategies that MFIP uses in its effort to get parents—typically...
the employment service provider’s recommendation (not authorization) of childcare. In cases where the childcare application is ultimately denied, the center is faced with a dilemma: cut their losses and discharge the child from care, or continue to work with the parent to straighten out the ineligibility factors (which the parent may or may not be upfront about) and get future care reimbursed through subsidy. The dilemma is made more difficult when part, but not all, of the childcare request is authorized. Figure 1 reflects the total cost, in weekly increments, of Strong Beginnings childcare for one infant and one toddler. If a Strong Beginnings center opts to allow these two unauthorized children to attend childcare for any weekly period, it does so with the risk that the parent may ultimately be deemed ineligible for childcare assistance for all or part of the time that childcare was delivered.

Maintaining authorization now requires undergoing a monthly review and approval process, as opposed to the former three- to six-month review. This involves an extraordinary amount of paperwork on the part of the parent and the childcare center. The time lapses that occur in paperwork processing may result, unknown to the center, in a child being in care long past the expiration of the authorization. In one case, a teen parent dropped off her child daily, complaining about how much homework she had, until finally communication between the school and the childcare worker revealed that she had not been in school for two months. The childcare center was not reimbursed for the child’s care. Situations such as these have a twofold negative effect: significant financial loss may affect quality of care for all children in the center, and the center may, in the future, be less able or less likely to accept the risk of enrolling a child in need of care but without authorization. This in turn may have an effect on the parent’s ability to accept or keep a job, ultimately reducing even further the possibility of gaining childcare authorization.

Employment Service Providers.

An employment service provider, who is selected from a list of authorized providers, draws up the plan for training or employment of each MFIP parent. This worker recommends approval for childcare authorization to one of Hennepin County’s childcare workers. However, the childcare worker may deny authorization for childcare based on additional information not available to the employment service provider, such as the presence of an unemployed father in the home or an outstanding childcare bill. In the meantime, the parent may already have identified a childcare center that would risk enrolling the child based on the employment service provider’s recommendation and the parent’s need to start a job immediately. Weeks later, the childcare worker may deny the authorization based on additional information. The child is then removed from the relationships already developed in childcare, the parent must decide whether to leave the child with informal caregivers (neighbors, relatives) or quit working, and the childcare center has lost weeks of revenue from unreimbursed childcare.

The employment service providers are expected to meet federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reporting requirements when considering reimbursement for childcare costs for the parents with whom they work. To meet these requirements, employment service providers are dependant on parents completing tracking forms that detail their job search. Completing paperwork is often difficult for parents,
and the employment service provider may not be aware of the challenges they face, such as caring for a sick child, literacy problems, or depression. Data privacy restrictions prevent employment service providers from communicating with other social workers involved with the family. Conversely, prospective employers may have a job available but cannot wait three to four weeks for the time it takes the parent to become authorized for childcare. This adversely affects the employability of MFIP parents.

Generating Solutions
The current MFIP system is fragmented and difficult to negotiate for everyone involved. Unfortunately, it is children—our youngest and most vulnerable citizens—who are most directly impacted by the barriers and complications of funding. By developing a more coordinated system that is customized to the integrated needs of families, childcare centers, and employment service providers, the unintentional roadblocks within the system can be overcome. Using the natural relationships that develop between children, parents, teachers, directors, and employment counselors, an integrated approach that focuses on the whole family can support both the child’s stable enrollment in childcare and the parent’s work stability.

The Power of Relationships. For participating childcare centers, the rate of parent engagement is high, despite the parents’ struggles with inadequate housing, unsafe neighborhoods, domestic violence, mental health problems, and their own negative educational experiences. The Strong Beginnings childcare centers very intentionally cultivate relationships with families to provide quality care. It is the contention of the CAP committee that the positive relationships high-quality childcare centers have developed with many of their MFIP families can be extended to include other members of the parents’ MFIP “team.” With the employment service provider, childcare worker, and other workers coming together more intentionally and visibly in the best interest of the whole family, the parent will experience a less fragmented, more supportive system, encouraging her toward success. This will result in more parents successfully seeking, obtaining, and maintaining employment, and more children benefiting from continuous, consistent, responsive high-quality care. More secure, developmentally competent children are more satisfying to a parent, resulting in healthier parent-child relationships.

Proposal for a Service Integration Pilot. The CAP committee, with leadership from the University of Minnesota and Hennepin County, has developed a proposal for a Service Integration Pilot project. Under the CAP pilot project, an integrated service team would be formed on an as-needed basis and would include the following members: the parent engaged in an MFIP job search, the parent’s employment service provider, the parent’s childcare worker, and the Baby’s Space family facilitator or the Strong Beginnings family service coordinator from the childcare center. Targeting MFIP families who are engaged in a job search and who have already lost childcare authorization once, this team would work together to develop an integrated family service plan that would include not only the parent’s employment plan, but also the child and family’s participation in the childcare center. The individual members would be assembled at the request of a participating childcare center when a parent meets the target population criteria. The CAP team would help the parent understand the process, reinforce to the parent the specific benefits of stable childcare and developmental benefits for the child, and identify the areas in which the parent needs assistance in maintaining compliance with the employment plan. The CAP team would then develop a modified MFIP, family-focused employment plan that would include the goals of continuous childcare authorization, stable childcare arrangements, and utilization of childcare center resources to help parents in their job search and maintenance efforts. Currently, Hennepin County is considering the merits of the Service Integration Pilot project, which when implemented will be evaluated to determine how effective the plans are at (1) improving stability of the child’s experience in childcare, (2) decreasing the amount of time when a parent is ineligible for subsidy due to unemployment or noncompliance with MFIP requirements, and (3) reducing the revenue loss of childcare centers due to loss of childcare reimbursement.

This approach to encouraging compliance is based on the difficulty many parents face in managing the paperwork that accompanies childcare authorization. Parents of children under six years of age who are engaged in a job search are required to document 87 hours of search activities per month (roughly four hours per day). For many such parents, the problem is not in completing the required number of hours, but in completing the job search tracking forms by which their compliance is measured. The participating Strong Beginnings and Baby’s Space Partnership centers have family facilitators.
who could assist parents with the task of documentation. These centers have daily contact and interaction with these parents as they greet parents and children, offer support and advocacy, and provide parent education and referral services. The CAP pilot will allow the employment service providers access to these relationships, to encourage and support parent compliance with the reporting requirements by addressing the needs of both the parent and child in the context of the family.

The family’s team will offer support, problem-solving, and encouragement in a collaborative setting. This team approach is intended not only to support the family, but also to enhance the contribution of each of the team members by regular communication and coordination of objectives. It is not anticipated that there will be additional cost to the system from this pilot project, other than allowing participating worker and childcare representatives the extra time needed for training and collaboration.

Over a two-year period, both the parent’s success in complying with MFIP and the child’s developmental outcomes will be compared with a control group of MFIP families for whom the services are delivered as usual.

This collaborative, integrated approach acknowledges that the overarching goal is for family success, which includes healthy, developmentally on-track children and self-sufficient, competent parents. The committee believes this pilot is a start toward encouraging the success of MFIP families now, as well as breaking the chain of intergenerational welfare dependence. For the CAP committee participants, it has been an eye-opening experience to sit together and be educated about the complexities of the multiple systems and processes involved in MFIP. It has helped the participants to empathize not only with the challenges that parents and children face, but also with each other, as all have attempted to accomplish specific tasks in relative isolation within this fragmented system. Collaboration has, across the board, energized each participant to create a more integrated system—one that not only promises to provide a more effective, more holistic, and family-friendlier system for welfare reform, but also results in enhanced job satisfaction as part of a larger, long-range solution to the hopelessness of intergenerational poverty.

What Remains to be Done
The challenges that arise at the nexus of finances for quality care and education and the well-being of children reveal some of the most critical issues facing Minnesota today. Below are specific actions and outcomes necessary to address the difficulties facing many low-income working families. The dual risk of poverty and instability for our youngest citizens must be addressed to assure that all children are ready to start and able to succeed in the public school system. Our collective experience resoundingly supports these directives.

1. Increase the number of low-income, high-risk children who are prepared to enter kindergarten by ensuring that these children have consistent access to high-quality childcare centers.
2. Increase the number of MFIP adults who become self-reliant and able to earn a livable income by using the relationships and resources that high-quality childcare centers offer to draw the link for parents between their children’s development and their compliance with their MFIP employment plan.
3. Ensure continuous reimbursement to high-quality childcare centers for childcare actually delivered by stabilizing childcare authorizations through the use and coordination of team resources in such a way as to improve childcare and employment-reimbursement compliance on the part of the parent.
4. Improve employment service providers’ federal participation rates by implementing the above strategies.

The good news is that it is known what children and families need. Continued public support for high-quality childcare has the potential to promote the healthy development of children and self-sufficiency for low-income families. The collaborative discussions described above have suggested that the key to success will be taking to other communities what the Strong Beginnings–Baby’s Space Partnership has learned about the power of relationships, and transferring this awareness to the larger systems within which everyone involved must operate. The collaboration believes it can effect change in a fragmented system by cultivating relationships between all the stakeholders—the employment service providers, the childcare workers, the childcare providers, county program managers, and the families themselves. It will take sitting at the table together and holding paramount the needs of both the child and parent.

The needs of children like Tyler are as worthy of consideration as is the need to move his mother from welfare to work. Indeed, considering Tyler’s need for quality, developmentally enhancing relationships and experiences is part of the long-range solution to welfare reform. But more than that, Tyler is deserving of society’s caring response because he and all of Minnesota’s children are worthy in and of themselves.

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This study was supported by a grant from CURA’s Faculty Interactive Research Program. The program was created to encourage University faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. These grants are available to regular faculty members at the University of Minnesota and are awarded annually on a competitive basis. Additional funding was provided by The Bush Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, and the Irving Harris Foundation.