

Talking Points

A weekly section to spur conversation



SCHOLARSHIPS FOR CHILD CARE ARE DRYING UP. NOW FAMILIES ARE PAYING THE PRICE

By Moriah Balingit | The Associated Press

For parents who need to work but can't afford the steep cost of child care, federally funded scholarships can be a lifeline. Delivered through state child care assistance programs, the scholarships can mean the difference between a parent working full time — or not at all.

But qualified families increasingly are being turned away, thanks to the rising costs of child care and the end of pandemic-era funds, and some families that had scholarships have seen them end. In at least three states — Arizona, Colorado and Texas — parents who apply face long waitlists. Other states, including Nevada and Oklahoma, have increased copayments for parents or have said they will serve fewer children. In Idaho, enrollment was paused for part of last year.

Last week, the Trump administration laid off some employees who helped states implement child care assistance. It's all left advocates worried about the future of federal child care programs.

"What it means is that ultimately child care will become less safe, it's going to become more expensive, and it's going to become harder to find," said Ruth Friedman, who was the director of the Office of Child Care under former President Joe Biden.

Less child care funding, federal staff layoffs

As part of Trump's sweeping cuts to the federal government, the administration eliminated jobs in the Office of Child Care, which oversees federal child care subsidies and ensure states are enforcing safety standards.

All staff in five of the 10 regional offices were cut, along with more in the office's headquarters in Washington. They included staff who upheld federal safety requirements for child care providers and ensured subsidies were being used effectively. They worked with states to enforce requirements to run background checks on child care employees. They also safeguarded programs from waste and fraud.

During the pandemic, Congress approved record spending to boost the child care industry, recognizing its importance to restarting the economy. States received \$24 billion to help child care providers boost wages, buy masks and air purifiers and train staff, plus an extra \$15 billion for child care assistance scholarships.

That money expired in September. Congress declined to extend it, despite a push from Biden and child care advocates. Since then, some states have attempted to continue programs with their own taxpayers' money. But many, such as Arizona,

have ended special pandemic-era programs, like those that helped teachers pay for child care. Now, Arizona parents who apply for basic child care assistance are put on waitlists — with no clear end in sight.

"There's a much bigger need than there are funds," said Kim Kofron of the Texas-based advocacy group Children at Risk. "We know all of these families are willing to work."

No longer eligible for scholarships — or waitlisted

In Phoenix, child care worker Janeth Ibarra would have paid nothing last year for care for her twin boys, because she would have received a special scholarship for those in her field. This year, her income qualifies her for regular state child care assistance. But because the state ran low on money for the program, she was on a waitlist earlier this year.

As it stands, Ibarra, 22, earns \$16.50 an hour and is paying more than \$1,200 a month for child care, after a steep discount from her employer.

"Even with overtime, it's barely survivable," Ibarra said. At the end of last year, Ibarra had to spend the last of her savings on special formula for one of her sons, a purchase not covered by her food assistance benefits. She tried to breastfeed more to save money.

In Idaho, where lawmakers in 2023 rejected pandemic aid for child care, the state stopped accepting applications for its child care assistance program. When the applications resumed, the state tightened income restrictions. Now, the only families who qualify earn less than 130% of the federal poverty line, or \$41,795 for a family of four. Before, a family of four could earn up to \$56,000 and still receive a scholarship.

In Colorado, a dozen counties stopped accepting new applications for the state's child care assistance program because they ran out of money, The Colorado Sun reported.

Trump points to tariffs as child care solution

Trump has been vague on his plans to make child care more affordable. He said during his campaign that he believed tariffs would rake in "trillions of dollars." Child care, he added, is "relatively speaking, not very expensive compared to the kind of numbers we'll be taking in."

Economists, though, have warned tariffs could cause prices for other household goods to skyrocket, squeezing family budgets, and it's unlikely there would be much money left over for the government to spend if Trump successfully implements steep tax cuts. Advocates are concerned child care funding could be cut as the president seeks to shrink the federal

government.

For states trying to maintain child care assistance scholarships, the costs of running the programs have risen. Because many child care providers operate in the margins, the Biden administration increased the amount they receive when they take scholarship students.

It's all evidence the problems that vex the child care industry have not necessarily abated with the pandemic, said Karen Schulman, senior director of child care policy at the National Women's Law Center.

"The crisis was going on long before COVID," Schulman said, citing the unaffordability of care for many families, along with the low pay of the child care workforce.

Making tradeoffs to afford child care

Even as providers struggle to make a profit, child care is prohibitively expensive for many families. In a study of 2022 child care prices, the Labor Department found the median cost of care for an infant in a center was more than \$15,600 in large counties — higher than the median rent in many places.

When Brooklyn Newman divorced her husband, she moved with her two boys, now 2 and 4, into a trailer while she got back on her feet. The Phoenix mother was eager to send her older boy to preschool so he could have structure as the family weathered the split. But she could not afford tuition for her younger son until the preschool gave her a scholarship funded by pandemic aid.

With both boys in school half-time, Newman could put in more hours at her job as a freelance business analyst. But when the scholarship ended, she had to pay out of pocket — adding \$1,000 a month to her preschool tuition. She made a painful trade-off: She juggled working in the evening while watching her children at home — sacrificing quality time with them so she can earn enough money to continue to send them to preschool.

"I'm constantly behind a computer, you know, giving everything I can," Brooklyn said earlier this year, her voice tightening with emotion. Occasionally, her sons will hide her computer mouse to keep her from working.

But she can see growth from their time in preschool — in their language, in their confidence, in their relationships with teachers and classmates. "You're watching them grow. It's just the best feeling. And that's why I do everything I can to have them there."

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Talking Points

WHY WATER FLUORIDATION IS UNDER FIRE IN THE US

By Mike Stobbe & Kasturi Pananjady | The Associated Press

U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has said he wants communities to stop fluoridating water, and he is setting the gears of government in motion to help make that happen.

Kennedy this week said he plans to tell the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to stop recommending fluoridation in communities nationwide. And he said he's assembling a task force of health experts to study the issue and make new recommendations.

At the same time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it would review new scientific information on potential health risks of fluoride in drinking water. The EPA sets the maximum level allowed in public water systems.

Here's a look at how reversing fluoride policy has become an action item under President Donald Trump's administration.

The benefits of fluoride

Fluoride strengthens teeth and reduces cavities by replacing minerals lost during normal wear and tear, according to the CDC. In 1950, federal officials endorsed water fluoridation to prevent tooth decay, and in 1962 set guidelines for how much should be added to water.

Fluoride can come from a number of sources, but drinking water is the main one for Americans, researchers say. Nearly two-thirds of the U.S. population gets fluoridated drinking water, according to CDC data.

The addition of low levels of fluoride to drinking water was long considered one of the greatest public health achievements of the last century. The American Dental Association credits it with reducing tooth decay by more than 25% in children and adults.

About one-third of community water systems — 17,000 out of 51,000 across the U.S. — serving more than 60% of the population fluoridated their water, according to a 2022 CDC analysis.

The potential problems of too much fluoride

The CDC currently recommends 0.7 milligrams of fluoride per liter of water.

Over time, studies have documented potential problems when people get much more than that.

Excess fluoride intake has been associated with streaking or spots on teeth. And studies also have traced a link between excess fluoride and brain development.

A report last year by the federal government's National Toxicology Program, which summarized studies conducted in Canada, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Mexico, concluded that drinking water with more than 1.5 milligrams of fluoride per liter — more than twice the CDC's recommended level — was associated with lower IQs in kids.

Meanwhile, last year, a federal judge ordered the EPA to further regulate fluoride in drinking water. U.S. District Judge Edward Chen cautioned that it's not certain fluoride is causing lower IQ in kids, but he concluded that research pointed to an unreasonable risk that it could be.

Kennedy has railed against fluoride. Kennedy, a former environmental lawyer, has called fluoride a "dangerous neurotoxin" and "an industrial waste" tied to a range of health dangers. He has said it's been associated with arthritis, bone breaks, and thyroid disease.

Some studies have suggested such links might exist, usually at higher-than-recommended fluoride levels, though some reviewers have questioned the quality of available evidence and said no definitive conclusions can be drawn.

How fluoride recommendations can be changed

The CDC's recommendations are widely followed but not mandatory. State and local governments decide whether to add fluoride to water and, if so, how much — as long as it doesn't exceed the EPA's limit of 4 milligrams per liter.

So Kennedy can't order communities to stop fluoridation, but he can tell the CDC to stop recommending it.

It would be customary to convene a panel of experts to comb through the research and assess the evidence that speak to the pros and cons of water fluoridation. But Kennedy has the power to stop or change a CDC recommendation without that.

"The power lies with the secretary," but public trust would erode if recommendations are changed without a clear scientific basis, said Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University.

"If you're really serious about this, you don't just come in and change it," he said. "You ask somebody like the National Academy of Sci-

ences to do a study — and then you follow their recommendations."

On Monday, Kennedy said he was forming a task force to focus on fluoride, while at the same time saying he would order the CDC to stop recommending it.

HHS officials did not answer immediately questions seeking more information about what the task force would be doing.

Some places are already pulling back on fluoridation

Utah recently became the first state to ban fluoride in drinking water, and legislators elsewhere are looking at the issue.

An Associated Press analysis of CDC data for 36 states shows that many communities have halted fluoridation in recent years.

Over the last six years, at least 734 water systems that consistently reported their data in those states have stopped fluoridating water, according to the AP's analysis.

Mississippi alone accounted for more than 1 in 5 of those water systems that stopped. Most water systems that discontinued fluoridation mainly did so to save money, said Melissa Parker, the Mississippi state health department's assistant senior deputy.

During the pandemic, Mississippi's health department allowed local water systems to temporarily cease fluoridating because they could not purchase sodium fluoride in the midst of global supply chain issues. Many never restarted, Parker said.

CDC funding for fluoride is typically a small factor

Since 2003, CDC has funded a limited number of state oral health programs through cooperative agreements. The agreements run in cycles, and at the beginning of this year 15 states were each receiving \$380,000 over three years.

The money can be used on a number of things, including collecting data on people with dental problems, dental care and technical assistance for community water fluoridation activities.

The current oral health funding is going to Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The states are told not to use the money for chemicals, because the funding is intended

to help set up fluoridation, not for everyday expenses, federal officials have said. South Carolina, for example, sets aside up to \$50,000 to help communities in that state fluoridate. Iowa spends about \$65,000 to promote community water fluoridation.

Earlier this year, CDC officials declined to answer questions about how much of the total oral health money has been going toward fluoridation.

Now, there is no one to ask: Last week, the CDC's entire 20-person Division of Oral Health was eliminated as part of widespread government staffing cuts.

Congress appropriated money to CDC specifically to support oral health programs, and some congressional staffers say the agency must distribute those funds no matter who is running the HHS or CDC. But Trump-driven budget cuts have struck at a number of programs that Congress had called for, and it's not clear what will happen to the CDC oral health funding.

Fluoridation is relatively cheap compared with other water department expenses, and most communities simply incorporate the cost into the water rates charged to customers, according to the American Water Works Association.

In Erie, Pennsylvania, for example, fluoridating water for 220,000 people costs about \$35,000 to \$45,000 a year and is entirely funded by water rates, said Craig Palmer, the chief executive of the Erie Water Authority.

So cutting off the CDC money would not have much impact on most communities, some experts said, although it could be more impactful for some smaller, rural communities.

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