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Investment in childcare benefits families, communities

Ohio should increase funding for public childcare so more working families can make ends meet and communities can enjoy the economic benefits, a new Policy Matters Ohio report says.

Ohio's funding for public childcare has improved but still falls short of what is needed. Ohio should expand access to the program while also improving quality.

"It is more difficult for families to qualify for Ohio's childcare program than it is to qualify for programs in 44 other states," said Senior Project Director Wendy Patton, the report author. "Yet the cost of childcare is staggeringly high, taking up to half of the earnings of a parent with two young children making \$40,000 a year in Ohio."

Ohio should restore initial eligibility back to the 2010 threshold of 200 percent of the poverty line, or \$40,000 for a parent and two children. At that income level, the family is eligible for help from food pantries. They should also be eligible for help with one of the largest parts of a young family's budget: childcare.

The state should also improve the quality of the childcare services for low-income working families. Poor quality care can hurt children during the important early years, when their brains are wired to do the most learning.

The small businesses that provide childcare services for the state struggle to keep trained staff and provide quality care because the state payment for the service is so low. For example, the gap between what Ohio pays for infant care and the nationally recommended rate is the second largest in the nation.

"Quality affordable childcare yields high returns for children, families, communities and the economy," Patton said. "Most importantly, it prepares children to learn and get along, building a foundation for a productive life."

Ohio's public childcare program was improved in the current budget. Legislators eliminated co-pays for the poorest working families, allowed families in the program to remain enrolled with some help all the way up to 300 percent of poverty and allowed extended time for a job search once a year. They also raised the ceiling at which a family can get into the program from 125 percent of the poverty level (\$25,200 for a parent with two children) to about 130 percent (\$26,208).

"The program is a little better, but there is more work to be done," Patton said.