



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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February 28, 1979

The Honorable Harrison A. Williams, Jr.
Chairman, Committee on Human Resources
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We refer to your letter dated January 29, 1979, requesting comments on S. 4, a bill to provide assistance and coordination in the provision of child-care services for children living in homes with working parents and for other purposes.

We have recently completed a [review of early childhood and family development programs] and on February 6, 1979, we issued our report entitled "Early Childhood and Family Development Programs Improve the Quality of Life for Low-Income Families" (HRD-79-40). Our report shows that early childhood and family development programs for low-income families are needed and that they can result in reduced health, social, and educational problems in young children that are expensive and difficult to overcome in later years. The following information on early childhood and family development programs is highlighted in the digest of our report.

About 3.7 million young children are badly in need of help to attain an opportunity to lead successful and healthy lives. Many young children receive inadequate care. Consider the following:

- In 1975 about 89,000 women who gave birth received little or no prenatal care, thereby greatly increasing the risk of mental retardation in the newborn. Health experts have estimated that 75 percent of the incidence of mental retardation can be attributed to adverse environmental conditions during early childhood.
- Millions of children suffer from poor nutrition, a lack of immunization, abuse, neglect, and undiagnosed learning disabilities.

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- Low-income children as a group perform significantly worse in school than other children. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) estimates that 25 percent will drop out before obtaining their high school diplomas. Children who fail in school may turn to delinquent behavior.

Research completed in 1977 indicates that developmental programs for low-income children during their first 4 years of life

- produced lasting, significant gains;
- helped them to perform significantly better in school than control groups of children who had no early childhood development programs; and
- were most effective when the child starts at a young age and when parents are closely involved in the program.

The research also showed that parents were receptive to and enthusiastically supported such programs.

Only a small percentage of children and families needing services receive them. Head Start is the largest comprehensive child development program; however, it served only about 402,000 children in fiscal year 1978, and it is basically limited to children between 3 and 5 years old. State and local comprehensive programs in early childhood and family development are extremely limited for children 4 years old and under.

HEW has demonstrated an effective program in early childhood and family development with the Child and Family Resource Program. This program provides services to low-income families and their children from the prenatal period through 8 years. The program is comprehensive and provides services under four major components: family social services, early childhood education, health screening and services, and parental involvement.

The costs of early childhood and family development programs would vary, depending on how the programs were implemented and on community needs and resources. Based

on our review of Child and Family Resource Programs, we found that these comprehensive programs cost about \$1,890 per year per family and up to \$1,154 in costs incurred by outside agencies that provide services to families referred by the program.

In our report, we state that we believe the following implementation factors need to be considered for an effective early childhood and family development program:

1. The program should provide or secure comprehensive services, with emphasis on prevention. The health, nutritional, and social services needs of families should be met if child and family development programs are to achieve maximum effectiveness.
2. The program design should give flexibility to local program staff to implement special efforts to meet the unique needs of families in a specific community.
3. The program should supplement rather than duplicate existing community resources. For maximum effectiveness at minimum cost, the program should serve as a link between families and existing support organizations that can provide services to meet family needs or enhance family goal accomplishment.
4. Parents should have an influence on program planning and administration, and parents should be involved directly in the educational/developmental program aimed at improving the development of the young child.
5. Selection and training of staff is very important. The staff must thoroughly understand the program's goals and how their contribution to the program relates to those goals. Program staff need to understand child development and be aware of how the family plays the most important role in a young child's development. Both preservice and inservice training are important.
6. Guidelines or standards should be established to insure that the program is properly administered. A continuous evaluation system should be established to determine program effectiveness.

In our report we state that the Congress should consider this report in its deliberations on any future legislation that authorizes comprehensive child care programs and that if such legislation is enacted, it should require that the programs provide or secure (emphasizing use of existing community resources) comprehensive services for young children and their families who wish to participate, including

- preventive and continual health care and nutrition services,
- family services based on a needs and goals assessment for each family,
- developmental/educational programs for children from birth through preschool years (with recognition that parents are the first and most important educators of their children),
- preschool/elementary school linkage efforts to enhance the continuity of development, and
- programs that involve parents in program activities and give parents an influential role in program planning and management.

Funding comprehensive child care programs should be increased gradually, and evaluations should be made while they are ongoing. The programs should be revised and improved as new and effective techniques pertaining to the development of young children and families are discovered and refined.

S. 4 contains a number of provisions that concern some of the factors needed for an effective early childhood program. In its deliberations on S. 4, we believe that the Committee should consider whether revisions should be made to the bill to more specifically provide that the programs provide or secure, particularly to families in lieu of the children alone, the comprehensive services discussed in our report.

If the Committee believes that programs should be authorized as discussed in our report, we believe that our implementation considerations should be detailed in

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the Committee's report on S. 4 to insure that its intent in this regard is made a part of the legislative history of the proposed legislation.

We note that section 12(e) of S. 4 would grant the Comptroller General authority to audit the programs and activities carried on under the proposed legislation, but that there is no provision requiring the recipients of financial assistance under the Act to keep the type of records necessary for us to effectively audit the programs and activities concerned. Accordingly, we recommend the following language be included in the Bill:

"Each recipient of financial assistance under this Act, whether in the form of grants, obligations, or other arrangements, shall keep such records as the Secretary shall prescribe, including records which fully disclose the amount and disposition by such recipient of the proceeds of such assistance, the total cost of the project or undertaking in connection with which such assistance is given or used, the amount of that portion of the cost of the project or undertaking supplied by other sources, and such other records as will facilitate an effective audit."

At the request of the Subcommittee on Child and Human Development, we will present testimony on our report at the hearings to be held on S. 4 on March 20, 1979. At that time, we will discuss our report in greater detail and will be available to respond to any questions that the Subcommittee may have on our report and S. 4. Also, in the interim, members of our staff will be available to discuss our report and S. 4 with the Committee and Subcommittee.

We trust that the foregoing information will be of assistance to the Committee.

Sincerely yours,

Deputy

R. F. K. 11/12
Comptroller General
of the United States