

SMART START

TRANSITION GRANTS



Frequently Asked Questions

Section 1: General Questions

1. What are Smart Start Transition Grants?

The Smart Start Transition Grant is a child care grant program funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services' (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and administered by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA). These grants will transition licensed child care programs from the Strengthen and Grow Child Care grants to Smart Start Child Care in FY25. Funding for Smart Start Child Care in FY25 will be subject to sufficient appropriation by the general assembly. Smart Start Transition Grants focus on providing stable and predictable funding to support workforce development and improve quality.

2. How much are the grant amounts?

Programs that participate in the Smart Start Transition Grants will receive the following amounts for every quarter that they opt in and are deemed eligible. Funding will be provided in advance of each quarter. The funding year will begin in October 2023 and end in September 2024.

Grant Award Amount

Licensed Centers

Infant Toddler Classroom: \$28,000/year or \$7000 per classroom

Preschool Classroom: \$24,000/year or \$6000 per classroom

Licensed Family Child Care: \$10,000/year or \$2500/quarter per program

Licensed Family Group Home: \$15,000/year or \$3750/quarter per program

Additionally, add-on funds are available for programs operating in areas with greater systemic barriers facing individuals living in that area, such as low employment, poverty, or crowded housing. The Smart Start Transition Grants will measure this using the [Social Vulnerability Index \(SVI\)](#), a tool for measuring these systemic barriers. Programs that are in areas with a high Social Vulnerability Index will receive add-on funding in addition to the above amounts. More information on the Social Vulnerability Index can be found in the Grant Amounts and Budget Requirements section below.

3. Where can I learn more about Smart Start Transition Grants?

Grant information can be found at <https://www.ilgateways.com/smart-start/smart-start-transition-grants>. You can also contact INCCRRA by email at grants@inccrra.org or by phone at 1-855-939-4858.

4. What is the timeline for Smart Start Transition Grants? When does the programs start and end?

Programs who apply and are deemed eligible will receive funding beginning in September 2023 for the first quarter, running October – December 2023. Programs must opt in each quarter, like the Strengthen & Grow Child Care Grant. Quarters will run as follows:

Round 1: October 2023 – December 2023 (Applications available July 10, 2023 – August 10, 2023)

Round 2: January 2024 – March 2024 (Applications available October 2, 2023 – October 31, 2023)

Round 3: April 2024 – June 2024 (Applications available January 2, 2024 – January 31, 2024)

Round 4: July 2024 – September 2024 (Applications available April 1, 2024 – April 30, 2024)

5. Where does funding for Smart Start Transition Grants come from?

Transition Grants are funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Child Care Stabilization Funds and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) Funds.

6. Who is administering this grant program?

Like the Child Care Restoration Grant Program, Child Care Workforce Bonus Program, and Strengthen & Grow Child Care Grants, IDHS DEC has partnered with INCCRRA to administer the Smart Start Transition Grants program.

7. What will I be required to do as a part of participating in the Smart Start Transition Grants program?

Programs receiving a Smart Start Transition Grant will be required to meet spending requirements and submit quarterly reporting, like the Strengthen & Grow Child Care Grants. You can find more information about this in the tip sheets, available on the Smart Start Transition Grant website.

Section 2: Program Eligibility

1. What are the eligibility requirements?

Programs are eligible for the Smart Start Transition Grant if they:

- Have a current, valid child care license (licensed child care center, licensed child care home, or licensed group child care home).
- Were in operation as of June 1, 2023, and continue to care for children today.
- Operate full-day and full-year, defined as a program that is open and offering at least eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week, 47 weeks of the year.
- Currently participate in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and have 10% of licensed capacity, at time of application, enrolled in CCAP in any month between January 2022 and the date of application.
- Have no more than 75% of program/site revenues coming from Preschool for All, Prevention Initiative, Head Start, and/or Early Head Start.
 - *Note: This is a combined 75% inclusive of all revenues from Preschool for All, Prevention Initiative, Head Start, and/or Early Head Start*
 - *Note: This is 75% of your early childhood program / early childhood site, not your total organization budget*

For more information on eligibility visit <https://www.ilgateways.com/smart-start/smart-start-transition-grants>.

2. Am I still eligible if some of my classrooms operate full day and some operate part day?

Yes. Smart Start Transition Grant funding will be distributed by classroom, and programs will receive funding based on the number of full day classrooms in operation.

3. Do we include our ISBE preschool classroom in the number of classrooms? (It is 100% PFA funded.)

The 100% Preschool For All (PFA) classroom is not eligible for the grant. You would not include this classroom in your classroom listing. This applies to PFA and Head Start classrooms. However, the program can still be eligible for classrooms that are not funded by PFA or Head Start, if the program has no more than 75% of program/site revenues coming from PFA, Prevention Initiative, Head Start and/or Early Head Start.

4. If a program closes over the summer for June and July, can I still apply for quarters I am open?

Programs must operate full-day and full-year, defined as a program that is open and offering at least eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week, 47 weeks of the year. Based on this a program can only be closed 5 weeks of the year.

5. What if a program is not eligible for Smart Start Transition Grants in the first round? Can the program become eligible in the future?

Programs that are not currently eligible for Smart Start Transition Grants will have the opportunity to apply in a future round when the program meets eligibility requirements. For example, if you are not currently caring for CCAP children, you can begin participating and meet enrollment percentages and apply in a later round.

6. In the eligibility requirements for Smart Start Transition Grants, how will the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) percentage of enrollment requirement be measured?

IDHS DEC and INCCRRA will determine the percentage of CCAP enrollment based on a program's licensed capacity, at the time of application, and the number of children enrolled receiving CCAP each month. Programs will meet this eligibility requirement if, at any time between January 2022 and the date a program applies for transition grants, at least 10% of licensed capacity (at time of application) is enrolled in CCAP. For example, if a program has a licensed capacity of 100 children, and in at least one month at least 10 children enrolled received CCAP, the program will meet this eligibility requirement.

7. My program has multiple site locations. Does each site need to meet the CCAP percentage of enrollment threshold to be eligible for Smart Start Transition Grants?

Yes. Eligibility is determined on a site-by-site basis. Each site location must meet all eligibility requirements to be deemed eligible for a Smart Start Transition Grant.

8. How do I know if I meet the % CCAP requirement at my site?

Programs can meet the 10% of licensed capacity at time of application enrolled in CCAP eligibility criteria using monthly CCAP enrollment from any month from January 2022 until the date a program applies. You can determine your program's eligibility using the following tool for each site that you are applying for:

How many of my enrolled children participated in CCAP in one month?		A. _____	Note: If your CCAP enrollment fluctuates, choose a month from Jan 2022 to now where you had the highest CCAP enrollment.
How many children am I licensed to serve at the time of application?		B. _____	
	A ÷ B =	_____	X 100 = _____% If this is greater than 10% you may be eligible.

9. Are you required to have children enrolled in the CCAP program to apply for the grant?

Yes. Smart Start Transition Grants are available to programs who enrolled 10% or more of the program's licensed capacity at the time of application with children in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) during any month in 2022 to the date of application and currently participate in CCAP.

10. Are Illinois DCFS foster care payments included in the CCAP percentage of enrollment requirement?

Yes. If you receive child care payments from DCFS for caring for a foster child that will be included in the 10% CCAP enrollment requirement.

11. Would you be able to confirm if the CCAP percentage of enrollment requirement is in relationship to the number of children enrolled or licensed capacity?

It is 10% of the current licensed capacity at the time of application.

12. Am I required to participate in the Smart Start Transition Grants?

No. Programs can determine whether they would like to apply for a Smart Start Transition Grant.

13. Are ExceleRate Child Care Center Pilot Programs/Smart Start Quality Support Programs participants eligible to apply for the Smart Start Transition Grants?

Yes. As we transition from Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants to Smart Start Transition Grants, the portion of the grant that must be spent on personnel will increase from 50% to 75%. For this reason, ExceleRate Child Care Center Pilot programs/Smart Start Quality Support Programs will be able to receive 25% of the total Smart Start Transition Grants award starting in October 2023.

14. If we qualify in round 1 and lose our CCAP child, what happens?

If you are no longer caring for a CCAP child or children when round two of Smart Start Transition Grants opens, you will want to opt-out or not submit a budget request for round 2 and not receive grant funds. We encourage you to work with your local CCR&R to recruit CCAP children to your program, so that before the next round you begin caring for CCAP children again. You can then opt-in for future grant payments.

15. Are school-age only classrooms eligible for Smart Start Transition Grants?

If you are providing care in a school-age classroom full day, full year defined as a program that is open and offering at least eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week, 47 weeks per year for the entire grant quarter for which you are applying, then the classroom can be included. Most school-age only classrooms will not meet this eligibility.

16. If we receive the Smart Start Transition Grant for several classrooms in our building but not for our school-age classrooms, can grant funds be spent on teaching staff or items for the school age classrooms that are not eligible?

Yes. The grant can be spent across the entire child care site budget. School-age classrooms and staff can benefit from the grant dollars.

17. Why are Infant-Toddler classrooms eligible for more funds than Preschool classrooms?

Since infant-toddler classrooms have lower ratios and more staff in the classroom, infant-toddler classrooms will come with a higher per-classroom award. This is also to recognize the need for more infant-toddler child care, and to recognize that these classrooms are often more expensive to operate and more costly for families. Smart Start Transition Grants will reflect the value and importance of infant-toddler child care, providing them with the investments they need to succeed alongside preschool classrooms.

18. My program is planning to open an additional classroom during the upcoming grant period. Can I add this classroom to my classroom card and include it for the next round of funding?

Classrooms that are marked "Active" on your program's classroom card should be current open classrooms with children enrolled and in attendance. When submitting a budget request for an upcoming round of funding for the Transition Grant, programs should not include classrooms that are not open yet. Once the classroom opens, then programs can add the classroom to their classroom card and include it for the next round of grant funds.

Section 3: Applying for Smart Start Transition Grant

1. When will the Smart Start Transition Grant applications be released?

Transition Grant Round 1: October 2023 – December 2023
(Applications available July 10, 2023 – August 10, 2023)

Transition Grant Round 2: January 2024 – March 2024
(Applications available October 2, 2023 – October 31, 2023)

Transition Grant Round 3: April 2024 – June 2024
(Applications available January 2, 2024 – January 31, 2024)

Transition Grant Round 4: July 2024 – September 2024
(Applications available April 1, 2024 – April 30, 2024)

2. When are the Smart Start Transition Grant applications due?

We encourage programs to apply early and not wait until the last day. Below are the deadlines for each application round.

Round 1 – due August 10, 2023

Round 2 – due October 31, 2023

Round 3 – due January 31, 2024

Round 4 – due April 30, 2024

3. Can I mail in an application for Smart Start Transition Grant?

No. Applications must be submitted online through the Gateways Director Portal. Mailed applications will be shredded upon receipt.

4. If my application is approved, when will I receive funding for Smart Start Transition Grants?

Grant funds are mailed the month prior to the quarter for which funding is expensed. For example, round 1 funds should be received by September, round 2 funds received by December, round 3 funds received by March and round 4 funds by June. This is always dependent on INCCRRA receiving funding from the state (IDHS).

5. What can I do to prepare to apply for Smart Start Transition Grants?

You want to make sure you are ready to apply for each round of Smart Start Transition Grants. Start this check list below today!

- Keep your Registry membership and Registry Director Portal current. Your Registry membership and Director Portal access renew annually and often at different times. You can check your Director Portal Expiration using these steps.
- Make sure all reporting for all grants is complete and accepted, this includes Child Care Restoration Grants, Child Care Workforce Bonus, and Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants Rounds.
- You must have a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI). The DUNS number will not be accepted for Smart Start Transition Grants. This process can take time and should be started now! Entities doing business with the federal government will now require the Unique Entity ID created in SAM.gov. If you are unsure how to obtain a UEI, refer to the UEI tip sheet on the SSTG webpage.
- For licensed child care centers update your classroom listing often in your Gateways Registry Director Portal, use this [help article](#) for detailed instructions on how to update your classroom listing.
- For centers, corporations, partnerships, and Limited Liability Companies (LLC) – an Illinois Secretary of State Certificate of Good Standing will be required. This must have a date of 2023 to apply for Smart Start Transition Grants.
- Start to think about what your new grant budget will look like. The budget itself is going to be very similar to the SGCC budget, but take into consideration the new grant award amounts, and the new requirement that 75% of funds must be spent on enhanced personnel. An updated tip sheet specific to budget planning will be coming soon.

6. How can I get help with applying for Smart Start Transition Grants?

A recorded webinar will be available for you to view, as well as tip sheets. Find these support materials on the Transition Grants [webpage](#).

7. My program has multiple locations. Do I need to complete an application for each site?

Yes. Programs must apply for each site to receive a grant.

Section 4: Comparing Strengthen & Grow Child Care Grants (SGCC) and Smart Start Transition Grants

1. Will there be more rounds of SGCC?

No. Strengthen & Grow Child Care Grant provided six rounds of funding beginning in February 2022 through September 2023. SGCC Round 6 was the last round of SGCC funds.

2. My program currently participates in SGCC. Am I eligible to apply for Smart Start Transition Grants?

Yes. If your program meets all grant requirements specific to Smart Start Transition Grants, you will be eligible for funds. Refer to the chart below for the differences between the two grant programs.

Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants	Smart Start Transition Grants
Licensed centers and licensed family child care	Same as SGCC
At least 10% of program's current licensed capacity (at time of application) enrolled and funded by CCAP in any one month between January 2020 to date of application .	At least 10% of program's current licensed capacity (at time of application) enrolled and funded by CCAP in any one month between January 2022 to date of application .
Less than 75% of total revenues from other public funding streams (e.g., Head Start, Preschool For All)	Same as SGCC
Were in operation as of March 2021 and continue to care for children today.	Must be licensed, open and caring for children by June 1, 2023 to apply for Smart Start Transition Grants Round 1.
Operate full-day and full-year, defined as a program that is open and offering at least eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week.	Operate full-day and full-year, defined as a program that is open and offering at least eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week, 47 weeks per year .
Grant Award Amount Centers: \$25,000/yr or \$6,250/qt per classroom Group Homes: \$15,000/yr or \$3,750/qt per program Homes: \$10,000/yr or \$2,500/qt per program	Grant Award Amount Centers (Infant-Toddler Classroom): \$28,000/yr or \$7,000/qt per classroom Centers (Preschool Classroom): \$24,000/yr or \$6,000/qt per classroom Homes and Group Homes: same as SGCC
Social Vulnerability Index Add-On: 10% or 15% (using 2018 SVI)	Social Vulnerability Index Add-On: 10% or 15% (using 2020 SVI)
Allowable Use of Funds 50% of funds must be spent on enhanced personnel	Allowable Use of Funds 75% of funds must be spent on enhanced personnel

Section 5: Grant Amounts and Budget Requirements

1. How will grant amounts be determined?

Programs will receive award amounts based on the type of DCFS license they have, such as family child care home, group family child care home, or child care center. For licensed centers the grant amount is figured based on your number of eligible classrooms listed in the Registry Director Portal.

Programs that participate in the Smart Start Transition Grants will receive the following amounts for every quarter that they opt in and are deemed eligible. Funding will be provided in advance of each quarter. The funding year will begin in October 2023 and end in September 2024.

Grant Award Amount

Licensed Centers

Infant Toddler Classroom: \$28,000/year or \$7000 per classroom

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Licensed Family Group Home: \$15,000/year or \$3750/quarter per program

Additionally, add-on funds are available for programs in areas with greater systemic barriers facing folks living in that area, such as low employment, poverty, or crowded housing. The Transition Grant will measure this using the [Social Vulnerability Index \(SVI\)](#) a tool for measuring systemic barriers.

The Transition Grant will provide additional funding to programs located in an area within the top two quartiles – or the most vulnerable 50% - of Illinois' census tracts. If a program is in a census tract with a Social Vulnerability Index of 0.5 – 0.75, they will receive an additional 10% in funding. If a program is in a census tract with a Social Vulnerability Index of 0.75 – 1.0, they will receive an additional 15% in funding.

2. How do I know which census tract I am in and what my census tract's Social Vulnerability Index is?

The federal government has an interactive map that can help you determine your census tract's Social Vulnerability Index. [Click here to access the map](#). On the map, type your program's address in the top right corner in the box labeled "Find address or place," including city and zip code. Press enter. Then, click on the map next to your location to view the census tract's 2020 Overall Social Vulnerability Index Score.

3. What am I able to spend Smart Start Transition Grant funds on?

At least 75% of the grant funds must be spent on enhanced personnel including: increases in wages and benefits or other areas of compensation; staff bonuses; health, dental, and vision insurance; scholarships; paid sick or family leave; retirement contributions; ongoing professional development or training; premium or hazard pay; mental health consultations for staff; and other types of mental health supports to staff; and recruitment and retention of staff.

For the remaining 25% of grant funds, the money can be spent on the following categories:

- rent or mortgage payments, utilities, facilities maintenance, or improvements defined as minor renovations, and insurance, including late fees or charges related to late payment; minor facilities renovations that do not meet the definition of major renovation in 45 CFR 98.2; and maintenance,
- mental health services, including infant and early childhood mental health consultation,
- improvements to quality, including materials, resources and curriculum that improve the quality of the program,
- other costs of operation in accordance with the applicable administrative rules.

All spending related to Smart Start Transition Grants must be allowable per federal funding guidelines provided by the Administration for Children and Families:

CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03 Information Memorandum ARP Act Child Care Supplemental Funds – [CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03 \(hhs.gov\)](#)

CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-01 Information Memorandum CRRSA Act – [CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-01 \(hhs.gov\)](#)

4. Why am I required to spend 75% of each quarter's Smart Start Transition Grant amount on new workforce-related investments?

The Smart Start Transition Grants are designed to provide stable funding to improve child care workforce and quality. Child care workers are the most important ingredient in a high-quality program; however, current funding for child care results in low wages and high turnover. To better support the child care workforce and improve overall quality, at least 75% of Smart Start Transition Grant funds must be spent on investments in the workforce.

5. I do not have any employees. How can I meet the 75% requirement for enhanced personnel?

As the sole proprietor running a child care business, you are a part of the workforce. You can meet the 75% requirement by giving yourself a raise or bonus or supporting your own professional development.

Section 6: Budget and Reporting

1. I added a new position with SGCC funds. Can I continue to count this expense toward the 75% requirement for SSTG?

Any new position hired after May 1, 2023, can fully be expensed out of enhanced personnel. To be a new position it must be a brand-new position that did not exist before May 1, 2023.

2. I added a new position in round one of the transition grants and marked it as a salary-new position on my budget. For the budget in round 2 does this position move to existing salaries or stay in salary-new position? Does the expense count toward the 75% requirement in round 2?

This position can remain in salary-new position for the life of the Smart Start Transition Grant and can be expensed toward the 75% enhanced personnel requirement for the life of the Smart Start Transition Grant.

3. If I provided staff with a raise using SGCC funds, can that raise continue to be expensed out of enhanced personnel in Smart Start Transition Grants?

Any monetary raise provided to a staff position from February 2022 through the life of Smart Start Transition Grants can be expensed out of enhanced personnel. If the raise was provided before February 2022, it cannot be expensed to enhanced personnel.

4. What if my budget for round 1 is not what I spent?

The budget is simply a budget request. When you report your expenses, they do not have to match your budget. However, programs should be expensing the full grant amount each quarter. If 75% of the beneficiary payment is not spent on enhanced personnel costs your future transition grant amounts may be reduced, or you may be asked to return the unused funding.

5. Will reporting be required?

Yes. There will be required reporting. This will include an expense report, a narrative report, and the need to upload an approval letter. The quarterly reporting will provide your budget that you completed and allow you to input what was expended in each category. There will also be a narrative reporting section asking questions specific to enrollment. The narrative report is monthly and will need to be completed for each month of the quarter.

6. When is the quarterly report due?

Quarterly reporting is due on the 15th of the month following the quarter. For example, round one reporting is due on January 15th. If the reporting is not complete this could affect future grant payments.