



Enriching Lives

# NEWS RELEASE

## COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

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### **COUNTY TO LAUNCH CHILD CARE RATING SYSTEM**

The County of Los Angeles announced today that it will soon be launching the Steps to Excellence Program (STEP), an innovative new child care rating system to help parents make informed child care choices for their children.

When it starts in July, STEP will be the first program of its kind in California. In much the same way as the County's successful restaurant grading system has empowered consumers with information, the goal of rating child care centers is to educate parents and improve the quality and services of the centers.

STEP will begin by assessing more than 200 child care centers and more than 400 family child care homes in nine communities across the County, including Inglewood, Long Beach, Palmdale, Pasadena, Pomona, Santa Monica, Florence/Firestone, Wilmington, and Pacoima/Arleta. The program is supported with funds from the County of Los Angeles, the California Department of Education and the First 5 LA Commission.

"This is a great opportunity to give parents access to clear, concise information about child care centers that they may not have time or the ability to research on their own," said Supervisor Don Knabe, who carried the concept of the program through to the Board of Supervisors. "The STEP program will assess six key areas that all parents would want to know about a child care setting, including safety, program quality, teacher qualifications, and whether or not they can accommodate kids with special needs."

Child care is big business in Los Angeles County and across California. In Los Angeles County alone, it is estimated that more than \$1.4 billion is spent on child care services annually and the demand for services and facilities continues to grow every year. But, with this increasing demand for services comes an increasing need for oversight and access to information for parents about the quality of care their children are receiving in these facilities, Knabe said.

Participation in STEP will be voluntary. Child care providers will first conduct a self-review of their services. Based on the results of that review, providers can either proceed directly to the rating process, or engage in training and support prior to submitting an application. On-site observations will be conducted by a trained field researcher in all STEP programs. Data from the classroom observations as well as

administrative records will be considered in determining the STEP rating. A program at Step 1 will be meeting basic licensing standards, whereas a program at Step 5 will have better trained teachers, higher-teacher-to-child ratios, enriched learning environments, and stronger ties to community resources.

“Child care licensing standards in the State of California are based solely on health and safety concerns, and do not address program quality,” said Supervisor Knabe. “The goal of this program is to rate the quality of care being offered, establish a mechanism to distinguish programs that are meeting higher standards, and provide parents a benchmark to go by when selecting a facility for their children.”

The targets for participation in the pilot project are set at 50 percent of centers and 20 percent of family child care homes in each of the pilot communities.

These communities were identified for the following reasons:

- They include families of various incomes.
- They reflect the diversity of the County. Some of the communities have established networks to support the implementation of STEP and others do not.
- Some cities expressed interest in incorporating STEP into their operations.

Child care providers interested in participating in the program should contact the Office of Child Care at (213) 974-4103.

### Background

The Los Angeles County Policy Roundtable for Child Care began working on the issue of child care rating more than three years ago. At that time, two Roundtable members were personally involved in choosing child care. Their frustration, which was shared by thousands of other parents in Los Angeles County, fueled the Roundtable's interest in developing a system to both inform parents on the quality of individual child care settings and to support providers in offering high quality services. This issue caught the attention of Supervisor Knabe and was approved by the Board for implementation Dec. 12, 2006.

Currently, child care centers and family child care homes in Los Angeles County are licensed by the California Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD). On-site monitoring of licensed child care centers and family child care homes occurs only once every five years. Additional monitoring occurs if a complaint is filed with CCLD.

STEP is designed to build on the health and safety regulations of CCLD and offers an incremental approach to improving child care quality. In addition to reviewing administrative materials, STEP will incorporate scores resulting from on-site observations using the Family Child Care, Infant/Toddler, and/or Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales. Among 14 states that are operating child care quality

rating systems, 11 are using the Environment Rating Scales. STEP is unique in that it also incorporates scores from the Adult Involvement Scale and addresses the identification and inclusion of children with special needs.

STEP will be contracting with the Center for Improving Child Care Quality at UCLA to conduct the on-site observations using the Adult Involvement Scale and the appropriate Environment Rating Scale. This reflects the Roundtable's beliefs that relationships between teachers and children are central to the quality of care and that children of all abilities should have access to quality services. Roundtable members researched tools used in other communities and received guidance from Dr. Carollee Howes, a nationally recognized developmental psychologist and researcher with UCLA in structuring STEP.

STEP focuses on six areas: regulatory compliance, teacher/child relationships, learning environment, identification and inclusion of children with special needs, staff qualifications and working conditions and family/community.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care offer accreditation systems for centers and family child care homes respectively. These accreditation systems focus on quality. However, only 7 percent of child care centers and less than 2 percent of family child care homes in Los Angeles are accredited.

"In the past, many programs saw the gap between basic licensing standards and accreditation as insurmountable. STEP offers programs a roadmap to make important and incremental improvements. Clearly we would like to see additional programs able to meet accreditation standards at the close of the pilot. However, we will also celebrate programs that successfully move from STEP 1 to STEP 2 or 3," said Matt Rezvani, chair of the Roundtable. "Experience has shown that when meaningful standards and the support to meet those standards are available, child centers and family child care providers are more than willing to participate."

Fourteen states have implemented rating systems using a variety of mechanisms. In 2006, United Way launched a rating system for approximate 800 child care centers in Orange County.

As of July 1, STEP applications and resource materials will be available to family child care providers and child care centers in the STEP pilot communities. Child care operators are encouraged to conduct a self-evaluation prior to submitting an application. If in the self-evaluation process, programs identify areas where improvement is needed, they will be able to request financial assistance to implement program improvements related to STEP criteria. In addition, beginning in August the Office of Child Care will be conducting a variety of training sessions designed to assist programs in meeting the STEP standards.

"This is an exciting example of a new and much needed focus on the quality of child services available to children and families in Los Angeles County," said Arlene Rhine, member of the Los Angeles County Policy Roundtable for Child Care and director of the Child Development Center at Cal State Northridge.