

Child Care is Essential 2026

[H-7393 \(Diaz\)](#) / [S-2667 \(Vargas\)](#)



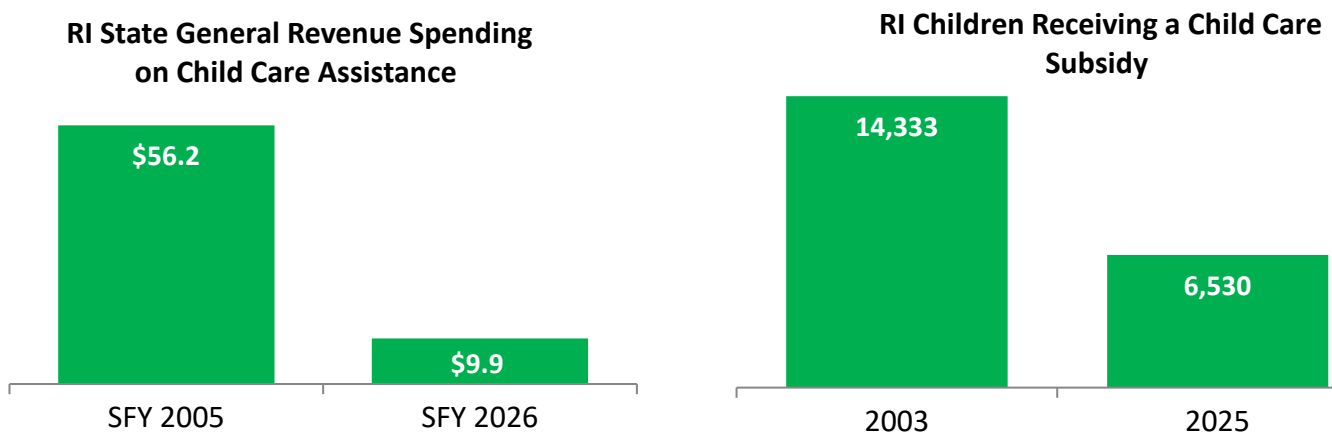
Right from the Start

Families need access to affordable, high-quality child care so parents can work, and children can learn and thrive. **Experts agree that 9 out of 10 families cannot afford child care.** The average cost of child care for an infant enrolled in a Rhode Island licensed child care center is \$16,899/year. Using the federal affordability guidelines, this makes infant care unaffordable for any Rhode Island family earning less than \$241,000/year.

The Rhode Island Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) and helps families pay for child care. Eligible low-income families are approved for a certificate they can use to enroll their children (birth – age 12) at a child care program that accepts the certificate. DHS pays child care programs based on rates that are set in statute. Some families are assessed a copayment that they pay directly to the child care program.

Rhode Island is one of only seven states in the U.S. (other states are: Arkansas, Idaho, Missouri, Nevada, West Virginia, and Wyoming) that are investing only the bare minimum needed to receive federal child care funding. **Rhode Island has cut \$46 million in state general revenue funding for child care assistance.**

Fewer Families Get Help Paying for Child Care Now Compared to 20+ Years Ago



The 2026 Rhode Island Child Care is Essential Act

- 1. Unifies sections of state law related to the Child Care Assistance Program** into a new statute named the Rhode Island Child Care is Essential Act.
- 2. Allows more families to qualify for the RI Child Care Assistance Program** by raising the family income limits to qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program to the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant benchmark, 85% of the state median family income and raises the “exit” income limit to 100% of the state median family income.
- 3. Adjusts rates for the RI Child Care Assistance Program to comply with the federal equal access standard** by meeting or exceeding the current federal equal access standard (75th percentile of the 2024 RI Child Care Market Rate Survey) for all ages and settings.

Helping More Families - Current and Proposed Family Income Eligibility Limits for Family of 3

	Current RI Law 2026	Child Care is Essential Goal
Entrance	\$71,305 ≤ 261% of the federal poverty level	\$96,692 ≤85% of State Median Family Income*
Exit	\$81,960 ≤ 300% of the federal poverty level	\$113,755 ≤100% of State Median Family Income

*Federal Eligibility Benchmark. States use the LIHEAP method to calculate.

Note: There are at least 17 states that meet or exceed the federal benchmark for child care eligibility (85% of State Median Income), including Arkansas, California, **Connecticut**, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, **Maine**, **New Hampshire**, New Mexico, **New York**, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, **Vermont**, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Rhode Island's Child Care Assistance Program Has Fallen Behind Our Neighboring States

Our family income limit to qualify for Child Care Assistance is one of the lowest in the northeast.

Vermont: \$157,090 (575% FPL)

Maine \$118,992 (125% SMI)

Connecticut \$109,306 (85% SMI)

New Hampshire \$104,660 (85% SMI)

New York: \$97,397 (85% SMI)

Rhode Island \$71,305 (261% FPL)

Massachusetts \$66,228/\$112,584 for child with a disability or child 's parent works as an early educator

Adjusting Child Care Assistance Program Rates to Meet Federal Equal Access Standards

	1 Star	2 Stars	3 Stars	4 Stars	5 Stars
Infant Current Rate	\$334	\$341	\$355	\$364	\$378
Infant Proposed Rate	\$463	\$472	\$482	\$491	\$501
Toddler Current Rate	\$278	\$284	\$296	\$303	\$315
Toddler Proposed Rate	\$356*	\$363	\$371	\$378	\$385
Preschool Current Rate	\$236	\$247	\$255	\$263	\$273
Preschool Proposed Rate	\$312*	\$320	\$329	\$337	\$345
School-Age Current Rate	\$210	\$215	\$231	\$250	\$263
School-Age Proposed Rate	\$280*	\$287	\$295	\$303	\$310

* Equal Access Benchmark (75th percentile of the 2024 RI Child Care Market Rate Survey)

Note: As of 2025, there were 20 states that met or exceeded the federal equal access standard for infant and toddler child care rates (75th percentile of the Market Rate Survey for the base 1 star rate), including Arkansas, Colorado, DC, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, **Massachusetts**, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, **New Hampshire**, New Mexico, **New York**, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, **Vermont** and Virginia.

Addressing the Infant Care Shortage

The Child Care is Essential bill sets CCAP rates for infants 30% higher than toddler rates to cover part of the funding gap associated with the staffing requirements needed to keep infants healthy and safe (4 infants for 1 teacher) versus toddlers (6 toddlers for 1 teacher).