

To the Committee on Budget and Finance of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania
To the Committee on Social Affairs and Labor of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania
To the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania
To the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania

2024 10 21

ON THE FUNDING OF CHILDREN'S DAY CENTERS

Children's day centers are a daytime social care service for children, regulated by the Catalogue of Social Services approved by the Minister of Social Security and Labor. Their purpose is to develop the social and life skills of children and their family members. This service is available for children aged 6 to 18 years. Currently, it is provided in 58 municipalities, with a total of 508 children's day centers, the majority of which are non-governmental organizations. Approximately 13,000 children in Lithuania benefit from the services of these centers. In children's day centers (hereinafter referred to as CDCs), children engage in a safe environment where they learn communication skills, acquire new abilities, and receive assistance from specialists (social workers, psychologists, therapists, speech therapists). The goal is to address each child's individual needs, with their education tailored to their family's circumstances through individualized plans based on social work methods. For some children, especially those from families facing significant challenges, these centers are their only safe haven, offering a respite from difficult daily realities. For this reason, CDCs provide critically important qualified support to children.

In 2020, significant changes occurred in the service system when children's day care services began to be accredited to strengthen service quality and ensure financial continuity. This means that the funding base for CDCs consists of state budget allocations, while municipal contributions depend on the number of children attending CDCs each month and whether the child has disabilities or special educational needs, or if case management is applied. Municipal funding also varies based on municipal decisions. CDCs use these funds to employ social workers and other specialists, such as activity coordinators, special educators, psychologists, and others. The funds are also used for children's meals, activity supplies, and educational resources. It is important to note that non-governmental CDCs must cover facility rental, heating, and other utility costs from these same funds.

Umbrella organizations such as the Lithuanian anti-poverty network, the NGO Confederation for children, and the Lithuanian children's day centers association are increasingly receiving concerns from their members—CDCs—about major funding challenges that threaten the continuity of these centers' activities and the quality of their services:

1. In recent years, there has been growing attention to the quality of services provided by CDCs. Children's day care services are increasingly recognized not only as a means of keeping children occupied but as an essential part of social services aimed at creating positive changes and fostering children's inclusion. This, in turn, places high demands on social workers who engage with children, requiring continuous contact with them and systematic work to meet their needs. Members of the EAPN Lithuania support this direction and continue to collaborate systematically with the Ministry of Social Security and Labor to improve service quality.

However, they emphasize that insufficient funding has become a critical obstacle to ensuring high-quality services for children.

2. The state-funded portion of CDC budgets has not changed since 2022. During this time, the cost of consumer goods and services has increased by 21.5%, and the average gross monthly wage has risen by 27%. The funding allocated by the state to CDCs has not been adjusted to account for inflation or wage growth and remains at €8.5 million in total. Meanwhile, municipal funding is often allocated only for basic expenses, such as heating and utility bills, and does not address the need for competitive wages. Consequently, CDC budgets have remained stagnant, leaving no room for salary adjustments or increases for employees.
3. The Social Services Law clearly defines the qualifications required for social service workers and mandates ongoing professional development (e.g., supervision sessions required by law). However, the current funding situation makes it impossible to meet these requirements. CDCs face challenges in ensuring compliance with qualification standards, as there is a significant disparity between the salaries paid by social service institutions and the limited financial capacity of CDCs to provide competitive wages from their funding. This reduces the attractiveness and prestige of working at CDCs, even though highly qualified employees are needed to work directly with children and handle complex cases. As a result, organizations often can only employ social workers or social pedagogues on part-time contracts (e.g., 0.25 FTE), frequently relying on voluntary work to fill the gaps. This situation undermines employee motivation and often leads to burnout. Organizations experience high staff turnover and a lack of qualified personnel, which severely affects service quality and continuity.
4. It should be noted that some organizations can maintain service continuity and ensure fair employee wages only thanks to private donors. However, we firmly believe that by accrediting services, the state commits to ensuring long-term service funding. This means that these services should be sustained not through private donations but through sustainable state and municipal funding. Meanwhile, private funding should be used to create added value—additional services, activities, initiatives, and innovations.

In light of the aforementioned arguments, as part of the upcoming state budget planning, we propose the following:

1. From 2025, increase the state-funded portion of the budget for CDCs to reflect the recent rise in average wages (gross), increasing it to €10.8 million;
2. Annually index the funding allocated to CDCs to account for inflation and wage growth rates, ensuring appropriate working conditions for social workers and the provision of high-quality services.

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