UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Various Factors Affect Head Start and Other Early Childhood Teachers’ Eligibility for Benefits

What GAO Found

In response to GAO’s survey, officials from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories reported that they have various laws or policies that may affect whether Head Start and other early childhood education (ECE) teachers are allowed to collect unemployment insurance (UI) benefits during summer breaks. Officials in three states—Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming—reported that Head Start teachers are generally not eligible for UI benefits over summer breaks. In other states, officials outlined various factors that can affect eligibility. Specifically, officials from 30 states said the type of employer—for-profit, non-profit, or municipality—can influence eligibility for Head Start teachers (officials in 28 states reported this for ECE teachers). In addition, officials in 17 states reported that eligibility for Head Start teachers can be affected by the program’s relationship to a school or board of education (officials in 11 states reported this for ECE teachers). For example, West Virginia officials reported that Head Start teachers considered under the authority of the board of education are generally not eligible for UI benefits.

In 2015, about half of the 90,000 Head Start teachers (about 44,800) across the country may have been eligible for UI benefits during their summer break, according to GAO’s analysis of available data and the information states reported about their laws, regulations, and policies in response to GAO’s survey. The remaining teachers and assistant teachers were likely not eligible because they worked for school districts or charter schools (about 14,150); worked in programs with breaks that were too short to allow them to collect benefits (about 28,940); or were generally not eligible under state laws, regulations, or policies (about 2,510).

To communicate UI eligibility rules to both employers and employees, state UI agencies reported using a variety of methods; however, selected stakeholders identified several concerns with these efforts. According to GAO’s survey, state directors reported that they use various communication channels to provide general information to both employers and employees on matters, such as how to file a claim in their states. The three most commonly cited methods used by the states included websites, hotlines, and handbooks. Even though most states reported that they are using multiple methods of communication with employers and employees, some Head Start and ECE stakeholders in five selected states told GAO that the complexity of federal and state laws and policies governing state programs continue to make UI eligibility rules difficult to understand, even with information that their states are providing. While some of this confusion can be attributed to the variability and complexities of states’ eligibility policies, GAO also found that states are generally not evaluating the effectiveness of their communication approaches. Specifically, over half of the states reported that they have not evaluated the effectiveness of their communication approaches with employees, and about two-thirds reported they have not evaluated the effectiveness of their communication approaches with employers. The states that were conducting evaluations reported that the feedback allowed them to make improvements in their communication materials for both employers and employees. For example, some states reported making their claims processing applications more user friendly and understandable as a result of this feedback.