WAGE$: Helene Expansion for Disaster Relief
Annual Incentive Payments Q&A

CHILD CARE WAGE$®: Helene Expansion for Disaster Relief

What is Child Care WAGE$®: Helene Expansion for Disaster Relief and how is it different from the Child Care WAGE$® Program?

Child Care WAGE$®: Helene Expansion for Disaster Relief (WAGE$: Helene Expansion) is fully funded through the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) as a way to expand WAGE$-based opportunities in the counties impacted by Hurricane Helene. The Child Care WAGE$® salary supplements are funded through local Smart Start partnerships that have elected to participate.

What opportunities are available through WAGE$: Helene Expansion?

Funds will support two different strategies. It will expand WAGE$ salary supplements into three counties (Ashe, Madison and Watauga) and will provide annual incentive payments to WAGE$ participants in other impacted counties based on their county's participation in the WAGE$ salary supplement program. A separate fact sheet is available to further explain the salary supplements.

Which counties are eligible to receive the WAGE$: Helene Expansion incentive payments?

For the initial funding year, those counties include: Alexander, Alleghany, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Cabarrus, Caldwell, Catawba, Cherokee, Clay, Cleveland, Forsyth, Gaston, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Iredell, Jackson, Lee, Lincoln, Macon, McDowell, Mecklenburg, Mitchell, Nash, Polk, Rowan, Rutherford, Stanly, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Union, Wilkes, Yadkin, and Yancey. Future eligibility will be determined based on annual WAGE$ participation.

Who is eligible to receive an incentive payment?

An annual incentive payment will be issued in the first year to WAGE$ participants who were paid a six-month salary supplement in 2026 and remain eligible based on the most recent confirmation with their employer. In addition, these annual incentive payments may be provided to new applicants who have applied by November 1st (with a complete application) and qualified for a six-month supplement but who have not been paid at the time the annual incentive payments are issued. To qualify, new applicants will need to remain eligible for WAGE$ in their county and employed at the child care site from which they applied. A confirmation will be done with their employers to providing the annual incentive payment.

How much is the annual incentive payment?

In the first year, the amount is expected to be $1,350 and payments will be issued in early 2027. The amount in future years will be determined based on funding and participation.

How many payments will participants be eligible to receive?

The funding is expected to be available until September 2029, and one payment will be made in each of three funded years to those who qualify.

What if a county has a waiting list and applicants have not yet been paid by WAGE$?

The annual incentives are being offered through DCDEE and not the local Smart Start which funds the WAGE$ salary supplements. New applicants on the waiting list may also qualify for an incentive payment pending eligibility at the time of confirmation.

Is the incentive payment taxable income?

Yes. Participants will be mailed an IRS-1099 form at the end of January as needed in accordance with IRS guidelines. Recipients are responsible for reporting and paying any personal income taxes due.

Child Care WAGE$®: Helene Expansion for Disaster Relief
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