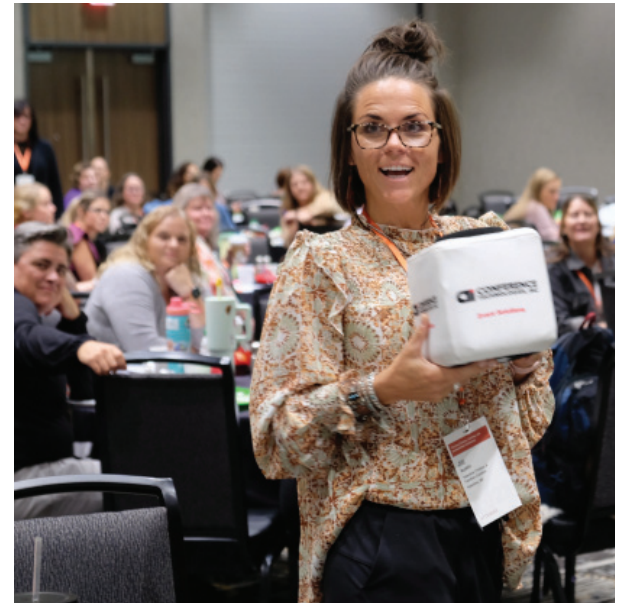
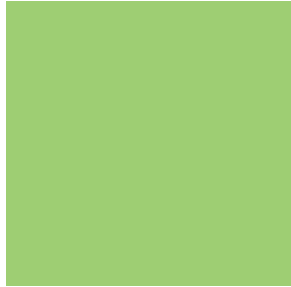


COMMUNITIES FOR KIDS

The Origin Story and Early Stories of Partnership and Progress



Communities for Kids™
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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Communities for Kids (C4K) was born from a simple yet powerful vision: to ensure that communities can thrive by establishing and maintaining a robust early childhood care and education infrastructure. This vision, combined with the commitment and support from organizations like the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation, and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, with support from Joan Lombardi, laid the foundation for what has become a transformative initiative.

In 2017, C4K began its journey by listening to the voices of communities struggling with shortages in quality child care. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by each community, C4K developed a tailored approach that emphasizes community engagement, data-driven solutions, and flexible technical assistance. The initiative's success is built on the belief that the best solutions come from within the community itself, guided by local strengths and needs.

Starting with a pilot cohort of nine communities, C4K has grown exponentially, thanks in part to our work with key partners and opportunities that have allowed us to expand our reach and impact. Over the past seven years, C4K has partnered with over 67 Nebraska communities, fostering collaboration, delivering essential resources, and sharing expertise to prioritize child care.

Key to C4K's methodology is its collective impact approach, which encourages communities to work together toward common goals. This framework guides communities through various phases of readiness, exploration, commitment, and action, with a special focus on rural areas. The initiative also emphasizes the development of fundraising skills and holistic problem-solving to create inclusive, community-based early childhood solutions.

C4K's efforts have yielded significant outcomes: enhancing the quality and capacity of child care, scaling the initiative across a broader area, and generating economic benefits. The initiative's organic growth speaks to its effectiveness and the trust we have built within communities. In addition to our origin story, we feature each community we worked with in our first seven years to highlight their efforts and collaboration with C4K.

This is the story of C4K spanning from July 2017 to June 2024, and we are just getting started.



Marti Beard

ORIGIN STORY

ORIGIN STORY

Communities for Kids (C4K) is an initiative, launched in Nebraska in 2017, dedicated to ensuring that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure.

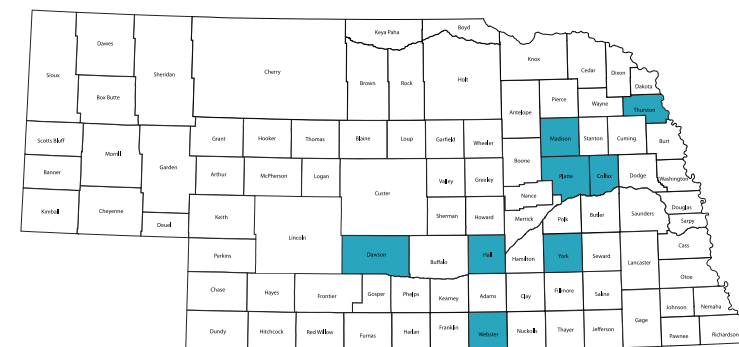
The initiative was born from statewide need.

Calls for support from rural Nebraska communities seeking resources to develop quality child care were the spark needed to create C4K by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, along with two key philanthropic partners. In a span of seven years, C4K evolved from initial discussions to a dedicated initiative now serving over 67 communities statewide. The primary work includes collaborating with communities to prioritize child care, delivering essential resources, and offering expertise to establish sustainable early childhood care and education infrastructure.

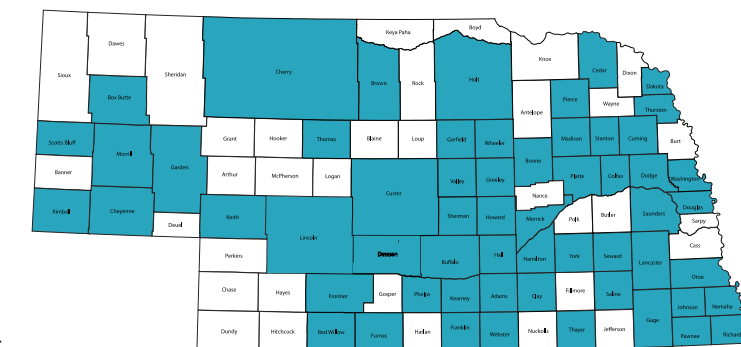
The initiative is unique nationally and was built to offer a tailored and customized approach aligned to each community's strengths and needs. In a short period of time, C4K has built a statewide network of trusting relationships and amassed impressive key outcomes, including scaling the initiative to communities in more than half of Nebraska's 93 counties.

This is the origin story of Communities for Kids.

C4K Communities in 2017



C4K Communities in 2024



THE BEGINNING

“Communities for Kids is a groundbreaking initiative that centers on the local needs of young children and families; energy and innovation emerge when community voices are heard and real engagement is valued.”

*Joan Lombardi, Ph.D.
Director, Early Opportunities
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development,
United States Department of Health and Human Services*

Jessie Rasmussen’s phone kept ringing.

The President of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund consistently heard similar stories from Nebraska’s rural communities fearing population loss, and one of the main causes cited was the lack of quality child care. The collective concerns from the communities became a catalyst for conversations about addressing the child care challenges, notably the pressing issues of quality and accessibility.

In 2016, Rasmussen, and her Buffett Fund colleague Gladys Haynes, Director of Nebraska Early Learning Initiatives, invited representatives from Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation to help form a planning group to respond to the requests for help from rural communities. They chose the team thoughtfully, ensuring mission alignment. The Buffett Fund’s mission is that every child is thriving by the age of 5. Leaders from Nebraska Children, a well-regarded and well-versed organization in Nebraska with an emphasis on statewide community work and well-being, included Mary Jo Pankoke, President and CEO; Betty Medinger, Senior Vice President; and Amy Bornemeier, Vice President of Early Childhood. The Scott Family Foundation was represented by John Scott, Chairman, who represents the foundation and the Scott family’s deep commitment to the people of Nebraska. Later, after the launch of Communities for Kids, John Levy, President of the Scott Family Foundation, became deeply involved



in supporting the work of C4K and serving as an advisor. A longtime national advocate for community-led work, Joan Lombardi, was a critical cheerleader and advisor. The combination of expertise, passion, and resources in the planning team laid a stable foundation for the formation of C4K.

It was clear to the team that there was a need for support. Discussions began on how to assist these communities in implementing services that would not only benefit families, but also contribute to the economic stability of the region. A sustainable infrastructure was needed to help the community expand child care capacity across the board.

“The upside of doing child care right in a community is that they can attract people back to work in their community, to live in their community, and contribute as members of their community,” Medinger said. “Children are safe and receive quality education for their first five years when their brain is developing. Parents have peace of mind when their children are in quality care while they’re working.”

The team began to dream about creating something new—something that would help guide communities to increase child care capacity, embed sustainability by focusing on building infrastructure, and enhance the quality of early childhood programs.

“When we first started thinking about Communities for Kids, we wanted an initiative that would help communities do thoughtful planning,” Haynes said. “So, we obviously wanted to help them with the gap in their child care slots that they had available for their population, but we wanted them to do it in a meaningful, planful way and not just jump in, spend a lot of money, and then not be able to sustain an initiative. I think that was our first overall goal.”

Medinger and Bornemeier took the lead on writing the concept paper. The process involved studying data from nine communities, identifying common themes, and proposing a consultation model.

“Sometimes it was about building and having a good structure. Sometimes it was about professional development. Or finding good people. What does quality mean? What other resources can I tap into? How do we write grants in our community?” Medinger said. “There was a whole list with similar themes. And then from there, it was a matter of saying, ‘Well, here’s the need. How would we try to help them address that need?’”

The aim was to connect communities with expertise in early childhood, covering various aspects like building structures, professional development, and resource access. The initiative sought to empower communities to develop efforts independently, with support from external experts.

The concept paper laid the foundation for C4K, focusing on critical ideas that are central to the initiative, including the need to:

- Listen to the community
- Gather, understand, and utilize data
- Find and engage diverse champions
- Offer the right resources at the right time
- Recognize each community has unique strengths and needs
- Provide guidance and expertise, not answers

Scott describes the idea of the C4K initiative: “It would be helping communities learn, supporting communities in terms of information sharing, learning how to communicate, giving them the confidence and the tools to move forward, helping them understand how to evaluate the challenges in their own communities, and then next steps and how to get it done. And that’s a worthwhile project.”

Once the concept paper was complete, the new initiative needed a leader. Marti Beard, who has extensive experience in nonprofit child care in Nebraska, was recruited and tapped to lead C4K. Beard’s approach of delivering expert advice in a respectful way helped build trust in communities, and she hired a team with the same commitment.

The first year was a busy one for Beard. She helped select the first cohort based on survey data and community engagement, drove across the state to attend weekly strategy meetings, and measured outcomes to adjust the initiative’s approach.

The first cohort, also referred to as the pilot year, ran from July 2017 to June 2018 and included Columbus, Gothenburg, Grand Island, Lexington, Norfolk, Pender, Red Cloud, Schuyler, and York County. The western Panhandle region of Nebraska was invited to join the first cohort but paused efforts, later joining up in the fourth cohort. This initial group of communities played a crucial role in helping to shape the services offered by C4K. These communities, having sought assistance from the Buffett Fund, became integral contributors to the formation of the initiative by collaborating with the newly established C4K team.

From the very beginning, the initiative was characterized by a focus on quality, inclusivity, and unique community-centric solutions. “Change happens at the speed of trust.’ That is a quote that I’ve heard repeatedly from different sources associated with community-based work,” said Bornemeier, “and it couldn’t be more true for C4K.” Hiring staff that were familiar with rural Nebraska’s cultures and dynamics was crucial to the initiative’s success. “Trust was required by communities to believe in the process and approach that C4K was engineering,” she said. “Trust is required by families and providers to invest their time in identifying issues and coming together to create unique strategies to address their local needs. Trust was required when additional funding was sought and awarded to expand into even more communities.”

In the third year of operations, C4K took part in a project that shaped its trajectory: Nebraska received a Preschool Development Grant, a \$9 million boost to Nebraska’s early childhood field. Tasked with taking its framework and amplifying it, C4K separated project dollars into buckets called Early Learning Scholarships, the Spanish Speaking/Bilingual Provider Support Initiative, Quality and Capacity Building, and Planning. What started as a privately funded initiative with nine communities was now much larger, and C4K had the opportunity to expand and add additional cohorts of communities to meet the growing need.

“And the rest is history,” Medinger said. “It took off like crazy.”



THE FRAMEWORK

“What’s really been done well by Marti Beard and her team is that they go in and listen and get to know the community, get to know the issues, but they also know how to guide. They know how to say, ‘Let’s slow down a little bit here. What do you already have going on in this community?’ ... What is really exciting is to see how each community is coming up with their unique answer to providing quality child care in their community.”

Jessie Rasmussen
President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

When the C4K initiative began, the team quickly learned that how they offered guidance and expertise was just as important as the information given. They began offering communities a contract to help them pull together diverse core teams, collect valuable data, engage their neighbors, create work plans, and ultimately improve their early childhood landscapes.

The C4K framework illustrates the initiative’s unique approach of working with communities. It embodies a distinctive methodology of community engagement that includes three key elements:

- Collective impact approach
- Technical assistance and initiative guidebook
- Theory of change

Through the collective impact approach, diverse stakeholders unite in a collaborative effort to advance a shared goal, fostering a more comprehensive response to building an early childhood infrastructure. The initiative relies on both expert technical assistance and a resourceful guidebook that are structured around C4K’s Three Pillars—Engage, Utilize, and Connect. Additionally, the theory of change, drawing inspiration from John Kotter’s proven methodology, underpins the initiative’s internal workings. Together, these components define the C4K framework, steering communities toward positive and lasting change in early childhood development.

In joining the C4K initiative, a community contributes through four committed roles: readiness, by assessing and preparing for child care prioritization; exploration, which involves delving into collaborative opportunities and challenges; commitment, to signify the formal dedication to actively participate in the C4K framework; and action, to encompass implementing agreed-upon strategies and taking practical steps toward defined goals.

The intentional distribution of the roles and responsibilities between the C4K team and the community is a signature aspect of the C4K framework.

Additional aspects of the framework include:

Rural Communities Focus and Expertise

A special component of the C4K initiative is the focus on helping communities in rural areas, which makes it unique in Nebraska and nationally.

“I know in talking to my colleagues in the funder community around the country, their ears perk up on this whole business of trying to respond to building early childhood systems in rural communities,” Rasmussen said. “Because they know it’s different, and they know for many of them that most of their historical investments have been in large urban communities. So figuring this out, when a good part of this country is rural, is appealing to them.”

Determining the Roles: Who Will Lead Fundraising?

Right from the start, C4K kept bumping into one key question that needed to be answered in community after community: Who will be our fundraiser? After a lot of deliberation among the C4K team, it became clear that for the community to have the best chance at long-term, sustainable success, they needed to be taught how to fundraise—not to have someone do it for them. C4K tweaked their framework to support communities as they developed their own fundraising skills through a variety of offered trainings, expert advice, and resources.

“One of the important decisions that was addressed ... was the role that they would play in helping these communities raise money,” Scott said. “I’m really happy that the decision, more or less, that was made was that Communities for Kids would do the training, would do the education, and would be a support system for these communities... I think that was really key.”

This approach helped people become more effective about funding and financing and became an important aspect of C4K. In some communities, foundations were even started that supported early childhood.

THE CHALLENGES

“When I describe Communities for Kids, I tell people it’s a holistic approach to addressing early childhood challenges in Nebraska and in specific communities. ... I say how do we get everyone behind our community into making sure that we truly address early childhood and not just one little aspect of early childhood, but really to make it a community-based approach.”

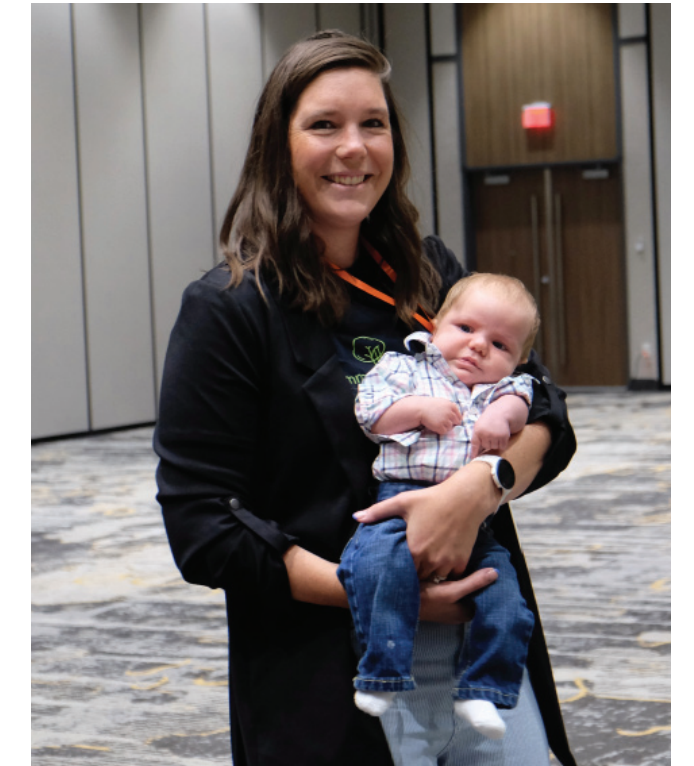
*John Levy, President
William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation*

There is a phrase around C4K when challenges arrive: Shift happens.

From the beginning, the C4K team, with full support from the Buffett Fund and the Scott Family Foundation, recognized that the work to prioritize child care in communities is complex, and challenges are inevitable. This is why the C4K framework places an emphasis on the collective impact approach and incorporates the Three Pillars of Engage, Utilize, and Connect within communities, because those become the critical skills that hold the early childhood infrastructure together when challenges arrive.

And arrive they did. Numerous challenges arose that offered the opportunity for C4K and the communities to work together addressing the problems and learning from them.

“I think part of it was that we didn’t really know what to expect,” Beard said. “One of the things we learned early on is that every community was approaching the work very, very differently. And while it seemed like a challenge at the time, we now know that that was a gift, that is absolutely a strength of what communities in Nebraska are showing us. We were really able to tailor our program to meet those needs and find ways to connect.”



Highlights of some of the challenges include:

Learning Curve

Even after the first cohort was underway, there was a learning curve. “We learned that you need to take a little bit of time to do an analysis of readiness,” Rasmussen said. “One of the things that the Community for Kids team did early on was develop a tool for communities to use to say, ‘Where are we in the exploration of building quality child care programs in our community, and how ready are they to move and to activate themselves and their whole community?’” Rasmussen emphasized the significance of a readiness assessment, acknowledging that communities may not progress at the same pace.

Community Participation: Who Was Showing Up to Help

In the realm of community participation within the C4K framework, a fundamental task is to ensure inclusivity by reaching out to every member of the community. This requires thoughtful strategy, dedicated effort, and unwavering persistence. The importance of this effort lies in acknowledging that any segment of the population left unengaged represents a loss to the overall initiative. It could mean that the infants and children within the unconnected network might miss out on the vital resources the community aims to establish. Equally crucial is the examination of the roles played by those attending meetings, often characterized as the “unusual suspects.”

“On the early childhood advisory committees, you saw lots of providers, parents, maybe a couple of business people, former teachers, but you didn’t see people who really carried the power in the community,” Haynes said. “And I think over time, the early childhood advisory committees have really picked up people that do carry power within a community, be it the mayors, school superintendents.”

This inclusion evolution reflects a deliberate effort to involve all community members from parents with young children to elected officials with the power and influence needed to address issues effectively.



Bureaucracy and Red Tape

Over the years, the initiative encountered various peripheral issues hindering the establishment of quality early childhood programs.

“Things like helping communities establish their own nonprofit, their own 501(c)(3)s, and coming up with ways to think about business planning, zoning issues and water issues, and all of those things that go with thinking about capacity and building programs that were a bit of a surprise, that we didn’t really anticipate right away,” Beard said. “But in looking back, those were some of the most valuable lessons we learned, because we were able to co-create solutions with communities. We were able to come up with strategies, and we were able to make a lot of friends and partners in a lot of different fields that we still use today as resources for our communities.”

To date, there has not been a challenge identified that couldn’t be solved. And each issue is an opportunity for continuous quality improvement.

“My expectation is that Communities for Kids is going to continue to play an important role in helping communities. This isn’t a problem that gets solved in one year, five years, maybe not even 10 years,” Scott said. “As we’ve all learned, you can build the physical plant that these kids go to, but there’s ongoing challenges facing us, facing these communities. Running the centers, staffing these centers, equitable pay. How do we help these kids? And decisions have to be made constantly. I think that having Communities for Kids available, helping these communities figure out those answers ... and how can we do this well so that we help families and kids down the road. It’s a generational thing.”

And C4K is ready for the long haul. The initiative was built to be resilient, adaptable, and determined.



THE KEY OUTCOMES

“How do we provide opportunities for early learning for children so that we get the benefits for them and their families as you move forward through life? My hope was that at the end of the day, we’d have communities that would know how to tackle this problem as a community, and frankly, I think we’ve succeeded in that regard.”

*John Scott, Chairman
William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation*

Measurement of C4K progress in communities is an integral part of the initiative and helps inform continuous quality improvement practices.

The key outcomes of C4K can be organized into three distinct measurement areas including:

- **Quality and capacity:** *To enhance quality and expand capacity of early child care and education programs*
- **Scaling:** *To expand C4K operations, increase reach, and grow impact*
- **Economic impact:** *To quantify new resources available to support child care and to capture and understand the broader benefits that quality child care services and supporting systems bring to a community’s economy*



A few key outcomes to highlight include:

Quality and capacity: *Guided and supported communities to build sustainable child care infrastructure that strengthens quality and expands capacity.*

Quality:

- Child care programs located in C4K communities are strongly encouraged to participate in Step Up to Quality, Nebraska’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).
- Of the 618* statewide licensed programs participating in Nebraska’s Step Up to Quality program in June 2023, 513 of the rated programs, or 83%, are located in C4K communities.
*As of June 2023, Step Up to Quality has a total of 733 programs enrolled, including licensed child care programs, Head Start programs, and school district early childhood programs.

Capacity:

- In the years following the pandemic, stabilization of child care programs became an important focus. C4K communities have increased child care capacity, across all cohorts, between June 2021 and June 2023 by 1,934 spots, through program development and expansion support.
- 32 communities have built or renovated centers, 29 have provided microgrants to current providers to expand their capacity, and 38 communities used funds to support educational and professional development expenses for high-quality programs.

Scaling: *Significantly increased number of Nebraska communities and counties served.*

In 2018, C4K partnered with:

- Nine communities (2% of Nebraska communities)
- Eight counties (9% of Nebraska counties)

In 2023, C4K partnered with communities in over half of Nebraska’s counties:

- 67 communities (13% of Nebraska communities)
- 57 counties (61% of Nebraska counties)

Economic impact: *Added almost \$25 million of increased financial support for quality early childhood efforts.*

- C4K communities raised a combined \$10,483,581.
- C4K has distributed over \$14 million in a combination of federal and private funds to communities through 360 contracts.

While the three primary measurement categories offer a comprehensive view of our key outcomes, there are also other significant developments that further demonstrate C4K's progress and underscore the broader impact of the initiative's collective efforts in communities.

Word of Mouth

The C4K initiative has organically grown from nine to 67 communities in over seven years without an advertising budget. The initiative has spread by word of mouth from community to community, in many different languages, to over half of the state's 93 counties, and there is a waiting list to join a future cohort.

Initiative growth fueled by word of mouth in communities is vital for several reasons. First, it signifies a high level of trust and credibility, as individuals are more likely to engage with and endorse an initiative that they have heard positively about from peers or family members. Second, word-of-mouth expansion ensures that the initiative reaches those who may benefit from it most, as community members are best positioned to understand and communicate the needs and preferences of their own community. Growth through word of mouth is not just about reaching more people, but about building a sustainable, community-driven initiative that resonates deeply with its audience.

Language

Levy measures success in how he hears community members evolve when they speak about their early childhood needs. Often new cohort members begin by telling him about "daycare, daycare, daycare." But once they get referred to C4K, something shifts. "After they get more involved in Communities for Kids, you hear them start talking about 'high-quality early childhood education and services,'" Levy said. "It's much more than just, 'Let's have a warehouse for kids and a safe place for kids.' They transition into, 'Let's have an enriching experience for kids so that they're prepared for kindergarten.' They're prepared to go on with school and to excel in school."

Haynes has a similar story about attending an advisory meeting: "I remember the first few meetings ... and they still talked about the 'us and them' or the 'we and them.' And now to hear them talk about it as 'our community, our early childhood needs' has just been a really great thing for me to see."



Network for Impact

The annual Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference, sponsored by the Buffett Fund and collaboratively planned by various Nebraska early childhood organizations, including C4K, is a valuable barometer for the growing demand across the state for quality early childhood strategies, and it has become a vital resource for those seeking information and assistance in addressing their early childhood needs, including hundreds of members from C4K communities.

"The Thriving conference ... is well attended by representatives from the various communities that are currently involved in Communities for Kids, as well as those on the waiting list," Haynes said. "One of the things that really happens is they're able to share with one another what they've done in their community. And sometimes it's just hearing about those other ideas, maybe it's just knowing that you can step outside the box and identify different ways of meeting your needs that's so helpful."

As attendees share experiences, seek advice, and forge connections, the conference becomes not just a meeting point but a testament to the power of collaboration in shaping the future of early childhood development and supportive infrastructure in the state connected by a peer network. And this is very important to Rasmussen: "I want to see that there is now an understanding in all these communities across Nebraska that realize we need a much stronger public investment in order to support every child, every family, every community, and ultimately contribute to the strength of the state."



Impact Beyond Numbers

When evaluating program effectiveness, quantitative metrics provide a crucial lens, offering tangible insights into success. Yet, valuable insights also lie in qualitative information—the narratives that unfold within each community touched by the program. It's about more than achieving statistical milestones—it's about the stories of thriving families. These qualitative dimensions reveal the depth of impact, painting a vivid picture of how the initiative has not only reached a significant percentage of the state but also transformed lives on a personal and communal level.

Rasmussen agrees. “The way to assess the effectiveness of a program is, yes, by metrics and so to say that you're getting to 50% of the state is an important metric and reflects success in your program,” she said. “But I think what's even more powerful is the qualitative information, the stories from each of the communities, whether it's from families who have moved back to their home community because now they know they have a really good place for their children to be while they're working, or to see a community come together where everybody is contributing what they have, whether it's money or whether it's their labor or whether it's their time.”

The support and success stories that come from the communities are an incredible way to measure the effectiveness of the C4K initiative. For example, this assessment came from Lindsey Jarecki, a member of the Boone Beginnings Board of Directors in Boone County, Nebraska: “Communities for Kids is the catalyst to legitimacy and professionalism that our project needed. Our group was so passionate, committed, and driven towards change in the Boone Beginnings Early Childhood project; however, when Communities for Kids stepped into a supportive role, magic happened. It would have taken longer, and the quality would be lacking. Our tiny community can offer access and quality because of Communities for Kids. Looking back on what our community had and thought was acceptable for kids before and after C4K support is such a stark difference; it is simply not a comparison. Families and children are not just surviving in Boone County now, they are now thriving.”

Jarecki's experience in Boone County powerfully captures the essence of C4K's transformative effect at a local level. This theme of profound change and progress, as seen through the lens of individual communities, sets the stage for understanding the broader, statewide impact of the initiative. As Rasmussen notes, the significant return on investment and the widespread enthusiasm among communities to join the initiative highlight not just its effectiveness, but its role as a transformative force across the state, even amidst challenging times.



“Honestly for the amount of philanthropic dollars that go into this initiative, it's one of the biggest bang for the bucks we've ever gotten,” Rasmussen said. “To see this many communities being engaged and to know there's another 30 or so that are banging on the doors to get into this initiative. So it's very exciting because what you're seeing is something that's transformational for the state and that's what we all like to get, but sometimes that doesn't happen, certainly not in seven years, especially when you realize a few of those years are in the heart of the pandemic.”

As phone calls from around the country come into the C4K team, the initiative is poised to maximize the potential for positive change and community impact throughout Nebraska and beyond.



NEXT STEPS

“I believe Communities for Kids has a gift to offer other states: the science behind working in a community and helping them organize to solve their own problems.”

*Betty Medinger
Former Senior Vice President
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation*

Communities for Kids is on a transformative journey marked by impactful growth and outreach. Inspired by the vision to share the science of community engagement and problem-solving, C4K has crafted an early childhood care and education capacity-building initiative framework that is resonating not only within Nebraska, but also across the United States.

In response to inquiries and positive feedback, the C4K team is ready for pivotal next steps. The plan encompasses comprehensive engagement with interested communities in all 93 Nebraska counties. Moreover, there is a strategic commitment to address calls from beyond Nebraska's borders, with plans to form a pilot cohort for a national scaling project in 2024-26. This initiative's impact is further poised to extend significantly through digital platforms in 2025, maximizing insights and contributions to a wider community.

To accommodate for the potential of expanded national communities work, the C4K team revised the initiative's vision statement: **Communities for Kids will lead national efforts to ensure that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure.**



As C4K enters this phase of expansion and innovation, an invitation is extended to new communities and individuals to reach out and connect with the C4K team. The journey ahead holds promise, and C4K is ready to explore new paths with communities, supporting them in creating lasting positive change by partnering with communities to prioritize child care through a sustainable infrastructure.

“When I get communities that tell us how great Communities for Kids has been to work with and the difference it's made in helping them address their community challenge, it doesn't get much better than that, really,” Scott said. “I feel like it's really working.”



EARLY STORIES OF PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRESS

July 2017-June 2024

The Communities for Kids initiative's success has a lot to do with the 67 communities and one region who have been the pioneering partners. This section honors the collaborative efforts and shared achievements of these communities, highlighting the invaluable lessons and successes we've experienced together.

Each spotlight outlines a community's specific goal, a significant achievement, and a key quote that encapsulates their journey with C4K spanning from July 2017 to June 2024. The C4K team is privileged to have worked alongside these dedicated communities, learning from their unique insights and experiences as we collectively strive to enhance early childhood care and education across Nebraska.

COHORT 1

“All the support is amazing. All the C4K staff go above and beyond for everyone in every community.”

– York County

COLUMBUS

The town of Columbus' initial goal was to build a center that would bridge the child care gap for the community, create high-quality care, and provide community resources to the existing providers.

The achievement they are most proud of? Opening of the Kramer Child Development Center! The center includes nine preschool classrooms, one junior kindergarten classroom, and a child care center that serves 36 infants, 36 toddlers, and 26 preschoolers.

“Quality and affordability of child care continue to be the biggest priorities in our community. We are dedicated to partnering with our community to find the right avenues to address these challenges.”



GOTHENBURG



When they first began, Gothenburg wanted to be sure every family in the community had access to affordable, high-quality early childhood experiences, maintain and strengthen connections between current providers through the Gothenburg Early Childhood Learning Coalition, and promote access to preschool opportunities for every child prior to kindergarten.

Gothenburg feels their biggest achievement to date has been the community's support in creating 94 additional licensed full-time child care spots through the construction of a new early learning center. This new center is giving local families spots for child care that haven't been available in years. Local early childhood providers also continue to be supported through networking and connections to resources.

“We have more leaders in the community understanding child care is the foundation of the community's success. We have had 100% of students entering kindergarten with preschool experience the last two years. These classes have shown the highest levels of school readiness and the least need for interventions at the start of school. The community is having conversations about the need for and impact of high-quality early childhood care and education and we have more advocates than ever before.”

GRAND ISLAND

Grand Island began with wanting to identify their child care capacity gap by obtaining data, building a strong Core Team of community members, creating public awareness of the issue(s), and better aligning all early childhood programs in Hall County to work collectively.

They are most proud of their highly engaged Spanish-speaking child care provider learning community, active early childhood advocacy coalition, and plans for the Grand Island YWCA to implement a community-supported capital campaign for an early childhood facility project at the newly acquired location (old Wyandotte Building).

“The work we have done with C4K has increased trust from child care providers and awareness that we are available to support them in many ways. Several providers now contact us first when they have questions or need additional support. The change in the ability for our community (to) use LB 840 funds AND the change to city code related to allowing licensed child care home II’s to operate as a legal business are direct results of relationships that have been formed with both businesses and the government officials.”



LEXINGTON



Lexington’s initial goals were to identify their child care capacity gap by obtaining data, build a Core Team of community members, create public awareness of the issue(s), align with other early childhood programs in Dawson County to work collectively on the issue(s), and create a more diverse early childhood workforce that matches the demographics of the community. Their biggest achievements to date?

Fifteen Spanish-speaking providers have attended over 100 hours of Early Childhood Training; licensed capacity of Spanish-speaking/bilingual providers grew from 22 to 70, with three more license applications pending. They provided funding and support for local bilingual community members to participate in early childhood, CPR, and First Aid Train the Trainers to offer training in both English and Spanish to early childhood providers. Finally, a community-led group continues to meet to address the ongoing capacity need in Lexington and find “right-sized” solutions for the community.

“The work being done in Lexington due to Communities for Kids has been transformative. Families now have access to more diverse, trained, and high-quality providers. We hope to continue to grow child care capacity availability that reflects our unique diverse population well into the future.”

NORFOLK/MADISON COUNTY

Norfolk’s first goal was to coordinate and align current child care programs and the programs in development.

They are very proud of their infrastructure planning work, support of capacity expansion, Early Learning Scholarships, Spanish-speaking provider support, quality enhancement efforts, and partnership with the Norfolk Area Childcare Collaborative, a business and child care cooperative.

“Within this last year, I have noticed a huge shift in the attention to early childhood. Our community started meeting last June to discuss the child care shortage crisis. During these conversations, community leaders, business partners, early childhood educators, and other individuals have learned the importance of quality early childhood care and our community needs. This conversation has also led to many wonderful things being in motion.”



PENDER



Pender residents worked in collaboration with the local Community Fund to build a community center that included a child care program with spaces for up to 60 children 0-5. With the shared community space, the program has access to a gym for large-motor play. The program is supported by the local hospital, which provided funding and administrative resources.

Pender takes pride in their community meetings, funding, and connection to resources such as training, materials, business planning, and fundraising.

“Our community is focused on developing community partnerships, supporting local providers, and sustaining efforts.”

RED CLOUD

Red Cloud's goal was to build a facility with a high-quality environment and staff it with high-quality educators to address their capacity needs.

The Valley Child Development Center opened in January 2018 with a capacity of 80. After operating for six years, the center has successfully sustained their high-quality care and learning environment and retained their quality staff to provide an affordable, reliable, and safe early childhood development center. "It's so much work being at the center all day," said one child in the toddler room. "Yeah, man," another agreed, "my brain is full!"

"[The Valley Child Development Center] TVCDC has been a catalyst for attracting new families to Red Cloud. Young professionals are making decisions about where they want to live, and a lot of that is based on having access to high-quality child care. TVCDC is a critical part of recruiting talented people to our growing community."



SCHUYLER



The Schuylar team has primarily focused on improving the quality and increasing the capacity of child care. They understood the need to connect with their Spanish-speaking child care providers. It was important for them to establish trust, build relationships, and offer support and education.

Their key accomplishment? Hosting an early childhood Provider Gallery Walk for Spanish-speakers. This helped to develop relationships between C4K and child care providers and identify their needs. With funding, they were able to provide support, education, and resources in the provider's first language.

"Our hard work continues as we address the need for equitable, accessible early childhood care and education. We are moving toward expanding capacity in Schuylar with the support of our team and the community."

YORK

York's initial goal was to increase support for their provider network through local trainings and staff support, expand quality by providing access to the Ages & Stages assessment for all local early childhood providers, and increase community outreach to share the early childhood efforts of the York County Child Care Alliance.

They engaged businesses to support further expansion of early childhood capacity, built a strong provider network, and established connections between programs and providers.

"York is very appreciative of the time and effort C4K has given to our community. We are so thankful for the ongoing funding. Because of C4K we have increased the quality in our community."



COHORT 2

“C4K was absolutely vital to the effectiveness of our program throughout this entire process. We continue to grow and improve as an organization because of the support and feedback.”

– North Platte

BOONE COUNTY

Boone County’s goal was to increase availability of child care. They began by researching data and gap number information, holding town hall events, and doing a community survey.

Their biggest accomplishment to date? Opening Boone Beginnings, a high-quality and developmentally appropriate early childhood program, which currently serves over 70 children, birth through preschool. In the fall of 2024, they are adding an afterschool program that includes transportation. They also employ 15 full-time staff consisting of teachers and administrators, and are continuing to develop their relationship and partnerships with the local school and health center.

“C4K was the catalyst in taking our dream of a high-quality child care center and making it a SUSTAINABLE reality. Boone County knew where we wanted to go, but C4K provided the road map of how to get there. We were supported every step of the way in areas such as budgeting, community engagement, fundraising, facility design, and program development. While we are technically graduated from C4K, the team is still supportive and provides continued guidance.”



BROKEN BOW/CUSTER COUNTY



The team in Custer County wanted to coordinate and align current child care programs and the new programs in development.

They continue their exploration of a large-capacity expansion project in conjunction with a community wellness center, as well as the various family and provider outreach programs they have already put in place.

“We have had several meetings with child care providers, parents, (and) business leaders in our community that were all focused on providing quality care and affordable care for all children.”

KEITH COUNTY

Keith County started with wanting to develop key messaging and branding for early childhood efforts, build connections between providers to enhance quality, connect providers with mentors for support, and increase marketing for early child care programs through the local Chamber of Commerce.

They created a strong providers network, engaged organizations and stakeholders across the community to join the early childhood conversation, secured local support to continue having a dedicated local early childhood coordinator, and are piloting a locally designed program to enhance quality.

“Over the past few years, early child care and education has become more of a hot topic in Keith County. We have a lot more local stakeholders on board and are continually having the discussion with them and other entities to work together on this problem.”



NEBRASKA CITY/OTOE COUNTY



Nebraska City’s initial goals were to support families by expanding child care capacity within Otoe County, continue advocacy and policy advancement for early childhood education, and coordinate with local community organizations.

They expanded capacity by 120 early childhood spots, created widespread awareness of the need and value of early childhood education, and collaborated with other local C4K initiatives to continue the work.

“Sharply increased community awareness of the child care capacity issue. Much appreciation from the provider community for the support from our ECCC and the financial and training supports as well.”

NORTH PLATTE/LINCOLN COUNTY

North Platte wanted to develop ways to engage businesses in early childhood efforts, increase public awareness, define quality in North Platte/Lincoln County, develop fundraising to support early childhood resources, establish a provider alliance, and devise ways to support current early childhood professionals.

Their biggest achievements? Providing supplemental financial support for low- to moderate-income families to assist with child care bills, establishing a nonprofit focused on early care and education efforts, improving communication between Communities for Kids Lincoln County (C4KLC) and the community, distributing locally secured ARPA funds to low-income families to assist with child care expenses, and facilitating local discussions regarding the lack of child care spots and how they will support growth in the county.

“We brought awareness for the need for quality child care in our community. This is now addressed by our local officials and our economic development group as well. They are working with us to move forward and provide quality care for all children.”



STUART/HOLT COUNTY



Stuart’s main goal was capacity expansion with a new child care center, and they are making great strides—they are now constructing Brain Builders Childcare Center!

“We will continue fundraising and are constructing our new... Childcare Center! We have been surprised by unexpected community members who are not usually engaged coming forth and offering to support this project.”

TECUMSEH/JOHNSON COUNTY

Tecumseh's initial goals? They wanted to support local providers, identify individuals that would like to start child care facilities, and bridge the child care gap by creating a facility under the Tecumseh Tomorrows' umbrella.

They completed a business survey, developed relationships with local businesses, finalized a mission and vision statement for a solidified 501(c)(3) of Tecumseh Tomorrows, and continued to work on expanding child care capacity within the community.

"We have had small one-on-one discussions with prominent people in our community about these issues. Moving forward we plan to open up meetings to further engage the community on the need for affordable, high-quality care for ALL of our community members."



VALENTINE/CHERRY COUNTY



Valentine began by wanting to improve the quality and availability of child care in the community, implement partnerships and collaborative relationships to support children and families in the community, and provide early childhood professional development opportunities and other workforce supports.

Their biggest achievement to date? Creation of Valentine Children and Families Foundation, a local nonprofit to support overall community well-being including early childhood, connection for local early providers to access and receive supports, and engage a number of local entities in a collective approach to support goals.

"We will continue to focus on supporting current and new providers (to) become licensed, along with helping to find locations for those who wish to not do child care in their homes. We also will continue to collaborate with other service organizations in our community to better the services to children and families in the Valentine and surrounding areas."

WOOD RIVER

The goal in Wood River was to purchase and remodel a site to create a high-quality learning environment for the community.

They are proud of the local collaborations they've built to recruit and retain high-quality teachers.

"Developing and sustaining our high-quality teachers in order to maintain and uphold quality care to Wood River and our surrounding communities."



COHORT 3

“This project has been an amazing experience, showcasing the work of the local community and the resources of Communities for Kids.”

– Adams County

ADAMS COUNTY



The initial goal in Adams County included identifying the child care capacity gap by obtaining data, building a Core Team of community members, creating public awareness of the issue(s), and supporting Kenesaw United Early Childhood Coalition with their remodel project, which opened as a child care facility in September 2021.

Adams County is also proud of their high Spanish-speaking provider engagement and successfully negotiating business/child care partnerships.

“The local providers have felt so much support from C4K. They love having a place to turn for resources and support. The community is growing each day with knowledge of the importance of early childhood quality care. And children and families are finding more choices for where they send their children to quality care.”

AINSWORTH/BROWN COUNTY

Ainsworth wanted to create a child care center in a downtown building for capacity expansion and downtown revitalization.

The team raised \$2 million for capacity expansion, created the Ainsworth Child Development Center, held community outreach events, and engaged various businesses to participate in supporting their early childhood efforts.

“It’s helped our community realize that we have support outside of Brown County and that other people believe in us and our goal. So they have stepped up to meet that calling easily.”



ATKINSON/HOLT COUNTY



Atkinson's initial goal was to explore capacity expansion while heavily supporting existing licensed child care providers and addressing workforce needs.

They were able to increase capacity by 24, started a licensed provider group, and created a Certified Child Caregivers training program with a pipeline for the early childhood workforce.

"We continue to reach new audiences and local advocates. We have built a strong relationship with a local investment group that is willing to provide resources and assistance for our build."

BURWELL/GARFIELD COUNTY

Burwell started off wanting to create a child care facility, while utilizing federal funding to support existing licensed providers. They were able to build the Sandhills First Steps Child Care Facility, which opened in 2024!

"They say building a building for quality care is difficult. Yes, it has its challenges; however, quality care is not about the building but about high-quality staff, families, a board, and community that works every day to secure the sustainability of this opportunity. Sandhills First Steps has completed a remarkable endeavor by creating an opportunity for child care expansion in Garfield County, but efficacy amongst all stakeholders will create the lasting legacy."



GARDEN COUNTY



Garden County's initial goals? Raising public awareness and engagement around early childhood, supporting quality improvement among the early care and education programs in Garden County, and continuing to explore opening a new child care facility.

They are most proud of providing direct assistance to early childhood programs, offering child care scholarships, connecting to regional supports and opportunities, and engaging the broader community in developing plans for a new facility.

"We will be focusing on continuing to expand and support child care efforts, while strengthening connections with local stakeholders."

GERING

Gering wanted to create a plan of advocacy for early childhood, expand partnerships, determine common definitions of early childhood terms, develop a provider network, and increase early childhood capacity.

Their biggest achievements to date? Increasing access to child care services through scholarship funds; engaging the community around building an early childhood plan to increase capacity for infants and toddlers; maintaining strong relationships with the school district, local foundation, and regional partners; and supporting providers through regular connection.

"The focus in our community has shifted in that we have really started a conversation that wasn't happening before. It has made us all more aware as a community and really helped unify our team on goals for our organization to fully make an impact."



LINCOLN



The Lincoln team initially focused on supporting providers across the county through their Lincoln Littles organization. They wanted to offer monthly gatherings for providers to hear from DHHS, C4K, the local health department, and other partnering agencies to hear the latest updates.

It was a huge success. Through the Lincoln Littles platform, their monthly gatherings helped develop a state-of-the-art alert system for programs to know when there is a police presence near their child care facility or at the school they transport to. The team achieved lasting relationships with owners and directors of programs, creating trust and providing resources and grants to the programs as they struggled with the aftermath of the pandemic.

“Support from Communities for Kids was instrumental. Lincoln Littles is helping even the playing field by transforming the landscape of early childhood, expanding quality, supporting families, early childhood providers, teachers, businesses, and our community. Our organization relies on voices in the field to inform our priorities by active partnerships and engagement using a collective impact model. ... Ultimately, our work is intended to not only meet immediate needs, but also act as a catalyst to systemic change through policy.”

MCCOOK/RED WILLOW COUNTY

McCook wanted to address the child care capacity need in their community.

They began an infant incentive program to increase infant care spots in the community, created an early childhood education/workforce training fund to support early childhood providers with the cost of training and incentives for participation in Step Up to Quality, and successfully identified funds to ensure long-term sustainability of these projects.

“Our work has empowered local child care providers to grow over 100 new child care spots. Our initiatives also helped providers and centers receive additional training and education, start new in-home programs, and expand into bigger locations to accommodate more kids. It provided additional incentives to allow for more staff to create more infant spots for families looking to return to the workforce.”



ORD/VALLEY COUNTY



The team in Valley County wanted to develop an early childhood network of capacity expansion, provider support, quality enhancement, and community vitality.

They were able to support capacity expansion with Linda's Daycare, licensed provider trainings and quality enhancement, and exploration of a remodel capacity expansion project.

“Since becoming a C4K community, we have seen an increased awareness in understanding the impact child care has not only on a community, but on children and families. Because of the general community awareness, we assisted with and witnessed a private child care center expansion that filled a large portion of our community's need.”

WILCOX-HILDRETH

The Wilcox-Hildreth team wanted to support efforts to have licensed care in both the Wilcox and Hildreth communities.

They were able to help license a Family Child Care Home II located in the basement of the church in Wilcox, creating capacity for 12 children!

“C4K benefited our communities by providing the financial resources to allow child care providers to improve social-emotional activities, increase capacity through new facilities, and made our communities more aware of the need for quality early childhood programs.”



COHORT 4

“This has helped our community realize the importance of quality early childhood education and how important it is to support the providers who work incredibly hard every day to provide that quality to their children.”

– Ashland-Greenwood Area

ASHLAND-GREENWOOD AREA



Ashland-Greenwood wanted to support its existing providers, reach out to potential new providers and support their goals of becoming licensed, and support coordinating strategies for before and after school care.

The team was able to increase capacity by 58 children! Their Before and After school program is now open and operational, and they have continued to honor and support local child care providers. The team helped open a child care center in Ashland and kept the program operating successfully despite a few bumps in the road. They've developed a lasting relationship with the economic development group to establish sustainability for the C4K group. The Parents of Preschoolers (POPS) monthly program offered in conjunction with the local library and primary school is a resounding success.

“This has helped our community realize the importance of quality early childhood education and how important it is to support the providers who work incredibly hard every day to provide that quality to their children.”

BERTRAND AREA

The Bertrand team's initial goal was to explore the child care gap in the community and use obtained data to create a right-sized solution for their area.

They helped a private individual open a Family Child Care Home II in the basement of the Methodist Church, negotiated space within a city building to open a second Family Child Care Home II, and supported early childhood providers with materials to increase quality of care.

“Helping our preschool providers with things needed for their locations and fully supplying the new child care with all things necessary to start.”



BUFFALO COUNTY



Buffalo County had many initial goals. They wanted to identify the childcare capacity gap in their community by obtaining data, building a Core Team of community members, creating public awareness of the issues, and better aligning all early childhood programs in Buffalo County to work collectively on the issues.

They saw a lot of success. The team created the Childcare Champions program, which has successfully mentored 12 programs to become licensed, widened outreach to Spanish-speaking providers, and supported early childhood programs with funds to increase capacity and improve quality of care, resulting in a capacity increase of 126 licensed spots!

“The support of BCCP and the Childcare Champions have been priceless. During a time when the expenses just kept coming, the stipend gave me a peace of mind to know I could cover the spread! I feel valued by my community and by the work that I provide.”

CHEYENNE COUNTY

The Cheyenne County team wanted to focus on a countywide approach for early childhood, expand capacity, raise public awareness about the importance of early childhood care and education, and create knowledge and access to developmentally appropriate approaches and supports.

Through their work with C4K, they were able to create and distribute a community survey assessing needs, engage with local entities to learn more about their child care needs, and are exploring how to support the possible expansion of a local child care center.

“We would like to enhance the system and fill gaps in services where we do not have what is needed for children and families. We also hope to have a better grasp of what’s needed in our community, as the last couple of years have brought about many changes that we haven’t currently identified, we just know they exist.”



DAKOTA COUNTY



Dakota County’s initial goal was to support already existing licensed child care programs with training and outreach, while assisting those interested in offering quality licensed child care.

Through their planning work with C4K, they were able to support the YMCA capacity expansion, implement Early Learning Scholarships, support their Spanish-speaking providers, and enhance quality across the county.

“Through strategic planning and collaboration with partners, Growing Community Connections is revolutionizing child care solutions, driving economic development, and building a brighter future for the tri-state area.”

DODGE COUNTY

The team in Dodge County began their initiative by coordinating the efforts of current child care programs, and had a vision of supporting newly developed programs.

Dodge County’s key accomplishments through its planning work with C4K include implementing Early Learning Scholarships, supporting Spanish-speaking providers, and enhancing quality in Dodge County.

“Our community members see the importance of the early childhood workforce. The community acknowledges the challenges while still arriving at the table to develop solutions and establish committees of support. The early childhood professionals we partner with in Dodge County demonstrate what quality is and how it can have long-term impacts on our community’s young minds.”



DOUGLAS COUNTY



Douglas County set out to increase access to high-quality early childhood programs in the North and South Omaha communities, as well as working with Spanish-speaking and bilingual programs. They are proud of the work that has supported providers in their underserved communities and have worked to eliminate barriers for them such as language and location. The team ensures that all providers are informed about opportunities for professional development through various modes of communication, and that all opportunities offered are centered on cultural responsiveness and relevancy.

Listening to the voices of providers and using their feedback was crucial to their approach, and they are proud of this collaboration. The quote they chose reflects some of the gratitude their providers have expressed.

“(I enjoyed) interacting with other child care professionals at a non-in-service event. It made me feel special. Thank you for giving back. We need to feel appreciated.”

GAGE COUNTY

The team in Gage County initially wanted to provide local grants to support their providers, create community partnerships, and increase capacity.

They successfully supported local providers through multiple grants and established a nonprofit, Gage County Childcare Collaborative, to continue their efforts. The collaborative will continue to promote, grow, and sustain the local child care initiative. They have built a board of passionate leaders and experts in the early childhood education industry and are ready to develop and implement solutions that work best for their community.

“It feels as though we are just getting started in this initiative, but we have seen many positive impacts already in these early stages, such as having established an enthusiastic C4K committee, with diverse backgrounds and professions represented.”



GILTNER



Giltner’s initial goal was to expand child care capacity in partnership with Giltner Public Schools.

They have increased capacity by 25 children and are planning a new facility.

“Our community is starting to see the importance of early childhood and the impact that our center is making both on the children of our community and surrounding communities and the enrollment numbers of our public school system.”

NEMAHA COUNTY

The team in Nemaha County wanted to increase their support for their existing providers, outlying communities, family engagement programs, and quality initiatives.

They were able to successfully expand capacity within the community while supporting providers struggling to increase wages. They hosted a Provider Gallery Walk for providers to have their voices heard within the community.

“The child care providers in our community have come together to discuss what is important to them. Community groups are interested in supporting early childhood programs in our community.”



O'NEILL



The community of O'Neill wanted to utilize C4K in conjunction with other Nebraska Children and Families Foundation initiatives for early childhood support.

Through planning work with C4K, O'Neill was able to assist its existing providers, begin outreach programs, and expand capacity. The community is working with licensed child care providers by offering Youth and Family Thrive training.

“We continue to develop activities to benefit our early child care providers.”

OVERTON

Overton was initially focused on building a facility to address their capacity needs.

The project plans for their build are complete, and there is an anticipated capacity expansion of 24 spots; they are currently implementing capital campaign strategies.

“We have been able to increase our capacity and help other providers also increase their capacity, which has helped to also bridge the gap for children needing care within the Overton community.”



PAWNEE COUNTY



Pawnee County's initial goal was to support capacity expansion for infants within the community. They wanted to support their licensed providers while seeking out non-licensed programs to provide resources and assistance.

They were able to host a Provider Gallery Walk and expand infant capacity within the community.

“More of the community is realizing how important child care is, and we have more in-home providers interested in becoming licensed. We plan to have more impact on families and the community going forward.”

PANHANDLE REGION

The Panhandle Region wanted to allocate funds for additional supports to Panhandle C4K communities and other counties in the region, support coordination through regional Systems of Care, Birth-8 participation, and create a regional campaign to increase awareness of the importance of early childhood.

They worked collaboratively with all five C4K coordinator positions across the region—all communities involved hired Early Childhood Community Coordinators! This created support at a regional level, with ECCCs reporting out at Systems of Care work meetings, offering connection to larger work.

“We have seen the number of communities working with C4K increase. We have seen local economic development become part of the early care and education conversation at a local and regional level. Child care providers are utilizing grant funds to support expansion and improve the access in their communities for child care.”



COHORT 5

“We have been supported in every way that we can think of throughout our time with C4K. The calls, conferences, and technical assistance have made our work a success.”

– Sherman County

BAYARD



Bayard’s initial goal? Creating a new child care center in partnership with the school to help address the issue of declining enrollment in the school system.

The Bayard C4K team was able to create a successful partnership with city, school, and the current local early childhood program, and opened a child care facility in one year with a capacity of 56.

“We are now able to bridge the gap in care for children between the ages 0-2 years old.”

CEDAR COUNTY

Cedar County wanted to develop an early childhood network of capacity expansion, provider support, quality enhancement, and community vitality.

They were able to create collaborative partnerships with schools, businesses, and state agencies, a robust county-wide Core Team that works collectively, and a child care center through an innovative partnership with the local school. They are also utilizing NIFA bonds for funding and support.

“It is exciting to see child care being talked about and to see the progress being made in such a short time. We have three communities looking to start child care centers, which will be huge for capacity.”



KIMBALL COUNTY



The team in Kimball County had initial goals of increasing child care capacity through the development of new programs, supporting current programs, and engaging the broader community in the importance of early childhood education and supports.

They created supports for their newly opened in-home program and child care center, and continue to foster conversations regarding early childhood in their community.

“This project encouraged a committee member to open a new center, which will greatly increase capacity in our community. A large employer has also mentioned interest in partnering with others on a new child care facility because they recognize the need (however, more work needs to be done to make this happen).”

SEWARD COUNTY

Seward County’s initial goal was to expand child care capacity and support existing local providers, providing a space for them to gather and discuss issues and concerns.

They successfully expanded capacity in Seward County through the utilization of pandemic funding and hands-on support of providers. The relationship created between the economic development organization and local child care providers helped secure multiple large grants from local and state organizations to help sustain what they have built.

“I believe we’ve really elevated child care to a more prominent place in community conversations. Our in-home providers are more connected than they’ve been in quite some time and are receiving more direct support than ever. I truly believe the expertise we’ve gained over the last two years has given many individuals the confidence and resources they need to open new centers (three) and in-home businesses (one).”



SHERMAN COUNTY



Sherman County’s initial goal? Complete a remodel project to create 30 spots for child care.

And the future Sherman County Sprouts Child Development Center building is currently in its remodel phase! Capital campaign strategies are fully implemented to support the costs of the project, and the center will open midsummer in Loup City.

“Providers have really appreciated the guidance, support, and resources that we have been able to provide. Our community is recognizing the need for quality care and starting to understand what that looks like for early childhood programs.”

SPALDING

Spalding’s initial goal was to expand capacity for its children and families while addressing the issue of economic vitality.

They are proud to have opened a Family Child Care Home II (Spalding First Steps) and to have hosted community outreach events.

“We started with our providers to get them to the table, and now we are asking our providers to get the parents to the table with personal invites to some of our Core Team meetings and community activities so they can see what is happening and also make some important suggestions for our future establishments.”



ST. PAUL



St. Paul's initial goals included completing remodeling projects in their current child care center to increase capacity and provide a quality learning environment, and sustaining the long-term operation of the facility with the eventual purchase by the local early childhood foundation from the private owner.

The remodel projects to the main child care center in St. Paul have resulted in an increase of capacity of 24 children—the center is now permitted for 121! Additionally, various quality upgrades have also been made to the building. Their foundation is currently engaged in a capital campaign to raise funds for the purchase of the facility and has donations/pledges of close to \$400,000 thus far. Also, utilizing pandemic funds, they were able to help open a new child care program in St. Paul serving 12 children.

“I think overall morale of providers has improved knowing they now have a resource to turn to for potential financial assistance and to act as a sounding board. Families have been encouraged by some of the improvements at Kid Academy.”

COHORT 6

“We had great support, and C4K staff were always there to assist whenever we had questions.”

– Falls City

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge began with a focus on high-quality child care by transforming their three Family Child Care Homes IIs into one Child Care Center. They are now striving to provide early education preparation to younger children.

Cambridge addressed their community capacity gap, and continues to do so. They also had the opportunity to purchase a previously operating center, which is expected to open in August 2024! This new venture will allow them to serve 62 more children. In addition, The Cambridge Community Daycare Foundation was awarded Nebraska Rural Workforce Housing Funds to help address a shortage of housing available in the Cambridge community.

“The Cambridge Community Daycare Foundation has developed partnerships with the school, economic development, local foundations, and businesses that has allowed us to begin, sustain, and grow in our effort to support the community of Cambridge.”



CENTRAL CITY/MERRICK COUNTY



Central City started off with a goal of supporting capacity expansion of the Merrick County Child Development Center and exploring opportunities for closing the early childhood capacity gap.

Their key accomplishment was completing a community-wide early childhood assessment.

“Our group’s focus is on equity, inclusion, and high-quality, affordable child care.”

CLAY COUNTY

The Clay County team started off wanting to identify the current community early childhood landscape and plan to address the capacity need.

They were able to host meetings with Economic Development, the Chamber of Commerce, and local business leaders to share the crucial role in strengthening early childhood infrastructure.

“This team identified early on that child care was a priority focus area for their county and pulled together a steering committee made up of providers and school/community leaders. This group has worked together since December 2021 to build the diversity and geographic representation of their perspectives, design and distribute a community survey, and review the results to help focus their efforts. This effort has brought together schools, townships, child care providers and the faith community to highlight the challenge and priority of child care.”



EUSTIS



Eustis wanted to identify community needs and locate a site for a new child care center.

They successfully gathered assessment information and engaged in multiple business, organization, child care, and parent listening sessions.

“Members of the community met in spring 2022 to discuss the need for additional child care and early childhood education. More than 60 members attended the meeting, and two committees were formed to address early childhood education/child care and housing. Residents of all ages are excited for this potential growth and are seeking solutions to meet these needs.”

FALLS CITY

The Falls City team's initial goal was to work with C4K on continuing to foster their partnership with the school district to further early childhood infrastructure-building efforts.

They are proud to say they successfully supported local providers through transitions and providers retiring. They also supported new providers to become licensed and provided guidance through the licensing process.

"Opening one or two more child care programs and working with the hospital to help with their goals for child care for their employees."



HOLDREGE AREA



The Holdrege Area's initial goal was to create a system of support between the Holdrege Area Business Community and the Holdrege Area Early Childhood Facilities to increase access for working families.

They are in the process of exploring a co-op geared toward addressing the specific child care capacity needs they have.

"The Core team will work with current child care providers in Phelps County to ensure they have the resources needed to be successful and address any immediate needs."

STANTON

The Stanton C4K team understood the importance of adequate quality child care capacity for thriving children and families, so their vision was to create a child care facility.

They were able to hold a Provider Gallery Walk, distribute a community-wide survey, and develop a Parent Forum to grasp the level of early childhood care needed for a bedroom community to Norfolk.

"The goal of the Stanton C4K is to provide quality early childhood care and meet the needs of each child and family in whatever way best supports the future of our community."



WHEELER COUNTY



The Wheeler County team's initial goal was to support the capacity expansion project of Cedar River Rascals Daycare.

They supported a Family Child Care Home II expansion and helped with sustainability planning for all child care facilities in the area.

"We have so many amazing donors who want to see this community thrive, so we have had businesses and people donate out of their personal funds to help both child cares get started."

WISNER-PILGER

The Wisner-Pilger team's initial goals were to develop a school-led community Core Team for capacity expansion and enhanced quality educational opportunities for all children, and to support families for economic vitality.

They are in the beginning stages of development for a school addition site for 3- to 4-year-old child care with the vision of supporting an independent business for birth to age 3 child care.

“The Core Team plans to have open community forums to engage community members, while also being very intentional about inviting those that have or are currently ‘living this experience.’”



COHORT 7

“I cannot speak highly enough of the Communities for Kids staff! Their openness and support I’ve received walking into this grant has been warm, educating, and firm. Additionally, the passion that the team has for this work is amazing to see!”

– Box Butte County

BANCROFT-ROSALIE



Bancroft-Rosalie is just getting started, and their goals include inspiring collaboration between local child care providers, the village boards of Bancroft and Rosalie, and the local school district to develop a plan for addressing the child care shortages in both communities.

They are proud of the local Core Team they have built and are committed to building a thriving early childhood infrastructure.

“Through the work of our C4K Team we hope to align and expand Early Childhood efforts throughout Bancroft and Rosalie with broad community participation and support.”

BLUE HILL

The team in Blue Hill wanted to create a new child care center in partnership with the Methodist church to address the child care gap and the declining church population.

They successfully opened a child care facility in their community, going from a licensed child care capacity of 0 all the way to 75 in the span of just one year. They also provided support to teachers pursuing their education to become early childhood educators, and created a relationship with the school to start a career pathway for high school juniors and seniors to take their CDA right into their program for TEACH for free associate and bachelor's degrees.

“Our community has come together in a large way to not only donate a wonderful large facility for a child care program, but to also support the providers starting the program. They are fully invested in the success of this initiative as their children need quality child care and education. We cannot wait to start reaching out to others to see if we can open a family home next!”



BOX BUTTE COUNTY



Box Butte's initial goal was to coordinate current child care programs and the new programs that are being developed.

They gathered a diverse Core Team with representation from local and regional partners, supported development of one new program opening, and have centered early childhood as a priority with economic development efforts.

“Child care in this area is critical and we need to work to find more quality programs for the people in our communities.”

ELM CREEK

Elm Creek is excited to get started. Their goals include establishing a 501(c)(3) that will oversee their child care initiatives, identifying new providers, helping to find a site for the new program and assist with its licensing, and continuing to foster their partnership with the school district to strengthen their early childhood infrastructure.

They have built a strong Core Team and are so excited to begin the Communities for Kids work.

“We believe the Core Team is representative of all areas of our community and we will continue to assess that on an ongoing basis to make sure that it serves all populations in our community.”



FRIEND

The diverse team in Friend has just begun their work, and aims to move swiftly on their child care capacity goals to offset the loss of their only center in 2023. They are dedicated to growing and sustaining their child care efforts and creating a thriving early childhood infrastructure.

Friend's key accomplishments are the establishment of their Core Team and the hard work they have done to explore early childhood needs in the community, including undertaking a survey and an economic impact report. In just six months of C4K work, the Friend team has already partnered with the hospital to secure a location for a new facility and is now working on blueprints and a capital campaign. They are also committed to supporting their existing providers' needs.

"We are going to engage families during this process. We will plan to support our community through providing the capacity spots they desperately need. Our focus is to keep families in Friend ... through supporting and providing quality, sustainable early childhood education."



HAMPTON



Hampton is looking forward to establishing a safe and nurturing environment for children, hiring qualified and trained staff, developing an age-appropriate curriculum, fostering positive relationships in the community, and ensuring open communication with their fellow community members about their child care program project.

Hampton is proud of the Core Team they have built so far and is hard at work planning for their new facility.

"A well-rounded group of leaders from the community, those with experience in child care and education, as well as those with a strong understanding of businesses in our area, will be key individuals to help support this cause."

MINDEN

Minden's initial goal was to obtain data and conduct community engagement listening sessions to begin addressing their child care capacity needs.

They were able to obtain commitment by local organizations and businesses for the initiative by signing official declarations of support. They hosted the Buffalo County Child Care Champions informational session, which resulted in three new Family Child Care Providers in the community. They are prioritizing appreciation for local providers and supporting them to provide quality care.

"A short-term goal is to identify diverse community members that are passionate about early childhood education and who are willing to serve alongside in this capacity."



PIERCE COUNTY



Pierce County's initial goal? Create a countywide initiative for quality capacity expansion with a lens on economic vitality!

They list their key accomplishments as completing a community survey, facilitating community conversations, planning the Provider Gallery Walk, and hosting the Stakeholders Meeting.

"Focused on determining strategies and outcomes for early childhood using data-driven decisions and development of key messaging, materials, and vision to support best practices in early childhood care and education."

THAYER COUNTY

Thayer County wanted to establish a supportive C4K Core Team, create opportunities for funding to train child care staff, identify individuals that would like to create in-home or center-based child care facilities, and make the Thayer County Economic Development Alliance (TCEDA) the main source for child care resources and communication.

Their key accomplishment? Becoming a C4K community! They have worked hard to partner with local providers to join the C4K Core Team to help identify needs for the community.

“We want to empower children and families today so they may thrive in our community for years to come.”



THEDFORD/THOMAS COUNTY



Thedford/Thomas County's initial goal was to begin a child care center capacity expansion project that would be the only licensed child care in the county.

Their key accomplishment was creating a child care center downtown in partnership with the Veterans of Foreign Wars for capacity expansion and downtown revitalization.

“Sandhills Area Childcare is committed to improving our community for our children and for our future. We are proud to support steps toward a thriving community by collaborating with our local Legion to create a space for children to grow and be cared for, while also improving the infrastructure of a local building to foster community growth and development.”

OUR THANKS

OUR THANKS

As we reflect on the journey of Communities for Kids, we are deeply grateful for the support and guidance from our partners and funders who believe in our mission. Their contributions have been instrumental in shaping and driving our work, and story, forward.

Above all, we are deeply grateful to the first Communities for Kids communities. Your commitment and hard work to enhance child care access and quality and to build sustainable infrastructure have been inspiring. It is a privilege to walk alongside you, learning from your unique experiences, and celebrating your achievements. Your dedication continues to drive our mission forward, ensuring that child care remains a priority in Nebraska.

The C4K initiative has flourished through connection and collaboration. We can't wait to meet future cohorts throughout Nebraska and nationally.

Here's to a future where every community and family has access to quality child care for each child.

—The Communities for Kids Team



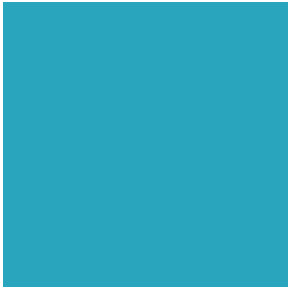
VISION

Communities for Kids will lead national efforts to ensure that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure.

MISSION

To partner with communities to prioritize the expansion and enhancement of quality early childhood care and education by identifying and addressing each community's unique strengths and needs.





Communities for Kids
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