

Bridging the Gap Between Child Care and Community and Economic Development

FINAL REPORT





Introduction

In 2023, Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) launched a research project and associated implementation framework to address knowledge gaps and facilitate bridge-building between child care, community development, and economic development in communities throughout the country. This project was made possible by the generous support of the Lilly Endowment.

The project was intended to address two questions:

1. How can child care unlock community and economic development funding?
2. How can child care join, inform, influence, and advise community development conversations, priorities, and decisions?

To better accomplish the important goals of this project, CCAoA partnered with Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Recognizing that connecting community-based entities, such as Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs), is a critical piece in bridging systemic gaps and supporting sustainable expansion, CCAoA engaged LISC through an intentional, structured approach rooted in collaboration. Throughout the project, LISC served as an invaluable resource, offering strategic guidance and community insight that elevated the impact of the work. This partnership highlights the importance of coordinated, community-driven efforts, and CCAoA and LISC remain committed to strengthening this collaboration in the future.



Key Takeaways

The child care and community and economic development sectors have aligned objectives: fostering healthy, thriving communities. Ensuring families have reliable access to affordable, high-quality child care enables workforce participation, thereby bolstering local economies. These sectors are ideally positioned to collaborate and support each other.

Through this project CCAoA outlined three key actions to take when combining child care with community and economic development efforts:

- Understand the landscape of community and economic development and child care in your area.
- Establish partnerships.
- Create a cross-sector data-driven plan.

Understand the landscape of community and economic development and child care in your area: Investing time in understanding community and economic development, along with the local child care landscape, will lead to greater success. Each community has unique needs, making a “one size fits all” approach difficult to implement effectively. States, regions, and communities may already have community and/or economic development plans.

Establish partnerships: As demonstrated through CCAoA’s collaboration with LISC, partnerships—especially those that span agencies and sectors—are vital to the success of community and economic development work that includes and supports child care. Sharing data with partners can help provide a common language for better communication and collaboration and align efforts toward shared goals. Local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) and Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are great places to start.

Create a cross-sector data-driven plan: Leverage data to pinpoint community needs and uncover new opportunities for growth, innovation, and intervention, and use the data to guide planning, ensuring the greatest impact. This work requires time, so breaking the work into smaller, realistic goals can help build momentum and sustain motivation toward larger objectives.

A summary of the project and its key findings was shared in a [one-pager](#).

Including Child Care in Community and Economic Development

PROJECT COMPONENTS

CCAoA has launched a new dedicated [web page](#) for the Bridging the Gap project. This hub serves as a go-to resource for all project materials, reports, and documentation, offering comprehensive insights into project efforts to strengthen community and economic-based partnerships and drive sustainable child care solutions. Key components of the project are listed below.

Landscape Analysis

As an initial step, CCAoA conducted a thorough landscape analysis that included a review of the federal and state landscapes of community and economic development, and surveys and interviews with intermediaries who are working to include child care in community and economic development.

CCAoA's partnership with LISC was key to the success of the landscape analysis. LISC was invaluable in helping define community and economic development and identify resources, including key players and funding streams. Child care and community and economic development are broad topics, so having LISC's support led to a greater, faster understanding of all the moving parts. LISC also helped promote the survey used to get feedback from intermediaries when the landscape analysis began. CCAoA's relationships with CC&Rs were also vital in completing the landscape analysis.

The findings of the landscape analysis, including key takeaways and recommendations, were outlined in a preliminary report, [Bridging the Gap Between Child Care and Community and Economic Development](#).

Roadmap

Based on the landscape analysis, CCAoA created [Bridging the Gap Between Child Care and Community & Economic Development: A Roadmap for CCR&Rs and Intermediaries \(roadmap\)](#). The roadmap can be used by community organizations that support child care, as a tool to inform outreach and cross-system engagement efforts, and to help infuse child care into community and economic development efforts. It offers concrete steps for CCR&Rs and other intermediaries to take to include child care in community and economic development. At CCAoA's 2025 Symposium, a group of 29 attendees participated in a session to hear about this work and explore each section of the newly-released roadmap. The atmosphere was charged with excitement and a shared sense of anticipation as they engaged in small groups to further discuss the document, eager to apply its guidance to both current initiatives and future endeavors. The collaborative energy and forward-looking focus made the session a meaningful milestone in preparing for future work.

Following the Symposium, CCAoA hosted a national webinar to share the work more broadly and officially launch the roadmap and new project web page. With over 600 people registered and 365 people in attendance live, the webinar showcased the roadmap, highlighted key findings, sub-grantee projects, and provided attendees with direct access to the resources now available online. Project resources were also shared in a blog on the CCAoA website as well as over social media.

Community of Practice

To ready and equip CCR&Rs and other intermediaries to engage or partner in community and economic development efforts, CCAoA awarded five subgrants and an opportunity to participate in a Community of Practice (CoP), through a competitive request for proposal (RFP) process. Thirty-seven organizations responded to the RFP, indicating a high level of interest in this project. Participants worked on projects to include child care in community and economic development in their communities, during the five-month CoP process.

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and want to learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Individual members advance their own work but also contribute to the larger field.

Source: [Early Childhood Education Professional Development: Training and Technical Assistance Glossary](#)

The participating organizations included:

- [Child Care Answers \(Indiana\)](#)
- [Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development \(Ohio\)](#)
- [The Early Childhood Council of La Plata County \(Colorado\)](#)
- [Low Income Investment Fund \(LIIF\) \(Georgia\)](#)
- [thread \(Alaska\)](#)

A variety of related topics were discussed during the CoP sessions, with guest speakers for many of them. Topics included establishing partnerships, cross-sector data-driven plan development and implementation, and messaging.

Throughout the CoP, LISC staff served as partners and subject matter experts. They joined meetings and helped facilitate discussions with both large groups and small group breakout rooms. LISC staff also participated in providing technical assistance to CoP participants, along with CCAoA staff. An initial draft of the roadmap served as a resource for CoP participants as they worked on their projects and participated in the CoP. They also provided feedback on the roadmap to offer a reflective voice and inform it from an implementation standpoint. Based on this process, additional

information was identified to include in the final version of the roadmap, including more details on messaging and messengers, tips for success, and extra planning space for organizations working in more than one community.

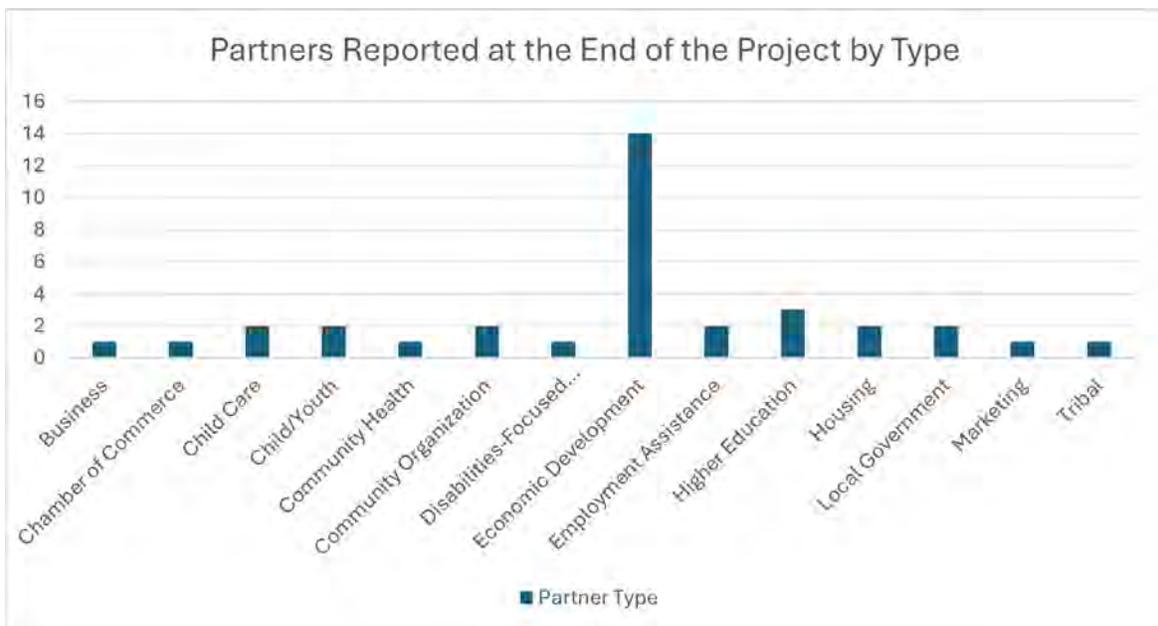
CoP participants provided data using a partnership rating scale to assess the quantity and quality of their partnerships at the start, midpoint, and end of their projects, tracking progress in integrating child care into community and economic development efforts.

There were 36 partnerships reported by the participating organizations at the end of the project. This represents a 71% increase from the number of partnerships reported at the beginning. Participants also reported that eight existing partnerships were strengthened over the course of the project.

Approximately 45% of the partners reported were economic development organizations. Eleven of the 14 partnerships with economic development organizations were established during the project; only three were previously established. Other types of partners reported more than once included child care, child/youth organizations, higher education, housing, and local government.

CCAoA discussed the increase in relationships with economic development organizations with LISC, who shared that many economic development entities are also doing community development work. Organizations self-identify; many non-profit organizations identify as community development organizations, while more government agencies identify as economic development.

FIGURE 1: TYPES OF PARTNERS



CoP participants convened meetings with other organizations in their service areas to further their work. Over the course of the project, 35 meetings were held. Participating organizations included businesses, CCR&Rs, Chambers of Commerce, child care, community development, economic development, and higher education, among others.

FIGURE 2: MEETING PARTICIPANTS



With guidance and coaching, organizations participating in the project were able to make a great deal of progress.

- Child Care Answers**, a CCR&R in Indiana, leveraged previous work in a county to enhance and accelerate efforts. They joined multiple coalitions and facilitated employer-sponsored roundtables that focused on child care. They helped child care providers become Chamber of Commerce members and supported them as they began participating in meetings and events, including providing funding for substitute providers to fill in while they were attending. The Chamber of Commerce decided to feature Child Care Answers as part of their [entrepreneurial guide for new businesses](#). This will help people opening new businesses in the area to remember to consider child care needs. Child Care Answers collected data through a survey and used the information in a [video for employers](#) about the services they offer. They continue to offer employer information sessions, nurture partnerships, and promote their services.

- **Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development (COAD)**, an organization and network of community action agencies, including a CCR&R, COAD4kids, conducted a family needs assessment and early childhood education surveys to gather data to share with economic development groups to use in conversations. They also partnered to map where child care was in the area, to share with stakeholders. They calculated the social return on investment (SROI) for employer-supported child care and created the [COAD Social Return on Investment Impact Calculator](#). COAD also created State of Child Care Reports, in partnership with Buckeye Hills Regional Council.
- **Early Childhood Council of La Plata County**, a CCR&R in Colorado, convened 15 focus groups, developed a robust data collection process, engaged a contractor for research, and collected local data for an Early Childhood Data Dashboard. They also created the [La Plata County Early Childcare Strategic Investment Plan](#). In addition, they shared some investment strategies with CoP participants that they identified during their work on the project:
 - **How to bring more funding into the local child care system:**
 - » Local Tax: La Plata County Lodging Tax, City of Durango Lodging Tax, Early Childhood Special District, Property Tax Mill Levy, Property Tax, and Impact Fee discounts
 - » State and Federal Tax Credits for Businesses: Childcare Contribution Tax Credit, Enterprise Zone Tax Credit, Employer-provided Childcare Tax Credit
 - » Employer Investment: Large and small contribution models—prepaid slots
 - » Financing: Small business development/ co-location financing to combine non-child care subsidies
 - **How to invest the dollars for greatest impact:**
 - » Zoning, Permitting & Fire Protection: Audit of regulations from a child care business perspective, mapping of areas and buildings that can meet Institution 4 building and fire code
 - » Infrastructure: Childcare Catalyst Fund to match financing for child care facilities, Real Estate Investment Trust for home providers, mission-driven lenders and CDFIs
 - » Workforce: Local shared services model: benefits, insurance, etc., explore a wage incentive for teachers working in infant and toddler classrooms, explore a child care business incubator program
- **Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF)**, a CDFI with headquarters in California and several regional offices, worked to bring additional child care supply to a county experiencing job growth but lacking enough child care to support the increase in employees. LIIF worked with the Economic Development Authority, who allowed them to join their new child care advisory group, to develop a data-driven plan. For their project, LIIF developed a mapping and data application to visualize child care supply. The map allowed them to identify areas with a concentration of child care and other areas with very little. LIIF used this data to engage with the Economic Development Authority and the child care advisory group. They developed strategies and a plan to move forward. The work is still in progress, but LIIF is

considering piloting a tri-share model that would allow employers to invest in child care to build child care supply. LIIF continues to work with the businesses that are coming into the area to address child care needs.

- In Alaska, **thread**, a CCR&R Network, made significant progress in their project by gaining a better understanding of their partners and the economic development landscape in the state, as well as identifying communities for collaboration. thread partnered with the University of Alaska, Center for Economic Development to gain a deeper understanding of the landscape of economic developers across the state. They also identified seven communities with relevant Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs) that had identified child care as a priority. thread convened stakeholders in roundtable discussions and completed research and engagement. The work continues to progress as they learn more and continue to build relationships in communities. They are working to develop a statewide menu of services to support these communities and the child care sector across Alaska.

Case Studies

To deepen understanding of the organizations' impacts, CCAoA conducted in-depth case studies on three of the organizations participating in the CoP and their Bridging the Gap projects. These explorations provided a closer look at the unique approaches, challenges faced, and notable successes achieved in each initiative. These case studies also highlighted significant strides in bridging critical gaps, particularly in child care access, community cohesion, and local economic development. The insights gained not only underscore the transformative nature of this work but also illuminate paths forward for broader systemic change.

- [The Early Childhood Council of LaPlata County](#)
- [Child Care Answers](#)
- [Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development](#)

Participant Learnings

Participants completed a survey in SurveyMonkey that documented increased skills and knowledge in several areas because of their participation in the CoP and use of the roadmap:

Project Management Skills:

- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Experience gathering data from stakeholders such as families, child care providers, and community leaders, through surveys and focus groups.
- **Strategic Planning:** Organizing tasks, prioritizing initiatives, and identifying milestones.
- **Problem-Solving:** Developing solutions for logistical challenges (e.g., transportation, funding, aligning care schedules with family and community needs).

Improved Communication:

- **Active Listening:** Understanding the perspectives and needs of community leaders, businesses, families, and child care providers.
- **Advocacy:** Presenting findings to decision makers and stakeholders to promote increased child care access.
- **Collaboration:** Coordinating with interdisciplinary teams to drive project goals.

Community Engagement:

- **Building Trust:** Building and maintaining relationships with diverse community groups.
- **Outreach Strategies:** Connecting people with resources.
- **Varied audiences:** Many people in the community benefit from this work, including families, child care providers, employers, and community and economic development.

Deepened Understanding of Child Care:

- **Supply:** Sharing information about child care supply and the role of community and economic development in building supply.
- **Policy Awareness:** Insights into policies affecting child care funding and availability.
- **Economic Impact Analysis:** Understanding the broader implications of child care availability.

Increased knowledge of community and economic development:

- **Increased understanding:** Received an introduction to the landscape and common terms used in the community and economic development field, as well as the needs of these organizations.
- **Successful Initiatives:** Outreach and communication with system leaders in other states and communities to learn about investment strategies and community and economic development activities that are working in other areas.

Participants shared additional information they learned throughout the course of implementing their projects and using the roadmap:

- One organization needs to serve as the owner of the work to make sure momentum is sustained.
- Data can be overwhelming. Share small amounts at a time as it relates to the stories and solutions being presented. Review data at each meeting.
- Child care may be identified in a plan, but that does not mean that it is a priority for the community. This can pose a challenge.
- When meeting resistance, it is helpful to focus on solutions that do not require new revenue or government expenditures, such as land incentives and resource pooling from private industry.

- Listen, learn, and be part of the process. There is a lot you might want to tell potential and current partners, but you must listen first so you can understand where partners are.

There were also overall learnings that emerged through this work:

- The nature of community development is dynamic. Community development corporations do not all look the same. Community context might drive the presence of community organizations. They may not all immediately identify as community development organizations. Some economic development organizations may also do community development. It is important to talk with partners early on to learn about how they are orienting the work.
- Developers should be considered in this work, to avoid missing opportunities. Developers can support child care in a variety of ways, including supporting child care initiatives and including child care in residential and commercial developments.
- Once a data-driven plan is established, think about how that plan gets formalized and who will hold accountability. This will look different in different areas. It is important to identify someone to manage the work and ensure it continues.

Assessing Project Impact

CCAoA examined two questions about the impact of the work done in this project:

1. How did CCAoA's implementation of research-to-practice shape changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of participating stakeholders?
2. How does this project inform future work to advance the intersection of child care and community and economic development systems?

Data was collected from participants through the SurveyMonkey survey mentioned above.

How CCAoA's Implementation of Research-to-Practice Shaped Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors of Participating Stakeholders

Participants shared that connecting with others through the CoP helped them feel supported through this work. Specifically, they identified:

- Learning from peers in other states.
- Sharing challenges and successes.
- Getting ideas for future work.
- Understanding that this works takes time, but forward progress is still a success.



Creating SMART goals at the beginning of the project lent itself to the success of completing the project on time and without feeling rushed.
- **CoP Participant**

During the initial research phase of this project, CCAoA spoke to CCR&Rs and intermediaries to learn about the work they do to include child care in community and economic development. A list of challenges faced by many of them emerged. After the CoP, participants shared their experiences and what they learned. Many of the challenges identified at the beginning were addressed through the feedback and learnings shared during the CoP. Table 1 lists challenges identified before the CoP and the responses CoP participants provided after CoP participation that show progress toward solutions. While this progress is positive, responses also highlight the need to continue this work to inform and support CCR&Rs and other intermediaries.



You don't have to be economic development experts. You need to know a little, then partner with the right people.
- CoP Participant

TABLE 1: How participation and resources shaped knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors

Challenges shared by CCR&Rs and intermediaries before the project:	Responses from CoP participants after participating:
Lack of knowledge on the topic: Child care and community and economic development personnel are not always knowledgeable about each other.	CoP participants reported that they increased their knowledge on the topic of including child care in community and economic development and will implement what they learned in their practices.
Unsure where to start: This work can be overwhelming.	<p>“Economic development was really intimidating before this grant. I feel I have lots of new vocabulary and do not feel self-conscious about starting a conversation about it.” --CoP participant</p> <p>“Know your audience and speak their language. You need more than ‘the feel-good stories.’ Talk about data and money. Identify influencers who can speak on your behalf. It helps to have the same message coming from a different voice.” --CoP participant</p>
Funding: Many organizations do not have funding specifically devoted to this work. Many organizations do not know about available funding streams.	“This project will help us advocate with our Board of County Commissioners and City Council to explore local funding that could improve access and affordability to early childhood care and education.” --CoP participant
A seat at the table: Many organizations have not traditionally been included in this work.	“Child care experts and providers need and deserve to be heard, and their positions held valuable when chambers and community developers are planning and making decisions.” --CoP participant

How This Project Informs Future Work to Advance the Intersection of Child Care and Community and Economic Development Systems

Through implementing this project, CCAoA learned that there are many organizations (CCR&Rs and other intermediaries) interested in this work who would like to receive support as they navigate through it.

Specific topics identified by CoP participants to inform future work include:

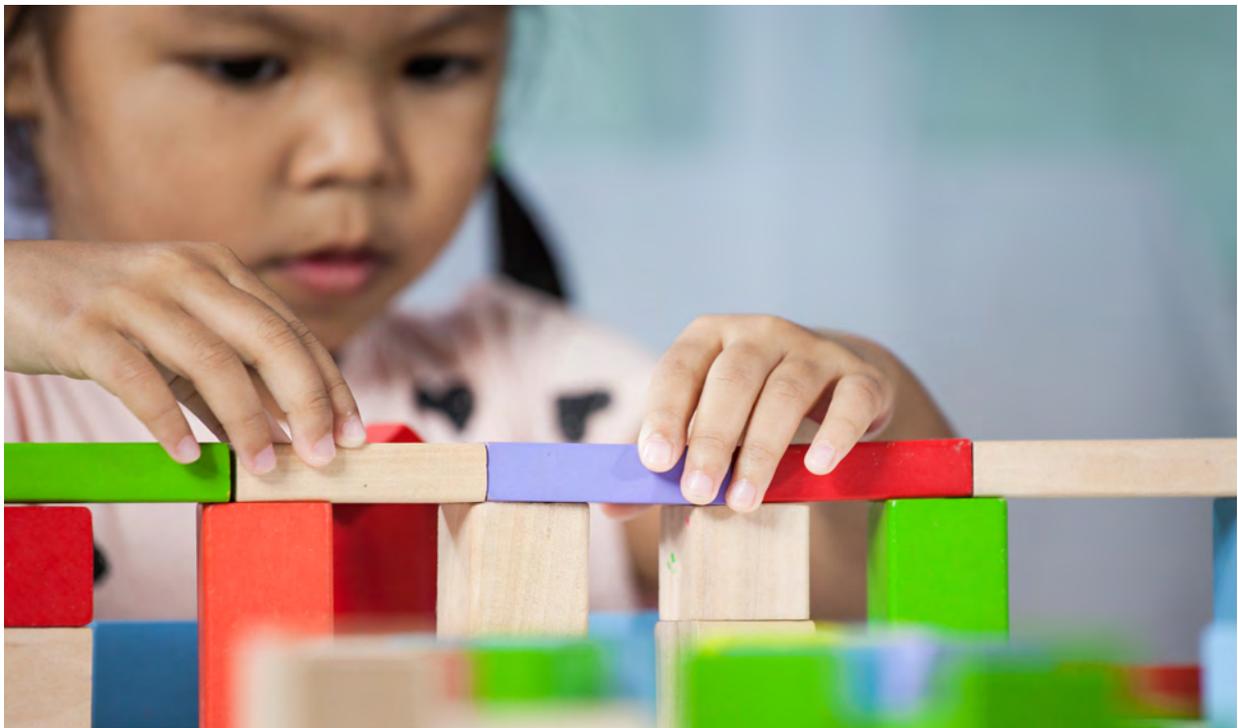
- The importance of messaging and messengers that help advance the work.
- The roadmap was a useful tool to help organizations understand more about including child care in community and economic development.
- Including organizations from the child care field as well as community and economic development in the CoP helped participants learn and grow.

Working with LISC throughout the process was also identified as a support by CoP participants. Having access to people who were knowledgeable about community and economic development was beneficial.



Child care is important and deserving of their time. If we want change, there will be uncomfortable conversations. Don't apologize!

- CoP Participant



Child Care Answers Plans for the Future

Advocating for Investment in Child Care

- **Highlighting Economic Impact:** Educating policymakers and stakeholders about the direct link between accessible, high-quality child care and economic growth. When parents have reliable child care, workforce participation increases, and businesses benefit from a stable labor pool. Being able to use the information that they have gathered, are gathering, and will continue to gather throughout their area is how they will be able to highlight this impact with stakeholders.

Supporting Families as the Workforce Backbone

- **Providing Resources:** Offering comprehensive support services, such as child care referrals, financial assistance knowledge, and referrals to address other needs, including educational workshops, basic needs, and resources families need in order to thrive. This will continue to help families access affordable, quality child care.
- **Reducing Barriers:** Addressing systemic challenges, including transportation, nontraditional work hours, and geographic limitations, to ensure child care meets the needs of diverse working families within diverse communities.

Collaborating with Businesses

- **Employer Engagement:** Partnering with local employers to design family-friendly workplace policies, such as on-site/near-site child care, flexible schedules, subsidies for employee child care expenses, and more.
- **Enhancing Workforce Retention:** Demonstrating and educating about how investing in child care access can reduce employee absenteeism, improve satisfaction, and enhance productivity.

Stimulating Local Economies

- **Job Creation:** Supporting the development of new child care facilities and programs not only provides care for children but also creates jobs in the child care industry and related fields.
- **Entrepreneurial Support:** Connecting those who offer resources, training, and funding for individuals seeking to start or expand child care businesses, particularly in underserved areas.

Advancing Equity in Economic Growth

- **Addressing Disparities:** Prioritizing initiatives that target communities disproportionately affected by child care shortages, including low-income communities and rural or urban areas with limited options.
- **Ensuring Accessibility:** Promoting inclusive policies that provide equal access to child care, regardless of socioeconomic status, language, or cultural background.

Building Sustainable Partnerships

- **Connecting Stakeholders:** Serving as a bridge between government agencies, nonprofits, child care providers, and the private sector to align resources and strategies for maximum impact.
- **Long-Term Planning:** Advocating for policies that integrate child care into broader economic development strategies, recognizing it as essential infrastructure.

By championing these efforts, Child Care Answers can work to ensure that child care is not just seen as a family issue, but as a fundamental pillar of economic development, creating thriving communities where families and businesses can prosper together.

Additional Learnings

Community and economic development are complex, so it is critical to ensure child care is represented in conversations. CDFIs can assist CCR&Rs in lifting up the child care voice.

The messages shared and the messengers sharing them are important. These pieces are iterative and constantly evolving. Messaging and messengers must change based on who the audience is, but they must also change as new data emerges.

When organizations work together and provide shared messaging, it can be extremely helpful. Having more than one person delivering the same message can lead to success.

It is important to stay flexible, to be able to adjust to accommodate issues and changes that come up within a community. The original plan may not be the one you end up using.

Continue to foster relationships even if you are not making much progress. As you navigate through the work, or as the environment changes, these partnerships might grow and be helpful.



As a project member, our biggest takeaways were in terms of how important trust is in helping a community. Trust is foundational in building strong resilient communities. It facilitates collaboration, fosters meaningful relationships, and ensures that efforts to address challenges are both effective and sustainable. Trust encourages individuals, groups, and organizations to work collectively toward common goals. When people trust one another, they are more likely to pool resources, share knowledge, and collaborate effectively.

- CoP Participant



Conclusion

Bridging the gap between child care and community and economic development involves many factors, including understanding the landscape and working collectively to foster positive change. Working together can produce outcomes that strengthen communities while also invoking positive outcomes for families.

Participants made a lot of progress throughout the course of this project, but there is still more that can be done to further the inclusion of child care into community and economic development. It is important to continue to provide technical assistance and resources to support efforts to include child care in community and economic development.

Additional ideas emerged to continue the momentum from this project:

- Continue to seek out funding sources to pay for staff time to work on including child care in community and economic development.
- Identify opportunities to provide and participate in technical assistance. CCR&Rs and other intermediaries would benefit from continued learning as they work to ensure child care is included in community and economic development. They may also need support as they provide technical assistance to child care providers to help them understand the opportunities they have as well. These opportunities may include ways for them to advocate for child care in the community and economic development arena and to take advantage of opportunities such as funding.
- Establish a repository with examples of models of this work. Seeing how others are addressing challenges can support organizations who find it overwhelming to get started.



I would love to have even more time with this grant and TA to dive deeper into the advocacy of aligning child care with economic development. I feel I can barely take advantage of all the resources available through Child Care Aware® of America and LISC.

- CoP Participant



The Bridging the Gap work has allowed us to make connections and build relationships with economic partners previously unknown to us. It also allowed us to be a connector between communities across the state doing similar work, as well as between key players within a community.

- CoP Participant