

Improving Health and Development through Access to Childcare Initiative

Introduction: The community in which this project is focused (Pinetop-Lakeside) has only one licensed childcare program and a population of 4,030. Schools and health providers, and businesses struggle to attract and retain employees due to the lack of quality, dependable childcare. Lack of care also impacts community members who struggle to obtain stable employment, which in turn leads to high poverty and poor community health outcomes. We are proposing to expand access to high-quality, accessible, and affordable childcare through the development of a model early childhood development center. The center will provide access to early learning and development while also affording families a safe, stable care setting so they can work and improve their financial stability. This center is envisioned as a platform to empower families, enabling them to participate in the workforce while fostering the holistic development of young children.

Narrative: Encompassing 10,000 square miles, Navajo County, Arizona, hosts diverse terrain and three tribal nations. Residents face arduous journeys of over three hours to access education, healthcare, and childcare. The region grapples with a shortage of qualified educators and healthcare professionals. According to Northland Pioneer College's survey, nearly 25% of school positions were vacant in July 2021, while 20% relied on emergency substitutes. Prospective employees often decline offers due to scarce affordable housing and childcare. The county's poverty rate surpasses 27.9%, and infant mortality exceeds Healthy People 2020 targets. Urgent investment in housing and childcare infrastructure is essential.

Our project's goal is to ensure families access to vital childcare, enabling consistent work attendance and educational progress, crucial for achieving household economic stability. As emphasized by Rasheed Malik of the Center for American Progress (2021), childcare acts as the cornerstone that empowers diverse endeavors. Enhancing both economic prosperity and community welfare hinges on improving childcare accessibility in our locality.

Our dynamic partnership includes committed entities dedicated to crafting enduring solutions for quality childcare through sustainable, replicable model programs. Key stakeholders encompass Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation (SCDC), Northland Pioneer College (NPC), and Blue Ridge Unified School District (BRUSD).

SCDC utilizes its community network to connect stakeholders, gather vital data, and provide transparent project updates. NPC, with its expertise in early childhood education, empowers childcare personnel and engages students. Collaborating with its nursing program, NPC offers clinical experiences, including health screenings. The team involves the Associate Dean, capable faculty, and a former Quality First coach. Notably, Blue Ridge Unified School District donates space for the project, acknowledging the importance of early learning. The district-owned building will be renovated and leased at a nominal fee, recognizing childcare's role in supporting students and educators.

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Our Objectives:

1. To design and open a model early childhood center that serves children from birth to age five with a high-quality, developmentally effective early learning environment.
2. To implement a comprehensive family support system that includes family engagement, resource delivery, early childhood education, and health connection services.
3. To create a replicable, community-supported model for comprehensive early care and education.

Our Strategies:

4. Seek support (financial and otherwise) from a wide array of community partners/programs
5. Once licensed, seek public funding through the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF)
6. Engage the business community in championing the value of childcare as economic infrastructure support.
7. Utilize childcare quality data and evidence to implement an effective curriculum and adequate family support
8. Connect families with health and nutrition services both internally via childcare health consultation and externally via Healthy Steps and ACE's Training.

Intended Outcomes:

9. Increase economic stability of families and, in turn, improve community health outcomes
10. Improve infant mortality rates (though we acknowledge this may not be realized with the opening of one center. The goal is that we may replicate this project to scale and have a vision of this outcome).
11. Reduced rates of child abuse and neglect.

Short-term impacts:

- Increase in the number of children who have access to high-quality childhood programs
- A model partnership that brings together a variety of community members and partners who can address systems thinking and change
- An increase in community champions who will connect the value of childcare to later health outcomes for children and families.

Long-term impacts:

- Improve school readiness and later academic success
- Improve family well-being leads to reduced child abuse and neglect and increased access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare
- Improvement of economic stability of the community and businesses willing to support families and family needs.

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The information obtained can help us to work with other communities in creating sustaining quality, accessible childcare. The project can be used as a model and lead to a community-wide awareness of the impact of lack of childcare on our workforce. We hope to change the community culture and build an environment that supports young children and their families. We have been granted funds by LISC to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study and architectural design, including the creation of construction documents. Our project is progressing as planned, with a target completion date set for September 30, 2023.

Recently, we concluded a thorough assessment of childcare services within Pinetop-lakeside and the neighboring communities. Initial results from this assessment are under review. Notably, in response to question 13, which inquired about difficulties faced in securing childcare, 100% of survey participants expressed challenges. Impressively, 93% of respondents identified inadequate access to dependable, affordable, and quality childcare as a key barrier preventing them from utilizing essential services. Additionally, a significant 90.7% confirmed that reliable, affordable, and high-quality childcare would enable them to attend work or school. Within this group, 61.5% believed such an opportunity would notably enhance their household income. Given the approximate high poverty rate in Navajo County, the establishment of a dependable, affordable, and quality child development center would undeniably yield substantial benefits for residents in both Pinetop-Lakeside and the surrounding areas.

Upon completing these pivotal initiatives, we will have the requisite documentation and insights to formulate a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the renovation of the school district building. Notably, we are currently backed by funding from BUILD, Care1st, and BCBS Health Choice. These resources are directed toward supporting a project coordinator in the creation of programs that leverage insights from the feasibility study. Currently, the funding gap we face pertains to renovation costs, a common hurdle in grant funding applications. Other than construction funding, this project is shovel-ready, aligning seamlessly with the Arizona Trust Funds timeline. We are confident that this endeavor warrants serious consideration for funding by the State of Arizona Trust Fund, given its potential to contribute significantly to the rural community's welfare.

We express our deep gratitude for your thoughtful consideration in allocating funding towards investing in early childhood education, particularly in the underserved rural communities of Northern Arizona. Your support is both invaluable and appreciated.

Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation, Blue Ridge Unified School District, Northland Pioneer College, and surrounding area partners and residents.