



BRIGHT SPOTS

**in supporting Family, Friend,
and Neighbor care for young
children in Colorado**

Shining a light on strategies that support
community-based license-exempt child care





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Foreword

Ask any parent: one of the most challenging things about raising young kids is finding affordable, quality child care.

But this isn't just a problem for parents. Even if you don't have kids, we all depend on someone who depends on child care. Child care is a critical (if often invisible) component of any thriving society. It is essential for economic mobility, community prosperity, and healthy child development. Without reliable and affordable child care, parents can't work, businesses can't hire, and children fall behind—especially in under-resourced neighborhoods. All of these issues have ripple effects that affect everyone.

In this time of sharp political divisions, there is broad bipartisan support for investing in the child care system. A February 2025 poll by the First Five Years fund showed that nine in ten Republicans think it's a problem or crisis that Americans can't afford child care,

along with 91% of Independents, and 97% of Democrats. Almost three-quarters of Republican voters went on to say that increasing federal funding for child care is an important priority and a good use of tax dollars, as did 70% of Independents and 90% of Democrats.¹

Historically, states including Colorado have responded to the needs of working parents by focusing on regulating and supporting formal, licensed child care options. However, as of 2022, Colorado was short 94,000 slots at licensed child care facilities for children under age 6 with working parents.² This strain on our child care system has only been increasing as the number of licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes continues to decline.³

For this and other reasons, many families send their children to home-based child care settings where they are cared for by trusted Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers. FFN caregivers can operate legally without a license and exist in every community across Colorado—in rural communities, suburban neighborhoods,



within dense cities and in resort towns. While licensed caregivers advertise online and post signage out front, FFNs often share information through word-of-mouth and close personal relationships, making them less visible overall.

Despite a universal need for improved access to affordable, quality child care, most communities overlook the incredible resource of FFN caregivers. FFNs face barriers to accessing financial and professional resources that can grow and sustain their ability to deliver quality care. Yet in several communities across Colorado, we are starting to see FFNs gain an array of support that encourages them to build their knowledge, skills, and social connections in a way that enhances the early childhood system to better serve families with young children.

In an effort to understand and elevate these examples, the Donnell-Kay Foundation, along with the Buell Foundation, Colorado Gives Foundation, and The Colorado Health Foundation, commissioned the Bright Spots project to highlight the efforts of six organizations (the “Bright Spots”) to show that through tenacious collaboration with FFNs and other stakeholders, it is possible to elevate the crucial role that FFNs play in their communities, provide meaningful assistance to help FFNs make a living, and successfully advocate for investments in a child care system that works for everyone.

The goal of this work is not to determine the “best of the best” in terms of FFN support organizations. There are numerous groups in Colorado doing great work in this field. Our aim here is to present a representative range of strategies that improve conditions for FFN care in various communities throughout the state. We prioritized diversity across geographic regions, populations served, and the types of support offered. We also sought organizations that have a track record of success, are culturally and linguistically responsive, and could help inspire other communities. All of the photos in

the report showcase caregivers and children from the Bright Spots. We are grateful that they welcomed us to their community and their homes.

The Bright Spots project builds on other efforts to increase our collective knowledge around FFN care, and identify FFN needs and policy and practice opportunities in Colorado. [Please check out recent informative work done by [Mile High United Way](#),⁴ [Early Milestones Colorado](#),⁵ the [Thriving Providers Project](#)⁶ and [Home Grown](#).]

By engaging with seven FFN co-researchers from diverse backgrounds to help lead this project, we honor the expertise of these amazing caregivers and ensure that this work is grounded in their realities and unique perspectives.

By focusing on what is going *well* in support of license-exempt FFN care in six diverse communities across Colorado, we hope to inspire local community organizations and Early Childhood Councils, those interested in policy and systems solutions, and funders to take meaningful action.

We hope you’ll join us in celebrating the trailblazing work of the Bright Spot organizations and help build momentum toward an inclusive, supportive child care system that works for everyone.



The Colorado
Health Foundation™





BRIGHT SPOTS Executive summary

Every family deserves the freedom to choose the child care setting that works best for them. Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers play an essential role in meeting the needs of working families of all backgrounds.

FFN caregivers can operate legally without a license. These caregivers are highly sought-after in every community in Colorado, especially where affordability and flexibility are primary concerns. Additionally, in communities of color, families often prefer care where language and cultural backgrounds are shared.

Despite this, FFN care remains largely invisible and vastly undervalued in terms of societal status and systemic support. While recognition of this problem is growing, direct and specific knowledge of what is working *well* to support FFNs has not been compiled in one place. Until now.

This report highlights six exemplary programs—“Bright Spots”—that offer valuable insights into improving FFN support systems.

- A** Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition
- B** Early Childhood Council of Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties in Partnership with Rural Communities Resource Center
- C** Empowering Communities Globally
- D** The Good Food Collective
- E** La Piñata del Aprendizaje
- F** United Way of Weld County

What we learned

Bright Spots vary in size and development, but all share a deep commitment to supporting FFNs. These organizations build a sense of belonging; provide access to critical training, resources, and financial support; and ensure that FFNs feel valued for their crucial role in caring for children and families. Bright Spots provide guidance for caregivers in the language of their heart, help them navigate complex systems, and nurture mutually-supportive caregiver networks. Bright Spots leaders have navigated significant challenges with resilience and ingenuity, proving that meaningful change is not only possible, but already happening.

Here is what we learned:

1 Trust and belonging matter

Bright Spots create welcoming spaces where FFNs feel valued, connected, and supported. Their language and culture are seen as an asset, not a barrier. The resulting sense of trust extends into their own communities, further strengthening networks of care for both child care providers and families with young children.

2 Affirming dignity builds confidence

Participation in Bright Spot programs instills a sense of dignity in FFNs, affirming their value as essential child care providers and community leaders. This confidence becomes an asset in all parts of their lives.

3 Guidance overcomes barriers

FFNs need more than information—they need hands-on support. Bright Spots programs provide direct guidance, walking alongside FFNs to ensure they're able to access training and essential resources to develop their identities and cultivate their skills as child care providers.

4 Advocacy fuels change

Bright Spots build bridges between FFNs and decision makers to encourage mutual learning and understanding. FFNs come to recognize the power of their voices, advocating for their own needs and driving systemic change that strengthens the early childhood system as a whole.

5 Creativity and resilience propel innovation

Bright Spots leaders demonstrate great ingenuity and drive to overcome the many challenges associated with this work. Long-term flexible funding will help build on their accomplishments and expand into other communities.

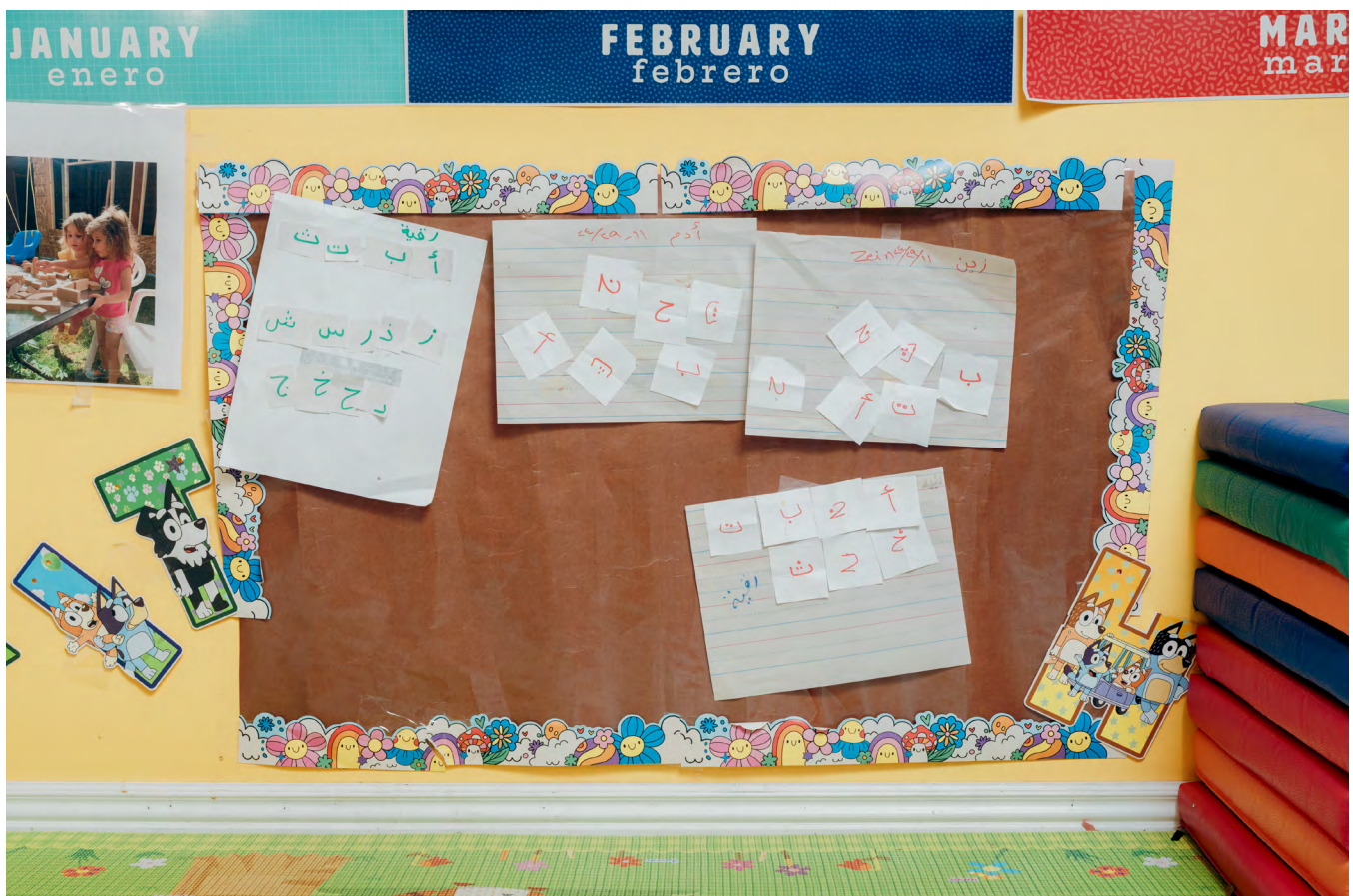
Moving forward

The Bright Spots project aligns with broader national efforts to elevate the importance of FFN care. By reframing FFN care as a vital community asset rather than an informal fallback option, this work challenges outdated perceptions and opens new pathways for greater inclusion and engagement. Drawing on firsthand insights from interviews, program observations, and focus groups, this project amplifies the voices of FFNs to drive needed change.

Many challenges faced by FFNs could be addressed through coordinated leadership, smart policy changes, and public and private investments—all best informed by FFNs and their supporting organizations. This report, along with its case studies, offers inspiration and a call to action for community organizations, Early Childhood Councils, policymakers, and prospective funders alike.

The key takeaway is clear: Colorado has the opportunity to build on the work of these Bright Spots organizations to embrace and support FFNs in the greater child care system, improving quality of care and access for all.

By shining a light on strategies to strengthen Colorado's early childhood workforce, we aim to spotlight the indispensable role of FFNs, and galvanize increased support for them and the families they serve. We invite you to read the full report to learn more about the common themes across Bright Spots, and to dig deeper by reading any of the six Bright Spots case studies to learn more about their unique efforts.





Introduction

As of 2022, Colorado was short 94,000 slots at licensed child care facilities for children under age six with working parents.⁷ This strain on the child care system has only been increasing as the number of licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes continues to decline.⁸ For this and other reasons, Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care is the most prevalent form of early childhood care in Colorado and the nation—serving an estimated 60 percent of children in the United States, or approximately 5.2 million children.⁹ Despite this broad appeal and the vital role it plays for families and communities, FFN care is largely invisible and vastly undervalued in terms of societal recognition and systemic support.

Existing child care systems and policies heavily favor licensed providers, limiting FFNs access to crucial resources. Driven by deep commitment to children and community, these essential

caregivers often make little to no money because they are feeding the kids in their care out of their own pantries, or because they know that parents can't afford to pay. And few receive any kind of coordinated public funding, training, or resources. Further, providing care at home can be socially isolating, especially for FFNs in rural areas who live far from learning and gathering spaces. Navigating early childhood systems can be complex even for native English speakers, let alone for the many immigrants and refugees who enrich Colorado's workforce.

The Bright Spots project highlights the ways that six FFN support organizations in Colorado are working to successfully engage with FFNs to help cultivate self-confidence, form community networks, develop professional skills, access available resources, and advocate for changes in the child care system that will make it more inclusive and effective for everyone.

What is Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care?

In Colorado, FFNs are allowed to operate legally without a formal license from the State as long as they meet the license-exempt requirements of caring for four or fewer children ages birth to 18 years old and no more than two children under the age of two. FFNs are both providers-of-choice and a social safety net. They help meet the practical needs of families who need flexible care or who work outside of the 9-to-5 workday, as well as for those who need to prioritize affordability or care for children with special needs.

Many parents prefer a home setting for their children and may seek out a caregiver who shares their first language and culture. In Colorado, Spanish is the most commonly spoken language among non-English-speaking caregivers. Most of the Spanish-speaking FFNs in our study have roots in Mexico or Central and South American countries. We were fortunate to also connect with FFN caregivers from Arabic and Dari linguistic backgrounds. In looking at what FFN support organizations are doing to address the challenges faced by communities with the greatest magnitude of access barriers (economic, social, cultural, linguistic), we seek to offer insights that will also apply to efforts to support all FFNs.

How has support for FFN care evolved in Colorado?

The work to advance FFN care in Colorado was born 45 years ago through the pioneering efforts of one of our Bright Spots: the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition. Other Bright Spots here are forging their own unique paths, in turn creating programs and systems to meet the needs of providers in their own communities and working hard

FFN care is license-exempt, home-based early child care provided by relatives, family friends, or parents caring for other children alongside their own. It goes by many other names:



grandmas &
abuelos grandpas
bibi **& abuelitas**
AUNTIES **tías** khala
dada babysitters **TETE**
neighbors **SISTERS**
friends of
the family

to ensure that FFNs receive the support, recognition, and resources they deserve.

In the past decade, Colorado's FFN policy landscape has grown significantly. Under the fearless leadership of Lorena García—executive director, Colorado state representative, and one of the state's most vocal FFN advocates—the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition has ensured that the voices and perspectives of families and caregivers are embedded in policy decisions. Their work has secured state funding for FFN support and led to the creation of the FFN Advisory Council within the Colorado Department of Early Childhood. As a result, FFNs are beginning to be recognized

as a vital group whose voices must be heard. These efforts show how community-driven advocacy can lead to lasting change that reflects the needs and priorities of those most impacted by decision-makers' actions.

Our approach

The Bright Spots project started with the shared belief that learning directly from FFNs and the organizations committed to serving them is essential in order to make meaningful and realistic advancements in the child care system. At the onset, we gathered insights from champions of FFN care in Colorado: staff at the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, state-level advocates, FFN support organizations, and child care providers themselves. Together, their perspectives informed the project's four questions:

1. What can be learned from groups in Colorado who are organizing and serving FFNs well? What strategies have these organizations used to reach FFNs, to build what FFNs say they need, and to remove barriers?
2. How have FFN support organizations shifted narratives in order to expand thinking about the role FFNs might play in helping meet Colorado's need for high-quality child care?
3. How can state or local systems better serve FFNs? How have they elevated the voices of FFNs towards this end?
4. What strategic actions can funders, local leaders, and the state take to direct more funding and resources toward practical improvements for FFNs?

In order to explore these questions, we invited seven FFNs to help lead the eight-month study. These caregivers served as co-researchers, bringing a rich set of perspectives, ambitions,

Recent policy shifts in support of FFN care in Colorado include:

- ▶ In addition to defining legally license-exempt care, Colorado allows FFNs to apply for Qualified Exempt status, which allows qualifying families receiving financial assistance through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) to choose FFN care.
- ▶ FFNs with Qualified Exempt status are now eligible for assistance through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), known in Colorado as the Colorado Food Program, if they serve families participating in CCCAP.
- ▶ FFNs can pursue licensure with fewer barriers and improved access to public support. [SB21-199]
- ▶ FFN support organizations have access to a one-time funding program, which can be used to equip FFNs with materials, training, and supportive services. [SB22-213]
- ▶ The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) established the FFN Advisory Council offering representation to FFNs at the state level and promoting stronger communication between caregivers and the statewide agencies intended to support them. [SB22-213]
- ▶ FFNs are eligible for a state income tax credit for individuals working in the caregiving sector. [HB24-1312]
- ▶ FFNs will have improved access to CCCAP benefits, via a simplified application process. Greater access to the Colorado Food Program (CACFP) is also being studied. [HB24-1223]
- ▶ Spanish-speaking FFNs have improved access to licensing information through CDEC's Bilingual Licensing Unit.

Introduction

and caregiving experiences. The group includes people who speak four different mother tongues and hail from Mexico, China, Lebanon, and the United States. Our combined team became a group of 11: seven FFNs, two community-based researchers, a professional interpreter/translator, and a project lead with expertise in early childhood strategy from 20 years in philanthropy. FFNs were paid for every hour of their time and were compensated for technology, such as Chromebooks and modems.

The Colorado Early Childhood Framework¹⁰ also guided our work, assuring our team that the state recognizes that FFNs have a place in the early childhood system, and that the early childhood community sees preparation, training, compensation, career development and recognition as critical to building a strong child care workforce.



Methods

An array of FFN and institutional leaders identified numerous programs that are supporting FFN care and told us what we might learn that could advance the field. We then developed criteria to select six organizations to study in more depth and become our “Bright Spots.” Our objective was to tell the story of their origin, explore what they did and how they did it, and reflect on the factors that enabled them to support FFNs in their personal and professional journeys.

We designed the project around multiple in-depth case studies¹¹ that explore programs serving FFNs to hear the voices and perspectives of people deeply involved in the work, and to see the interactions between them. We embraced a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)¹² approach, engaging FFNs through all stages of the project as co-researchers who contribute expertise and share in decision-making and responsibilities.

OUR TEAM CONDUCTED:

23 in-depth interviews with directors, staff and community members

13 hours of observations of trainings and graduation ceremonies

Visual storytelling and focus groups with 42 FFNs

For more details about the study methods and limitations, see Appendix C.



Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition

A

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **1980**

Areas served: **Statewide**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Pioneer in recognizing the importance of supporting FFN care to improve outcomes for children
- Developed the influential Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO) training program and PASO Academy for special needs children
- Helps FFNs become policy advocates and community leaders
- Leads efforts to achieve significant legislative wins
- Focuses on healing trauma and systemic change in Colorado

Read
details in
the case
study



Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties in Partnership with Rural Communities Resource Center

B

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **2020**

Areas served: **Yuma, Washington, and Kit Carson counties**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Leverages flexible funding allows support for both licensed and license-exempt (FFN) caregivers in rural communities
- Engages innovative strategies for FFN recruitment and community-building
- Forges strong partnerships with Rural Communities Resource Center and other local organizations to enhance and expand resources for FFNs

Read
details in
the case
study



Empowering Communities Globally

C

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **2019**

Areas served: **Denver, Arapahoe, Adams, and Douglas counties**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Prioritizes caregiver knowledge and sense of belonging through its cohort training model
- Reaches underserved refugee communities and practices language justice, offering services largely in Arabic and Dari, and other languages as needed
- Builds trusting, culturally sensitive relationships with FFNs to guide them in overcoming barriers and reaching personal and professional goals
- Utilizes dual capacity-building for professional advancement and advocacy

Read
details in
the case
study



The Good Food Collective

D

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **2023**

Areas served: **La Plata County**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Directly serves FFNs in response to community needs through an expanded mission
- Addresses the root causes of food insecurity by supporting the economic stability and growth of FFN caregivers with an intersectional approach
- Works to change the narrative around FFN care

Read
details in
the case
study



La Piñata del Aprendizaje

E

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **2018**

Areas served: **Denver Metro: Montbello, Globeville/Elyria-Swansea, Thornton**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Promotes early childhood education in the Latino community
- Uses a culturally-relevant approach to teach caregivers how to implement developmentally appropriate practices with children and form communities of peer learning
- Builds strong partnerships for family support, promoting self-care and community connection

Read
details in
the case
study



United Way of Weld County

F

Serving Colorado FFNs since: **2009**

Areas served: **Weld County**

Why is it a Bright Spot?

- Supports both licensed and license-exempt (FFN) caregivers
- Meets the needs of their population through an adaptation of CSPC's PASO training program
- Cultivates partnerships that enhance support for providers
- Recruits 200+ new FFNs annually

Read
details in
the case
study



Findings

As FFN support organizations, Bright Spots weave together a range of programmatic strategies designed to meet FFNs where they are—offering social support, financial assistance, professional development, leadership opportunities, and advocacy. These organizations go beyond providing resources; they cultivate environments where FFNs deepen their understanding of child development and strengthen their ability to thrive and grow as caregivers. Bright Spots work not only to sustain FFNs, but to equip them to lead, advocate, and shape the systems that impact their lives.

Five key findings:

- 1 Trust and belonging matter.** Bright Spots build trusted relationships with FFNs, accompanying them on their path to build confidence, skills, and agency.
- 2 Affirming dignity builds confidence.** Bright Spots honor FFNs as essential members of the early childhood workforce and encourage them to feel a sense of dignity in their role.
- 3 Guidance overcomes barriers.** Bright Spots create accessible pathways to ensure that FFNs have the training and support they need to deliver high-quality care.
- 4 Advocacy fuels change.** Bright Spots build bridges between FFNs and decision makers to encourage mutual learning and understanding.
- 5 Creativity and resilience propel innovation.** Bright Spots leaders demonstrate great ingenuity and drive to overcome the many challenges associated with this work.

Finding 1: Trust and belonging matter

Bright Spots build trusted relationships with FFNs, accompanying them on their path to build confidence, skills and agency.

FFNs value the trusting relationships they form with Bright Spots staff, who guide them toward their individual goals and ensure they never feel alone. In Latino culture, the term *acompañamiento* [akumpa - nya - miento] refers to the practice of working alongside a person and treating them with empathy. This means entering into genuine dialogue, building trust, and witnessing their growth as they navigate and overcome barriers. It is not about leading or directing, but rather supporting people as they engage in their own learning and empowerment processes.¹³

- Darcy, an immigrant mother participating in **D The Good Food Collective**, struggled silently in her early days in the United States, filled with feelings of invisibility and fear: **“When I arrived in this country, [...] We lived in the shadows, as if we were invisible. But something in me said: This is not right. We are immigrants, and our voice is valid.”** After meeting Tiffany, the program manager at The Good Food Collective, Darcy soon realized she wasn’t alone. Through community meetings, she and others found solidarity and support among peers who shared their struggles.
- **C Empowering Communities Globally** recognizes that aspiring FFNs need to master the web-based Professional Development Information System (PDIS) to document their progress and move up through the levels in the state’s quality rating system. To ensure that women who speak Arabic and Dari—the language spoken most often in Afghanistan—are not left out, staff sit beside them for two hours to translate each training

and guide them in uploading their certificate. Deborah Young, the executive director, assures them: **“You will not be left out or forgotten. That is why we’re here. We will give you the tools to help you so you can continue on with the work you want.”**

- At **E La Piñata del Aprendizaje**, FFNs grow to feel as though they are part of a big family. They learn from classroom leaders who teach by example, modeling interactions with children that nurture development. Experienced FFNs take on mentoring roles, guiding newer participants with respect and empathy. Ms. Rosa puts it this way: **“For me, La Piñata is family, love and wisdom. Family, because we feel at home here; love, because Lupita and Blanca [the program directors] transmit that affection to the children and to us; and wisdom, for everything they have taught us through the courses and acompañamiento.”**

Finding 2: Affirming dignity builds confidence

Bright Spots honor FFNs as essential members of the early childhood workforce and encourage them to feel a sense of dignity in their role.

Focused as they are on caregiving, FFNs often don’t realize the important role they play in their community. This perspective shifts as staff work alongside them to help affirm their value as caregivers and community members. The process is gradual, built on treating FFNs with respect, providing meaningful training and resources, and encouraging them to engage in self-advocacy. Bright Spots recognize that FFNs are essential to the diverse range of child care options that parents, families, and communities rely on—and they honor the FFNs with the dignity they deserve.

- ▶ In 2006, **A The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition** created the Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO) program for FFNs—a robust 120-hour, evidence-based training focusing on child development. Ms. Ramirez, a program alumna, reflects on how PASO transformed her perspective on child care: **“Having a training like PASO and [earning] the CDA certification empowers us as people and as women. We are no longer just ‘nannies’ or ‘babysitters’—after PASO, I am no longer a babysitter, because now I have my certification, my knowledge, my training hours. I have a solid foundation, a resume, and, above all, the backing of a professional certification. That is the difference.”**
- ▶ **F United Way of Weld County**’s Early Childhood Council embraced FFN care in 2009 when it first started offering an adapted version of PASO training, but its efforts intensified in 2016 when the Weld County government realized that two-thirds of children were being cared for in license-exempt settings. Despite initial resistance from some partners and licensed providers, the Council remained committed to the belief that every child care provider deserves support to offer the highest possible quality of care. In the words of Adriana Carrillo, the facilitator of Weld County’s Early Childhood Council: **“We will never favor licensed care over FFN care [...] center care versus family child care at home. We want to have an equitable support system for all kinds of care, because what we want most is for children to be in the best situation for them.”**
- ▶ **E La Piñata del Aprendizaje** is transforming the way Latino communities perceive and approach early education. The organization encourages caregivers to see

themselves as professionals, blending their deep love and care for the children with evidence-based child-rearing practices. Caregivers are treated with dignity and respect, and are reminded to prioritize their own well-being alongside the children they nurture. Ms. Isela, an FFN in the program, shares: **“Before I described myself only as a caregiver. Now, thanks to La Piñata, I have more tools and materials to improve the care I give children.”** Ms. Josefina acknowledges how the staff genuinely look after their needs: **“Guadalupe and Blanca already care about us; that is, they also care about us being okay.”**

Finding 3: Guidance overcomes barriers

Bright Spots create accessible pathways to ensure that FFNs have the training and support they need to deliver high-quality care.

The child care field offers a wealth of resources, from training in child development and sound business practices to early learning materials and financial assistance. Yet FFNs often cannot take advantage of these resources due to inadequate communication channels, complex or unfamiliar technology, or materials not being provided in the language of their heart. Bright Spots overcome these barriers by ensuring that essential resources and training are accessible to all who need them. In particular, Bright Spots demonstrate a strong commitment to language justice, which upholds the right of every person to communicate, understand, and be understood in the language in which they feel most articulate and powerful.

- ▶ **C Empowering Communities Globally** hires and trains bilingual and bicultural interpreters from the community. The same group of Arabic- and Dari-speaking

interpreters are present for the duration of the 12-month FFN training. Over time, they are able to develop friendships and trust with the FFNs in the program. The interpreters ensure that language barriers never stand in the way of FFN engagement.

- **F United Way of Weld County** refers FFNs to the Weld County Department of Human Services if they have a child who can be supported financially through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP). Department of Human Services CCCAP Manager, Anna Korthuis, guides FFNs recruited by the United Way through the Qualified Exempt process. Being Qualified Exempt allows a family to be reimbursed for child care expenses through the CCCAP subsidy and to receive food benefits through the Colorado Food Program (CACFP). Now, more FFNs are Qualified Exempt in Weld County than in any other county in Colorado.

Finding 4: Advocacy fuels change

Bright Spots build bridges between FFNs and decision makers to encourage mutual learning and understanding.

Most Bright Spots are building the capacity of FFNs to advocate for their own rights and needs, while also teaching elected officials how to engage with FFNs and act on their behalf. As FFNs learn new skills and begin to recognize their own value, and as their contributions gain broader recognition, decision-makers also come to see the importance of these contributions, learn to engage with FFNs, and support changes grounded in a mutual understanding of the impacts of their actions. FFNs may get involved by pushing for legislative changes, participating in community organizing to support a ballot measure, or attending events to voice their needs.

- A primary goal of **D The Good Food Collective** is to empower immigrants to advocate for themselves and their communities, and to influence those in power to recognize the impact of collective action. This is challenging, as shown by an incident where city officials misinterpreted community frustration as personal anger. Tiffany, the program manager at The Good Food Collective, recounted a pivotal moment when the city official said, **“I don’t understand, because when I talk to these moms, they’re just so mad at us.’ [...] And I said, ‘No, they’re not angry with you. They’re angry with the situation, and they have a lot of passion and understanding.’”** By bridging this cultural gap between FFNs and elected officials, The Good Food Collective promoted the mutual understanding necessary to work towards a common goal.
- **A The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition** routinely invites graduates of their PASO training program to advocate for themselves by engaging with policy makers. This gives policy makers a chance to hear directly from FFNs and act on their recommendations. Ms. Ramirez, an FFN in the program, shares her experience: **“I have been volunteering in the community for a long time, but it was at the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition where I began to advocate for legislative changes. I have participated at the Capitol, sent letters and testimonies. What has marked my life the most has been being in the *Grupo de Lucha* and the *Grupo de Voz* [two community organizing groups], supporting my colleagues to promote the bill for the [child care] tax credit.”**

Finding 5: Creativity and resilience propel innovation

Bright Spots leaders demonstrate great ingenuity and drive to overcome the many challenges associated with this work.

At this time, the nonprofits that support FFNs do so without dedicated, sustainable state funding or government programs designed for the people they serve. (The state grants program authorized by SB22-213 that funds FFN training and support programs is a notable exception; it expires in 2026.) Therefore, Bright Spots organizations have had to be creative as well as dogged in their pursuit of funding from anyone with an aligned mission. Bright Spots have had to change strategy, form new alliances, or enlist unexpected program partners. They have also had to advocate with funders to support unique approaches, taking time to carefully select the right staff, and ensuring that FFNs have a seat at decision-making tables in their communities. Bright Spots are at varying stages of their program growth and development. Each has had to adapt to different circumstances under different conditions with different resources. What holds true in every case is the fierce and focused commitment of their leaders to support their community of FFNs.

- Five years ago, Claudia Strait, longtime leader of the **B Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties**, noticed a significant decline in licensed child care providers in the region. In 2020, it took great courage for the organization to embrace service to FFNs, unsure whether funding would continue to support this new direction. However, they recognized that most of the children in the counties they served were being cared for by FFNs, and shifting their services toward FFNs would enable them to continue to fulfill their

core mission. In Claudia's words: **"I want FFN care to be recognized, and for providers to feel confident rather than fearful. This is essential care. Many of our special needs children are in FFN care."**

- The **D Good Food Collective** forged a new partnership with The Colorado Health Foundation, focusing on community-led food systems. When their own community feedback identified child care as a challenge for family financial security, they made a compelling case for the connection between the two issues. As Rachel Landis, the Executive Director, shared, **"We came back to the Foundation and said, our community did not say 'work on expanding the food pantry'; our community said, 'work on childcare', as a means of addressing household food insecurity. The Foundation genuinely reflected on our request and then supported it. That was such a unique and beautiful thing for a philanthropy organization to do—to genuinely honor community needs. They have since provided additional funding, which has been incredible."**





Recommendations

Bright Spots create innovative programs that ensure FFNs receive the recognition, resources, and support they deserve. Staff are committed to supporting FFNs as they pursue their individual paths and dreams, whether that involves caring for a beloved family member, building a license-exempt business, or becoming a licensed provider. In the process, FFNs are empowered to act as resources in their communities and develop agency to advocate for systemic changes that will improve the child care system as a whole.

The recommendations that follow are rooted in what we learned from the experiences of Bright Spots staff and the FFNs in their orbits. Here we offer ideas to inspire community organizations and Early Childhood Councils, those interested in policy and systems solutions, and funders to take action.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For community-based organizations and Early Childhood Councils

1. Create a welcoming environment where FFNs feel camaraderie and a sense of belonging.
2. Address barriers to accessing professional development opportunities and early childhood systems.
3. Connect FFNs to ways to build their financial stability.
4. Help FFNs see their value and emerge as leaders.
5. (For Early Childhood Councils) Embrace FFNs along with licensed providers.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For policymakers

1. Ensure FFNs and their supporting organizations are at the table with decision-makers.
2. Policy changes must address not only eligibility, but access.
3. Recognize that FFNs are key to an expanded child care workforce, and many speak languages other than English.
4. Simplify the licensing process.
5. Strengthen cross sector support for FFNs.
6. (For county governments) Set equitable CCCAP rates for Qualified Exempt providers.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For funders

1. Incentivize and support Early Childhood Councils to work with FFNs.
2. Provide multi-year, flexible funding to allow for creative solutions to the unique problems of local communities.
3. Invest in language justice to support the remarkable diversity of FFNs.
4. Fund efforts to bolster FFN compensation through enrollment in financial assistance programs and initiatives to increase compensation.



For community-based organizations and Early Childhood Councils

There is no single set of “best practices” for starting an FFN initiative, but common elements do emerge. Leaders and FFNs display remarkable courage and commitment in overcoming barriers of language, racism, money, political opposition, complex technology, policy, funding, and more. Most Bright Spots started small, gauging interest, addressing challenges, and pivoting and growing to meet community needs. With persistence and creativity, they have developed supportive caregiver networks, increased access to resources and training, and spurred advocacy for greater systemic shifts.

Recommendation 1: Create a welcoming environment where FFNs feel camaraderie and a sense of belonging.

Caregiving at home can be isolating, especially in rural areas where FFNs can live far from town centers and social or learning spaces. For many immigrants and refugees, displacement brings a profound sense of loss—of home, community, language, and identity. Bright Spots emphasize the value of building trusting relationships with FFNs so they feel a sense of belonging. This takes time and happens in both one-on-one and group settings that come to feel like family. It is also nurtured through *acompañamiento*—the practice rooted in Latino culture of walking alongside someone, symbolically taking their hand to help them reach their goal.

Hiring bilingual staff from the community enables organizations to build relationships and

deliver training for FFNs in the language(s) of their heart. **C Empowering Communities**

Globally hired staff who were immigrants themselves and knew what it was like to start over in a new country. **The message from Bright Spots is clear: everything starts with the relationships that staff build with FFNs, and those that FFNs build with one another.**

Recommendation 2: Address barriers to accessing professional development opportunities and early childhood systems.

FFNs face significant barriers when it comes to professional advancement. Issues of cost, housing requirements, and language accessibility often stand in the way. Early childhood systems and their requirements can be a challenge for US-born English speakers, let alone the many immigrants and refugees who enrich Colorado’s workforce. Without access to education and training resources, these caregivers are often excluded from pathways to personal and professional development.

Bright Spots see it as central to their role to understand the multiple barriers FFNs face and to address them both individually and collectively in order to improve how the system works for all caregivers. For example, the co-directors of **E La Piñata del Aprendizaje** use culturally-relevant communication and teaching methods, modeling developmentally-appropriate language, behaviors, and lessons that caregivers can apply with children. Biweekly, staff at

C Empowering Communities Globally meet one-on-one with every FFN in their program to address digital literacy and offer language interpretation in Dari and Arabic as well as hands-on guidance in navigating the PDIS training platform. Most Bright Spots also provide costly resources such as child-sized furniture, educational toys and books, and craft supplies.

Recommendation 3: Connect FFNs to ways to build their financial stability.

FFNs often receive little to no compensation for their commitment to caring for children. Ensuring that FFNs have access to opportunities to increase their earnings and gain access to financial benefits improves financial stability, making it more likely they will continue in their role as a caregiver.

The Bright Spots training programs highlighted here are all offered at little or no cost; in fact, **C Empowering Communities Globally** and **D Good Food Collective** pay FFNs to participate. **E La Piñata del Aprendizaje** creates earning opportunities by connecting FFNs with childcare gigs during community

events, ensuring competitive pay and structured contracts. **F United Way of Weld County** hires PASO graduates to provide the childcare for current PASO students. Training programs allow FFNs to earn state-recognized certificates, enabling them to charge higher rates. These programs help FFNs recognize their worth and teach them how to better communicate that value to parents seeking care.

Most FFNs are unfamiliar with the financial benefits available to them. To address this, most Bright Spots highlight resources like CCCAP and the Colorado Food Program (CACFP) to help expand their access to financial support. The **A Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition** partners with other FFN support organizations to host informational events where FFNs can learn about childcare workforce tax credits.

F United Way of Weld County refers FFNs to the Weld County Department of Human Services to become Qualified Exempt, enabling them to access CCCAP benefits. The

B Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties in Partnership with Rural Communities Resource Center has become an application hub for food assistance, utility assistance, and other public benefits.



Recommendation 4: Help FFNs see their value and emerge as leaders.

Bright Spots help FFNs feel like they are not alone, that their culture is an asset, and that they have a right to ask for better conditions. For many immigrant FFNs, coming to a new country means navigating an unfamiliar landscape filled with uncertainty and insecurity. Many experience self-doubt and lack the confidence to advocate for themselves and their needs. Bright Spots help FFNs reconnect with their own cultures and the strength of their communities, encouraging them to step into their power rather than remain at the mercy of a system that often fails to properly recognize them. They become active participants in building the system they need, demonstrating what can be done to benefit all FFNs.

Bright Spots help FFNs develop leadership skills and open avenues for advocacy. The **A Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition** builds a pipeline of FFNs interested in testifying before the legislature. The **B Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties in Partnership with Rural Communities Resource Center** has an FFN serving on the board of the council. The **D Good Food Collective** assists FFNs in speaking directly with state and community leaders to change regulations and policies to better support their work. They also educate FFNs about key system players, such as city councils, Early Childhood Councils, county offices, and other groups.

Recommendation 5 (for Early Childhood Councils): Embrace FFNs along with licensed providers.

As local hubs across Colorado charged with coordinating, collaborating, and aligning resources for early childhood care and education, Early Childhood Councils are poised to lead in the movement to support FFNs as an untapped resource. In recent years, more councils have begun to take steps in connecting with FFNs. This happens largely through limited programming or engagement of a small number of caregivers. Councils have an opportunity to learn from Bright Spots' experiences and fuel an expansion of their efforts. This will require state funding streams for councils, which have historically focused on services for licensed providers, to be more inclusive. As funding becomes more flexible (as recommended below), Early Childhood Councils should come together to share early stumbling blocks and strategize community-specific ways to build programming with and in support of FFNs.

The two councils in the Bright Spots project—the **F Early Childhood Councils serving Weld County (United Way of Weld County)** and **B Yuma, Washington, and Kit Carson counties**—have now made it their mission to serve both licensed and license-exempt providers. Even so, it wasn't easy to pivot towards FFN care. Both councils navigated tension between licensed-exempt and licensed providers, hired bilingual staff from the community, and created joint professional development opportunities and community events to welcome all providers. Increased funding to serve FFNs helped make this shift possible.

For policymakers

The availability of high-quality, affordable child care in Colorado could be increased by supporting FFNs through smart policy changes and public investments informed by caregivers and the local organizations that support them. Well-intended policies often fail to achieve their aims because FFNs remain unaware of the resources available to them or cannot access the systems due to language or logistical barriers. Legislators, state agency staff members, and advocates committed to expanding and improving child care for working families may find useful lessons in the experiences of these six Bright Spots.

Recommendation 1: Ensure FFNs and their supporting organizations are at the table with decision-makers.

Bright Spots demonstrate several ways in which engaging the powerful knowledge and experience of FFNs has improved program delivery, secured financial resources, and influenced legislation and local policies. When FFNs are engaged early on and appreciated for their wisdom and experience, policy outcomes and community planning are more likely to be successful. Additionally, the Bright Spots project shows the value of engaging FFNs in research and evaluation efforts, knowing how their insights and leadership can increase both the credibility and validity of work in the field. Policymakers can leverage the relationships that FFN serving organizations have with FFNs in their communities to engage caregivers and use their input to design effective policies and services. For example, **D Good Food Collective** worked with partners to convene

stakeholders, including FFNs, to demonstrate to city leadership the value of hiring an interpreter to improve communication and build trust. This effort ultimately led to the passage of a lodging tax that will support early childhood and worker housing investments.

Recommendation 2: Policy changes must address not only eligibility, but access. Legislation should include funding for implementation, following recommendations from FFNs and supporting organizations.

Existing systems for policy implementation are still primarily oriented toward licensed providers. While recent regulatory and legislative changes have opened doors for more FFN support, very few FFNs are walking through. Some of the reasons include low financial benefit relative to required level of effort, lack of awareness, language barriers, and limited pathways for provider participation. Local FFN support organizations can play a key role in addressing these barriers, but they need funding to do so effectively.

Bright Spots report that FFNs rarely know about Early Childhood Councils or the PDIS, benefits like CCCAP the Colorado Food Program (CACFP), the state income tax credit for caregivers, or even community-based resources like food assistance. Additional funding is needed to support essential one-on-one coaching to help FFNs navigate complex processes and systems like the PDIS

or completing steps to qualify for programs like CCCAP. Funding for improving access could be directed through existing systems, such as Early Childhood Councils or the state-level entities that support them.

Recommendation 3: Recognize that FFNs are key to an expanded child care workforce, and many speak languages other than English.

When so many FFNs are immigrants who speak languages other than English, it is essential that any system that aims to support them implement equitable language access beyond translation or interpretation. Some Bright Spots went to great lengths to hire, train, and develop their own interpreters with both cultural and subject expertise, allowing them to become long-term, trusted members of the community. Such an effort requires both funding and infrastructure. Both the **(B) Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties in Partnership with Rural Communities Resource Center** and the **(D) Good Food Collective** reported difficulty in finding in-person trainers who could come to their rural communities and deliver Spanish-language training on critical topics such as home safety. Yet offering these trainings in FFNs' home language is essential for effective comprehension and application. While the Colorado Department of Early Childhood is making strides in language access to training within the PDIS system—including plans to soon add Arabic translation, several Bright Spots noted that translation itself is not enough, that FFNs need guidance through the training to make sure the content is clear.

Recommendation 4: Simplify the licensing process.

Many FFNs working with Bright Spots aspire to become licensed caregivers, but face major barriers in meeting the requirements. These include cost, logistical challenges, language barriers, and regulations that make the process difficult or even impossible. For example, an FFN may complete training and receive a Child Development Associate (CDA) certification, only to discover that she cannot attain licensure because her apartment or mobile home does not meet space requirements. For others, the financial burden of meeting licensure requirements puts the goal out of reach. **(F) United Way of Weld County** has staff dedicated to supporting FFNs through the licensing process, including a team member from the community who speaks Spanish. Inviting staff and FFNs seeking licensure to participate in policy discussions about streamlining the process and requirements would be the most effective way to improve outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen cross sector support for FFNs.

The issues of economic prosperity, food security, affordable housing, educational equity, and child care are deeply interconnected. Parents cannot go to work without access to child care that they trust. Well-informed FFNs can serve as vital links for families to access healthy food and essential services. Well-trained FFNs supported by Bright Spot organizations are often a key source of information for parents in identifying early signs of developmental delays or the need for sensory assessments in young children. At the same time, FFNs have shared how rules around housing and space requirements create barriers



to licensure, highlighting the potential role of housing assistance in expanding the number of prospective licensed providers. In countless ways, service systems intersect around child care providers, including FFNs. Leaders across policy sectors have an important role to play in advocating for FFNs and investing in cross-sector support infrastructure to increase the quality and availability of child care for everyone.

Recommendation 6 (for county governments): Set equitable CCCAP rates for Qualified Exempt providers.

Colorado currently has around 100 FFN providers who have completed the process to become Qualified Exempt and are authorized to care for children from families using CCCAP subsidies. By contrast, some states support far more FFN providers through their child care assistance programs. For example, in Cook County, Illinois, which has a population similar to the entire state of Colorado, approximately 5,000 providers receive child care subsidies and are also eligible to participate in CACFP.

In Colorado, county governments set CCCAP reimbursement rates for Qualified Exempt providers. While this approach aligns with the state's tradition of local control, it has resulted in significant variation in rates across the state. For example, according to the most recent county rate plans, a Qualified Exempt FFN provider in Boulder County would receive \$11.55 per full time CCCAP-eligible child per day, whereas a provider in Pitkin County would receive \$44.00¹⁴. These disparities affect provider participation and limit options for qualified families to receive benefits.

Counties have the authority to set equitable CCCAP rates for Qualified Exempt FFN providers. By setting reasonable rates, counties can help recognize, support, and stabilize this invisible workforce. Counties can also do more to actively promote CCCAP benefits to FFN caregivers who often care for children for little to no pay. In counties where FFN-serving organizations exist—like the Bright Spots highlighted in this report—local governments have a natural partner to promote this resource and connect with FFNs to help them navigate the Qualified Exempt process.

For funders

No sustained public funding currently exists for supporting FFN care (the aforementioned state grant program for FFN support organizations will expire in 2026). Philanthropic investment in supporting FFNs has also been limited relative to both the need and opportunity to make meaningful structural differences in the early child care landscape. Funders wield significant power to drive and advance change. By using their platforms as civic-minded, mission-driven organizations, they can elevate and enrich conversations around the challenges facing FFNs and the communities they serve. Often—and hopefully—increased public financial resources and policy change will follow.

Bright Spots have demonstrated extraordinary and determined leadership, piecing together programs and funding through creative local solutions, private philanthropy, and one-time public funding. Still, the ongoing struggle to make ends meet fosters uncertainty and limits their willingness and ability to do more. If this important work is to continue and grow in other regions, more long term flexible funding is needed.

Recommendation 1: Incentivize and support Early Childhood Councils to work with FFNs.

Some of the funding that Early Childhood Councils receive is restricted to working with licensed caregivers. However, Bright Spots found creative ways to include license-exempt providers in training and other services without compromising support for licensed caregivers. In our view, inclusion should not require a work-around. Policy changes to

funding streams can make it easier for local organizations to improve the quality of care across all settings. Funders can also invest in initiatives that encourage Councils to explore and implement a shift toward supporting FFNs.

Recommendation 2: Provide multi-year, flexible funding to generate creative solutions to the unique problems of local communities.

Bright Spots highlight the pivotal role funders play in enabling them to adapt their programming to better support FFNs. Bright Spots value the role of funders as community leaders, thought partners, and catalysts for systems transformation. When funding is short-term, it becomes more difficult to hire staff, develop relationships with FFNs, and effectively plan, undermining the ability to sustain and expand FFN support. Multi-year, flexible funding is essential for meeting ongoing community needs.

Several Bright Spots shared how The Colorado Health Foundation created a flexible funding stream that allowed community voices to help drive and shape their program development. For example, the Good Food Collective emphasized how important it was that the foundation listened when the community identified child care investments as the most impactful way to ensure food security for families. A sustained funding commitment enabled community voices to be heard and allowed for programming to develop in direct response to their needs.

Recommendation 3: Invest in language equity to support the remarkable diversity of FFNs.

There is an incredible diversity of families now living in Colorado, and any funded programming must be tailored to their unique needs in order to achieve desired outcomes. In particular, organizations must be able to allocate funding for language justice. Too often, training, print, and web-based materials and application processes are available only in English or, at best, in English and Spanish. This leaves other populations without a full understanding of crucial information. All Bright Spots spent time learning about immigrant and refugee communities in their service areas and needed funding for translation, interpretation, and hiring long-term employees and contractors to accommodate language differences.

Recommendation 4: Fund efforts to bolster FFN compensation through enrollment in financial assistance programs and initiatives to increase compensation.

Invest in innovative strategies that help raise FFN awareness of available financial assistance programs like CCCAP, the Colorado Food Program, and the Care Worker Tax Credit, and increase one-to-one support to help them navigate barriers to enrollment. Seek out communities and organizations that are eager to develop new approaches to expanding earning opportunities and improving compensation for FFNs. When programs demonstrate early success, be prepared to

sustain them with long-term funding, either directly or through intentionally-cultivated funding partnerships. Bright Spots emphasize the need for long-term investments—such as five-year funding initiatives—that can provide stability and growth opportunities for FFNs and their communities.





Changing the narrative around FFN care

Beyond the findings and recommendations discussed above, this project builds on efforts in Colorado and across the country to shift the narrative around FFN care. By reframing FFN care as a valuable community asset rather than as an informal fallback option, we can challenge outdated perceptions (“old stories”) and open new pathways for inclusion and policy effectiveness (“new stories”). Here are four important reframes:

Reframe 1

Child care is essential for economic mobility, community prosperity, and creating a connection between critical resources and families of every kind and circumstance. Without safe, affordable child care, parents cannot work, and employers struggle to find workers, resulting in less stability community-wide. Informed caregivers can be a vital source of information to the families they serve by sharing resources about early intervention services, food benefits, housing assistance and more. Their input can help stabilize families and ensure that their children will be well-prepared to enter school.

OLD STORY

Child care is a concern and resource relevant only to parents of young children.

NEW STORY

High-quality child care is essential for the entire community to thrive. Everyone should be invested in making it more accessible and affordable.

Reframe 2

High-quality child care exists within a safe, supportive environment that provides developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children. It is characterized by responsive caregivers, positive interactions, and a structure that fosters learning and positive development. Families value a range of options in child care settings, and systems should strive to ensure high-quality care wherever children need it. Bright Spots support this goal by offering training and mentorship in nurturing environments to help FFNs strengthen the quality of care they provide.



OLD STORY

Only licensed providers can offer safe, high-quality child care.

NEW STORY

Quality care can happen in any setting where children are nurtured by trusted adults. Licensure is not the only pathway to quality.

Reframe 3

Long-standing efforts to expand and advocate for the licensed child care workforce have, at times, unintentionally created negative perceptions around license-exempt child care providers as well as a needless sense of competition. Bright Spots push back against this scarcity mindset and recognize that FFNs are essential to the diverse range of child care options that families and communities need.

OLD STORY

The child care system should focus on licensed caregivers.

NEW STORY

The majority of young children with working parents are cared for by family, friends, and neighbors. The child care system should support both licensed and license-exempt child care providers in order to meet the needs of families and communities.

Reframe 4

Immigrants and refugees serve as FFNs at higher rates than do Coloradans in general. Efforts to address the particular challenges these FFNs face will result in system-wide improvements that benefit all FFNs and increase child care options for all families. In addition, care environments that align with family cultural and language values enhance child development and community identity.

OLD STORY

Immigrants and refugees are a burden on society.

NEW STORY

We are a nation of immigrants and refugees; our diverse cultures contribute richly to the tapestry of American life. Likewise, the leadership and participation of immigrants in shaping policy and programs continue to add strength and value for everyone.





Conclusion

Across Colorado and the nation, home-based care provided by Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers is often overlooked and largely unsupported. However, in the programs highlighted in this Bright Spots project, FFNs are seen, heard, and deeply valued.

Bright Spots organizations develop authentic, trusting relationships with providers by walking alongside them—listening, learning, and growing together—so that FFNs develop the confidence, skills and agency needed to thrive and provide high-quality care to children in their communities.

Despite the vital role FFNs play in the early childhood system—and in society in general—both public and philanthropic investment in supporting FFNs continues to fall short relative to both the community need and the significant opportunity to increase the quality and availability of child care for everyone. Bright Spots have shown extraordinary and determined leadership, weaving together programs and funding through creative local solutions, private philanthropy, and one-time public funding.

Stakeholders from across the early childhood landscape express a growing interest in learning how FFN support organizations are

approaching their work and securing funding. Institutional leaders and advocates seek to exchange strategies for improving systems and creating policy change. All could benefit from resources that present practical ways to address common needs and barriers.

The stories of these six programs stand as a testament to the resilience and dedication of those committed to transforming child care in Colorado. Their leadership is not only redefining how FFNs are supported but also is paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive early childhood system.

► **We invite you to learn more through the Bright Spots case studies.**

Our hope is that this report and its findings will ignite meaningful dialogue and inspire action. By investing time and funding into efforts to support FFNs, Colorado has the opportunity to drive transformative, lasting change—change that honors and strengthens a vital part of the child care workforce, fosters inclusive communities that help families thrive in their work, and ensures all children have access to high-quality, culturally-responsive care.



Glossary

CACFP: The Child and Adult Care Food Program, known locally as the “Colorado Food Program,” is a federal food benefit that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to enrolled care providers.

CCCAP: The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program is a subsidy program for child care funded by the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF).

CDA: The Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, issued by the Council for Professional Recognition, is a nationally recognized certification for early childhood educators demonstrating competence in caring for children from birth to age five.

CDEC: The Colorado Department of Early Childhood is a state agency working to ensure the delivery of an early childhood system that supports the care, education, and well-being of Colorado’s young children, their families, and early childhood professionals in all settings.

Early Childhood Councils: 35 local councils support Colorado’s 64 counties by serving as an early childhood hub for partners, providers, caregivers, policymakers, and business leaders to coordinate, collaborate, and align resources. The Colorado Department of Early Childhood relies on Councils to administer quality improvement and systems building efforts.

Early Childhood System: An aligned set of multi-sector services, supports, programs, and policies that, in partnership with families, focuses on improving outcomes for young children and families at the city, county, or regional level.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) provider: A broad term for home-based child care provided by adults who typically have a previous relationship with the children in their care. In Colorado, FFNs are allowed to operate legally without a formal license from the State as long as they meet the license-exempt requirements of caring for four or fewer children ages birth to 18 years old and no more than two children under the age of two.

FFN Support Organization: Organizations that implement intentional strategies to support FFNs as a valuable part of the early childhood workforce. The Bright Spots are all examples of FFN Support Organizations.

License-exempt child care (as defined by the Colorado Department of Early Childhood): A family care home where less than 24-hour care is provided for four or fewer children ages birth to 18 years old and no more than two of the children are under the age of two years old. The children are not required to be related to each other or to the caregiver. If the provider is caring for their own child(ren), their child(ren) is included in the four children limit.

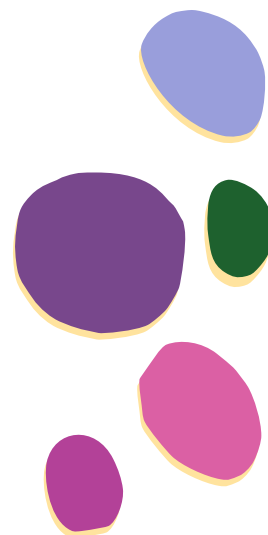
PDIS: The Professional Development Information System is Colorado’s digital platform for early care and learning professionals to access training, credentials and qualifications.

Qualified Exempt (QE) provider: A license-exempt child care provider who has completed Colorado’s process to receive CCCAP subsidy payments. This subset of license-exempt providers are currently the only ones eligible to receive benefits from the Colorado Food Program (CACFP, see above).

Key Informants

Thank you to the many voices that informed the Bright Spots project.

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Study methods and limitations

FFNs on our study team helped lead every stage of this Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project—from designing the questions asked to collecting and analyzing the data. CBPR “embodies a democratic commitment to break the monopoly on who holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken.”¹⁵ During the project planning period, August and September, 2024, our team came together virtually for 75-90 minutes every week to get to know one another, learn and shape the goals of the project, and build our skills as researchers. We covered key concepts in research ethics, such as confidentiality, as well as skills in developing open-ended questions and leading interviews and focus groups. Before data collection, we received approval for conducting multiple case studies from the Heartland Institutional Review Board.

Data collection

We asked each Bright Spot to decide which conversations and observations could best highlight their work during an on-site visit. Each site received compensation for hosting our visit. Staff and community partners completed written consent forms; verbal consent was obtained for FFNs, in recognition that some FFNs may be fearful of signing a consent form due to the absence of a valid immigration status. Consent forms were prepared in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Dari.

Because the case studies were designed to center the voices of providers, our team talked in depth about the sensitivities we would all have in our approach. We recognized that FFNs might feel vulnerable sharing their personal stories and hesitant to discuss any perceived shortcomings

of the programs. To respond to these concerns, we created safety and trust in a few ways. FFNs on our team a) designed the questions we would ask during in a way that would feel welcoming, b) led interviews and focus groups in program participants’ preferred language, and c) shared a few details of their personal lives as providers build connection and demonstrate understanding. All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, giving FFNs on our team a chance to respond authentically, with non-scripted follow-up questions. These interviews and focus groups were “a conversation between equals rather than a distinctly hierarchical, question-and-answer exchange.”¹⁶

In October and November, we visited each Bright Spot in small teams, each with a research lead and two or three FFNs. To respect the time of the FFNs on our team and the Bright Spots in the field, our time in data collection was limited, totaling 6-10 hours at each site. Across the six sites, we conducted interviews with 23 directors, staff and community members; observed 13 hours of trainings and graduation ceremonies; and conducted photovoice or focus groups with 42 FFNs. Photovoice is a research method that invites participants to document their experiences with photographs and share meaning through group discussion.¹⁷ In our observations, we focused on a) the welcoming nature of the classroom environment, assessing how inviting and inclusive the space was for participants and b) engagement, observing attentiveness and involvement in discussions. Interviews, focus groups, and photovoice were 60-120 minutes in length, audio-recorded and transcribed, and available to our team for analysis in English and Spanish.

Analyses

Between November and January, our data analysis process was deeply collaborative. For every interview, focus group, and photovoice project, we simultaneously listened to responses and reviewed transcripts as a team. We were guided by central questions such as: What evidence do we see of a welcoming environment? How did FFNs engage with their facilitators? We followed Jackson's five-step framework for analysis by: (1) organizing the data, (2) reviewing and familiarizing ourselves with the information, (3) classifying data into themes, (4) interpreting findings and identifying patterns, and (5) representing information through case study narratives.¹⁸ FFNs rarely missed a meeting over the eight-month project, even as they were running their own home child care businesses and taking care of their own families. This consistency helped us keep our momentum during analysis. We shared findings and initial drafts with each Bright Spot to ensure their case studies reflected the story they wanted to tell.

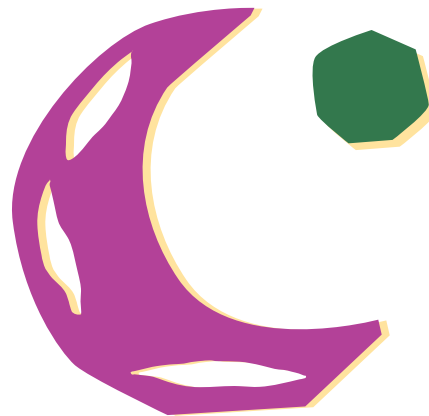
Limitations

This study has several limitations common in case study research. One limitation is the point-in-time nature of data collection. While case studies are intended to provide a deep understanding of a particular context, our observations were conducted during a brief window of time (one to two days), which limits our ability to understand the nuances of the sites over time or under different conditions.¹⁹ Further, our findings are descriptive and exploratory in nature. While we can identify patterns, relationships, and insights from our on-site visits, we cannot draw causal conclusions from the data. We cannot say the program is responsible for the observed change we see.

Further, several members of our team are current or former participants of the Bright Spots programs studied. While this could introduce potential bias in our observations and analysis, we also believe it provides valuable context. Our team's firsthand experiences give us an insider's understanding of the programs, which can deepen our analysis.²⁰ However, this insider perspective may unintentionally influence our interpretations, and we acknowledge this potential bias as a limitation in the research.²¹



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- A photograph of a woman with brown hair tied back, wearing glasses and a bright blue zip-up hoodie. She is sitting and holding a young child in her arms. The child is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. The woman is looking down at the child with a gentle expression. In the background, there is a white wall with several colorful, vertical, crayon-shaped decorations hanging on it. To the right, a portion of a colorful educational poster is visible. The setting appears to be a classroom or a play area.

