

## BRIGHT SPOT: Empowering Communities Globally

Supporting refugee women as community leaders in quality child care

Serving FFNs since: **2019**

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

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ECG leadership and staff: **Dr. Deborah Young and Irina Karic**



### Origin story

Empowering Communities Globally (ECG) has supported families internationally for 41 years. They established programming for Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers in Colorado in 2019. The organization is led by Dr. Deborah Young, a single mother of five, professor, global Fulbright Scholar, and lifelong crusader for the rights of children in conflict zones. She is also a current FFN provider. In the 1980s, she worked in refugee camps and natural disaster sites, witnessing firsthand how “little ones are really not attended to during conflict.” Upon returning to the U.S., she also found that “quality child care is not typically situated in the middle of where we put refugees and immigrant families.”

She became curious to find out whether refugee women from the countries she had worked in—such as Jordan and Palestine—could access support to become early childhood care providers

after resettling in the U.S. She discovered that while Colorado offers training and credentialing, anyone whose native language is neither English nor Spanish face significant obstacles. To bridge this gap, ECG launched the *Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN): For the Care of Children Program*, initially supporting Arabic- and Dari-speaking women (Dari, the primary language

“Quality child care is not typically situated in the middle of where we put refugees and immigrant families [in the U.S.]”

– **Dr. Deborah Young**  
ECG Founder

spoken in Afghanistan). Its mission became clear: to support informal caregivers, particularly refugees and immigrants, by strengthening their caregiving skills, enhancing their knowledge of child development, and improving outcomes for themselves and their families.

With initial funding from The Colorado Health Foundation, ECG gained the resources to design innovative, culturally-responsive learning and training supports to address the needs of immigrants and refugees. Deborah recruited two women to join the staff, both of whom were immigrants themselves who understand firsthand what it feels like to be alone in a new country. In 2023, one became the FFN Program Coordinator. Before joining ECG, she had earned her Ph.D. in bilingual education and had worked for three years in a local preschool setting. The second, Irina Karic, now the Program Quality and Development Manager, is a current Ph.D. student in the Critical Studies: Education and Human Development program at the University of Colorado Denver. A refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Irina spent nearly a decade as a humanitarian aid worker in Palestine and Jordan. With a strong staff in place, ECG began recruiting women from the community to become FFN providers through its paid training program.

## Empowering immigrant women through early childhood leadership and economic mobility

### Recruitment

Early on, ECG staff learned that immigrant women caring for their families' or neighbors' children often do not see themselves as formal providers working in the field of early childhood education. To help them recognize their professional potential, ECG invests time in building relationships with



women and their families, creating space for deeper conversations. ECG casts a wide net, recruiting participants through word-of-mouth as well as online social groups through apps like WhatsApp and Viber within the Arabic- and Dari-speaking communities.

ECG's partnership with Lutheran Family Services (LFS), the largest refugee resettlement agency in Colorado, has been instrumental in expanding outreach. Together, the organizations co-designed Pamoja, a continuing education program now offered at the Community College of Denver (CCD) to support refugee and immigrant women in earning Early Childhood Education credentials. Many women learn about the FFN program through these classes.

One of ECG's most successful recruitment strategies is its home visiting program. When families, many from the Middle East and Afghanistan, first arrive in Denver, ECG welcomes them into their own homes, offering information in 10 different languages about pathways to early childhood education degrees and certifications towards economic advancement. In recognition of societal norms and cultural dynamics in many Arabic- and Dari-speaking families, ECG respects the important role that men often take in their families as primary decision-makers, protectors, and providers. ECG involves husbands and other family members in the orientation process, fostering a supportive and inclusive network around women's engagement in the program. In cases where transportation is a barrier, ECG provides Uber rides to ensure accessibility to training sessions.

### FFN training

The FFN program operates out of the Eloise May Library, situated on the border between Denver and Aurora, home to Colorado's most diverse immigrant and refugee community. Each year, a new cohort of caregivers enters the program. In this first cohort, the 12 women in training—ranging in age from 25 to 45, many wearing hijabs—have navigated difficult journeys from their native countries of Libya, Iraq, Morocco, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Algeria, and Syria. ECG now serves its second cohort of 30 FFNs, 22 of whom are new participants. ECG helps participants form strong bonds between and among them over the 12-month program. Creating a deep sense of belonging is vital.

**“We’re not going to be serving refugees and immigrants unless we’re attending to a sense of belonging.”**

–Dr. Deborah Young, Founder

For many refugees and immigrants, displacement brings a profound sense of loss—a loss of home, community, language, and identity. Restoring these foundations is essential for their well-being and long-term success. Many of the individuals ECG serves also face discrimination and marginalization. Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab or visibly express their faith, have long experienced discrimination rooted in cultural, religious and gender biases. When immigrants and refugees feel welcomed and connected, they are more likely to engage in social and economic life and develop a stronger sense of personal agency.

### Early childhood system navigation

While all women in the FFN training program have legal authorization to work in the U.S., they still face the challenges and stresses of building a new life in a new country. Many remain deeply concerned about the impacts of conflicts on loved ones still in their home countries. Understanding a new culture—not to mention the legal and governmental systems—of a new country takes time. As a result, many women express uncertainty around regulations and legalities for home-based child providers.

Sometimes, ECG's home visitors can address such concerns early. Deborah explains, “Through home visits, we’re getting to know communities, we build safety. We’re now finding people who are watching children. Because they’re really afraid to tell anybody, ‘What if they take my children away because I’m watching other children, and isn’t it illegal to do this?’” She can quickly calm their fears and explain that the exact opposite is true. “No, my dear, it is absolutely essential that you do this. In fact, you not only contribute to your own family, that family [that you are caring for], but to the state. The state needs you because parents can’t go to work.”



Step by step, ECG staff guide women through the rules and regulations for home child care in Colorado, delivering information at a manageable pace. This gradual approach builds trust and a sense of security in the ECG community. Women learn that completing ECG's 12-month FFN training will earn them a state-recognized certificate, an important milestone toward their vocational goals.

### A cultural and linguistic bridge

Even for women joining the program who were well-educated professionals in their home countries, the language barrier can make FFN training seem daunting. Many fear that it will prevent them from building their own successful child care business. While ECG encourages women to take English classes, Deborah reassures them that translation and interpretation support is integral to the program: "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." ECG views multilingualism as a strength—a "superpower"—rather than a barrier.

**"What motivates me is the support to the women because I know if we don't provide them the support that they need, they will not find it somewhere else. We take care of the language... we understand this, and we try to communicate with them in a way that helps them go forward."**

– FFN Program Coordinator

Bi-weekly, program participants meet one-on-one with staff for 30 minutes to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound (SMART) goals. These meetings also address technical learning including digital literacy, PDIS, and access to training, in addition to the foundation of building trust and a sense of belonging. Irina describes the importance of these one-on-one conversations as transformative: "These women do not know what they could imagine [...] they put such tight and narrow parameters around their own vision, which is entangled with their own [limited] sense of agency."



Once a woman articulates her initial goal, ECG honors her vision and supports her progress in every way. R.R., an FFN from Afghanistan lovingly known to children as “khala” (“auntie” in Arabic), echoes this sentiment: “FFNs of our country really need support and help to improve their skills, knowledge, such as material, training [...] and also for opening their own child care.” ECG visits FFN’s in their homes to continue to support them toward their individual goals. Staff use observational tools to support learning about child care in the United States.

Since Colorado’s early childhood Professional Development Information System (PDIS) is not yet accessible in all languages, ECG serves as a bridge facilitating cross-cultural and multilingual understanding. ECG helps aspiring FFNs master the web-based PDIS platform where they can document their progress and move up through the state’s rating system levels. While completing these courses in English with language interpretation can take twice as long, ECG is committed to ensuring that all participants, including Dari and Arabic speakers, have access to the resources they need to succeed.

In addition to navigating systems, the FFN training also educates women on the many cultural differences in child-rearing that exist between the U.S. and their home countries. For instance, Deborah notes how the concept of “showing up” for children differs between Palestine and the U.S. Understanding differences in expectations around child development is part of the process of integrating in a new society. One participant, M.K. from Afghanistan, described the contrasting expectations for language acquisition between the U.S. and her home country. She explained that in Afghanistan, children under the age of two are well-loved and cared for, but many families—including her own—do not place an emphasis on talking with young children to spur language development, a practice that is more common here in the U.S. After applying

the practice with her daughter, M.K. described how proud she was of her daughter’s growing language acquisition, attributing it to what she had learned through ECG.

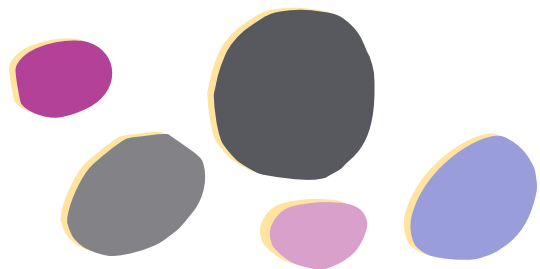
**“Yesterday, I was talking with my mother-in-law, she told me I was spending too much time with my daughter: ‘You are talking with her, but she doesn’t understand what you are telling her, you’re wasting your time.’ But I saw the difference. My daughter talked earlier than the other people in our environment.”**

–M.K., FFN from Afghanistan

Through the program, women learn ways to support children’s brain development by reading to them and making up stories together to foster language development and avoid speech delays. FFNs also discover how to pass on their sense of cultural pride, as well as their home language, to the children in their care.

**“[ECG] encourages us to focus on home language. For example, the kids whom I’m watching, I speak to them in my home language (Arabic); that’s letting the child speak and communicate in two languages that creates connection in the child’s brain.”**

–Karima, FFN from Algeria



# What makes the Empowering Communities Globally a **BRIGHT SPOT?**

ECG challenges the narrative that immigrants are taking away from their U.S. communities, and instead offers a counterstatement that celebrates their contributions. ECG creates a safe space in which women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds are heard, seen, supported, and valued. As Deborah explains, “What I’m hoping is they see themselves as a contributor to their family, to the families they serve, and to their community or state. Right? That they recognize who they are and what they contribute.” This perspective aligns with the state’s growing recognition of the need for a more diverse early childhood workforce, as articulated in the Colorado Early Childhood Framework, so that all children can have quality care settings in their own communities.

ECG’s decision to train FFNs as a cohort is intentional. By learning together, FFNs not only build skills to grow their individual businesses but also to connect to the larger community, underscoring their critical role. At trainings, Deborah encourages participants to share their new knowledge with neighbors, friends, and family members from their home countries in order to expand ECG’s impact organically.

## Language justice

ECG attributes much of their success to their strong support of cultural and linguistic diversity. Without access to the same education and training resources that English speakers have, women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds



**“In my country, Family, Friend, and Neighbor providers do not exist, which leaves many families without reliable child care options. If Afghan women had access to training and resources, they could improve their skills and knowledge to start their own businesses, such as offering child care services. By empowering Afghan women to become FFN providers, we could create more opportunities for both economic independence and better childcare solutions in our communities.”**

**Rahela**  
FFN from Afghanistan



lack pathways for personal and professional development. Language justice is critical to overcoming these barriers, enabling community members to build meaningful and independent lives for themselves and their families.

ECG hires trusted community members who are professionally trained bilingual and bicultural interpreters to be part of the FFN group. These interpreters understand the content of training and create lasting connections. The same cadre of Arabic- and Dari-speaking interpreters remain with the cohort for the duration of the 12-month FFN training, establishing trust and building friendships as their groups progress.

### Emerging from isolation toward growth and leadership

Many of the women ECG serves experience significant social isolation, often compounded by a lack of access to essential resources such as healthcare, legal support, and safe housing.

This lack of critical resources also impacts education and employment opportunities, with limited language services and unrecognized credentials making it difficult to secure dignified employment opportunities. ECG staff members work alongside FFNs to tackle these barriers, starting by first asking women to develop their own goals. By fostering a sense of agency, ECG encourages women to see themselves as leaders in their own lives and communities, capable of overcoming obstacles and advocating for themselves and each other.

**“[ECG] aligns with my mission to create nurturing environments where every child, family, and community can flourish. It’s about making knowledge and resources accessible, sharing strategies across cultures, and supporting diverse voices to ensure no one is left behind.”**

–Karima, FFN from Afghanistan



After completing the FFN training, women gain access to near-endless opportunities for continued professional development through ECG's network of programs and connected organizations. S.H., an FFN from Afghanistan who children lovingly call "amma," shares how ECG helped to open a new window to lives they did not know were possible: "Empowering Communities Globally, they just create the furnace [spark], allowing us to have equal opportunities. This means they just always encourage us to not just sit at home and raise our children; between that we can work. We can learn many skills so we can watch our children and friends' children, our neighbors' children, so this is really helping." Rather than hiring externally, ECG hires from within, building community capacity and leadership.

### **Making systems work better for all**

ECG is supporting FFNs in transforming themselves from within while also pushing systems to change for those who speak languages other than English or Spanish.

Because the state lacks qualified observers in all the languages spoken by in-home providers seeking advancement, ECG is committed to hiring and training women who can rise into these roles. Deborah describes the catch: "If I speak Arabic or Dari or Karen or Chin, who is

going to come watch me? We're filling another gap by getting people certified in different languages to observe."

ECG also encourages Dari- and Arabic-speaking FFNs to increase their visibility to policy makers and participate in local and state-level advocacy. This might include showing up for public meetings of the state's Early Childhood FFN Advisory Group or attending the fundraising gala for the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition. It can also involve meetings with state legislators or joining in advocacy work led by other organizations. FFNs learn that if they attend public meetings, interpretation in their languages will be more likely to be offered. Deborah explains how a small group of immigrant women can transform the system. "The more you show up, the more we will be in state decision-making. [We] have to keep showing up, and they'll invest." Such advocacy has paid off. ECG has been working with stakeholders to expand access to the PDIS in more languages, with progress already made in adding Arabic translation.

Empowering Communities Globally is a relationship-based powerhouse organization preparing immigrants and refugees to help address the crisis-level shortage of high-quality child care in the Denver/Aurora area. For the women in the program, ECG is like encountering an entire galaxy of supportive new friends and opportunities to learn and earn a living.