

BRIGHT SPOT: United Way of Weld County

Building toward an equitable support system for quality child care in agricultural communities

Serving FFNs since: **2009**
Area served: **Weld County**

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Origin story

United Way of Weld County (UWWC) serves as a hub for early childhood systems-building and service delivery. It is home to Weld County's Early Childhood Council, "a local vision and voice" for young children, which works to build a coordinated system to support families with young children. Additionally, UWWC hosts training and resource programs for child care providers, and navigation services to help caregivers reach their professional goals and find greater financial stability.

Starting in 2009, UWWC adapted the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition's Providers Advancing Student Outcomes (PASO) program to start offering it to Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers in their area. This widely respected training program prepares FFNs for professional roles in early childhood. It was a lifeline for women seeking to build business skills in community

PASO program highlights:

- ▶ 15 weekly full-day sessions
- ▶ 120 hours total
- ▶ Offered exclusively in Spanish
- ▶ Onsite childcare available during training
- ▶ Includes mentoring and home visits
- ▶ CPR, First Aid, Medication Administration training
- ▶ Cooking Matters for Childcare Certificate
- ▶ 1:1 support for Child Development Associate certification and renewal

with other caregivers. Since its inception, the program has been held almost exclusively in Spanish, embracing the many Latina women in Weld caring for young children. In its early years, the program's limited funding meant it could serve only a small percentage of the community.

In 2016, this all changed. UWWC partnered with the Weld County Department of Human Services (WCDHS) to produce a study that revealed that more than two-thirds of children in the county were being cared for in informal home settings. In response, WCDHS provided funding for UWWC to expand its PASO enrollment and offer other support to FFNs in order to increase the quality and quantity of child care for young children in the area. Since then, UWWC has built a strong internal team consisting mostly of native Weld residents with deep ties to the community. The team has held firm in their belief that quality care exists in all settings (licensed or license-exempt) and families deserve a choice in care for their children.

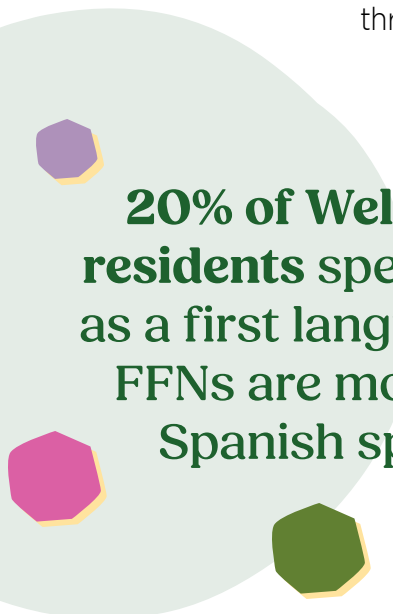
Expanding this vision for what high quality care might look like wasn't easy. It happened through years of conversation with partners and child care providers via Weld County's Early Childhood Council. The council had been supporting FFNs through PASO, but its reach beyond the training was limited. Furthermore,

some original council members were not inclined to support FFNs in general, and many licensed providers feared losing their business to license-exempt providers. UWWC worked hard to manage these different perspectives and allay tensions within the council.

“We strongly support family choice as far as who’s taking care of children, and with that, we will never favor licensed care over FFN care...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.”

–Adriana Carrillo, Assistant Director of Early Childhood Initiatives and facilitator of Weld County’s Early Childhood Council

While funding for FFN programming remains year-to-year, Weld continues to prioritize PASO Institute and its rich network of resources. When outside grant funding wanes, UWWC protects its investment in FFN programming through outside donations. The Colorado Child Care Contribution Tax Credit, a 50% tax credit directed to early education in Weld County, also provides a portion of the funds needed. The tax credit incentivizes individuals and businesses to donate to early childhood causes, which bolsters UWWC’s work. Other critical dollars come from private foundations that invest in the health and well-being of Colorado children and families. Over the years, funding for PASO Institute has been provided by Buell Foundation, The Colorado Health Foundation, Daniels Fund, The Weld Trust, Tony Grampsas Youth Services Program, and Weld County Department of Human Services. A new grant award from the Colorado Department of Early Childhood through Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) for quality improvement will allow UWWC to further increase the number of trained FFN providers in Weld County.



20% of Weld County residents speak Spanish as a first language. Many FFNs are monolingual Spanish speakers.

Currently, UWWC develops connections and trusted relationships with more than 200 FFNs each year. When an FFN reaches out, countless opportunities become available—for training, resources, and mentoring tailored to the FFN's personal goals. Some receive support to create a thriving home child care business; others hope to find work at child care centers or preschools.

Personal and professional transformational through PASO

Lorena Ruiz leads the PASO Institute with passion and purpose, organizing and advocating for FFNs in and out of the classroom. Two graduates-turned-trainers, Saray Muñoz and Gabriela “Gaby” Montes-Duran, are now lead instructors. They now run two cohorts a year, with 20 women graduating from each—though this will soon expand to 30. The program requires 120 hours of training delivered across 15 8-hour Saturday sessions.

Participants emerge from PASO training knowing that caring for children is a true profession. Jazmin shared that as a young girl she dreamed of being a kindergarten teacher, only to be told by her mother that working with young children isn't a profession. Through PASO, she reclaimed her dream: “Now that I've been able to be in these classes, and now that I work with children, now I know the importance of taking care of them. And so that dream was taken away from me a long time ago, and now I can say, now I truly am a

provider, and now I can educate the children that are under my care and learn from them.”

“I’m a completely different person. [It was] the most important decision that I have made in my life.”

–PASO graduate

FFNs speak of the training as transformational, both personally and professionally. Core to the training are opportunities for self-reflection. Participants examine their own upbringing, gaining insight into their own parenting styles and—by learning more about child development—actively choosing how they want to raise their own children and those in their care. The current cohort are all Latina, and they easily relate to one another's early experiences of care and discipline.

With a crack in her voice, Edith shared how the PASO experience helped her begin to forgive herself and forge a new pattern for child rearing: “I am a mom of three daughters and I have felt bad because of the way that I raised them, because I didn't have knowledge, and I tell them, I ask for forgiveness. [...] I tell my daughters that if there is another life I want them to choose me as their mom again, because I'm going to do my best. And I'm sorry I'm a little emotional. Because these classes have really marked me. I went through a very difficult childhood, and I was repeating those patterns.” FFNs relay that through the training, they learn to treat children with respect, kindness, understanding, and love.



PASO also includes one-on-one mentoring. Trainers visit FFN homes, deepening trusted relationships. Regardless of a participant's education or past experience, staff assure them that they will support them with *acompañamiento*—the practice rooted in Latino culture of walking alongside someone, symbolically taking their hand to help them reach their goal. UWWC is proud to report that 95% of PASO graduates continue working in early childhood.

Recruitment challenges

While all staff are Latina, fluent in Spanish, and respected in the community, recruiting FFNs to commit to PASO training still demands persistence. Staff rely on community connections—at resource fairs, events, local businesses, and via word-of-mouth—to find people who could benefit from the program. One FFN recalled how Gaby approached her while shopping with her children, just weeks after she had immigrated from Mexico. Gaby was impressed with how the woman interacted with her children, offering them comfort in a new and foreign place. When Gaby approached her, she was not yet ready to commit to PASO; however, she kept Gaby's card, and two years later, she enrolled.

Through personal conversations, staff create a sense of safety and relieve FFNs' various anxieties about enrollment. They assure them they will not collect or report personal information. While grant funds largely cover the cost of training, scholarships are available if the \$50 registration poses a barrier.

“The barrier is the fear. ‘What are they going to ask?’ ‘Are they going to be checking on me?’ ‘Are they going to report me to the state if I'm not doing something right?’”

–PASO trainer

Licensure navigation

While licensure isn't the goal, some FFNs do become licensed providers after graduating from PASO; others pursue licensure after encountering a social media post or a flyer in the community. In 2024 alone, hundreds of FFNs expressed interest, and 28 followed through on the long and complicated process of getting licensed. Weld County continues to see licensure growth each year, now with the second highest rate in the state. Still, few Spanish-speaking FFNs pursue licensure—a pattern Weld is working to change.



Lisa Sadar, Assistant Director of Early Care and Education, points to system-level changes that have helped more FFNs become licensed. First, the increased investment from WCDHS beginning in 2016 expanded the PASO program, and also increased efforts to support FFNs towards licensure. This, coupled with changes in state policy allowing FFNs to become licensed using an ITIN number instead of a Social Security number, has opened doors for FFNs to provide care to more children than is allowed under license-exempt status.

Second, UWWC hired and trained navigators who understand and can explain complicated child care regulations to FFNs. These navigators quickly learned that many Spanish-speaking FFNs held misconceptions about legal requirements around FFN care. In response, UWWC hired a bilingual navigator, ensuring that women could be guided through the process in the language of their heart.

“We answer all their questions [...] and try to mitigate any fears or concerns that they have or doubts in themselves.”

–Jane Martin, Lead Childcare Coordinator

Jane Martin patiently oversees the licensing recruitment process, working alongside the two navigators to provide monthly orientations and one-on-one mentoring both in person and online. The process of becoming licensed requires a significant investment of time and money, taking anywhere from three months to several years. Even with UWWC’s financial support for application fees and required materials (such as toys, learning supplies, and home safety equipment), the out-of-pocket expenses for licensure can total up to \$3,000. Once providers are licensed, UWWC continues support for providers by promoting their businesses and connecting them to resources.

Additional resources, referrals and ongoing support

Because FFNs are often not aware of systems available to them to enhance their professional skills and financial well-being, United Way of Weld County has developed an interconnected web of resources and training. Beyond PASO, UWWC offers additional free FFN training on topics such as emergency preparedness, medicine administration, legal issues, early literacy, and nutrition—which is taught in-house through their partnership with the Weld County Department of Public Health and Environment and partners. Whenever possible, trainings are offered in women’s home language rather than with interpretation, fostering better comprehension and richer discussion.

FFNs also benefit from the material goods UWWC provides at no cost. These include children’s tables and chairs, age-appropriate books, fire extinguishers and smoke alarms, car seats, baby gates, and diapers—all essential for creating safe, nurturing environments for their childcare businesses.

“My home has had a very radical change. I was a bit strict. I didn't want toys anywhere. [...] So for me [now] to have an adequate area for them to have everything that they can reach. For them to be able to say, this is my area. This is my space. I can play here. I can learn here. I can be me.”

–Iramey, PASO graduate

UWWC also refers FFNs to the Weld County Department of Human Services if they care for a child eligible for financial support through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP). Anna Korthuis, the Department of Human Services CCCAP Manager, oversees the Qualified Exempt (QE) process at WCDHS,

which makes FFNs eligible to receive both CCCAP subsidies and reimbursements for healthy meals through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP, or known locally simply as the Colorado Food Program). She finds that most families are entirely unaware of these opportunities. Recruitment occurs in part through UWWC referrals, as well as through Anna's outreach during community events. Now, more FFNs are Qualified Exempt in Weld County than in any other county in Colorado.

Although it is no longer her explicit role, Anna continues to enroll families: "It's not in my job description anymore, but this is my goal personally, because I know out there in the community, if [families] knew about this, we'd have more quality care for kids, that parents don't necessarily want to put them in an institutional-type licensed provider."

**Of the 100
Qualified Exempt
providers in the
state in 2024,
44 were based in
Weld County.**



What makes United Way of Weld County a **BRIGHT SPOT?**

Quality care in all settings

UWWC has never wavered in its belief that all types of care have value and that parental choice is paramount. This appreciation for FFNs aligns with the state's evolving recognition of FFNs as a valued part of the early childhood care landscape, as reflected in updates to the Colorado Early Childhood Framework.

"Because we do want the best for all children, and we want to meet people where they're at. We want quality spaces, no matter what kind of spaces they are. And we just know that our community needs this, and we are very, very firm in the belief that if our community needs something we're going to support that." –Adriana Carrillo, Assistant Director of Early Childhood Initiatives and facilitator of Weld County's Early Childhood Council

UWWC shows how they value FFN care in myriad ways. Relationships built with each provider are aimed at supporting each person's dreams and growth, regardless of their licensure status. Lorena Ruiz, leader of the PASO institute, affirms the dignity of all providers: "We're opening opportunities so FFNs feel the same value as the ones that are licensed."

A community of care providers

UWWC understands that positive relationships and belonging in the community sustain FFNs in their lives and work. Their programs intentionally cultivate that sense of community, particularly within the PASO program. Gaby shares: "More than giving the class or the

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Adriana Carrillo

Assistant Director of Early Childhood Initiatives and facilitator of Weld County's Early Childhood Council

training, we build relationships. We want to build trust, a close relationship with them. We want for them to be open." Staff embrace the philosophy of *acompañamiento*—a culturally-rooted practice in Latino communities that refers to the act of holding someone's hand along their journey.

“PASO has given me colleagues. It has given me joy to have these colleagues. They are happy, dedicated, patient, and interested in giving love and education to the children.”

–PASO graduate

FFNs feel a sense of camaraderie in PASO and value the relationships they form with one another. FFNs feel strongly that their bond

with the trainers and each other will last after graduation. As one FFN shares: “I think that PASO allows you to not feel so alone in the journey of being providers, that we have support, that although this class is going to be over, we’re going to have that connection, we’re going to have a network of support. We’re going to continue sharing ideas.” Alumnae also talk about how the trainers continue to reach out to share opportunities and resources after graduating, with one musing, “I like that they don’t forget us.”

A strong fabric of partnerships

Partnerships are integral to UWWC’s mission that states: “United Way of Weld County builds powerful partnerships to bring about lasting community-wide change.” They rely on interdepartmental collaboration and over 45 external partnerships with nonprofits and government agencies to advance their vision of elevating FFNs as an essential part of the early childhood workforce.

From its home at UWWC, Weld County’s Early Childhood Council’s ability to evolve is instructive for other councils looking to support FFN care. By investing time in collaborative solutions to strengthen and grow the early childhood system, Weld County’s Early Childhood Council helped increase community-wide support for home-based child care. This shift followed years of conversations, negotiations through differences, and trust-building. As one of the UWWC’s longest-standing and most valued partners on Weld County’s Early Childhood Council, WCDHS has played a key role in elevating the role of FFNs by investing in PASO expansion and supporting the Qualified Exempt enrollment process to help families access CCCAP and CACFP benefits.



United Way of Weld County has developed its FFN programming through strong leadership, a steadfast commitment to the dreams and needs of FFNs, and a deep belief in the importance of supporting a parent’s choice in determining the best care setting for their child(ren). What sets UWWC apart is that despite its large scale, it remains committed to uplifting each FFN with dignity and an assurance of her value and importance to the children and families in the community. As an expression of that commitment, UWWC staff prioritize lasting relationships with each FFN caregiver and foster relationships among FFNs. They “walk the talk” in making sure FFNs have a voice in community planning and in the priorities of agency partnerships. They strive to ensure that no one is left behind, walking alongside each caregiver as they progress on their own professional journey.