



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 for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties
- 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.

