



## BRIGHT SPOT:

# Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington, and Kit Carson Counties (ECCYWK)

Elevating the role of FFN care in rural Colorado through a tapestry of programs and partnerships

Serving FFNs since: **2020**

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

Case study authors: **Almita Enríquez, Christy Weber, Erika Moldow, Ph.D.**

ECCYWK leadership and staff: **Claudia Strait, Karina Valenzuela, Pam Kage, Maribel Vazquez, Sheila Anzlovar**



## Origin story

The mission of the Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington, and Kit Carson Counties (ECCYWK) is “to be a comprehensive, high-quality, innovative, diverse, and adaptable system of early childhood support in our rural communities.” Historically, their activities and funding were limited to supporting licensed child care providers and facilitating paths to licensure. However, after the 2017 passage of a statewide rule that allowed providers meeting certain guidelines to care for young children without undergoing the time intensive and costly licensure process, longtime ECCYWK leader Claudia Strait noticed a dramatic drop in licensed care providers in the region. At that time, there were only 43 licensed providers in centers, preschools, or family child care homes across this enormous rural frontier region of Northeast Colorado.

ECCYWK operates in a politically conservative agricultural area where the **poverty rate for children under 18 is 17%**—well above the state average of 11%.

While the number of licensed caregivers was declining, the demand for child care remained constant. Families found infant care nearly impossible to access. One parent, unable to return to work without care, recalled: “I signed my baby up to be taken care of after she was born so I could go back to work, and [the daycare] told me that my daughter wouldn’t have a place until she’s almost three years old.”

The ECCYWK faced a profound challenge: how could they effectively support children and families by only focusing on licensed child care providers in a region where 80% of the care was provided by family members and friends? They recognized that expecting most grandparents, tías, and neighbors (many of whom cared for just a few children) to become licensed was unrealistic. But they had never supported license-exempt Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care before.

In early 2020, a strategic partnership with The Colorado Health Foundation enabled the ECCYWK to pivot to better meet the region’s care needs. They were awarded a flexible, two-year grant to support skill-building, mental

health, and social connections for FFNs. Given the region’s significant Spanish-speaking Latino population—comprising half the residents in the town of Yuma—hiring a bilingual/bicultural coordinator with deep community ties was essential. In 2020, they hired their first FFN Coordinator, and in 2022 the position was filled by Karina Valenzuela, a warm, engaging former preschool teacher who grew up in Yuma and is fluent in Spanish. Other key staff supporting the FFN program include Quality Improvement Specialist/Credentialed Coach Pam Kage, Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Sheila Anzlovar, and Office Coordinator and trained interpreter Maribel Vazquez.

After the grant ended, the ECCYWK remained committed to maintaining the momentum of their emerging FFN program. The Caring for Colorado Foundation stepped in to extend programming through another two-year grant. A new quality improvement grant awarded by the Department of Early Childhood through Colorado State Parent Coalition (CSPC) in 2025 will allow the ECCYWK to offer incentives to 30 FFNs.



## Programs

The ECCYWK listens closely to what FFNs need and designs opportunities accordingly. Many FFNs in the region experience social isolation, so the new FFN program offers in-person connections through playgroups and home visits, along with opportunities for online learning. Activities are offered at no cost and in Spanish or with interpretation. The program also includes distribution of books and coordination of the annual Early Childhood Wellness Fair, which provides various health screenings for young children.

### Play groups and home visits

The ECCYWK's first FFN support effort was to create a play group where Spanish-speaking FFNs could come together to build community as well as their understanding of early childhood development. A group of 11 FFNs has been meeting for four years, with many of the same providers still attending. The continuity shows the power of connection. Each FFN may bring up to four children ranging in age from newborn to 13.

**“I want to help the people that I feel that don’t have all of the support, which are the ones that are in this program, because many of them only speak Spanish. [...] Everything they receive is in Spanish.”**

–Karina Valenzuela, FFN Coordinator

Many women attending the quarterly play group have immigrated from Mexico, often soon after their husbands arrived to work in agriculture. Some are interested in becoming licensed, but their immigrant visas prohibit licensure. One FFN explained: “Karina told me about the license. I think that we will all like to have one [...] I think that having a license gives



parents the security that they’re leaving their children with someone, first, prepared and responsible, who is in a house that has already been checked [for security measures]. [...] I don’t know if I can because of the type of visa that I have.” Still, FFNs know they are welcome to join all ECCYWK programming, regardless of their immigration or licensure status.

Karina also builds trusted personal relationships with providers through individual monthly visits. During this time, either in the provider’s home or at a local park or library, Karina shares developmentally appropriate materials and offers advice aligned with Colorado’s Early Learning Development Guidelines. During the first visit, new FFNs sign a program agreement: a social contract connecting them to a wider network of providers. On the second visit, Karina brings a Welcome Wagon (a literal wagon that can carry two children) filled with essential safety materials. From there, Karina

can provide many types of support, including troubleshooting computer issues for FFNs who need tech help. Barbara, an ECCYWK board member caring for her grandchildren on their farm, shared her excitement for Karina's visit: "We can talk just about anything, because she always asks if there's anything I need, and then there hasn't been anything I haven't enjoyed."

### Training and resources

Most training is offered online, bringing licensed and license-exempt providers together in monthly "Huddles." Topics may address ADHD, literacy development, or guidance in accessing certifications within the state's online Professional Development Information System (PDIS) portal for early childhood professionals.

**"I just think it's nice that we have a group, it's great that we have the Huddle meetings, and they provide ongoing education for everybody that's an FFN."**

—Annette, FFN

To support participation, the ECCYWK offers resources such as educational toys (manipulatives, easels, sand and water tables), furniture (child tables and chairs, cubbies, book displays), and safety equipment (fire extinguishers and other safety items). During home visits, Karina demonstrates how FFNs can use such materials to help children meet developmental milestones. Annette describes the benefit: "I think early childhood is about learning through play, and that's the most important thing they can do. So with the FFN providers having an opportunity to get all these items and Karina bringing the ideas to them, the children just benefit tremendously."

### Program challenges

Because adults caring for families' or neighbors' children often do not see themselves as formal child care providers, recruitment has been a challenge. The ECCYWK attends community events, conducts personal outreach in public places like the post office and grocery stores, and posts in newsletters and on social media. All outreach is bilingual in English and Spanish. Because one-on-one conversations are their most powerful outreach tool, the ECCYWK offers a \$25 gift card to anyone who refers an FFN. Thanks to strong relationships between ECCYWK and its partners—especially family resource centers and public libraries—trusted referrals are often made by those who know both the people and programming well.

**"Sometimes we have to tell them they are an FFN."**

—Director Claudia Strait

Arranging in-person training in Spanish, particularly on emergency preparedness, remains a challenge due to travel distances for presenters and participants. Courses must be offered in Spanish to ensure comprehension and retention; however, even when language barriers are removed, the travel barriers remain. As Karina explained: "They are very isolated from society, so isolated that they haven't received a first aid class in Spanish. [...] So it's isolated for two reasons, right? Isolated because they're working in their own homes and not having contact with other adults, and then isolated because they're in Yuma, which is so far from other areas."



## Expanding impact through partnerships

In rural and frontier regions, few paid staff are available to support non-profit work of any kind, and budgets are lean. At the same time, most community meetings are attended by the same individuals who come to know each other's lives and challenges well.

This makes building partnerships both easy and mutually beneficial. For example, the ECCYWK funds and coordinates Early Childhood Wellness Fairs where partners like Rural Communities Resource Center serving

Yuma and Washington Counties and Prairie Family Center serving Kit Carson County offer dental screenings. In addition, Eastern Colorado Services for the Developmentally Disabled (early intervention) and Baby Bear Hugs provide developmental screenings.

The ECCYWK has long-term, trusted relationships with anyone who has a resource valued by families and children. For example, the area's family resource centers—Rural Communities Resource Center and Prairie Family Center—are part of the region's network of support given their focus on the entire community.





## Rural Communities Resource Center (RCRC)

Since 1984, the Rural Communities Resource Center has been committed to breaking patterns of isolation for families in Northeast Colorado. It provides individual counseling, guidance for enrolling in government benefits, and critical resources such as their food program. It serves all who need help, including FFNs. Margo Ebersole, executive director of RCRC and a lifelong Yuma resident leads a bilingual staff: Lucie Ebersole, Berenice Marquez, Junice Ramirez, Jamie Baker and Claudia Sarmiento.

**“Margo and Lucie are my go-to for advice. They’ve been around the block a lot. I can ask them anything, and they’ll always be blunt and honest, and they’ll always help me in every way they can.”**

–FFN who cares for her cousin’s two young children

The Resource Center provides one-on-one support to FFNs enrolling in government benefits including Medicaid, SNAP, CHIP, LEAP, and referrals to WIC. Margo explained the value

of having this local support: “The county office is 30 miles away, but it might as well be a universe away for some people’s intents and purposes. So, we’re a Certified Application Assistant Site, and then we just wrote to get funding from Cover all Coloradans that will help more people have healthcare coverage in Colorado.”

Food access has become a growing part of the Resource Center’s social justice efforts. Yuma has just one grocery store, requiring some families to travel long distances to buy food. Many FFNs feed children in their care with little or no compensation, even when it may mean that they themselves go without food. The Resource Center offers a 24-hour pantry of non-perishable foods, a monthly drive-through food distribution center, and daily breakfasts and lunches offered through the Federal Summer Food Program. All food options are offered on a foundation of trust, with neither requirements nor barriers.

**“We’d rather err on the side of if someone says they need food, they probably do. We don’t think people are terribly taking advantage of canned green beans.”**

–Margo Ebersole, RCRC Executive Director



Each month, 160-180 families access the drive-through distribution supported by the Food Bank of the Rockies. The drive-through setup improves access for FFNs with mobility issues and for those who have children in tow. Staff take advantage of the time when families are waiting in their cars to make additional connections. They may greet families, distribute supplies, books and coats, and/or offer flu and COVID shots or childhood vaccines.

FFNs also bring children to the City Park for free meals and engaging arts activities. Meals are provided through partnership with the Morgan County non-profit organization Kids At Their Best, and funded through the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Kids at Their Best wrote RCRC into its federal grant as a community meeting the 50% Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) threshold. One community member reflected on the value of the gathering: “Not only parents, but also caregivers, who would have just an hour or two where they could just sit back and breathe [...] to offer something to their children rather than putting them in front of the television. It was a huge thing.”

Prairie Family Center, based in Burlington, provides similar services for the community—including FFN providers—in Kit Carson County.

## Yuma Public Library

Soon after assuming the role as the Youth Service Librarian in Yuma, Ashley Lynch partnered with the ECCYWK. At the time, Yuma Public Library was the recipient of an early literacy program grant called Growing Readers Together through the Colorado State Library. Launched in 2018, this funding initiative targeted FFNs and has since concluded. The library created a welcoming hub for FFNs to spend time with the children in their care sharing bilingual book collections, educational toys, singing, painting, and story hours. Ashley explained how inviting and enriching the space became:

“We bought toys that were for kids and families to use in the library, because especially in the winter, we’re a safe place to be. We have the heat on, we might have the popcorn going and we found that a lot of families who were doing at-home care aren’t necessarily set up for that.”

Library staff recognize, too, that many grandparents who care for young children also need services. In response, library staff are becoming certified to help beneficiaries with Medicare-related issues. FFNs now come to the library for resources, a sense of community, and a safe space to support the development of young children in their care. Bilingual families have also become a critical bridge to recruiting other Spanish-speaking families to benefit from the services available to them.



# What makes the ECCYWK a **BRIGHT SPOT?**

## Removing the stigma of FFN care

In 2020, the ECCYWK in Yuma made a bold decision to embrace service to FFNs, even without knowing whether future funding would support this new direction. Still, they knew that they had to shift their services towards FFNs in order to stay true to their core mission. This brave shift aligned with the state's move to recognize FFNs as a valued part of the early childhood care landscape, a shift reflected in updates to the Colorado Early Childhood Framework. While the ECCYWK still encourages and incentivizes licensure, they also prioritize support for FFNs.

## Building relationships and connections

The ECCYWK recognizes the need for outreach to build connections with FFNs, many of whom live far from town centers and resources. One FFN remembered her first time hearing about the ECCYWK at a community event: “She invited us to listen to her so that we could see what the program was about and how we could benefit personally and how we could benefit the community.” This last phrase is important, as it highlights how the ECCYWK explains to caregivers not only how they might personally benefit from involvement, but also how vital their services are to the community. The ECCYWK prioritizes the relationships between staff and FFNs, as well as among FFNs themselves. A sense of belonging

“ 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.”

**Claudia Strait**  
Director of ECCYWK

is essential. As Barbara explains, “It’s hard for some people to make friends in a small community.” The ECCYWK embraces the ethos of *acompañamiento*—the practice rooted in Latino culture of walking alongside someone, symbolically taking their hand to help them reach their goal.

## A strong fabric of collaborations

In a rural region with great distances between communities, resources are often limited and difficult to access. Ingenuity and partnerships are key. While the ECCYWK, RCRC, Prairie Family Center, and Yuma Public Library don't have formal written agreements with each other, they support each other's programming, join together at community events, and refer individuals and families to one another. Ashley from the Public Library describes how they connect the community to resources: “We always just know we have each other [...] If I can't help you, maybe Claudia can. If Claudia can't, maybe Margo can [...] We really pride ourselves on if we can't get you or do for you what you need, we will find you who will [...] we'll bend over backwards trying.”