

Establishing an Early Childhood Coalition Takes a Village



Montgomery County is in the beginning stages of addressing the importance of early learning

Montgomery County is ready to tackle the challenge of early childhood education. The county, which is ranked in the 10 lowest in Indiana for child care seats, has only 2% of children under age 5 enrolled in high-quality programs.



"We know we are lagging in that area in the state. We need to make sure all Montgomery County children are ready to succeed in school and life."

Kelly Taylor, CEO of the Montgomery County Community Foundation (MCCF)

In 2019, MCCF received a planning grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to convene local stakeholders to identify, prioritize and assess opportunities and challenges. Through a series of discussions with residents, lack of child care quickly emerged as a common concern and a top priority to address.

At the same time, Crawfordsville Mayor Todd Barton was convening monthly workforce development roundtable discussions with local employers.

"I was consistently hearing that the lack of available child care was causing problems for employees," Barton said. "When we looked at what was keeping people out of the workforce, child care was at the top of the list."

MCCF and the city of Crawfordsville decided to form a task force with representatives from local government, employers, child care providers, parents, schools and nonprofit organizations. With the assistance of Transform Consulting Group, the 18-member task force spent six months completing a community needs assessment.



“We completed workforce surveys and parent surveys,” Taylor said. “Our task force took a bus tour of existing child care facilities. We had focus groups with parents and interviewed early learning providers.”

The task force turned their research into a comprehensive five-year strategic plan with five main goals:

- increase community and parent education;
- improve accessibility;
- increase program quality;
- improve affordability and
- strengthen program supports.

An early childhood coalition with a dedicated staff is key to setting these initiatives in motion. MCCF was recently awarded a second grant from Lilly Endowment, which will provide funding for the creation of the Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition and a director of early learning position. “We are very excited to move forward on this project and begin a coordinated approach to solving child care issues in the community,” Taylor said.

The coalition will be able to build on existing relationships MCCF has formed with child care providers. Increasing the number of high-quality programs working to Paths to QUALITY is another goal.

Taylor said the time and resources needed to navigate the Paths to QUALITY process is overwhelming for some providers. In conjunction with Chances and Services for Youth (CASY), the coalition wants to be a local resource to help provide funding, training and professional development to improve quality.

“When we did our parent focus groups, we heard parents say, ‘Quality is not even on the radar; I just need somewhere to put my child so I can go to work,’” Taylor said. “That was heart-wrenching to hear.”

In Crawfordsville, there are hundreds of full-time jobs that are not filled; there are also high rates of subsidized housing and people on government assistance.



“We are constantly trying to reconcile those two issues, and child care is part of that equation. We know people often can’t afford to go to work because of child care.”

Todd Barton, Crawfordsville Mayor

Workforce has become a driving issue, and local businesses are willing to step up and get involved. They realize quality child care is necessary to attract and maintain a stable, quality workforce.

“This is not something that government could solve alone, or the nonprofit community could solve alone,” said Barton. “It’s going to take everyone coming to the table.”