



Communities for Kids

Focus Group Report

The Communities for Kids (C4K) initiative was created in response to community requests for assistance with shortages of high-quality early care and education programs. C4K aims to partner with communities to support and coordinate planning for access to high-quality early care and education. Partnerships are customized to address each community's unique assets and needs so that each community can grow and prosper well into the future. The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation provides expertise and coordination to support communities using a collective impact approach.

To learn more about the implementation process for C4K and to determine ways to improve the initiative, two focus groups were conducted. One group was comprised of representatives of four full implementation communities (Schuyler, Norfolk, Gothenburg and York). The second group included representatives of two communities (Pender and Red Cloud) that are in the technical assistance phase of C4K. This report is a synthesis of both focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS



There are several benefits to participation in the C4K program. Perceived benefits ranged from child and family level impacts to community level improvements. Respondents felt the structured setting and earlier education opportunities available in formalized childcare programs prepares children for elementary school, and had a “trickle-up effect.”

The community also benefitted from the program. “We’ve already started to see it raise up the entire community.” Because of C4K, more community members are employed and more children are in quality care. Especially in a smaller community, the full and part time job opportunities the centers add are viewed as significant contributions to the local economy.

Those doing full implementation reported the community survey was a main benefit to participating in the program. The survey provided a lot of insight into what their community needed and the data was very useful in educating the community, stakeholders and partners about the status of early childhood care in their community. Having this data was essential to moving forward with the project.

Community events were also a success, as they offered a way to engage families. Communities appreciated the financial supports that provided the opportunities to do a raffle and/or incentivize participation (e.g., by giving away a STEM-related toy). One community reported that having a speaker from the Dividends Program was an important component to their success, as it educated the business community about the economic impact of having high-quality early childhood programs as well as the specific benefits these programs provide to the local businesses that want to attract qualified employees to their community. Hearing from an outside expert who could explain the project in term of concrete numbers and a return on investment perspective was particularly motivating for local business partners.

C4K staff are key to the success of local initiatives. Staff members were praised throughout the focus group conversations. Staff members were viewed as one of the “main benefits” of the program. The C4K liaison:

- helps identify resources for the community
- assists the local leadership group in making connections across the community
- is a sounding board for ideas and answers questions
- is an expert who has seen other communities go through similar struggles
- provides support and education to the program’s volunteers,
- is a morale booster and generally, “the go-to person.”



Focus group respondents consistently indicated their C4K staff supports were prompt, responsive, and catered to the specific needs of their community. They also were supportive of the people leading the new child care programs; one provider noted, “I think I called her once and was like, ‘you need to talk me off the ledge.’ She reassured me, ‘it’s fine and this is what we are going to do.’”

Some participants noted their C4K contacts were particularly helpful for communities that might not qualify for other forms of federal funding/assistance but have a true need for quality childcare. One participant noted, “We received the news we made the list and it was truly a gift for us. M. has opened so many doors for us that we did not know existed... She was able to reach out to people... we did not know. It’s all been amazing.” Another reported that working with C4K felt “like winning the lottery.” They were encouraged to “dream big... At first, we were like ‘oh we have these little ideas.’ But M. was like, ‘no, think bigger.’ That was exciting - we were able to share the vision and ideas.”

Additional specific praise included:

They're great sounding boards. They think outside the box because they have been there and they have done it. And just that shoulder, just somebody to listen. Sometimes you do not even want them to solve it. You just want somebody that will listen and understand.

Sometimes I forget she has other communities because she focuses so much on you and your community and your needs. She does so much for you. Coming here and seeing all the communities she has been working with, I'm like oh my God how do you do this? [I have] so much respect and admiration for her that she can do that!

Some participants expressed concern that with the growth of the C4K program in new communities, the staff may be “pulled too thin.” They reported they rely on the support of the C4K staff and wanted to be conscientious that they do not “burn out those nice people.” Participants suggest the C4K program add new staff members to assist the incoming communities and let the established programs continue working with their current support people because, “Having the security of someone that already knows what we have been through would definitely be a bonus!”

Conducting a survey was an important strategy for communities but the process was not perfect. All full implementation communities issued surveys to get feedback on the needs and ideas of their community members. Response rates were high and community feedback via those surveys was seen as a success in and of itself. Ways of collecting data included distributing surveys at a children’s festival (children earned prizes while the parents filled out the surveys), offering drawing entries as an incentive for completion, using both paper and social media platforms, and distributing them at parent teacher conferences.

Communities did express some concerns about the survey process. They noted that some of the topics they received feedback on are beyond their focus and they did not know what to do with the information. “They (the surveys) produce a lot of data. Does it fit with what we work on or do we have to create something to address it? ... It’s great data but not all of it pertains to exactly to what we are doing and I don’t want to drop it. What else should we be doing with that information?” They also felt overwhelmed, noting, “It’s important stuff. It impacts the children. [But] we can’t take it all on.”

Additionally, one community noted “sample selection bias” in their surveys. They pointed out that although a large majority of their survey respondents had a college or advanced degree, those demographics did not match their average community member. Responses were gathered from banks and schools and other involved entities, but the community felt, “we were not getting the responses from the people we really needed to hear from and that’s the people who are falling into that gap area.”

Survey results highlighted a number of topics the communities are now working to address. Results of the surveys included both positive and negative components. They showed the “good and bad. We found out what the need was and we also found out what was really lacking in town and/or what the people wanted. It was eye opening in a way.” Results from these surveys and other data collected informed the development of strategic plans, helped identify strategies for the priority issues, and engaged the community to address the identified needs. The following summarizes some of the survey results.

- **Resources.** One theme to the survey results included a need to increase awareness of the resources available in the communities. Community members, including professionals, such as teachers and child care providers, were reportedly unaware of some of the vital resources and

services available in their cities or the surrounding communities to assist families and children in need.

- **Quality Care.** Another need identified was “The urgency of quality daycare.” Focus group respondents noted their communities have few centers or qualified in-home providers and those that do exist may not all meet quality standards. “It’s just eye opening what some people think of daycare and the quality is maybe not necessarily on the forefront... So it’s tough.” One community reported that providers are not motivated to get better or change. “They kind of have the market--there’s no one else there,” so they have no incentive to do the paperwork for Step-Up to Quality or put in the effort to improve. They also expressed uneasiness with someone from the state coming to observe because “this is not a dog and pony show, I’m taking care of kids here” and “I don’t need to prove anything to them.” Multiple communities heard similar concerns.
- **Concerns from childcare workers.** Survey data helped communities work with providers to show how addressing the need for additional childcare will not decrease the number of children in their home-based services and were not designed to “take over” any existing program; “The data we gathered has given us the opportunity to sit down with providers and say ‘you’re at capacity, this is our need. You are going to still be at capacity.’ It really put it into perspective for them that we are not going to run you over through this process.” Communities reiterated that the C4K program would not compete with existing providers or pre-k programs and were “not trying to steal your kids from you.” Through these honest conversations, providers opened up and admitted they wanted to retire, etc., and were worried about the children in their care. The survey data allowed programs to “break down walls” and child care providers warmed up to the goals of the C4K program.
- **Other.** Other key findings included a need to address daycare safety concerns, increase mental health supports, and the need for specific supports for teachers like CEUs and local trainings.

Communities have identified their partnerships as having the greatest impact on expansion or enhancement of quality early childhood programming. Partners included local programs like Head Start, the hospital system, community centers, neighborhood businesses, the public schools and local unions. Successful partnerships provided needed infrastructure, funding (directly, via subsidies, and via scholarships), assistance with event planning/hosting, information distribution, community engagement ideas and supports, and messaging. One community noted that they leveraged their relationships with their partners by making connections with their partners’ partners. Another noted they made connections with key individuals, who then could use their own positions (employment, political, etc.) to advance the early childhood work in the community; one community shared that a high-level executive of a large business has recently started attending board meetings and “is totally on board.”

Communities request help from C4K in building and strengthening their relationships with other entities in the community. Despite the successes noted above, communities reported they need more and stronger relationships to be successful, and they would appreciate assistance in making these connections. Even leveraging ideas from the C4K program and other partners, leaders are not always successful getting their community engaged. Some participants indicated they had engaged their “front line staff” but cannot get buy in from business leaders. Another reported, “Districts are not supporting early childhood programs across the state” and feel they “don’t have the best support from our school districts.”

One specific suggestion communities had was to have C4K staff introduce the concept of community-wide collaboration to potential partners because C4K may have more credibility to generate buy-in from the community. “I think that would be helpful because sometimes it can come from us over and over, but when it comes from another source it helps with partnership and buy in.” One participant suggested that an effective collaboration structure is “probably going to have to come from the state level because, let’s be realistic, there are egos everywhere and it’s an ego thing.” Community leaders may be more likely to listen if the request comes from someone with more authority.

Communities also indicated they need assistance in other areas to expand and enhance early childhood in their communities. Multiple communities indicated they needed help with the general direction of the project. “We’re at that ‘what do we do?’ stage.” The assistance they have received so far from the C4Y is helpful but they need that support to continue. They struggle identifying the “next steps,” everything from a feasibility study to specific projections that they can take to potential investors. Another community identified similar struggles, specifically noting they would appreciate a visual representation such as bullet points to walk them through the process.

They also need assistance with the data collection and analysis. Communities recognized the value of data that would reflect impact on the children and community improvement, but they were unsure how to measure these changes.

Another area they do not feel confident in was “the business approach.” Specifically, they were unsure how to write business plans and articulate the finer details of running a childcare center or program. One participant noted, “I can talk early childhood learning all day, but to actually sit down and write a business plan and what it takes” to run the business is not an area of expertise. They have questions on things ranging from sustainability, to grant writing, securing donors and avoiding donor fatigue.

Communities noted that they did feel supported in engaging their own volunteers and managing their own program. This support is important to maintain, however, because, “It keeps your volunteers engaged and willing to work.”

Respondents value networking with other communities in the C4K program. Specifically, they appreciated coming together at the “Thriving Children, Families, and Communities: The Role of Early Childhood Programs” conference with other communities in the C4K program where they can speak to their peers and learn from others’ experiences. One participant noted, “We like an annual summit where we can meet face to face. We have each other’s contact number and information but we can talk more in 5 minutes in the hall waiting for another session than we can via email.”

A few focus group participants pointed out that they did not feel they were in competition with other communities in the C4K program, and said they like that their fellow communities are willing to share their successes and their failures.

Staffing remains a barrier for the full implementation communities. Center leadership reported that it is very difficult to find potential employees willing to work for the “low pay” they could offer. “Workforce for us is a huge issue. People can make more at money McDonald’s than as a PreK teacher or childcare provider.” Employment benefits are also a difficult issue to navigate; employers struggle to find the funds to offer them, and many potential employees would prefer a higher base pay and no benefits because they qualify for state assistance and/or have other sources of benefits.

Other employment barriers included finding employees with eligible citizenship statuses or those with the relevant education and/or experience. One community noted they only had a few US citizens working in childcare and none of them is a college graduate. Especially combined with the low pay and benefits issues, finding someone who meets the minimum requirements of the position is particularly difficult. Employers also worry about turnover, as quality employees often leave for better opportunities elsewhere.

Participants have advice for other communities beginning the C4K process. The first suggestion focuses on connecting with community partners and getting their support from the beginning. One participant noted, “I think [it is important] to get the community buy in first. Have everybody on board that you can.” They recommend that the community partners understand what the process entails for them, and have them think about “What are they going to bring to the project, not just what are they going to get out of it.”

It is important to be clear about the community’s needs and then manage expectations regarding the implementation. For example, one community noted they needed childcare, but did not understand that a plan to increase daycare services would be very different than a plan to build a child development center (and the associated costs and employment standards, etc. that go with a more complicated plan). Similarly, the leadership of the project needs to be clear about how they see everything coming together. As plans evolve, leadership changes (from businesses to hospitals to community programs, etc.) and the goals and assumptions change as well. If these are not transparent in the planning, people will be confused and/or upset.

Communities admit, however, that this level of advance planning is difficult or impossible because you cannot plan for something you did not anticipate happening. “The theme of this project is: you don’t know what you don’t know.” Instead, they give the advice, “that it’s a journey!”

Programs recommend communities new to the C4K program should meet a few key readiness factors before implementing a new early childhood program. Readiness factors include a review of the physical resources for the child care(s) such as building, location and materials, a board of directors, a program director, and the

involvement of relevant professionals who can guide the work. Other important factors to include are strategic plans, budgets, buy-in and support from key community businesses, and a general understanding of the goal for the project.

SUMMARY

Overall, communities participating in the C4K program reported many benefits and successes. One of the most highly valued benefits was the support they received from the C4K staff members. Those who conducted a community survey found them helpful but also identified areas for improvement to the survey process. Feedback from these surveys identified the following topic areas for the communities to focus on: identifying community resources, increasing quality childcare opportunities, addressing concerns of the current childcare employees, and implementing mental health supports.

Making connections within their communities with local businesses, school systems, hospitals, local programs, etc. was both an important component for program success and an area in which the communities requested additional support from C4K staff. They also would like help navigating and planning the next steps for their work and sorting the finer details of program implementation. Another barrier communities faced was in staffing their early childhood programs.

Full implementation communities had advice for new communities just starting the C4K process, which included making community-wide connections, getting partner buy-in, and being transparent throughout the planning and implementation process. They also had a short list of key readiness factors they recommend programs have before starting.

Focus group respondents made special care to say “Thank you” for the opportunity to participate in C4K, calling it “a lifesaver.”



“

I completely appreciate everything the foundation is doing for us and all the other communities of Nebraska. My background is early childhood so I know the importance and am thankful [the help] is finally here.

A participant reflects on C4K

”



Evaluation Report prepared by
Rosie Zweiback, M.A & Becky Skoglund, M.A.
Interdisciplinary Center of Program Evaluation
The University of Nebraska Medical Center’s Munroe-Meyer Institute:
A University Center of Excellence for Developmental Disabilities

