

Early Care and Education in Estes Park

Prepared for the Estes Park Lodging Tax Task Force

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Why does Early Care and Education matter?

A child that is in an affordable and quality early education program will be better prepared for kindergarten, read earlier, be more likely to graduate high school and attend college, earn a higher wage, live a healthier life and have better developed life skills.

In 2008, United Way and the Coloradoan conducted a community-wide assessment of poverty in Larimer County and determined the absence of affordable childcare was the single greatest deterrent to a family's self sufficiency

Childcare Access and the Economy

10% of Colorado residents quit or don't take jobs because of childcare challenges. During the pandemic, this challenge was heightened and families in Larimer County reduced their work by 42% due to lack of childcare.

Lack of access to child care and early education leads to increased work absences and can remove talented employees from the workforce

- In Estes Park, all sectors have experienced loss of employees directly due to inability to find early care in our community. This includes the school district, hospital/clinic, Town of Estes Park, retail, and lodging.

In the last year alone, more than 20 million women with children in the US have left the workforce due to lack of childcare access

Economic Impact of Child Care Shortage in Larimer County

Infant/toddler care shortage = \$2.2 billion in lost earnings, productivity, & revenue for CO; \$99 million for Larimer County.

\$680 million lost by employers in CO; \$31million in Larimer County resulting in an opportunity cost of over 900 jobs each year.

Essential Elements of ECE:

Accessibility- there is a shortage of early care and education opportunities in Estes Park. This shortage earns Estes Park the designation as a “childcare desert”.

- Funding would support increasing capacity by developing and building early care and education centers to serve multi age children to include infants/toddlers, the age range most in need of care in our community and support operational aspects that ensure high quality, such as educator training, materials and equipment to meet best practices, and improvements to facilities to increase capacity or quality.
 - There are only 4 licensed infant slots in the community currently
 - Annually, 80-90 children are born into our community.
- In Larimer County there is a 40% shortage in childcare access for families with preschoolers unable to find care.
 - 75% of Larimer County families cannot find infant care.
- Young people in Estes Park (Youth in Action survey 2019) don’t have the expectation of being able to stay here, get a good job, and raise a family.
- Young people planning to begin a family find no early care options and decide to move to a down valley community to start their family.
- Birth numbers In Estes Park are reflective of parents choosing to give birth outside of Estes Park to access a preferred birthing experience. Our community is lacking in choice around women’s healthcare options, especially in regard to pregnancy and birth/delivery.

Funding: Invest in the early childhood system to expand capacity and improve quality.

Affordability- parents must be able to afford early care to be able to go to work and contribute to our economy, serve our meals, make our coffee, teach our children, and police our streets.

- In Larimer County last year families spent \$12,000/year as an AVERAGE cost of care per child.
 - For infants, \$16-\$20,000
- 37% of INCOME for Larimer County families was spent on childcare, on average. This represents a household income for a family of 4 of \$64,919 with 2 children in care under the age of 5.
- CCAP- CO Child Care Assistance Program- this is funded by the state and is impacted by leadership priorities and legislation. This fund was frozen for 2 years resulting in massive increased need for tuition assistance Estes Park families, as well as the entire state.

- LCCF- Larimer County Childcare Fund (United Way implements) has a goal of parents paying no more than 15% of their income on childcare. This is still a challenge for some families and local tuition assistance programs delivered by EVICS bridges the gap for Estes Park families.
- Experiences of Estes Park families often necessitate emergent care needs to maintain employment or be able to remain in the community. This inevitably leads to a challenge in maintaining housing.
- In 2021 EVICS awarded 30 families in Estes Park over \$70,000 in tuition assistance. Since 2006, over \$250,000 has been awarded to local families.
 - Funding would support existing platforms for tuition assistance to ensure families in our community can afford early care and education. These funds could be distributed via these existing platforms, LCCF and EVICS Family Resource Center and maintain the best practice of families not paying more than 15% of their income on early care.

Funds: Subsidize the cost of child care and preschool programs for families with children from birth to age 5.

Workforce- Early care providers and educator salaries must be elevated to represent the vital work they do, caring and educating our future, making it possible for our economy to flourish because parents have safe spaces and qualified, well trained educators and caregivers with whom to leave their children.

- Estes Park recently lost an ECE center due to the inability to hire a qualified Director for the site. This resulted in a loss of 20 toddler and preschool slots.
 - Work is underway to remedy and reopen this site in the future.
 - There are qualified or nearly qualified individuals in our community, but salaries keep them from working in the ECE field.
 - Increased salaries would incentivise and attract these professionals back to their field.
- Early educators make an average of \$13-\$15 an hour
- This is not enough to afford housing in Larimer County
- Early educators require extensive education and credentials to work in an early childhood classroom.
- Education in early childhood is a demanding field with long hours and can be emotionally and physically taxing.
- Early childhood educators are leaving the field faster than we can hire them!
- Parents don't encourage or support their children entering into the ECE field due to the low salaries and perceived status as a "babysitter".

- This impacts programs to support ECE courses offered in High School settings, one attempt at ECE workforce development.
- Funding would support sustained ability to elevate educator and caregiver salaries to be able to recruit and retain qualified staff, which directly impacts the ability of a center to remain open and offer care. Additionally, funding would support benefits as this is an identified element of need in ECE workforce and is often the reason educators leave community based centers for school district positions. Salaries must be elevated to a level **that mirrors at least what CO school districts are paying, roughly \$50-\$75,000 annually depending on position (Director, Lead Educator, Assistant Educator)**

Funds: Subsidize workforce salaries to meet an elevated County wide standard that supports recruitment and retention of qualified staff.