

County-Level Efforts to Expand Center- and Home-Based Child Care: A Case Study

Increasing Child Care Accessibility and Quality



South Dakota Child Care Workforce Study

Developing Practical Strategies to Strengthen the Workforce and Support Economic Growth

Initiative Highlights

- Plans to support child care including available community resources
- Three available buildings to expand center-based child care availability
- Ongoing consultant support for plans

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Grassroots Efforts to Expand Center- and Home-Based Child Care

From day one as Director of Codington County Community Services (CCCS) in 2021, Sara Foust has had an expanding 'to do' list. Local commissioners asked Codington's social service agencies to improve their collaborative efforts, which led to developing a strategic plan related to social services in the community, and identified child care as a community need.

The CCCS Director and her colleagues brought a diverse group of people together to address child care issues in the community, including several human resource professionals who recognized the need for child care. Over the last two years, this action team has been brainstorming solutions to address the lack of child care in Watertown. The largest local child care facility has about 150 children enrolled and has a waiting list of 100 more children, and is planning to close its doors soon. The church that houses the facility needs the space to serve its growing congregation. "So we were in a crisis, but now we're in an accelerated crisis because of the pending closure of the facility," the CCCS Director explained. "We have a lot of parents that are home and not working. Not only can they not afford child care, there's no child care available. Increasing capacity is going to have a ripple effect for everybody across the community."

She added, "We definitely have some good ideas for solutions. If our community can pull together and we can find the funding that we need, we will be able to solve capacity; and then we can focus on quality."

Community Partnerships

Additional Space to Expand Child Care Availability

The CCCS Director noted three key community partners for expanding child care facility capacity.

- **Facility option 1** – Lake Area Technical College purchased a building from the school district, half of which was already being used for child care. The college wants to expand child care to the other half of that building. First, they need funding for building updates. If secured, they could expand child care to the other half of the building and hire additional staff to accommodate up to 80 additional children.





- **Facility option 2** – The Benedictine Sisters of Watertown at the Mother of God Monastery have a mission to give back to the community. The Sisters want to renovate an empty building on monastery property and open a child care center with the capacity for 220 children. This would allow them to employ the staff and serve the children from the child care facility expected to close soon.
- **Facility option 3** – The school district consolidated its schools and would like to sell the building that is no longer being used. A local businessman is interested in purchasing that building and funding renovations to convert it into a child care facility.

“So if we can get all three of those options going, we would meet the capacity needs in Watertown; and we could start to have some discussion on quality,” said the CCCS Director.

She and the action team are also working with family day care providers to increase state-registered home-based child care capacity in Watertown. They are collaborating to create a network of family day care providers to support each other and help increase that capacity. Some providers have begun meeting to achieve these goals, and the CCCS Director believes that more outreach can increase the number of participating providers as well as investment from community partners such as the chamber of commerce.

Logistical Support

South Dakota State University’s Child and Family Resource Network, one of South Dakota’s five Early Childhood Enrichment providers, helped start the action team and supported the efforts to address this as a community issue. They worked with the action team to conduct a survey to more specifically identify and validate the community’s child care needs to guide their

continued work. All along the way, they have participated in action team meetings. “They have really been instrumental for the work that we’ve done,” said the CCCS Director.

She also noted that other members of the broader and business communities have attended action team meetings but have not yet gotten involved: “I think people engage differently at different moments. They have attended action team meetings to listen and learn, and there’s support.”

Supporting the Community’s Child Care Workforce

In addition to working to increase Watertown’s child care capacity and quality, the CCCS Director and action team are also working to strengthen and expand the next generation of the child care workforce. They are discussing ways that they can support the Lake Area Technical College Child Development Program to improve the quality of the child care workforce. Students will have the choice to complete either a one-year certification program or a two-year associate degree program that will include a business/administration component.

Supporting Strategies and Resources

Community Education

The CCCS Director and action team have held meetings focused on child care for the broader and business communities, the first of which, held in April 2024, introduced the problem and discussed the impact of the upcoming child care facility closure.



They held a town hall meeting to continue that initial conversation with community members in May and have plans for future meetings specifically for the business community. Additionally, members of the action team have been going door to door to talk with businesses about the community's child care needs.

Thoughtful Framing and Approach

The action team is formalizing a collective impact model to give the community a greater sense of ownership of the initiative to guide the team's work moving forward. With help from the Economic Development Director, the team is highlighting the need to expand child care as an infrastructure issue to garner support from the business community. "Child care is one hundred percent infrastructure. Without child care, we don't have a workforce. So we need to look at it as a workforce issue," the CCCS Director said.

Targeted Guidance and Support

With the support of a planning grant from the Governor's Office of Economic Development through Governor Kristi Noem's Investment Plan for Child Care, the action team hired a consulting group to aid their efforts, and their collaborations are ongoing. The consulting group has analyzed data from a community survey, conducted a survey of local employers, drafted reports for the action team, and is planning to conduct educational events specifically focused on the business community to fill child care knowledge gaps and encourage support for this effort.

Implementation Facilitators

Community Awareness and Buy-In

Conducting family and employer surveys and establishing an action team has helped build community awareness. The Watertown Area Chamber of Commerce has an ongoing voice in those conversations because the director is one of the members of the action team. Since it began meeting, the team has drawn additional community members to the child care conversation. "I do think our community has come to the table, so that has been helpful," said the CCCS Director.

Some additional work is needed to move beyond awareness to really understanding the depth of the issue and garnering support for moving toward action. "They don't recognize the complexity of it, and so that's the issue. People recognize the need, and they recognize the expense for families. They don't recognize how challenging it is on the facility side of things," the CCCS Director said. "I really think we have a lot of the right people at the table; now it's a matter of those people recognizing that this effort is going to require their commitment and action."

Philanthropic Possibilities

Watertown's community members want to give back to their community. The CCCS Director noted that there are some strong philanthropic attitudes in the community as evidenced by the identification of three potential child care center sites. She's hoping that the community will assist in securing funds for renovations and later staffing and ongoing operational costs for the three buildings currently available to expand child care.

Progress Indicators

- The CCCS Director and action team hire a consultant to assess the community's child care needs. The consultant has conducted an employer survey, analyzed survey data, drafted a child care report, and is helping to educate the business community on the topic.
- The CCCS Director and action team have identified three options for new child care facilities in the city that could create the capacity to fully meet families' child care needs.

Considerations for Replication

The CCCS Director believes that any community in South Dakota can bring people together to develop an action plan with potential solutions for community issues. She says it's also important to understand what community resources are available to support the plan.

- **Collecting data to inform action** – The CCCS Director and action team conducted a community survey to assess families' child care needs and conducted a survey of local employers with the help of a consultant.
- **Thoughtful short- and long-term planning** – Hiring a consultant to assist in assessing the community's needs was valuable. The action team is also working to develop a collective impact model to guide their continued work.
- **Dedicated leadership** – While the CCCS Director had prior experience as a family day care provider, in her current role as a social worker, child care was not her area of focus. However, child care emerged as one of five areas of need identified in the community-wide strategic plan. Therefore, she has stepped into a leadership role. "I'm willing to help lead that initiative, and that's how I see myself. I'm just trying to lead this work together," she said.

