



EXPANDING QUALITY CHILD CARE IN MESA COUNTY, COLORADO: A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH TO BOLSTERING OUR LOCAL ECONOMY

Jeff Kuhr, Mesa County Public Health

There are many challenges facing Mesa County, Colorado. At about \$50,000, the median household income is roughly \$15,000 less than the state average. Reading and math scores among school-aged residents are about 10 percentage points lower than state averages, according to 2018 Kids Count data. But for the people of Mesa County, hardship does not begin when one enters the workforce or sends a child to kindergarten. Families with young children struggle to find child care. The earliest years of a child's life are among the most formative, when they build foundations for lifelong health and learning. Without properly addressing Mesa County's child care crisis, pouring resources into interventions later in life might not be sufficient to lift people out of poverty and position them as stable contributors to the Mesa County economy.

A recent study by the Center for American Progress found that more than half of Colorado children live in child care deserts. Mesa County is one of those deserts. The county has almost 10,000 children between birth and five years and an additional 13,000 between 6 and 13 years. Currently, Mesa County can provide licensed care for only about 20 percent of the county's youngest residents.

Maintaining current facilities at capacity is a challenge across the state due to a lack of qualified staff, and each state and federal program that oversees child care licensing presents a unique set of requirements, creating yet another burden for already overwhelmed providers. In 2017, staffing issues resulted in two Mesa County facilities closing rooms, two shutting down their operations completely, and another withdrawing its licensing application. Western Colorado Community College has an early childhood education program, but with 29 centers, 32 preschools, and 28 school-age programs, the demand for educators greatly outpaces the supply. And because of the burden of navigating complex, disparate state and federal systems, most providers in the county do not take full advantage of opportunities to offset costs. For example, 45 facilities are eligible for a USDA meal program, but only five participate. And despite financial incentives for facilities to earn a high-quality rating, only 10 percent of eligible facilities in the county have gone through the process and earned ratings of average or above.

Early childhood development, care, and education are crucial for school readiness and lead to a citizenry better prepared to fill higher-paying roles in the workforce, making them an appropriate, necessary first step to ending generational poverty. In Louisiana, 2016 data shows that employers lost an estimated \$816 million due to employee absences and turnover, nearly \$84 million in tax revenue due to lost workplace productivity, and more than \$1 billion to the state's economy from spillover effects of inadequate child care. In Michigan, a 2017 study identified access to high-quality child care as the primary barrier to workforce participation for families with low incomes. So as executive director of Mesa County Public Health, and with the support of early childhood leaders across our community, we launched the Child Care 8,000 initiative to increase the number of licensed child care slots from 4,200 to 8,000 by 2022 to reliably invest in the future of our community.

TO GET THERE, WE'VE OUTLINED SEVERAL PRIORITIES:

Strengthen the child care workforce

- For a number of reasons, including the pay and effort required for credentialing, child care is not a particularly attractive field for a lot of people right now. To begin to change this narrative and bolster the supply of child care educators to better meet demand, we are offering child development associate credentialing and assisting with college credit payment; partnering with local high schools and Colorado Mesa University to expand certification, credit, and internship opportunities; and increasing the starting hourly wage for lead teachers to \$13 while simultaneously increasing industry wage capacity through gains in efficiency.

Optimize child care business efficiencies through centralized administrative services

- To make navigating systems more seamless and help providers take advantage of cost-cutting opportunities, we aim to develop a business-services cooperative with centralized resources related but not limited to payroll, human resources, nurse consulting, food programs, quality rating assessments, and new employee training.

Enhance the family child care home provider system by streamlining the licensing process and related trainings

Partner with local businesses to achieve sustainability

- To ensure that gains are not just programmatic but also extend to system-level impact, we aspire to forge partnerships with business entities like Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC) to build sustainable incentive models like offering tax credits to employers who subsidize child care expenses.

From the outset, we have recognized that these kinds of changes at scale will take time and require buy-in from community leaders and leading organizations. This is why our strategy to realize 8,000 slots includes the positioning of early childhood development, care, and education as inextricably linked to improving school readiness and overall education outcomes and economic development. We know that parents remove themselves from the workforce when they do not have access to safe, nurturing places for their children to be during work hours.

While we continue to make progress in each of these priority areas, we have celebrated a couple of smaller wins along the way. In the last two years, we have gotten Mesa County Commissioner Rose Pugliese to champion the initiative publicly, been awarded over \$300,000 in various grants, and hired a strategist to help solidify a business plan. We have submitted a proposal to a Phoenix-based investment broker for a new market tax credit to pay for a portion of a resource center to house an early childhood education center, added 500 slots within existing child care facilities, and developed a partnership with the statewide EPIC group to begin building sustainable incentive models. Most recently, we partnered with Colorado Mesa University, the Grand Junction Economic Partnership, the Grand Junction Housing Authority, and our state legislators to introduce legislation permitting the transfer of the state-owned Regional Center campus to a local government entity. If passed, this legislation would enable our county to acquire the land that would ultimately house the early childhood education center. The current momentum behind the project is tremendous. Commissioner Pugliese believes the project is visionary for our community.

Child care is a basic service that needs to be in place for stable families. Stable families beget vibrant economies and thriving communities. Through Child Care 8,000, Mesa County, Colorado, is leading the effort to strengthen communities by moving children and families toward educational success, economic stability, and health and well-being in a way that is sustainable for the long term.



Jeff Kuhr
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Jeff Kuhr is the director of public health for Mesa County, Colorado. Based out of Grand Junction, his agency serves 148,000 residents on Colorado's western slope, providing a wide range of public and environmental health services. Mesa County Public Health plays a key leadership role toward the integration of resources among local health care, social services, and public health agencies.

"In the last two years, Mesa County has changed the trajectory of early childhood education in our community. Securing quality child care is no longer viewed as just the parents' burden. Leaders from across sectors now recognize that the lack of quality child care impacts our local economy, and that it requires a community-wide approach to support children, their parents, and our child care businesses. Participating in the Ascend Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to share ideas with mentors and peers, both from Colorado and from throughout the United States. Looking at our processes and potential solutions through the 2Gen lens make them more meaningful to my employees and our community partners. I am grateful for the Ascend Fellowship; it was the catalyst for Mesa County Child Care 8,000. I look forward to continuing to partner with Ascend and with the Fellows."