



# Engaging Colorado's FFN Child Care Providers in Early Childhood Systems



**EARLY MILESTONES**  
COLORADO

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# Introduction

FFN care is child care provided consistently by a family member, friend, or neighbor, typically within a home setting. These providers are a critical part of the early childhood workforce and make it easier for parents to work and contribute to the economy. More than half of Colorado's families depend on child care provided by grandparents, aunts, relatives, family friends, or neighbors.<sup>1</sup>

Responsive, caring, and stable relationships with adults are critical to young children's healthy development.<sup>2</sup> Strong relationships with caregivers lay the foundation for success in school and life.<sup>3</sup> FFN child care providers often have established relationships with the families they serve and are trusted to provide the loving, nurturing, and consistent care young children need to thrive.

FFN providers make up the largest group of child care providers in the country.<sup>4</sup> FFN care is more often used by families of color and low-income families.<sup>5</sup> Most FFN child care providers are women, and over half of FFN providers across the U.S. are people of color.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, nearly one-fifth (19.1%) of FFN providers surveyed reported caring for a child with special needs.<sup>7</sup>

Parents often choose FFN care because it can offer schedule flexibility, convenience, and proximity to families' homes or workplaces. Other reasons include a preference for home-based care, familiarity with the provider, and wanting a provider with similar cultural or linguistic traits. Long waiting lists and a lack of affordable child care options are also factors.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented FFN providers with similar challenges to licensed child care providers. These include reduced enrollment, increased costs for personal protection equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies, and decreased household income.<sup>8</sup> Unlike licensed providers, FFN providers were not given priority access to COVID-19 vaccinations.

FFN providers and the families they serve are more likely to represent populations that are systemically denied equitable opportunities to thrive. Communities of color, immigrants, and refugees have historically been excluded, underserved, under resourced, and marginalized by education and health systems in the United States.

Colorado's early childhood systems must provide stronger support for FFN providers during and beyond pandemic recovery. This work will require a better understanding of the effects of centuries of racial and cultural discrimination, as well as stronger engagement of the communities most impacted. This report summarizes key issues for FFN providers and recommendations to strengthen systems that promote positive, equitable outcomes for providers and the families they serve.

# Background & Methodology

Early Milestones partnered with Mile High United Way (MHUW) in Fall 2020 to conduct a survey and focus groups with FFN providers. Findings from the [COVID-19 EC Sector Research Partnership](#) were used to ensure this survey captured the unique situation of informal care during the pandemic.

In 2021, Early Milestones led a discovery process to build a collective understanding of (1) how the voices of FFN providers influence Colorado's early childhood (EC) systems, and (2) how early childhood systems can better support the critical role of FFN providers for young children and families.

This project sought to answer the following questions:

- › Who connects and engages with FFN care?
- › What are the different pathways for reaching and engaging FFN care providers?
- › What communication methods are effective with FFN care providers in connecting them with each other as well as with systems-level partners?
- › What are the key equity issues faced by FFN care networks, including connections with people of color and those with less power and privilege?
- › What strategies, resources, and supports might be utilized to build stronger networks of FFN care?
- › What barriers and opportunities should be addressed to ensure FFN care is recognized, supported, and integrated into EC systems improvements?

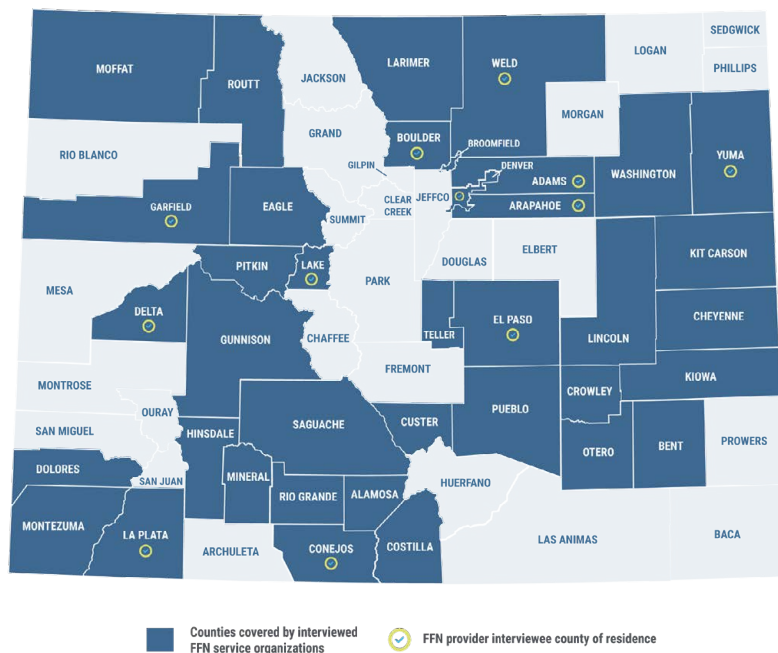


Twenty interviews were conducted with individuals from FFN support organizations. These participants represent early childhood councils, community-based organizations, mental health clinics, and higher education institutions. Twenty additional interviews were conducted with FFN child care providers to learn from their lived experiences in the field. (See [Interview Protocols](#)). Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone call between March and May of 2021. Twelve provider interviews were held in English, and interpreters were used to conduct seven interviews in Spanish and one in Arabic.

Olga González, Executive Director of Cultivando, served as the project's equity consultant. In this role, Olga evaluated interview protocols, invitations, incentives, key findings, and recommendations to ensure our approach was inclusive, respectful, and fair.

To understand the unique equity issues faced by FFN child care providers, interviewees were selected to be representative of Colorado's diverse population, including providers of color, immigrants, refugees, and other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of twenty provider interviewees, 10 identified as Latinx/Hispanic, 6 as white/non-Hispanic, 2 as Black, 1 as Indigenous, and 1 as Middle Eastern. Nineteen identified as female, and one identified as male. Interviewees ranged in age from early 20's to late 60's and provided care for their grandchildren, nieces, nephews, other relatives, and for friends' and neighbors' children. Children in the care of interviewees ranged from infants to school-age children.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. Transcriptions were analyzed for key themes. Interviewees received gift cards for sharing their time, experiences, and expertise.



# Key Findings

Key findings and recommendations were compiled from the interviews described above and are supported by data from the 2020 FFN provider survey. Many of these recommendations will require cross-sector collaboration. Partners best positioned to act are suggested for each recommendation.

## REACHING, ENGAGING, & COMMUNICATING WITH PROVIDERS

Many FFN providers do not consider themselves child care providers or self-identify as FFN. They see themselves as a grandparent, a friend, or a neighbor helping someone in their community. Support organizations stated that this informal approach makes it difficult to identify FFN providers to offer services.

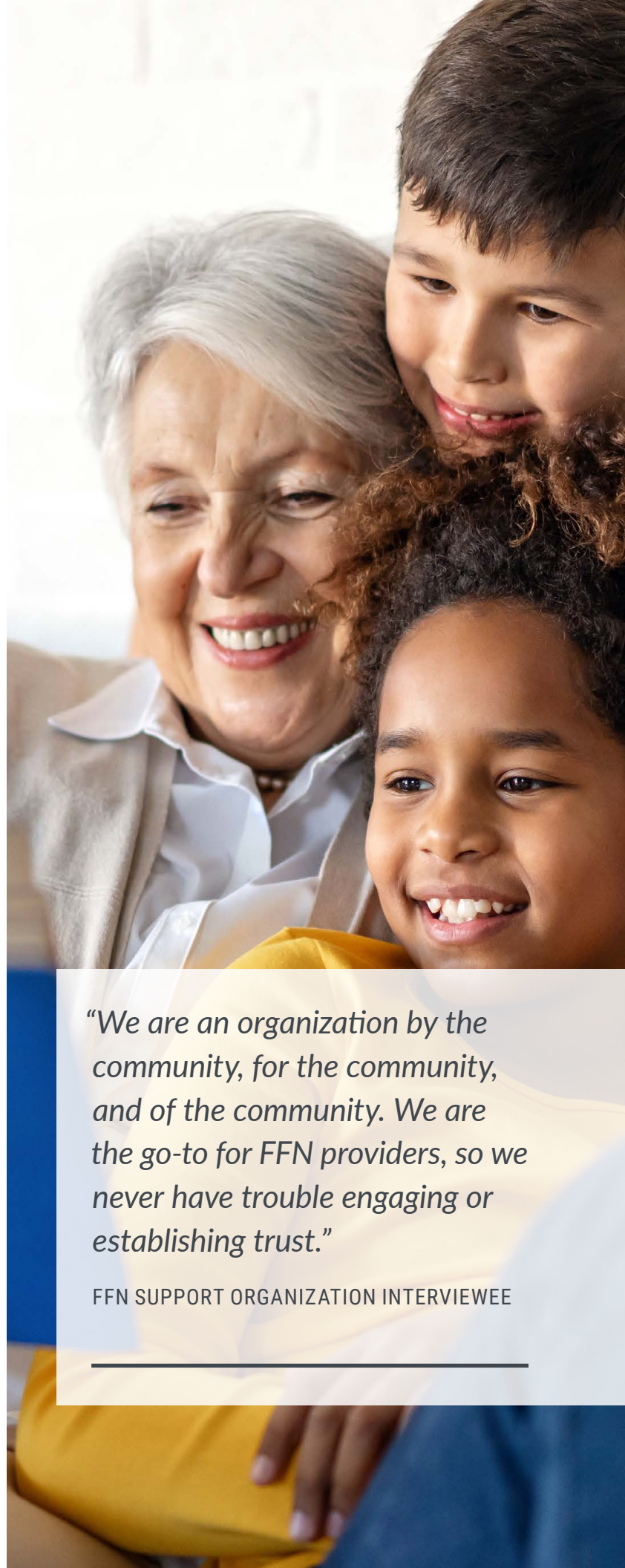
FFN support organizations stated that identification and engagement with providers are more successful when the support workforce reflects their communities' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and life experiences. These organizations maintain consistent, open lines of communication to build trusting relationships with FFN providers. Outreach is done through grassroots networks and community-level tactics, such as knocking on doors, going to parks and libraries, and building relationships with trusted leaders and connectors.

Word of mouth is an effective form of communication for providers and support organizations. If a trusted friend or neighbor shares a positive (or negative) experience interacting with an FFN support organization, other providers often hear about it. Other effective forms of communication between FFN support organizations and FFN providers are group texts (WhatsApp), Facebook groups, and emails. Some FFN providers interviewed used Google and YouTube to find helpful information related to their role as child care providers. Importantly, FFN support organizations highlighted that communicating in the primary language of the FFN providers is another key to successful engagement.

Honoring FFN providers' experience and expertise is key to successful engagement. FFN providers are often overlooked during system-level and policy discussions. However, they are an essential part of the early childhood workforce and should be valued in decision-making processes. When engaging FFN providers in system-level discussions, interviewees underscored the need to first create trusting relationships and inclusive, equitable conditions for meaningful participation.

## Recommendations

- › Fund grassroots community engagement so trusted FFN support organizations can identify, build relationships with, and engage FFN providers. **PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY**
- › Ensure that the FFN support workforce reflects (in language, culture, race, and life experiences) the communities served by creating career pathways and advancement opportunities for people of color and bilingual individuals. Leadership positions should also reflect the communities served. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Fund staff of existing support organizations to provide technical support to FFN providers. Create FFN navigator positions to help FFN providers identify and utilize supports available to them. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Partner with local organizations that have relationships with FFN providers to encourage participation during system-level meetings. Compensate these organizations for sharing information and resources. Provide inclusive and equitable conditions for engaging FFN providers during meetings, such as simultaneous interpretation, translation of materials, child care, and meals. Consider alternative meeting times during evenings or weekends to accommodate non-traditional schedules. **STATE & LOCAL AGENCIES**
- › Compensate FFN providers for participation in state systems conversations, including meetings of the Office of Early Childhood's Family Voice Council, RAISE Coalition, and the FFN Strategic Partnership Network. **PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY & STATE AGENCIES**
- › Convene professionals from community-based organizations, government agencies, and early childhood councils to learn from each other, share best practices, troubleshoot common issues, and discuss policy and systems needs. **STATE-LEVEL INTERMEDIARY**



*“We are an organization by the community, for the community, and of the community. We are the go-to for FFN providers, so we never have trouble engaging or establishing trust.”*

FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATION INTERVIEWEE

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## ACCESS TO RESOURCES IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES

FFN providers expressed difficulty in locating information and resources in languages other than English. One Spanish-speaking provider searched for information to become a qualified exempt provider under Colorado's Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP). However, the information on the Office of Early Childhood's website is only available in English.

The top five home languages spoken by parents of dual language learners in Colorado are Spanish, Amharic/Ethiopian, Chinese, French, and Russian/Ukrainian.<sup>9</sup> FFN providers shared difficulty accessing affordable trainings (CPR, First Aid, Medication Administration, and Safe Sleep) in languages other than English. While some community-based organizations provide trainings in FFN providers' primary languages, additional strategies and investments to support diverse language providers are needed.

Only 20% of FFN providers interviewed were aware of their local early childhood councils. None were aware of the state's Professional Development Information System (PDIS). Early childhood systems can better connect FFN providers with existing supports and ensure they meet FFN providers' specific needs and experiences.

### Recommendations

- › With the passage of [SB21-077](#) and [SB21-199](#), which remove the documentation barriers for immigrant FFN providers to become licensed:
  - › Pursue analysis from immigration law experts to understand any potential impact obtaining a license could have on an immigrant's ability to become a "lawful permanent resident" or pose a "public charge" risk. [STATE AGENCIES](#), [EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY EXPERTS](#), [IMMIGRATION LAW EXPERTS](#)
  - › Provide training and resources to FFN support organizations to inform about and help providers navigate the licensure process. [STATE & LOCAL AGENCIES](#)
  - › Build staffing capacity within existing, trusted community-based entities to support newly eligible FFN providers who choose to pursue licensure. [MULTIPLE PARTNERS](#)
  - › Ensure all information regarding licensure, CCCAP, and the qualified exempt process is available in multiple languages. [STATE & LOCAL AGENCIES](#)
- › Create a position within OEC to serve as liaison with FFN support organizations and coordinate resources available to FFN providers. This position should carry into the new Department of Early Childhood in 2022. [STATE AGENCIES](#)
- › To reduce financial barriers, provide scholarships for FFN providers to complete pre-licensure trainings. [STATE AGENCIES](#)
- › Connect FFN providers to business and financial literacy resources, including tax consultation when starting a new, licensed child care business. [STATE AGENCIES](#)
- › Create a website to connect FFN providers with state-level resources, funding opportunities, and other valuable information. [STATE AGENCIES](#)
- › Raise awareness of existing supports for FFN providers, such as PDIS, early childhood councils, Expanding Quality in Infant and Toddlers (EQIT) trainings, Child Find, and funding opportunities like the qualified exempt process to access CCCAP. Utilize a range of communication tools, including social media, text messaging, emails, and word of mouth. [FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS](#), [STATE AGENCIES](#)
- › Fund and staff FFN peer support groups to reduce isolation, provide resources, and encourage knowledge sharing. [FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS](#), [STATE AGENCIES](#), [PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY](#)



- › Increase the availability of PDIS trainings in languages other than English to ensure equitable access for diverse language providers.

STATE AGENCIES

- › Increase the availability of EQIT training in additional languages. Consider partnering with organizations that serve linguistically diverse communities to deliver the trainings.

STATE AGENCIES

## COMPENSATION & COST OF CARE

FFN providers are often more closely connected to the families they serve than licensed child care centers. FFN providers are motivated to provide care to help their relatives, friends, and neighbors and because they enjoy caring for and educating young children.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the relationship-based nature of their work, some FFN providers receive no monetary compensation for the care they provide.<sup>11</sup> Over one-third (35.3%) of providers surveyed reported receiving no child care-related income, and a quarter (23.4%) reported earning less than \$100 per week.<sup>12</sup> Nearly three-fourths (73.9%) reported an annual household income of less than \$45,000.<sup>13</sup>

Many interviewees shared that they consider a family's financial situation and ability to pay when setting rates. Some providers shared that the rates they charge are often not enough to cover the costs of care. Nearly 90% of FFN providers expressed financial challenges related to the costs of providing care and creating learning environments for the children they serve. The rising cost of fresh, healthy food was the top financial challenge. Providers also shared difficulty with the costs of learning materials (i.e., books, toys, and art supplies) and basic needs (i.e., diapers, wipes, and cleaning supplies).

During the pandemic, Mile High United Way provided direct cash assistance to FFN providers. Other philanthropic organizations plan to pilot similar programs and study how financial assistance impacts FFN providers and the children served.

Most providers cited financial challenges associated with the cost of care. However, only one interviewee went through the process to become a qualified exempt provider, which enables a provider to accept CCCAP. This finding aligns with the 2020 survey, which found that 9.6% of FFN providers reported receiving CCCAP payments.<sup>14</sup> Most interviewees were either not aware of the qualified exempt process or did not know that exempt FFN providers are eligible to apply. Some cited that documentation status is a barrier for them to apply. Reimbursement rates for CCCAP qualified exempt providers are much lower than for licensed family child care homes and centers.

Colorado's entire early childhood workforce faces inadequate compensation. However, FFN providers are accepting lower wages to help families and, by doing so, subsidizing the child care system. Unlike licensed centers, FFN providers must cover all costs associated with providing care. To ensure all children in FFN care have opportunities to thrive, early childhood systems must prioritize connecting FFN providers and the families they serve with financial resources.

*“All I want to do is take the stress off families, so I charge lower rates...I know the families can't find care that they can afford in centers, and I want to help them, so they don't have to sacrifice to afford child care.”*

FFN PROVIDER



## Recommendations

- › Evaluate the costs of providing care to young children within homes, including healthy food, learning materials, and creating quality learning environments and outdoor play areas. **RESEARCH COMMUNITY**
- › Increase CCCAP reimbursement rates for qualified exempt providers to align with the actual costs of creating quality learning environments within home settings. **STATE & LOCAL AGENCIES**
- › Study FFN providers' experiences, incentives, and barriers to participating in the CCCAP qualified exempt program. Continue to raise awareness among the FFN community and remove barriers for FFN providers to access CCCAP funding. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Study the impacts of direct cash assistance programs on FFN providers' financial stability and explore long-term efforts. **PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY**
- › Explore extending eligibility to FFN providers so they can access the Child and Adult Food Program to help offset the costs of healthy food for children in their care. **STATE AGENCIES**
- › Develop partnerships with existing efforts that provide access to fresh, healthy foods. Connect FFN providers to those organizations. Consider delivery services to reduce transportation barriers. **FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS, LOCAL AGENCIES**
- › Organize local donation drives of toys, books, and other learning materials to give FFN providers access to low- or no-cost supplies. **FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS, PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY**
- › Invest in the expansion of programs in support organizations that provide regular learning experiences and materials for FFN providers to use with children in their care. Consider partnerships with educational retailers to offer discounts on learning materials. **FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS, PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY**

## DISCRIMINATION

Several FFN providers described experiences of discrimination based on race, documentation status, and primary language when interacting government agencies, child care settings, and nonprofits. These frequent experiences have a negative impact on their overall well-being and desire to engage with early childhood systems. Providers said these discriminatory experiences are a major factor in deciding whether they seek services and supports.

Some FFN providers recounted their own negative experiences as young children in early care and K-12 education settings. One shared that her motivation to provide care is to protect children from the racial discrimination she experienced. Prior research suggests that the creation of some FFN networks is a response to marginalized families' experiences with racism and other discrimination from mainstream systems.<sup>15</sup>

FFN care is exempt from state licensing when the providers adhere to the legal exemption regulations. Interviewees described feeling discriminated against because the care they provide does not require a license. FFN providers know they do not receive support equal to the licensed workforce. Many early childhood councils offer trainings to all providers, regardless of licensed status. However, some FFN providers shared that other providers made them feel unwelcome.

Systemic and interpersonal racism are serious threats to the public health of communities of color.<sup>16</sup> Experiences of racism negatively affect mental and physical health.<sup>17</sup> When FFN providers experience stress or depression, it limits their ability to provide positive emotional and behavioral support and the nurturing care that children need to thrive.<sup>18</sup>

Local and state government agencies, early childhood councils, nonprofits, and other organizations interacting with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse FFN providers should receive diversity, equity, and inclusion training. Individuals employed in these organizations should understand the negative impacts of their words and actions and learn to approach diverse FFN providers with respect, cultural humility, and cultural responsibility.

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*“One of the things that could help is for folks to have cultural training around how to treat people respectfully and how to talk to people from different cultural backgrounds. Without that knowledge, they can do so much damage to us, to our communities, our families, and to our kids. As a Latina who speaks Spanish, I have had terrible and damaging experiences when interacting with people in government, early care centers, and nonprofits and so have the families I work with. Racism hurts and it causes harm to us.”*

FFN PROVIDER



## Recommendations

- › Provide ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings to professionals in nonprofits and government agencies. Build capacity to approach all FFN providers with respect, cultural humility, and cultural responsiveness. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Ensure that the FFN support workforce reflects (in language, culture, race, and life experiences) the communities served by creating career pathways and advancement opportunities for people of color and bilingual individuals. Leadership positions should also reflect the communities served. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Create additional training modules within PDIS to help professionals understand the lived experiences of historically excluded and marginalized groups. Create trainings alongside people who represent these groups. Compensate individuals who create and facilitate trainings and incentivize module completion. Create a certificate program that all care settings can earn, so families know which providers have committed to being inclusive, welcoming, and safe spaces. **STATE AGENCIES**
- › Fund local health clinics to offer all FFN providers access to low- or no-cost health care, annual wellness check-ups, and mental health services, regardless of immigration status. Ensure these services do not track immigration status to avoid public charge consequences. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**
- › Fund local behavioral health services to support FFN providers, especially people of color, to heal from traumatic racial discrimination, regardless of immigration status. Ensure these services do not track immigration status to avoid public charge consequences. **MULTIPLE PARTNERS**



*“I know at least 80 children in our community who won’t have access to a spot in a center. So if FFN’s aren’t included, how will those children receive the benefits of the new universal preschool program? Is it truly universal if families who choose FFN care aren’t included?”*

FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATION INTERVIEWEE

## POTENTIAL TO DELIVER UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL

Following the passage of Proposition EE, Colorado faces new challenges to retain and recruit a workforce large enough to serve all the state's four-year-old children. Some FFN providers have credentials, education, and training to meet the increasing demand associated with universal preschool efforts.

Children of color experience positive academic and social-emotional outcomes when their teachers reflect their racial and cultural identities.<sup>19</sup> While most FFN providers stated no intention of working within preschools or center settings, some wish to become early childhood teacher qualified. FFN providers who would like to pursue this credential could help meet increasing demand and ensure children of color can learn from teachers who reflect their racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Individuals in FFN support organizations expressed concerns that FFN providers and the families they serve would be excluded from universal preschool funding. FFN providers that meet qualification requirements (not yet determined) should be considered part of the workforce to deliver universal preschool. This approach would ensure that all children, regardless of child care setting, and their families have access to the benefits of universal preschool funding.

### Recommendations

- › Provide career navigation support to FFN providers who want to pursue early childhood teacher qualification. **FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS**
- › Expand successful programs that offer the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential to FFN providers to help those who want to pursue early childhood teacher qualifications. **STATE AGENCIES, FFN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS**
- › Pursue support for transcript translation, review, and degree reciprocity so those with existing qualifications from other states or countries can more easily enter the workforce. **STATE AGENCIES, HIGHER EDUCATION**
- › Invest in scaling the Connecting Home Visiting Agencies and Home Child Care Providers Pilot to reach more FFN providers. **STATE AGENCIES**
- › Explore partnerships with home visiting programs and FFN providers as part of the workforce to deliver universal preschool. **STATE AGENCIES, HOME VISITING PROGRAMS**



# Future Research

Colorado has made progress toward understanding the FFN landscape. However, work is still needed to ensure all providers have equitable access to essential resources. Multiple organizations declined interviews for this project because they currently lack concerted efforts to specifically support FFN providers. This suggests there are geographic areas that may need additional investments and capacity building.

The early childhood community needs to identify funding streams for implementing recommendations within this report. Ensuring that all Colorado children are valued, healthy, and thriving requires community- and system-level collaboration that includes and supports FFN providers.

- › Map existing support programs specifically available to FFNs. Identify geographic areas that need additional investments and capacity-building. In areas with little or no existing support, co-create and co-design support programs alongside local FFN providers. **STATE-LEVEL INTERMEDIARY**
- › Map funding streams that could support implementation of these recommendations in Colorado. Convene key players to leverage existing resources and begin implementation planning. **STATE-LEVEL INTERMEDIARY**

*“When thinking of supporting us, I hope [early childhood decision makers] think of the kids we care for first. Everything we do is for the children, and we want to do what’s best for them. Sometimes, we need more information and support to do what’s best for the kids in our care. We love and care for them and want nothing more than to see them learn, grow, and succeed.”*

FFN PROVIDER

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