BRINGING PARENTS BACK INTO THE WORKFORCE

Workforce Innovation Grants expand child care and open doors

WISCONSIN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

STATE OF WISCONSIN DWD Department of Workforce Development

January 2026

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ADDRESSING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES TO CHILD CARE SECTOR

January 2026

We are proud to support the projects in this report, which are creatively working to bolster the in-demand child care sector—the backbone of our state's workforce system.

Our state continues to face a workforce shortage, as with other states, driven by an aging population and slowing birthrates. Because of Wisconsin's high labor force participation rate—consistently higher than the national average—we're focusing on helping communities and workers overcome certain barriers to full employment. Building up our child care workforce is among them.

Access to high-quality, affordable child care is necessary for many parents to go to work. A shortage of child care options can keep people out of the workforce who would otherwise be working. As a result, employers have trouble finding workers to fill available jobs. Child care not only supports children's healthy development, but it is also an essential component of driving economic growth and prosperity.

The programs outlined in this report used fresh approaches to provide solutions to boost the child care workforce by developing sustainable solutions that fill needs for families, communities, and employers.

Governor Tony Evers' groundbreaking $158 million investment from the American Rescue Plan Act supported these efforts to address the state's ongoing workforce needs. Projects in this report are examples of some of the creative, local solutions to regional workforce challenges. The grants have provided workforce training and supportive services to 87,200 Wisconsin residents since they began, and continue to yield results today.

Sincerely,

Amy Pechacek
Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION DEPENDS ON CHILD CARE

January 2026

One of the keys to building an Economy for All in Wisconsin, so that everyone has the opportunity to thrive, is ensuring that families and communities have access to affordable, quality child care throughout our state. If families can't find care for their children, parents can't work. If parents can't work, businesses can't operate. If businesses can't operate, communities can't grow. It's that simple.

In recent years, business and community leaders have recognized that this equation is central to their growth, particularly as the working-age population has declined and competition for workers has increased.

Wisconsinites have a proud history of finding innovative solutions to some of the biggest challenges, and the state's Workforce Innovation Grant (WIG) Program is part of that great tradition.

In 2021, Governor Evers created the WIG Program to encourage communities to identify local workforce needs and develop and implement solutions that could be replicated elsewhere.

Jointly administered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the program used funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to award $128 million to 27 projects across the state.

The WIG-funded programs detailed in this report are part of a long-term investment in human capital, keeping skilled people in the workforce and preparing the next generation of bright, educated, and well-developed people who will continue to prosper in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

Sam Rikkers
Chief Operating Officer
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

THE CHALLENGE

PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE TO MEET ECONOMIC, FAMILY NEEDS

A lack of adequate child care options forces many parents to reduce their hours, take less-demanding jobs, or leave the workforce entirely—and women bear a disproportionate share of the family caregiving responsibilities. Data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows that in 2020-21, 13% of children from birth to age 5 lived in families in which someone quit, changed, or refused a job because of problems with child care. In addition, women are five to eight times more likely than men to experience negative employment consequences related to caregiving.

Aside from direct impacts on employment, a lack of access to child care can inhibit parents' professional development by preventing them from enrolling in degree programs and other continuing education. This causes a ripple effect for Wisconsin's economy, as it can prevent workers from learning new skills employers need.

The reasons behind a lack of access to child care can be nuanced. Some areas are child care "deserts" (defined as census tracts in which there are more than 50 children under age 5, but zero child care providers—or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots). Other areas have licensed capacity but lack the skilled workforce to allow them to operate at full capacity. One thing is clear: Access to child care options helps businesses across Wisconsin attract and retain employees, ensures that employees—particularly women—can remain in the workforce, and increases the prospects for an educated, skilled workforce in the future.

Beyond these positive effects, child care access also provides children with a stimulating learning environment that supports their future success. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families reports that quality child care benefits children in several ways:

- It encourages healthy brain development, promoting abilities such as creativity, self-regulation, problem solving, and communication.
- It increases chances of success later in life; kids who experience quality care programs are 25% more likely to graduate high school.
- It promotes healthy social behavior, as learning through play stimulates brain development that helps build the skills needed for peer interactions, empathy, resilience, self-soothing, and self-regulating.

Wisconsin residents value access to quality child care. A recent WisconSays Survey found that 90% of Wisconsinites, including those without kids, say finding affordable, high-quality child care in Wisconsin is a problem, and over three-quarters of Wisconsinites support an increase in state funding to address the issue.

A robust child care sector contributes to economic vibrance, providing jobs in communities—many of them for women. In 2022, Melinda French Gates, co-chair of the Gates Foundation, cited the importance of meeting the need for child care. “It’s time to start treating child care as essential infrastructure—just as worthy of funding as roads and fiber optic cables. In the long term, this will help create more productive and inclusive post-pandemic economies,” she said.

THE VISION

BUILDING TODAY'S WORKFORCE, TOMORROW'S PROMISE THROUGH CHILD CARE

As part of the governor's Workforce Solutions Initiative, Wisconsin had the vision to tackle targeted workforce needs in a variety of areas, including child care, transportation, education, health care, and housing, among others. A total of $128 million was awarded to 27 projects during the course of the program.

The WIG Program harnessed the power of creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime local workforce needs. The grants encouraged development of leading-edge, long-term solutions enabling businesses and institutions to find ways to connect people to resources that fill a need for the community, support the hiring needs of businesses, and help people find family-supporting careers more easily. WEDC, in collaboration with DWD, oversaw the program, which developed powerful, effective, and transformative solutions.

The programs outlined in this report used innovative approaches to provide the high-quality child care Wisconsin needs to keep communities strong, families thriving, and the economy and workforce firing on all cylinders.

INNOVATION ONE:
SERVING STUDENT-PARENTS, EXPANDING THE CHILD CARE WORKFORCE AT MADISON COLLEGE

Wisconsin—like many states—has a shortage of early childhood educators. After discovering that the share of its student population who were also parents was nearly 20% higher than the national average, Madison College and its community partners used a $2.9 million WIG award to expand its early childhood education (ECE) program and increase access to affordable child care for student-parents.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Increases regional child care access through its new Goodman South Early Learning Campus and by collaborating with the City of Madison and organizations such as Reach Dane and the Greater Watertown Community Health Foundation
- Removes barriers to education by providing student-parents with reserved child care spots, scholarship support, and the option of curriculum materials in Spanish

THE SITUATION:

The early childhood educator shortage results in an estimated

$122 BILLION ANNUAL LOSS

in earnings, productivity, and revenue, nationally.

Source: 2023 ReadyNation Study, Council for a Strong America

STAFF SHORTAGES ARE DRIVEN BY LOW WAGES

increasing existing staff burnout and turnover.

Source: 2024 National Survey of 10,000 ECEs, National Association for the Education of Young Children

83% of Wisconsin's ECE workers have some college education or degree, but are

PAID LESS THAN HALF THE WAGE

of similarly educated workers.

Source: 2021 Institute for Research on Poverty, UW-Madison

THE EXPERIENCE:

When Madison College officials teamed with student-parent support experts at Generation Hope in a seven-college project through the FamilyU program, the officials were surprised to learn how many of the college's students were also parents.

"It was a surprise to all of us that 42% of our student population throughout our district are parents," says Donna Jost, the college's child care administrator. "That's much higher than the national average, which is about 25%. We needed to look at child care in a much bigger way."

The college recognized an opportunity to address the needs of these student-parents while also investing in the expansion of its training programs for early childhood educators and applied for $2.9 million in WIG funding to address the issue. The college designed its proposal to target its greatest needs: infant-toddler credentials and entry-level for-credit coursework. The proposal also targeted a Spanish-speaking population, given the pressing need for Spanish-speaking providers in the area.

FamilyU, a customized, evidence-based, two-year capacity-building experience, aims to improve student-parent success. It provides coaching, outreach to other cohort institutions, and data collection and analysis; this technical assistance is designed to create more family-centric campuses.

Madison College's FamilyU experience largely aligned with the first two years of WIG funding, and officials developed plans to expand the number of child care workers along with child care opportunities for students at Madison College. The grant allowed the college to create a district roadmap for child care and help satisfy some of its goals.

The district roadmap, created with the help of multiple Madison College campuses and departments and community child care experts, is designed to identify and remove barriers to education and child care and provide opportunities in South Central Wisconsin to meet workforce needs while helping students hone their skills.

Jessica Cioci, dean of the college's School of Human and Protective Services, says WIG funding allowed the college to take a two-pronged approach to easing child care needs.

"It's not just that there aren't enough child care centers. There are also child care centers where they might have the license capacity for a certain number of children, but they don't have the teachers they need to open the early-childhood classrooms."
– Jessica Cioci, Dean, Madison College School of Human and Protective Services

THE EXPERIENCE:

The college took aim at those shortages, using WIG funding to provide scholarships for students in a nine-credit program that led to a basic early childhood educator diploma and a 12-credit infant-toddler certificate. Online instruction enabled students throughout the 12-county district to participate.

In addition to the new Early Learning Campus, Madison College expanded its ECE curriculum across the district, added bilingual coursework, and provided more than 200 scholarships to aspiring child care professionals. Through its FamilyU partnership, the college employed a student-parent navigator and hosted annual child care workforce conferences, creating clear career pathways and systemic support for student-parents pursuing ECE credentials. By aligning its practicum placements with community child care sites, Madison College ensured that students received hands-on experience while local providers gained qualified staff support—helping address ongoing workforce shortages in ECE.

AS OF SUMMER 2024,

200+ ECE STUDENTS HAD RECEIVED SCHOLARSHIPS

for coursework at Madison College

WITH SUPPORT FROM WIG,

220+ CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

participated in continuing education and networking opportunities

THE EXPERIENCE:

From fall 2022 through summer 2024, WIG funding served 201 students who took 419 classes. Seventy-four have completed their credential or are actively enrolled to do so. Of those:

- 35 graduated with at least the basic early childhood educator credential, and others completed the series of classes but never formally applied for the program. These students likely did not apply because of the high school transcript requirement. Many international students, for example, cannot access theirs, so they register for classes but don't apply to the program because of this barrier. (The college is considering solutions to this issue, such as waivers for international credentials.)
- Of 39 enrolled in classes as of fall 2025, there were:
  - Six enrolled full-time, including one in ECE
  - 24 enrolled part-time, including 18 in ECE coursework
  - Nine enrolled less than part-time (six credits or fewer in a semester), including six in ECE coursework

The college also used the funding to help child care providers throughout the district gain access to eight hours of training and networking at three daylong ECE conferences. They included:

- 100 participants in Madison in June 2023, with sessions offered in English and Spanish
- 50 participants in Reedsburg in November 2023
- 71 participants in Watertown in November 2024, with sessions offered in English and Spanish

Cioci says the college's efforts will pay dividends in the labor market and for families. "It was impacting students' ability to complete their courses of study because they couldn't find child care," Cioci says. "And the shortage of child care providers was keeping students who graduated from going out and finding family-sustaining wages."

Sylvia Ramirez, the college's executive vice president for finance and administration, says access to child care is key to student success and building strong communities.

THE EXPERIENCE:

“It doesn’t help to have child care at every campus if you don’t have student-parents feeling like they are welcome and that they’re able to access the institution and succeed here,” she says.

WIG funding also allowed Madison College to partner with an agency that helps connect students regionally with available accredited, licensed, or certified child care providers. In addition, the funds enabled the college to partner with the YMCA of Dane County to purchase some family memberships, allowing students to access short-term drop-off child care so they could study or have virtual meetings with instructors.

But the largest part of the grant, $1.8 million, went to establishing an Early Learning Campus adjacent to the college’s Goodman South Campus, where there is a significant unmet need for child care. The $10 million project is located in a former Madison fire station that the college was able to purchase for $1 from the city.

In addition to the $1.8 million in WIG funds, Madison College dedicated $2.5 million to the project and DWD provided a $1.45 million Early Education Grant; the remainder came from private donations. After renovation, the center opened in January 2026.

“The WIG funding was a catalyst. It allowed us to launch the fundraising work for the building,” says Valentina Ahedo, vice president for student success pathways.

Ramirez says the city’s contribution of the land and building allowed the college to build a bigger center and reuse an existing building just steps from the Goodman South Campus. The new center will have seven classrooms for children ages six weeks to five years.

The facility will allow the college to:

- Increase access to high-quality, affordable child care for Madison College student-parents and other families in the South Madison community
- Offer extended hours and drop-in care, including evenings and Saturdays
- Help ensure a pipeline of highly trained early childhood educators for the future
- Help reduce barriers to workforce participation for women, a group disproportionately affected by the pandemic and decreased child care access

Since the college’s ECE classes are headquartered at Goodman South, the center will also feature a shared adult classroom space. “We’ll be able to expand the work we do with practicum placements and supervision of practicum students in the same child care setting,” says Jost.

THE EXPERIENCE:

Cioci says some of the classrooms will also have viewing windows, enabling ECE students to observe experienced teachers and children in classroom settings. Similar to operating room viewing windows for medical students, this format allows students to observe daily activities without altering or influencing what happens in the room.

The importance of having access to child care at Madison was crucial as Darin Wellons completed his academic work. Wellons, a single father of two, graduated in December 2024 with a degree in web software development.

“My kids have been actively involved in my educational journey, accompanying me to campus and feeling more than welcome. That resource is super awesome because child care is such a huge barrier. You can’t do anything as a parent without child care.”
– Darin Wellons, student-parent, Madison College

Ahedo says the college’s data-driven initiative to make child care more available and welcoming is benefitting the broader community as well: “It’s a community issue. It’s an economic issue, and it touches everybody with ties to the community. Being able to be a leader in that—that’s a privilege.”

Madison College’s efforts gained national recognition. The college is one of 13 higher education institutions nationwide to be awarded the FamilyU Seal, which celebrates the college’s investment in serving parenting students and achieving positive outcomes for student-parents.

THE RESULTS: 2022–2025

As of summer 2025, Madison College’s efforts have benefited

MORE THAN 400

students and child care providers

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. **Leadership buy-in triggers success.**

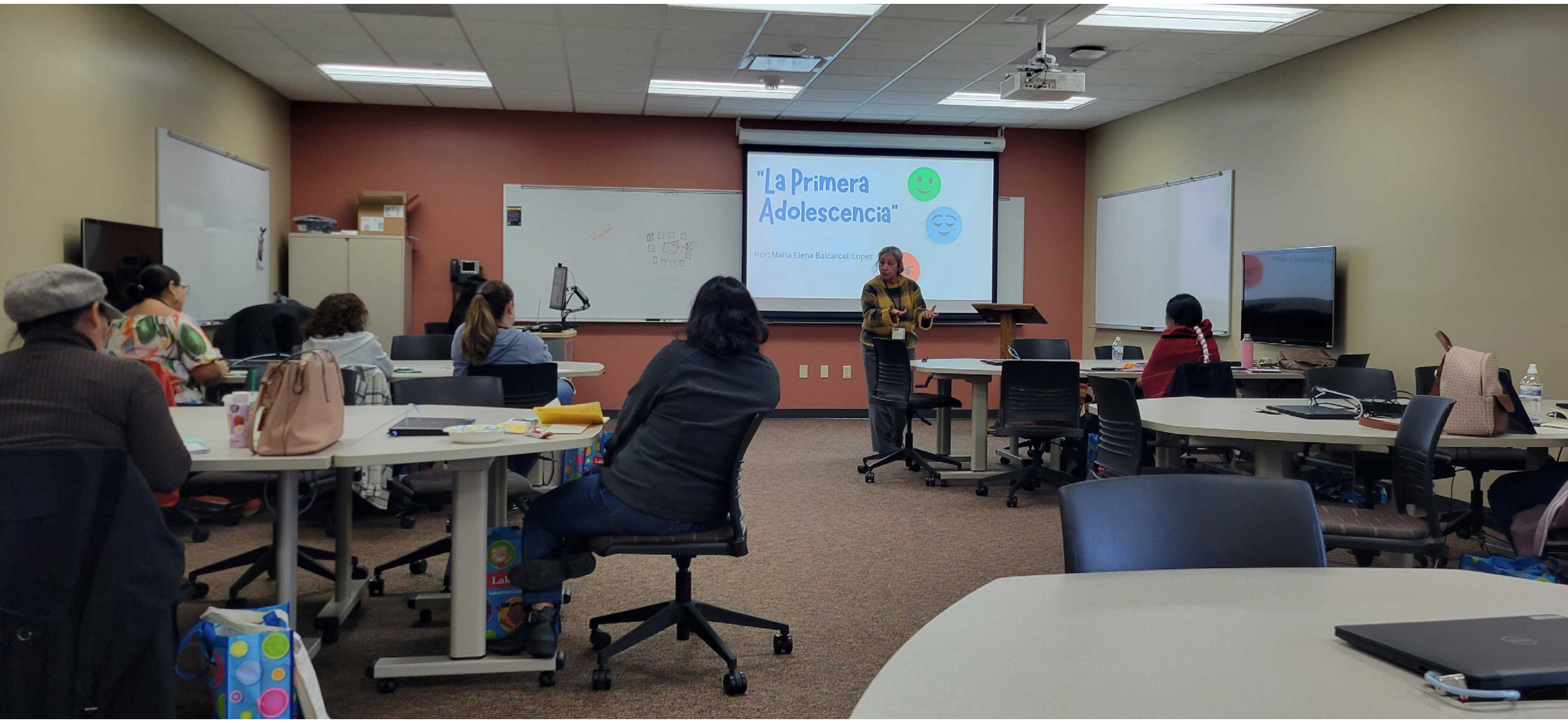
   The college's child care initiative began with the direction and enthusiastic support of Jack E. Daniels III, its former president. "People here knew that he was engaged, and it was a priority for the institution," Ramirez says. "He allowed us to spend a major amount of time on it, and that made a huge difference."

2. **Listen to parents.**

   The college ran focus groups and sought dialog with student-parents to gauge their needs. "We really came to embrace the idea that we were doing this with parents, and not for them," says Cioci, noting that the engagement included fathers as well as mothers. "As we did more outreach to the community and we had student-parents there, they silenced the room with their stories. Centering the student voice is so important."

3. **Connect with data.**

   Jost pointed out the danger of relying on what you think you know, versus what the data show. "Data work is hard. It's hard to gather and interpret it," she says. "But it was the work with the data that helped us to succeed."



INNOVATION TWO:
GREEN COUNTY YMCA OFFERS CHILD CARE SOLUTIONS, COMMUNITY SPACE

With only enough slots to accommodate 65% of its children who need care, Green County has been deemed a "child care desert." To better meet the demands of its community, the Green County YMCA combined $3.7 million in WIG funding with other financial resources to build a state-of-the-art child care and preschool wing and a 6,000-square-foot youth development wing.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Provides expanded access to child care for children from six weeks old to preschool and programming for ages 5 to 12
- Addresses barriers to care by offering extended hours, affordable rates, and inclusive care for children with special needs
- Provides wraparound services and awareness building through partnerships with area social services and counselors to address issues like bullying and self-harm

THE SITUATION:

In Wisconsin

54% OF PEOPLE

live in child care deserts.

Source: 2019 Center for American Progress

In Green County, there's a

5:1 RATIO

of children to child care slots.

Source: 2025 Center for American Progress

Statewide, there is a waitlist of

48,000+ CHILDREN

according to providers.

Source: 2024 Child Care Supply and Demand Challenges in Wisconsin, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and Institute for Research on Poverty at UW-Madison

THE EXPERIENCE:

The Green County Family YMCA developed a WIG-funded plan to build crucial child care infrastructure that would provide greater support to working families in this area that's considered a child care desert, where demand far outstrips supply.

Using $3.7 million in WIG funding, the YMCA was able to help build a new 5,000-square-foot child care center for kids from six weeks old through kindergarten age, plus a 6,000-square-foot youth development center to serve children from age 5 to 12. The YMCA's new model emphasizes not just physical expansion but human-centered impact—offering extended hours, affordable rates, and inclusive care for children with special needs and families with financial barriers. With 100 children currently enrolled and room for 34 more, the center is helping families stay in the workforce while building community resilience.

The Green County YMCA Foundation has ensured the sustainability of these efforts, with ongoing support to maintain affordability and quality, keeping the center accessible for working families long after WIG funding ends.

Luke Smetters, the YMCA's director of operations, says the new child care center is able to serve 86 children in five classrooms. The youth development center is able to enroll 75 kids, a 50% increase from the previous facility. The facilities opened in June 2025.

"If there's a lack of child care, we can't get parents working. Our facility is helping to solve that problem by providing quality child care and freeing up parents to work. That helps kids, families, and the community."
- Luke Smetters, Director of Operations, Green County Family YMCA

The youth development center went from two outdated classrooms to four flexible classrooms, each of which can be divided to serve the needs of the program. "There are partitions that can create two large rooms or four individual rooms," Smetters says. "There's a tremendous demand for that age group, and we're filled with kids again this year. There's a huge need to serve those families."

THE EXPERIENCE:

Smetters says officials were mindful of the need to serve special needs children. “There has been an uptick of children with special needs,” he says. “As part of the youth development center planning and design, we built a sensory room, so if a child needs some time away or relaxation, they have a place to go.”

Originally, the child care center was designed to have five classrooms and a shared office, but planners scrapped the office in favor of providing another classroom to serve future demand.

Craig Hoesly, a local financial advisor, transitioned his four-year-old and six-month-old to the center and has been delighted with the quality of the program.

“It's been nothing but great, including the teachers who have been so attentive to the kids’ needs,” Hoesly says. “This facility is huge for a small community. Thriving communities must have access to high-quality child care and a place they can trust that their kids are in good hands, which enables parents to go to work and provide for their families.”

GREEN COUNTY YMCA ADDED
7 NEW CLASSROOMS
with age-specific care

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT NOW HAS
50% MORE CAPACITY
for its programming

The YMCA also partnered with area social service and counseling agencies to provide wraparound services and awareness-building, as needed.

THE EXPERIENCE:

For example, the nonprofit Jacob's Swag, which focuses on suicide awareness and prevention, does regular programming on mindfulness. The Multicultural Outreach Program also provides cultural awareness services in the county, which has a growing Hispanic population. The YMCA works with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Green County and Avenue's Counseling to serve its children.

Big Brothers Big Sisters moved its offices into the newly renovated YMCA partly to broaden its exposure and attract more adult mentors for its in-demand services. "People coming to the building see them and are asking about their services, so we're supporting that program, as well," Smetters says.

The renovated YMCA also has a healthy living kitchen and a large room with flexible features such as room dividers and easily movable furniture to accommodate a variety of uses. A partnership with a local hospital will teach children about healthy eating habits and basic food preparation.

The YMCA's WIG-funded child care components are part of a larger $26 million project to renovate and expand the facility, which was built in 1982. The WIG funding, earmarked for the child care facilities, was part of a $10 million match that leveraged a $20 million donation from Colony Brands Foundation, $15 million of which went toward construction and another $5 million for the YMCA's foundation.

THE RESULTS: 2022-2025

As of June 2025

100 CHILDREN

were enrolled in Green County YMCA programs

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. **Strong partnerships equal successful projects.**
   Smetters says a tight-knit nonprofit community helps achieve results for the entire surrounding community. “Everybody is trying to do as much as possible with as little as they possibly can,” he says. “The nonprofits here are pretty intentional about staying in their own lane. We don’t want to duplicate services, and we want to help each other. Those partnerships are absolutely critical.” Smetters says building those relationships early helps open opportunities—like securing WIG funding.

2. **Beware of recruiting employees away from local schools.**
   When it came to attracting good teachers, Hoesly said officials targeted their efforts outside of the area. Casting a wider geographic net brought new teachers to the area and avoided deepening the local shortage of teachers, he adds. “Pulling day care teachers from other facilities doesn't really help the community fill the void if you have the same teachers going to a different place. We were able to hire from outside and it didn't affect the facilities that were already established.”

INNOVATION THREE:

DOOR COUNTY PROJECT AIMS TO PROVIDE FLEXIBLE, RESPONSIVE, QUALITY CHILD CARE

The Door County economy relies heavily on tourism and the workers employed by it. However, the area suffers from a shortage of child care for working parents and a lack of affordable housing for early childhood educators. The United Way of Door County used a $3.5 million WIG award to grow and stabilize the local ECE workforce, which provides essential support for the tourism industry.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Established an affordable housing community in addition to subsidizing home ownership for local early childhood educators
- Built a new early childhood education center and merged with another local center to expand care, offering more slots, expanded hours, and after-school and summer care
- Trained ECE staff in areas such as equity and inclusion, implicit bias, trauma-informed care, and American Sign Language to ensure that caregivers provide inclusive services for the community

THE SITUATION:

In Door County,

HOUSES COST 25% MORE

than the national average.

Source: 2025 Redfin

The average ECE teacher makes

50% LESS ANNUALLY

than the median income in Door County.

Sources: 2025, Zip Recruiter, 2023 Data USA/ Deloitte/Datawheel

Workforce apartment rental units were

470 SHORT OF DEMAND

in Door County in 2019.

Source: 2019 Door County Development Corporation

THE EXPERIENCE:

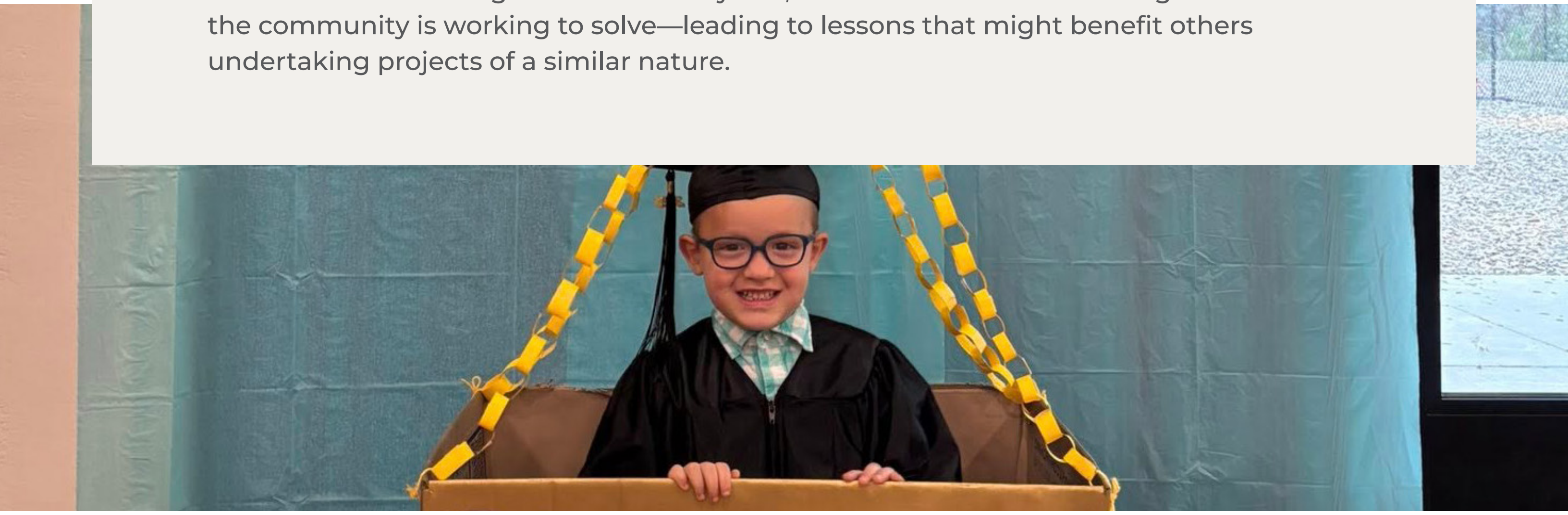
Providing child care opportunities in Door County is a key to preserving a healthy economic base in this prime Wisconsin tourist area. A project led by United Way of Door County used $3.5 million in WIG funding to help ensure that Door County families have access to the quality child care that helps parents participate in the workforce. The model may be useful for other areas where work patterns vary seasonally or otherwise do not follow a typical Monday-through-Friday, nine-to-five pattern.

“We know that as more baby boomers are retiring, that was going to impact our manufacturing workforce, our county government, medical facilities, and other sectors,” says Amy Kohnle, executive director of the United Way of Door County, which administered the grant. “We looked at it from an economic perspective. People need jobs and they need quality child care. And the burden often falls on women the hardest.”

While some of the funding went to an affordable housing project in Sister Bay, the larger component of the grant was the new child care center in Sevastopol, just outside Sturgeon Bay. The initiative reimagined how child care centers operate—developing sustainable business models that integrate staff training, mentorship, and leadership succession planning. To ensure that early childhood educators can meet the evolving needs of families, the project supported professional development in areas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion; trauma-informed care; and American Sign Language.

To stabilize the child care workforce, the project also piloted housing support strategies, including partnerships to create subsidized home ownership opportunities for early childhood educators. Project partners continue to explore ways to expand affordable rental housing options for the area’s workforce.

The center, partially paid for by $3 million in WIG funding, is providing essential child care for 120 children aged 6 weeks to 4 years, but has faced some challenges that the community is working to solve—leading to lessons that might benefit others undertaking projects of a similar nature.



THE EXPERIENCE:

In addition to the WIG funding, the DOCO Child Development Center—a subrecipient of the WIG funding through the United Way—needed to raise $3.1 million in private donations to cover the cost of the project. Not long after opening its doors in 2024, the center experienced a leadership transition that contributed to delays in reaching the fundraising goal. Recognizing the center's value to the community, a local bank stepped in to provide interim financing, and the center is currently working with the Door Community Foundation on a public campaign to raise the remaining funds. As part of the leadership transition, the center consolidated with another nearby child care center—called Children First—to form a new venture called Doorway to Learning.

The merger entailed restructuring and downsizing of the centers' administration and installing a new board of directors. The merger also enabled better, more efficient use of space and allowed the newly formed Doorway to Learning to have two campuses: the new building that serves 120 children and the former Children First building, which now offers afterschool care for 50 kids and summer care for another 50-plus kids.

These changes work to address broader challenges within the child care industry: While in many communities ECE capacity as a whole falls short of demand, some locations may have excess slots for certain age levels.

THE NEW CHILD CARE CENTER

CREATED 120 SLOTS

for Door County families

BOTH CENTERS HAVE WAIT LISTS OF

UP TO 50 FAMILIES

for child care slots, as of 2025

A lack of age-specific child care slots can create an economic problem for child care centers, because caring for infants and younger children requires more staffing and the associated costs than for the older kids. This mismatch between ECE professionals and the specific population they are trained to teach is highly dependent on local factors and can shift over time as children grow older. In the case of the Door County merger, there were more slots than enrollments in the 3- and 4-year-old age group. By drawing from a larger population, combining the centers allowed for more flexibility and better alignment with community needs.

THE EXPERIENCE:

The 18,500-square-foot center is empty from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m., and officials are exploring the possibility of renting out a large meeting room, along with the center's commercial kitchen, to community groups and others as an additional source of revenue. They have also considered doing weekend drop-in care to serve the tourist community, allowing parents to enjoy an evening out in Door County. Thanks to the merger, the new center was also able to achieve some savings based on scale.

"Both of the centers are at capacity now, and both have waiting lists," Kohnle says. "The piece we're working on now is trying to get more nontraditional money into the child care center so that we can continue to pay our employees well and lower the tuition burden."

The United Way of Door County also built succession planning into the grant, planning to go beyond short-term employee retention and build long-term career pathways in child care. The program aimed to support professional growth and leadership development, including providing opportunities in specialized areas such as American Sign Language and trauma-informed care. "Our goal was for early childhood educators to see this work not just as a job, but as a viable and sustainable career," Kohnle says.

By the end of 2025, about 16 employees took advantage of those opportunities, with more expected to participate by the grant's conclusion in March 2026. The United Way will conduct follow-up evaluations with participants to assess outcomes. "Providing accessible, targeted training not only strengthens individual educators but also increases organizational stability and continuity or care for children and families," she adds.

THE RESULTS: 2022-2025

This project's efforts have added

220+ NEW CHILD CARE SLOTS

for Door County families

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. **Closely monitor performance.**
   Ensure that subrecipients written into your grant know what's expected of them. "Make sure they are fully aware of their responsibility and of what those timelines look like," Kohnle says.

2. **Think innovatively.**
   Unconventional problem-solving and planning should be encouraged. For example, the plans to use the new center as a meeting and event venue and offering weekend drop-in care hold promise for the future, demonstrating a way to create additional revenue streams for the center and ensure long-term sustainability, she says.

3. **Incorporate community feedback.**
   From April to October 2020, United Way conducted every-other-week virtual town halls to discuss every aspect of child care in Door County. The meetings helped set community priorities, boost understanding of the issue, and position United Way to seek WIG funding.

THE CONCLUSION:

WIG funding—and the creative thinking and partnerships it sparked—are continuing to strengthen Wisconsin's child care infrastructure, helping working parents find quality care for their kids while allowing them to participate in the workforce. That ability builds stronger families, businesses, and communities. A stronger child care sector supports the next generation of workers that will craft Wisconsin's future.