



CITY OF CRAWFORDSVILLE

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Crawfordsville's Response to Childcare Challenges: Overview Report

I am currently serving my fourth term as Mayor of Crawfordsville, Indiana, having taken office in January of 2012. Crawfordsville is a small city 49 miles west of Indianapolis and is the county seat of Montgomery County, which has a population of approximately 38,000. Crawfordsville was recently ranked the 60th Most Dynamic Micropolitan in the U.S. and the 2nd most dynamic in Indiana. (*2024 Most Dynamic Micropolitans* report by Heartland Forward)

Our community serves as a regional hub for shopping, entertainment, and employment with an emphasis on manufacturing. Our diverse manufacturing base includes companies such as Nucor Steel, Lakeside Book Printers, Tempur Sealy, International Paper, Acuity Brands Lighting, Kroger Manufacturing, Wal-Mart Optical Manufacturing, Closure Systems International, American Innovation, and many others. As a result, an additional 7,000 people commute into our county for employment. We are also home to one of the nation's top-rated liberal arts schools, Wabash College.

Crawfordsville, like many rural communities, faces a severe shortage of high-quality, affordable childcare, with local business leaders initially drawing attention to the issue.

Background

Shortly after taking office, I implemented a robust Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) program that included annual visits with leadership from our larger employers. These visits are centered on the candid conversations to determine what is working well in our community and where businesses are facing challenges, as well as how we can help them not only succeed but consider additional investment and growth in their local facilities. Early on, these conversations were almost always centered on the challenge employers faced in securing an adequate workforce. In addition, as we delved deeper into the complex factors affecting the workforce, employers frequently identified the lack of childcare options as a significant barrier keeping people out of the workforce, or at the very least, contributing to a noticeable loss of productivity as employees struggled with scheduling and stress issues surrounding uncertain childcare options. These discussions provided me with invaluable insight into the importance of adequate childcare options from the perspective of businesses and employers.

Anecdotally, I witnessed first-hand members of our city staff struggling with the same issues. Many of our key staff members are also parents of young children and frequently face the stress of balancing work requirements with the challenges of ensuring their children receive adequate care.



My initial, somewhat naïve, reaction to this issue was to incorporate childcare providers into my business attraction efforts, and I endeavored to convince new providers to locate in our community. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that the business model for childcare was fundamentally flawed, and it wasn't economically feasible to operate a childcare business in a smaller community like ours.

In 2018, the Indiana Public Policy Institute and Early Learning Indiana brought together representatives from across Indiana to convene the Economic Impact of Early Care and Education Research Project Advisory Board which researched and assessed the economic repercussions resulting from childcare-related work disruption. Their research concluded Indiana was losing \$1.1 billion in economic activity every year due to childcare related absenteeism (\$580.7 million) and turnover (\$519 million).

Additionally, the Advisory Board selected our community as one of the focus counties in this study, and the data was eye-opening for everyone. The study concluded that childcare-related issues were resulting in a \$7.9 million impact on businesses in Montgomery County, which in turn led to a \$4.9 million impact on the local economy and a \$808,000 loss of income tax revenue for local governments. This data more than confirmed the message we were getting from business leaders and spurred the community into action.

In response, we joined forces with county government, business leaders, and philanthropic leaders to form a Childcare Task Force. This group aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and explore potential solutions. One of their first steps was to conduct a formal survey of area employers. This survey data found that 4 out of 5 employers (81%) believed that their employees were having difficulty focusing at work, were late, or missed work due to issues related to childcare. Additionally, in 2018 only 3% of local children needing childcare were enrolled in a program classified as high quality by the State of Indiana, and by 2019, Montgomery County was ranked 81st of Indiana's 92 counties for access to quality childcare for children under the age of 6. We found, that in total, there were more than 2,000 children under the age of six in need of care, alongside an additional 1,000 requiring school-age care. This data meant our community was classified as a "childcare desert."

In the meantime, the Montgomery County Community Foundation (MCCF) was engaged in a long-term strategic planning process to determine how it might best focus its philanthropic resources to improve the community. Their conclusion, was to focus resources on addressing the childcare issue. The Childcare Task Force strongly agreed that MCCF was best suited to lead this effort moving forward, and in 2020, the Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition was born.

Creating Solutions

The Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition is a leadership initiative of the Montgomery County Community Foundation. The Coalition's vision is to ensure that all Montgomery County children are ready to succeed in school and life, with a mission of creating a collaborative and



high-quality early childhood education system that supports the development and education of children age 0-5 in Montgomery County.

The Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition is comprised of 12 members from our local community, including representatives from local government, local employers, philanthropic organizations, school administration, and childcare providers. The Coalition meets every other month to support initiatives and ongoing programs that benefit local childcare providers and families with young children. The Coalition created a strategic plan with five top goals: to increase community and parent education, improve accessibility, increase program quality, improve affordability, and strengthen program supports.

Strengthening Support

One of the key strengths of our local effort lies in the commitment to not only add more childcare capacity, but also to support and strengthen our existing childcare providers. This effort has centered around the addition of a full-time Early Learning Director to implement the plan fully and efforts have included:

Increasing Community and Parent Education

Over the past four years, the Coalition has dedicated significant effort to building strong, collaborative relationships within our community to better support local teachers and parents of young families. A key part of this work involves raising awareness and providing education about the importance of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) for children's development and future success. Through regular participation in community events and outreach activities, we engage families, educators, and community members in conversations about how quality ECE benefits children and strengthens families.

Each spring, we host a Family Fun Day, an event designed not only to bring families together for enjoyable activities but also to provide valuable resources and information about early learning opportunities and support services available locally. Our most recent Family Fun Day drew over 500 families, highlighting the growing interest and trust in our work. These events serve as an important platform for community education, helping parents make informed decisions about their children's early care and learning experiences while fostering a supportive network among families and educators.

Improving Accessibility

Despite significant progress in expanding our early learning infrastructure, the demand for child care in our community remains high. Currently, more than 2,000 children under the age of six are in need of care, alongside an additional 1,000 children requiring school-age care. Unfortunately, our community has limited options for before- and after-school programs, as well as for comprehensive summer care—leaving many families with few reliable choices.

Recognizing the urgent need for high-quality child care for school-age children, the Coalition took action. In June 2022, in partnership with the Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation

Department, we launched *Camp Milligan*, a full-day summer camp designed to provide safe, engaging, and enriching experiences for children during all 10 weeks of summer break.

Camp Milligan goes beyond traditional care by incorporating educational programming and hands-on learning. Each day includes structured curriculum activities, cooking lessons, time in a STEM lab, and weekly field trips that broaden children's experiences and keep them actively learning while school is out. Our local school districts are key partners in this effort, providing daily lunch service and transportation for field trips—further demonstrating the collaborative spirit that drives our community initiatives.

A unique strength of Camp Milligan is the quality and dedication of our staff. All camp counselors are education majors, with several having graduated and now serving as teachers in our local school systems. This connection not only enriches the camp experience but also helps cultivate a strong local educator pipeline.

Now in its fourth year, Camp Milligan continues to be one of our most in-demand programs. It consistently reaches full capacity as soon as registration opens and has become a cherished community asset—offering families peace of mind, supporting children's development, and reinforcing our shared commitment to high-quality child care and education.

Increasing Program Quality

Our community has made strategic investments to support families and enhance the early childhood system. With the addition of a full-time Early Learning Director to oversee the execution of our strategic plan, we have achieved a 50% increase in the number of children enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs. (Brighter Futures Indiana, 2025). This growth directly translates to more families gaining access to reliable, developmentally appropriate care—laying a stronger foundation for long-term educational and social outcomes.

The Early Learning Director has provided countless hours of free on-site coaching and technical assistance to local childcare providers on topics spanning everything from program operations, personnel support, and family engagement.

Improving Affordability

Affordability is a key factor in workforce participation rates. Simply put, parents are forced to determine if it's economically feasible to work or if it makes more sense financially to simply stay at home with their children. Unfortunately, we find that often this reality keeps people out of the workforce at a time when their participation is critically needed.

The Coalition has collaborated with local childcare providers to reassess tuition rates and help them become eligible for CCDF and On My Way Pre-K vouchers—critical tools for expanding access to affordable, high-quality early learning. Through targeted grant support and employer partnerships, we've made strides in strengthening childcare businesses and increasing options for working families. However, Indiana's recent funding reductions to CCDF and On My Way Pre-K threaten to reverse this progress. More than 22,000 children are now on the CCDF waitlist statewide, and the number of children served in high-quality preschool settings has dropped from nearly 7,000 to just 2,500. These cuts will leave thousands of families without access to the care they rely on to work and their children need to thrive.

We urging policymakers in Indiana to prioritize early childhood funding and restore access to these vital programs. Investing in childcare is not only a support for families—it's a proven driver of workforce participation, educational equity, and long-term economic growth.

Strengthening Program Supports

One of our greatest achievements over the past four years has been our unwavering commitment to strengthening the early childhood educator workforce. In addition to offering free on-site coaching, our Coalition launched a *Professional Learning Series* designed specifically for local early childhood educators. This series consists of five bi-monthly, in-person workshops each year. Topics and guest speakers are thoughtfully selected based on direct feedback from providers and on-site observation data, ensuring relevance and immediate classroom impact.

Each workshop includes a catered meal and a \$100 teacher supply kit, allowing educators to apply what they've learned directly in their classrooms. Now in its fourth year, the series remains highly popular—registration fills the same day it opens—demonstrating the strong demand for quality, accessible professional development.

We firmly believe that a skilled and supported teacher is one of the most crucial factors in achieving early childhood outcomes. That's why, beyond ongoing training, we're also investing in the future workforce. Our Coalition partners with the local high school's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program to help build a sustainable pipeline of new early childhood educators, and we continue to explore new opportunities to attract individuals into the field.

Strengthening Capacity

A key component of our plan is to grow capacity alongside strengthening our existing providers and improving quality. The focal point of this effort was the development of the Montgomery County Early Learning Center (MCELC).

Much collaborative thought and effort was put into planning the transformational project and we undertook a comprehensive fundraising campaign to construct the center and ensure its financial sustainability.

The Montgomery County Early Learning Center opened this year in Crawfordsville, Indiana, to serve children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old with 124 new quality childcare seats. The new Center is the result of a \$5 million investment made possible through a unique partnership of 16 entities representing businesses, government, and philanthropy. This unique model includes blended funding support from government, philanthropy, and businesses.

The partnership includes City of Crawfordsville, Montgomery County Government, State of Indiana, Montgomery County Community Foundation, North Central Health Services, Early Learning Indiana, Acuity Brands Lighting, DES Engineering, Hoosier Heartland State Bank, Lakeside Book Printers, Nucor Steel, Penguin Random House, Tempur Sealy, Tipmont REMC, Tri-County Bank and Trust, and Wabash College.

The Montgomery County Community Foundation owns the facility and engaged KinderCare Learning Companies to operate the facility.

In addition to the \$5 million raised to construct the facility, four of the partners, which including local government, businesses and the Community Foundation, provide annual funding to subsidize the Center's operations, ensuring that tuition rates are reasonable and affordable for families.



This transformative community project comes at an opportune time and has increased local childcare capacity by over 30%. This is critically important as our area is experiencing record levels of economic development success through private investment and job growth. This record growth is the result of significant investments by employers such as Nucor Steel, Tempur Sealy, Closure Systems International, International Paper, Penguin Random House, Kroger Pace Dairy, Lakeside Book Printers, and others. The addition of these new jobs, alongside existing vacant full-time positions, necessitates our focus on attracting new residents, as well as retaining our younger generations, to meet the workforce needs of our employers. The fact that access to reliable childcare is often a deciding factor for parents when considering where to live and work cannot be overlooked in meeting the need to grow our workforce. Infant and toddler care are difficult to find in many communities and waitlists for services are very common. The Montgomery County Early Learning Center addresses this need, by dedicating 84 of the 124 seats to care of the younger age group. By investing in childcare infrastructure and programs, Crawfordsville and Montgomery County are laying the groundwork for long-term economic prosperity. As an incentive for participation in funding, donors at higher levels received naming rights, advisory board seats, and the opportunity to reserve childcare slots for employees. The latter of which has proven to be a valuable recruiting tool for donor employers.

Workforce Pipeline

We have been working to strengthen our workforce pipeline. This includes establishing the Crawfordsville Career Academy to address incumbent worker training, high school equivalency test preparation, career technical training for high school students, industrial maintenance training, a new apprenticeship program, and Ivy Tech Community College.

However, a significant paradigm shift has occurred with our understanding that early learning must be an essential part of the workforce pipeline effort. It's one of the very first important pieces of ensuring success. There has been considerable research in recent years on the importance of early learning for brain development in young children.

As a result, we are not only addressing the workforce needs of today by allowing parents to work, but we are also helping shape the success of the future workforce, an effort we hope will pay dividends in 15-25 years.

Conclusion

We are resolute in our understanding of the importance of adequate quality childcare to our local economy and employers. We have come to understand, through our strong relationships with businesses, that this is a key factor in determining their ultimate success or failure.

There are many factors affecting the challenging childcare landscape, and the Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition's Strategic Plan and Five Goals are designed to positively address these factors to the extent possible. This model has strengthened our existing providers, adds capacity, improves quality, and helps with affordability.

Our model is unique because it represents a totally collaborative community approach. We have come together as government, philanthropy, and business to address a challenge that is critical to our future success, with the understanding that none of our sectors could adequately address it on our own. Business can't solve this in a rural community like ours, as the numbers

simply don't work, and neither government nor philanthropy has the financial depth to solve it without business support. As a result, we came together as one team and as a community.

Crawfordsville's unique data-informed, coalition-led, and partnership-driven approach addresses many facets of the childcare challenge, aiming to ensure community success, business success, workforce success, and, ultimately, the success of our next generation.

It stands as a promising model for other communities facing similar challenges and we are always ready to share information from our journey with other communities.


This committee, and the federal government, can help our work in Crawfordsville and rural communities like ours by supporting working parents through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the Employer-Provided Child Care Credit (Section 45 F). These programs provide parents with school choice, enable employers in our community to have access to a stable workforce and incentivize businesses, small and large, to invest in making childcare more affordable for their workforce.

I want to commend both the House and Senate for including language to enhance the Employer-Provided Child Care Credit in their respective reconciliation bills. The increase will provide local employers in my community with the ability to receive a credit of 50 cents on every dollar invested in childcare.

These programs help us close the gap for working families, ensure an adequate workforce for the businesses that make our communities thrive, and the most important factor in our future success – our children who will comprise the workforce of the future.

In Crawfordsville and Montgomery County, Indiana, we have stepped up collectively as a team and have made great strides, but truly need Federal support alongside us as we face the evolving challenges moving forward.

Respectfully Submitted,



Todd D. Barton, Mayor
Crawfordsville, Indiana
June 20, 2025