

Child Advocates

Making a Difference

Advocates Secure Funds to Improve Child Care Environments

In the ongoing struggle to provide low-income children with quality child care environments, NACA member Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has helped to establish the Rhode Island Child Care Facilities Fund (RICCFF). Helping child care providers to help themselves, the fund provides assistance in the form of capital, capacity building, and technical expertise to ensure that the facilities in which children are cared for are adequate, healthy and safe. With creativity, collaboration, and dedication, RI KIDS COUNT has taken a lead role in addressing an often-overlooked piece of the child care puzzle, improving the quality of child care space for the state's young children.

Recognizing the Importance of Space

In 1998, Rhode Island passed sweeping legislation that guaranteed child care subsidies to all eligible families at or below 225 percent of the poverty level and improved support for the state's child care system. With increased access to child care came increased demand for child care facilities, and RI KIDS COUNT recognized that the demand would only grow. In the first three years after the child care legislation was passed, the number of children

receiving child care subsidies doubled, and the amount of space available to serve those children became limited.

RI KIDS COUNT began to consider ways to meet the growing need for child care space while maintaining a commitment to improving child care quality. During their involvement with the passage of the 1998 child care legislation, Starting Right, they learned of some of the best practices used to improve child care quality around the country. One such practice was a child care facilities fund. Rather than merely increasing the quantity of child care centers, facilities funds enabled existing child care centers to address their needs for improved and upgraded facilities, contributing to the overall quality of child care programs. In this way, centers operating on limited budgets could for the first time have professional assistance in assessing their space and facilities needs, as well as funding assistance for the full range of projects, from routine repairs and safety improvements to building additions or whole new centers.

"For too long we have overlooked where our smallest citizens spend a large part of their day," notes Rhode Island KIDS COUNT executive director Elizabeth Burke Bryant. "A

high quality facility is just one piece of the puzzle for high quality child care, but it's a very important piece."

Raising Support for the Fund

Realizing that a child care facilities fund could be effective in Rhode Island, advocates from RI KIDS COUNT began to approach potential collaborators about how to make it happen. First they reached out to the Rhode Island Foundation

and received enthusiastic support. The Rhode Island Foundation joined with RI KIDS COUNT to spearhead the organizational effort and committed \$1.25 million in funding. Together, RI KIDS COUNT and the Rhode Island Foundation identified the need for an intermediary organization

that could help in overseeing the fund. The Rhode Island Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) joined their partnership as that intermediary organization, bringing years of experience in managing housing initiatives to bear on child care facilities improvement. They also brought technical support from the national office of LISC, which has assisted in the development of other child care facilities funds across the nation.

The Rhode Island Child Care Facilities Fund is expected to create or improve child care space for more than 2,500 children over the next five years.

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With a strong partnership established, RI KIDS COUNT, the Rhode Island Foundation, and Rhode Island LISC set a fundraising goal of \$4.7 million for the first five-year period of the fund. They first contacted the state Department of Human Services to see if state support for the fund could be secured. After learning that the fund would provide technical assistance in addition to funding assistance, DHS decided that the fund would be a good investment for the state and matched the Rhode Island Foundation's funding commitment, which accounted for over half of the partnership's funding goal. The Rhode Island Foundation reached out to other potential funders, securing commitments from United Way, the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation, Hasbro Charitable Trust, and others. In a surprising turn of events, U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee secured \$400,000 worth of federal appropriations for the fund, placing the partnership over its initial funding goal. Thanks to the persistence of all those involved, the partnership had exceeded its original goal by raising more than \$5 million after only a year of fundraising, and they were well-positioned to launch the fund.

That launch took place in January of 2002, and established three primary purposes of the fund: 1) access to capital; 2) capacity building and training; and 3) technical assistance. With LISC overseeing the administration of the fund, the RICCF draws on the resources provided by its public-private partnership to assist child care providers in these three different ways. Providers receive access to capital in the form of low-interest loans for major construction and renovation projects, and small grants for planning projects, archi-

tectural drawings, environmental impact studies, and legal fees. Capacity building helps providers to strengthen connections between the quality of their facilities and the quality of their programs. This is done through workshops, information dissemination, planning sessions, and strategy-building. Finally, technical assistance in the form of RICCF staff and consultants is available to help in improvement, relocation, or expansion projects. Consultants can provide ongoing assistance and are available at no cost to the providers.

By drawing upon the experience of others and mobilizing support among diverse stakeholders, RI KIDS COUNT has helped to implement a source of funding and support for child care providers for years to come.

A Strong Start

Since the fund was launched, it has approved three major loans and awarded nine planning grants, distributing over \$1.5 million in funding for child care providers in Rhode Island. The loans are being used for construction and renovation projects that will impact over 400 children, a third of whom will fill new child care slots. The planning grants are expected to impact over 1,100 children, most through center-based child care providers.

The RICCF is conducting site visits and meeting with 23 additional organizations or individuals in order to discuss potential facilities projects and provide technical assistance. These organizations and individuals are diversely located around the state and represent an array of programs, from large non-profit organizations to small for-profit centers and community development corporations.

Additionally, the RICCF has made \$75,000 in grant funds available to family child care providers for space improvements and equipment. These funds are expected to impact approximately 100 family child care homes. The RICCF is also in the process of planning several training opportunities, including a training program for family child care providers, a child care facility symposium, a workshop to be offered at early childhood conferences, and a training program for individuals interested in starting their own child care center. The RICCF entered 2003 in a strong financial position, which is expected to continue throughout the first five years of its existence, thanks to the strong and diverse funding base.

Putting Children First

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has helped to place the state at the forefront of quality child care initiatives in the nation, and the Child Care Facilities Fund is yet another example of their tireless work on behalf of children. By drawing upon the experience of others and mobilizing support among diverse stakeholders, RI KIDS COUNT has helped to implement a source of funding and support for child care providers for years to come. In doing so, they have ensured that Rhode Island is truly investing in the future.

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