

Small County Success with Child Care

Audubon County Children's Nest

It all started in January of 2013 with a conversation between a state legislator and the local Early Childhood Iowa Area Director when the question was raised on how do we grow Iowa's fifth smallest county-Audubon County. A solution: add child care spaces. At that time, it was hard to know that 2020 Audubon County would have a four-year-old child care center utilizing a vacant wing of an adult care center serving 50 children with a waiting list for incoming infants. From one conversation, a strong group of young professionals in the county and the support of early childhood professionals a center was born.

How it happened: In May 2013, a working group of parents, community leaders and early childhood professionals met in to address Audubon County's deficit in available childcare. At any one time, approximately 20% of Audubon County families with children ages 0-5 are seeking childcare options (Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral). However, in 2014 the county had a shortage of 61 childcare slots, forcing many families to forgo otherwise available work, or rely on friends or family to help piece childcare together. These statistics do not include school age children and do not account for the expected future retirement of several current in home providers. From this working group, a 501(c) 3 nonprofit was formed in 2014, named the Audubon County Early Childhood Organization (ACECO). The mission of ACECO is to support safe, quality and reliable early childhood care in Audubon County improving the standard of living for all families. In 2015, ACECO began by supporting those already providing early childhood care in Audubon County and increased the availability of high quality childcare by opening the county's first and only childcare center, The Children's Nest. This childcare center addressed the countywide childcare shortage by providing an additional 45 quality childcare slots and employing the equivalent of 7 full time staff.

In 2015, approximately 20% of Audubon County families with children ages 0-5 were seeking childcare options (Child Care Resource & Referral). According to Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral, 89% of families in Audubon County with children under six have two parents working at least part-time (or the only parent, in the case of single-parent households). In 2014, there was a deficit of 61 childcare slots in Audubon County.

Most children, families, and childcare providers served by the Children's Nest are residents of Audubon County. Audubon County has a population of under 6,000 people. The median household income is \$48,313 and approximately 15% of all residents live below the poverty level (US Census Bureau) many of them being children. Audubon County is home to two school districts, both of which report extremely high free and reduced lunch numbers. For example, almost half (49%) of elementary students at Audubon Elementary School come from families with incomes low enough to qualify for free or reduced lunches; 38% of all student's district wide qualify.

Research indicates that a child's quality of life and the contributions he or she will make to society can be directly traced to their first 2,000 days. High quality early education yields higher graduation rates, reduced crime, higher earnings, and better jobs. As a result, economists

estimate that every dollar invested in early education produces a 10 percent Return on Investment (ROI) through increased personal achievement and social productivity. If we invest in high quality early care, health, education, and family support programs for all Iowa families, we will empower more children to reach their full potential as adults (Early Childhood Iowa).

In Audubon County they came together and have provided a huge opportunity for the successful implementation of a childcare center as many young families consider moving to the area. Without adequate childcare options, families struggle to find openings, especially if they have multiple children or infants.

Early Childhood Professionals that played a part in development of the center:

- Early Childhood Iowa Area Director and Board members
- Early Childhood Iowa funded Child Care Advisor
- Child Care Resource and Referral Staff
- DHS Licensing Consultant
- First Children Finance resource were used
- ISU Extension Staff for training
- Child Development Home Providers

Community Members involved included:

- Audubon County Economic Development
- Numerous local business provided financial seed money of over \$150,000
- Audubon Community Schools
- Audubon County Medical Center
- Audubon Public Health
- Audubon Community Foundation
- Friendship Home where the center is located

Other grants received

- Iowa West Foundation
- Partnerships 4 Families ECI

The Children's Nest was honored to host Governor Reynolds and Lt Governor Gregg in July of 2019. They saw firsthand the success the center has had and heard from local business leaders the importance of the child care center to their employees and recruit of employees.

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