

WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO SUCCESSFUL POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE IN FOUNTAIN VALLEY?

What Those Involved Had to Say



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OVERVIEW

Policy and systems change is necessary to confront root causes of social issues and inequities that plague our local communities. Addressing these social issues (substance misuse, violence, housing insecurity, food insecurity, etc.) leads communities towards experiencing better health outcomes, more community connectedness, and safer, more stable homes. Policy and systems change is complex and challenging, but it can be done, as shown by the creation of Fountain Valley Childcare Association, Education, and Support (CARES). That change did not happen spontaneously. Many people in the community contributed towards the success of these efforts, often over a long period of time. We hope to reflect some of that work throughout this report so the work can be celebrated and learned from to inform future policy and systems change efforts in the community and across others.

In the fall of 2023, the Community Organizing for Prevention (COFP) evaluation team conducted a series of interviews to learn more about what contributed to successful systems change efforts within Fountain Valley. Some people were COFP coalition members, others were familiar with COFP but not actively involved, and some were members of a COFP strategy workgroup. These individuals represented different ages, racial/ethnic groups, sectors, and identity backgrounds and spoke from their perspectives. Taken together, these people told a broader story about what contributed to successful policy and systems change in their community.

The COFP evaluation team is grateful to the community members who participated in interviews and shared their candid experiences around this process in their community.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE IN FOUNTAIN VALLEY:

The creation of Fountain Valley CARES was a huge win in El Paso County and changed the ways in which the community can come together around an issue that had been identified. Prior to the formation of Fountain Valley CARES in December 2022, childcare providers in the area attended a Communities That Care (CTC) meeting with the intention of sharing their experiences as providers around the issue of childcare. As important stakeholders in the matter, these childcare providers saw themselves as powerful advocates for addressing this issue in the community. During a focus group, coalition members identified that childcare was something the community wanted to prioritize and address with an informed action plan, as it was an issue that was impacting many community members in various ways. These childcare providers' attendance and advocacy catalyzed the efforts of actively engaging the Fountain CTC coalition in focusing on this identified strategy of increasing access to quality childcare in their community.

With the collaboration and support of COFP staff, these passionate providers were able to apply for a Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) grant to successfully obtain the funds to launch their own non-profit organization, which would house an innovative lending library (a library for new providers to borrow items as they are starting their business), and provide support to families and caregivers in finding quality childcare services in their area. In May 2023, the organization began expanding its membership. Currently, 136 registered members have access to resources and support offered by the organization.

What was once seen as an issue that only impacted parents and families is now seen as an issue that is important to the wellbeing of the entire community. With its mission to "recruit and retain high quality, licensed childcare providers through resources and education in the Fountain Valley", families and providers now know where to turn for support and connection to resources related to quality childcare. This is systems change!

WHAT SOCIAL ISSUE DOES THIS IMPACT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOUNTAIN VALLEY RESIDENTS?

Access to quality childcare/licensed childcare providers:

Improves outcomes for youth.

High quality early childhood programs and services designed to meet the childcare needs of families can positively impact the development of children. More specifically, quality childcare can promote academic success over the lifespan by supporting healthy brain development, acquisition of motor and language skills, healthy socialization, and learned self-regulation.¹

Builds readiness for early childhood education success.

There were children in the community who needed access to settings that could offer various socialization and educational development opportunities, especially before entering the public school system. A lack of quality childcare settings meant children lacked these opportunities and struggled more when they entered traditional educational settings.

The lack of providers leaves some families without childcare.

The demand for childcare was greater than the availability of providers, making it a challenge for parents/guardians to find appropriate care for their children during the day. This was also a barrier for parents/guardians who wanted to work or further their education but could not find adequate care for their children to do so.

¹ NIDA. 2016, March 7. Table of Contents. Retrieved from www.nida.nih.gov/publications/principles-substance-abuse-prevention-early-childhood/table-contents



A lack of protection creates harmful gaps.

For families. There were few childcare providers who had the necessary training and certifications that could affirm that they operated under safe regulations and guidelines. Parents could not trust which providers were aware of various risks and dangers that could be present in a childcare facility and know who was or wasn't trained on how to avoid and/or address those risks when necessary.

For providers. There were no protections in place to support owners and staff of childcare facilities. A lack of protection sometimes left providers feeling more vulnerable to claims of malpractice. This possibility can act as a barrier for people opening their own childcare facilities.

Small businesses were faced with restrictions.

The city had imposed zoning restrictions on childcare facilities and other small businesses, posing a barrier for folks wanting to open their own childcare facilities. Colorado's Senate Bill 23-213 highlighted that the county and city zoning codes would not be able to supersede the state restrictions. Members of Fountain Valley CARES worked with local officials to ensure these facilities were opened legally, without the local zoning code and Homeowner's Association (HOA) restrictions. It was a labor-intensive process that led to successful outcomes for local childcare providers.

Families lacked information, support, and awareness.

Parents did not know what was available and where to find resources and support related to childcare. This led to confusion and a lack of awareness in the community, which created barriers for many families attempting to access childcare. The establishment of Fountain Valley CARES helped to create a central hub where families knew they could access the support and resources they needed to help meet their childcare needs.

Providers had limited to no support.

Those running childcare centers or those interested in doing so needed support. Many did not know what certifications and training were available to them to help ensure they were operating under the safest conditions possible. There was also confusion around the process of having a childcare center reimbursed by available state funds, which could make childcare more affordable and accessible to families in the community's lack of awareness and confusion would prevent potential childcare providers from opening their own quality childcare facilities.



HERE'S WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAD TO SAY ABOUT WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT AND SUCCESS OF FOUNTAIN VALLEY CARES:

The power of passionate individuals coming together toward one goal.

A driving factor for success was the presence of a handful of individuals in the community who were passionate about the availability of quality childcare services. The work being done around this initiative helped provide a space and structure to bring these individuals together to work toward a common goal, which resulted in the creation of Fountain Valley CARES. Those individuals realized they had power to create the change they wanted to see in the community.

Awareness around the issue.

Prior to the start of this initiative, many people in the community were unaware that access to quality childcare was an issue, or why it was an issue that needed to be addressed. By engaging not just parents, but youth and other community members as well, about the prevalence of this issue and how it impacted the community beyond a family or caregiver's household, those organizing around the issue were able to engage the individuals and organizations needed to create change in the community.

The effort that was put into the creation of Fountain Valley CARES itself helped to raise awareness around the issue and why it was important for the community's overall health. Such efforts included the sharing of Fountain Valley CARES' various initiatives, raising awareness within the community around the barriers to childcare that parents were experiencing, and encouraging youth and others to see the benefit in becoming a childcare business owner or entrepreneur. Fountain Valley CARES has also maintained a presence in the public eye by presenting at conferences and by building a website to share the work they are doing in

supporting other communities and regions across Colorado in establishing similar organizations in their area.

Organizational partnerships.

Without the involvement of organizations such as COFP/CTC, the Salvation Army, and the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CIRCLE grant program) Fountain Valley CARES would not have become a formal association. These organizations provided the necessary financial support and staff that helped coordinate and provide structure for the initiative. Because of these relationships, Fountain Valley CARES is currently partnering with Garfield County Public Health to share their successes in this work, along with hosting pre-licensing classes in Spanish for community members interested in becoming childcare providers.

City support.

While zoning restrictions are important for ensuring that certain small businesses are operating in a safe manner, some of these zoning restrictions were seen as unnecessary barriers to those wanting to operate quality childcare facilities. The city was able to hear these concerns and made adjustments that allow for those more community members to open their own quality child centers.

HERE IS WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAID WERE CHALLENGES IN THE SYSTEMS CHANGE PROCESS:

Inaccessible meetings.

It was mentioned that meeting times were not conducive for people who worked during regular business hours. This limited the number of people who could support the work, and limited the diversity of voices that could aid in the success of the initiative. To address this barrier, discussions took place around moving the meeting times to accommodate different schedules. Fountain Valley CARES also took into consideration the schedule of other local community organizing meetings to ensure that all members were able to be active in as many meetings as possible, including CTC meetings.



Here is what community members said about how the support of COFP influenced the initiative's success:

Facilitated dialogue.

COFP brought in staff who helped to start and sustain the conversation around the issue. While there were some conversations in the community surrounding the issue, these conversations were often in private or never went much further. The COFP process was seen as a sounding board that allowed these conversations to advance toward action.

Provided structure.

The CTC framework provided an organized approach to work collectively toward a common goal, with organizations or individuals not being in competition with or separate from one another. As a result, the childcare strategy team was created in this space. This strategy team ultimately was the start of Fountain Valley CARES. The CTC coalition continues to be seen as a valuable space where members of both CTC and the strategy team continue to work together, coordinating meeting times and collectively engaging in work being done across both initiatives.

OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD:

Those involved can continue to press for change at the state level.

Those involved in Fountain Valley CARES noted that more protections need to be put into place to protect childcare providers from false claims and accusations, as these unsubstantiated claims can cause providers to shut their businesses down to protect their own wellbeing and livelihood. It was also mentioned that Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) reimbursement rates are so low that many providers cannot afford to enter into a contract with the CCCAP. This means individuals who want to fill that gap in the community are unable to due financial constraints. It is important to continue educating and advocating around these issues at the state level.

Continue to advocate for more resources.

The population in Fountain Valley is growing rapidly. The gap between resource availability and population growth continues to widen. There is a need for a focus on bringing more resources to the community to meet the growing demands of the population. Those who have power and connections in the community can continue to seek the appropriate funding needed to fill these resource gaps.

Think about future generations.

Fountain Valley CARES is currently working to expand and raise awareness to community members about involving and considering employment with babysitter pools, substitutes, and assistant childcare providers, along with encouraging more people to open childcare services within their own homes. This is a great opportunity to raise awareness among the younger generations that early childcare and early childhood education are great career areas to invest time and energy into. When appropriate, they involve teens in the work being done within the community. Doing so can help build future childcare providers and community leaders who can sustain efforts moving forward.

One system change can lead to other changes.

The creation of Fountain Valley CARES has shown the community that change is possible. Members of Fountain Valley CARES feel more confident and capable of advocating for change in their community. Some members have even gone on to participate in the legislative process at the state level, as they recognize that these decisions have impacts at the local level. Keep this momentum moving, learn from it, and tap into it to address other issues that were identified within the community.

