

Strategic System Building

Better Together



ANNUAL REPORT
2026

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Funding provided by the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services through the Child Care and Development Fund

Better Together Means Shared Direction

Together, we are moving Iowa child care forward.

Across Iowa, providers, families, communities, and state partners worked together to strengthen the child care system through coordinated services, reliable data, shared tools, and responsive support.

As a trusted connector, Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) helps bring people, resources, and expertise together to support quality child care and improve access for Iowa families.

The stories and data featured throughout this report are just a snapshot of what is possible when Iowa partners work toward a common goal. We are grateful for those partnerships and look forward to continuing this work together.

Respectfully,
On behalf of Iowa's Five CCR&R Regions

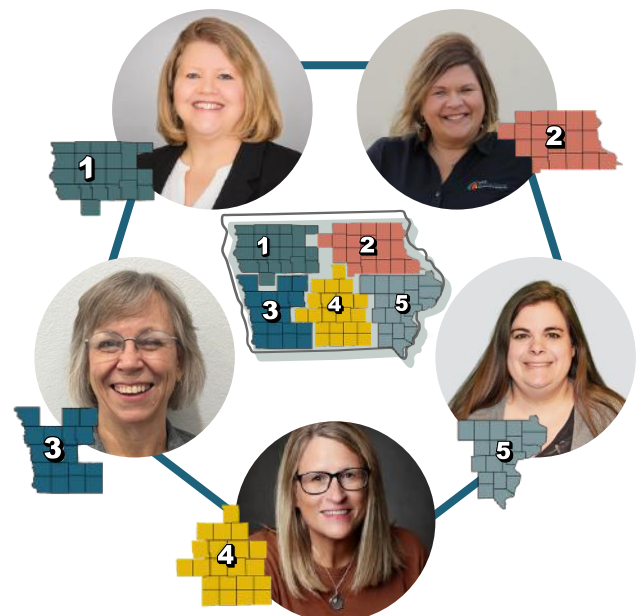
Melissa Juhl Northwest (Region 1)

Mary Janssen Northeast (Region 2)

Deb Martens Southwest (Region 3)

Lora Patton Central (Region 4)

Becky White Southeast (Region 5)



Funding provided by the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services through the Child Care and Development Fund

Statewide coordination. Local support.

1

Quarterly Collaboration Meetings

CCR&R staff participate in quarterly collaboration meetings with Iowa HHS and statewide partners—including HHS staff (policy, center and home compliance, registration), Child Care Nurse Consultants, and Child Care Collaborative of Iowa Financial Management Coaches. These meetings strengthen relationships, promote consistency, and support alignment across services. Each quarter, teams share updates, discuss emerging themes, and address questions to ensure coordinated, high-quality support for Iowa's child care system.

2

CCR&R Staff Investment

Beginning in State Fiscal Year 2026, Iowa HHS strengthened its partnership with CCR&R by investing in staffing strategies that reduced consultant caseloads and increased statewide capacity to support child care programs. Using a standardized formula, HHS balanced and lowered caseloads across regions, ensuring consultants had the time and resources needed to provide high-quality technical assistance, coaching, and responsive support. This investment has enhanced the consistency and effectiveness of services delivered to child care providers statewide.

3

Community Development

Building on statewide coordination efforts, the Community Development team facilitates partnerships among economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, community leaders, and child care advocates. Through community engagement, collaborative planning, and data-informed discussions, the team helps communities identify child care challenges, explore solutions, and strengthen early childhood systems that support children, families, employers, and local economies.



5 Regions working through one statewide system.

Statewide Impact Impressions

FY26 Snapshot of Support Across Iowa

Families Connected With Child Care Information

549

Unduplicated Families Served

Technical Assistance Services Provided

35,840

Consultations + Visits

IQ4K-Rated Programs

605

Registered Programs + Licensed Programs + Department of Ed. Programs

New Child Care Spaces Supported

1,996

CDH + CCA slots of care added due to new regulated home child care businesses



“Thank you so much for your support throughout our journey of opening our new center in Carroll, Iowa. The support you provided was absolutely amazing. I truly appreciate everything and look forward to our continued partnership.”

-Bright Horizons Children's Centers LLC

Multiple Pathways to Support for Families

Parent Services & Outreach

Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) Parent Services helps families navigate child care options through personalized referrals, trusted information, and resources that support informed decision-making. In FY26, outreach efforts expanded through partnerships with hospitals and clinics across Iowa, increasing awareness of CCR&R services and helping families access the support they need to find quality child care.

Family Access at a Glance

Referrals completed	Translation services used	Hospitals & Clinics Contacted
574	38	112

“As a foster parent, I have used CCR&R services multiple times and am so thankful for the support I’ve received. The information and guidance I was given made a real difference for our family”

-Foster Family, Polk County

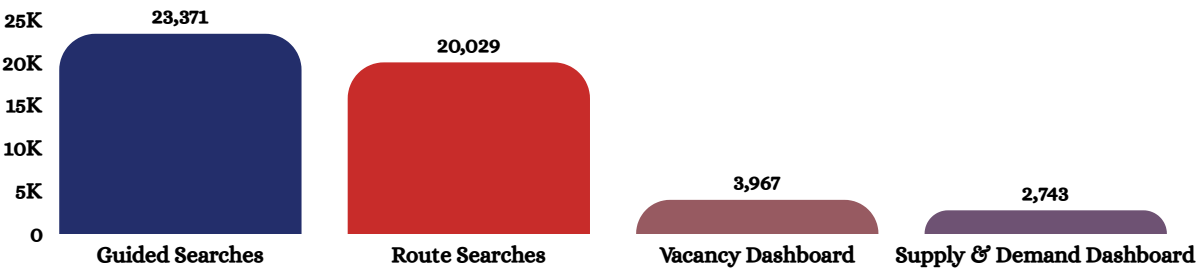
Iowa Child Care Connect



Iowa Child Care Connect (C3) is an easy-to-use interactive tool that provides near, real-time information to support CCR&R efforts in:

- Helping parents locate child care
- Increasing visibility for child care programs by highlighting available openings, allowing programs to fill spaces more quickly and strengthen financial stability
- Assisting communities in understanding the child care landscape through data on current supply, demand, and gaps across different age groups

Child care programs play a vital role by providing monthly data on their operating capacity and available openings. This information powers the C3 Child Care Data Dashboards and Child Care Search. These insights support not only families, but also community planning and decision-making around child care needs.



Easing Registration Stress

Starting a Child Development Home Business

In fall 2025, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) worked together to streamline the process for starting a Registered Child Development Home (CDH) business in Iowa.

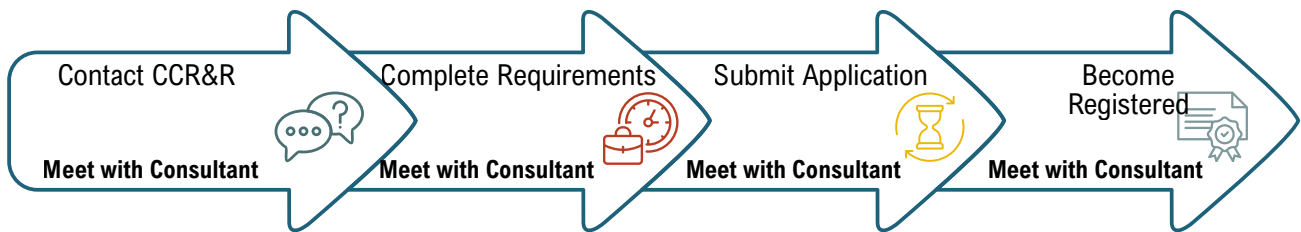
After reviewing the existing process and listening to feedback from child care providers who felt getting started took too long, HHS and CCR&R narrowed the steps while keeping the process provider-driven.

Individuals interested in starting a CDH business can begin by contacting a CCR&R consultant through the CCR&R website. The consultant provides the application, explains the process, and helps applicants understand requirements that may include:

- **Background checks for adults living in the home where child care will be provided**
- **Required professional development**
- **Permission to provide child care in the residence**
- **Other requirements needed to complete registration**

With strong partnerships between CCR&R consultants and individuals applying to become CDH providers, the process can move forward in as little as six weeks.

This streamlined approach helps make the registration process easier to navigate and supports individuals as they take the first steps toward opening a Child Development Home in Iowa.



Registration

applications processed & submitted



58	Child Care Homes Accepting Child Care Assistance (CCA)	209	registered child development home (CDH) applications.	264	regulated home child care businesses added to Iowa's communities
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Supporting Program Growth Across Iowa



What is *Growing Iowa*?

The *Growing Iowa* Program helps child care programs address identified needs and support ongoing growth and improvement. Funding is awarded based on documented program needs and eligible purchases, helping licensed child care centers and child development homes strengthen compliance, advance quality improvement efforts, and better serve children and families.

Available in all **99 Iowa counties**, *Growing Iowa* funding supports two key areas:

Regulatory & Compliance Improvements and **Quality Improvement Initiatives**.

**Providers awarded
Growing Iowa funds**

573

Partnership in Action

Growing Iowa funding helps programs address health, safety, and licensing requirements.

Previously, our program was licensed to serve children ages two and older. However, through conversations with families and community members, we identified a significant and growing need for infant care within our area. While we were eager to expand our services, the financial investment required to meet infant licensing standards presented a major barrier.

The *Growing Iowa* Grant provided the essential funding needed to purchase required infant equipment and materials to meet state licensure regulations. As a result of this grant, we are now proudly licensed to serve up to eight infants. This expansion has allowed us to better support working families in our community and provide high-quality, nurturing care to our youngest learners.

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity this grant has provided. Without this support, we would not have been able to meet the needs of our families or expand access to infant care.

-Shelby Kooima, Director
First Steps Academy Childcare Center



“The *Growing Iowa* Grant has had a transformational impact on our child care center.”

-Shelby Kooima, Director
First Steps Academy Childcare Center

The statewide story becomes real in local moments

Partnership in Action

CCR&R has been an incredibly valuable partner in supporting our programs, staff, and families. Through training opportunities, guidance, collaboration, and ongoing support, they have helped strengthen the quality of care we provide across all of our centers.

Amber, in particular, has played a huge role in supporting our teams through the IQ4K process across multiple centers. She has provided guidance every step of the way while also serving as a true cheerleader for our teachers — observing classrooms, offering meaningful feedback, and helping staff build confidence and skills within their roles.

She has also helped strengthen our PBIS cohort team by guiding us through implementing PBIS program-wide with both staff and families. Her ability to collaborate, encourage growth, and provide practical strategies has made a lasting impact on our programs.

One of the greatest strengths of CCRR is their willingness to truly partner with providers — not just offer services, but actively support solutions that help programs grow and better meet the needs of children and families in our communities. We are incredibly grateful for the continued partnership, support, and investment in the child care field.

- Daniela Haas, Regional Director of the Crittenton Centers
Child Development Centers



Technical Assistance Makes a Difference

“CCR&R has given me many choices of ongoing positive opportunities to grow in my business. Their building team of kind, knowledgeable, and encouraging individuals makes learning a whole lot of fun! Thank you!”

-Tracy Ehlers, Little Wonders
Carroll, IA

Advancing Quality Through Support

“My IQ4K specialist and my consultant collaborate really well together. Between both of them I feel very supported working on IQ4K and program goals as a whole. I truly owe the success of our IQ4K application to the wonderful support they provide my program.”

- Anonymous
I-Consult Survey Respondent

Consultation Topics

Top 6 technical assistance (TA) topics

- IQ4K
- Business Policies and Practices
- Training Consultation
- Growing Iowa
- Support Registration
- Support Licensing

Collaborative efforts provide valuable opportunities



CCR&R **Child Care Consultants** recently partnered to support a local child care program in making intentional environmental changes that improved classroom organization, engagement, and daily routines. Experienced and newer consultants worked side by side with program staff to assess the learning environment, identify opportunities for improvement, and implement meaningful changes designed to better meet the needs of children and educators.

The collaboration not only benefited the program but also created valuable learning opportunities for CCR&R staff. One newer consultant reflected, “Through this experience, we worked as a team, bringing different perspectives and experiences. This helped build my knowledge, provided helpful tips and strategies, and deepened my understanding of the center’s needs and goals.”

The impact was immediate. Following the consultation, program staff reported noticeable improvements in both their preschool and school-age classrooms. With 15 to 20 school-age children attending during spring break, the new room layout helped children quickly engage in activities and transition smoothly throughout the day. Staff shared their appreciation for the support, noting that the more thoughtfully designed environments created calmer, more effective spaces for learning and play.

This success story highlights how collaboration, mentorship, and consultation services strengthen both early childhood programs and the professionals who support them.

Strengthening Programs Through Partnership

“State investments, CCR&R support, IQ4K, WAGES, and T.E.A.C.H. have helped us expand high-quality child care, achieve a Level 4 IQ4K rating, support staff education, and add 55 new child care spaces, benefiting children, families, employers, and our community.”

*-Darcy Sundall, Director/Owner,
Carousel Preschool & Daycare*

Confidence and Peace of Mind

“Knowing we have our Child Care Consultant and Behavioral Health Specialist in our corner gives us confidence and peace of mind. Their guidance, resources, and dedication have strengthened our staff, enhanced our program, and made a real difference for the children we serve.”

-Center Director Polk County

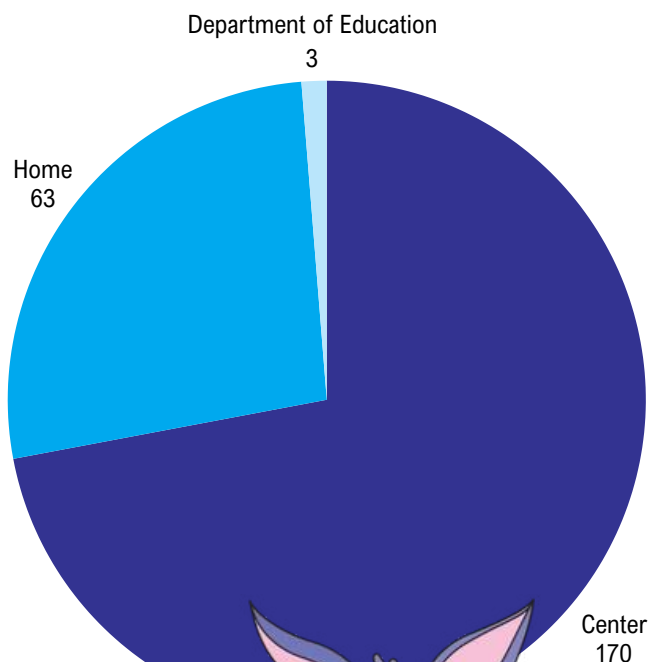
Supporting Continuous Improvement



QUALITY SUPPORT

- **Iowa Quality for Kids (IQ4K) is the state's child care quality rating system**
- CCR&R supports providers and families with tools, guidance, and resources.
- Programs earn recognition by meeting child care quality standards and strengthening daily practices.
- Kaya the Quality Kangaroo helps children, families, and providers learn about quality care in a fun and engaging way.

IQ4K Applications submitted in FY26



Follow Kaya
on Facebook!



Partnership in action

With demand for high-quality child care outpacing supply, sustained support remains essential to keep classrooms open, recruit and retain trained educators, and maintain the quality benchmarks recognized by IQ4K.

Our center is deeply grateful for the grant funding that helped launch our first center and made this growth possible.

As you consider future child care and early learning policy, we encourage continued investment in:

- Capacity expansion grants that help add seats where waitlists are longest
- Workforce scholarships and wage supports tied to credentials and degrees
- Quality improvement initiatives aligned with IQ4K to sustain high standards

-Darcy Sundall, Director
Carousel Preschool & Daycare Center

Professional Development Partnership

FY26 PD At a Glance

Total Attendance

7,945

Increase in Attendance

69.29%

2025: 4,693 attendance
2026: 7,945 attendance

Satisfaction Survey Score

99%

(Knowledge & Understanding)

- **Early Childhood (EC) Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)**
 - Supports positive behavior practices and social-emotional development in early learning environments.
 - **Self Study now available**
- **ChildNet 3.0**
 - Builds foundational business and operating skills for child care providers.
- **Leaders in Early Education Administration Development (LEEAD) Licensing Compliance: Lead with Confidence**
 - Develops leadership and licensing compliance knowledge for current and aspiring directors.
- **Program for Infant/Toddler Care of Iowa (PITC)**
 - Focuses on responsive care and healthy development for infants and toddlers.
- **School Age Matters (SAM)**
 - Addresses the unique needs of school-age children and out-of-school-time programs.

Coaching for Professional Development Credit

Child Care Resource & Referral now offers **Coaching for Professional Development Credit**, an Iowa-approved opportunity that allows eligible child care providers and teachers to earn professional development credit through individualized coaching.

Using **Practice-Based Coaching** and a **Guided Action Plan**, participants work one-on-one with a certified coach to strengthen teaching practices, professional skills, and behaviors that support positive outcomes for children.

Participants earn **3 hours of professional development credit** for each completed Guided Action Plan topic. Coaching hours may count toward annual licensing, registration, and IQ4K professional development requirements.

Eligible training series include ChildNet 3.0, EC-PBIS PK, and EC-PBIS IT.

Coaching for Credit

30 participants total

More Than Credit -Through observation, feedback, reflection, and goal setting, coaching helps participants apply learning in practice while strengthening teaching quality and program outcomes.

Building Better Outcomes Together

Behavioral Health Services remain a valuable resource for Iowa child care programs, providing consultation, coaching, training, and practical strategies to support children, families, and educators. Through relationship-based support, **Behavioral Health Specialists help programs strengthen classroom environments, build staff confidence, and promote positive outcomes for children.**

Lucas County

“CCR&R's Behavioral Health team has helped our program experience tremendous growth. Through individualized training, resources, and behavior plans tailored to children's needs, they have positively impacted our classrooms. We are grateful for these no-cost services and hope they continue for years to come.”

-Lucas County Center Director

Behavioral Health Interactions

Based on reported consultation (TA) topics

2,042 Behavior Support Consultations

1,340 EC-PBIS TA Supports

Partnership in action

A family child care provider recently shared how a resource from the **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Family Child Care Toolkit** has made a meaningful impact in her program. During a coaching visit, the toolkit was reviewed and practical implementation strategies were discussed. During a follow-up conversation several weeks later, the provider enthusiastically described how she had integrated Meddy Teddy into her classroom.

Each morning, she places Meddy Teddy in a new pose on her mantel. When children arrive, they eagerly search for the teddy and practice the pose together. The provider shared that the activity creates excitement similar to the daily anticipation children often experience with an “Elf on the Shelf” activity, giving them something fun to look forward to each morning. Beyond engagement, the activity has helped ease drop-off transitions while supporting relationship-building skills.

The provider expressed appreciation for the toolkit and its impact on her children and daily routines.

Story County

“CCR&R and our Behavioral Health Specialist have been invaluable partners. Through on-site support, practical strategies, and resources like the weighted caterpillar, they have strengthened staff skills, enhanced classroom environments, and helped us better meet children's needs while enriching experiences for families and children.”

-Story County Center Director

EC-PBIS Program Wide Cohorts

29 Programs Participating Year 1-3



Connecting Communities to Solutions

As we look ahead to FY27, we are excited to expand our **Community Development** services to better address Iowa's growing child care needs. While Community Development has been a cornerstone of our work for many years, the increasing demand for child care requires a broader and more strategic approach. This year, our Community Development team started strengthening early childhood networks by **designing, coordinating, and facilitating meaningful collaboration among economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, community leaders, and child care advocates.**

Through community engagement, collaborative learning opportunities, and data-informed solutions aligned with Iowa HHS priorities, the team will help communities build stronger child care systems that support children, families, employers, and local economies.



Strategic Outreach

100% Iowa's Councils of Governments (COGs) contacted

Those contacted were informed about CCR&R Community Development services and support.
Held in **90 out of 99** Iowa counties

154 Community meetings held

2,619 people participated in conversations focused on local child care needs, partnerships, and next steps.

Partnership in action

Play Haven Child Care has been working to open a new child care center in Walnut, Iowa, since late 2022. As a volunteer board with no prior experience in the child care industry, we were fortunate to have Shirley's guidance through Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral along this journey.

The path from an initial vision to a fully operational center has included many highs and a few challenges, and we could not have navigated it successfully without her support. Shirley's expertise in regulatory compliance, licensing requirements, and the operational aspects of running a child care center — from developing policies to hiring staff — has been invaluable at every stage of this process.

We are deeply grateful to have had access to such a knowledgeable and dedicated resource. This project would not be where it is today without Shirley's guidance, and we extend our sincere thanks for her partnership throughout.

- Rachel Hamilton, President
Play Haven Child Care Board of Directors

Iowa's Councils of Governments (COGs) provide professional planning, programming, and technical assistance to Iowa's cities, counties, businesses, community organizations and Iowans of all ages

Strengthening Statewide Capacity

Building a strong child care system requires partnership at every level. Throughout FY26, CCR&R worked alongside state leaders, local communities, and system partners to strengthen support for Iowa's children, families, and child care programs.

Partnership in action

A legislative visit to *Key West Early Childcare Center in Dubuque* provided an opportunity for policymakers and child care partners to hear firsthand about the successes and challenges facing early childhood programs. During the visit, Senator Townsend, Representative Lundgren, and staff from the offices of Representative Hinson, Senator Grassley, and Senator Ernst toured the center and met with the program director.

The director highlighted the importance of the **Child Care Assistance (CCA) pilot program**, sharing that five staff members currently rely on the support and may not be able to remain in the workforce without it. She also discussed the ongoing impact of staffing shortages, noting that an additional classroom serving approximately 20 children remains closed due to a lack of qualified staff.

The visit also showcased how the WAGE\$ program supports workforce development by helping educators continue their education and work toward four-year degrees. In addition, attendees learned about CCR&R services, including consultation, professional development, and IQ4K support, which help strengthen program quality and sustainability across the region.

“We have many moms who are able to work at our center and be with their children due to the state-paid child care assistance pilot program.”

-Darcy Sundall, Director
Carousel Preschool & Daycare Center



“We often field questions about finding child care in our community. We already have several CCR&R resources at the Youth Desk and in a few other key spots inside our library, where they are always available for our patrons to take”

-Waverly Public Library



The newly redesigned Iowa Child Care Resource & Referral website makes it easier than ever to access trusted information, professional development opportunities, forms, applications, and child care resources.

Explore the new site at www.iowaccrr.org



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