

# DREAM UP! GRANT PROGRAM REPORT



## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROCESS

From May to October 2023, KW2 conducted 45-minute virtual interviews over Zoom with Dream Up! core team leads and team participants. All core teams were provided the opportunity to participate; however, it was not mandatory. Invitations to participate were made through collaborative efforts of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), First Children's Finance (FCF), and KW2. Twenty-seven of the thirty-seven Dream Up! core teams participated, representing the following counties:

- » Juneau County
- » Langlade County
- » Dane County
- » Milwaukee County
- » Wood County
- » Columbia County
- » Calumet County
- » Richland County
- » Crawford County
- » Vernon County
- » Waupaca County
- » Marathon County
- » Adams County
- » Shawano County
- » Rusk County
- » Sauk County
- » Winnebago County
- » Douglas County
- » Manitowoc County

### THE GOALS OF THE CONVERSATION WERE TO:

- ▶ Gain insights into how communities were coming together to address their local child care needs before Dream Up!
- ▶ Learn how core teams brought together key community members to facilitate knowledge sharing, build initial consensus, and move forward initial action
- ▶ Identify challenges and opportunities for supporting future community-led child care efforts

# DREAM UP! GRANT PROGRAM: THEMES

Across Wisconsin, Dream Up! communities are bringing together parents, employers, child care providers, community organizations, and other local leaders to learn more about the unique challenges and opportunities their regions face in expanding access to licensed child care. While the conversations, decision drivers, implementation plans, and sustainability strategies differ in nuanced ways, there are a number of insights across teams. The following section outlines the high-level observations and insights gathered across the key informant interviews that may prompt further discussions and activities aimed at supporting community-led child care access. Please note: these insights are not in ranked order.

## BEFORE DREAM UP!, MANY COMMUNITIES WERE NOT FORMALLY DISCUSSING OR ACTING ON ISSUES RELATED TO EXPANDING CHILD CARE ACCESS.

In communities where conversations had started, most described the activities as informal and included individuals who were already familiar with one another.

- ▶ Several groups mentioned that the Dream Up! grant served as a catalyst for sparking conversations on the issue of child care, and also encouraged more community engagement on the issue.
- ▶ The grant program has also encouraged child care providers in the same community to come together to discuss issues they thought were unique to them, and partner to find mutual solutions.

## QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “If they were (discussing the issue of child care), it wasn’t something that I was aware of happening. Dream Up! has been really effective at catalyzing community conversations. We’ve had a lot of conversations that have sparked up because of this process.”
- “I would say that the conversations are happening in some counties. I don’t think they were happening in our county. The Dream Up! grant was the start of those conversations and getting people involved.”
- “This is the first time where some of these child care providers have had a chance to talk to other child care providers. We’re hearing from people on different sides of the city. What they’ve told me is that they’re finding a lot of similar issues, when they thought it was just a ‘Them’ issue.”
- “A lot of people... think it’s an issue, but they’re not the one to deal with it. Nothing really gets done because the people who do see it as a big issue aren’t able to get an audience with the people who can really make a difference. They don’t perceive it as that big of an issue that they need to concern themselves with.”





## LOCAL DATA IS KEY.

Nearly all core teams said it was necessary for them to assess their community’s care needs from the perspectives of businesses, community members, and child care providers. Information gathered in the assessments not only helped the team better understand their local needs, it also helped them explain the situation through “hard numbers” to decision makers and generate buy-in. The assessments were done most often through surveys; however, participation in the assessments were mixed. Businesses were the ones who most often did not participate.

## QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “With the Dream Up! grant, we’re using the funds to survey our employees. We will be getting all of that information for a report so that we can really identify what the needs are. Is it a full day here? Is it an off-shift day here? How much can they afford to spend? We’re hoping to garner a lot of information from the survey responses.”
- “We’re actually getting ready to launch [a community needs survey] in the next week or two. We have one survey for daycare owners, who are not in our program, to ask about their needs and certification questions We also have a second survey that is to our county’s Latino families. We want to ask some of those more nuanced questions, like what percent of your income do you pay in childcare every month? And we hope to release that in a report once we have the results.”
- “The employers did not fill out the survey. We got employee surveys back from, working parents; but, out of the 30 businesses I emailed the survey to, I got zero back. I called all of them personally and told them that they were receiving a survey, and they gave me the email of who to send it to and I have not heard back why they haven’t.”
- “We’ve sent out surveys for various things, a lot of them had to do with specific pieces of the plan for the grant. We’re getting excellent feedback. We never get good feedback when we send surveys out. But for this, because it’s for childcare and childcare is important, we’re getting lots of feedback.”



## CONNECTION BETWEEN HOUSING CRISIS AND CHILD CARE.

Several groups shared that they discovered the severity of their community's child care shortage through community conversations on the housing shortage. In many cases, communities that initially came together to address housing then pivoted to addressing child care because it was seen as a more urgent issue.

- ▶ Many groups mentioned that the combination of a housing and child care shortage is keeping younger generations from moving to their community and joining the workforce.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “We actually came upon our [child care] desert status because we were trying to address housing... As we were working to address that issue, we kept coming up against roadblocks. So, we decided to go back to families in the community and ask: ‘What are other stressors on your monthly budget?’ Child care surprisingly far outweighed housing stressors in the family budget.”
- “We started our conversation on the housing shortage... People won’t move into the areas to join the workforce, if there’s no housing

available. They’re not going to travel to come to work. But, even if there was housing available, there’s no child care. So, you want a younger population coming in, but if you’re not providing the housing and you’re not providing child care and you’re not providing other amenities that younger generations want. You’re not ever going to get that population to move into our area. What started as a housing conversation that ended up morphing into child care. And from that we identified child care as a much bigger issue.”







## CORE TEAMS SEE VALUE IN HAVING PARTICIPANTS REPRESENTING CHILD CARE EXPERTISE AND LOCAL EMPLOYERS.

Although the makeup of a core team varies regarding the organizations represented and the backgrounds or positions of individuals, there are two primary roles that Dream Up! participants continue to note as important to their current and/or future work: local employers and individuals who are experts in child care policy and regulations. Both roles are seen as valuable for their perspectives and experience, particularly as a community is attempting to better understand the nuances of the challenges and what solutions truly address the issue AND are realistic and sustainable. They are also seen as integral to getting buy-in from other local businesses and child care providers.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “We did include existing child care providers on that team too, just because we didn’t want them to feel like we were trying to push, like steal from them. So we had them involved as well as direct service providers that work directly with young families. We had some home visiting program staff in our area who are facing this with their clients every day and kind of could speak and were knowledgeable on that as well.”
- “(Prominent clinic name) was on our team because they’re one of the larger employers in our county. We had the city administrator on our team as well as the board. We had folks from the (town name) Economic Development Corporation on the team because they too will all identify that child care is an issue. We wanted to make sure we could bring the people at the table who could make or help influence some decision we wanted, and make sure that they’re aware of what the issues are.”
- “Our core team, besides some staff members, is almost entirely child care professionals. We wanted to be specifically working with the people who are boots on the ground. These are the people working with kids every day. These are the people who are a connection to families. They’re also, thankfully, very steeped in the community. Most of them are home-based centers. We do have a few traditional home-based daycare centers and some actual centers. We also have participants in our program who are looking to start a daycare. We wanted the entire gambit of experience of people who are successfully running a childcare center, people who want to, people who are early in this journey so that we hear from their experiences, learn what things we can change, learn the landscape, and also hopefully grow a pipeline so we can have connections within.”
- “We looked at everybody that has a stake in the game as far as employers, community resources, and community leaders that just have influence in our county. We went everywhere. We’ve got everybody from the mayor and the chamber reps, to other child care providers, to people from (name of child care provider). We pulled together everybody that we could think of that could lend a different lens to the situation.”

## LOCAL EMPLOYERS ARE DIFFICULT TO ACTIVATE BUT ARE SEEN AS CRITICAL TO THE WORK.

Many communities shared their challenges in meaningfully engaging local employers on the issues related to child care access.

- ▶ Engagement ranged from asking employers to provide simple feedback on their employees' child care needs to attending community listening sessions, to having an active role on the Dream Up! core team.
- ▶ Most commonly, teams report local employers acknowledging that employees' access to child care does impact their day-to-day productivity; however, employers are uncertain on their role in addressing the issue (versus "The Government," families, another organization, etc.).
- ▶ In some cases, communities stated that employers still see this as an issue that families should just be able to "figure out," and often refer to the historical practice of a stay-at-home parent being a practical solution.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- "I think they don't see the scope of it as we do... I don't think they really understand that... You really have to kind of hit 'em in their pocketbooks in order for them to have some initiative to move things forward."
- "A lot of the pushback we get is it's a family issue. These are things they should have thought about before they had children. In this particular community, a lot of who we're dealing with are the older generation, and many of the ones I've had conversations with are like, well, you know, my wife stayed home with my kids, so maybe mom should stay home. That was a lot of the pushback that we got."
- "We have a [name of prominent manufacturer] plant here, and we know they are struggling to find labor. [Their director of HR came to a community meeting] to tell us they didn't have any hiring problem. They were fine, they didn't need anybody... But, my [family member] is a supervisor there, and I know that's not the truth. We had elected officials there, our state senator and, our local representative... the largest employer in the county is sitting here telling our elected officials we don't have a problem. Which, I know flat out is a lie."





## THERE IS NOT A COMMON FOUNDATION FOR TEAMS TO WORK FROM.

Dream Up! communities are excited and willing to think outside of the box in addressing their child care challenges. That said, they often describe entering the work with incomplete information about the array of options to consider and are unable to leverage lessons learned from other communities.

- ▶ For example, some teams described assuming that partnering with a local business to open a child care facility would be a collaborative and efficient way to hit the ground running. However, after talking with building inspectors, child care regulators, and on-the-fence employers, teams realized it is more challenging than anticipated and ultimately were forced to identify different solutions.
- ▶ This inefficient use of time leads to some local participants losing interest after the initial excitement and/or a lot of time spent investigating projects that ultimately end up not being feasible.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “We talked about getting more businesses at the table before the grants, But we had businesses that just wanted to up and create a daycare. They just wanted a fast solution, but it wasn’t sustainable or actually efficient.”
- “So, what we have heard repeatedly through our efforts is we have a lot of larger centers that are church affiliated and therefore they don’t get licensed. So, then they don’t get access to the subsidies or all the other benefits that come along with it. They also don’t have any real desire to become certified. We have one that is trying to get certified, and, it’s a bear. It’s the requirements... people just get exhausted with it.”

## MAINTAINING MOMENTUM REQUIRES DEDICATED STAFF TIME.

Looking to the future, many Dream Up! teams acknowledge that without additional, sustainable funding and/or a dedicated position, it will be challenging for them to prioritize the work.

- ▶ This sentiment was especially strong for core team members who have full-time jobs on issues outside of child care initiatives and/or part of communities that do not have the ability to prioritize funding on these issues.
- ▶ Several groups are taking matters into their own hands by looking into their city’s budgets or other grant/ funding programs to keep the programs created under Dream Up! running.
- ▶ It was expressed that sustainability will be achieved through funding the actual positions at the child care centers, rather than funding new equipment or renovations.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “Well, some providers are ‘thanked’ out. We don’t need things, we need people... We can create an environment where hopefully we can have more people want to help with retention and recruitment.”
- “We have some leftover ARPA funds we’re hoping to find. We’re entering our city’s budget process right now. We’re hoping this pot of grants will continue so that we have a system in place for the city to be able to help child care centers... It would help lift them up and give them the resources they need to keep the momentum in the right direction... We can’t just stop the work. It’s important work.”



### ACCESS TO CHILD CARE IS IMPACTING THE WORKFORCE, BUT IS NOT A CONSISTENT MOTIVATOR FOR EMPLOYERS TO PARTICIPATE IN DISCUSSIONS.

Several groups stated that the lack of high-quality, affordable child care in their community is keeping parents from entering the workforce and/or showing up to work.

- ▶ Some groups mention that this issue’s impact on productivity has led to some momentum in businesses trying to solve the child care issue.
- ▶ There is a trickle-down effect from parents being prevented from entering the workforce due to lack of child care. This not only impacts the workforce, but also impacts health equity, state benefits programs, and housing.

### QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

- “Businesses think that this is a parent problem... I don’t think employers saw a role or realized how much [lack of access] was affecting their workforce, whether it was retaining people or recruiting people. Recruiting is the last thing they’re starting to realize. I think it was [originally] about retaining people because people were leaving because of child care. Then all of a sudden it became a bigger community conversation.”
- “We have heard from a couple of factories that productivity has been down because employees are missing work because they don’t have child care. So, a lot of our businesses have been on board with trying to figure out what to do with the child care needs.”
- “We have two jobs per person open right now. There’s not enough applicants, there’s not enough workforce for our local employers in the economy. We also see a lot more participation in benefit programs like the state welfare programs... I think that will also impact our families. Housing is very, very limited and that’s its own separate crisis. There’s a lot of issues tied together. It’s tied to a lot of the local health equity and issues that we have currently in our community.”



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING COMMUNITY EFFORTS

The following section outlines considerations for engaging and supporting local or regional efforts related to expanding access to child care. Policy recommendations are not included. These recommendations are not in any rank order.

**ILLUSTRATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE ISSUES:** It is difficult for individuals to effectively and efficiently discuss the multidimensionality and systemic issues related to child care access. This is a foundational activity that must occur to get stakeholders onto a common knowledge base and motivated to participate in the work. To streamline and support local conversations, we recommend that a high-level “guide” of the issues be developed, online or offline

**DEVELOP AN EXAMPLE OF A CHILD CARE BUSINESS PLAN/MODEL:** Participants shared one of the barriers they need to overcome in local efforts is that individuals and employers often do not see child care as a legitimate business. There is confusion as to why tuition is so high, wages are low, the employment pipeline is leaky, and slots are limited. A number of participants shared that taking the time to walk through a sample business plan for a child care business helped some local stakeholders better understand the urgency of the issue. Developing a sample business plan and explainer is recommended.

**CREATE A BOILERPLATE PRESENTATION DECK AND RECOMMENDED TALKING POINTS:** Many individuals do not have experience presenting an issue and an “ask” to decision makers and elected officials, let alone on the issues related to child care. Communities are learning how to do this “on the fly” and in some cases, messages/data shared in the presentations are inconsistent. Providing a standardized presentation deck and recommended talking points, which can also be flexible for local data, issues, voice, is recommended.

- ▶ DCF may also consider an FAQ with the questions framed through the lens of individuals who may not see access to child care as an issue. Common questions/comments that individuals shared in our conversations included:
  - » Moms used to stay home to watch their children. Families should just return to that structure.

- » If you cannot find child care, you are not serious about working because finding care is not that hard.
- » Why is child care so expensive? The real issue is families cannot afford care... not that there isn't care available.
- » Child care issues are not the responsibilities of employers or tax payers to fix.
- » Regulations on child care providers are what is limiting slots and/or keeping new providers from opening.

**CURATE A LIST OF WAYS COMMUNITIES ARE ADDRESSING THE ISSUE AND INCLUDE WHO TO CONTACT TO LEARN MORE:** It is not common for communities to “cold call” other communities to learn more about how they are addressing child care issues. As such, communities are working in silos and from scratch on developing options and action plans. Providing a list of all the ways communities are locally addressing or discussing the issue, along with a point of contact for the community, is recommended.

**PROVIDE SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL NEED ASSESSMENTS:** Many communities expressed the importance of surveying employers, community members, and child care providers so that they can better understand local issues. Communities do not often have experience undertaking needs-assessment surveys. Providing examples of questions communities may consider and a “best practices” guide for engaging communities through surveys is recommended.

- ▶ In addition to providing sample questions, it is also recommended that an editable boilerplate “one-pager” be developed to assist communities in organizing and communicating their findings to stakeholders and the general public.
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**PROVIDE A LIST OF STATE OR LOCAL EXPERTS ON KEY TOPICS:**

Participants shared that they often were unsure who to contact on key issues that came up at certain points during their work. In some cases, the teams did not even realize they would need to engage specific experts when they began their discussions. It is recommended that a list of contacts be developed to cover common issues, including but not limited to:

- ▶ Child care licensing and regulations
- ▶ State collected data related to child care providers, community needs, labor needs, etc.
- ▶ Building regulations for child care providers

**DEVELOP A GUIDE ON BEST PRACTICES WHEN DEVELOPING A “CORE TEAM:”** For communities who were not Dream Up! grantees but are interested in developing a team to begin addressing child care access in their areas, the development of a “how to” guide is recommended.

This guide could include but is not limited to recommendations on the types of organizations and/or individuals to invite to a team, sample invitee language, boilerplate language on why the development of a team is important, examples of the types of work the team will be doing with time commitments, sample meeting agendas, etc.

**DEVELOP FRONT WINDOW SIGNAGE FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESSES WHO BELIEVE EXPANDING CHILD CARE ACCESS IS A PRIORITY AND ARE SUPPORTING LOCAL ACTIVITIES:** With so many of these conversations happening behind the scenes, community members often do not realize there are organizations and employers who are working to expand access to child care in their areas. Making it more transparent and positive for supporters will bring awareness to the general public and may encourage other influencers/employers to engage on the issues.

