



DEPARTMENT OF
**PUBLIC HEALTH &
HUMAN SERVICES**

Rural Institute
For Inclusive Communities



MONTANA BRIGHT FUTURES BIRTH TO FIVE SUMMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT

Rural Institute Research and Evaluation Team

June 30 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report reflects the contributions of many individuals and organizations who supported data collection, provided critical context, and engaged in ongoing dialogue throughout the evaluation process.

We are grateful to the staff at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) who supported data access and collection efforts, responded to follow-up questions, and provided essential context to ensure accurate interpretation of findings. We especially acknowledge the BFB5 leadership team for their continued engagement with the evaluation team and for providing thoughtful feedback on report content and structure throughout the development of this report.

We also thank the many partners and organizations across the state who contributed data for this evaluation and took the time to respond to questions, clarify reporting processes, and share insights about their work. These contributions were critical to understanding both the implementation of activities and the broader system context in which they occurred.

We are grateful to the stakeholders who participated in the needs assessment and strategic planning processes. Their input helped inform both the direction of the initiative and the interpretation of findings presented in this report.

Finally, we acknowledge the broader network of early childhood system partners whose ongoing work to support children, families, and professionals across Montana forms the foundation of the activities examined in this evaluation.



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Findings from two activity-specific evaluations are also incorporated into this report. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) conducted the **Universally Offered Home Visiting** evaluation, and the Stellar Group conducted the **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation** evaluation. The respective evaluation teams completed analysis and reporting for those activity-specific evaluations, and their findings are summarized here as part of the broader BFB5 evaluation.

The evaluation team also acknowledges the many DPHHS staff and implementation partners who contributed data, documentation, and contextual information. Apart from key informant interviews conducted by the University of Montana evaluation team, the information summarized in this report was collected through partner-administered surveys, administrative records, program databases, implementation reports, and other partner-managed data collection processes. Their contributions were essential to understanding BFB5 implementation and interpreting findings across activities.



SUGGESTED CITATION

Rural Institute Research and Evaluation Team. (2026). *Montana Bright Futures Birth to Five final summative evaluation report*. University of Montana, Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, prepared for the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

DISCLAIMER

This report is supported by Grant Number HHS-ACF ALN 93.434 from the Office of Early Childhood Development within the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this report. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the Rural Institute and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Montana Department of Health and Human Services or the Administration for Children and Families



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents evaluation findings from Montana's Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative, Bright Futures Birth to Five (BFB5). The evaluation examined implementation efforts and outputs across a broad range of activities intended to strengthen Montana's prenatal-to-five system, including workforce development, family engagement, child care expansion, cross-sector coordination, systems planning, and infrastructure development.

Findings were analyzed across five interconnected domains of an early childhood system: Context, Components, Connections, Infrastructure, and Scale. Across these domains, evidence suggests that BFB5 served to support systems-building and capacity expansion. Findings were strongest for documenting implementation efforts, participation, workforce supports, relationship-building, planning efforts, and development of statewide infrastructure. Evidence related to longer-term workforce outcomes, family outcomes, service quality, and statewide systems change was more limited and varied across initiatives.

KEY FINDINGS

CONTEXT

BFB5 supported planning and engagement activities that brought together stakeholders from Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Key sectors engaged in activities included state agencies, Tribal Nations, higher education institutions, early childhood programs, community organizations, businesses, philanthropic partners, and families. The statewide Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan, and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis generated updated information about workforce conditions, service gaps, financing structures, and stakeholder priorities. These efforts produced shared planning resources that can support future policy, funding, and implementation decisions.

At the same time, workforce shortages, geographic barriers to service delivery, uneven access to services, and the complexity of coordinating programs across multiple agencies continued to shape implementation efforts throughout the grant period. Changes to workforce registry participation requirements and statewide service delivery structures also complicated interpretation of some workforce and implementation trends. Program evaluation data suggest that BFB5 contributed to statewide planning and engagement efforts but do not provide evidence that broader structural challenges facing Montana's early childhood system were resolved during the grant period.

COMPONENTS

BFB5 activities engaged early childhood programs, early childhood professionals, families, employers, community organizations, and local coalitions through professional learning opportunities, workforce supports, family engagement initiatives, service expansion efforts, and community-based implementation activities. BFB5-supported subgrants totaling \$11,589,071.84 were awarded across 44 counties, supporting child care expansion, workforce development, coalition infrastructure, and family support efforts. During the grant period, professional learning activities reached early childhood professionals through 1,947 recorded instances of participation. In addition, family engagement trainings expanded from 76 participants across five trainings in 2024 to 669 participants across 21 trainings in 2025, reaching 35 counties.

Workforce supports emerged as one of the initiative's strongest areas of investment and participation. BFB5 supported scholarships, apprenticeship pathways, recruitment and retention planning, professional learning opportunities, and mental health consultation supports. Across the grant period, 53 early childhood professionals enrolled in apprenticeship pathways, Recruitment and Retention cohorts supported participating programs in developing workforce planning strategies, and Child Care Workforce Program scholarships helped reduce child care costs for eligible early childhood workers. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation activities expanded access to reflective practice, educator well-being supports, and consultation capacity.

CONNECTIONS

BFB5-supported activities created regular opportunities for early childhood programs, agencies, Tribal partners, higher education institutions, community organizations, and family-serving programs to engage in joint planning and information sharing. Transition Summits, local early childhood coalitions, the Montana Home Visiting Coalition, statewide convenings, and planning workgroups brought stakeholders together to discuss transition planning, referral processes, workforce challenges, family engagement, and other priorities affecting young children and families across Montana.

Several initiatives also developed shared resources intended to support greater consistency across programs and sectors. The Montana Family Engagement Framework, Early Childhood Career Workbook, revised Montana Early Learning Standards, and redesign efforts related to the Quality Recognition System provided guidance related to family engagement, workforce pathways, developmental expectations, and quality improvement. Universally Offered Home Visiting introduced a structured referral and navigation model designed to connect participating families with

home visiting, health, and community-based services through coordinated screening, referral, and follow-up processes.

Evidence is strongest for participation in convenings, coalition activities, referral initiatives, and framework development. Findings suggest that BFB5 supported relationship-building and communication across sectors; however, evidence related to the depth, consistency, and long-term sustainability of cross-system coordination remains more limited.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SCALE

BFB5 strengthened several foundational structures intended to help Montana's prenatal-to-five system function more consistently, coordinate across partners, and expand selected activities across communities and program settings. Investments supported formal data governance and analytic infrastructure through ECIDS development, administrative modernization through MAQCS and Part C data system enhancements, fiscal planning through the Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis, and shared standards and quality alignment through the revised Montana Early Learning Standards and redesigned Quality Recognition System.

BFB5 also expanded workforce infrastructure and local implementation capacity. Apprenticeship pathways, the Child Care Worker Program, Recruitment and Retention Cohorts, professional learning activities, and inclusion-focused technical assistance increased access to workforce supports and implementation resources. Overall, BFB5 moved several core systems-building efforts from planning toward implementation and strengthened the structures needed for broader, more coordinated, and more sustainable system development over time.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Despite evidence of progress across multiple initiatives, workforce recruitment and retention challenges, uneven local infrastructure, rural and frontier access barriers, and questions about long-term sustainability remained significant implementation challenges. Key informant interviews and program data consistently identified workforce capacity as one of the most significant constraints to expanding services and sustaining implementation efforts. Many system-building activities, including workforce pathways, governance structures, data systems, and quality improvement initiatives, remain in active stages of development and will require continued coordination, investment, and organizational commitment to support long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on evaluation findings, several high-level recommendations emerged for continued strengthening of Montana's prenatal-to-five system:

1. Sustain and institutionalize workforce stabilization strategies
2. Strengthen coordinated family navigation and referral systems
3. Expand implementation supports for shared statewide frameworks
4. Strengthen local infrastructure through community-based coalitions
5. Advance data integration, evaluation, and continuous learning
6. Identify sustainable financing strategies for high-impact initiatives



INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF MONTANA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTEXT

Montana's early childhood system operates within a distinct landscape that presents both persistent challenges and meaningful opportunities for systems building. As a large, predominantly rural state, Montana is characterized by vast distances between communities, low population density, and significant regional variation in access to services. Montana is the fourth-largest state in the nation by land area (145,550 square miles), yet ranks 44th in population, with just over 1.1 million residents and an average population density of only 7.4 people per square mile. More than one-third of Montana's population lives in rural or frontier areas, creating unique challenges for access to early childhood services, workforce supports, and coordinated systems across geographically dispersed communities.¹

Montana's youngest children are disproportionately affected by economic instability and uneven access to care. Recent state data show that 17.7% of Montana children under age five live in poverty, indicating the challenges many families face related to housing stability, child care access, and basic economic security. Poverty rates vary widely across counties, reflecting significant regional inequities in family well-being and access to support systems.^{2,3}

Montana's 2025 Early Childhood Needs Assessment provides a comprehensive analysis of the state's mixed-delivery early childhood system, highlighting persistent challenges related to access, affordability, workforce capacity, and system coordination.⁴ Findings underscore that barriers are not distributed evenly. Families with infants and toddlers, children with developmental delays or disabilities, families living in rural and frontier communities, and those needing non-traditional hours of care face some of the most significant challenges in securing early childhood care and education that meets their needs.

The 2025 Needs Assessment also reinforces the importance of recognizing Montana's diverse community contexts. Tribal communities across the state bring significant strengths, cultural knowledge, and community-based assets that enrich early childhood systems, while continuing to navigate historic and ongoing inequities in access to services and supports. Each Tribal Nation maintains distinct governance structures, priorities, and early childhood systems, underscoring the need for intentional consultation, partnership, and responsive system design.⁴

The early childhood workforce is central to Montana's system challenges and opportunities. While the state has invested in workforce infrastructure, including a statewide practitioner registry, professional development systems, and apprenticeship pathways, staffing shortages, turnover, and compensation challenges continue to limit system capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic further strained the workforce and destabilized child care supply, even as federal relief funds temporarily expanded capacity and stabilized programs. Despite recent gains in licensed child care slots, workforce availability remains a key constraint on sustained access and quality.

Montana's early childhood mixed-delivery service landscape includes licensed child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, home visiting, early intervention, health services, and family support programs. While many foundational components are in place, services have historically operated across separate funding streams, data systems, and governance structures. Families and early childhood professionals have consistently reported challenges navigating this fragmented landscape, particularly during transitions between programs or developmental stages.⁴ Taken together, these contextual factors highlight the need for coordinated and data-informed systems-building efforts across the birth-through-five continuum.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BFB5 INITIATIVE'S PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The Montana Bright Futures Birth to Five (BFB5) initiative was designed to strengthen the state's early childhood system through a comprehensive, coordinated approach that advances access, quality, and alignment across programs serving young children and their families. Funded through the Administration for Children and Families Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG-B5), the initiative builds on prior statewide planning and implementation efforts to address longstanding system gaps while responding to emerging needs identified through data, stakeholder input, and ongoing evaluation.

BFB5 was developed to support Montana's vision of a more coordinated and responsive early childhood system in which:

- families can access high-quality, developmentally appropriate services;
- early childhood professionals are supported through strong workforce pathways;
- and programs, agencies, and community partners work toward shared goals for children and families.

Rather than focusing on a single program or service area, BFB5 includes a broad portfolio of systems-building activities spanning family engagement, workforce development, program quality improvement, service expansion, infrastructure

strengthening, and data system development. Emphasis was placed on supporting infants and toddlers, children with disabilities or developmental delays, families living in rural and underserved communities, and strategies intended to promote access across Montana's mixed-delivery system.

The scope of BFB5 is statewide and cross-sector, engaging state agencies, higher education partners, community organizations, Tribal communities, local early childhood programs, and other stakeholders involved in supporting young children and families. Rather than operating as a stand-alone initiative, BFB5 was intentionally embedded within Montana's broader strategic planning and continuous quality improvement efforts. This positioning reflects the initiative's role not only as a catalyst for innovation, but also as a mechanism for strengthening alignment across existing programs, policies, funding streams, and systems-building efforts.

OVERVIEW OF PARTNERS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

The BFB5 initiative was implemented through a broad partnership structure that reflects the cross-sector nature of Montana's early childhood system. DPHHS, through the Early Childhood and Family Support Division (ECFSD), served as the lead agency responsible for grant administration, oversight, coordination, and statewide implementation support. However, implementation of BFB5 was not carried out by DPHHS alone. Much of the work depended on partnerships with other state agencies, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, Tribal partners, professional organizations, local early childhood programs, public health agencies, and community-based coalitions across Montana.

This distributed implementation structure was central to the design and success of BFB5. Through contracts, subgrants, technical assistance partnerships, evaluation partnerships, and community-based implementation roles, partners contributed the expertise, relationships, and local capacity needed to carry out activities across a geographically large and diverse state. Partners supported efforts related to workforce development, employer engagement, family engagement, early literacy, inclusion, home visiting, systems coordination, quality improvement, fiscal analysis, data infrastructure, evaluation, and service expansion.

Community-based organizations and local coalitions played a particularly important role by supporting outreach, professional learning, family engagement, transition planning, and service expansion within their regions. Parents and caregivers also contributed through participation in advisory structures, feedback activities, and program engagement opportunities. Together, these partnerships made statewide

implementation possible and brought local knowledge, lived experience, and cross-sector expertise into the work.

Because partner contributions were extensive and central to BFB5 implementation, a full list of implementation partners and their roles is included in [Appendix C](#).

ABOUT THE EVALUATION AND HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

The BFB5 evaluation was designed to examine implementation and systems-building progress across Montana's birth-to-five early childhood system. Because BFB5 was developed as a systems-building initiative rather than a single program model, the evaluation focused not only on individual activities, but also on broader system conditions related to service access, cross-sector coordination, workforce capacity, infrastructure development, and long-term sustainability.

This evaluation was conducted by the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities at the University of Montana in partnership with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). Early evaluation activities were initially coordinated internally through development of the Program Performance Evaluation Plan. During the grant period, evaluation responsibilities transitioned to the Rural Institute to support ongoing implementation analysis, data synthesis, and reporting.

Findings presented in this report are drawn from multiple data sources collected across BFB5 activities, including administrative records, partner implementation reports, attendance records, participant surveys, statewide planning documents, and key informant interviews. Data collection responsibilities were distributed across partner organizations and state agencies, with each partner responsible for collecting and reporting information related to their funded activities. Because BFB5 activities varied in design, delivery, implementation stage, and intended outcomes, data sources and measures also varied across strategies. Some activities relied primarily on participation counts and administrative reporting, while others included survey findings, qualitative feedback, implementation indicators, or program-specific outcome measures. Reporting periods, response rates, and data completeness also varied across activities based on partner reporting structures and program timelines. As a result, findings in this report should be interpreted primarily as descriptive of implementation efforts and outputs.

Throughout this report, the term *early childhood professionals* refers broadly to individuals who work in the early childhood field, including educators, home visitors, administrators, specialists, and other professionals who support young children and families. The term *early childhood programs* refers to centers, family child care homes, organizations, schools, agencies, and other settings that provide services to young

children and families. Additional definitions of key terms used throughout this report are provided in [Appendix E: Key Terms](#).

Readers seeking a quick overview of BFB5 activities may refer to [Appendix A: BFB5 Activity Quick Reference Guide](#), which summarizes major initiatives, target populations, and the primary BUILD domain(s) in which each activity is discussed. Additional detail regarding data sources, analytic approaches, and limitations are provided in [Appendix B](#). Key findings and implications are summarized at the conclusion of each BUILD domain section.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BUILD FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMS EVALUATION

The BUILD Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives was used to guide the organization and analysis of findings presented in this report.⁵ Developed specifically for evaluating complex, cross-sector systems initiatives, the BUILD Framework examines multiple dimensions of systems change, including context, connections, infrastructure, scale, and program components.

The framework recognizes that systems-building efforts are interconnected and do not progress in a linear or uniform manner. As a result, progress may be reflected not only through direct service outcomes, but also through strengthened coordination, improved alignment, expanded infrastructure, and increased system capacity that support longer-term change.

The sections that follow are organized by BUILD domain. Individual BFB5 activities are discussed within the domain that best reflects their primary systems function; however, some activities are referenced across more than one section when they contributed to multiple dimensions of systems change. Key findings and implications are summarized at the conclusion of each BUILD domain section.

Figure 1. BUILD Framework domains used to organize BFB5 evaluation report.

Findings are organized across five interconnected systems domains: Context, Components, Connections, Infrastructure, and Scale.

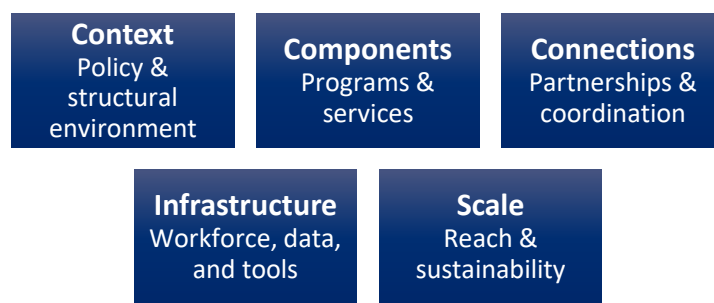


Figure 1. BUILD Framework domains used to organize BFB5 evaluation report.

LIMITATIONS

This evaluation report reflects the realities of assessing a large, multi-partner systems-building initiative implemented across diverse programs, agencies, contractors, and community partners. Findings draw from administrative records, partner-reported implementation data, survey responses, participation records, program reports, and qualitative feedback. Because BFB5 activities varied in design, timeline, reporting requirements, and implementation context, available data also varied across activities in format, completeness, consistency, timing, and level of detail. In some cases, changes to data collection tools, survey items, reporting practices, or program implementation limited direct comparability across years, sites, survey waves, or participant groups.

Findings presented in this report are primarily descriptive and focused on how activities were implemented. The evaluation documents activities supported through BFB5 funding, including grants awarded, services expanded, professional learning opportunities delivered, resources developed, and participation in grant-supported initiatives. The evaluation was not designed to determine whether BFB5 independently caused longer-term outcomes or broader system changes.

Several findings rely on self-reported information from partners, early childhood programs, training participants, and program administrators, which may be influenced by differences in reporting practices, interpretation of questions, or incomplete responses. In addition, some administrative data systems were developed for program operations rather than evaluation, creating limitations related to data consistency and comparability across activities and years. As a result, findings should be interpreted as evidence of implementation, documented outputs, and emerging patterns observed during the grant period rather than definitive evidence of long-term impact.



BFB5 OVERVIEW: STORY OF THE ACTIVITIES

The BFB5 initiative supported a broad set of activities intended to improve services, supports, and coordination across Montana’s prenatal-to-five system. Activities addressed areas such as workforce development, family engagement, early learning quality, access to services, data systems, and cross-sector planning. While individual activities had distinct goals, many were implemented alongside related efforts and involved shared partners, creating opportunities for coordination across initiatives.

Activities were implemented over multiple years and were adjusted as implementation progressed. In some cases, approaches, timelines, or delivery methods were modified in response to participant feedback, implementation challenges, emerging needs, or changes in the broader early childhood landscape. Families, early childhood professionals, Tribal Nations, community leaders, state agencies, and other partners contributed to planning and implementation efforts throughout the grant period.

The sections that follow describe each major activity area using the original grant structure while reflecting how activities were implemented in practice. This section focuses on what was implemented, who was involved, and how activities evolved over time. Findings related to participation, outputs, and outcomes are presented in later sections of the report.

ACTIVITY 1: UPDATE COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE B-5 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The **Comprehensive Statewide B-5 Needs Assessment**⁴ activity established an updated understanding of Montana’s early childhood landscape to inform statewide planning and implementation efforts. This work focused on identifying system strengths, gaps, emerging needs, and fiscal realities affecting young children, families, early childhood programs and professionals, and communities across the state following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implementation centered on updating Montana’s statewide early childhood Needs Assessment through surveys, interviews, stakeholder engagement activities, and review of administrative and contextual data. The process incorporated perspectives from families, early childhood program administrators, educators, community organizations, state agencies, and Tribal partners to better understand statewide and regional experiences across the prenatal-to-five system. A **Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis**⁶ was also conducted to strengthen understanding of early childhood financing, resource allocation, and long-term sustainability considerations.

Stakeholders and constituents from across sectors and regions were engaged throughout the process to review findings, discuss emerging priorities, and identify ongoing system challenges and opportunities. Together, the Needs Assessment and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis provided updated information about statewide conditions and informed ongoing decision-making across BFB5 implementation. Rather than functioning as a one-time reporting activity, these efforts contributed to continuous learning about system needs, service gaps, workforce challenges, and opportunities for coordination across Montana's early childhood system.

ACTIVITY 2: UPDATE STATEWIDE B-5 STRATEGIC PLAN

The **Statewide Strategic Planning**⁷ process supported the revision and implementation of Montana's statewide early childhood strategic plan. The work drew on findings from the updated Needs Assessment and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis and engaged agencies, organizations, Tribal communities, early childhood programs and professionals, and other stakeholders in identifying priorities for the prenatal-to-five system.

Implementation included reviewing and updating the statewide strategic plan to reflect current data, stakeholder input, related state and agency planning efforts, and emerging priorities identified during the grant period. Stakeholders from across Montana participated in planning discussions to review goals, identify areas of shared focus, and inform future priorities. The **Program Performance Evaluation Plan** was updated concurrently to better align evaluation activities with strategic goals and implementation efforts.

Planning activities continued throughout the grant period as implementation data and stakeholder feedback became available. As a result, both the **Statewide Strategic Plan** and **Program Performance Evaluation Plan** were revised to reflect current priorities, implementation experiences, and identified needs across Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

ACTIVITY 3: MAXIMIZE PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN THE B-5 SYSTEM

The Parent and Family Engagement activity supported a range of efforts intended to increase access to information, strengthen family supports, and promote family involvement across Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Activities included enhancements to family-facing resources, development of guidance for family engagement practices, community transition planning efforts, and statewide learning opportunities for families and professionals.

A major component of this work involved the continued development of **ParentingMontana.org**. Activities included website enhancements, infrastructure

updates, webinars, and annual reporting designed to improve the accessibility and relevance of information available to families with young children. A statewide **Family Engagement Framework** was also developed through stakeholder work groups to provide guidance for family engagement practices across child care, home visiting, early intervention, and related early childhood services.

Community-based Transition Summits brought together local teams to support planning around key transitions experienced by young children and families, including entry into kindergarten, the arrival of a newborn, and transitions from Part C to Part B services. At least one summit was designed in partnership with Tribal communities and incorporated Tribal priorities and perspectives. Additional family learning and engagement opportunities were provided through initiatives implemented with the **Montana State Library Early Literacy Project** and through statewide convenings such as the **Great Beginnings, Great Families Conference**.

The grant also supported planning and piloting efforts related to **Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV)**. These activities focused on referral pathways, coordination among service providers, and approaches to voluntary supports for families during pregnancy and early childhood. Over the grant period, several family engagement activities expanded virtual and hybrid participation options to increase accessibility for families and providers across Montana.

ACTIVITY 4: SUPPORT THE B-5 WORKFORCE AND DISSEMINATE BEST PRACTICES

The B-5 Workforce and Best Practices activity supported recruitment, retention, professional growth, and workforce supports for Montana's early childhood workforce. Activities focused on expanding career pathways, increasing access to professional learning, supporting workforce well-being, and promoting evidence-informed practices across early childhood settings.

Implementation included **Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion, Recruitment & Retention Cohorts and mini-grants, Child Care Worker Program** scholarships, and a statewide **Recruitment & Retention Study**. Together, these efforts were intended to support workforce entry, advancement, and retention while informing ongoing workforce development strategies.

Professional learning opportunities were offered through in-person and virtual trainings, cohort-based learning, asynchronous modules, consultation, coaching, and train-the-trainer approaches. Activities served early childhood educators, home visitors, early interventionists, mental health consultants, coalition leaders, and other professionals working with young children and families. Training topics included family engagement,

developmental screening, inclusion, infant and early childhood mental health, trauma-informed care, and relationship-based practice.

A major focus of professional learning involved strengthening provider capacity to engage and partner with families. Signature offerings such as **Development Is a Journey** and related trainings addressed developmental screening conversations, family-centered communication, father engagement, and strategies for navigating challenging conversations and behaviors.

Professional development activities also included **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), Pyramid Model trainings, Trauma-Informed Care modules, and workforce wellness supports**. While IECMHC had previously been implemented in Montana through Head Start and Project LAUNCH, BFB5 supported the piloting and expansion of a broader model designed for use across child care settings. **Recruitment & Retention Cohorts** provided opportunities for participating programs to assess workforce challenges, develop retention plans, and test recruitment and retention strategies.

Additional training and technical assistance focused on developmental screening, inclusion, and referral practices. Early childhood professionals received support in the use of Ages and Stages Questionnaires® (ASQ) and Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional® (ASQ-SE) through training and technical assistance delivered by Brookes Publishing consultants. Coordination with Part C and Child Find partners also supported shared understanding of referral processes across early childhood settings.

The Sandbox Project provided inclusion-focused training, assistive technology supports, and technical assistance for early childhood programs. Participating programs had opportunities to explore and implement assistive technology and other supports within classroom and care environments.

Many workforce initiatives incorporated sustainability strategies, including train-the-trainer models, implementation guides, cohort curricula, and recruitment and retention toolkits. Several activities also transitioned to braided or partner funding during the grant period. Over time, professional learning opportunities increasingly incorporated virtual, hybrid, and asynchronous formats to improve accessibility for participants across Montana's rural and remote communities.

ACTIVITY 5: SUPPORT PROGRAM QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The Program Quality Improvement activity supported the revision of key statewide quality and early learning frameworks, including **Montana's Quality Recognition System (QRS)** and the **Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS)**. These efforts were intended

to update existing guidance, incorporate stakeholder input, and reflect current priorities for programs serving children from birth through age eight.

A major component of this work involved redesigning Montana's STARS to Quality system into a revised statewide QRS. Supported by national technical assistance, the redesign process included review of the existing framework, stakeholder workgroups, partner feedback, and consideration of approaches intended to better support quality improvement efforts within early childhood programs.

This activity also supported the revision of the MELS. Stakeholders representing agencies, organizations, Tribal communities, higher education, and early childhood programs participated in the revision process. The updated standards were designed to reflect current research, practitioner feedback, and developmental expectations across the birth-to-age-eight continuum.

In addition to QRS and MELS work, the activity supported workforce resources connected to professional growth and career pathways in Montana's early childhood field. BFB5 supported training for early childhood professionals based on the Montana Early Childhood Education Knowledge Base, a 2022 resource that describes core knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions for early childhood educators. The activity also supported development of the Montana Early Childhood Career Workbook, a resource intended to help individuals explore early childhood career options, answer common career questions, and connect with professional growth resources.

Together, the QRS redesign, MELS revision, Knowledge Base training, and Career Workbook development supported updated quality improvement guidance, shared early learning expectations, and workforce resources intended to guide future professional learning and program implementation across Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

ACTIVITY 6: SUBGRANTS TO ENHANCE QUALITY AND EXPAND ACCESS TO EXISTING AND NEW PROGRAMS

The Subgrants to Enhance Quality and Expand Access activity provided funding to support service expansion, pilot new approaches, and address community-identified needs across Montana. Subgrants were designed to increase access to early childhood services, support inclusion efforts, and allow communities to implement strategies responsive to local contexts.

Implementation included **Slot Expansion Grants** that supported infant and toddler care, extended operating hours, services for children with disabilities and developmental delays, and crisis care capacity. **Employer-Sponsored Care Grants** engaged businesses in developing child care solutions intended to support employees and increase access

to care for working families. Additional activities included **Crisis Child Care** pilots, the **Community Response Program**, and **Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV)** pilots.

Crisis Child Care pilots and the Community Response Program provided short-term supports for families experiencing instability or crisis. **UOHV pilots** explored approaches to voluntary, time-limited supports for families during pregnancy and early childhood, including referral processes and service coordination.

Several subgrant activities were modified during implementation to reflect community needs, program readiness, and lessons learned from early implementation efforts. In some cases, grant structures, timelines, or implementation approaches were adjusted to better support participation and local implementation. The subgrant strategy also provided opportunities to test and document approaches related to child care access, inclusion, family supports, and service delivery in rural and underserved communities.

DATA SYSTEMS, EVALUATION, AND CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The Data Systems, Evaluation, and Continuous Quality Improvement Strategy supported data governance, evaluation, and data infrastructure activities across the BFB5 initiative. These efforts focused on developing processes, structures, and partnerships to support data collection, reporting, planning, and evaluation across Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

A major component of this work involved planning and infrastructure development for **Montana's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)**. Activities included establishing governance structures, defining agency roles and responsibilities, and developing processes related to data sharing, access, use, and privacy. An ECIDS governance structure was established that included Data Owners, Data Stewards, and Leadership Teams to support decision-making related to data management and future system development. Stakeholder engagement activities also informed the development of use cases, data priorities, and governance policies.

BFB5 additionally supported data infrastructure efforts through the **MAQCs** and **Montana Milestones systems**. These activities contributed to data collection, reporting, and planning efforts across participating programs and agencies and provided information used for program monitoring and implementation tracking.

Evaluation activities were carried out by individual programs, partner organizations, DPHHS, and external evaluation partners. Data sources included administrative records, implementation reports, participation data, surveys, planning documents, and other program-specific information. During the grant period, evaluation efforts expanded to

include external support from the Rural Institute, which contributed to data analysis, reporting, and synthesis across activities.

Data system and evaluation activities were implemented incrementally throughout the grant period. In several cases, timelines, priorities, and implementation approaches were adjusted based on staffing capacity, partner participation, and system readiness. As a result, the grant supported the establishment of governance structures, evaluation processes, and data infrastructure intended to inform future planning, reporting, and decision-making efforts.



BUILD DOMAINS

CONTEXT

Within the BUILD Framework, the Context domain focuses on the broader policy, public, and environmental conditions that influence how early childhood systems develop and operate.⁵ In Montana, these conditions include the structure of the early childhood system, geographic and demographic characteristics, workforce conditions, and the broader policy environment.

This section highlights contextual factors that influenced the implementation of BFB5 activities during the grant period. Readers seeking a more comprehensive analysis of Montana's early childhood landscape should refer to the 2025 Statewide Early Childhood Needs Assessment.⁴ Because BFB5 was not designed as a public awareness or policy advocacy initiative, the information presented here is drawn primarily from statewide planning documents, grant records, stakeholder engagement activities, and partner reports. Additional information about data sources and limitations is provided in [Appendix B](#).

Montana's early childhood system includes child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, home visiting, early intervention, health services, and family support programs delivered through multiple agencies, funding streams, and community-based organizations. Although these services collectively support young children and families, they have historically operated through separate governance structures, funding mechanisms, and data systems, creating challenges for coordination across programs and services.⁴

Montana's geography and population distribution also influence access to services.⁴ As a large and predominantly rural state, many communities face challenges related to distance, workforce shortages, and limited infrastructure. These conditions affect access to early childhood programs, health services, and family supports and can create implementation challenges for providers and communities. Tribal Nations across Montana bring important cultural strengths and community assets to the early childhood system, while also navigating longstanding inequities in access to resources and services.

These conditions are closely connected to Montana's early childhood workforce. Data from the Montana Early Childhood Project (ECP)^a registry indicate that 4,770 early childhood professionals were listed in the registry as of December 31, 2025.⁸ The

^aThe ECP registry collects and maintains administrative data tracking demographics, levels of professional development, and changes in job retention among licensed early child care and education professionals.

registered workforce was primarily female (94%) and predominantly White (83%), with American Indian and Alaska Native professionals representing 5% of registered participants. Educational attainment varied across the workforce, with 23% holding a bachelor's degree or higher and most participants entering the profession through a range of educational and training pathways.

ECP registry participation increased during the BFB5 grant period. The number of active registry users grew from 2,496 in December 2022 to 4,770 in December 2025.⁸ This increase likely reflects multiple factors, including changes to participation requirements for professionals working in licensed early childhood settings and increased engagement with statewide professional development systems. As a result, increases in registry participation should not be interpreted as equivalent to growth in the size of Montana's early childhood workforce. Rather, these data indicate increased participation in the state's workforce registry system during the grant period.

Table 1 shows the number of active ECP registry users present in the registry in December 2022, December 2025, or both times. Because registry absence may reflect workforce exit, changes in employment setting or role, lapses in registry participation, or changes in participation requirements, these data should not be interpreted as a direct measure of workforce retention.

Table 1. ECP Registry Users, December 2022, and December 2025

Active ECP Registry Users:	Count
Active Users in 2022 Registry Only	1,741
Active Users in 2025 Registry Only	4,015
Active in Registry in 2022 and 2025	755
Percent Retained	30%
Percent Retained Among ECP Registry Users with a bachelor's degree	24%

County-level registry data also show substantial regional variation in active registry participation between 2022 and 2025 (Figure 2). Eighteen counties experienced increases greater than 50%, while a small number of counties showed substantial decreases in active registry participation. These patterns should be interpreted cautiously because changes in registration requirements influenced registry participation during the grant period. County-level variation in registry participation may be useful for understanding differences in engagement with workforce infrastructure across Montana, but it should be interpreted alongside other evidence of workforce conditions, including rurality, population density, local labor markets, and availability of early childhood services.

Figure 2. County-level change in active ECP registry participation, 2022 to 2025.

Registry participation increased in many counties. Between December 2022 and December 2025, 18 counties showed above 50% increase in ECP registry users (e.g., dark green), while 2 counties showed nearly 100% decrease.

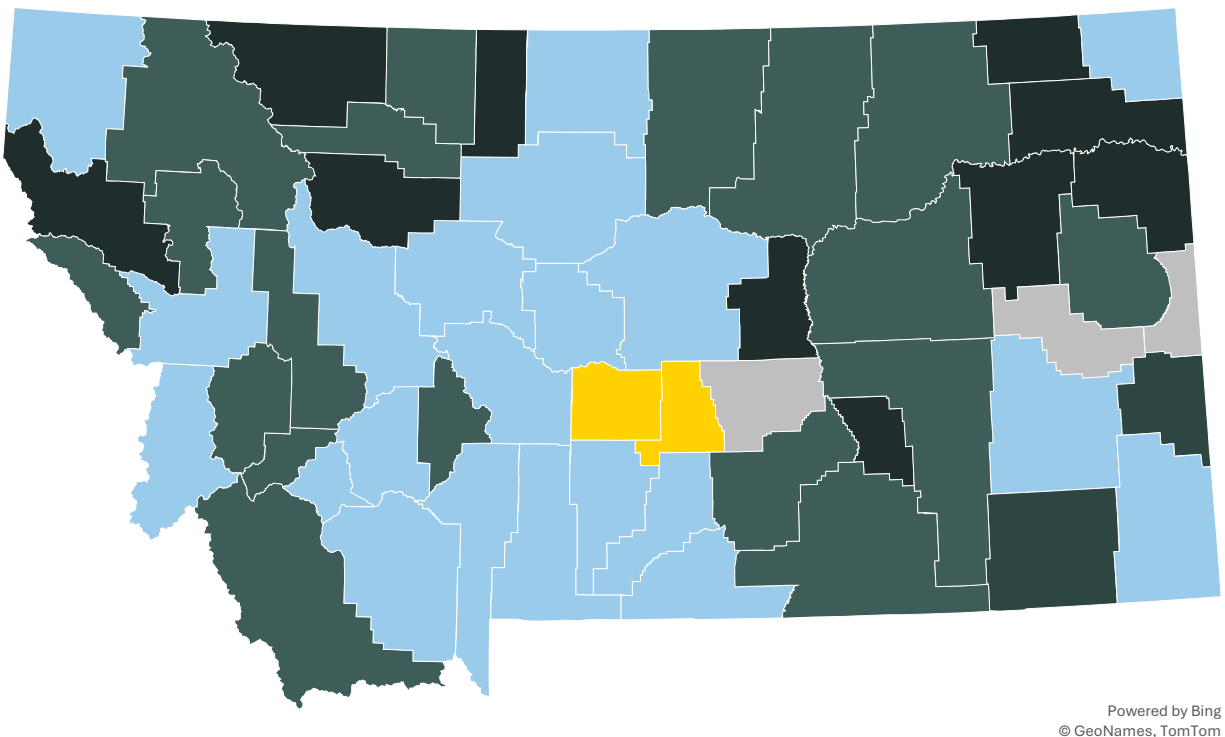
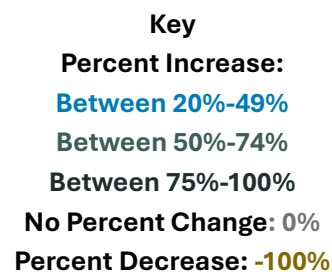


Figure 2. County-level change in active ECP registry participation, 2022 to 2025



Registry data also highlight the demographic composition of Montana’s early childhood workforce. Consistent with national trends, the workforce remained disproportionately composed of women across both time periods (Figure 3). However, active registry participation increased across all reported gender groups between 2022 and 2025, suggesting broader participation in workforce systems and professional infrastructure over time.

Figure 3. ECP registry users by gender, December 2022 and December 2025.

Women represented the large majority of active registry users in both years, and active registry participation increased across all reported gender groups.

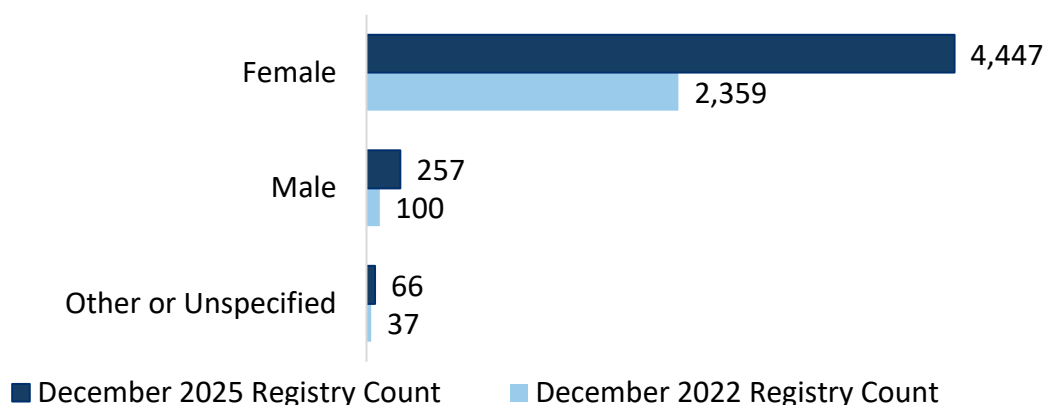


Figure 3. ECP registry users by gender, December 2022 and December 2025.

Educational and credentialing patterns within the registry further illustrate the complexity of Montana’s workforce landscape. Between 18% and 20% of active registry professionals reported holding a bachelor’s degree, while a much larger proportion held certificates, credentials, or other non-degree qualifications (Figure 4). These findings reflect the diverse pathways through which individuals enter and remain in Montana’s early childhood workforce, including apprenticeship programs, Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials, and other workforce training models. At the same time, the small proportion of degree-holding professionals highlights ongoing challenges related to workforce preparation, compensation, and long-term professional advancement within the field.

Figure 4. ECP registry users by highest reported education or credential, December 2022 and December 2025.

Most active registry users reported non-degree or certification-based pathways, while about one in five (20%) held a bachelor’s degree in 2025.

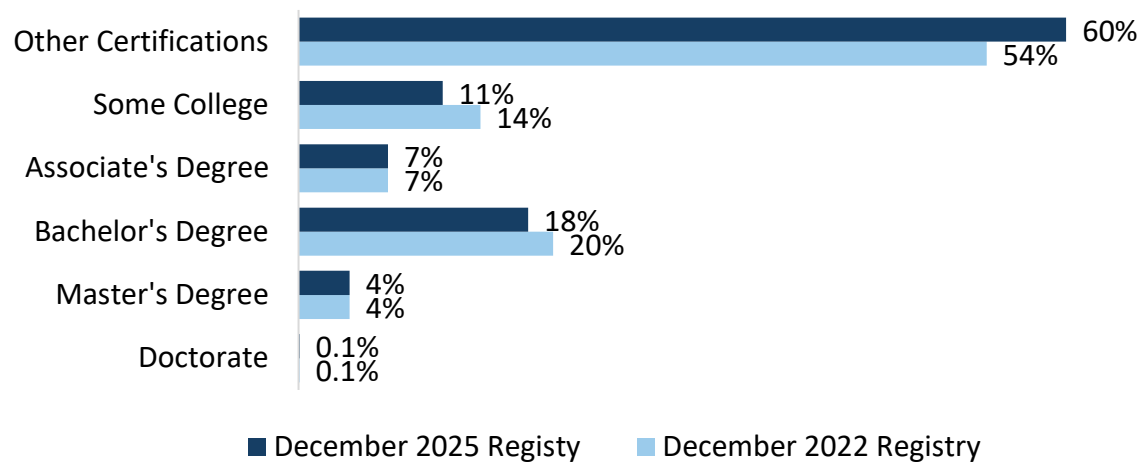


Figure 4. ECP registry users by highest reported education or credential, December 2022 and December 2025.

Although registry participation increased over the grant period, registry retention data suggest continued instability and movement within Montana’s early childhood workforce. Among professionals active in the registry in December 2022, only 30% remained active by December 2025 (Table 1; Figure 5). Registry absence may reflect a range of factors, including workforce exit, changes in employment settings or roles, lapses in registry participation, or changes in professional registration requirements and reporting practices during the grant period.

Figure 5. ECP registry users retained in the registry from December 2022 to December 2025.

About one-third (30%) of registry users active in December 2022 were also active in December 2025.



Figure 5. ECP Registry users retained in the registry from December 2022 to December 2025.

Retention patterns also varied by educational credential (Figure 6; Table 1). Nearly half of retained professionals held certification-based credentials, while approximately one-quarter held bachelor's degrees. These findings show that the retained registry workforce includes professionals across multiple educational and credentialing pathways, including certification-based, apprenticeship-related, and degree-based routes. This pattern underscores the importance of maintaining varied workforce development pathways that reflect how early childhood professionals enter and remain connected to Montana's professional infrastructure.

Figure 6. Retained ECP registry users by highest reported education or credential, December 2022 to December 2025.^b

Among users active in both the December 2022 and December 2025 registries, nearly half reported a certification-based credential and 24% reported a bachelor's degree.

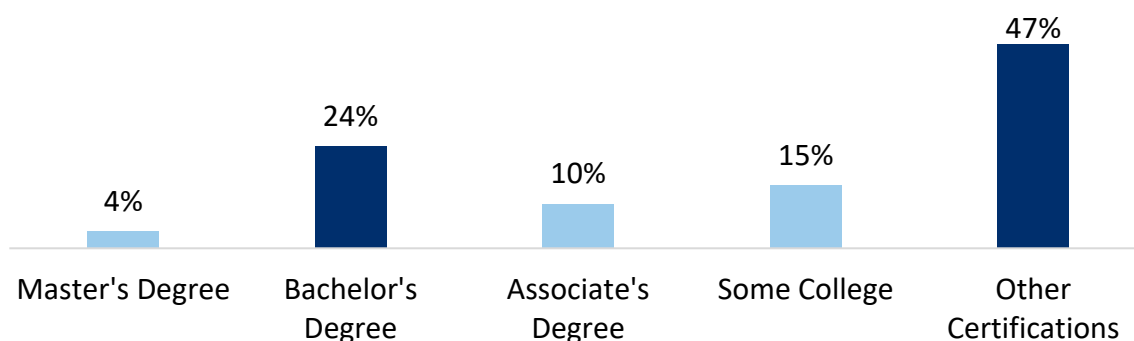


Figure 6. Retained ECP registry users by highest reported education or credential, December 2022 to December 2025.

The workforce data presented above reflect both increased participation in Montana's professional workforce infrastructure and ongoing workforce challenges. Registry participation increased during the grant period, while retention patterns and regional variation suggest that workforce recruitment, retention, and distribution remain important considerations for the state's early childhood sector.

These workforce conditions existed alongside broader statewide efforts to improve coordination, expand access to services, and support planning across programs serving young children and families. Many of these priorities are reflected in Montana's Early Childhood Strategic Plan, which outlines goals and strategies for the prenatal-to-five

^b Figure represents highest degree obtained. Professionals with a bachelor's or master's degree could have also reported other certifications but is not represented here. Those professionals categorized under other certifications did not earn or report any other degree.

system.⁷ BFB5 was implemented within this broader context and built upon existing partnerships, planning efforts, and statewide initiatives already underway.

POLITICAL, PUBLIC, AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT

The BFB5 initiative was implemented within a broader policy and public environment that influenced how early childhood services were discussed, funded, and administered across Montana. Relevant contextual factors included state policy priorities, agency leadership, governance structures, and ongoing discussions related to the needs of young children, families, and early childhood professionals.

In Montana, responsibility for early childhood programs is distributed across multiple agencies, funding streams, and community-based organizations. The Early Childhood and Family Support Division (ECFSD) within the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) was developed following earlier PDG B-5 funding and strategic systems planning efforts to bring state-administered early childhood programs within DPHHS into one division. ECFSD now oversees programs such as child care, home visiting, early intervention, and related family supports. Additional partners, including state agencies, Tribal Nations, community organizations, educational institutions, and private programs, also contribute to the delivery of services for young children and families. The Montana Legislature establishes policy and funding parameters, while state agencies are responsible for program administration and implementation.

During the BFB5 grant period, early childhood issues were frequently discussed in relation to child care access, workforce challenges, and the role of early childhood services in supporting families and local economies.⁴ Legislative discussions, planning efforts, and public conversations often focused on the availability of child care, workforce recruitment and retention, and the impact of these issues on communities throughout the state. Early childhood topics were also reflected in statewide planning documents, public reports, and community discussions during the grant period.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND SYSTEMS PLANNING

Public engagement and statewide planning activities were important components of BFB5 implementation. Several grant-supported efforts engaged families, early childhood professionals, Tribal partners, state agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders in identifying priorities, reviewing data, and informing future planning. These activities included the statewide Needs Assessment,⁴ Strategic Plan revision,⁷ and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis (CFA).⁶ Together, these efforts provided information about system needs, funding considerations, and priorities for Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

A key component of this work was the statewide Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning process. The **Needs Assessment** incorporated surveys, interviews, administrative data, and public data sources to examine conditions affecting young children, families, professionals, and communities across Montana.⁴ Findings from these activities informed discussions about statewide priorities and future planning efforts.

As part of the **Strategic Planning** process, stakeholders reviewed and responded to draft recommendations developed from Needs Assessment findings. Participants rated recommendations based on importance and feasibility, and results were organized into a matrix that helped identify priorities with varying levels of readiness for implementation. Recommendations were subsequently organized into three tiers: Tier 1 (“Ready Now”), Tier 2 (“Emerging”), and Tier 3 (“Future Focus”). This process provided a structured approach for incorporating stakeholder input into statewide planning efforts.⁷

BFB5 also supported a **Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis** (CFA) of Montana’s prenatal-to-five system.⁶ The CFA examined funding sources, financing structures, and the estimated costs associated with delivering early childhood services. Findings were intended to inform discussions related to financing, investment priorities, and long-term sustainability across Montana’s prenatal-to-five system.

The CFA included extensive stakeholder engagement activities involving child care programs, home visiting and early intervention programs, higher education representatives, Tribal partners, Child Care Resource and Referral organizations, early childhood coalitions, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and state agencies. Activities included surveys, interviews, planning discussions, and multiple statewide convenings. A statewide meeting held in Helena in May 2025 served as one component of this broader engagement process, providing opportunities for participants to review financing challenges, discuss priorities, and contribute to the development of a shared fiscal vision and guiding principles.

Additional BFB5 activities provided opportunities for information sharing and community engagement. **Transition Summits** brought together community leaders, professionals, educators, and Tribal partners to discuss early learning transitions and community priorities. **ParentingMontana.org** was relaunched in 2025 as a statewide resource for families and professionals and recorded nearly 10,000 visits to content related to children ages 0–8. The **Montana State Library Early Literacy Project** distributed books and story-time kits and offered digital story-time programming for families and caregivers. Additional participation and reach data for these activities are presented in later sections of the report.

BFB5 also supported development of governance structures associated with Montana's **Early Childhood Integrated Data System** (ECIDS). During the grant period, partners established governance processes, policies, and data-sharing agreements intended to support data management and future coordination across participating agencies and programs.

Collectively, these activities generated information, stakeholder input, planning documents, and governance structures that informed statewide discussions about priorities, funding, and future early childhood planning efforts.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS INFLUENCING IMPLEMENTATION

Several contextual developments influenced implementation during the BFB5 grant period. These included changes in state policy, shifts in service delivery systems, and modifications to statewide contracting structures that affected programs serving young children and families.

One significant policy development was the passage of Montana House Bill 352.⁹ The legislation established voluntary early literacy targeted interventions designed to improve reading proficiency by the end of third grade and provided funding for activities such as summer “jumpstart” programs, home-based literacy supports, and early assessments for children ages three to five who may be at risk of not meeting reading benchmarks. As these initiatives were implemented during the grant period, some newer services may not be fully reflected in data collected through earlier needs assessment activities. Several BFB5-supported activities related to family engagement, transitions, and early learning operated alongside these emerging efforts.

Changes also occurred within Montana's early intervention system. Part C Early Intervention services are delivered through contracted entities selected through a competitive procurement process. In July 2024, new contracts were implemented, resulting in a shift from five regional contractors to four entities serving all counties in Montana. This change affected implementation conditions for partners involved in transition planning, early intervention coordination, and related service delivery activities.

State contracting structures for child care support services also changed during the grant period. DPHHS revised how Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) services and related program supports were organized. Under the revised structure, early childhood program-focused services and family-focused services were administered through separate contracts and delivered by a different mix of organizations. This transition resulted in changes to organizational roles, staffing structures, regional responsibilities, and implementation partnerships across the child care support system.

Because several BFB5-supported workforce, quality improvement, and technical assistance activities operated within or alongside these systems, these changes formed part of the broader implementation environment during the grant period. Collectively, they illustrate how BFB5 activities were implemented within an evolving policy and service delivery landscape shaped by both new initiatives and ongoing organizational transitions.

The context described throughout this section influenced both the opportunities and challenges associated with BFB5 implementation. Within this environment, BFB5 supported a range of activities focused on workforce development, family engagement, quality improvement, data systems, and service expansion. The following section describes these activities and how they were implemented during the grant period.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reach of Context and Systems Planning Activities

BFB5-supported planning and engagement activities involved participants from across Montana's prenatal-to-five system. State agencies, Tribal Nations, higher education institutions, Child Care Resource and Referral organizations, early childhood coalitions, community-based programs, families, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and other partners contributed to needs assessment activities, strategic planning efforts, financing discussions, and statewide engagement processes.

Several major planning initiatives supported broad stakeholder participation during the grant period. The statewide Needs Assessment incorporated input from families, early childhood professionals, and system stakeholders through surveys, interviews, and analysis of administrative and public data sources. The Strategic Planning process engaged stakeholders in reviewing, prioritizing, and refining recommendations for Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Similarly, the Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis included surveys, interviews, planning discussions, workgroups, and statewide convenings involving partners from child care, home visiting, early intervention, higher education, Tribal communities, state agencies, and other sectors.

Additional engagement opportunities were provided through activities such as Transition Summits, ParentingMontana.org, and Montana State Library literacy initiatives. Transition Summits brought together local and regional partners to discuss early learning transitions and community priorities. ParentingMontana.org expanded access to early childhood information and resources for families and professionals, while statewide literacy initiatives distributed materials and programming designed to engage families, caregivers, and community organizations.

Collectively, these activities brought families, early childhood professionals, Tribal partners, agencies, businesses, higher education institutions, and community organizations into statewide discussions about service needs, workforce challenges, financing priorities, and future directions for Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

What Changed in the System

Through the Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan revision, and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis, Montana developed updated information about workforce conditions, service gaps, financing structures, and stakeholder priorities across the prenatal-to-five system. These efforts produced shared planning resources that state agencies, Tribal partners, community organizations, early childhood programs, and other stakeholders can use to guide future policy, funding, and implementation decisions.

The grant period also coincided with several important developments in Montana's early childhood landscape. Legislative initiatives related to early literacy expanded supports for young children and families in some communities and created additional connections to activities focused on transitions, family engagement, and early learning. Changes to Part C contracting structures and Child Care Resource and Referral service delivery systems also altered implementation conditions for early childhood programs, technical assistance organizations, and other partners operating within the broader early childhood system.

Findings from the Context domain suggest that BFB5 helped establish a common set of planning resources and engagement processes across Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Through statewide assessments, strategic planning activities, fiscal analysis, and stakeholder engagement efforts, partners contributed information about service needs, workforce challenges, financing priorities, and opportunities for future system development.

At the same time, many of the contextual conditions described throughout this section remained largely unchanged during the grant period. Workforce shortages, geographic barriers to service delivery, uneven access to services across communities, and the complexity of coordinating programs across multiple agencies continued to shape implementation efforts. In addition, changes to workforce registry participation requirements and statewide service delivery structures complicated interpretation of some workforce and implementation trends.

As a result, findings from the Context domain are best understood as describing the environment in which BFB5 activities were implemented. They provide important context for understanding implementation conditions, emerging priorities, and statewide planning efforts, but should not be interpreted as evidence that BFB5 resolved broader structural challenges facing Montana's early childhood system.

COMPONENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPONENTS DOMAIN

The Components domain of the BUILD Framework focuses on the programs and services that form the operational core of an early childhood system. Building on the contextual conditions described in the previous section, this domain examines how BFB5 supported the development, expansion, and strengthening of on-the-ground programs and services that make up the early childhood system across Montana. These components represent the ways in which families, professionals, and communities interact with the system. This section draws from administrative records, participation data, service utilization indicators, participant surveys, and partner implementation reports summarized in [Appendix B](#).

During the grant period, BFB5 supported a diverse set of programmatic activities implemented across settings, organizations, sectors, and digital platforms. These activities were designed to address gaps in access, strengthen program quality, and respond to emerging needs among families and the early childhood workforce, particularly for populations facing the greatest barriers, including families in rural and frontier communities, families with infants and toddlers, and families experiencing crisis or instability. Activities supported through BFB5 included both family-facing supports, such as crisis care, early literacy resources, home visiting pilots, and family engagement initiatives; and professional-facing supports, such as workforce scholarships, Recruitment & Retention cohorts, professional development, consultation models, and inclusion supports. Together, they focused on expanding access to services, supporting the workforce, improving program quality, and helping families connect with available resources.

This section examines how BFB5 activities contributed to strengthening access, quality, and service delivery across Montana's early childhood system.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO CHILD CARE AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

A central focus of BFB5 was expanding access to early childhood services. Investments supported programs, employers, and communities in increasing the availability of care and testing new approaches to meeting family needs. Efforts to expand access included subgrants and targeted funding strategies to local organizations and partners used to develop, expand, or strengthen services. Across the grant period, 638 **subgrants** totaling more than \$11.5 million were awarded to recipients in 44 counties across Montana. These investments supported a range of initiatives, including child care slot expansion (particularly for infants and toddlers), workforce supports, coalition infrastructure, and home visiting pilots.

Through a partnership with Zero to Five Montana, BFB5 supported two cohorts of **Employer-Sponsored Care Grants** totaling \$2 million. Cohort 2 alone included 26 employers implementing child care benefit models such as tuition assistance, dependent care assistance programs, on-site or near-site child care, and reserved child care slots. More than 215 employees were enrolled in child care benefits, and employers with fully implemented strategies reported an average staff retention rate of 96%. Together, these investments reflect a broader systems approach to expanding access by supporting early childhood professionals, programs, employers, and communities in addressing child care barriers for working families.

BFB5 **Slot Expansion Grants** supported 201 child care programs across 30 counties in expanding service capacity and increasing the availability of care. Programs could expand their capacity in three areas: infant/toddler slots, expanded hours, and/or care for children with special needs. Slot Expansion Grants were implemented over a relatively short period, from April through December 2025. Baseline data reflect program-reported enrollment or capacity at the time of application, while final reporting data reflect program status at the end of 2025.

Among programs serving infants, 66% reported increased infant enrollment between baseline and the end of the grant period.^c A similar trend was observed among programs serving toddlers, where 60% of participating programs reported increased toddler enrollment over the same period. Programs serving preschool-age children also demonstrated enrollment growth, with 51% reporting increased preschool enrollment between baseline and the end of 2025.

Together, these findings suggest that slot expansion funding supported participating programs in increasing enrollment capacity and expanding access across multiple age groups during the grant period. However, because programs received funding for different types of expansion, these overall enrollment patterns should be interpreted as broad evidence of increased enrollment among Slot Expansion Grant recipients, not as evidence tied to any single grant strategy.

To better understand the grant's infant/toddler-specific contribution, infant and toddler enrollment changes were also examined separately among programs that specifically received Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants. Among this subgroup, 68% of programs reported increased infant enrollment, and 60% reported increased toddler enrollment following implementation of grant-supported expansion activities (Figures 7 and 8).

^c Slot Expansion Grant analyses are based on programs with valid data for each relevant measure. The data included here reflect only programs whose application and final reporting data included the relevant enrollment, capacity, or service category, with valid responses available for comparison.

These findings suggest that BFB5 investments supported increased infant and toddler enrollment capacity among programs funded specifically for infant/toddler slot expansion, an important outcome given that infant and toddler care carries some of the largest cost and subsidy gaps within Montana’s early childhood system.⁶

Figure 7. Change in infant enrollment among programs with Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants.

Nearly seven in ten (68%) programs with Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants reported increased infant enrollment.

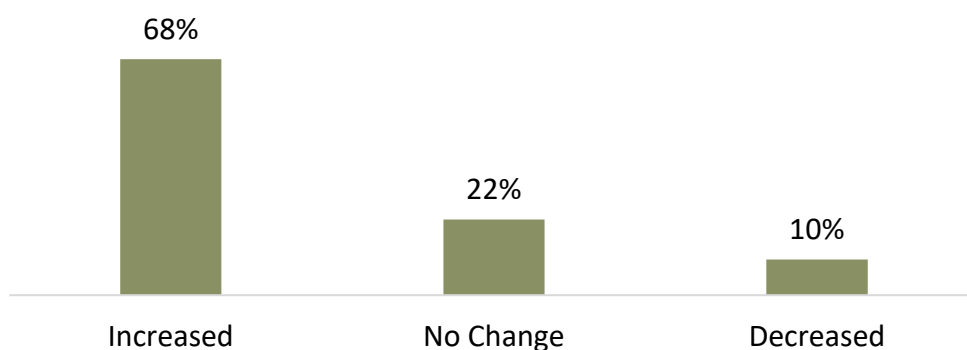


Figure 7. Change in infant enrollment among programs with Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants.

Figure 8. Change in toddler enrollment among programs with Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants.

Most programs with infant/toddler slot expansion grants reported increased toddler enrollment.

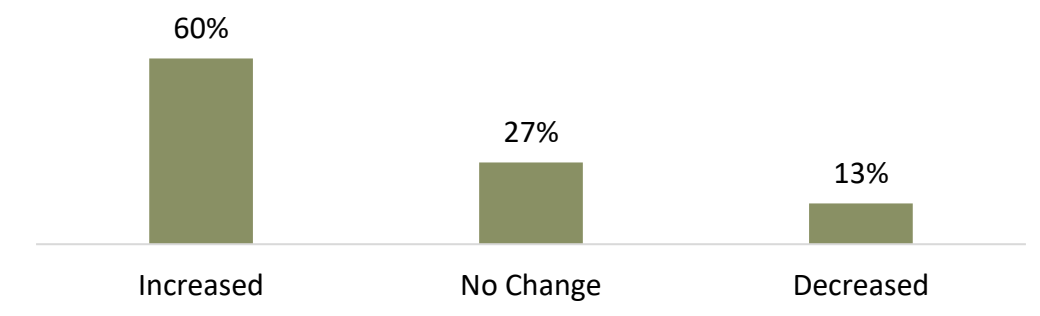


Figure 8. Change in toddler enrollment among programs with Infant/Toddler Slot Expansion Grants.

Slot Expansion Grant investments also supported expanded program flexibility and inclusion capacity. Among programs receiving Expanded Hours grants, most reported being able to remain open longer hours or offer weekend care options that were

previously unavailable (Figure 9). This suggests that targeted investments helped address barriers faced by families needing non-traditional care schedules, including those working evening, overnight, or weekend shifts.

Programs receiving Infant/Toddler grants reported increased infant and toddler enrollment capacity, with most indicating that grant funding enabled them to add slots or expand services for younger children beyond their prior enrollment capabilities. Similarly, programs receiving Special Needs grants reported increased capacity to serve children with disabilities or developmental support needs. Approximately three-quarters (73%) of participating programs indicated that grant funding enabled them to serve children with special needs whom they previously could not accommodate. Figure 9 below shows the percentage of programs that increased child care capacity across the identified needs.

Together, these findings show that BFB5 support led to these time-bound program expansion efforts, increasing participating programs' reported capacity to offer expanded hours, serve infants and toddlers, and accommodate children with disabilities or developmental support needs.

Figure 9. Slot expansion grants helped programs increase targeted child care capacity. Most programs reported increased capacity for expanded hours, special needs care, and infant/toddler care.^d

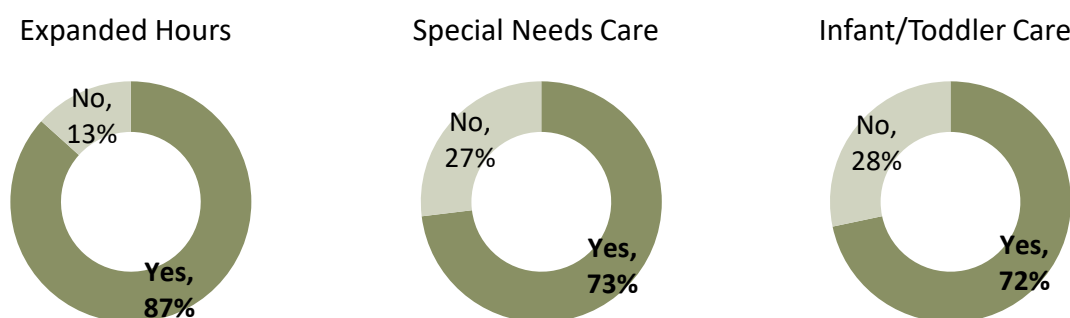


Figure 9. Slot expansion grants helped programs increase targeted child care capacity.

The **Crisis Child Care** pilot was implemented in Missoula County through Slot Expansion funding and was informed by the Toby's House crisis nursery model in Great Falls. The

^d Percentages are based on programs that selected each grant type in their application and provided a valid response to the corresponding capacity question. Expanded Hours: n=60; Special Needs Care: n=78; Infant/Toddler Care: n=159.

program provided short-term, no-cost emergency child care for children ages 0–6 whose families were experiencing instability or crisis situations and connected participating families with additional community resources and supports. During the grant period, the pilot served 11 families and represented an initial effort to explore how crisis-based child care supports might be replicated within Montana’s broader early childhood system.

The **Community Response Program (CRP)** was a separate, existing Children’s Trust Fund initiative that helped families connect to community-based services and supports. BFB5 provided supplemental funding support to the CRP during the grant period. Through the program, families were connected to resources such as mental health services, food assistance, parenting education, and community activities. Most families who received referrals through the program went on to access or begin services from the organizations to which they were connected, with annual follow-through rates ranging from 68% to 82% (Figure 10). In total, the program facilitated 1,317 referrals across the grant period.

These findings suggest that the CRP referral system functioned as more than an information-sharing mechanism. Within the broader DPHHS service infrastructure, the program provided an active pathway for connecting families to community-based resources and supports. BFB5 funding helped sustain and expand access to these referral and navigation supports during the grant period while leveraging a new statewide service delivery system.

Figure 10. Total CRP referrals to parents and caregivers, 2023-2025.

Referrals peaked in 2024, while across 2023-2025, 68% to 82% of referred parents and caregivers initiated services they were referred to via the CRP.

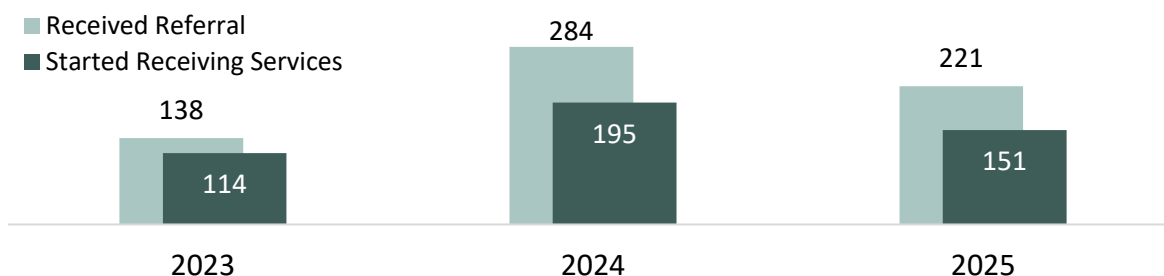


Figure 10. Total CRP referrals to parents and caregivers, 2023-2025.

Referral patterns also show which types of supports families most often accessed through CRP. Mental health-related referrals represented the largest category of

referrals made across the grant period, followed by referrals related to basic needs supports, parenting resources, and community services (Figure 11).

Figure 11. CRP referrals by type of referral, 2023-2025.

Mental health services referrals were the most frequent type of referral made by CRP.

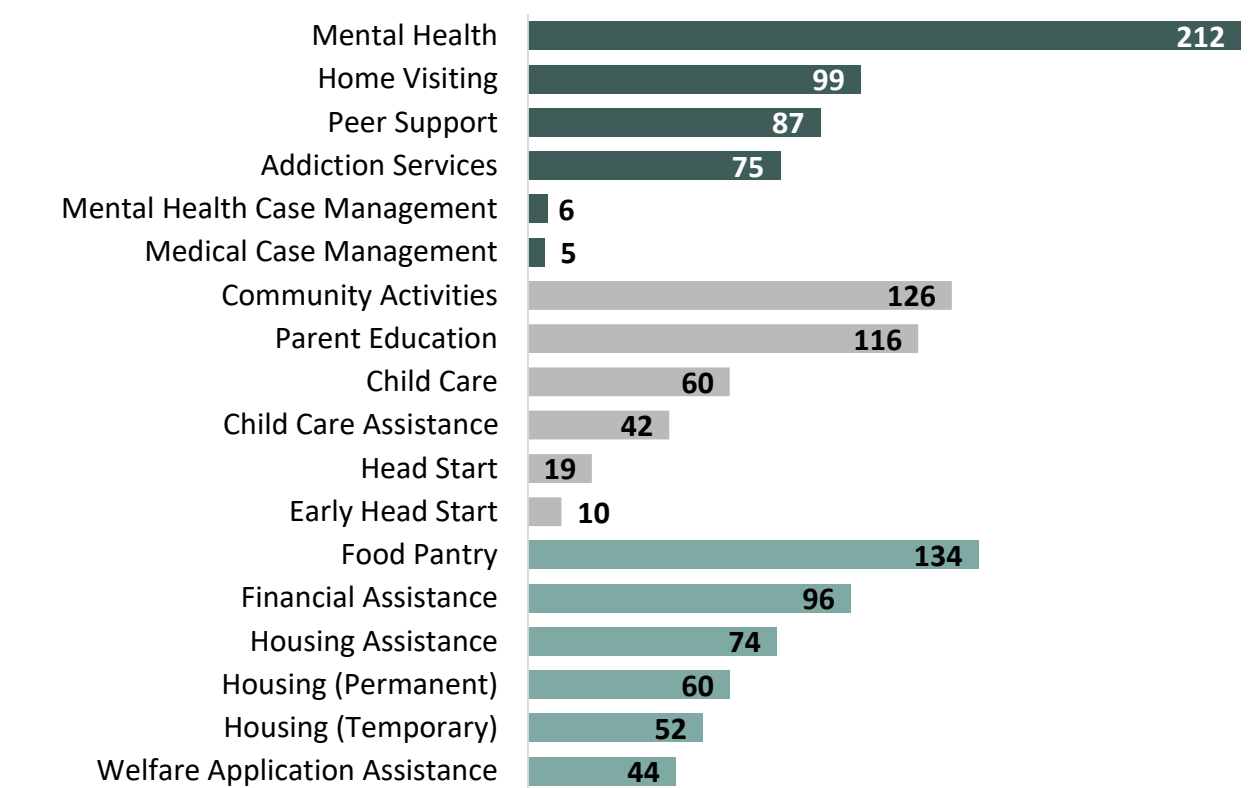


Figure 11. CRP referrals by type of referral, 2023-2025.

STRENGTHENING FAMILY ACCESS, NAVIGATION, AND EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES

BFB5 also supported efforts to improve how families access information, resources, and early learning opportunities. The re-launch of **ParentingMontana.org** in 2025 enhanced a centralized digital platform designed to provide families and early childhood professionals with access to parenting information, developmental resources, and early learning supports. During 2025, the platform recorded 9,591 visits to content related to children ages 0–8, indicating engagement with the resource, although visit counts may not represent unique individual users.

Complementing this digital resource, the **Montana State Library Project** expanded access to early literacy materials and family engagement opportunities through several virtual and community-based strategies supported by BFB5 funding. In 2025, the project

reported 543 virtual program attendees, 15,466 early literacy text messages sent to families, approximately 4,500 bookmarks with early literacy tips distributed statewide, and summer reading supplies funded for 71 public libraries. The project also distributed 5,408 books through the Montana Food Bank Network to organizations across Montana and provided 668 story time kits to families. Distribution records show that the Montana State Library Project reached a broad geographic range of communities: approximately 60% of books distributed through the Montana Food Bank Network went to organizations located in frontier counties. Additional outreach included reading spaces in libraries, WIC offices, clinics, laundromats, grocery stores, food banks, and other locations where families with young children may spend time waiting. Together, these efforts extended early literacy resources beyond formal early childhood program settings and created multiple access points for families to engage in reading, shared literacy activities, and early learning supports.

Family engagement efforts were also supported through training and convening activities led by the Montana Head Start Association. In 2025, the organization delivered 21 family engagement trainings reaching 669 early childhood professionals across 35 Montana counties. This built upon earlier efforts in 2024, when five trainings reached 76 participants. The trainings were designed to strengthen educator knowledge and implementation of family engagement practices across a variety of early childhood settings.

Together, these activities strengthened family access and navigation by expanding the ways families and early childhood professionals could connect with parenting information, literacy materials, and early learning supports. BFB5-supported partners used a combination of digital resources, community-based distribution, virtual programming, and professional training to extend supports beyond traditional program settings and make family engagement resources available across multiple points in Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY AND PROGRAM QUALITY

A substantial portion of BFB5 investments focused on strengthening the early childhood workforce and building program capacity to serve young children and families. Professional learning opportunities supported through BFB5 reached a wide audience across the state, with 1,947 instances of participation by early childhood professionals during the grant period, including 1,406 instances in 2025 alone (Table 2). These opportunities were delivered by multiple partner organizations through a range of formats, including trainings, cohort-based learning, communities of practice, and coaching models intended to support professional knowledge, reflective practice, and program quality.

Table 2. Training and Professional Development Activities Supported by BFB5

Training or Professional Development Activity	Number of Participants*
Act Early: Partnering with Families on Developmental Screenings and Referrals	20
Apprenticeship Program	53
ASQ - Train the Trainer	21
Brazelton Family Engagement Training	43
CDA Boot Camp	34
Confident Fundraising Starts here: Telling Your Story, Growing Your Impact (UOHV)	17
Demystifying Assessment & Community Referral: Intro to IECMHC	11
Development is a Journey - Virtual and In-Person Training	231
Do No Harm (UOHV)	17
IECMHC Community of Practice Development	8
IECMHC Community of Practice: Demystifying Assessment & Community Referral	6
IECMHC Community of Practice: Trauma-Informed Care in Early Childhood Settings	10
LearnERS	55
Montana Early Childhood Coalition – Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) Family & Leadership Training	20
Montana Pyramid Model - Practices Training for Home Visiting	38
Montana Head Start Association Trainings: Circle of Parents, Fatherhood Engagement, Understanding Resistance: A Trauma Informed Approach to Engaging Families, and Connection: The Not-So-Secret Sauce	238
Navigating Challenging Conversations: Why, What and How	47
Partnering with Fathers	5
Quality Trainings with Debi Mathias- BUILD	200
RAISE Provider Training - Demystifying Assessment & Community Referral: Intro to IECMHC	11
RAISE Provider Training - Intro to Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: How to Engage with Your Consultant around Educator Wellness	13
Reflecting and Responding: Staying in Relationship When Behavior Challenges Us	28
Relationship Based Care for Infants and Toddlers Training for Trainers: Building a Strong Network of Infant/Toddler Care in Montana	25
Sandbox Project Training	697
Sandbox Project Technical Assistance and Coaching	43
Strengths-Based Family Engagement for Home Visitors	56
Total Participation Instances Across Activities	1,947

*Participation data represent participation instances rather than unique individuals and are not deduplicated across activities.

One notable example was the **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC)** initiative, which functioned as both a workforce support and quality improvement strategy within Montana's early childhood system.¹⁰ Implemented through BFB5-supported partnerships using a braided funding stream, IECMHC activities focused on building the foundations for a more coordinated statewide infrastructure for reflective consultation, workforce development, and relationship-based consultation supports that could be integrated into child care and early childhood education settings. Through training, reflective consultation, communities of practice, and pilot implementation activities, the initiative was designed to support early childhood professionals in strengthening adult-child relationships, promoting children's social-emotional development, and responding to behavioral and relational challenges in classroom and care settings. The findings presented in this subsection are drawn from a separate evaluation of the IECMHC activity conducted by Stellar Group.¹⁰

Implementation efforts extended beyond direct consultation activities to include development of broader IECMHC workforce and support structures. BFB5-supported partners developed Montana-specific training pathways, reflective supervision supports, consultation guidance, and sustainability planning efforts intended to strengthen long-term IECMHC capacity across the state. In 2024, the University of Montana Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development launched a modular Montana IECMHC training program that included content related to reflective practice, developmental screening, cultural humility, advocacy, classroom consultation, and Montana's early childhood system. Two cohorts completed the training program, resulting in 14 mental health professionals completing Montana's IECMHC training pathway, nine of whom later contracted to provide consultation during pilot implementation activities.¹⁰

The initiative also emphasized reflective supervision and consultation (RSC) as a core component of workforce support and professional growth. Through partnerships with Georgetown University and external IECMHC consultants, Montana-specific RSC infrastructure was developed that included monthly reflective consultation groups, consultant communities of practice, and sector connector training models. Participating sector connectors received 87 hours of individual reflective supervision and 60 hours of group didactic and discussion training intended to strengthen leadership capacity and reflective practice supports within Montana's early childhood workforce.¹⁰

Pilot implementation efforts focused intentionally on supporting early childhood professionals working in settings that served children and families experiencing elevated vulnerability and stress. For the 31 pilot sites with available demographic data, all served at least one identified high-need population, including subsidy-eligible families, children in foster care, families experiencing housing insecurity, children with

disabilities or healthcare needs, dual-language learners, and children at risk of suspension or expulsion from early childhood settings. Most of these sites served three or more identified high-need populations.¹⁰

Stakeholder feedback and survey findings identified IECMHC as a valued support for educator well-being, professional reflection, and relationship-based practice, particularly within a workforce experiencing ongoing stress, burnout, and turnover pressures. Among early care and education staff who completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory at both the start and end of consultation, Emotional Exhaustion decreased by 15% and was the only burnout domain with a statistically significant reduction. These findings should be interpreted as exploratory because matched pre/post burnout data were available for 45 ECE staff across 19 sites and the pilot included variation in sites, consultants, and consultation duration. The initiative also introduced new structures for reflective practice, peer support, and consultation within Montana's early childhood system.¹⁰

At the same time, implementation findings highlighted the complexity of developing IECMHC infrastructure across a geographically large and rural state, including the need for continued investment in reflective supervision capacity, cultural responsiveness, sustainable funding structures, and long-term workforce development supports. Evaluation findings from the Stellar Group also noted that trained consultants remained concentrated in several population centers, highlighting continued challenges related to geographic distribution and statewide access to consultation services.¹⁰

The prominence of IECMHC within Montana's statewide Needs Assessment and strategic planning efforts further reflects its emerging role within the state's broader early childhood system.^{4,7} Findings suggest that IECMHC established new training pathways, consultation structures, and reflective supervision supports within Montana's early childhood system. Stakeholders viewed these supports as valuable for educator well-being and professional reflection, although additional implementation and sustainability efforts will be needed to determine their long-term reach and impact.¹⁰

Facilitated by Zero to Five Montana, **Recruitment & Retention Cohorts** provided structured, cohort-based support to early childhood programs focused on workforce stability and organizational planning. Twenty-two participants completed Cohort 1, and 26 participants completed Cohort 2, with participating programs developing recruitment and retention plans tailored to their local needs. Survey data collected by Zero to Five Montana from Cohort 1 indicated that most of the 15 programs with available data maintained or improved staff retention relative to baseline, suggesting improvements in workforce stability among participating programs despite ongoing pressures.

Findings suggest that the Recruitment & Retention Cohorts were particularly valuable as peer-learning, planning, and practice-improvement opportunities. Among the 15 programs with retention data at both time points, the share reporting staff retention rates of 75% or less decreased (from 60% in the year before the cohort to 53% during the cohort year), while the share reporting retention rates of 90% or more increased (from 13% to 27%) (Figure 12). Although workforce shortages and turnover remained persistent challenges across the sector, these patterns suggest that some participating programs may have strengthened retention practices and organizational supports during a period of continued workforce strain.

Figure 12. Retention improved for some Recruitment & Retention Cohort participants.

Among 15 programs with valid data in both years, fewer reported retention rates of 75% or less, while the number reporting retention of 90% or higher increased from 2 to 4.

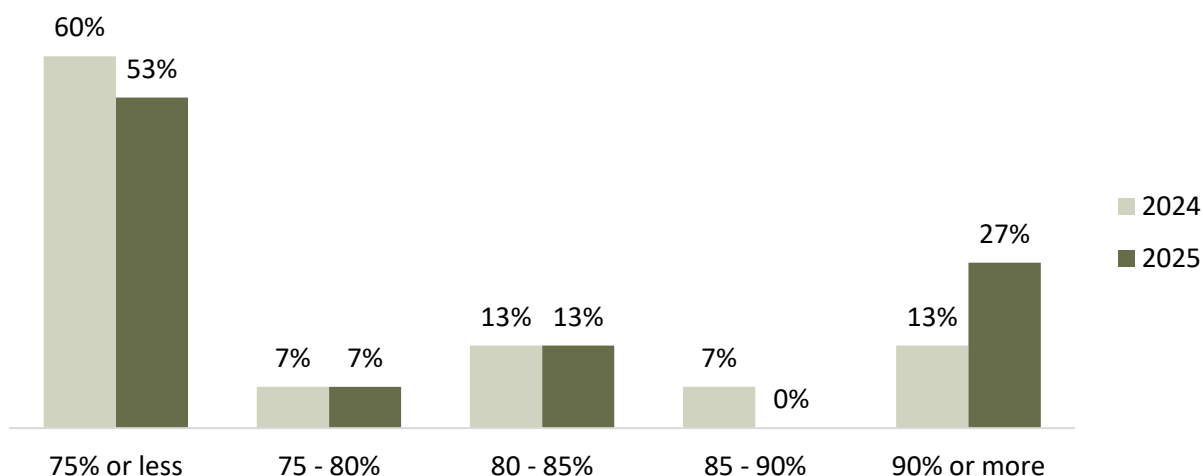


Figure 12. Retention improved for some Recruitment & Retention Cohort participants.

Across survey waves, participants consistently identified peer connection, shared problem-solving, and opportunities to learn from others in similar leadership roles as valuable aspects of the cohort experience. As one participant explained, the cohort provided a way of “connecting with other Directors” and realizing they were “not the only one who feels a little lonely at the top.”

Participants also reported applying cohort tools to strengthen onboarding, staff support, leadership practices, and retention efforts. Examples included 30-day and 90-day check-ins, orientation checklists, coaching meetings, stay surveys, exit interviews, professional development opportunities, and more intentional hiring processes. These

participant-reported changes suggest that the cohorts helped strengthen organizational practices related to workforce stability.

At the same time, recruitment remained a persistent challenge, particularly in rural communities and in comparison to industries offering higher wages and benefits. As one participant reflected, “applicants are few and far between.” Together, these findings suggest that the Recruitment & Retention Cohorts helped participating programs strengthen internal leadership, onboarding, and retention practices, while broader labor market and compensation challenges remained significant constraints.

An additional workforce support included the **Apprenticeship & Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion (Apprenticeship)** program. The Apprenticeship program provided a structured pathway that combined paid employment, on-the-job learning, and formal training, allowing early childhood professionals to build credentials while remaining employed in the field. Across the grant period, 53 participants enrolled in apprenticeship programs, with completion rates ranging from 59% to 68% across three cohorts (Figure 13). While the apprenticeship model created an alternative route for workforce preparation and advancement, variation in completion rates suggests that participants may have experienced differing levels of support, capacity, or access to training over time. Even so, the program represented an important strategy for expanding workforce development pathways in a rural state where access to traditional higher education and credentialing opportunities may be uneven.

Figure 13. Enrolled Apprenticeship Program participants and program completion, 2023-2025.

Across three cohorts, 53 participants enrolled and 33 (62%) completed the program during B5 implementation.

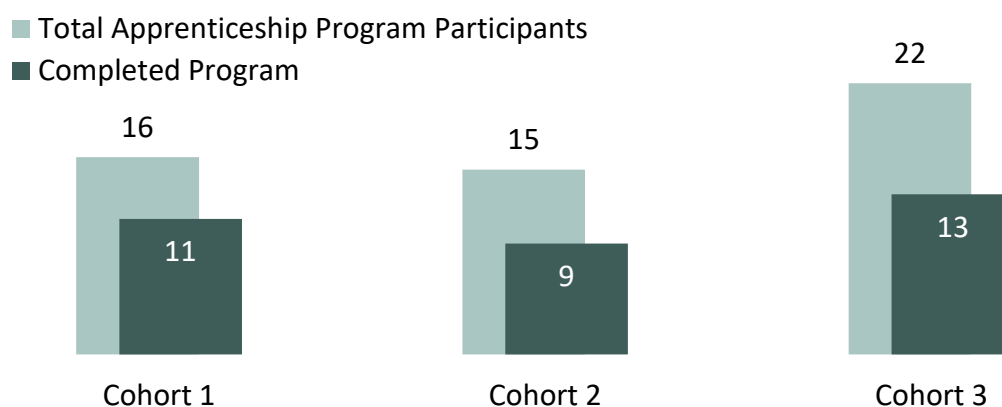


Figure 13. Enrolled Apprenticeship Program participants and program completion, 2023-2025.

Finally, the **Child Care Worker Program (CCWP)** was implemented as a pilot strategy to support Montana's child care workforce by reducing child care costs for eligible child care workers and their families. The program temporarily expanded income eligibility for child care subsidy assistance from 186% to 250% of the federal poverty level (FPL) for child care workers in direct-care roles within licensed or registered child care programs. Eligible workers also received a capped monthly copay of \$100. The program was designed to test whether reducing child care costs for the early childhood workforce could support recruitment, retention, affordability, and staff stability.¹¹

This section draws on two distinct sources of evidence: CCWP program data reported by DPHHS in the CCWP fact sheet and supplemental analysis of survey data conducted by the RIIC Evaluation Team.

According to the DPHHS CCWP fact sheet, 280 child care providers^e participated in CCWP during the pilot period from October 2023 through December 2025.¹¹ The program served workers and families across two funding categories. Families at or below 185% FPL were supported through the Best Beginnings Scholarship program using Child Care and Development Fund resources, while families between 186% and 250% FPL were supported through BFB5 expanded eligibility funding. DPHHS reported that 268 families and 498 children participated at or below 185% FPL, with \$5,698,187 in net payments. An additional 141 families and 246 children participated in the expanded eligibility group between 186% and 250% FPL, with \$2,907,865 in net payments. These participation data indicate that CCWP reached both the existing subsidy-eligible child care workforce and workers made eligible through the BFB5-supported expansion.¹¹

DPHHS also conducted a descriptive workforce turnover analysis, comparing CCWP participants above 185% FPL with the broader licensed child care workforce.¹¹ DPHHS defined workers as retained if they continued working in a direct-care position, regardless of whether they remained at the same organization or facility. Across the cumulative period, DPHHS reported a turnover rate of 52% across all workers who were employed at licensed child care facilities statewide (among 11,210 unique workers who were employed at licensed child care facilities statewide, 5,797 left the child care field

^e Throughout this report, the terms early childhood professionals and early childhood programs are generally used to refer, respectively, to people who work in Montana's early childhood field and to the centers, facilities, family child care homes, organizations, and other settings that provide services to young children and families. In the Child Care Worker Program discussion, the terms workers, families, and providers are used intentionally to align with terminology used by DPHHS in Child Care Worker Program reporting and related communications. In that context, workers and families refer to individuals/families receiving Child Care Worker Program scholarship support, and providers refers to the child care programs or settings where those workers were employed.

and did not return). CCWP participants during the same period had a turnover rate of 24% (among 146 CCWP participants, 35 left the field and did not return) (Figure 14).¹¹

Figure 14. Turnover among CCWP participants and the broader licensed child care workforce, cumulative pilot period.

Final DPHHS data show lower turnover among CCWP participants above 185% FPL than among the broader licensed child care workforce; findings are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal.



Figure 14. Turnover among CCWP participants and the broader licensed child care workforce, cumulative pilot period.

For calendar year 2025, DPHHS reported turnover of 33% among all licensed child care workers and 18% among CCWP participants above 185% FPL.¹¹

This analysis suggests that CCWP participants above 185% FPL experienced lower turnover than the broader licensed child care workforce during the pilot period.¹¹ However, these comparisons should be interpreted as descriptive rather than causal. Workers were not randomly assigned to participate in CCWP, and CCWP participants may have differed from the broader workforce in ways that affected retention. Even with this limitation, the turnover pattern is consistent with the program's underlying theory of change: reducing the cost of child care for early childhood workers may make continued employment in the field more financially feasible.

The RIIC Evaluation Team conducted additional analysis of CCWP survey findings to better understand how providers and workers experienced the program.^f This analysis included review of survey items and qualitative coding of open-ended provider and worker responses. These findings should be interpreted as respondent perceptions and implementation context, rather than as independent evidence of program impact.

Provider survey findings suggest that providers perceived CCWP as valuable for recruitment and retention. Among provider respondents, 92% agreed that CCWP benefited providers, 74% reported using CCWP as a recruitment strategy, and 74%

^f Surveyed child care workers included only those workers participating in the program through expanded eligibility, with an income between 186 and 250% of the federal poverty level.

agreed that the program helped retain staff. Analysis of open-ended responses found that providers most often described CCWP as helping them recruit and retain staff by making employment in child care more financially feasible for workers. Providers also described the program as reducing financial strain for both programs and employees because it allowed providers to offer a meaningful employment benefit without absorbing the full cost of reduced tuition or staff child care discounts.

Worker survey findings suggest that CCWP may have been especially important as a retention and stabilization support. While 53% of worker respondents reported that CCWP influenced their job acceptance, 92% reported that assistance influenced their desire to stay in their role, and 79% reported satisfaction with the scholarship assistance they received. Open-ended responses identified several consistent themes: the program helped workers stay employed in child care by making work financially possible, reducing financial stress for families, and allowing workers' children to remain in care while their parents continued working.

At the same time, open-ended provider responses identified income-based eligibility rules as a consistent limitation of the program. Across both survey years, providers suggested that the program should be redesigned so more workers could use the benefit. This finding suggests that the program's broader workforce stabilization potential may depend not only on the availability of child care assistance, but also on whether eligibility criteria align with the economic realities of Montana's early childhood workforce.

Across provider and worker responses, CCWP appeared to reduce the financial penalty of working in child care while also needing child care for one's own children, though eligibility requirements were a barrier. This pattern suggests that CCWP functioned as both a workforce stabilization strategy and a family economic support for participating workers.

SUPPORTING COORDINATED AND RESPONSIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

In addition to expanding services and strengthening quality, BFB5-supported activities also sought to strengthen coordination and responsiveness across Montana's early childhood system. **Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV)**, was a pilot implemented through existing home visiting infrastructure and community partnerships and designed to support family navigation and access to services during pregnancy and early childhood. Building on Montana's Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) system, UOHV provided universal time-limited prenatal and postnatal supports designed to connect families with developmental, mental health, and community-based resources. The UOHV-related findings presented in this subsection

are drawn from a separate evaluation of the program conducted by Montana DPHHS staff.¹²

Across the pilot period, UOHV served 191 families with 194 children, including a large majority who met the program's target population criteria.¹² Through screening, referral, and follow-up activities, the pilot tested whether a single entry point could help families connect more efficiently with existing home visiting, developmental, health, and community services. UOHV supported the development of more structured referral and navigation processes while also providing insight into how time-limited home visiting supports could be integrated within Montana's broader early childhood service system.¹²

Administrative and survey data suggest that UOHV functioned as both a referral coordination and family support strategy.¹² Among participating caregivers who completed a satisfaction survey, 98% reported that their home visitor partnered with them to identify community resources aligned with their family's needs, and 93% reported following up on at least one referral. Families most commonly reported accessing medical and health services, financial and food assistance, and early childhood and family support services following participation in the program.¹²

Participant feedback also highlighted the relationship-based and family-centered nature of the model.¹² Most caregivers reported feeling less stressed as a result of participation, increased understanding of child development, and high levels of comfort and trust with their assigned home visitor. These findings suggest that the pilot may have helped families navigate available services while also providing relational support during pregnancy and the first year of life.¹²

At the same time, implementation findings identified several challenges related to data collection consistency and screening completion rates across pilot sites.¹²

Administrative records showed lower-than-expected rates of completed developmental and postpartum depression screenings relative to established MIECHV benchmarks. These findings highlight the challenges associated with implementing a new service model across multiple sites and suggest that additional infrastructure, training, and implementation supports may be needed to strengthen screening practices and data consistency as the model evolves.¹²

Together, the findings suggest that UOHV showed promise as a family navigation and referral coordination strategy implemented through Montana's home visiting infrastructure, while also highlighting areas where additional implementation supports may be needed to strengthen consistency and fidelity across sites.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Programmatic Components and Service Reach

Across the grant period, BFB5 supported a broad range of activities designed to expand access to services, strengthen workforce supports, and improve coordination within Montana's early childhood system. Findings from the Components section suggest several major patterns across implementation activities.

First, BFB5-supported activities increased service availability across several areas of Montana's early childhood system. Slot Expansion Grants supported participating programs in adding enrollment capacity, extending operating hours, and increasing their ability to serve infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Additional initiatives, including crisis child care and home visiting pilots, tested new approaches to supporting families experiencing barriers to care or newly navigating the early childhood system.

Second, families had access to additional information, literacy resources, and referral supports through several partner-led initiatives. ParentingMontana.org recorded more than 9,500 visits during 2025, the Montana State Library distributed books and literacy kits statewide, and the Community Response Program connected families to mental health, housing, food, and parenting supports through more than 1,300 referrals.

Third, BFB5 investments increased participation in workforce supports through professional learning, consultation models, scholarships, apprenticeship pathways, and peer-learning cohorts. Nearly 2,000 participation instances were recorded across professional development activities, while workforce initiatives such as IECMHC, Recruitment & Retention Cohorts, apprenticeships, and CCWP scholarships provided different forms of support for early childhood professionals.

Findings in this section are strongest for participation, implementation reach, and reported changes in program capacity or practice. Evidence related to longer-term impacts on workforce stabilization, program quality, child outcomes, or family outcomes remains more limited and varied across activities. Together, these findings suggest that BFB5 primarily functioned as a systems-building and capacity expansion initiative during the grant period, supporting partner-led efforts to strengthen service availability, workforce supports, and coordination across Montana's prenatal-to-five system.

What Changed in the System

BFB5-supported activities expanded several points of access to services and supports for families and programs across Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Child care capacity increased among many participating Slot Expansion grantees, with programs reporting

expanded enrollment, extended operating hours, and greater ability to serve infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Employer-sponsored child care initiatives introduced new benefit models for working families, while the crisis child care pilot tested an additional approach to supporting families experiencing instability or emergency situations. Through supplemental BFB5 funding, the CRP connected families to mental health, housing, food, parenting, and other community-based services, facilitating 1,317 referrals and annual service initiation rates ranging from 68% to 82%. ParentingMontana.org, digital story time programming, book distribution efforts, and family engagement initiatives also expanded access to parenting information, literacy resources, and early learning supports outside formal care settings.

For professionals, BFB5 investments increased participation in workforce supports through professional learning, consultation models, scholarships, apprenticeship pathways, and peer-learning opportunities. Nearly 2,000 participation instances were recorded across professional development activities, while initiatives such as IECMHC, Recruitment & Retention Cohorts, Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion, and Child Care Worker Program scholarships provided different forms of support for educator well-being, leadership development, reflective practice, workforce participation, and retention planning. Collectively, these activities expanded both the availability of services for families and the range of supports available to early childhood professionals.

At the same time, evidence across activities remained uneven in both depth and duration. Findings were strongest for participation, implementation reach, service utilization, and reported changes in program capacity or practice. Evidence related to longer-term workforce stability, program quality, child outcomes, or family outcomes remained more limited and varied across initiatives. Several activities remained in early stages of implementation or lacked sufficient longitudinal data to support stronger conclusions about effectiveness or sustained impact. As a result, findings from the Components domain are best interpreted as evidence of implementation progress, expanded service availability, and increased support structures for families and professionals rather than definitive evidence of long-term statewide outcomes or fully realized systems change.



CONNECTIONS

The Connections domain focuses on how families, early childhood professionals, and organizations interact within an early childhood system. In Montana's prenatal-to-five system, services for young children and families are delivered through multiple sectors, including early care and education, health, home visiting, early intervention, family support, libraries, schools, community organizations, Tribal communities, and state agencies. As a result, families and professionals often interact with multiple programs and organizations at the same time. Activities included in this domain focused on helping partners share information, coordinate efforts, connect families with services, and work together around common priorities.

This section examines BFB5 activities that brought partners together across sectors and communities. Efforts included statewide convenings, local coalition activities, family engagement initiatives, referral and navigation systems, workforce pathway resources, and development of shared frameworks and standards. Many of these activities were implemented through partnerships among state agencies, community organizations, higher education institutions, early childhood programs, and local coalitions. Evidence presented in this section is drawn from convening records, participation data, referral tracking, stakeholder engagement activities, and partner implementation reports summarized in [Appendix B](#).

STRENGTHENING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND SHARED LEARNING

Several BFB5 activities focused on creating opportunities for partners across sectors to gather, share information, and engage in relationship-building.

Transition Summits

BFB5 supported **Transition Summits** as a strategy for strengthening relationships, information-sharing, and coordination across the programs and organizations that support children and families during key developmental transitions. These convenings brought together early childhood educators, school personnel, community partners, parents, and other stakeholders to share practices, discuss transition challenges, and build connections across sectors.

Rather than focusing on a single transition point, the summits addressed the multiple transitions children and families experience across the early childhood continuum, including transitions into parenthood, movement from early intervention (Part C) to preschool special education services (Part B), and entry into kindergarten. Participating communities identified their own transition priorities and developed community-specific transition plans based on local needs, assets, and implementation contexts.

The summits created opportunities for participants to exchange information, learn from one another, and engage in cross-sector dialogue related to supporting children and families during periods of transition. Through these discussions, communities explored strategies for improving communication, strengthening continuity across services and settings, and identifying opportunities for greater local coordination.

Participation reflected engagement from stakeholders across sectors and regions of Montana. In 2023, 47 participants representing 13 counties attended the Transition Summit, followed by 61 participants in 2024. In 2025, 33 participants attended, representing five Tribal communities: Blackfeet, Crow, Flathead, Fort Peck, and Rocky Boy's.

Although the evaluation does not assess the long-term effects of the transition plans developed through these convenings, participation evidence suggests that the summits provided a structured opportunity for relationship-building, shared learning, and local planning around transition-related challenges and opportunities.

Great Beginnings, Great Families Conference

The annual **Great Beginnings, Great Families** conference serves as a statewide convening intended to strengthen connections among early childhood professionals, community organizations, and state partners. Through presentations, workshops, and networking opportunities, the conference creates a forum for participants to share information, discuss emerging issues, and learn about practices occurring across Montana's early childhood system.

Participation remained strong throughout the grant period, with 245 participants in 2023 (148 in-person and 97 virtual), 216 participants in 2024, and 268 participants in 2025. The sustained participation across years suggests continued interest in opportunities for cross-sector learning and engagement among professionals working in early childhood education, health services, family support programs, and community organizations.

As a statewide convening, the conference provides a forum for information-sharing, professional networking, and relationship-building across sectors. This evaluation does not assess how participation influenced subsequent collaboration or practice; however, participation data suggest that the conference functions as an important venue for bringing together individuals and organizations working across Montana's early childhood system.

Statewide Needs Assessment, Strategic Planning, and Fiscal Analysis Engagement

BFB5 also supported cross-sector connection through stakeholder engagement activities associated with the statewide Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan, and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis. Although these activities are discussed elsewhere in this report as planning and analytic products, they also created structured opportunities for partners across Montana's prenatal-to-five system to share information, identify system needs, review priorities, and consider opportunities for coordination across programs, agencies, funding streams, and communities. These processes provided forums for partners to contribute perspectives, build shared understanding of system strengths and gaps, and connect planning conversations across early childhood sectors.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LEVEL COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to statewide convenings, BFB5 activities supported community-level coordination through partnerships and local networks.

Early Childhood Coalitions

Local early childhood coalitions serve as important connection points within communities, bringing together partners from early care and education programs, public schools, health providers, family support organizations, and other sectors. Through a collaborative partnership among Zero to Five Montana, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Montana, and The Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development, regular convenings created structured opportunities for community and state partners to share information, strengthen relationships, identify local priorities, and connect community planning efforts with broader statewide early childhood initiatives.

BFB5 staff regularly participated in convenings to support communication and information-sharing between local coalitions and state-level partners. The coalition structure brought together organizations that often operate separately, creating opportunities for dialogue, relationship-building, and shared planning around the needs of young children and families. They served as structured opportunities for community organizations and state partners to share information about implementation efforts, community needs, and statewide priorities.

Coalition Transition Grants

In addition to supporting coalition convening structures, BFB5 provided targeted grant funding to local early childhood coalitions to support transition-focused planning and implementation activities within communities. **Coalition Transition Grants** were awarded to 16 coalitions in 2024 and 18 coalitions in 2025, representing 18 unique coalitions across the two-year period. The funded coalitions serve areas spanning 38

Montana counties, reflecting broad geographic reach across western, central, and eastern Montana, including both larger population centers and smaller rural communities. These grants supported local efforts related to family engagement, kindergarten and program transitions, meeting facilitation, cross-sector planning, self-care strategies, family-friendly policies, and other locally identified priorities intended to strengthen continuity of services for young children and families.

By pairing coalition convening with direct funding, BFB5 gave local coalitions resources to move from planning conversations toward community-level implementation. This funding allowed coalitions to adapt transition and family engagement work to local needs, strengthen relationships among community partners, and test approaches that could support more coordinated services for young children and families.

Home Visiting Coalition

The **Montana Home Visiting Coalition** represents another example of cross-sector collaboration within Montana's early childhood system. Facilitated by Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Montana, the coalition brought together organizations involved in home visiting and family support to promote communication, information-sharing, and alignment among programs serving young children and families across communities.

BFB5 contributed funding as part of a broader braided financing approach that also included philanthropic support and participant dues. This shared investment structure supported coalition activities while reducing reliance on a single funding source and creating opportunities for continued coalition work beyond the grant period.

Coalition activities included regular convenings, cross-program planning, and discussions focused on referral pathways, family support strategies, and continuity of services. Through these activities, the coalition provided a statewide forum for Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) sites, Early Head Start programs, and national home visiting model sponsors to exchange information, identify shared priorities, engage in strategic planning, and increase awareness of home visiting services and supports.

SUPPORTING FAMILY–PROGRAM PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Strengthening connections between early childhood programs and families was also a focus of BFB5 activities.

Montana Family Engagement Framework

The **Montana Family Engagement Framework** was developed to provide shared guidance for early childhood programs seeking to build meaningful partnerships with families. Developed by the Montana DPHHS with input from an interdisciplinary

workgroup representing early care and education, health, and family support sectors, the framework reflects a cross-sector approach to supporting family engagement practices across Montana's early childhood system. The final version of this framework is not yet available to the broader public.

The framework defines family engagement as strength-based relationships among families, programs, and communities that support children's development and well-being. It outlines key strategies for strengthening family engagement, including welcoming families into programs, promoting culturally responsive practices, supporting two-way communication, involving families in decision-making, and fostering connections among families and communities.

In addition to developing the Montana Family Engagement Framework, family engagement training opportunities were offered to early childhood professionals statewide in response to needs identified through Montana's early childhood system and the 2019 statewide Needs Assessment.¹³ Many of these trainings were coordinated by partner organizations with support from BFB5 and focused on strengthening family engagement practices across programs and communities. Together, the trainings created opportunities for practitioners to build shared understanding of family engagement principles, exchange strategies, and reflect on approaches for supporting children and families across settings.

The Montana Family Engagement Framework and related professional learning activities served as shared resources intended to strengthen communication and partnership between families and early childhood programs. These efforts provide a shared foundation for discussing family engagement practices across sectors and settings. While the evaluation does not assess how consistently the framework was implemented across programs, the development of shared guidance and statewide training opportunities represents an effort to promote greater alignment around family engagement practices within Montana's early childhood system.

CONNECTING FAMILIES TO RESOURCES AND SERVICES

BFB5 activities also supported initiatives that connect families with services and early learning resources.

Family Literacy and Engagement Resources

Through a partnership with the **Montana State Library Project**, families had opportunities to participate in digital story time and access literacy materials designed to support early language and literacy experiences at home. In 2025, 542 parents and caregivers participated in digital story time, while 5,408 books and 668 story time kits were distributed to families and community organizations (Figure 15).

Together, these activities expanded access to literacy materials beyond traditional program settings and created additional opportunities for families to engage with books and literacy resources within home and community contexts. By combining virtual engagement opportunities with tangible literacy materials, the initiative functioned as both a family engagement and early literacy strategy. The effort created additional points of connection among families, community organizations, and early learning resources across Montana.

Figure 15. Resources distributed by the Montana State Library Project.

In 2025, the Montana State Library Project distributed 5,408 books to community organizations and 668 Story Time Kits to parents and caregivers.



Figure 15. Resources distributed by the Montana State Library Project.

While the Montana State Library Project is also discussed in the Components section because of its role in expanding access to early learning resources, it is included here in the Connections domain because it helped connect families with community-based learning opportunities and supported engagement between families and early childhood programs.

Referral Coordination Through Universally Offered Home Visiting

Another effort supporting system connections involved referral coordination through **Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV)**, a BFB5-supported model designed to strengthen connections between families and community-based supports during pregnancy and early childhood. Building on existing MIECHV infrastructure, UOHV provided a structured, voluntary entry point for families to access time-limited prenatal and postnatal home visiting services while also connecting families to additional community resources based on identified needs. Across the pilot period, UOHV served 191 families with 194 children, the majority of whom met the MIECHV's target population criteria.¹²

Implementation data suggest that UOHV functioned as both a referral coordination and family support strategy within Montana's home visiting system. Among caregivers completing a satisfaction survey, 98% reported that their home visitor partnered with

them to identify community resources aligned with their family's needs, and 93% reported following up on at least one referral.¹² Families most commonly accessed medical and health services, financial and food assistance, and early childhood and family support services through program referrals. These referral findings suggest that UOHV created a more structured process for linking participating families with existing services through screening, referral, and follow-up during pregnancy and early childhood.¹²

CLARIFYING WORKFORCE PATHWAYS

BFB5 activities also supported connections within the early childhood workforce.

Early Childhood Career Workbook

BFB5 supported the revision of **Montana's Early Childhood Career Workbook** by providing facilitation, technical assistance, editing, and printing support to Montana Early Childhood Project to convene a stakeholder group and guide the revision process. Within the Connections domain, this effort supported greater alignment and visibility across Montana's early childhood workforce system by helping professionals, students, and employers better understand how training, credentials, and educational pathways connect across sectors and roles within the field.

The workbook is designed to help individuals navigate career pathways within Montana's early childhood workforce by providing information about training requirements, credential options, and educational pathways across the field. The resource describes professional roles across a variety of early childhood settings, including child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start programs, early intervention services, and K–3 classrooms. It also outlines pathways from entry-level training to certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and advanced graduate study in early childhood education, supporting greater transparency and navigation across workforce preparation pathways within Montana's early childhood system.

STRENGTHENING ALIGNMENT ACROSS STANDARDS AND SYSTEMS

Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS)

The revision of the **MELS** represents another effort to support alignment across early childhood systems. The revision process engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including educators, higher education partners, state agencies, community organizations, and early childhood professionals. Participation increased from 30 stakeholders in 2023 to 60 stakeholders representing multiple sectors and 15 Montana counties in 2025.

Figure 16. Total number of stakeholders engaged in the MELS revision process.

The BFB5 team engaged 60 stakeholders in some capacity in the MELS revision process in 2025.

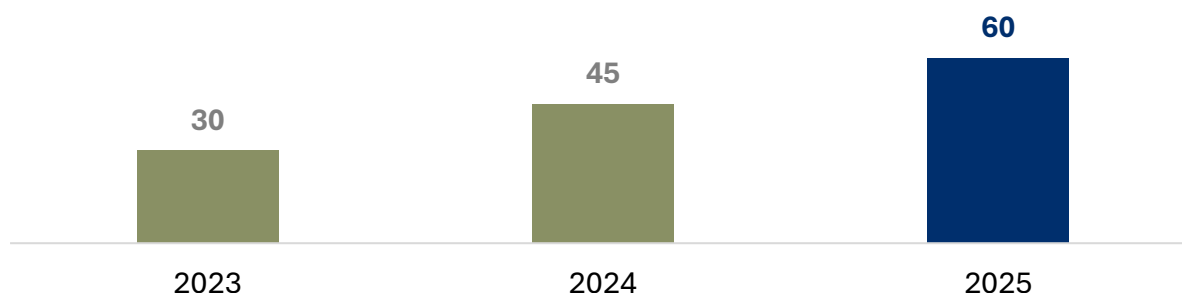


Figure 16. Total number of stakeholders engaged in the MELS revision process.

A core leadership team of 8–10 representatives from higher education, federal technical assistance partners, and state leadership met regularly to guide the revision process. This team helped synthesize stakeholder feedback, support decision-making, and maintain connections between the leadership group and the broader stakeholder community.

Through this collaborative process, the updated standards provide a shared framework for understanding children’s development and learning across early childhood settings. This shared framework is intended to support alignment across programs and promote continuity as children transition between settings and into the early elementary grades.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reach of Connection Activities

BFB5-supported activities brought together early childhood programs, families, community organizations, Tribal partners, higher education institutions, state agencies, and family-serving organizations through statewide convenings, coalition structures, professional learning opportunities, referral initiatives, and standards revision efforts. These activities created opportunities for stakeholders to discuss transition planning, workforce challenges, family engagement, referral processes, service coordination, and other priorities affecting Montana’s prenatal-to-five system.

Several initiatives also developed shared frameworks and resources intended to support alignment across programs and sectors. The Montana Early Learning Standards revision, Montana Family Engagement Framework, Early Childhood Career Workbook, coalition convenings, and Quality Recognition System redesign activities provided

shared guidance related to child development, family engagement, workforce pathways, and quality improvement. These resources gave programs, professionals, and partners common tools and language for discussing practices and priorities across settings and sectors.

What Changed in the System

BFB5 created additional opportunities and structures for coordination and collaboration across Montana's prenatal-to-five system. Transition Summits, local early childhood coalitions, the Montana Home Visiting Coalition, statewide convenings, UOHV referral coordination, family engagement work, workforce pathway resources, and standards revision efforts helped partners engage in shared planning, information exchange, and problem-solving across programs and sectors.

These activities also helped strengthen common reference points across the system. Shared frameworks and resources related to family engagement, workforce pathways, developmental expectations, quality improvement, and referral coordination provided guidance that could be used by early childhood programs, professionals, agencies, and community partners. Viewed through the Connections domain, these efforts supported stronger communication and alignment among partners that often operate through separate programs, funding streams, and service systems.

At the same time, available data described participation in convenings, coalition activities, stakeholder engagement processes, referral initiatives, and framework development. Evidence related to the depth, consistency, and long-term sustainability of cross-system coordination remains more limited. Many of the partnerships, coalitions, and collaborative efforts described in this section continued to rely on relationship-based leadership, temporary funding supports, or voluntary participation. As a result, sustaining these connections will likely require continued investment in facilitation, staffing capacity, communication infrastructure, and organizational commitment across partners.



INFRASTRUCTURE AND SCALE

The BUILD Framework distinguishes Infrastructure and Scale as separate but related dimensions of systems change. The Infrastructure domain focuses on the foundational conditions systems need to function effectively and with quality, including governance, financing, workforce development, data systems, standards, and implementation capacity. The Scale domain focuses on the extent to which system components, resources, and infrastructure become available across communities, sectors, and populations.

For this evaluation, Infrastructure and Scale are presented together because BFB5's contributions in these areas were closely interconnected. During the grant period, BFB5 invested in structures intended to strengthen Montana's prenatal-to-five system while also expanding the reach of selected activities, tools, resources, and implementation models. In many cases, evidence related to scale was tied directly to infrastructure development: activities expanded reach by building workforce pathways, shared standards, data systems, funding strategies, implementation tools, and partner capacity.

This section examines how BFB5 strengthened the foundations needed for Montana's prenatal-to-five system to function more consistently, reach more communities and early childhood programs, and support continued systems-building beyond the grant period. Findings should be interpreted as evidence of foundational progress and emerging conditions for scale, rather than evidence that all activities were fully institutionalized, sustained, or implemented consistently statewide.

STATEWIDE DATA GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

One of BFB5's clearest infrastructure contributions was support for Montana's early childhood data governance and analytic infrastructure. Early childhood data in Montana have historically been housed across multiple systems, programs, contractors, and agencies, each with separate privacy requirements, reporting practices, and data-sharing processes. This fragmentation limited the state's ability to answer cross-program questions about service access, participation, reach, and outcomes across the birth-to-five system.

BFB5 supported continued development of the **Montana Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)**, which is intended to strengthen the state's capacity to link and use early childhood data across programs. During the grant period, the Early Childhood and Family Support Division established formal governance structures for ECIDS, including a divisional data governance structure made up of the ECFSD Leadership Team, a Data Governance Committee of program data owners, and a Data Stewards

Committee of data stewards and data support staff from ECFSD programs. These structures created clearer roles for decision-making related to data access, privacy, use, and integration.

ECIDS development also included concrete governance and legal infrastructure. In 2024 and 2025, the data governance committee adopted 15 data governance policies and procedures. The team completed 25 data governance-related memoranda of understanding and data use agreements across the two years. A Data Governance Charter was completed in February 2025, followed by Data Governance Procedures in May 2025. Together, these outputs represent important groundwork for integrated data use because they establish how data decisions will be made, who participates in those decisions, and how privacy and data-sharing requirements will be managed.

BFB5 also supported technical infrastructure for data integration. Montana selected Snowflake as the data warehouse for ECIDS. The Snowflake structure includes raw data transferred from source systems, an integration layer, and a presentation or analytic layer for reporting tools. In 2025, four data systems were integrated into Snowflake, and a programmatic use case process was developed. The first prioritized use case focused on common eligibility, with the goal of helping ECFSD analyze potential eligibility across Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and ECFSD programs such as Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarships, WIC, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

An analytic readiness memo developed through DPHHS's technical assistance work with ECDataLab documented Montana's progress in moving from general ECIDS planning toward more specific analytic development.¹⁴ This work supported a clearer use-case process, helped identify gaps in technical and organizational capacity, and assessed readiness across six areas: aligned use cases and state priorities, requests for data to inform decisions, established data-sharing processes, technical infrastructure, access to business intelligence tools, and identified data analysis staff. Across several indicators, Montana moved from limited or moderate maturity toward moderate or high maturity, suggesting measurable progress in both governance and analytic readiness.¹⁴

The ECIDS work addresses a core limitation in Montana's early childhood system: no single program data system can answer many of the cross-program questions needed for statewide planning and continuous improvement. The analytic readiness process helped clarify how data from multiple programs and agencies could contribute to a more complete picture of children, families, services, and workforce conditions across the early childhood system. The resulting data landscape and prioritized use cases

provide a roadmap for future integration, analysis, and reporting across DPHHS and other participating systems.

The ECIDS work remains in development at the end of the grant period, and next steps include continuing data migration into Snowflake, implementing approved use cases, developing a unique identifier across ECFSD data, strengthening analytic staffing, and supporting program staff in using data for policy and program decisions. However, BFB5 contributed to the governance, legal, technical, and analytic foundations needed for more coordinated data use over time.

In addition to ECIDS development, BFB5-supported infrastructure efforts contributed to modernization of statewide early childhood administrative and data systems. Through coordinated investments braided with Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), and Part C funding streams, BFB5 advanced enhancements to the **Montana Access to Quality Child Care System (MAQCS)** and related data infrastructure used to support program administration, quality monitoring, compliance tracking, fiscal oversight, and service coordination. Planned MAQCS enhancements included functionality to support Best Beginnings Scholarship waitlist management, administration of Montana's redesigned Quality Recognition System (QRS), program complaint and inspection tracking, and integrated monitoring of health and safety compliance requirements across licensed and registered child care programs. BFB5 also supported modernization of Part C data infrastructure through investments in **Montana Milestones** and **Family Education Services** systems used for IDEA Part C data collection, reporting, compliance monitoring, and fiscal oversight. These investments are less visible to families and professionals than direct services, but they matter for long-term system functioning because administrative systems shape how programs are monitored, how participation is tracked, how quality improvement is documented, and how agencies use information to guide decisions.

BFB5 also supported fiscal planning infrastructure through the **Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis** of Montana's prenatal-to-five system.⁶ The CFA created shared information and analytic tools to support future financing decisions to document existing funding streams, estimate the true cost of child care and home visiting services, and identify opportunities to better coordinate and maximize resources. This work gives state leaders and partners a clearer picture of how funding flows across the system, where system supports are funded, and what level of investment would be needed to sustain higher-quality and more accessible services over time. The findings suggest that future growth will require not only expanded service funding, but also continued investment in the fiscal, administrative, and quality-support infrastructure needed to manage a comprehensive prenatal-to-five system.

SHARED STANDARDS AND QUALITY SYSTEM ALIGNMENT

BFB5 also strengthened infrastructure through investments in shared standards and quality system alignment. These efforts included revision of the MELS and redesign of Montana's QRS. Both activities helped formalize shared expectations for early childhood practice across settings and professional groups.

The **MELS** revision created an updated statewide resource for understanding developmental expectations from birth through age eight. The revised MELS expanded the standards to include kindergarten through third grade for the first time, strengthening continuity across early childhood and early elementary systems.¹⁵ The revision process also created an opportunity to align developmental guidance with current research, practitioner experience, and the needs of Montana's mixed-delivery system. The revised MELS provides common language for developmental expectations and can support alignment across child care, preschool, early intervention, home visiting, public schools, and other systems serving young children.

Similarly, the **QRS** redesign revisited how Montana recognizes, supports, and monitors quality across early childhood programs. The redesign process was intended to strengthen alignment between quality expectations, participant experience, continuous quality improvement, and statewide system priorities. Participation data indicate that professionals continued engaging with quality-related supports during the redesign period, including quarterly incentives and Pre-Star or Star 1 awards distributed across multiple program settings. While these data do not demonstrate quality improvement directly, they do suggest that professionals remained connected to Montana's quality support system during a period of transition from STARS to the redesigned QRS. This continued engagement helped maintain the implementation base needed for the redesigned QRS to launch and support future quality improvement efforts across Montana's early childhood system.

Figure 17. Total number of STARS programs that received incentives through BFB5.

A total of 204 programs received incentives through a Pre-STAR and STAR 1 one-time award amount or as STAR Quarterly Incentives between July 2024 and September 2025.

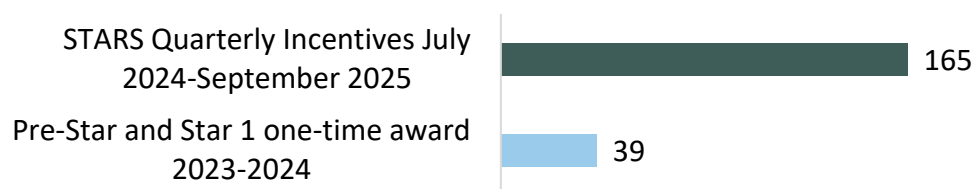


Figure 17. Total number of STARS programs that received incentives through BFB5.

Program participation data further illustrate the diversity of program types engaged within Montana's quality infrastructure system (Figure 18). Participating programs included center-based programs, group child care programs, and family child care programs, reflecting the mixed-delivery nature of Montana's early childhood system. Engaging multiple program types in quality improvement efforts is especially important in Montana's mixed-delivery early childhood system. Families rely on different types of care depending on what is available in their communities, particularly in rural and frontier areas where family child care or group child care may be the primary or only local option. Including center-based, group, and family child care programs helps ensure that quality improvement infrastructure reflects the range of settings families use across the state.

Figure 18. STARS programs receiving BFB5-supported incentives by facility type.

More than half (58%) of STARS programs who received incentives through BFB5 were center-based programs.

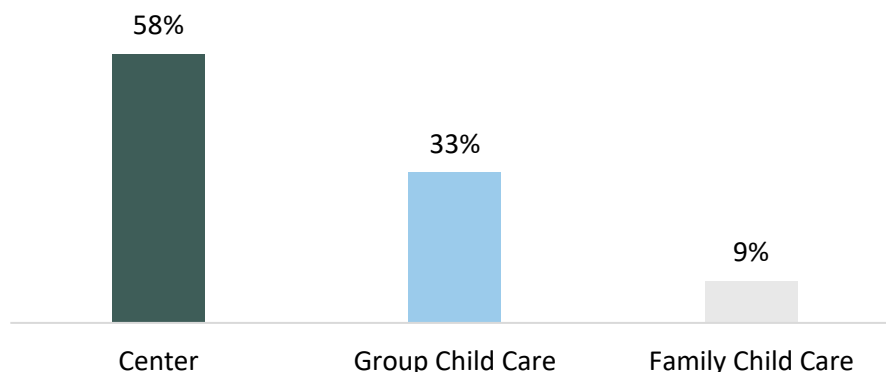


Figure 18. STARS programs receiving BFB5-supported incentives by facility type.

Updated standards and revised quality frameworks do not, by themselves, demonstrate that program practice changed consistently statewide. Their importance lies in creating common reference points and system tools that can be used in future implementation, training, technical assistance, monitoring, and continuous improvement. Continued uptake will depend on how these tools are communicated, embedded in professional learning, incorporated into quality systems, and used by programs and partners over time.

WORKFORCE PATHWAYS AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE

Workforce development was one of BFB5's largest areas of investment and a significant focus of system-building activities. Montana's early childhood workforce challenges are persistent and structural, including low compensation, turnover, staffing shortages, limited advancement pathways, and access barriers in rural and frontier communities.⁴ BFB5 did not resolve these workforce conditions, but it strengthened several system supports intended to make workforce development more accessible, organized, and sustainable over time.

BFB5 supported multiple workforce infrastructure strategies, including **Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion**, the **Child Care Worker Program, Recruitment and Retention Cohorts**, professional development activities, and inclusion-focused technical assistance. Together, these activities expanded the state's workforce-support infrastructure by piloting and evaluating financing approaches, strengthening career pathways, supporting program-level retention planning, and increasing access to professional learning and technical assistance.

The **Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion** contributed to workforce infrastructure by strengthening formal career pathways into and within the early childhood field. Across the grant period, 53 participants enrolled in the apprenticeship program, with participants representing communities in Cascade, Deer Lodge, Fergus, Flathead, Gallatin, Granite, Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Phillips, Ravalli, Silver Bow, and Teton counties. Completion rates were 68% in the 2023 cohort, 60% in the first 2025 cohort, and 59% in the second 2025 cohort. These findings show that BFB5 supported a structured training pathway with reach across multiple regions of the state. While the available data do not establish long-term career advancement or workforce retention outcomes, they do indicate investment in a formal pathway for developing and sustaining the early childhood workforce.

The **CCWP** added a workforce-support mechanism to Montana's child care subsidy infrastructure by testing an expanded eligibility and affordability model for child care workers. The program temporarily extended subsidy eligibility for child care workers up to 250% of the federal poverty level and capped monthly co-pays at \$100 for eligible workers in direct-care roles. This approach reduced child care costs for workers while allowing providers to offer lower-cost care to employees without absorbing the full financial loss. As an infrastructure investment, CCWP is most relevant as a tested financing and subsidy strategy designed to support recruitment, retention, and slot utilization within the child care system. Turnover data collected through the program suggest that participating providers experienced lower staff turnover than non-participating providers, indicating potential value as a workforce retention strategy.

While these findings do not establish causation, they provide preliminary evidence that reducing child care costs for early childhood workers may contribute to greater workforce stability and warrant further consideration in future workforce and subsidy policy decisions.

Recruitment & Retention Cohorts strengthened workforce infrastructure at the program level by creating a structured planning process for workforce challenges. Across 2024 and 2025, 47 programs completed cohort participation and developed recruitment and retention plans. By creating a structured forum for programs to assess workforce challenges, identify retention strategies, and connect those strategies to organizational goals, the cohorts helped build program capacity to support employee growth and advancement. Evidence from the cohorts shows successful completion of structured plans and broad program participation in the planning process; however, available data do not yet demonstrate whether these efforts resulted in sustained improvements in staffing stability, retention, or career advancement outcomes.

Professional learning was another major workforce infrastructure investment. During implementation, BFB5-supported **Professional Development** activities recorded 1,947 participation instances across statewide trainings, virtual and asynchronous learning, cohort-based learning, coaching, consultation, and train-the-trainer models. These investments strengthened Montana’s professional learning infrastructure by expanding multiple delivery channels for workforce training, including approaches designed to reach professionals in rural and frontier communities. Participation data demonstrate increased access to professional learning opportunities statewide, though additional data would be needed to assess resulting changes in professional practice or program quality.

The Sandbox Project strengthened workforce infrastructure for inclusive practice by creating a coordinated support model that combined training, coaching, technical assistance, assistive technology resources, and classroom materials. In 2025, 697 professionals completed Sandbox Project training, with some of those professionals accessing additional coaching, technical assistance, and MonTECH tools.

Figure 19. Number of participants engaged in Sandbox Project activities, 2025.

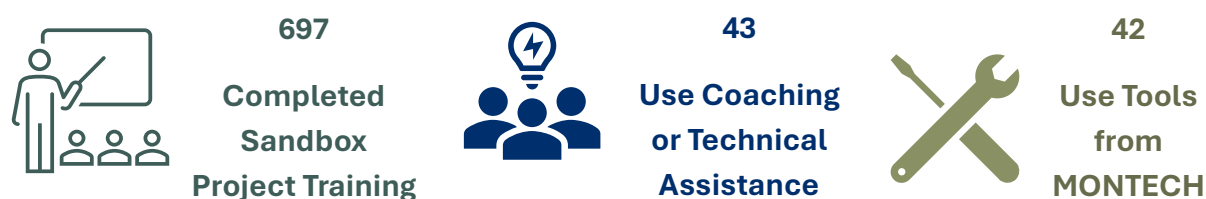


Figure 19. Number of participants engaged in Sandbox Project activities, 2025.

The project also distributed 236 Sandbox Project kits, including both starter and customized kits tied to program support activities (Figure 20). A key output of this activity was the expansion of resources available through MonTECH’s Early Childhood Lending Library, which provides programs and families access to assistive technology, adaptive equipment, and developmental support tools that can be borrowed and used in early learning environments. By connecting training and technical assistance with ongoing access to equipment and materials, the Sandbox Project helped strengthen infrastructure that extends beyond individual training events and remains available to support inclusive practice over time.

Figure 20. Sandbox Project kits distributed to training participants.

In 2025, 236 Sandbox Project kits were distributed to programs and educators.

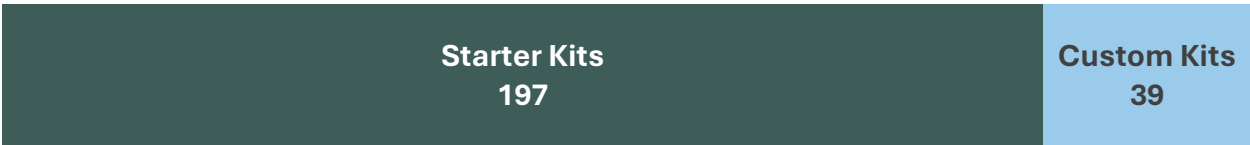


Figure 20. Sandbox Project kits distributed to training participants.

Across these workforce activities, BFB5 strengthened the supports available to Montana’s early childhood workforce. The available program data indicate formal pathway development, structured retention supports, expanded professional learning access, and inclusion-focused technical assistance. These findings suggest that BFB5 strengthened workforce infrastructure and conditions for future activities, though workforce challenges related to compensation and stability remain.

LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY AND TARGETED EXPANSION

BFB5 also used **subgrants** to expand local implementation capacity and support targeted service expansion. Across the implementation period, BFB5 awarded 638 subgrants totaling \$11,589,071.84. Subgrant funding supported several types of activities, including the Child Care Worker Program, Early Childhood Coalitions, Recruitment and Retention efforts, Slot Expansion Grants, STARS incentives, and UOHV. Subgrant recipients were located in 44 Montana counties (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Subgrants awarded by BFB5 2023-2025, by County.

BFB5 awarded subgrants to recipients in 44 counties across Montana.

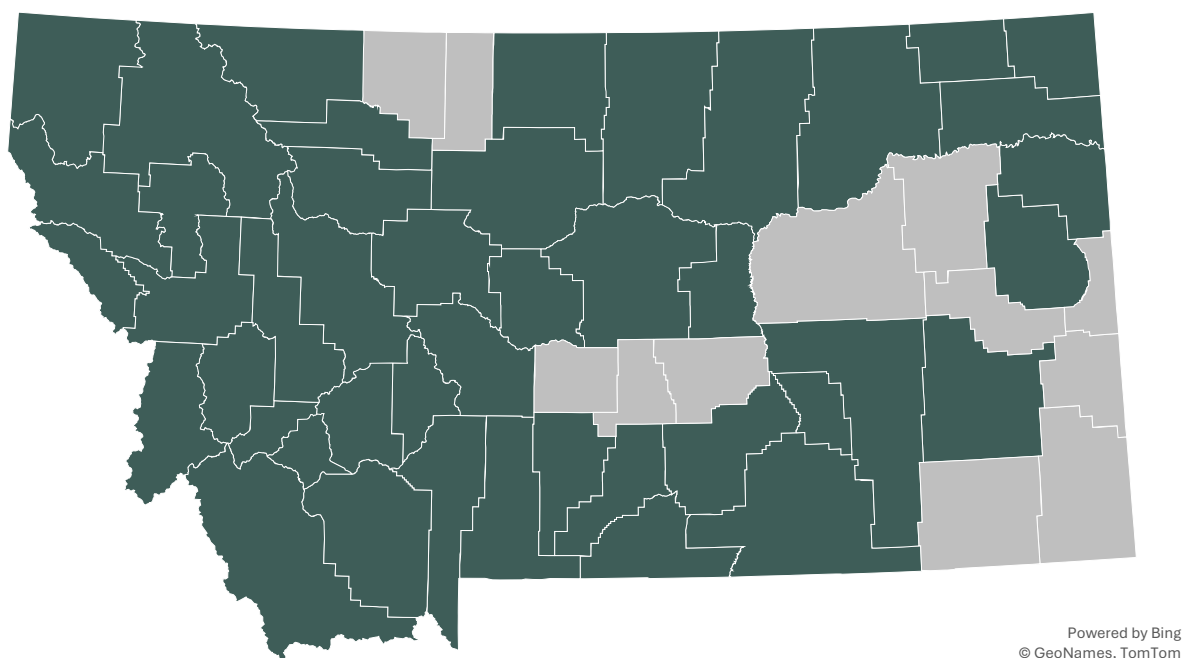


Figure 21. Subgrants awarded by BFB5 2023-2025, by County.

Subgrants also allowed communities and programs to adapt implementation to local context. Rather than scaling one uniform model, BFB5 used multiple funding mechanisms to support local service expansion, quality improvement, workforce strategies, coalition work, and home visiting implementation. This flexibility was appropriate for Montana’s mixed-delivery system, where communities vary in existing services, program capacity, workforce availability, and family needs.

Subgrants show where resources were awarded and what kinds of local capacity were supported. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate sustained service availability, consistent implementation quality, or long-term community-level outcomes.

SUSTAINABILITY PATHWAYS BEYOND THE GRANT PERIOD

In addition to building infrastructure during the grant period, several BFB5-supported activities have identified pathways for continuation beyond the grant. These pathways vary by initiative. Some activities have been incorporated into existing state or partner systems, some have secured braided or time-limited continuation funding, and others will continue through ongoing planning, technical assistance, or community investment. Together, these examples suggest that BFB5 contributed not only to short-term

implementation, but also to the development of structures, partnerships, and funding strategies that may support continued systems-building over time.

Several workforce and professional development activities have continuing infrastructure in place. Reflective supervision and **Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation** capacity will continue to be supported through MIECHV funding for home visiting, with continued efforts to expand reflective practice across the early childhood workforce. Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies has also received funding to advance work related to the Montana Association for Infant Mental Health. **Professional development** efforts will continue through statewide availability of PDG B-5-developed online training modules, implementation of the **Montana Early Learning Standards**, Knowledge Base, and **Career Workbook**, continued use of the Relationship-Based Care Infant Toddler Train-the-Trainer model within the redesigned **QRS**, and five years of secured access to Pyramid Model training for early childhood professionals. The early childhood position focused on **Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion** at the Department of Labor and Industry will also continue through DLI funds, building on work initiated through PDG B-5 and ARPA funding.

Several coordination and local implementation efforts also have continuation pathways. Home visiting coordination will continue through the Montana Home Visiting Coalition, which has secured at least 18 months of operational funding and established a fee structure to support longer-term sustainability. **UOHV** programs will continue in some communities through secured grant funding and local community investment. Zero to Five Montana will continue **Recruitment & Retention Cohort** efforts and employer engagement supports through Family Forward and CCDF-funded technical assistance. **Crisis Child Care** resources, including Toby's House and the Early Years Educational Center, are also expected to continue operating and serving families beyond the grant period.

BFB5-supported planning and governance activities will also continue to inform statewide systems-building. The statewide **Early Childhood Strategic Plan, Needs Assessment**, and **Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis** remain central resources for future planning. Launch Labs will continue supporting implementation design and action work groups. The HB 924/MECA Board is expected to build on PDG B-5 work through continued attention to child care infrastructure needs identified through **Slot Expansion** work, consideration of a **CCWP**-like provider support model, implementation activities guided by the Early Childhood Strategic Plan, and continued development of integrated evaluation and data-informed system planning. Montana's participation in the Zero to Three Fiscal and Policy Cohort will also continue to support **IECMH** policy, financing, and strategic planning.

Data infrastructure has one of the clearest continuation pathways. **ECIDS Montana** will remain operational through a phased integration plan and sustained staffing, supporting continued data governance, cross-agency collaboration, and long-term data integration. In addition, braided PDG B-5 and Part C funding supported acquisition of statewide data systems intended to improve data quality, access, and continuous quality improvement across early childhood programs over time.

These continuation pathways suggest that some BFB5-supported infrastructure is moving toward institutionalization or sustained partner ownership. However, the strength of sustainability varies across activities. Some initiatives have secured funding or an ongoing administrative home, while others remain dependent on future policy decisions, partner coordination, local investment, or implementation capacity. As a result, these examples should be interpreted as evidence of emerging sustainability infrastructure rather than proof that all BFB5-supported activities have been fully sustained or scaled statewide.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Across the grant period, BFB5 strengthened several foundational supports intended to help Montana's prenatal-to-five system function more consistently, coordinate across partners, and expand selected activities across communities and program settings. Findings from the Infrastructure and Scale section suggest several major patterns across systems-building activities.

BFB5 strengthened data, administrative, and fiscal infrastructure needed to support more coordinated planning and decision-making. ECIDS work established formal governance structures, data-sharing processes, technical infrastructure, and a use-case process for integrated data analysis. Related investments in MAQCS, Part C data systems, and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis also supported the administrative and financing infrastructure needed for program monitoring, quality improvement, fiscal oversight, and sustainability planning.

BFB5 supported shared standards, quality alignment, and implementation tools across Montana's mixed-delivery early childhood system. The revised Montana Early Learning Standards and redesigned Quality Recognition System created updated frameworks for developmental guidance and quality improvement. Continued implementation will determine how consistently these tools are used in practice.

BFB5 expanded workforce infrastructure and local implementation capacity through multiple strategies. Apprenticeship pathways, the Child Care Worker Program, Recruitment and Retention Cohorts, professional learning, and inclusion-focused technical assistance expanded access to workforce supports. Subgrants also

supported targeted expansion and local implementation across 44 counties, demonstrating broad reach through resource distribution and partner-led implementation.

Several BFB5-supported activities also have identified continuation pathways beyond the grant period. These include activities with ongoing funding, existing administrative homes, braided funding arrangements, partner-led continuation strategies, or integration into broader planning and implementation structures. Examples include continued ECIDS development, sustained data system investments, ongoing home visiting coordination, selected UOHV continuation efforts, workforce and professional development supports, Recruitment and Retention cohort activities, crisis care resources, Department of Labor and Industry workforce infrastructure, and implementation work connected to the Early Childhood Strategic Plan, Needs Assessment, Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis, and HB 924/MECA Board.

What Changed in the System

BFB5 moved several systems-building efforts from planning toward implementation and, in some areas, toward longer-term sustainability. The initiative strengthened the governance, data, fiscal, quality, workforce, and local implementation infrastructure needed to support a more coordinated prenatal-to-five system over time.

The most notable changes were improvements in the structures that make broader system functioning possible: clearer data governance processes, updated statewide standards, redesigned quality infrastructure, expanded workforce pathways and professional learning supports, distribution of resources to local communities and programs, and continuation pathways for selected activities beyond the grant period.

These changes represent meaningful systems-building progress. While many structural challenges facing Montana's prenatal-to-five system remain, the initiative strengthened the conditions needed for more coordinated planning, broader implementation, sustained partner ownership, and continued system development. In this sense, BFB5's primary contribution was not only expanding individual activities during the grant period, but also building the infrastructure, relationships, tools, and sustainability pathways that strengthen Montana's capacity to sustain and improve its early childhood system over time.

PARTNER PERSPECTIVES ON BFB5 IMPLEMENTATION

To better understand implementation of BFB5 activities and programs, the RIIC Evaluation Team conducted semi-structured key informant interviews with 19 individuals involved in BFB5 implementation, coordination, or oversight between October and November 2025. Interview participants included program managers, subcontractors, implementation staff, and Montana DPHHS staff connected to BFB5 activities. Participants were selected by BFB5 Leadership at DPHHS to represent a range of BFB5 implementation roles and perspectives.

Interview questions were developed to assess how implementation partners perceived the reach, effectiveness, adoption, implementation, and sustainability of their BFB5 programs or activities.¹⁶ Interviews were analyzed for themes related to these components, with attention to how partners described what was implemented, who was reached, what supported or constrained implementation, and what conditions may affect continuation beyond the grant period. Because these findings are based on implementation partner interviews, they reflect participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of BFB5 implementation. Interview findings should be interpreted as qualitative evidence of how partners experienced implementation rather than as independent verification of program reach, impact, or geographic distribution.

REACH

Finding 1. BFB5 was designed to strengthen the early childhood system broadly, but reach was uneven across communities and sectors.

Interviewees described BFB5 as a broad systems-building grant intended to strengthen Montana's early childhood system at multiple levels. Participants did not describe the initiative as focused on a single program, service setting, or population. Instead, they described a systems-level effort that included state agencies, local partners, early childhood programs, early childhood professionals, home visitors, child care programs, mental health consultants, and the infrastructure that supports children and families.

Families with young children were often described as the ultimate beneficiaries of BFB5, but most grant activities reached families indirectly through workforce, program, organizational, and state-system supports. As one participant explained,

"If you get right down to it... families with young kids [were the target population] but through that, to reach them you had to go through the child care workforce,

mental health workforce, the home visiting workforce. But I think in the end, when you look at all the outcomes with all those systems, in the end, it's Montana families" (P01).

Participants described BFB5 reach as strongest where activities could build on existing infrastructure, relationships, and local capacity. For example, one participant described UOHV uptake in Gallatin County as unusually strong, explaining, "we already had the hospital system in place where we're able to go meet with every newly delivered family five days a week at the hospital" (P01). This example illustrates that some BFB5 activities were easier to launch or expand in communities and sectors where related infrastructure, referral pathways, and partner relationships were already in place.

The same pattern appeared in participants' discussion of Tribal engagement. One participant described stronger engagement where communities had existing or prior experience with similar programs: "Blackfeet had a home visitation program. They're the only Tribal nation that has a home visitation program...I think this was work that was familiar to them. And so, they very quickly came on board and CSKT previously had a Project LAUNCH site, so this was also work they were familiar with" (P02). The participant also noted that having a consultant who was a Tribal member was "a significant piece." Together, these reflections suggest that prior experience, trusted relationships, and culturally grounded connections helped support project reach where they were present.

At the same time, participants consistently described reach as uneven. Rural communities, Eastern Montana, Tribal communities, Tribal Head Start programs, and some smaller or less-connected communities were described as harder to reach. Participants did not describe these gaps as a lack of intent. Rather, they pointed to geography, distance, workforce shortages, limited service capacity, fewer early childhood programs, and the need for deeper relationship pathways. In this sense, reach was not only a question of whether funding or activities were available, but also whether communities had the relationships, infrastructure, and local capacity needed to engage with those opportunities.

Overall, interview findings suggest that BFB5 reached most effectively where early childhood infrastructure, programs, and relationships already existed. The same conditions that helped some activities move quickly also help explain why reach was more difficult in communities and sectors where local infrastructure, staffing, service capacity, or relationships were less developed.

EFFECTIVENESS

Finding 2. BFB5 was perceived as useful for building infrastructure, testing selected models, expanding professional development, and generating implementation learning, but the grant timeline limited what could be demonstrated during the evaluation period.

Participants generally perceived BFB5 as making progress toward strengthening Montana's early childhood system, while also emphasizing that the grant period was too short to fully demonstrate longer-term systems change. Interviewees pointed to professional development, pilot projects, workforce supports, data infrastructure, strategic planning, and cross-sector coordination as areas where BFB5 contributed to implementation capacity. At the same time, participants described many activities as still developing, newly implemented, or constrained by the limited time available for planning, implementation, adaptation, and evaluation.

One perceived value of BFB5 was that it allowed partners to test selected strategies that would have been difficult to launch through existing funding streams. Participants described temporary funding as imperfect, but useful for trying new approaches, gathering implementation data, and learning whether a model had enough promise to inform future work. As one participant explained, "Sometimes you can't see whether or not an initiative will be successful or have the intended impact that you're hoping for without trying it" (P08). This reflects one way participants described the grant's value: BFB5 created space to test approaches, learn from implementation, and generate information for future decisions.

Professional development was one of the clearest areas where participants perceived progress during the grant period. Interview participants described training and workforce development products as investments that could continue to benefit the field if they remain available and are supported through ongoing implementation. One participant stated, "The other thing that I think was super successful about the grant was the amount of training that came into this state. And training is one of those things that's absolutely sustainable beyond the grant" (P08). This should be interpreted as participant perception rather than evidence that all trainings will continue, but it indicates that some partners viewed training products, curricula, and professional development infrastructure as more likely to have value beyond the grant period than time-limited services or financial supports.

Participants also described some BFB5 investments as important because they began longer-term infrastructure work, even though the full value of that work was not yet visible during the grant period. Data infrastructure was one example. Rather than

producing immediate changes visible to families or programs, data infrastructure work was described as part of the foundation needed for future planning, reporting, and decision-making. As one participant explained:

“I think we’ve come a long way, and I think once we have it fully implemented or even partially implemented, we’re going to start seeing dividends for the ECCE and really hopefully being able to make some really impactful decisions based off that data and more real time, more accurate data that can really paint a picture of how these programs are helping people” (P12).

In this context, BFB5 helped move the system toward stronger integrated data use, but the grant period was not long enough to demonstrate the full impact of that infrastructure.

Participants also raised concerns about the timing of the Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan, and funding decisions. Some expected current data to guide implementation, but the Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan were completed near the end of the grant period. One participant explained,

“My assumption was that we would have the data and then ... the state would use that to make some informed decisions around how funding would go out. However, I do recognize that the funding went out, the needs assessment is near completion, strategic plans near completion, but then the funding is over” (P01).

This concern reinforces the broader finding that BFB5 generated important planning products and implementation learning, but the timing of those products limited their ability to shape grant-funded implementation during the same grant cycle.

Overall, participants perceived BFB5 as useful for building infrastructure, expanding professional development, testing selected models, strengthening workforce supports, and generating information that can inform future early childhood systems work. They were more cautious about whether the grant had enough time to demonstrate measurable systems change, population-level outcomes, or durable changes in access for children and families.

ADOPTION

Finding 3. Partner engagement was strongest when BFB5 aligned with existing priorities, known system gaps, and work already underway.

While Finding 1 focuses on who and where BFB5 reached, this finding focuses on why partners chose to engage with BFB5 activities and what made that engagement easier or more complicated. Partner engagement was strongest when BFB5 activities aligned

with existing priorities, filled known system gaps, or extended work partners already wanted to do. Participants generally did not describe adoption as a question of convincing partners to take on unrelated work. Instead, they described BFB5 as providing funding, structure, or momentum for priorities that already had local or organizational relevance.

Several participants described strong engagement when BFB5 activities filled a known system gap or extended work partners already wanted to do. For UOHV, one participant said, “there wasn’t even any question. It was just something we’ve always wanted to do. It’s a gap in our system” (P11). In this example, BFB5 created an opportunity to move forward with work that partners already saw as important.

BFB5 also helped sustain momentum from prior work or other funding streams. For example, one participant described how apprenticeship and workforce development had been gaining momentum when another funding source was ending:

“as we were gaining this momentum and really understanding where the gaps were and where we had opportunities is really kind of when ARPA funds were going to expire. So B5 really was able to pick up and continue to carry on that work with me in that role” (P13).

This example shows how BFB5 sometimes functioned as a bridge between existing work and future system goals.

Staffing capacity appeared as an initial concern for some implementation partners, but the interviews did not indicate that capacity concerns prevented participation altogether. Participants described the challenge of adding new work to already busy teams and having to consider how staff time would be allocated. In the interview data, staffing capacity was best understood as part of the practical decision-making context for partners taking on BFB5-funded work, rather than as a primary barrier to adoption.

Prior system history also shaped engagement in some areas. One participant described inheriting stakeholder frustration because similar work had been funded before and then discontinued. As the participant explained, stakeholders

“came onto this project feeling already rather jaded about it, frustrated because this initiative of, or the initiative, the intervention of early incident, early child mental health consultation had already been funded for multiple iterations in Montana and then just dropped off” (P03).

This concern was specific to that area of work, but it illustrates that partners’ willingness to engage can be shaped by prior experiences with temporary funding, discontinued initiatives, and uncertainty about whether new efforts will continue.

Taken together, these findings suggest that adoption was strongest when BFB5 aligned with existing priorities, addressed recognized gaps, and built on work already underway. Engagement was more complicated when partners had limited staffing capacity, prior experiences with discontinued initiatives, or uncertainty about whether activities would lead to durable systems change.

IMPLEMENTATION

Finding 4. Implementation depended on existing relationships, flexible problem-solving, clear roles, and the ability to navigate administrative constraints.

Participants described BFB5 as a broad portfolio of activities rather than a single intervention. This breadth allowed the grant to touch multiple parts of the early childhood system, including workforce, family engagement, data infrastructure, home visiting, mental health consultation, child care expansion, adaptive equipment, strategic planning, and professional development. One participant described the goals as “really both trying new things and providing existing supports to the early childhood system to strengthen the early childhood system through a variety of inroads” (P04).

Existing relationships were one of the strongest implementation supports. Participants repeatedly described pre-existing partnerships, coalitions, state staff knowledge, and local networks as conditions that made implementation possible. One participant explained, “I think pieces that made implementation successful were preexisting partnerships and relationships. I think it made it easier to have rapid response” (P15). In Finding 1, existing relationships helped explain uneven reach across communities; here, they help explain how partners were able to carry out activities, communicate opportunities, gather feedback, troubleshoot, and adjust when implementation conditions changed.

Implementation was also supported by staff expertise, partner flexibility, and willingness to problem-solve. Participants described teams and leadership structures as supportive, knowledgeable, committed, and willing to work through delays. External subject matter expertise also helped with some projects. These supports mattered because the work required partners to navigate changing timelines, delayed contracts, shifting implementation conditions, and the administrative requirements attached to public funding.

Several participants described implementation challenges related to project planning, coordination across partners, and the operational complexity of integrating new grant-funded activities into existing systems. These challenges were most visible in activities that required multiple teams, programs, data systems, or administrative structures to work together under a short grant timeline. One participant described the planning

challenge this way: “There's not a cohesive project plan from the beginning. And so, things got rolled out without really considering what unintended consequences might be” (P02). Other participants described related challenges integrating new activities with existing programs, data systems, and administrative structures. For example, another participant noted, “Our ability to connect with each other and communicate was critical and challenging because they didn't know our system. They don't know our data system, and it's old and a little clunky and kind of weird” (P11). A third participant described the broader operational strain created by the number and complexity of grant activities: “We just took on a lot of various projects that I'm not sure that we necessarily had the operational infrastructure to be able to do that all effectively” (P15). Together, these findings suggest that implementation was harder when project planning, communication pathways, or operational infrastructure were not sufficient to support the complexity and pace of the work.

Administrative requirements and the breadth of the grant also constrained implementation. Participants acknowledged the need for responsible stewardship of public and federal funds, but described procurement, contracting, fiscal requirements, and approval processes as time-consuming and difficult to navigate within the grant timeline. These challenges were amplified by the size and complexity of BFB5, which included many activities across workforce, family engagement, data, home visiting, mental health consultation, child care expansion, adaptive equipment, strategic planning, and professional development. The issue was not that these activities were unimportant, but that broad systems-building grants require sufficient time, staffing, planning infrastructure, and administrative support to move from planning to implementation to evaluation.

Overall, BFB5 implementation was strongest where existing relationships, staff knowledge, partner flexibility, and local infrastructure helped partners navigate delays and complexity. Implementation was harder where activities required new infrastructure, new relationships, extensive procurement, or sustained local capacity that could not be built quickly.

SUSTAINABILITY

Finding 5. Participants described sustainability as dependent on continued funding, strategic use of data and tools, organizational ownership, and clear transition planning.

Participants described sustainability as mixed. They identified some BFB5 products and infrastructure as more likely to support future work, while also emphasizing that many

activities remain vulnerable without ongoing funding, staff time, and organizational ownership.

Training, tools, data systems, needs assessment findings, strategic planning products, and relationships were often described as more sustainable than direct services or financial supports. One participant explained that training can continue because “you invest in a training or a professional development suite, and then those things just exist” (P08). Another described data infrastructure as a durable investment, noting that “new and enhanced data infrastructure pieces will continue after the grant” (P15).

Participants also described relationships and cross-program coordination as continuing assets from BFB5. These relationships may support future work even when specific grant-funded activities end. However, participants were clear that many direct services and financial supports are unlikely to continue without new funding. One participant stated plainly, “some things cannot be sustained. I mean, they can't be” (P08). Another described a central tension in systems grants: “The place that people often want you to put the money is into direct services, which is the least sustainable” (P15). In other words, the activities that communities most easily see and value may be the hardest to maintain without continued funding support.

Sustainability depends not only on whether money exists, but on whether funding is strategically allocated to infrastructure that can support continued work. As one participant explained, “Everybody's always going to tell you money. And curiously, I do think money is a piece of it, but I don't think money's all of it” (P02). The same participant emphasized the importance of “strategically allocating dollars to projects and processes where there is infrastructure and a system in place and cohesive expectations,” adding that “centralizing things will be very helpful” (P02).

Several participants emphasized the importance of data and transition planning for sustainability. One participant noted that data from successful interventions could be carried into future legislative sessions,

“If we have the data that shows those interventions were successful, I think there will be advocacy groups that will take that forward into future legislative sessions, advocating for funding in those areas” (P15).

Another described the importance of building data systems so the work would not restart from scratch if funding or staffing changed,

“We really wanted to strategically look at this time around making sure we did the correct steps to get it in a place where even if we lost funding, even if somebody

left that it was in a place where the next person could just pick up and make progress as opposed to starting from scratch” (P12).

Overall, participants viewed BFB5 as creating assets that could support future early childhood systems work: data, plans, tools, training, relationships, pilot experience, implementation guides, quality assurance structures, and implementation lessons. They did not assume sustainability would happen automatically. Continued impact will depend on future funding, strategic use of BFB5 data and tools, clear transition planning, and ensuring that the resources developed through BFB5 are available for partners to use beyond the grant period.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Across interviews, participants described BFB5 as a broad systems-building initiative that strengthened Montana’s early childhood infrastructure, though not evenly across communities or sectors. The grant worked best where partners could build on existing relationships, prior work, local capacity, and program infrastructure. It was harder to implement in communities and sectors where those conditions were less developed, including rural areas, Eastern Montana, Tribal communities, and settings with fewer early childhood programs or local partners.

According to implementation partners, BFB5’s strongest contributions were infrastructure-oriented: professional development, pilot testing, data systems, needs assessment and strategic planning products, partner relationships, implementation guides, quality assurance structures, and implementation lessons. Participants also described value from pilots and financial supports, while noting that those activities are more vulnerable to ending without continued funding. These findings reinforce that BFB5 should be understood as a time-limited systems investment rather than a single program or service model. Its long-term value will depend on whether the state and partners use the infrastructure, data, tools, and relationships developed through the grant to guide future early childhood policy, funding, and implementation decisions.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE BFB5 EVALUATION

Across the BUILD domains, the evaluation found evidence of progress in participation, statewide reach, workforce supports, relationship-building, planning, infrastructure development, and implementation capacity. BFB5 investments helped expand access to selected services and supports while also creating tools, structures, and partnerships that can support continued systems work. Understanding longer-term outcomes for children, families, the workforce, program quality, or statewide system change would require continued monitoring and additional evaluation beyond the scope and timeline of this report.

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

- BFB5 strengthened infrastructure and service delivery across the state's early childhood system through professional learning systems, workforce pathways, shared planning structures, data governance, implementation tools, referral models, and cross-sector coordination.
- BFB5 expanded the number and types of pathways through which families, early childhood professionals, programs, and system partners could engage with early childhood supports and system-building activities. These pathways included trainings, subgrants, convenings, family engagement resources, workforce supports, referral models, child care expansion strategies, and local implementation activities, though participation and access varied across activities and communities.
- Implementation was often strongest where activities could build on existing relationships, organizational capacity, prior work, and local infrastructure. Implementation was more difficult in communities and sectors where those conditions were less developed.
- Several activities created reusable tools, training structures, guidance materials, data systems, and implementation resources that can support future work beyond the grant period. Examples include the Montana Family Engagement Framework, Early Childhood Career Workbook, revised Montana Early Learning Standards, IECMHC training infrastructure, Sandbox Project resources, ECIDS governance structures, and Recruitment & Retention planning tools.
- Persistent challenges remain, including workforce shortages, rural and frontier access barriers, uneven local infrastructure, staffing constraints, data limitations, and uncertainty after time-limited grant funding ends.

CONTEXT: WHAT CHANGED WITHIN THE BROADER EARLY CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENT

- The updated Needs Assessment, Strategic Plan, and Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis created shared planning resources that can inform future policy, funding, and implementation decisions across Montana’s prenatal-to-five system.
- BFB5-supported planning and engagement activities brought together families, early childhood professionals, Tribal partners, state agencies, community organizations, higher education representatives, businesses, philanthropic partners, and other stakeholders to discuss system needs, workforce challenges, financing priorities, and future directions.
- The grant period coincided with important changes in Montana’s early childhood landscape, including early literacy legislation, Part C contracting changes, and restructuring of child care support services. These changes shaped the implementation environment for BFB5 activities.
- Longstanding contextual challenges remained, including workforce instability, geographic barriers, uneven service access, funding constraints, and the complexity of coordinating programs across agencies, communities, and funding streams.

COMPONENTS: WHAT CHANGED IN PROGRAMS, SERVICES, AND SUPPORTS

- BFB5 expanded child care access and capacity through Slot Expansion Grants, Employer-Sponsored Care Grants, Crisis Child Care, and related subgrant strategies. Slot Expansion Grants supported 201 participating child care programs in 30 counties, and many participating programs reported increased enrollment or capacity for infants, toddlers, expanded hours, or care for children with disabilities or developmental support needs.
- BFB5 expanded family-facing information, literacy, and referral supports. ParentingMontana.org recorded 9,591 visits to content related to children ages 0–8 during its first year; the Montana State Library Project distributed 5,408 books and 668 story time kits and reached 542 parents and caregivers through digital story time; and the Community Response Program facilitated 1,317 referrals, with annual service initiation rates ranging from 68% to 82%.
- BFB5 expanded workforce and program quality supports through professional development, IECMHC, Recruitment & Retention Cohorts, Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion, CCWP, and the Sandbox Project. Professional Development activities recorded 1,947 participation instances; 53 early childhood

professionals enrolled in apprenticeship pathways; 47 programs completed Recruitment & Retention Cohorts; and 697 professionals completed Sandbox Project training.

- BFB5 tested and expanded coordinated service delivery models, including UOHV, which served 191 families with 194 children and introduced a structured referral and navigation process through Montana's home visiting infrastructure.
- Findings are strongest for participation, implementation reach, service utilization, and reported changes in program capacity or practice. Evidence related to longer-term workforce stability, program quality, child outcomes, and family outcomes remains more limited.

CONNECTIONS: WHAT CHANGED IN RELATIONSHIPS, COORDINATION, AND COLLABORATION

- BFB5 created structured opportunities for shared planning, information exchange, and problem-solving through Transition Summits, Great Beginnings, Great Families, local early childhood coalitions, the Montana Home Visiting Coalition, Coalition Transition Grants, family engagement work, UOHV referral coordination, MELS revision, and QRS redesign.
- Transition Summits brought together early childhood educators, school personnel, community partners, parents, and Tribal partners to plan around transitions into parenthood, from Part C to Part B, and into kindergarten. Participation included 47 participants from 13 counties in 2023, 61 participants in 2024, and 33 participants representing five Tribal reservation communities in 2025.
- Statewide and community-level convenings supported continued cross-sector engagement. Great Beginnings, Great Families engaged more than 200 participants each year during the grant period, while local early childhood coalitions and the Montana Home Visiting Coalition created ongoing structures for communication, referral discussions, shared planning, and alignment across community and state partners.
- Shared frameworks and resources helped strengthen common language across systems. The Montana Family Engagement Framework, Early Childhood Career Workbook, revised Montana Early Learning Standards, and QRS redesign provided guidance related to family engagement, workforce pathways, developmental expectations, and quality improvement.
- Relationships were an important implementation support, but coordination remained uneven across communities and sectors. Sustaining these connections

will require continued facilitation, staffing capacity, communication infrastructure, and organizational commitment.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SCALE: WHAT CHANGED IN SYSTEM CAPACITY, REACH, AND READINESS FOR CONTINUED IMPLEMENTATION

- BFB5 strengthened data governance, administrative data systems, fiscal planning, shared standards, quality system redesign, workforce pathways, professional learning infrastructure, inclusion supports, and local implementation capacity.
- ECIDS work established governance structures, data-sharing processes, a use-case process, and technical infrastructure through Snowflake. By 2025, four data systems had been integrated into Snowflake, 15 data governance policies and procedures had been adopted, and 25 data governance-related memoranda of understanding and data use agreements had been completed.
- MAQCS enhancements, Montana Milestones modernization, and the Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis strengthened administrative and fiscal infrastructure related to program administration, quality monitoring, compliance tracking, IDEA Part C reporting, fiscal planning, and future financing decisions.
- The revised MELS and redesigned QRS created updated frameworks for developmental guidance, quality improvement, and shared expectations across Montana's mixed-delivery system. These tools do not, by themselves, demonstrate statewide changes in practice or quality, but they provide common reference points for future training, technical assistance, monitoring, and continuous improvement.
- Workforce infrastructure expanded through Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion, CCWP, Recruitment & Retention Cohorts, Professional Development, IECMHC training and consultation supports, and the Sandbox Project. These efforts expanded access to workforce supports, though long-term effects on compensation, retention, advancement, and stability remain ongoing areas for evaluation.
- BFB5 awarded 638 subgrants totaling more than \$11.5 million to recipients in 44 counties, which demonstrates reach through resource distribution.

LOOKING AHEAD: NEXT STEPS FOR STRENGTHENING MONTANA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

The recommendations below are grounded in findings across the BUILD domains and aligned with priorities identified through Montana's broader statewide strategic planning efforts. They are intended primarily for DPHHS/ECFSD and statewide early childhood system partners, while recognizing that long-term systems-building also depends on continued engagement from local coalitions, early childhood programs, Tribal communities, employers, higher education partners, philanthropy, and other partners. Recommendations are organized to distinguish between near-term priorities focused on sustaining and strengthening current implementation efforts and longer-term priorities related to statewide infrastructure and systems development.

NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES: SUSTAINING AND STRENGTHENING CURRENT SYSTEMS-BUILDING EFFORTS

RECOMMENDATION 1: SUSTAIN AND INSTITUTIONALIZE WORKFORCE STABILIZATION STRATEGIES

Workforce instability remains a persistent system-level challenge across Montana's early childhood system, particularly in rural and frontier communities. These findings suggest that workforce stabilization will require sustained and coordinated investment beyond time-limited grant initiatives.

Next steps:

- Coordinate with early childhood system partners to identify which BFB5-supported workforce strategies should be sustained, expanded, modified, or sunset based on participation, reach, and evidence of retention potential.
- Clarify agency ownership and cross-sector coordination roles for workforce supports across child care, home visiting, early intervention, and family support sectors.
- Develop a sustainability plan that identifies likely funding sources, policy levers, and implementation partners for priority workforce strategies.
- Continue monitoring workforce participation, retention, and regional reach to assess whether investments are addressing the communities and sectors with the greatest need.

RECOMMENDATION 2: STRENGTHEN COORDINATED FAMILY NAVIGATION AND REFERRAL SYSTEMS

Families continue to experience fragmentation across systems and services, particularly during transitions between programs, developmental stages, and service sectors. Coordination challenges were especially pronounced in geographically dispersed communities where services and referral pathways may be more limited.

Next Steps:

- Build on existing family-facing entry points, referral systems, and navigation supports to identify where programs, platforms, and community partners are already connected and where families may still experience gaps.
- Strengthen coordination among digital platforms, community-based referral pathways, and program-specific navigation supports so families receive more consistent information and follow-up across systems.
- Support shared referral and follow-up practices among participating programs while allowing flexibility for local communities, Tribal partners, and service providers to adapt navigation approaches to their context.

RECOMMENDATION 3: EXPAND IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORTS FOR SHARED STATEWIDE FRAMEWORKS

Capacity for implementing recently developed frameworks intended to strengthen consistency and alignment across the early childhood system remained uneven across communities, sectors, and early childhood program settings. Many activities demonstrated stronger progress in framework development and planning than in full statewide implementation.

Next Steps:

- Support local programs and organization in developing implementation plans for priority frameworks that specify audiences, training needs, technical assistance models, timelines, and responsible entities.
- Use professional learning, coaching, technical assistance, and train-the-trainer approaches to support adoption across regions and program types.
- Monitor implementation quality and regional reach, not only dissemination or participation, to assess whether frameworks are being used consistently in practice.

LONGER-TERM SYSTEMS-BUILDING PRIORITIES

RECOMMENDATION 4: STRENGTHEN LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED COALITIONS

Local coalitions and community-based partnerships remain important mechanisms for coordination, transition planning, family engagement, and service alignment. Continued progress will likely depend on sustaining local convening capacity, strengthening communication pathways between local and statewide partners, and supporting community-level infrastructure that reflects local needs, relationships, and implementation conditions.

Next Steps:

- Continue to build on existing coalition, Tribal, regional, and community-based partnership efforts rather than creating parallel structures where local infrastructure is already in place.
- Document the roles local coalitions and community partners are already playing in coordination, family engagement, transition planning, referral alignment, and feedback to statewide partners.
- Strengthen communication pathways between local coalitions, community partners, and statewide systems-building efforts so that local needs and implementation realities can inform broader planning.
- Identify the staffing, facilitation, data, and administrative supports needed to sustain local convening capacity over time.
- Continue investing in coalition and community-based infrastructure, particularly in rural, frontier, and Tribal communities where service access, coordination capacity, and trust-building may require sustained local partnership.

RECOMMENDATION 5: ADVANCE DATA INTEGRATION, EVALUATION, AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING

BFB5 implementation and evaluation efforts encountered challenges related to data consistency, variable reporting structures, uneven outcome measurement across activities, and limited long-term implementation data. Future opportunities should focus on moving from data infrastructure development toward practical, routine use of integrated data and evaluation findings.

Next Steps:

- Strengthen data-sharing agreements and reporting structures around priority use cases that would directly support cross-agency decision-making, resource allocation, program improvement, and sustainability planning.

- Develop a shared measurement approach for major systems-building investments, including common indicators related to reach, participation, implementation quality, outcomes, and sustainability.
- Embed evaluation and learning routines into future initiatives from the beginning, including regular review points for implementation progress, course correction, and long-term sustainability monitoring.
- Use evaluation findings to inform decisions about which activities should be sustained, scaled, modified, or discontinued.

RECOMMENDATION 6: IDENTIFY SUSTAINABLE FINANCING STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-IMPACT INITIATIVES

Sustainability across BFB5 activities remained uneven, particularly for workforce supports, coaching-intensive models, and pilot initiatives requiring ongoing technical assistance and staffing. The CFA strengthened understanding of Montana's prenatal-to-five financing landscape and identified opportunities for greater coordination across funding streams and sectors. The next phase should use that analysis to move from financing information toward financing decisions.

Next Steps:

- For high impact initiatives, determine whether the appropriate financing strategy is continuation funding, braided public funding, policy change, employer partnership, philanthropy, or another cross-sector investment approach.
- Distinguish between activities that require ongoing operational funding and those that require short-term transition funding to move from pilot status to institutional ownership.
- Assign responsibility for developing financing plans for selected high-impact initiatives, including timelines, decision points, and potential funding partners.
- Use statewide strategic planning and fiscal analysis findings together to determine which initiatives should be sustained, scaled, modified, or sunset.

CONCLUSION

BFB5 leaves Montana with a stronger foundation for continued prenatal-to-five systems work than existed at the start of the grant period. Across the BUILD domains, findings suggest that the initiative helped expand participation in services and supports, strengthen workforce and family engagement efforts, support cross-sector partnerships, and build infrastructure for future implementation. These contributions include shared planning resources, professional learning opportunities, referral and navigation supports, statewide frameworks, data governance structures, and local implementation capacity.

At the same time, the evaluation also shows that systems-building is ongoing work. Workforce instability, rural and frontier access barriers, service fragmentation, uneven local infrastructure, and sustainability challenges continued to shape implementation across activities. The long-term value of BFB5 will depend on whether the tools, partnerships, data systems, implementation lessons, and funding strategies developed through the grant are sustained and used to guide future decisions. Continued investment, coordination, evaluation, and implementation support will be needed to build on the progress made during the grant period and strengthen outcomes for Montana children, families, early childhood professionals, and communities over time.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - BFB5 ACTIVITY QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Activity	Primary Population	Brief Description	Primary BUILD Domain(s)
Apprenticeship & Pre-Apprenticeship Expansion	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals	Workforce pathway model supporting credentialing and paid on-the-job learning	Components, Connections, Infrastructure and Scale
Child Care Worker Scholarship Program (CCWP)	Early Childhood Professionals	Scholarship support to stabilize workforce participation and reduce child care barriers for workers	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Coalition Transition Grants	Community Coalitions	Funding and technical assistance supporting local coalitions as they transition toward sustainable community-based early childhood leadership	Connections
Community Response Program (CRP)	Families	Coordinated referral model connecting families to community services and supports	Components, Connections
Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis	State Agencies, Community Partners	Analysis of early childhood funding streams, expenditures, and financing strategies to support long-term system sustainability	Context, Connections

Crisis Child Care Slot Expansion	Families	Crisis child care pilot designed to support families experiencing acute instability	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)	State Agencies, Partners	Governance and integrated data infrastructure for monitoring and continuous improvement	Context, Infrastructure and Scale
Employer Sponsored Care Grants	Employers, Families	Grants supporting employer-driven child care solutions to improve access and workforce stability	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Great Beginnings, Great Families Conference	Families, Early Childhood Professionals, Community Partners	Annual statewide conference supporting cross-sector learning, networking, and dissemination of promising practices	Connections
Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC)	Early Childhood Professionals	Consultation and training model supporting educator wellness and children's social-emotional development	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Montana Early Childhood Career Workbook	Early Childhood Professionals	Career planning resource outlining pathways, credentials, and professional advancement opportunities within Montana's early childhood workforce	Connections

Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS)	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals	Statewide standards revision supporting developmental alignment birth through age eight	Connections, Infrastructure and Scale
Montana Family Engagement Framework	Families, Early Childhood Professionals	Statewide framework and professional learning initiative promoting meaningful family-provider partnerships across early childhood settings	Connections
Montana Head Start Association Family Engagement	Families, Early Childhood Professionals	Statewide family engagement training to strengthen provider-family partnerships and shared practices	Connections, Components
Montana Home Visiting Coalition	Home Visiting Programs, Families, Community Partners	Statewide coalition coordinating home visiting partners to strengthen collaboration, advocacy, and family supports	Connections
Montana State Library Project	Families, Children	Digital story time, literacy kits, and book distribution to support family literacy engagement	Context, Components, Connections
Needs Assessment	Families, Early Childhood Professionals, Community Partners	Statewide assessment of early childhood needs, assets, and priorities to inform planning and investment decisions	Context, Connections

ParentingMontana.org	Families, Early Childhood Professionals	Online parenting platform offering early childhood resources, developmental information, and family support tools	Context, Components, Connections
Professional Development	Early Childhood Professionals	Statewide training system supporting workforce skills, shared practices, and quality improvement	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Recruitment & Retention Cohorts	Early Childhood Programs	Cohort-based workforce stabilization and retention planning supports	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Sandbox Project	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals	Inclusion-focused training, assistive technology, and coaching supports for diverse learners	Components, Infrastructure and Scale
Strategic Planning	State Agencies, Community Partners, Early Childhood Professionals	Collaborative statewide planning process establishing shared goals, priorities, and strategies for Montana's prenatal-to-five system	Context, Connections
Subgranting System	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals, Communities	Funding mechanism supporting local implementation, access expansion, and program quality improvement	Components, Infrastructure and Scale

Transition Summits	Community Teams, Families, Early Childhood Professionals	Community planning summits supporting coordination around transitions across early childhood systems	Context, Connections
Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV)	Families	Home visiting pilot designed to strengthen family support and coordinated referral systems	Components, Connections

APPENDIX B – DATA SOURCES, ANALYSIS, AND LIMITATIONS

This evaluation draws on multiple administrative, survey, and implementation data sources collected across BFB5 strategies. Data were collected by lead implementing partners and state agencies as part of routine program operations, grant reporting, and evaluation activities. The table below summarizes the primary sources used in this report, the types of data available, and key limitations relevant to interpretation.

Table 3. Data Sources, Analysis, and Limitations

Data Source	Activities Informed	Primary Measures	Primary Analysis	Key Limitations
Submittable Slot Expansion Grantee Records	Slot Expansion Grants	Application data, award amounts, program characteristics, capacity expansion	Descriptive counts, award summaries, geographic distribution	Self-reported application and reporting data; variation in use of funds across grantees
Child Care Worker Program Administrative Records	Child Care Worker Scholarship Program	Program participation, scholarship amounts, recipient demographics, geographic distribution, subsidy utilization	Descriptive counts, retention analysis, cohort tracking	Survey data self-reported; retention data dependent on follow-up participation; changes in eligibility and workforce requirements limited comparisons overtime
Child Care Worker Program Survey Data	Child Care Worker Scholarship Program	Worker and provider perceptions of program value, retention influence, satisfaction	Survey summary analysis, descriptive statistics	Response rates varied; findings may not represent all recipients or providers

STARS Database / Quality Recognition System Records	STARS to Quality / Quality Improvement	Professional participation, incentives, retention within quality system	Descriptive participation analysis	System redesign underway; data structure and participation definitions changed over time
Early Childhood Project Registry Data	Workforce Pathways / Career Advancement	Workforce qualifications/credentials (including CDA completion), education levels, provider demographics, longevity, and geographic distribution	Descriptive workforce pipeline analysis	Registry participation may not capture all workforce participants statewide
Universally Offered Home Visiting (UOHV) Program Reports	Home Visiting Access and Coordination	Subgrant awards, implementation activity, participation data	Implementation summary and descriptive analysis	Contractor implementation models varied by community
Employer-Sponsored Child Care Grant Records	Employer-Sponsored Child Care	Award amounts, employer participation, child care model development	Descriptive funding and participation analysis	Employer strategies varied across projects
Zero to Five Recruitment & Retention Cohort Records	Recruitment & Retention Initiative	Cohort participation, retention plans, implementation progress	Cohort participation and implementation analysis	Cohort implementation varied; measures based on self-report
Recruitment & Retention Survey Data	Recruitment & Retention Initiative	Workforce challenges, retention conditions, implementation perceptions	Survey analysis and thematic summary	Survey response rates lower than participation counts

Quarterly Partner Reports	Cross-cutting (multiple strategies)	Activity updates, implementation milestones, participation counts, partner reflections	Cross-case synthesis and descriptive aggregation	Reporting formats and details varied by partner and quarter
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Notes:

- Participation counts reported in this evaluation may differ from survey response counts. Participation counts reflect total engagement in an activity, while survey findings reflect only valid completed responses.
- For the Montana State Library distribution analysis, frontier counties were identified using the Montana Office of Rural Health and Area Health Education Center's county-level classification, which defines frontier counties as those with six or fewer people per square mile based on U.S. Census population density data.¹⁷

APPENDIX C – BFB5 IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS

Table 4. Bright Futures Birth to Five Implementation Partners

Agency	Project	Type of Engagement
Brazelton Touchpoints Brazelton Touchpoints Home Page	Professional Development	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
BUILD Initiative BUILD Initiative: So All Children Reach Their Full Potential	STARS redesign support, Knowledge Base and Screening course development	Partner/ Contractor
Business Systems and Operations Bureau, DPHHS, ECFSD	ECIDS development and implementation, data governance development and implementation, evaluation	Partner/ Implementor
Butte 4 C's Child Care Resource and Referral Butte 4-C's United States	Universally Offered Home Visiting Contractor for Silver Bow and surrounding Counties	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
Child Care Development Fund Team/ DPHHS/ECFSD Child Care and Development Fund	Child Care Worker Program implementors, support with all child care related initiatives	Partner/ Implementor
Child Care Training Child Care Training: Montana Courses Child Care Training	Link for automatic professional development transfer to ECP, professional development, CDA, Apprenticeship, Pre-apprenticeship, course revision	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor

Center for Children, Families and Workforce, University of Montana <u>Welcome to the Center University of Montana</u>	IECMHC Course Development, revision, and implementation. Completion of an early childhood Recruitment & Retention Study	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
Children's Trust Fund/DPHHS <u>Children's Trust Fund</u>	Partner in coalition funding	Partner/ Implementor
Community Response Program (CRP)/DPHHS <u>Grantees</u>	CRP developers and implementors	Partner/ Implementor
Data Management Office (DMO) - Technology Services Division DPHHS <u>Technology Services Division</u>	Support of ECIDS technology, data integration, and ECIDS planning	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
Department of Labor and Industry <u>Montana Registered Apprenticeship</u>	Apprenticeship, Pre-Apprenticeship, CDA	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
ECDataLab <u>ECDataLab Analytic Readiness Cohort</u>	Contractor for ECIDS cohort and development support	Partner/ Contractor

Early Childhood Project (ECP) ECP Home Page	Apprenticeship, Pre-Apprenticeship CDA, Registry, Career Workbook Apprenticeship, Pre-Apprenticeship, CDA,	Partner/ Implementor
Early Learning Unit/DPHHS Early Learning Unit Home Page	MELS, Apprentice, Pre-Apprentice/ QRS redesign/ Knowledge Base/ Early Childhood Career Workbook/ Systems work/Pyramid Model/Screening- ASQ/Infant Toddler Relationship Based Train the Trainer/Training development and revision	Partner/ Implementor
Fiscal Bureau, DPHHS, ECFSD	All fiscal processes of the grant, submittable support	Partner/ Implementor
Florence Crittenton Family Services of Montana Florence Crittenton Montana	Universally Offered Home Visiting Contractor for Lewis and Clark and surrounding Counties	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Gallatin City County Health Department Home Visiting - Healthy Gallatin	Universally Offered Home Visiting Contractor for Gallatin and surrounding Counties	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Head Start Collaboration Office/DPHHS Head Start	Developer of the Road Show for Early Intervention, partner in all work with EHS/HS	Partner/ Implementor
Healthy Montana Families, DPHHS Healthy Montana Families	Collaboration on UOHV, data system revision for UOHV, SME and evaluation	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor

Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies <u>The Montana Early Childhood Coalition - Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies: the Montana Coalition</u>	Convener of the Home Visiting Coalition, Convener of the Early Childhood Coalitions, worked with the coalitions to develop transition plans and family strengthening plans	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Karen Filipovich, Consultant	Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Leadership Team - DPHHS	Advisory/ decision makers/partnerships	Partner/ Implementor
Lewis and Clark City County Health Department <u>Home Visiting - Lewis & Clark County</u>	Universally Offered Home Visiting Contractor for Lewis and Clark and surrounding Counties	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Montana Early Childhood Coalitions <u>The Montana Early Childhood Coalition - Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies: the Montana Coalition</u>	Worked in their communities to develop transition plans and family strengthening plans	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Montana Head Start Association <u>Our Work — Montana Head Start</u>	Family engagement training and facilitation	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Montana Milestones/Part C/DPHHS <u>Montana Milestones</u>	Pyramid Model for Part C/Screening ASQ/Data System/ Family Engagement	Partner/ Implementor

Montana State Library <u>Ready 2 Read Montana State Library</u>	Early Literacy outreach, Imagination Library, Virtual Storytime, Book nooks, Incarcerated Parents program	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
MonTECH, Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, University of Montana <u>MonTECH</u>	The Sandbox Project development and implementation	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Mountain Pacific <u>Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) - Mountain Pacific</u>	Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant main contractor to create a mental health consultant training program, support the mental health consultant workforce, build the infrastructure and system to deploy workforce to early childhood settings	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
One Health <u>Primary Health Care at One Health: Caring for Our Communities</u>	Universally Offered Home Visiting Contractor for Park County	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Parentingmontana.org/MSU <u>Homepage - Parenting Montana</u>	Update and enhance parentingmontant.org Parent website and content 0-8	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Peraton <u>Peraton Home Page</u>	Child Care Worker Data Management	Partner
Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies <u>Home - Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies</u>	Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis	Partner/ Contractor
Raise Montana <u>Child Care Raise Montana</u>	IECMHC Community of Practice, Training for IECMHC	Partner/ Subcontractor/ Implementor

Riverstone Health <u>Welcome Baby - RiverStone Health</u>	Universally offered Home Visiting contractor for Yellowstone County	Partner/ Contractor/ Implementor
Evaluation Services, Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, University of Montana <u>University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (RIIC) Evaluation Team</u>	Evaluation of the Bright Futures B-5 grant project; Early Childhood Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan revision completion	Partner/ Contractor/ Evaluator
Stellar Group <u>Stellar Group</u>	Evaluation of IECMHC pilot project	Partner/ Contractor/ Evaluator
Toby's House <u>Toby's House Crisis Nursery » Immediate Refuge and Safety for Children</u>	Mentoring of the Crisis Care contractor and development of a toolkit/implementation guide for the crisis care model	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
Windfall <u>About Windfall, Inc.</u>	Marketing materials, graphic design and editing on multiple projects	Contractor
Yarrow <u>Yarrow</u>	Facilitation of the ECP Strategic Plan and Early Childhood Career Workbook	Contractor

Zero to Five Montana <u>Zero to Five Our promise is to stabilize, innovate, and build the early childhood system in Montana so all families and communities can thrive.</u>	Recruitment & Retention Project Employer Sponsored Child Care Grant Program- recruiting, technical assistance, implementation, funding distribution, application process, outreach Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis- contract management Trailblazing Transition Summit- partners, development of Tribal specific content, facilitation, outreach, and networking	Partner/ Implementor/ Contractor
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APPENDIX D – PROGRAMS, SERVICES, AND SYSTEM SUPPORTS CREATED OR EXPANDED THROUGH BFB5

Appendix D summarizes BFB5-supported programs, services, and system supports that were reported as newly created, expanded, or enhanced during the grant period. Because BFB5 included both direct service activities and broader systems-building investments, the table includes family-facing programs, workforce supports, data infrastructure, quality improvement resources, planning tools, and other system supports. This appendix is intended to document the range of activities that contributed to the grant’s reporting measure related to programs created or expanded through BFB5 funding.

Table 5. Programs, Services, and System Supports Created or Expanded Through BFB5

Name of New Child or Family Service	Intended Audience/ Population Served	Family Engagement	Support Early Childhood Workforce & Disseminate Best Practices	Support Overall Quality Improvement	Sub-Granting	Monitor, Evaluate & Use Data for Continuous Improvement
Child Care Worker Scholarship Program	Child Care Workers		X		X	
Community Response Program*	Families Referred by CPS	X			X	
ECIDS	Early Childhood System, Division, Interest Holders					X
Employer Sponsored Care Grants - Zero to Five	Employers, Families				X	
Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation	IECMHC Consultants, Early Childhood Professionals, Children in Care, Families		X	X	X	
MECAP -Apprenticeship/ Pre-apprenticeships**	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals		X	X		

Montana Early Learning Standards	Early Childhood Professionals			X		
Montana State Library Project***	Families, Young Children	X				
Montana Head Start Association Parent Engagement	Early Childhood System, Families	X				
parentingmontana.org	Early Childhood Professionals, Families	X				
Professional Development	Early Childhood Professionals, Home Visiting, Part C, Families		X			
Recruitment & Retention - Zero to Five	Early Childhood Professionals, Families, Children		X		X	
Slot Expansion Grants - Crisis Child Care, Infant/Toddler	Early Childhood Programs, Families, Children		X		X	
The Sandbox Project	Early Childhood Programs and Professionals			X		
Transitions Summits	Community, Early Childhood Coalitions	X				
Universally Offered Home Visiting	Families	X			X	

*The Community Response Program was developed by the Montana Children's Trust Fund and supported by the MT BFB5 project.

**The Apprenticeship Program was revised for this project, but not newly created.

*** The Montana State Library Project had enhanced and new programming.

APPENDIX E – KEY TERMS

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology: products, equipment, and systems that enhance learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities.¹⁸

Developmental Screening

Developmental screening takes a closer look at how a child develops. The tools used for developmental screening are formal questionnaires or checklists based on research that ask questions about a child's development, including language, movement, thinking, behavior, and emotions. Developmental screening can be done by a child's health care provider, and by other professionals in healthcare, early childhood education, community, or school settings who have been trained in using these tools.¹⁹

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) System

The term “State B-5 Early Childhood Care and Education System” refers to core ECCE programs, including the CCDF and state child care, which may include center-based, family child care, and informal care providers; Early Head Start and Head Start programs, including State Head Start Collaboration Offices; the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, and other state or locally funded home visiting services; Part C and section 619 of Part B of IDEA; state preschool programs; and programs funded by Title I of the ESEA. In addition, it also includes a wide range of ECCE services that strengthen, engage, and stabilize families and their infants and young children, including supports that target health and wellness, such as Medicaid; the Children's Health Insurance Program; Title V Maternal and Child Health Programs; Healthy Start; Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); and WIC, and the infrastructure components that support these programs and services. When such a system functions well, core ECCE programs are integrated with the services that strengthen, engage, and stabilize families in support of the well-being of infants and young children.²⁰

Early Childhood Professional

Individuals who work in the early childhood field, including educators, home visitors, administrators, specialists, and other professionals who support young children and families.

Early Childhood Program

Centers, family child care homes, organizations, schools, agencies, and other settings that provide services to young children and families.

Evaluation

A systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using data to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and, as importantly, to contribute to continuous program improvement.²¹

Family Engagement

This term identifies a collaborative and strengths-based process through which early childhood educators, families, and children build positive and goal-oriented relationships. It is a shared responsibility of families and staff that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths each has to offer. Family engagement focuses on relationship-building with key family members in a child's life. These people include pregnant women and expectant families, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other adult caregivers. It requires making a commitment to create and sustain an ongoing partnership that supports family well-being. It honors and supports the parent-child relationships that are central to a child's healthy development, school readiness, and well-being. Family engagement also seeks ongoing opportunities to obtain parent perspective by involving parents and other family members in conversations, assessment, planning, and implementation in all areas impacting families.²⁰

IDEA Part B and C

The IDEA is a law that makes available free, appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. Infants and toddlers, birth through age 2, with disabilities and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA Part C. Children and youth, ages 3 through 21, receive special education and related services under IDEA Part B.²⁰

Quality Recognition System (QRS)

QRS is a voluntary quality rating and improvement system that aligns quality indicators with support and incentives for early childhood programs and early childhood professionals. The Early Childhood Services Bureau has enjoyed watching the program grow and develop with the input from the various stakeholders, and has listened carefully to early childhood professionals, parents, and national experts to provide a strong program, desired by many.²²

Systems-Building

Efforts to build, strengthen, or reform the programs, policies, services, relationships, infrastructure, and resources that make up an early childhood system so they work together more effectively to support young children and families. In this report, systems-building refers to work that strengthens long-term system capacity, not only direct service delivery during the grant period.⁵

APPENDIX F – ACRONYM GLOSSARY

Table 6. Acronym Glossary

Acronym	Full Term
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
ASQ	Ages and Stages Questionnaires®
ASQ-SE	Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional®
BFB5	Bright Futures Birth to Five Grant
BUILD	BUILD Framework for Systems Evaluation
CCDF	Child Care and Development Fund
CCR&R	Child Care Resource and Referral
CCWP	The Child Care Worker Scholarship Program
CDA	Child Development Associate®
CFA	Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis
CRP	The Community Response Program
DPHHS	Department of Public Health and Human Services
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECIDS	Early Childhood Integrated Data System
ECFSD	Early Childhood and Family Support Division
ECP	Early Childhood Project
FPL	Federal Poverty Level
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IECMHC	Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
MAQCS	Montana Access to Quality Child Care System
MELS	Montana Early Learning Standards
MIECHV	Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting
PDG-B5	Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five
QRS	Quality Recognition System
RIIC	Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities
RSC	Reflective Supervision and Consultation
UOHV	Universally Offered Home Visiting
WIC	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

APPENDIX G – IMPLEMENTATION PARTNER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction/Consent

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today about the Montana Bright Futures Birth to Five project.

I am [title] at the University of Montana's Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities. We are working with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services on the evaluation of the Bright Futures Birth to Five project.

I'd like to record this interview; do I have your permission to record? It will only be used to ensure accuracy and for note-taking purposes.

We asked you to participate in this interview today because we want to understand the successes and challenges you have experienced implementing the Bright Futures Birth to Five project over the last 3 years.

This interview is part of the program performance evaluation of the project. The information you share will help us to assess the outcomes of the past three years of work and will be included in the final summative evaluation reporting.

You've been identified as a key implementation partner, so we are interested in your perspective. There are no right or wrong answers.

Your responses will be kept confidential, and only the evaluation team will have direct access to them. While your organization will be listed in the final evaluation report as having participated in interviews, your individual comments will not be attributed to you or your organization. We may include de-identified quotes to illustrate key themes. Because many interviewees are connected with specific projects, there is a small possibility that readers familiar with the work could infer who shared a particular perspective. Please know that we will do our best to protect your anonymity and will not include any information that is highly sensitive.

Effectiveness

Purpose: Gauge perceived impact and outcomes.

1. What do you believe were the intended outcomes or goals of the project?
2. How effective do you think the project was in reaching those goals over the last three years?
 - Probe for specific examples or data, if applicable.

3. Have you seen any meaningful changes at the community, provider, or system level that you would attribute to the project?
4. Were there any unintended positive or negative outcomes that emerged?

Reach

Purpose: Understand who was served and who was missed.

5. Who do you believe the project was intended to reach?
 - Probe: Families? Providers? Specific geographic or demographic groups?
6. From your perspective, how effectively did this project reach those groups throughout the life of the project?
7. Were there any populations or communities that were harder to reach?
 - What were the barriers?
 - Were any specific strategies successful in addressing these gaps?

Adoption

Purpose: Understand buy-in and engagement at organizational and individual levels.

8. How did your organization or role become involved with the project?
9. What factors influenced your or your organization's decision to participate?
 - Probe: mission alignment, funding, partnerships, etc.
10. Were there any barriers to initial engagement or buy-in from leadership or staff?
11. What helped support or encourage your involvement?

Implementation

Purpose: Explore fidelity, adaptations, barriers, and facilitators.

12. How would you describe your role in implementing the project over the last 3 years?
13. What parts of implementation went well? What made those aspects successful?
14. What were the biggest challenges or barriers to implementation?

- Probe: staffing, funding, communication, systems, training, etc.
15. Were any changes made to the original project plan made during implementation? If so, why, and how? (E.g., different recruitment strategies, was funding reallocated to a different activity, was an activity changed to meet a newly identified need, etc.)
- Do you think these changes helped or hindered the project?
 - Were there any missed opportunities to change course or adapt the project that would have been impactful?
16. What resources, supports, or partnerships were most helpful during implementation?

Maintenance

Purpose: Assess potential for sustainability and long-term impact.

17. Which parts of the project do you think are most likely to continue after the grant period ends? Why do you think so?
- Which parts are least likely to be sustained? Why do you think so?
18. What would be needed to sustain those efforts?
- Probe: funding, policy changes, leadership support, training, etc.
19. Have any organizational or system-level changes occurred that will support longer-term sustainability?
- Probe: If they say no, ask them to explain why.

Final Reflection

20. Reflecting back on your efforts during the 3 years of the Bright Futures Birth to Five project, how would you describe your involvement and what it meant to you?
21. Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't asked about?

Closing

- Thank you for taking the time today to talk with me. I appreciate your feedback and honest answers. We'll include a summary of these interviews in the final evaluation report for Bright Futures Birth to Five, which will be available in late spring/early summer of next year.