



Childcare Sector Recovery & Resilience

American Rescue Plan Act
Final Report

Prepared By :

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Santa Barbara County

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About United Way

Since 1923, United Way of Santa Barbara County has been a key leader in local efforts to support children, families, and communities through its own unique collaborative programs and initiatives, partnership convening efforts, volunteer development, and funding. United Way's mission is to enrich the lives of children and families and build resilient communities by leading local programs and partnerships that improve academic achievement, financial security, and community resiliency.



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Executive Summary

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, United Way of Santa Barbara County was enlisted to support community partners in leveraging the remaining \$2 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding designated for recovery and resiliency efforts for the childcare sector. A longtime advocate and partner in Santa Barbara County's childcare efforts, United Way was selected for this project to bring its expertise, infrastructure, and community partnerships to build sustainable solutions that benefit the community's providers, employers, and families. At the conclusion of the grant period, United Way's Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative surpassed the projected outcomes and looks forward to continuing its efforts to support the local sector.

Overview

Prior to receiving the ARPA award, United Way was contracted to collect localized data for the Cities of Santa Barbara and Goleta, which provided key insights into the gaps exposed during the COVID-19 crisis. Upon receipt of the ARPA award, United Way expanded this assessment across the county, which validated that Santa Barbara County was experiencing a significant crisis of childcare availability and affordability. A local family with two children was found to be spending an average of 30%+ of their annual income on childcare costs. The economic impacts of the strained sector reached across stakeholder groups, from parents and caregivers struggling to find and afford care to local businesses' challenges with hiring and recruitment.

It was estimated that the total annual impact for Santa Barbara County alone was between \$200-\$300 million.



Quality, accessible early learning opportunities fall at the center of each of United Way's core focus areas of Academic Achievement, Financial Security, and Community Resiliency. As such, United Way was able to quickly leverage programmatic infrastructure, community partnerships, and data and resources to progress on its key goals and outcomes to create the Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative, which included:

- **Countywide Parent & Provider Assessment**
- **Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition**
- **Childcare Provider Training & Technical Support**
- **Creation of Parent & Provider Fund**
 - Childcare Facility Grant
 - Family Scholarship Program
- **Emergency Childcare Action Plan**

The Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative implemented these comprehensive strategies to strengthen the early childhood care system in Santa Barbara County. These cohesive efforts expanded access to high-quality, affordable childcare, enhanced provider sustainability, strengthened workforce readiness, supported family financial security, and built enduring partnerships to sustain and amplify impact across the local childcare landscape.

Collectively, these investments increased licensed childcare availability, strengthened provider operations, and fostered lasting improvements in Santa Barbara County's early childhood education landscape, supporting a more resilient, coordinated, and equitable childcare system for the county's children and their families.



Key Outcomes

- 50 childcare professionals have been hired as a result of ARPA expansion and start-up grants to childcare facilities.
- 47 center-based preschool (infant/toddler) slots were converted using ARPA funding.
- 225 new center-based childcare spots were created through ARPA investments, including 127 infant/toddler slots.
- All start-up and expansion grants leveraged additional funding from partner organizations, amplifying the impact of ARPA support.
- Successful development of diverse revenue streams to support continued work in sector stability and strength, including private philanthropy and foundations, corporate partnerships, and government investment.
- All childcare partners were already accepting subsidies prior to ARPA grant support.
- Childcare facilities completed the business training program available through the UC Santa Barbara partnership.

Achievements by Focus Area

Countywide Parent & Provider Assessment

- Successfully collected real time, countywide data on availability and affordability of care.

Establishment of the Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition

- Built on United Way's existing cross-sector partnerships to bring together over 25 leaders in business, government, philanthropy, and community impact.

Childcare Provider Training & Technical Support

- Created and delivered a self-paced business training for childcare providers in partnership with UC Santa Barbara.
- Trained over 40 childcare providers with a comprehensive Emergency Preparedness Training in collaboration with the Santa Barbara County Education Office and Cathedral Oaks Children's Center.

Brighter Futures Childcare Fund

- Developed a scholarship fund, which provided over \$100,000 in essential subsidies to 17 qualifying local families with children in childcare programs.
- Granted \$430,000+ in facilities grants to eight (8) local agencies, school districts, and provider facilities, creating 272 new licensed childcare slots for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children.

Countywide Emergency Childcare Action Plan

- Successfully developed and implemented the Santa Barbara County Emergency Childcare Action plan to efficiently mobilize support for essential workers and operatives in times of crisis.

272

**New Licensed
Childcare Spaces Created**
+22 Spaces to Benchmark

General Narrative

Countywide Parent & Provider Assessment & Report

Facilitated in 2023, the Santa Barbara County Childcare Needs & Assets Assessment & Report examines the challenges surrounding childcare in Santa Barbara County from an economic perspective, while centering on the importance of ensuring quality care for children. The survey aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how the childcare landscape, focused on children from birth to kindergarten, is perceived by both parents and employers in Santa Barbara County. In particular, this report responded to the directive issued by Santa Barbara County, urging special attention to childcare for infants and toddlers with a geographic focus on the areas of Lompoc, Orcutt, Buellton, Guadalupe, and Carpinteria.

1,028 local parents of children ages 0-5 completed the childcare survey, while 45 employers responded to an employer survey. Employer respondents were of various sizes and represented 14 industries and approximately 18,500 employees, which, based on census estimates, is at least around 10% of the total workforce in the county.

Countywide Parent & Provider Assessment

Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition
Childcare Provider Training & Technical Support
Brighter Futures Childcare Fund
Emergency Childcare Action Plan

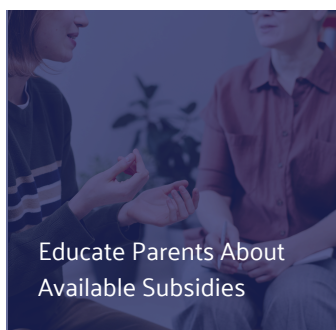
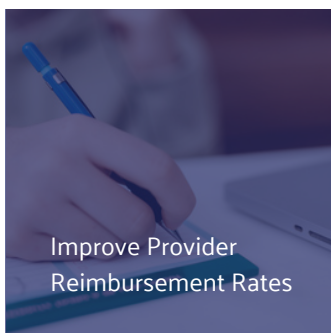


The assessment included the following approaches:

1. Online survey of parents with children aged zero to five who live or work in Santa Barbara County
2. Online survey of employers located in Santa Barbara County
3. Interviews with 14 local early care and education experts
4. Focus group with the Child Care Planning Council of Santa Barbara County
5. Communications with leaders from the Economic Forecast Project at UC Santa Barbara

Key Lessons Learned & Recommendations:

A strong childcare system is essential to workforce development and can contribute to a healthy and sustainable economy in Santa Barbara County and improved financial outcomes for families and academic outcomes for children. Based on information obtained from the countywide survey, a series of recommendations are outlined below to expand parent access, increase the number of childcare spaces, strengthen the sector, and ultimately sustain and grow the economy.



Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition



Anna Powell, Senior Research and Policy Associate,
CSCCE, UC Berkley

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ARPA & Beyond

The Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition was established to address a critical need for affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare in Santa Barbara County. Driven by United Way's vision of more resilient communities and supported by a committed network of local leaders and organizations, the coalition was formed to strengthen family, child, provider, employer, and economic outcomes through innovative collaboration strategies. Recognizing that quality childcare is foundational to children's academic success and household financial stability, the coalition focuses on strategies that allow families to participate fully in the workforce, manage their finances, and plan for the future with greater security.

Coalition meetings have featured expert speakers who explore critical issues shaping the local childcare landscape, including workforce development, the role of businesses in investing in childcare solutions, and the use of research to inform strategic momentum and action in Santa Barbara County. Members are tasked with contributing to the collective effort to expand access, share best practices, and implement innovative solutions that meet the needs of families from all economic backgrounds. Through this countywide initiative, coalition members play an essential role in guiding, supporting, and sustaining the development of new and existing childcare centers, ensuring that every child can thrive in a safe, nurturing, and educationally rich environment.

Upon onboarding, members agreed to:

- Attend quarterly meetings to discuss the existing challenges impacting the childcare sector.
- Assist in the development of a childcare sector action plan focusing on technical assistance for businesses/employers and emergency childcare for first responders and essential workers.
- Recommend, implement, and advocate for long-term, sustainable solutions that will create a stronger, more stable sector.
- Advocate on behalf of the initiative with stakeholders, partners, and circles of influence to fortify the coalition with supporters from all sectors.
- Attend meetings and presentations with community leaders to educate, persuade, and create change as needed.

The Coalition met eight times over the course of the grant period at partnering offices and venues across the county. Presenters included representatives from countywide agencies and childcare consultants, as well as visiting researchers such as Anna Powell, Senior Research and Policy Associate at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. Meetings provided an essential opportunity to bring cohesion and efficiency to the efforts of the cross-sector membership, keeping representatives engaged and informed of recent data, successes, and challenges.



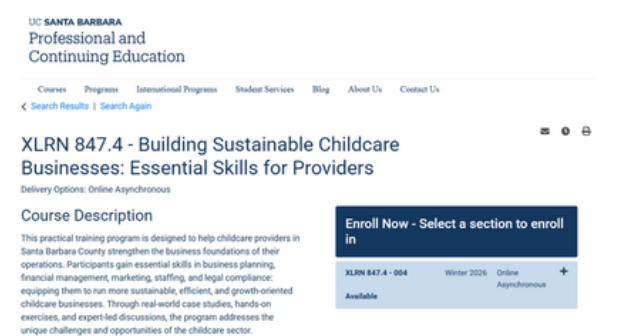
Childcare Provider Training & Technical Support

Childcare providers in Santa Barbara County face a range of challenges, from managing daily operations and staff to ensuring compliance and delivering high-quality care. Strengthening provider capacity through practical training, professional development, and access to resources not only supports the sustainability of these programs but also enhances the skills of staff, improves the quality of care for children, and helps families access reliable, nurturing early learning. Investing in providers ultimately strengthens the local childcare system, promotes positive outcomes for children, and supports family stability and workforce development.

Childcare Business Training Program

In partnership with the UC Santa Barbara Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE), the **Building Sustainable Childcare Businesses: Essential Skills for Providers** course was developed. This educational programming was developed with guidance from an advisory body of United Way representatives, childcare industry experts, and PaCE instructors. The curriculum was designed to equip childcare providers with the essential skills and knowledge needed to build sustainable, profitable programs. The modules include videos, slides, and documents focused on six core competencies: **business planning, financial management, marketing, human resources, compliance, and growth strategies**. All course materials are hosted virtually for self-paced, asynchronous learning. This training program will remain accessible, practical, and free of cost for all childcare providers in Santa Barbara County for the next three years.

The development and delivery of this training program highlighted the importance of flexible, accessible professional development for childcare providers, ensuring that providers can engage with the material on their own schedules. The experience emphasized the potential to strengthen relationships with local childcare providers, laying the groundwork for future collaborations and support initiatives.



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Emergency Preparedness Training

Emergency preparedness is a critical component of quality early childhood education. Childcare providers are responsible not only for daily learning and care but also for ensuring the safety and well-being of children during emergencies, including natural disasters, threats to safety, and other unexpected events. Effective preparedness helps providers respond quickly, reduce risk, and maintain calm and confidence.

United Way, in partnership with Cathedral Oaks Children's Center and the Santa Barbara County Education Office, designed an Emergency Preparedness Training focused on the Standard Response Protocol (SRP) and needs identified directly by providers. The training was piloted with over 40 childcare providers in November of 2025, who received practical resources to strengthen their readiness, including a template to update emergency plans, actionable steps for disaster preparedness, and an Emergency Preparedness Kit. The session also created an opportunity to build on the relationships and trust United Way has established with local providers, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to act effectively in emergencies.

Overall, participants highlighted the value of scenario-based, childcare-specific trainings that not only address practical and regulatory aspects of emergency preparedness but also continue to strengthen provider capacity, confidence, and the overall safety of the early childhood care network.



Provider Feedback & Improvements:

- **Advanced Emergency Preparedness:** Earthquake readiness, evacuation techniques for young children, reunification planning, transportation solutions, and managing post-emergency recovery.
- **Communication Strategies:** Best practices for responding to threats of violence or child endangerment, communicating with families, between departments, and with the broader school community.
- **Continued Childcare Facility Preparedness:** Additional training tailored to early childhood settings, including licensing requirements, hands-on exercises, facility walkthroughs, and strategies for maintaining calm and safety with young children during emergencies.
- **Collaboration & Networking:** Building neighborhood emergency communication networks, such as "phone trees," and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing among childcare programs.

Brighter Futures Childcare Fund

Through the ARPA funding, United Way developed and launched the Brighter Futures Childcare Fund, a centralized fund to support the Santa Barbara County community in addressing the availability and affordability of childcare. The Fund included the Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant for providers as well as the Brighter Futures Scholarship Program, which provides financial assistance for childcare costs for eligible families, aiming to narrow the cost-to-income gap from the current local average of 30%+ to 15% for participating households. The Fund will continue beyond ARPA to continue supporting the local sector.



Key Outcomes

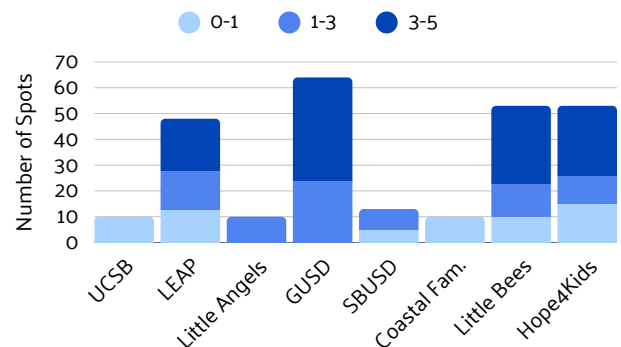
272 new licensed childcare slots added for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children were created.

Facility Enhancements: Significant renovations and expansions were completed, including new classrooms, dedicated infant/toddler areas, outdoor play environments, safety and accessibility upgrades, and updated classroom equipment.

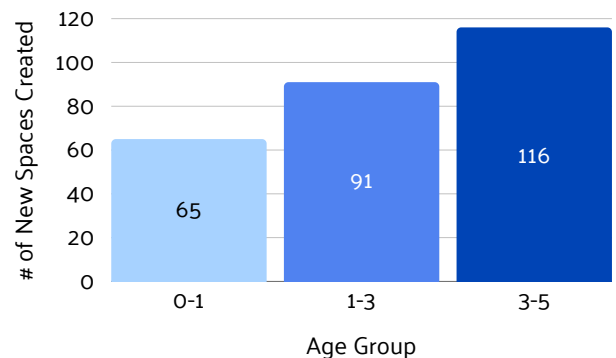
Workforce Development: Professional development and certification were provided for more than 10 early childhood educators, strengthening instructional quality and supporting evidence-based, responsive care.

Family and Community Support: Programs funded serve diverse populations, including low-income families, children in foster care, families with special needs, and provide wraparound services integrated in several programs to support child and family stability.

Grant Demographics



Childcare Spots Created by Facility & Age Group



New Childcare Spaces by Age Group

A critical component and strategy of the Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative was providing facility grants to childcare centers to create or expand infant and toddler spots, directly addressing the county's severe childcare shortage while supporting workforce development. The ARPA funding provided critical support to eight licensed, center-based childcare providers across Santa Barbara County, enabling both the expansion of services and the creation of urgently needed childcare slots, particularly in high-need communities with limited access to affordable, quality early care.

These grants were designated exclusively for direct start-up costs associated with creating or expanding infant and toddler spaces, including facility improvements, classroom materials, staff training, and outdoor equipment. Funds could not be used to cover ongoing operational or programmatic expenses, ensuring every dollar directly supported the expansion and immediate capacity-building of the childcare centers. Eligible centers made significant progress toward opening or expanding licensed infant/toddler spaces and submitted detailed applications, including budget, staffing, prior experience, projected revenue, and start-up cost needs. Allocation of funds considered factors such as the number of spots being created, overall cost structure, and availability of other funding sources.

Through these targeted facility grants, the initiative expanded local childcare capacity, enhanced facility quality, and strengthened staff expertise, increasing the number of safe, developmentally enriching spaces and supporting families in maintaining employment or continuing education. These investments not only met urgent community needs but also bolstered the quality and sustainability of local early childhood programs.



Lessons Learned:

Grantee reports from these childcare partners provided a unique window into the realities of opening or expanding early care capacity across Santa Barbara County. By reviewing their experiences in detail, United Way was able to identify both the practical successes and the challenges faced by providers as they worked to create new infant, toddler, and preschool spaces in underserved communities. These reports highlighted how strategic planning, targeted investments, and community-centered approaches directly influence program quality, accessibility, and sustainability.

The lessons learned from this collective experience, ranging from the importance of early facility planning and workforce development to family engagement and infrastructure improvements, offer actionable guidance for future initiatives and investments in the childcare sector.

*View a detailed report of awarded childcare facilities and GIS mapping in Appendix A.

Early & Strategic Planning is Critical

- Early strategic planning supported clear pathways through licensing, safety, and accessibility challenges, which can often take longer and cost more than anticipated.
- Advance planning for compliance-related expenses reduces delays and financial strain.
- Thorough documentation and readiness can significantly accelerate licensing timelines.

Flexibility in Implementation Supports Success

- Due to the complex nature of facilities, projects often face unexpected delays, such as staffing shortages, licensing wait times, or construction contingencies.
- Maintaining flexible timelines and phased enrollment enables programs to open without compromising quality or safety.

Targeted Workforce Investment Enhances Quality

- Training and certifying educators in infant/toddler care improves instructional quality and child developmental outcomes.
- Professional development ensures programs can meet diverse learning needs and strengthens long-term program sustainability.

Family Engagement Adds to Quality

- Active family involvement in facilities planning and development through parent nights, in-class participation, and ongoing communication increases satisfaction and increases program quality.
- Family engagement increases comprehensive and consistent social-emotional learning and cognitive development for young children.

Equity and Access Must Be Integrated

- Prioritizing high-need families and low-income household unique perspective and needs, ensures expansions address the greatest gaps.
- Sliding-scale tuition and scholarship programs maintain accessibility while supporting program sustainability

Infrastructure Investments Strengthen Outcomes

- Well-designed classrooms, outdoor learning areas, and safety upgrades enhance developmental outcomes and caregiver confidence.
- Facility quality investments positively influence community perception, increase enrollment, and contribute to long-term viability.

Partnerships and Collaboration Amplify Impact

- Collaborating with funders, licensing agencies, schools, and organizations facilitates smoother implementation and enhances family support networks.
- Partnerships are particularly important in underserved communities where systemic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers can limit program effectiveness.

Sustainability Planning is Key

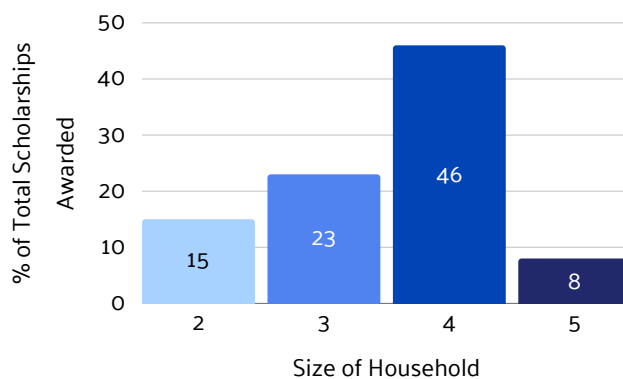
- Diversifying funding sources, pursuing accreditation, and implementing tiered tuition strategies maintain expanded capacity beyond the grant period.
- Establishing sustainability plans alongside program launch ensures long-term program continuity.



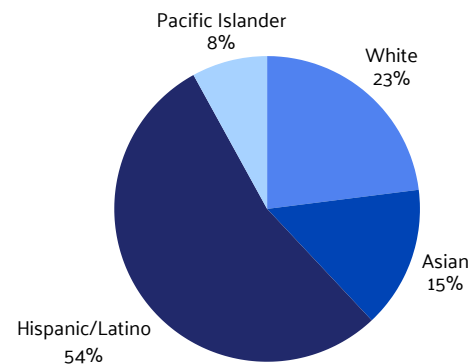
Key Outcomes

Through this program, **17 families and 22 children** have received scholarships, reducing childcare costs by 5-13 percent of household income and supporting greater family financial stability. The average annual percentage of childcare on the household budget prior to the scholarship was 20%.

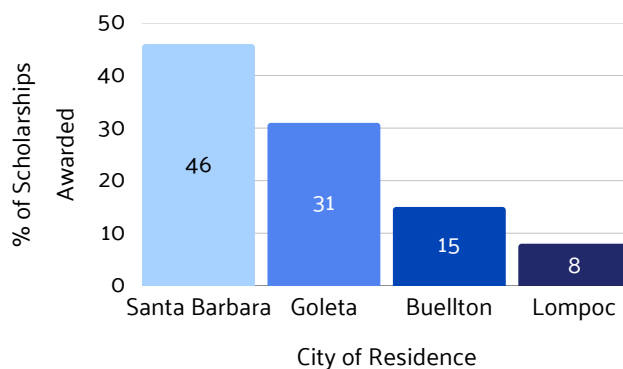
Scholarship Demographics



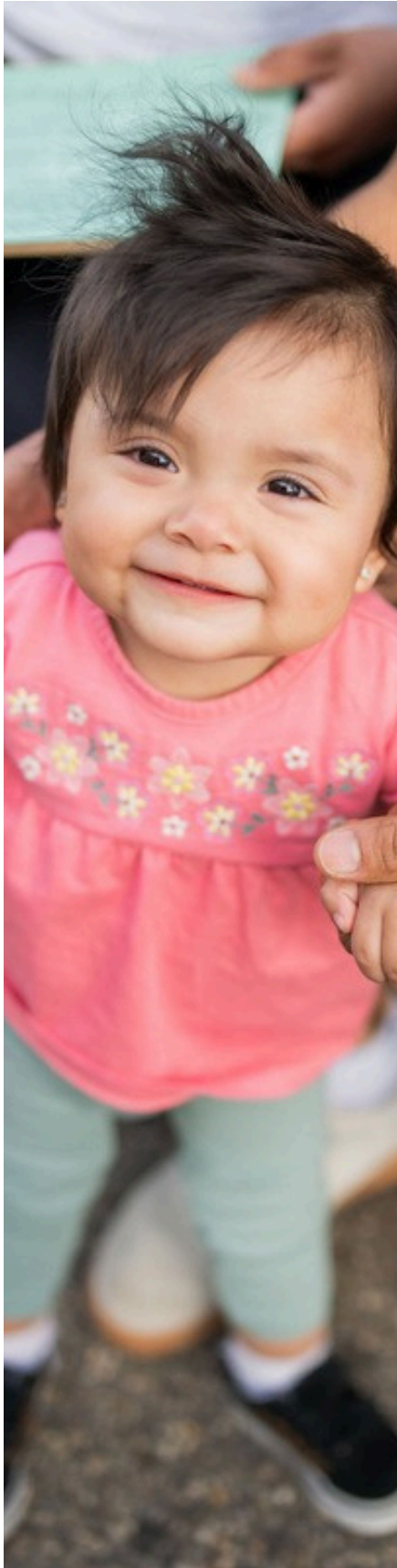
Nearly half of participating families (46%) are households with four members, followed by three-member households (23%).



Over half of families receiving a scholarship (54%) identify as Hispanic or Latino, followed by families identifying as White (23%).



The majority of families (77%) reside in South County, with 23% of families residing in North County.



Finding affordable, high-quality childcare is a challenge for families across Santa Barbara County. Though accessibility is an issue for all families with young children, middle-income households, often referred to as the “missing middle,” face a unique gap in support. These families earn too much to qualify for traditional subsidies yet still experience significant financial strain from the cost of childcare. The national recommendation for childcare expenses is 7% of a household’s income – here in Santa Barbara, families with two children can be expected to spend more than double that amount. Without cost-effective, reliable, high-quality care, many parents report the need to reduce work hours, leave the workforce entirely, or limit educational advancement opportunities. In addition, without consistent, reliable care, many children miss out on essential early learning experiences that are shown to support positive cognitive, social, and emotional development.

The Brighter Futures Scholarship Program provides financial assistance to middle-income families with children under five who spend more than 12 percent of their household income on childcare and did not qualify for other subsidy programs. To be eligible, families need to have secured a spot at a licensed childcare facility, live and work in Santa Barbara County, and fall within income guidelines based on family size. Awarded funding operates as cost-sharing directly with the provider, with award amounts tailored to each household based on family size, number of children in care, weekly attendance, childcare rates, and other financial considerations.

Through this pilot program, 17 families and 22 children have received scholarships, reducing childcare costs by 5–13 percent of household income and supporting greater family financial stability. The average scholarship per child was \$5,036 per year, providing meaningful financial relief that helped families manage childcare costs, maintain household and workplace stability, and remain in the workforce, while ensuring their children had access to safe, high-quality childcare centers where they could develop and thrive.

Overall, the program successfully expanded access to licensed, high-quality early care for working families, provided critical financial relief, supported child development, and enabled parents to participate in the workforce or pursue educational opportunities. It demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted, needs-based assistance in filling gaps for middle-income families who are often overlooked in traditional childcare support programs.

The Brighter Futures Scholarship Program had a meaningful and stabilizing impact on the financial stability of participating families living in a high-cost community where affordable childcare is increasingly out of reach. Awarded families overwhelmingly report that the scholarship reduced financial strain, lowered stress, and made it possible to remain employed, pursue education, and continue living and working in Santa Barbara County.

Financial relief was one of the most frequently cited outcomes from receiving a childcare scholarship. Parents shared that before receiving the scholarship, childcare costs consumed a disproportionate share of their income, forcing difficult trade-offs between tuition, rent, groceries, and basic household necessities. Several families reported that without the scholarship, they would have incurred debt, reduced their child's days in care, delayed preschool enrollment, or considered leaving the region altogether. Even modest monthly assistance was described as significant in easing month-to-month financial pressure and providing critical "wiggle room" in household budgets.

The scholarship also directly supported **workforce participation and educational advancement**. With increased financial ability to meet basic needs, many parents indicated they were able to work full time, take on additional hours, or pursue professional development and career advancement because they had reliable, affordable childcare. Multiple respondents credited the scholarship with enabling them to complete or continue graduate-level education, including master's and administrative credential programs, without taking on additional debt. This stability allowed families to invest in long-term economic mobility rather than remaining in crisis-driven decision-making.

Beyond financial and employment outcomes, families reported clear benefits for their **children's development and well-being**. Consistent access to quality childcare was associated with children meeting or exceeding developmental milestones, forming strong relationships with teachers and peers, and demonstrating increased independence and enthusiasm for learning. Parents also noted that reduced household stress positively affected their children, creating a more stable and supportive home environment.

Scholarship Impact | Participant Voices

"Even just \$500 extra dollars a month has lowered my family's stress about making it each month."

"Without this grant, we would have been incurring more debt just to afford childcare."

"With consistent childcare, my older son is building stronger relationships with his teachers and peers."

*Continued in Appendix : Community Feedback

Lessons Learned:

Operating the Brighter Futures Scholarship Program provided valuable insights into both the challenges and opportunities of supporting middle-income families with young children. The program demonstrated the importance of targeted, needs-based financial assistance in expanding access to high-quality childcare while promoting family stability, workforce participation, and child development. At the same time, implementing the program highlighted areas for refinement, including application design, resource allocation, and data tracking. The lessons outlined below reflect key takeaways from the program's first cycle and offer guidance for strengthening future scholarship initiatives.

Targeted Eligibility Criteria Focus Support & Highlight Opportunities for Further Assistance

Demand for Brighter Futures Scholarships significantly exceeded the program's capacity. While the program's eligibility requirements were intentionally designed to support middle-income families in the "missing middle," only 26 percent of applicants were approved. A substantial number of applications were denied due to income ineligibility, indicating that many families with demonstrated childcare needs fell outside the program's scope. The volume of applications and denials highlights a broader need for financial support beyond the current eligibility criteria and points to opportunities to explore additional strategies to expand access to affordable, high-quality childcare.

Financial Relief Significantly Supports Family Stability

Even modest reductions in childcare costs had a meaningful impact on families' financial stability. Scholarships reduced childcare expenses up to 13 percent of household income, averaging \$5,036 per child annually. Families reported lower stress, greater ability to meet essential needs, and improved capacity to maintain employment or continue education. These observations highlight the tangible, real-world effect of targeted financial assistance on both parents and children.

Demand Exceeds Immediate Funding Capacity

Persistent unmet need for childcare support among middle-income families—reflected in applications being waitlisted or remaining pending—underscores the importance of planning for sustainable funding. Unlike one-time grant awards, childcare assistance represents a recurring monthly expense for families, requiring dependable, long-term funding. This highlights the importance of flexible funding streams to meet ongoing demand and maximize program impact.

Childcare Access Supports Both Children and Families

Providing scholarships enabled children to access safe, consistent, and high-quality early learning environments. Observations showed that children benefited from improved developmental outcomes, social-emotional growth, and readiness for school, while parents were able to sustain workforce participation or pursue educational advancement. These insights demonstrate the dual benefits of targeted childcare support: strengthening family stability while promoting early childhood development.

Ongoing Data Collection Strengthens Program Management

Tracking household income, childcare costs, and scholarship allocations provided critical insights into program effectiveness. Expanding future tracking to include child development metrics, family employment stability, and longer-term retention in care could further inform improvements and guide targets in resource allocation.

Relationship-Building with Providers Enhances Collaboration and Reach

Strengthening connections with local childcare providers enabled collaborative problem-solving and information sharing. Integrating providers into programming processes helps ensure interventions are practical, responsive, and sustainable within the community.

Overall, the Brighter Futures Scholarship Program is addressing a critical gap in affordability and access to childcare. The program not only helps families meet immediate needs, but also strengthens family stability, supports educational attainment and workforce retention, and promotes healthy early childhood development. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the program, emphasizing that this support arrived at a pivotal time and made a lasting difference for their families' financial security and future outlook.



Emergency Childcare Action Plan:

As part of its ARPA contract with the County of Santa Barbara, United Way developed and implemented an Emergency Childcare Plan to support county employees activated during a disaster in accessing reliable childcare services. By addressing a critical barrier to workforce availability, the plan strengthened the County's ability to mobilize employees across all departments and maintain essential operations during emergencies. This support plays an important role in enabling timely and effective emergency response and recovery efforts.

The plan established a coordinated, countywide framework that brought together County administration, United Way, and licensed private childcare providers. Through this framework, United Way can rapidly assess childcare needs among activated employees, conduct real-time surveys of provider availability and capacity, and connect families with appropriate childcare options as needs arise. Designed to operate on a 24/7 basis, the plan provides continuous support for county employees throughout all phases of a disaster, from initial response through recovery.

Key Components:

- Compliance with Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and National Incident Management System (NIMS)
- Public Employees as Disaster Service Workers
- Emergency Declaration and Plan Activation
- Objectives and Action Items
- Situational Analysis and Assumptions
- County-Wide Survey Results
- Use of Existing and Alternative Childcare Centers
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Response Protocols
- Recommendations

The Emergency Childcare Plan for Santa Barbara County aims to provide a structured and reliable approach to emergency childcare services, ensuring that public employees can perform their duties without concerns for their dependents' safety. This plan enhances community resilience, promotes stakeholder collaboration, and fosters a culture of preparedness and responsiveness.

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Next Steps

Following the completion of the ARPA contract, United Way continues to prioritize childcare systems work informed by lessons learned through ARPA-funded efforts. While ARPA resources enabled critical stabilization and recovery activities, the work ahead reflects an evolution toward longer-term systems strengthening to address persistent gaps affecting childcare providers, the workforce, employers, and families across Santa Barbara County.

Future Objectives

Scholarships for “Missing Middle” Families

The pilot round of scholarships to middle income families proved to be an essential tool in combatting the high cost burden of childcare. United Way will continue to deliver scholarship opportunities, building strong partnerships with funders and business leaders.

Childcare Facility Grants

The accessibility of childcare remains a key challenge for families across Santa Barbara County. Childcare facility start-up and expansion grants continue to be critical support to providers, allowing them to effectively serve more children and families.

Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition

United Way continues to align community partners through the Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition. Serving as a forum for shared learning, alignment, and strategic guidance, the coalition has brought in speakers and experts from other communities and industries leading the way in childcare systems change, including Patagonia and the Kids First initiative in Aspen, Colorado. This learning-oriented approach is central to advancing systems change. Coalition stewardship in this next phase will focus on deeper cross-sector coordination and systems-level problem solving rather than time-limited program oversight.



Solutions & Recommendations For Future Engagement



Employer Engagement and Investment in Childcare: United Way will prioritize expanded engagement with employers, chambers of commerce, and national partners to position childcare as a workforce and economic imperative. This phase of work will focus on building employer understanding, facilitating employer-supported childcare strategies, and convening cross-sector learning opportunities such as a Childcare in the Workplace Symposium. These activities represent a strategic expansion beyond ARPA-funded recovery efforts and require dedicated staff capacity and partnership infrastructure.

Emergency and Disaster Preparedness for Childcare Providers: Building on initial preparedness efforts, United Way will advance childcare-specific emergency planning and training to strengthen provider resilience and continuity of care. As climate-related emergencies increase in frequency and severity, this work represents a necessary shift toward proactive risk mitigation rather than short-term response and remains largely unfunded through existing childcare systems.

Childcare Provider Capacity Building and Community Support: United Way will prioritize new and ongoing capacity-building supports for childcare providers, including technical assistance, professional development, licensing alignment, and quality improvement. This work reflects a transition from immediate stabilization toward long-term provider sustainability and requires consistent investment to maintain depth and reach.

Childcare Workforce Advocacy and Support: United Way will expand workforce-focused strategies that elevate data, research, and lived experience to inform policy, employer engagement, and systems change. This includes supporting career pathways, compensation discussions, and coordinated advocacy efforts that extend beyond the scope of ARPA-funded activities.

Conclusion

The Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative has demonstrated the power of targeted investment, collaborative partnerships, and strategic planning in strengthening Santa Barbara County's early childhood care system. Through ARPA-funded efforts, the initiative expanded access to high-quality, licensed childcare, created new infant and toddler spaces, supported middle-income families with scholarships, enhanced workforce capacity, and provided critical technical assistance and training for providers. Lessons learned from facility planning, workforce development, family engagement, and community-focused programming have provided actionable guidance to inform ongoing and future efforts.

These achievements would not have been possible without the dedication and expertise of United Way's many partners across Santa Barbara County, whose collaboration and commitment ensured the success of these programs. United Way is also thankful to First 5 Santa Barbara County for its consistent guidance, support, and trust in United Way to implement these strategies, and for the ongoing investment in a shared vision for a stronger early childhood care system.

While ARPA resources were essential for immediate recovery and stabilization, persistent gaps remain in access, affordability, and provider capacity. Building on the successes of the initiative, United Way is positioned to advance a next phase of work focused on sustainable systems strengthening, including employer engagement, emergency preparedness, workforce support, and ongoing provider capacity building. By leveraging the momentum generated through the Coalition, program partners, and community collaborations, these efforts aim to create a more resilient, equitable, and coordinated early childhood care landscape, ensuring that all children in Santa Barbara County have access to safe, high-quality care and that families are supported in their economic and educational pursuits.

The Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative has addressed urgent needs and laid a foundation for long-term impact, reinforcing the critical role of collaboration, innovation, and data-informed strategies in building a sustainable childcare system for generations to come.

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Training & Capacity Building
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Appendix A: Partnerships & Collaborations

Building on the network established through the Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition, the Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative works closely with additional partners to implement programs, expand childcare capacity, and strengthen provider skills across Santa Barbara County. These collaborations included childcare providers, training organizations, technical assistance consultants, and funding partners, all of whom contributed expertise, resources, and direct services to support families and providers.

Funding & Oversight



Technical Assistance & Consulting

Eileen Monahan Consulting
Maria Chesley Consulting

Childcare Facility Grantees

Hope 4 Kids
Coastal Family Preschool
Little Angels Preschool
Little Bees Preschool
LEAP Lompoc Children's Center
Guadalupe Early Learning Center
(Guadalupe Union School District)
Santa Barbara Unified School District Early
Education Program
UC Santa Barbara Early Childhood Care and
Education Services

Training & Capacity Building

UC Santa Barbara
Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE)
Santa Barbara County Education Office (SBCEO)
Cathedral Oaks Children's Center

Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition Membership Listing

Building on the network established through the Brighter Futures Childcare Coalition, the Brighter Futures Childcare Initiative works closely with additional partners to implement programs, expand childcare capacity, and strengthen provider skills across Santa Barbara County. These collaborations included childcare providers, training organizations, technical assistance consultants, and funding partners, all of whom contributed expertise, resources, and direct services to support families and providers.

Government & Public Offices

City of Goleta
 City of Santa Barbara
 County of Santa Barbara
 City of Buellton
 Office of Monique Limon, California Senate,
 District 19
 Office of Supervisor Laura Capps
 Office of Assemblymember Greg Hart
 Santa Barbara County Education Office

Chambers of Commerce

Buellton Chamber of Commerce
 Lompoc Valley Chamber of Commerce
 Santa Maria Valley Chamber
 Santa Barbara South Coast Chamber of Commerce

Educational Institutions

Guadalupe Unified School District
 University of California, Santa Barbara
 California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI)
 Allan Hancock College

Foundations & Nonprofits

Audacious Foundation
 Carpinteria Children Project
 Children's Resource & Referral of
 Santa Barbara County
 First 5 Santa Barbara County
 Future Leaders of America
 James S. Bower Foundation
 Eileen Monahan Consulting
 Maria Chesley Consulting
 United Way of Santa Barbara County
 Salvation Army
 Santa Barbara Foundation
 Santa Barbara Scholarship Foundation

Businesses & Employers

Deckers Brands
 Amazon
 Montecito Bank & Trust
 MarBorg Industries & HR Association
 Driscoll's
 Cottage Health

Appendix B: GIS Mapping



Converted Childcare Slots

The following sites represent existing programs where ARPA funding supported the conversion of childcare slots to increase capacity and better meet community needs:

UCSB Orfalea Family Children's Center – 900 West Campus Lane, Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Little Angels Preschool – 909 N. La Cumbre Rd., Santa Barbara, CA 93110

Coastal Family Preschool – 5026 Foothill Rd., Carpinteria, CA 93013

SBUSD – 236 W. Haley St., Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Expansion / Start-Up Childcare Slots

The following sites represent programs where ARPA funding supported new or expanded childcare slots to increase capacity and address community demand:

Little Bees – 725 Foster Rd., Santa Maria, CA 93455

LEAP – 500 North Ave., Lompoc, CA 93436

Guadalupe Union School District – 4465 North St., Guadalupe, CA 93434

Hope 4 Kids – 5070 Cathedral Oaks Rd., Santa Barbara, CA 93111



Facility Grants Detail by Subgrantee

Guadalupe Early Learning Center (GUSD) - \$130,000

Guadalupe, CA

The Guadalupe Union School District used United Way's Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant to address the critical shortage of licensed early childcare in Guadalupe by developing the Guadalupe Early Learning Center. The grant supported start-up costs for classrooms, outdoor learning spaces, curriculum resources, staff training, and family engagement initiatives, enabling the district to expand capacity from 24 to 96 childcare slots for children ages 2-5. Led by the Director of Early Education and Support, the project integrated partnerships with local Head Start and early learning programs to prioritize high-need families, providing much-needed early care in a community with limited options. Construction is complete, licensing is underway, and the center is positioned to significantly strengthen early childhood education access and outcomes for local families.

University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) - \$69,090

Goleta, CA

UC Santa Barbara's Early Childhood Care and Education Services used the Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant to expand access to licensed infant care by converting an existing preschool classroom into a dedicated infant learning environment. This project responds to significant unmet demand, with nearly four times as many infants on the waitlist as current capacity allows, and advances UC Santa Barbara's commitment to supporting students, staff, and faculty through access to high-quality, affordable childcare. Grant funds supported essential start-up investments, including infant-specific furnishings, equipment, and the creation of a sensory-rich, developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor learning environment designed to promote whole-child development. Construction is anticipated to conclude in March 2026, with licensing and final inspections to follow, and an expected opening in April 2026 that will increase infant capacity by approximately 10 spaces and strengthen workforce recruitment, retention, and family stability across the campus community.

Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD) - \$40,000

Santa Barbara, CA

The Santa Barbara Unified School District's Early Education Program (SBUSD-EEP) used the United Way Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant to expand access to licensed infant-toddler care by converting an existing preschool site into a district-operated infant-toddler center. Grant funds supported the purchase of infant-specific furniture and equipment, safety modifications, and facility upgrades required to meet age-appropriate licensing standards. The project builds on SBUSD-EEP's established early learning infrastructure and is designed to serve up to 15 infants and toddlers annually, prioritizing families with the greatest need. Facility updates have been completed, and the program is prepared to move forward with licensing pending fire inspection clearance and staffing readiness. Once licensed, the center will meaningfully increase the availability of high-quality infant-toddler care in Santa Barbara, where access to licensed care for children under three remains limited.

LEAP Lompoc Children's Center – \$75,000

Lompoc, CA

LEAP Central Coast used the United Way Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant to expand access to high-quality infant and toddler childcare in Lompoc, a community with a longstanding shortage of licensed early care options. The funding supported facility improvements, safety and compliance upgrades, staffing, and community readiness, enabling LEAP to fully prepare, license, and open the Lompoc Children's Center in March 2025. The center created 58 new childcare spots for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children, including dedicated indoor and outdoor learning spaces, and has been positively received by families and the community. This expansion provides families with much-needed early care in a region with limited childcare options.

Little Bees Preschool – \$50,000

Orcutt, CA

Little Bees Preschool is preparing to open a newly licensed childcare center in spring 2026, transforming a long-vacant building into a safe, welcoming space for children. The Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant was built on an initial investment in technical assistance for the director, helping lay the groundwork and refine a strategic plan for this purpose-driven project. The grant funded critical safety and infrastructure upgrades, including a fire alarm system, electrical improvements, security cameras, and classroom furniture and materials, creating 49 childcare spots: 10 infant, 15 toddler, and 24 preschool (ages 3–5) spaces. This expansion provides families with much-needed early care in a region with high unmet demand.

Hope 4 Kids – \$42,000

Goleta, CA

The Brighter Futures Childcare Facilities Grant transformed Hope 4 Kids' early childhood programs in Santa Barbara County. The grant added 25 new infant and toddler slots, doubling their previous capacity, directly addressing the childcare shortage in Goleta. A 1,500-square-foot facility expansion created three safe, flexible classrooms, while five new Early Childhood Professionals received training to raise care standards and support key developmental milestones. With a sustainability plan and pursuit of NAEYC accreditation, these improvements will provide lasting benefits for families and the community.

Facility Grants Detail by Subgrantee

Coastal Family Preschool – \$15,000

Carpinteria, CA

The Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant enabled Coastal Family Preschool to expand its infant/toddler program by adding 10 new infant spots, bringing total capacity to 25 children alongside its preschoolers, serving families across Santa Barbara County. The grant supported critical facility updates, safe outdoor spaces, specialized equipment, and additional staffing. This expansion allowed enrollment of children from low-income families, foster care, and other vulnerable situations, directly supporting family stability, child development, and community well-being.

Little Angels Preschool – \$15,200

Santa Barbara, CA

Little Angels Preschool used the Brighter Futures Childcare Facility Grant to open the “Roly Poly Class,” a new toddler classroom that added 12 toddler spots, directly addressing a critical local childcare need. The grant funded classroom and outdoor materials, play equipment, and staff training, enhancing the learning environment and providing families with safe, high-quality early care while strengthening the school’s overall program capacity.

Community Voices

Brighter Futures Childcare Scholarship

“Even just \$500 extra dollars a month has lowered my family’s stress about making it each month.”

“We still live paycheck to paycheck, but this scholarship gave us more wiggle room.”

“Without this grant, we would have been incurring more debt just to afford childcare.”

“It’s been integral to me being able to work full time in the office, as my job requires.”

“I’ve been able to go back to work full time and finish my last semester of school.”

“Without this scholarship, I would have had to reduce my child’s days in daycare in order to keep working.”

“My child is meeting milestones early, and I have no doubt that is due to being in daycare five days per week.”

“With consistent childcare, my older son is building stronger relationships with his teachers and peers.”



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