

Montana Tribal Early Childhood Report

# Building Partnerships: Leading Policies and Practices Through Our Voices



ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA  
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## THANK YOU TO THE PARTICIPATING PROGRAMS:



### About the Author

Carrie Spotted Bear, Early Childhood Tribal Policy Coordinator at Zero to Five Montana, is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation and was born and raised in Browning, Montana. Carrie is a first-generation college graduate and attended Blackfeet Community College, Montana State University and Montana State University Northern. Carrie's passion lies with young children and working with tribes and government agencies to promote the needs of early childhood education. She has more than 20 years of experience working in the early childhood field.

### About Zero to Five Montana

Zero to Five Montana works to stabilize, innovate, and build the early childhood system so all Montana families and communities can thrive. As part of our work to see the best outcomes for children, we promote efforts that work for families while fostering and investing in community engagement projects and serving as an early childhood resource for policymakers, employers, and families. If you have any questions as follow-up to this report, please email [info@zerotofive.org](mailto:info@zerotofive.org).

## INTRODUCTION

Native American children in Montana hold the key to the future across our tribal nations. Young children born and raised within their tribal communities learn the culture and standards of their tribe. We must ensure young children are receiving the best start in life by providing quality services and equal opportunities both on and off the reservations.

This report will be used to design a framework to mitigate challenges that impact reservation communities in early childhood services. This framework will assist tribes in aligning values and priorities while sharing knowledge amongst each other. Currently, there are gaps in services where we can identify opportunities that reflect the hope and aspirations of the tribes across Montana.

## BACKGROUND

Recognizing the need for coordinated support efforts to be placed within tribal communities to address early childhood issues, Zero to Five Montana is striving to ensure Montana's early childhood system uplifts the perspectives and experiences of parents and early childhood leaders across our tribal nations.

In 2020, Zero to Five Montana was awarded the Building Strong Foundations for Families Grant through ZERO TO THREE. Additionally, Salish Kootenai College was awarded the Pathway Project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Early Educators Investment Collaborative. Through the work of these grants, policy goals focused on the early care and education workforce were identified, and strategies were developed to elevate the work in and across Montana's tribal communities.

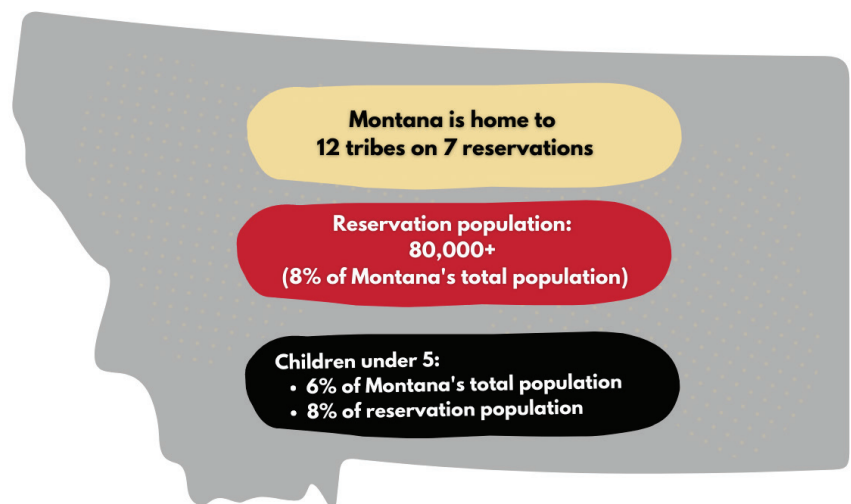
Funding from these grants was used to create a new position in – the Early Childhood Tribal Policy Coordinator at Zero to Five Montana. In addition to elevating the tribal program voices, the position was developed to increase coordination with a variety of state agencies focused on early care and education, tribal language revitalization, and gaps in services for tribal nations. Since the fall of 2021, the Montana Early Childhood Tribal Policy Coordinator has been working to advance a set of ambitious goals.

This report is a reflection on qualitative and quantitative data collected through site visits and review of existing data from Tribal Head Start, Early Head Start and tribal child care programs. The reservation site visits allowed us to learn about early childhood system challenges and opportunities among tribes, with the goal of identifying potential policy changes and action moving forward.

Montana is home to 12 tribes located on seven different land-based reservations. The combined population of the reservations in Montana is 80,067, or approximately 8 percent of the total Montana population. Children under the age of five-years-old make up 6 percent of Montana's total population. Children under the age of five account for 8 percent of the population on reservations in Montana<sup>1</sup>.

Pre-Covid data from American Indian/

Alaskan Natives Head Start Programs in Montana shows 1,529 children were enrolled in Head Start<sup>2</sup>. Post-Covid data shows a decrease in the number of children enrolled, down by 435<sup>3</sup>. The decrease in enrollment for Head Start children mirrors other early care and education figures as well as workforce patterns on Montana reservations pre- and post-pandemic. Employment rates on five out of seven reservations in Montana have slowly returned to or above pre-Covid levels<sup>4</sup>.



## **OBJECTIVES:** **Tribal Early Childhood Policy Work**

Zero to Five Montana, in collaboration with Salish Kootenai College, aims to increase engagement and input from each of Montana's unique tribes in Zero to Five Montana's state-level policy work. By developing a framework to convene an early childhood coalition dedicated to tribal needs, and increasing and improving coordination and collaboration among tribal community partners and state partners.

Zero to Five Montana will help facilitate each tribe's participation in the early childhood system advocacy and policy work in Montana – uplifting tribal communities and creating a Montana where all children can thrive.

## **SNAPSHOT:** **The Early Childhood Landscape on Montana Reservations**

To better understand the systemic barriers to tribal early childhood systems and the impact it has on children, families, the child care workforce, and the tribes as a whole, Zero to Five Montana launched a series of tribal site visits to meet with early education program representatives from the Blackfeet, Crow, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, Northern Cheyenne and Rocky Boy's reservations. The Little Shell Chippewa tribe does not currently address child care issues.

Early childhood programs on Montana reservations include Head Start, Early Head Start, tribal child care programs, Tribal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) programs, home visiting programs, immersion schools,

and private child care programs. Each reservation is unique in the work they do with young children, and each has different resources available. For instance, one reservation reports minimal mental health services available while a reservation on the other side of the state reports several resources are available on and off the reservation. A western Montana tribe, like the Confederated Salish and Kootenai, has better access to larger non-tribal community amenities compared to a tribe like the Northern Cheyenne that is located in a very rural area in southern Montana miles from the nearest city.

American Indian/Alaskan Native Head Start and Early Head Start Centers in Montana are not state-licensed but adhere to federal guidelines, standards and tribal council oversight. The programs are not required to be state licensed but that prevents staff from being eligible for incentives and support from the Montana Early Childhood Project. The Montana Early Childhood Project is a statewide program designed to improve the quality of programs and services for young children and their families. It is a registry of early childhood providers that tracks professional development, helps them find and register for quality training, and provides incentives and scholarship opportunities for continued higher education for early childhood providers.

The tribal CCDF programs are also under the tribal business council. Tribal business councils are the elected governing body that oversee and regulate tribal affairs within the exterior boundaries of a reservation. If the tribe has a CCDF-477 program they may they fall under an additional layer of leadership. These CCDF-477 programs are part of the tribal workforce programs administered by the tribes. Tribal CCDF programs fund tribal child care centers







and deliver home provider care on the reservations for children enrolled in that reservation's federally recognized tribe.

Private care centers on reservations may or may not be state licensed and are minimal or non-existent. Head Start and tribal CCDF child care programs

are the main sources of care for young children on reservations. If a family is over-income for Head Start or CCDF, this leaves the family either traveling a distance to enroll their child in a child care or leaning on friends and family, which can be unpredictable.

In addition to child care programs, the early childhood landscape of Montana reservations is influenced by the availability of healthcare services. Many of the reservations have limited access to dental, vision, hearing, developmental disability, and mental health screening and services for young children.

Families and children living on reservations are often referred to providers in nearby cities, where a broader array of services are offered. This often results in burdensome travel time, expenses, and waiting lists. Families also have to depend on providers that may be unaware of the unique needs of those living on a reservation.

Montana is a large state and often people refer to distance by the number of hours it takes to reach a destination. Families in some reservation communities may need to travel 30 to 200 miles to reach a larger city for services, particularly for speciality health and disability services.

During the site visits, all program representatives discussed the impact that COVID-19 had on their communities. Many elders were lost, resulting in significant grief and a loss of cultural knowledge, language, and leadership. Families, both nuclear and extended, play a critical role in tribal communities.

Elders working in early care settings often fill the roles of grandparents for young tribal children. The loss of these individuals has resulted in programs needing

to fill vacant elder positions and providing emotional support to staff and children as they navigate the loss of an important figure in their lives. The death toll in tribal communities due to COVID-19 has been very overwhelming for tribal communities.

All reservations in Montana adopted stronger policies and procedures above and beyond state guidelines in order to limit the impacts of COVID-19. Tribal programs and businesses on tribal lands remained closed to the public for longer periods of time and enforced mask mandates longer than state rules. All tribal child care programs are now open full time and to the public, but the COVID-19 status is still monitored very closely.

## **OUTREACH: Findings**

During the tribal site visits in the fall of 2021, the tribal program representatives helped identify current policies in each program, successes and challenges, collaboration and associated issues, and discussed creating a statewide tribal advisory coalition.

The common challenges in most reservation communities include but are not limited to:

***Fingerprinting and background checks take a long time (both at the state and tribal level) making hiring staff challenging.***

For an individual to work with young children ages 0-5, they must complete a federal and state background check. Five out of seven of the tribes identified background checks and fingerprinting as a challenge in hiring and retaining staff.

Programs on tribal lands use tribal personnel to perform background checks and often have only one person assigned in addition to other job duties. This can create delays in processing, especially if several people are being fingerprinted at one time, if the person is on leave, or the tribal program is closed per tribal business council request. On one reservation, the staff person designated to do background checks for the tribe was not authorized to do fingerprinting for the tribal child care center. The extra time it takes for tribes to process background checks becomes frustrating for individuals seeking employment and for the programs filling critical vacancies. Many programs report they have lost potential employees because they found another job while they were waiting for their background check to be processed.

### ***Recruiting and retaining staff is difficult due to low wages and stress/trauma rates.***

In most early care positions the starting wages are the lowest on the pay scale. Post COVID-19, some fast food chains and stores now offer a higher wage than an early care program. The median hourly wage of early care providers in Montana is \$11.19 per hour<sup>5</sup>, while a fast food worker can earn \$14 to \$22 per hour<sup>6</sup>. During the 2021-2022 school year, Montana's tribal Head Start programs lost 64 employees and could only fill 33 of those vacancies during the program year. Of the 64 employees that left, 12 left for higher compensation, five left for state preschool or other early childhood programs<sup>7</sup>. There is a need to identify strategies to not only retain staff, but also to recruit individuals for further education and training in early childhood.



Staff retention is not just a tribal barrier, it is a concern across Montana and the United States. Prior to COVID-19, families across the country reported difficulty finding care for young children<sup>8</sup>. When staff can not find child care for their own children, it makes it difficult to remain in the workforce. Lack of child care creates added stress to parents. In Montana, 40% of businesses say they are unable to find and retain qualified workforce due to lack of child care<sup>9</sup>. Although there is no data to track the need of child care on Montana reservations, the level of poverty, lack of child care options, and issues related to rural areas of reservations all indicate need.

The stress and trauma rates have been reported to be a factor in retaining staff as well. During the site visits, much discussion was led by the program directors about the staffing challenges post-pandemic. All Montana reservation early care program providers have experienced loss due to COVID-19 and staff members are struggling to deal with their own post-pandemic health issues. Many programs reported losing elders in their

programs during the pandemic and the loss has been personally and culturally traumatic. Due to staff shortages and increasing program demands, staff are experiencing increased stress in the classrooms. Stressors include the lack of workforce and added workload expectations, a driving demand to return to full enrollment status in programs, stronger guidelines to prevent spread of COVID-19 strains, and finding their own family care in the community. Providers are struggling to continue offering services due to the challenges in meeting their own basic needs which includes finding child care for their own children.

### ***The state licensing process and obtaining liability insurance is burdensome.***

Tribal providers would like to become state licensed in order to qualify for certain funding opportunities and incentives, and to have staff participate in the Early Childhood Project. One of the barriers is obtaining liability insurance. The process of obtaining liability insurance can be lengthy and burdensome, particularly for home providers in small communities. Providers are frequently caught in a difficult scenario in which insurance companies require licensure prior to issuing insurance, while state licensing requires insurance prior to issuing a license. Due to current economic conditions, insurance rates are increasing making it especially challenging for centers to remain open. Additionally, Insurance companies have been dropping child care centers due to liability claim concerns.

This challenge is not just isolated to the tribal child care programs in Montana. According to one of Montana's Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies that covers a large portion of northern Montana, several providers in the region have expressed difficulty in obtaining or maintaining liability insurance for their child care businesses.

Licensed child care programs in Blackfeet and Confederated Salish and Kootenai reservations have expressed difficulty with the state renewal licensing process. These licensed centers close for the summer months and are not in session during that time. Licensing requires renewal paperwork to be submitted 30-60 days prior to expiration. (The process also allows you to submit a partial application and send in remaining requirements within 30 days.) But if a staff member is not able to obtain first aid and CPR certification within those 30 days, then the entire application process has to be started over.

### ***Resource gaps exist for early childhood programs.***

The need for increased mental health resources and disability awareness for parents were reported among tribal early childhood programs. Two Tribal Head Start programs reported mental health providers at Indian Health Services are in high demand and only one behavioral health provider is on staff. Referrals are made to surrounding areas, but that often requires families travel more than 30 miles one way plus incur transportation costs. One way this has been addressed is by providing staff with professional development opportunities related to young children's mental health. This helps support children and families until more professional services are available. In addition, Tribal Head Start programs and some Immersion schools are reaching out to cultural ambassadors in their communities to start practicing cultural practices to heal.

Many of the tribal CCDF programs expressed not having connection with Part C services and did not know how to access those services for young children. Both tribal Head Start programs and CCDF programs report the need for disability awareness for parents and training opportunities for staff. There is a need for early interventions for children under the age of five and education made available to encourage parents to watch for signs of developmental delays.

### ***Tribal language speakers for early childhood programs are needed.***

The loss and lack of tribal language teachers for early childhood programs has created a need across all reservations. During the reservation visits, one tribe discussed the number of elders they lost who spoke the language. They said they do have younger speakers but they need to prepare them and transfer rights to them to be the language leaders of the tribe. That process has started within that one tribe specifically. A visit in Fort Belknap resulted in an introduction and discussion among staff from the local immersion school and the Head Start Program to collaborate on language teachers for the classrooms.

### ***Collaboration and coordination can be a challenge across tribal early childhood programs.***

Program directors and staff from each site visit all expressed an interest in learning more about other reservations and sharing ideas. Tribal Head Start and CCDF programs have either quarterly or annual meetings with other programs, but much of that time is used to address specific federal program guidelines, policy changes, and reporting issues. They never really have a chance to meet to share professional strategies and tribal policy concerns specific to Montana reservations.

The Northern Cheyenne tribe recognizes their remote rural reservation and small tribal communities within the tribal lands comes with additional, unique challenges. Unstable technology services have improved over the years, but they still experience limitations in some areas of the reservation. This creates problems in communicating with parents, accessing online professional development opportunities for parents and staff, and in some cases completing fingerprinting for staffing needs.



## **LOOKING FORWARD: Convening**

The next step is to use this report as a framework for the start of a tribal coalition team. The information and data will be used to connect the tribal nations with the state early childhood agencies to develop strategies and resources that address quality care and education for children and families. In doing so, it is important to recognize and value the sovereignty of each reservation and uniqueness of each individual tribe as part of the state of Montana. Federally-recognized tribes are sovereign land bases located within the state and the uniqueness of this concept requires understanding and compromise in order to effectively work together to

find a common ground. The common ground in the early childhood system is the idea that young children of Montana are the future.

It has been identified through the tribal visits that there is minimal if any communication between tribes as a whole. There is also minimal communication between tribes and state early childhood organizations. The creation of an Early Childhood Tribal Coalition Team, facilitated by the Zero to Five Tribal Policy Coordinator, is the next step in trying to fill the gap that separates the tribal and state organizations. The coalition will work to improve communication and collaboration among all involved agencies.

***Zero to Five Tribal Policy Coordinator will:***

- Share the findings of the report out to each tribal program that participated in the visits. We ask each tribal program to share with their tribal council and partners.
- Share the report to state early childhood organizations and partners
- Reach out to tribes and request 2-3 representatives to join the coalition team
- Ask state organizations to join coalition team
- Set up an in-person joint meeting to introduce everyone and share goals of the team by July 2023

**The Early Childhood Tribal Coalition Team will address three main goals:**

1. Improve communication and collaboration involving early childhood services
  - Between tribes
  - Between tribes and state organizations
2. Share resources between the state and tribes
  - Information- sharing to improve working relationships
  - Share tribal knowledge between tribes and with state agencies to promote cultural understanding and traditions of each tribe
3. Identify policies that support the future of young children in Montana
  - Co-create a strategic plan for all children and families
  - Identify how state and tribal plans can realistically support both entities

## **CONCLUSION**

The Zero to Five Tribal Policy Coordinator will work to advance strategies identified by the convening of a tribally-led statewide coalition. The first meeting will be held in July 2023.

Despite the challenges that exist, our outreach revealed there are many positive opportunities for young native children on Montana's reservations. Each reservation has a variety of services available and many early childhood teachers and child care providers live in the local communities and understand the culture. These early educators have a deep desire to provide the best opportunities for children and families in their respective communities. They are aware of the struggles, such as the effects of poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and that extended families are oftentimes raising young children. Teachers and providers can be the most stable environment for those young children throughout the day.

A coalition of tribes working together with state organizations to support early childhood efforts will help focus attention on the unique needs of the state's tribal children and families. Strengthening the relationships between tribal early childhood services will help identify and support tribal goals in the field, paving the way to a bright future for all native children in Montana.



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>United States Census Bureau. (2021). Montana Demographic and Housing Estimates, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=population+in+Montana+dp05&tid=ACSDP1Y2021.DP05>

<sup>2</sup>Office of Head Start, 2019 PIR

<sup>3</sup>Office of Head Start, 2019 PIR

<sup>4</sup><https://dli.mt.gov/data-dashboards/labor-force-participation>

<sup>5</sup>Median wage for child care workers | KIDS COUNT Data Center

<sup>6</sup><https://www.indeed.com/jobs?q=fast+food&l=Montana&vjk=39604035e26ea1d7>

<sup>7</sup>Office of Head Start - Program Information Report (PIR), Summary Report - 2022 - State Level- MT

<sup>8</sup><https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/03/19103744/ECPP-ChildCare-Crisis-report-2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Watson, Amy. "Impacts of Child Care on the Montana Workforce: Results from a Survey of Montana Businesses." November 2020. Montana Department of Labor and Industry. 2. "Lost Possibilities: The Impacts of Inadequate Child Care on Montana's Families, Employers and Economy." September 2020. Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Montana — Missoula