



ZEROTOFIVE  
MONTANA

# Advancing Early Childhood

2025 MONTANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION OVERVIEW



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## OVERVIEW

At Zero to Five Montana, we believe every child and family deserves to thrive, and this starts with sustainable early childhood policies. As a nonpartisan statewide early childhood organization, we work alongside communities, tribes, policymakers, employers, parents, and other advocates to create meaningful change for our young ones. From expanding access to quality early care and education to strengthening families to supporting child care businesses, our mission is clear: for our children, for our future.



*The Zero to Five Montana Policy Team*

During the 2025 Montana Legislative Session, our team worked tirelessly to ensure Montana families and children remained front and center. With 90 Republican and 60 Democrat legislators at the capitol for the 69th Legislative Session, many recognized the importance of investing in our children.

This session we saw an unprecedented number of bills with nearly 4,500 bill drafts requested and 1,759 bills introduced, the most recorded of any session. Of these numbers, early childhood was a hot topic with 260 bill drafts requested and 160 of these bills officially introduced (although not all had hearings). By the end of session, 49 early childhood bills passed through the House and Senate Chambers, and 45 made it across the finish line.

Leading up to and throughout the 85 days, Zero to Five Montana served as a trusted, nonpartisan resource for legislators. We offered expertise, data, and insight into the challenges Montana families face – from the rising cost of living, to access to affordable, quality early care and education programs.

We are proud to share this report. We hope it tells the story of our successes, our losses, and the road ahead. Together, we will continue advocating for our children and for our future.

## LEADING UP TO SESSION: LISTENING FIRST, BUILDING TOGETHER

Before we stepped foot in the capitol building for the 2025 Legislative Session, we spent months asking questions, listening, and learning from Montana’s communities. Through intentional outreach, trusted partnerships, and collaborative planning, we positioned this local expertise at the center of our policy conversations.

### Legislative Interim

During the 2023-24 interim (the period between legislative sessions) Zero to Five Montana worked steadily behind the scenes with lawmakers, bringing them clear data and experiences from families and early childhood professionals.

#### Early Literacy Advisory Council

Zero to Five Montana co-facilitated the Early Literacy Advisory Council that was established to provide recommendations to the Montana Board of Public Education for early literacy targeted intervention programming via the passage of House Bill 352 during the 2023 legislative session. The council’s scope of work included the following:

- Identify 3rd grade reading proficiency level.
- Recommend an evaluation methodology to determine whether a child is at, above, or below a developmental trajectory leading to reading proficiency at the completion of third grade.
- Identify a framework for the jumpstart program.
- Recommend a home-based early literacy program.
- Review Title 10, Chapter 63 – Early Childhood Education Standards



#### Legislative Interim Committees

In addition to the Early Literacy Advisory Council, Zero to Five Montana actively participated in discussions and hearings across multiple legislative interim committees including the Economic Affairs Interim Committee, the Children, Families, Health and Human Services Interim Committee (CFHHS), and the Education Interim Committee.

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## Legislative Interim (continued)

Between 2023-2024, the Economic Affairs Interim Committee studied child care and its impact on Montana’s workforce. During this time, Zero to Five Montana provided presentations, public comment, and data to the committee on a variety of child care topics including child care availability and accessibility, policy strategies to strengthen child care in Montana, and data on child care business liability insurance. Additionally, Zero to Five Montana engaged with the CFHHS Committee as they studied the proposed Child Care Licensing Rules package. Our team provided public comment with suggestions to improve the package and encouraged the committee to withdraw its official objections. Zero to Five Montana also participated in the Education Interim Committee’s study of early literacy, encouraging the committee to incorporate early numeracy into the early literacy intervention program.

Zero to Five Montana engaged with interim committees on 11 occasions. Through this consistent engagement, we not only built relationships and trust with legislators, but also demonstrated we are a nonpartisan resource available to provide early childhood data, connections, and perspectives leading up to and during session.



*Attendees and Sen. Ellie Boldman at Have a Heart for Kids 2025*

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## Statewide Polling

In the summer of 2024, we partnered with Montana State University to conduct our bi-annual statewide poll. The purpose of the poll was to better understand Montanans views and preferences related to early childhood issues, building on insights gathered from our initial 2022 poll.

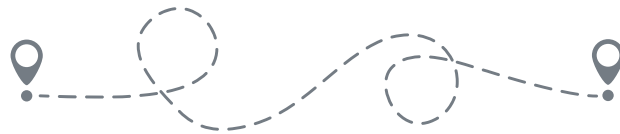
The 2024 poll contained 24 questions centered around early childhood topics such as the affordability and availability of high-quality child care, family supports, and the state government’s role in early childhood funding.

We yielded 460 responses from registered voters. The findings helped to inform our 2025 legislative work including one-pagers, testimonies, and conversations with legislators.

Highlights from the poll include:

- 93% of Montanans agree that child care costs are too high for many families.
- 79% of Montanans agree that the Montana state government should play a role in reducing the cost of child care for parents.
- 83% of Montanans agree that a lack of access to child care for working parents harms the economy.
- 75% of Montanans support state tax credits in Montana for employers who provide on-site child care or child care stipends to their workers.

For additional polling insights, see our one-pager summary [here](#).



## Community Conversations

Our team hit the road during the summer of 2024 to launch our first “Community Conversations Roadshow” visiting nine Montana communities: Billings, Cut Bank, Great Falls, Helena, Livingston, Lodge Grass, Miles City, Pablo, and Red Lodge. Over the course of four months, we met with communities to hear directly about their insights and experiences with the early childhood system. We were pleased to welcome 136 participants during the roadshow.

The community conversations highlighted several pressing challenges including limited availability and accessibility of high-quality early learning opportunities, significant barriers for families in accessing the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship, ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining early childhood professionals, and concerns around the affordability and availability of healthcare. Additionally, families continue to face struggles in meeting basic needs such as food, housing, and child care.

Zero to Five Montana consolidated the insights, perspectives, and expertise from communities [into a report](#) and used the findings to guide our [2025 policy agenda](#).

## Community Conversations (continued)

Based on the perspectives shared with us, we recommended the 2025 Montana State Legislature consider developing policies to:

### 1. Establish an Early Care and Education Trust Fund

- Create a sustainable funding mechanism to strengthen Montana’s early childhood infrastructure. The fund could be used to create pathways for public-private partnerships, expand access to high-quality early learning programs, support child care entrepreneurs, invest in workforce development, and enhance family supports and community partnerships.

### 2. Enact a Comprehensive Tax Credit Package

- Enact a comprehensive tax credit package that includes a child tax credit for working families to help offset the costs of raising children; credits for hard-working and in-demand child care workers; and credits for employers who recognize child care is critical for their workforce and offer child care benefits to their workers.

### 3. Increase the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Income Threshold

- Increase the income eligibility threshold for families to the maximum allowable level (or about 85% of the state median income) to ensure more parents can afford and access the child care services their family needs.

### 4. Expand Support for the Early Childhood Workforce

- Expand opportunities to recruit, retain, and support the early care and education workforce through business and professional development support. This could include apprenticeship programs, early childhood career and technical education, tuition assistance, or wage supplements.

### 5. Enhance Early Learning Opportunities

- Ensure more children have access to quality care and education across school districts and community-based organizations.

We entered the 2025 Legislative Session with the above policy priorities and community perspectives to guide our work and help determine what bills we would engage on.



*Community Conversations in Livingston, Summer 2024*

## Building Support for the 2025 Policy Agenda

By September 2024, we brought our community-informed agenda back to communities and partners by hosting a virtual Early Childhood Policy Agenda Discussion and Input Meeting. During this meeting, we presented the findings from the community conversations and shared our draft policy agenda. The meeting provided participants an opportunity to voice their thoughts, questions, and suggestions to help refine the policy agenda. Twenty participants joined the Zoom call and provided further input to refine Zero to Five Montana’s policy agenda.

To further build relationships, visibility, and trust with elected officials, we sent 150 personalized mailers to all winning candidates post-election: 50 senators and 100 representatives. Each packet included a congratulatory letter, our finalized policy agenda, a summary of our statewide poll findings, and an invitation to our “Have a Heart for Kids” advocacy event. These mailers also introduced legislators to Kali Wicks of Treasure State Strategies, our government relations partner for the session. As the 2025 Legislative Session approached, we wanted legislators to know we are a nonpartisan early childhood resource available to them and able to provide one-pagers, data, and issue briefs on a wide array of policy areas.



*Attendees at Have a Heart for Kids 2025*

To demonstrate broad community support, we invited Montanans to sign on in support of the 2025 policy agenda. The 147 signers included participants of the Community Conversation Roadshow, statewide organizations, parents, child care providers, business owners, local early childhood coalitions, and other community members. All names and organizations were included in the final agenda and delivered to the 150 legislators. Our hope was to illustrate to legislators that our policy agenda had buy-in from their constituents and was truly the voice of community members.

### **Why This Matters:**

By the time the 2025 Legislative Session was in full swing, we were more than prepared. Our organization was anchored in the hopes and challenges of Montana families, armed with data, and supported by a broad, diverse network of Montanans.

# LEGISLATIVE SESSION: ELEVATING VOICES, DRIVING CHANGE

Through the 2025 Montana Legislative Session, Zero to Five Montana stayed grounded in what families, early childhood professionals, and community leaders shared with us. Guided by our five policy priorities and organizational Theory of Change, we worked to transform these community needs into legislative outcomes.

We were often in the halls of the capitol. Our team delivered testimony on 71 bills: 64 in support (proponent) and 7 in opposition. Our advocacy efforts never wavered in our commitment to solutions that work toward a Montana dedicated to every child. The following few pages take a look at the key policy areas and bills we supported.

## Proponent Bills-Policy Priorities

### Early Care & Education Trust Fund

Creating a long-term, sustainable funding source for Montana's early childhood system was a top priority. This concept originally lived in Sen. Laura Smith's Senate Bill (SB) 565. While SB 565 ultimately died in the House Human Services Committee, it made significant progress and drew meaningful attention including a press conference and media coverage. The core idea from SB 565 lives on in House Bill (HB) 924, which was ultimately passed by the state legislature.

◆ **HB 924: Generally revise state finance laws** (Rep. Llew Jones): This bill revises state finance laws including the establishment of the Montana Early Childhood Account with a \$10 million appropriation that will gain interest over time. The fund could be used to support various early childhood initiatives, guided by the Montana Early Childhood Strategic Plan and managed by a public/private board. The fund may also receive private donations to expand its impact. Examples of what the fund could support include:

- Early childhood workforce development
- Child care quality improvements
- Child care affordability initiatives
- Early childhood innovation programs
- Emergency assistance for families with young children

*Engagement: 1 testimony; Sign-on letter for the Governor with 220 sign-ons*

*Status: Signed by Gov. Gianforte*

### Zero to Five Montana's Legislative Session Engagement at a Glance

- **260** bills tracked
- **121** Have a Heart for Kids registrants
- **71** testimonies, 64 proponent and 7 opponent testimonies
- **9** EveryAction campaigns, 290 participants
- **85** social media posts
- **27** Legislative Update weekly calls & other update calls
- **17** Legislative Update emails
- **15** technical assistance/1:1 supports
- **12** special edition action alert emails
- **10** media interviews
- **8** office hours/bill huddles offered
- **8** article quotes
- **4** panel discussions

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## Proponent Bills-Policy Priorities (continued)

- ◆ **SB 565: Creating the Montana endowment for early childhood and related structure** (Sen. Laura Smith): SB 565 would have strengthened early childhood programs and services, such as child care in Montana by creating a sustainable \$150 million endowment fund. This fund would have earned interest to support various initiatives, guided by the Montana Early Childhood Strategic Plan.  
*Engagement: 3 testimonies; EveryAction campaign; Advocacy Toolkit; press conference*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Human Services Committee*

### Tax Credit Package

Zero to Five Montana championed a comprehensive tax credit package focused on families, child care workers, and employers who provide child care support. SB 321, carried by Sen. Josh Kassmier, was the cornerstone child tax credit bill during the 2025 session. It passed through three committee votes and three floor votes. While SB 321 died in the House Appropriations Committee, it got blasted a final time on the House Floor emphasizing strong support among legislators to pass a child tax credit. Several other child tax credit bills were introduced during session as well, demonstrating a continued interest in supporting Montana families. While none of these bills passed, they contributed to the growing dialogue around the need for family economic supports.

- ◆ **SB 321: Provide for tax credits for children and child care** (Sen. Josh Kassmier): This bill would have established a tax credit package focused on families, child care workers, and employers who provide child care supports.  
*Engagement: 4 testimonies; EveryAction campaign; Advocacy Toolkit*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Appropriations Committee, failed blast motion for third House Floor vote*
- ◆ **HB 220: Provide for a child tax credit** (Rep. Mary Caferro): This bill would have provided a \$1,200 refundable child tax credit for children 5 and under (capped at \$56,000 income).  
*Engagement: 3 testimonies*  
*Status: Died in the Senate Finance Committee*
- ◆ **HB 537: Provide for a birth day tax credit for the birth of a child** (Rep. Lukas Schubert): This bill would have provided a \$3,000 refundable tax credit for the year in which a child is born (capped at \$60,000 single household/\$120,000 married income).  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Appropriations Committee, failed blast motion for second House Floor vote*
- ◆ **HB 942: Establish a child income tax credit** (Rep. Pete Elverum): This bill would have provided a \$1,000 child tax credit for children 5 and under (capped at \$35,000 single household/\$65,000 married income).  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Appropriations Committee*

## Proponent Bills - Policy Priorities (continued)

### Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Income Threshold

Child care affordability and accessibility is a top priority for Zero to Five Montana. While increasing the Best Beginnings Child Care subsidy level did not pass, Zero to Five Montana will continue advocating for similar policies in the future.

- ◆ **HB 457: Revise best beginnings eligibility** (Rep. Jonathan Karlen): This bill would have increased the income eligibility guidelines for the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship (i.e., program that helps families pay for child care) from 185% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 85% State Median Income (SMI) making the program available to more families.

*Engagement: 1 testimony, EveryAction campaign*

*Status: Failed second House Floor vote*

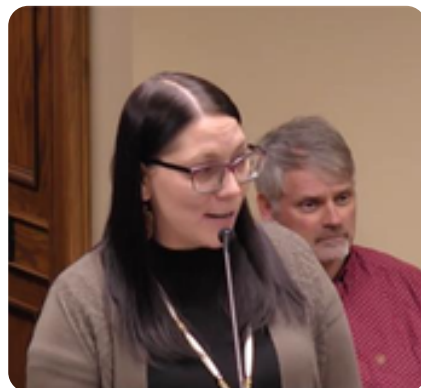
### Early Care and Education Workforce Supports

Zero to Five Montana recognizes early care and education providers are the workforce behind the workforce and advocated for various policies that would uplift child care providers. For example, Rep. Katie Sullivan's HB 945 would have established the Early Childhood Education and Child Care Infrastructure Grant Program to help create new or expand existing child care programs. While HB 945 did not pass, it represents a strong step forward in recognizing the need for robust child care infrastructure. Rep. Ed Buttrey's HB 381, provide educational credit for students volunteering in child care settings, had more success and passed both chambers.

- ◆ **HB 945: Create the early childhood education and child care infrastructure grant program** (Rep. Katie Sullivan): This bill would have established the Early Childhood Education and Child Care Infrastructure Grant Program that would help create new or expand existing child care programs. It would have provided \$10 million in grants to licensed child care programs and school districts to construct, expand, remodel, and repair facilities.

*Engagement: 1 testimony*

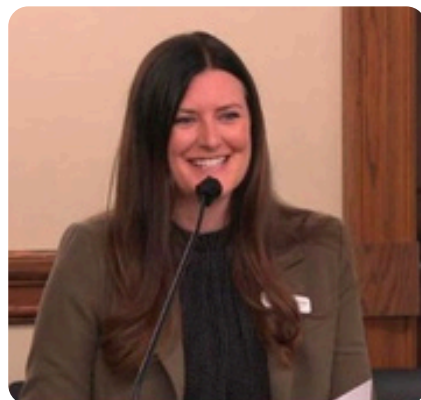
*Status: Died in the House Business & Labor Committee*



- ◆ **HB 381: Provide for educational credit for students volunteering in long term care, nursing home, home care, and child care settings** (Rep. Ed Buttrey): This bill allows 11th and 12th graders to earn up to two education credits when they volunteer in certain care settings including a child care facility.

*Engagement: 2 testimonies*

*Status: Signed by Governor*



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## Proponent Bills - Policy Priorities (continued)

### Early Learning

During the 2023 Legislative Session, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 352: Provide targeted interventions to support 3rd grade reading proficiency recognizing the critical role of early literacy in the development of young children. This legislation paves the way for public school districts to offer early literacy intervention programs to 4-year-olds who are identified as at risk for not reading proficiently by the end of third grade. In an effort to expand and improve early learning opportunities, Zero to Five Montana advocated for various early education bills.

- ◆ **HB 338: Revise laws regarding targeted early numeracy intervention** (Rep. Melissa Romano): This bill adds numeracy to early literacy targeted intervention programs (passed in 2023 via House Bill 352). It also adds flexibility to the timing of screenings for early intervention programs, allowing children to be screened on or before September 10, rather than only in April, May, and June.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
  
- ◆ **HB 628: Revise early literacy targeted intervention laws** (Rep. Melissa Nikolakakos): This bill would have added numeracy to the early literacy intervention program and would have allowed one “on-target” child for every five eligible children enrolled in a classroom or jumpstart program.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Vetoed by Governor*
  
- ◆ **HB 654: Increase access to early literacy targeted intervention programs** (Rep. Becky Edwards): This bill would have helped schools provide and/or expand early literacy intervention programming. It would have clarified that school districts can partner with community-based organizations to set up early literacy classroom-based programs off-site as long as the program is taught by teachers employed by the school district. It would have also established temporary boost grants to support school districts in creating or expanding classroom-based early literacy targeted intervention programs.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony; EveryAction campaign; Advocacy Toolkit*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Education Committee*
  
- ◆ **HB 168: Provide state funding for preschool children with disabilities** (Rep. Jonathan Karlen): This bill ensures 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities participating and being admitted into school district special education programs are eligible for inclusion in ANB calculations (i.e. school funding).  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*

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## Other Policies We Advocated for

In addition to our top priorities, we advocated for policies that aligned with our organizational Theory of Change including:

- ◆ **HB 245: Revise the Montana HELP Act workforce development provisions and termination date** (Rep. Ed Buttrey): This bill lifts the Medicaid sunset/termination date and continues Medicaid expansion. It also includes some minor changes to the HELP Link program (the Montana Medicaid workforce program) to provide voluntary workforce development assistance.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
- ◆ **HB 881: Revise medicaid buy-in program to include children with disabilities** (Rep. Mary Caferro): This bill would have allowed children with disabilities to qualify for the Medicaid Buy-In program. Services would have included medical, habilitative, and rehabilitative for eligible children.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Vetoed by Governor*
- ◆ **HB 456: Provide best beginnings scholarships to child care workers** (Rep. Jonathan Karlen): This bill would have automatically qualified any child care worker who works in a licensed child care center, or registered family or group child care home to receive the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship (i.e., program that helps families pay for child care). It was amended to include a qualifying household income cap that is less than two times the state median income.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Vetoed by Governor*
- ◆ **SB 181: Generally revise Indian education for all laws** (Sen. Jonathan Windy Boy): This bill strengthens the Indian Education For All Program (IEFA) by increasing tribal consultation, utilizing the specialist services of Indian language and culture specialists, and strengthening IEFA implementation accountability.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*



## Other Policies We Advocated for (continued)

- ◆ **SB 182: Generally revise MT Indian language preservation program** (Sen. Jonathan Windy Boy): This bill strengthens the state’s commitment to preserving American Indian cultural integrity by offering increased flexibility for educational partnerships providing Indian language preservation programs including with early learning providers.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
- ◆ **SB 147: Generally revise Montana Indian child welfare laws** (Sen. Jonathan Windy Boy): This bill revises Indian Child Welfare laws to be more equitable for tribes and tribal children.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
- ◆ **HB 76: Generally revise laws related to the board of behavioral health** (Rep. SJ Howell): This bill builds the family peer support program, a support program for families with children with disabilities.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
- ◆ **SB 319: Generally revise health care laws related to doulas** (Sen. Cora Neumann): This bill creates doula licensure requirements and ensures that doula services can be covered under Medicaid.  
*Engagement: 2 testimonies*  
*Status: Signed by Governor*
- ◆ **SB 325: Creating family and medical leave act** (Sen. Derek Harvey): This bill would have established the Montana Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act which provides paid family and medical leave to employees to care for themselves or a family member. Individuals may receive up to 12 weeks of family and medical leave insurance per year.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the Senate Business, Labor, and Economic Affairs Committee*



Hally Bretz testifying on Senate Bill 321

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## Opposition: Defending Quality and Safety in Child Care

While we championed many great bills, we opposed seven bills that would have undermined access to child care as well as the child safety and quality standards set by industry professionals. Alongside many others, our advocacy efforts helped defeat them.

### Child Care Licensing Rules

Three bills were introduced that would have weakened the health and safety of child care programs, risked Montana's ability to receive federal funding through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), and overturned the proposed child care licensing rules package that was set to go into effect following the closure of the legislative session. In an effort to defeat these bills, Zero to Five Montana hosted advocacy huddles and shared external [talking\\_points](#) with community members and other advocates for their use. We also spearheaded an EveryAction campaign for citizens to easily contact their elected officials regarding the proposed legislation.

- ◆ **SB 269: Generally revise laws regarding family and group day-care homes** (Sen. Dennis Lenz): This bill would have revised licensing requirements for family and group day-care homes. If passed, this bill would have taken the place of the proposed child care rules package.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony; EveryAction campaign; [External Talking Points](#)*  
*Status: Failed second Senate floor vote*
  
- ◆ **SB 285: Generally revise child care administrative rules** (Sen. Dennis Lenz): This bill would have revised child care licensing rules for child care centers. If passed, this bill would have taken the place of the proposed child care rules package.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony; EveryAction Campaign; [External Talking Points](#)*  
*Status: Failed second Senate floor vote*
  
- ◆ **SB 467: Generally revise child care laws** (Sen. Dennis Lenz): This bill would have revised Montana's child care licensing rules/regulations. It would have removed required health inspections by local authorities and increased family, friend, and neighbor ratios from 4 children to 6 children (same as proposed rules). It also would have restricted the Department of Public Health and Human Services from implementing policies more stringent than the bill text and required the department to seek the advice and assistance of the legislature when adding standards for day care.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the Senate Public Health Committee*

### Child Care Immunizations

Two bills that would have required child care providers to accept informed consent immunization exemptions were heard during the session. Recognizing this removes a provider's choice on how to run their business, could pose health and safety risks to children in child care, and could jeopardize Montana's ability to receive the Child Care and Development Fund, Zero to Five Montana advocated against these bills.

## Opposition: Defending Quality and Safety in Child Care (continued)

- ◆ **SB 474: Require acceptance of religious and personal medical exemptions to required immunizations** (Sen. Daniel Emrich): The bill would have made it unlawful for child care programs to discriminate based on vaccination status and added informed consent to immunization exemptions. This bill also added that a person who accepts religious exemptions from immunization would not be liable for civil damages and discrimination on the basis of religion includes denials of an immunization exemption.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the House Appropriations Committee, failed blast motion for second House Floor vote*

- ◆ **SB 382: Requiring acceptance of religious or conscience exemptions to immunizations** (Sen. Daniel Emrich): This bill would have required licensed and registered providers to accept religious or informed consent exemptions to immunizations. It also would have allowed children to attend school without obtaining the immunizations if the person (parent) files with the governing authority a signed statement, letter, or notarized affidavit stating that the signer received information about the required immunizations and declined to be immunized.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Tabled in the Senate Public Health Committee*

### Immigration

One bill was introduced that would have required child care providers to be mandatory reporters for illegal immigrants in their program. Should a child care provider fail to do so, this would result in a misdemeanor. Recognizing the ramifications this could have on children, families, and child care businesses, Zero to Five Montana advocated against this bill.

- ◆ **HB 927: Generally revise laws related to illegal aliens** (Rep. Lukas Schubert): This bill would have required employees who work in a registered or licensed child care program to report individuals who are not lawfully present in the United States. Purposeful failure to report an individual would result in a misdemeanor.  
*Engagement: 1 testimony*  
*Status: Failed second House Floor vote*

### Why This Matters

This session, Montana took big steps to invest in early childhood. We protected essential standards, built new funding pathways, and sparked conversations that will continue shaping policy for years to come.

## CONSTITUENT SUPPORT AND RESOURCES: SERVING AS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE

Advocacy can be overwhelming and confusing, especially for individuals new to the process. The legislative session is complicated and time-consuming, creating multiple barriers for those who want to engage.

Recognizing these barriers, Zero to Five Montana took steps to simplify the process and empower Montanans who wanted to speak up for early childhood. Our goal was to make navigating the legislative session as easy as possible. To achieve this, we offered various advocacy resources including our bill tracker, EveryAction campaigns, social media posts, weekly update calls and emails, 1:1 technical assistance, office hours, advocacy toolkits, and accessible data and information.

### Early Childhood Bill Tracker

Zero to Five Montana maintained a [live bill tracker](#) on our website monitoring all early childhood legislation introduced during the session. This tracker provided nonpartisan information to the public and was updated twice each day, empowering stakeholders to stay informed about the status and content of important legislation. Over the course of the legislative session, Zero to Five Montana tracked a total of 260 bills.

**260** bills tracked  
updated **TWICE**  
a day

*I just have to say how much I truly appreciate all of you at Zero to Five!*

*Your dedication to advocating not only for the children and families of Montana but also for providers and early childhood educators is remarkable. As a busy provider and owner of multiple businesses, I can confidently say that I wouldn't have the insight I do without your valuable updates and emails.*

*Thank you for all that you do!*

*- Kaycee Gibson Hodges  
Child Care Owner*

### EveryAction Campaigns

To make direct advocacy simple and effective, we launched nine campaigns through the advocacy platform EveryAction, focused on some of the most critical bills impacting Montana families and children. Through these campaigns, 290 constituents were able to quickly send personalized emails to their state legislators, advocating on issues ranging from opposing harmful child care regulatory bills (SB 269 and SB 285), to supporting the creation of an early childhood trust (SB 565), expanding the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship eligibility (HB 457), and establishing tax credits for families and child care (SB 321). These campaigns often coincided with action alert emails sent out across our network of partners, further amplifying engagement and reach. In total, 12 action alert emails were distributed during the session.

## Constituent Resources and Supports (continued)

### Weekly Updates

Zero to Five Montana hosted weekly legislative update calls every Thursday at noon attracting a total of 103 registrants. Each call featured a summary of the week's most significant early childhood bill activity, along with a preview of what to expect in the coming weeks. Participants also received a detailed document of all early childhood bill movements. After each call, the same information was sent to our advocacy email list including 217 recipients. The calls consistently provided space for participants to share input, comments, and ideas, fostering two-way dialogue. Various community coalitions and partners occasionally requested customized legislative updates from Zero to Five Montana staff.

*Thank you for the weekly emails! I get a lot of update emails from a lot of organizations and no one lays everything out as clearly to help me know what bills are coming up and how to advocate better than the Zero to Five Legislative update emails!*

*- Terri Amberg  
Executive Director of Butte 4-Cs*

### Technical Assistance, 1:1 Support, and Office Hours

The Zero to Five Montana team provided individualized technical assistance to 15 people throughout the legislative session. Support included answering questions about bills, help crafting live or written testimony, navigating the Montana Legislature webpage, and other advocacy needs. At times, some individuals provided testimony more than once, further highlighting their commitment to engaging in the advocacy process.

Midway through session, Zero to Five Montana began hosting weekly office hours, offering an open space for anyone to ask questions and receive real-time support on their legislative advocacy needs. Additionally, the team hosted two targeted bill huddles, for SB 321 and HB 654, designed to help participants better understand the legislation and prepare effective testimony.

### Social Media

To expand community awareness and engagement during the legislative session, Zero to Five Montana maintained a strong presence across social media, providing 73 Instagram and Facebook posts, 9 X and Bluesky posts, and 3 LinkedIn posts focused on legislative updates. This content included weekly session updates, upcoming bill hearings, information on specific bills, and ways to take action.

social posts

9 Bluesky & X  
73 Instagram & Facebook  
3 LinkedIn

## Constituent Resources and Supports (continued)

### Advocacy Toolkits

To support engagement around our top policy priorities, Zero to Five Montana created three custom advocacy toolkits for [SB 321](#), [SB 565](#), and [HB 654](#). Each one included testimony examples tailored to a variety of different perspectives such as parents, child care providers, and employers, along with social media graphics, one-pagers with specific talking points, and step-by-step guidance on how to make public testimony.

The toolkits also featured direct links to get involved in the legislative process and a tool to help individuals find their state legislators. Our goal was to make engaging in advocacy as easy as possible and empower more Montanans to make their voice heard.

### Advocacy Webpage

Zero to Five Montana's [Advocacy webpage](#) serves as a central hub of resources designed to minimize barriers to engage in the legislative process. The page features fact sheets on early childhood issues, information on the Montana state government and the legislative process, and templates to help individuals craft and share their personal stories. It also includes guidance on various forms of advocacy and a recorded Zoom training for those looking to build their advocacy skills. These resources were frequently referenced and shared during individual technical assistance.

“

*Thank you again for the opportunity, your encouragement, and all the support you've offered throughout this process [to testify on HB654].*

*It has made a big difference, and I'm deeply grateful.*

*- Maria Emmer-Aanes  
Executive Director at Early Childhood  
Coalition of Beaverhead County*

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# HAVE A HEART FOR KIDS 2025

In February 2025, we hosted our 2nd Annual "Have a Heart for Kids" advocacy event, a powerful two-day gathering designed to build awareness and elevate early childhood as a priority for our state.

Held in Helena, this event brought together families, early childhood organizations, and community and state leaders to share stories, highlight the importance of early childhood, and foster meaningful connections.



*Attendees outside the Governor's Office during Have a Heart for Kids 2025*

## **Day One: Early Childhood Summit & Legislative Reception**

The first day featured an Early Childhood Summit, a full-day event devoted to building connections, expanding knowledge, and preparing families for the following advocacy day at the state capitol. That evening, attendees and legislators gathered for a reception featuring a short film showcasing child care in Montana. The reception provided a relaxing space for dialogue with state legislators.

## **Day Two: Advocacy Day at the State Capitol**

On day two, participants gathered at the Montana State Capitol building for Have a Heart for Kids advocacy day to raise awareness on the importance of early childhood, encourage policymakers to prioritize young children, families, and early childhood professionals, and empower parent participants to share their perspectives directly with their elected officials.

**19**

families supported to attend from across the state

**16**

organizational partner tables in the capitol rotunda

**121**

registrants for one or both days

**MANY**

one-on-one conversations with legislators

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## Have a Heart for Kids Advocacy Event (continued)

Zero to Five Montana supported 19 families from across the state to attend this event, most of them battling severe winter weather to do so. Some parents also got to meet with the Governor. Sixteen organizations joined the event and set up tables in the rotunda to share resources with both legislators and parent advocates.

### Voices from the Event



*“This was such a great experience for my daughters and I, and I feel motivated and empowered to continue to be a voice for our families with young children.”*

*-Cheyenne Mikkelsen (HAHFK Parent Advocate)*

*“This was a great event in the rotunda and I had several excellent conversations, thank you!”*

*-Rep. Luke Muszkiewicz*

*“This is a great event to empower childcare workers and families to advocate for their children in a multitude of ways. It made us all realize that people do care and we have a voice.”*

*-Hannah Phelan (HAHFK Parent Advocate)*

*“Y'all as educators know how to keep everyone engaged and make learning fun. I also like that you brought in parent advocates from all over the state.”*

*- HAHFK Participant*

*“I was blown away at the opportunity and I really appreciate being a part of effecting change at such a high level.”*

*- Sarah Ewald (Child Care Director)*

*“Being there, talking to people and formulating my own narrative for what I wanted to accomplish was really valuable.”*

*- Casey Fuson (HAHFK Parent Advocate)*



### Looking Ahead

Feedback from participants shows many felt empowered, informed, and energized to continue their advocacy. We were thrilled with the turnout and conversations that took place at Have a Heart for Kids. As one attendee put it, Have a Heart for Kids “demystified” the whole capitol experience. We look forward to building on this momentum in the future.

## OUTREACH AND COALITION WORK

During the 2025 Montana Legislative Session, Zero to Five Montana facilitated and/or co-facilitated several coalitions and initiatives to support early childhood systems and strengthen advocacy efforts across the state. These included Montana Parent Voice, the Montana Early Learning Alliance (MELA), the Early Childhood Tribal Coalition, the Montana Early Childhood Coalition (MTECC), the Montana Strong Start Alliance and Empowered Parents.

- ◆ **Montana Parent Voice:** Montana Parent Voice grew into a robust community with 166 Facebook members and 289 Instagram followers, sharing resources and information about early childhood advocacy.
- ◆ **Montana Early Learning Alliance:** The Montana Early Learning Alliance (MELA) brought together 28 diverse organizations, meeting monthly to share data, coordinate advocacy, and advance quality learning options.
- ◆ **Montana Early Childhood Tribal Coalition:** Our new Early Childhood Tribal Coalition, launched in November 2024, met monthly to center tribal voices and priorities in early education, growing to 23 active members.
- ◆ **Montana Early Childhood Coalition:** The long-standing Montana Early Childhood Coalition (MTECC), co-convened with Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies and the University of Montana Center for Children, Families & Workforce Development, connected 21 local coalitions to share data, highlight local efforts, and offer regular legislative updates and opportunities to engage in early childhood advocacy.
- ◆ **Montana Strong Start Alliance:** The Montana Strong Start Alliance, launched with support from the Pritzker Children’s Initiative, began building powerful momentum around family economic security. It grew to 17 members and is gearing up for even more work ahead.
- ◆ **Empowered Parents:** The Empowered Parents Network, a partnership with Rocky Head Start and the Early Childhood Collaborative of the Greater Helena Area, provided training so parents could share their personal stories effectively with lawmakers.

### Why This Matters

The resources, tools, and spaces created during this session were critical in breaking down barriers and giving Montanans more opportunities to learn and engage. By helping families, community members, and organizations navigate the legislative process, we collectively elevated early childhood issues, sparked important conversations with lawmakers, and strengthened local leadership.

# STRENGTHENING EARLY CHILDHOOD MESSAGING IN A RED STATE

## Communications During Session

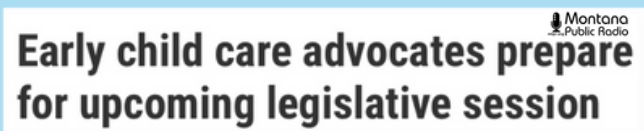
To encourage engagement and investment in early childhood issues, Zero to Five Montana developed a strong external communications strategy. We are encouraged early childhood gained so much news coverage and media attention. Below is a list of the various interviews, panels, and articles Zero to Five Montana was featured in:

### Public Panel Discussions

- 2/11/2025: Caitlin Jensen was a panelist for What the Helena childcare discussion
- 3/27/2025: Sarah Froehlke was a panelist at Hometown Helena child care discussion
- 4/5/2025: Sarah Froehlke and Caitlin Jensen presented at UM ECE Summit
- 4/12/2025: Melissa Winger spoke on Policy and Advocacy Panel for BELN Summit

### Media

- [Child care advocates hope new state trust will help address Montana's daycare crisis](#) (July 10, 2025: Montana Free Press)
- [House advances bill to study early literacy](#) (April 28, 2025: The Electric)
- [State aid for child care costs misses the mark in some tribal communities](#) (April 22, 2025: Montana Public Radio)
- [Bills targeting Montana's child care challenges maintaining steam](#) (April 15, 2025: Montana Free Press)
- [The time is now for investment in early childhood | Caitlin Jensen](#) (April 11, 2025: Helena Independent Record)
- [Bill providing basic math skills for pre-k youth sees support](#) (Feb. 3, 2025: NBC Montana)
- [Bills before Legislature aim to make child care more affordable, accessible](#) (Feb. 27, 2025: Montana Free Press)
- [Montana lawmakers eye child care challenges for the 2025 session](#) (Jan. 10, 2025: Montana Free Press)
- [Early child care advocates prepare for upcoming legislative session](#) (Dec. 30, 2024: Montana Public Radio)



## WHY OUR WORK MATTERED THIS SESSION

As the only nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused solely on early childhood in the Treasure State, Zero to Five Montana played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of the 69th Legislative Session.

Our continuous presence at the capitol enabled us to build, strengthen, and expand relationships with legislators, the governor's office, and partners. We hope our efforts and presence cultivated a stronger and more connected network of early childhood champions in Montana.

With the dedication and commitment of early childhood champions, 15 key early childhood bills passed the Montana Legislature:

- [HB 924](#): Generally revise state finance laws
- [HB 338](#): Revise laws regarding targeted early numeracy intervention
- [HB 168](#): Provide state funding for preschool children with disabilities
- [HB 381](#): Provide for educational credit for students volunteering in long term care, nursing home, home care, and child care settings
- [HB 357](#): Provide funding for middle school career and technical education
- [SB 35](#): Clarify enrollment counts for early literacy jumpstart program
- [HB 24](#): Clarify laws related to kindergarten
- [SB 181](#): Generally revise Indian education for all laws
- [SB 182](#): Generally revise MT Indian language preservation program
- [SB 147](#): Generally revise Montana Indian child welfare laws
- [SB 319](#): Generally revise health care laws related to doulas
- [HB 76](#): Generally revise laws related to the board of behavioral health
- [HB 245](#): Revise the Montana HELP Act workforce development provisions and termination date
- [HB 576](#): Revise funding for medicaid and health and support services to children and to adults who are aged, blind, and disabled
- [HB 601](#): Create online portal for community assisters related to Medicaid

We are thrilled so many early childhood bills made it across the finish line and the difference they will make to our Montana families and children. While not all of our priority bills passed, it was encouraging to see young children and families gain more attention in policy discussions. From legislators to media coverage to new bill concepts, early childhood is top of mind for many Montanans. Zero to Five Montana is pleased to have helped kickstart many of these discussions and interest in early childhood.

## LOOKING AHEAD: INTERIM SESSION AND BEYOND

The 2025 Legislative Session may have come to a close, but our work continues. Creating lasting, meaningful change takes time and continued advocacy. Thank you for advocating alongside us, not just during this Legislative Session, but throughout the year.

Looking ahead to the interim, our team will continue championing for Montana children and families by shaping the implementation of passed bills, building on the momentum from the 2025 session, and co-developing innovative policy solutions for the next session. For instance, we will be hosting our annual Summer Roadshow, traveling across the state to hear directly from families, child care providers, and other interested stakeholders about their early childhood priorities. We look forward to working with policymakers on newly established legislation as well as laying the foundation for the 2027 Legislative Session.

In addition to working with legislators, we want to hear from you! Here are a few ways to get involved with us during the interim session:

- [Join](#) our Advocacy Listserv to learn about ways to engage with legislators and other actions to take.
- [Join](#) the Montana Early Childhood Network which is a group of individuals, organizations, coalitions, and anyone who cares about a robust and supported early childhood system in Montana.
- [Join](#) Montana Parent Voice, a parent community dedicated to early childhood advocacy.
- Check out our [advocacy resources & tools](#) webpage which has tip sheets, trainings, and one-pagers to help you with your advocacy efforts.
- Keep an eye out for our 2026 Summer Roadshow.
- Reach out to us! [info@zerotofive.org](mailto:info@zerotofive.org).

Zero to Five Montana envisions a Montana that is dedicated to every child. We will continue engaging with legislators and communities in the interim to work for our children and our future to ensure Montana is a state where children and families thrive.

