

Montana Early Childhood Policy 2026 Community Conversations Roadshow Reflections



Executive Summary

Zero to Five Montana believes the strongest early childhood policy is built together with the families, providers, and communities it serves. In 2026, we hit the road for our second statewide Community Conversations Roadshow, continuing the work we began in 2024 by listening directly to Montanans about what is working, where challenges remain, and what they hope for the future of young children and families.

The team visited 11 communities, partnering with local hosts and coalitions to bring people together for honest conversation. This year, conversations were structured around three interconnected focus areas: family economic security, early care and education, and systems coordination. Each community shared unique perspectives about their experiences with the early childhood system, but several themes emerged consistently across the state:

- Families continue to face significant economic pressure from the combined costs of childcare, housing, health care, groceries, and other basic needs.
- Access to childcare remains a widespread challenge, with particular gaps for infants and toddlers and families needing flexible or nontraditional care.
- Recruiting and retaining the early childhood workforce is central to increasing access and maintaining quality.
- Families and providers often struggle to navigate fragmented programs, benefits, and services.
- Communities value local coalitions and partnerships and want stronger coordination across the early childhood system.
- Rural and tribal communities experience distinct access and infrastructure challenges that require locally responsive solutions.

Above all, this year's Roadshow reminded us that we do this work because Montana's children and families deserve a system that works for them. This report reflects what communities told us about making that happen and will help guide Zero to Five Montana's policy and advocacy work during the 2027 legislative session and beyond. Thank you to every community and participant who made time for this conversation; your insight is what makes this work possible.



Caitlin Jensen
Executive Director, Zero to Five Montana



Introduction

In 2024, Zero to Five Montana launched its first Community Conversations Roadshow, traveling to nine communities to hear directly from Montanans about early childhood. The effort shaped our 2025 policy agenda and confirmed that the strongest solutions come from the people closest to the problem. In 2026 we returned to the road to build on that foundation, reconnecting with communities like Lodge Grass and Miles City and reaching new communities for the first time.

The team held community conversations in Billings, Fort Peck Reservation, Missoula, Bozeman, Libby, Dillon, Helena, Lodge Grass, Miles City, Hamilton, and Arlee, as well as two virtual conversations open to folks across the state. Local coalitions and champions in each community did the work of pulling people together and organizing gathering spaces for the conversations. Attendees typically included early care and education professionals, parents and caregivers, home visitors, advocates, employers, health care providers, and local nonprofit and coalition representatives.

This year, the conversations were organized around three broad focus areas shaping the lives of young children and families: family and economic security, early care and education, and systems coordination. This gave participants a starting point to describe what is working and where challenges and gaps remain, while still leaving room for community-specific conversation.

This report reflects a range of perspectives shared with us across all 11 communities. These findings will guide Zero to Five Montana's policy and advocacy work as we head into the 2027 legislative session, and we hope they prove useful to the many partners working alongside us.

Purpose:

- Hear directly from communities about Montana's early childhood landscape.
- Identify strengths, challenges, and priorities across the early childhood system.
- Understand common themes as well as differences among Montana communities.
- Inform Zero to Five Montana's policy priorities and advocacy work.

ROADSHOW

AT A GLANCE March-July 2026


11 Communities


127 Participants


4460 Miles

What We Heard: Family Economic Security

WHAT'S WORKING

Communities described strong informal and formal networks, from food banks and libraries to home visiting programs and family resource centers, that help families get connected to support. Existing public programs, like the Best Beginnings Childcare Scholarship, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Montana's Children's Health Insurance Program, remain important sources of stability for families who can access them.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Affordability and basic needs: Nearly every community described the combined financial weight of housing, childcare, groceries, transportation, and other necessities. Economic pressures affect families across communities but can be particularly challenging in rural and frontier areas.

Access to health care and Medicaid: Health care and Medicaid access emerged across eight communities. Concerns included affordability, availability of providers, and families' ability to navigate coverage and services.

Best Beginnings Childcare Scholarship: Best Beginnings access came up in seven communities. Themes included eligibility thresholds, administrative barriers, and families falling into gaps where they earn too much to qualify for assistance but still cannot comfortably afford care. Four communities specifically raised the child support cooperation requirement as a specific obstacle for families seeking assistance.

Rural and frontier barriers: Limited services, long travel distances, transportation barriers, and workforce shortages compound challenges for families living in rural and frontier areas. In four communities, participants described how a lack of reliable transportation and the distance between services can make childcare, health care, and developmental supports difficult to reach.

Family-friendly policies: The need for paid family leave was discussed in five communities. Participants also identified employer-supported childcare and flexible workplace policies as ways employers could better support working families.

Family tax policies: Family tax supports, including a state Child Tax Credit, were discussed in six communities as a flexible way to help families cover everyday expenses.

Housing affordability and stability: Housing challenges were raised in five communities. Participants described a shortage of affordable and stable housing, particularly for single parent families and childcare professionals, and discussed how rising housing costs compound the financial strain of paying for everyday essentials.

Mental and behavioral health: Mental and behavioral health needs were raised in nine communities. Participants discussed limited access to services for children and families, shortages in community treatment capacity, difficulties managing children's challenging behaviors in the classroom, and the need for preventive and trauma-informed support. Provider stress and burnout were also described as both a workforce concern and a barrier to sustaining high-quality care.

What We Heard: Early Care and Education

WHAT'S WORKING

Communities consistently shared appreciation for childcare providers finding creative ways to meet local needs despite limited resources. Participants increasingly see early care and education as essential infrastructure for both families and local economies. In some communities, early learning opportunities and partnerships are expanding.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Childcare access and availability: Childcare access was one of the most widespread issues across the Roadshow. Nearly every community described shortages and difficulty finding care that fits families' schedules and needs.

Affordability: Even where care is available, cost remains a major barrier. Childcare business owners described the challenge of keeping care affordable for families while maintaining the financial stability of their programs.

Infant and toddler care: Infant and toddler care challenges were raised in six communities. Limited slots and the high cost of providing infant and toddler care contribute to access challenges.

Early childhood workforce compensation: Inadequate provider compensation was a widespread concern, coming up in nine communities. Low wages make recruitment and retention difficult and contribute to instability throughout the childcare system.

Workforce benefits and career pathways: A lack of benefits for the early childhood workforce was noted in six communities, and the need for stronger career pathways came up in six as well. Participants discussed health insurance, paid leave, apprenticeships, higher-education pathways, and opportunities to introduce high school students to early childhood careers.

Professional development and educator preparation: Professional development and educator preparation were raised in ten communities. Participants called for accessible training, coaching, and on-the-job support; stronger preparation in developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed practice; and continued efforts to professionalize the field. Several communities cautioned that training investments must be paired with the staffing and financial support providers need to participate.

Workforce capacity and classroom support: Four communities specifically discussed the need for substitute staff, floaters, and additional classroom support. These positions can help programs remain open, reduce burnout, maintain appropriate ratios, and better serve infants and children with disabilities or behavioral needs.

Childcare business sustainability: Business sustainability was a concern in seven communities, as providers work to keep tuition affordable while covering operating costs and paying staff a livable wage. Participants also raised licensing and regulatory requirements, property and facility limitations, administrative burdens, and the rising cost or limited availability of liability insurance. These barriers can be especially difficult for small and family-based providers and can prevent programs from opening, expanding, or remaining in business.

Preschool and early learning access: Preschool and early learning access emerged across nine communities. Communities discussed both expanding opportunities and ensuring programs work within the broader mixed-delivery early childhood system.

Flexible care options: Communities identified gaps in part-time and flexible care arrangements that do not fit traditional full-time childcare models.

Children with disabilities and additional needs: Disability and inclusion supports were raised in nine communities. Participants described long waits for screenings, evaluations, diagnoses, and early intervention; limited access to speech and specialized therapies; and insufficient classroom staffing and behavioral support. Providers may want to serve children with higher needs but lack the staffing, training, funding, or insurance coverage required to do so.

Employer involvement in childcare: Employer-supported childcare and employer involvement came up in six communities. Participants discussed employer-sponsored programs, childcare benefits, partnerships with local providers, and employers' broader stake in childcare as workforce and economic infrastructure.

Public understanding of childcare: Four communities emphasized the need to help policymakers, employers, and the public understand the true cost of providing care, the qualifications and responsibilities of early educators, and the return on investment in early childhood. Participants noted that childcare is still too often treated as babysitting rather than essential community infrastructure.

What We Heard: Systems Coordination

WHAT'S WORKING

Local coalitions and partnerships: Early childhood coalitions and local infrastructure emerged as one of the clearest strengths statewide, giving organizations and providers a way to share information, coordinate services, and respond quickly to local needs.

Community advocacy: Advocacy and public awareness were raised as a strength in seven communities, reflecting growing recognition that early childhood touches families, employers, and Montana's economy as a whole.

Public-private partnerships: Partnerships among providers, businesses, nonprofits, and government are helping communities fill gaps and build homegrown solutions where state-level resources fall short.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Navigating a fragmented system: System coordination and family navigation were among the most widespread concerns across the Roadshow. Families may interact with multiple programs, agencies, eligibility systems, and providers to get the support they need.

Connecting families to information: Communities want clearer, more trusted ways for families to learn what resources exist and how to access them.

Developmental screening and referral: Screening and referral issues emerged across five communities, while early intervention and developmental services were discussed in eight. Communities described the need for stronger connections among screening, referral, early intervention, health care, and early care and education; more timely evaluations and specialized services; and greater opportunities to deliver support within early childhood settings before children enter kindergarten.

Streamlining benefits and services: Communities discussed opportunities to simplify applications and eligibility processes across programs. Streamlined or coordinated benefit applications came up in four communities.

Parent education and family engagement: Four communities discussed the need to help parents understand child development, developmental milestones and screenings, available services, and ways to support children's learning. Participants also emphasized trusted, locally grounded family engagement and the need to reach families who may not be connected to formal systems.

Transitions into kindergarten: Three communities discussed kindergarten readiness and transitions between childcare, preschool, and K–12. Participants called for better coordination across settings, more consistent assessment and referral practices, and transitions that are developmentally appropriate for young children.

Culturally responsive systems building: Tribal communities highlighted the importance of culturally responsive services, tribal sovereignty, trusted relationships, and systems designed around community needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Conversations also emphasized Native language and cultural knowledge, relationships with elders, intergenerational programming, and continuity in funding and state contracting so community-led services can be sustained.

Conclusion

Insights from the 2026 Roadshow will directly inform Zero to Five Montana's policy priorities heading into the 2027 legislative session. We hope this report also serves as a practical resource for partners and leaders across the state, and as an invitation for continued community engagement.

Actionable State Policy Recommendations

Family Economic Security

Strengthen family economic security by reducing the financial pressures of raising young children and ensuring families can access the supports they need.

Early Care and Education Access and Affordability

Increase access to affordable high-quality early care and education that meets the diverse needs of Montana families and communities.

Early Childhood Workforce

Expand opportunities to recruit, retain, and support the early childhood workforce to ensure children have access to high-quality services and experiences.

Childcare Business Sustainability

Stabilize and strengthen childcare businesses to ensure they remain open and available for kids and families.

Supporting Children with Special Needs

Ensure children and families can access timely developmental, behavioral, and specialized supports.

System Coordination and Family Navigation

Invest in the coordination of the early childhood system at the local and state level to support families in their ability to understand, access, and navigate early childhood programs, services, and supports.

Community-Driven Solutions

Invest in solutions that reflect the unique needs of rural, Tribal, and local communities.

Call to Action

Turning what we heard into action will take a collaborative effort. Legislators, agency staff, providers, funders, and neighbors all have a role to play in building the early childhood system Montana families deserve. Zero to Five Montana plans to keep the conversation going through future Roadshows and in the policy work ahead, and we hope others will join us in treating these findings as a starting point rather than a finish line.

Appreciation and Acknowledgments

Zero to Five Montana is so grateful for the immense generosity and openness from the communities we visited – folks carving time out of their workdays, opening meeting spaces, and being willing to speak candidly with our team.

That generosity is the backbone of the Roadshow, and we want to acknowledge our partners here:

- Best Beginnings Yellowstone County, *Billings*
- Bitterroot Early Learning Network, *Hamilton*
- Early Childhood Coalition of Beaverhead County, *Dillon*
- Early Childhood Coalition of the Greater Helena Area, *Helena*
- Fort Peck Head Start, *Fort Peck Reservation*
- Greater Gallatin United Way, *Bozeman*
- Lincoln County Kids, *Libby*
- Miles City community, *Miles City*
- Mountain Shadow, *Lodge Grass*
- Snqweylmistrn, *Arlee*
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