COUNTIES CARE: COUNTY SERVICE SHARING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

County governments are working to break cycles of multigenerational poverty across the country. In 2015, over 14.6 million children were living in poverty in the United States, and over 21.1 million children were growing up in areas with high levels of poverty, whether or not they themselves were living in poverty.\(^1\) Among other factors, adverse childhood experiences, often prevalent in low-income areas, frequently inhibit the ability of individuals to escape the cycle of poverty that entrapped generations before them. In fact, the more time any individual spends living in a high-poverty area, the lower his or her chances are of succeeding economically in life—and this effect is heightened during childhood.\(^2\)

Early childhood development (ECD) programs are important for the healthy development of individuals and communities, and as long-term economic investments. The World Bank defines ECD as “the physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development of a child from the prenatal stage up to age eight.”\(^3\) By age three, a child’s brain has already grown to 80 percent of its full volume, making the period from the prenatal stage up through the child’s third year especially important.\(^4\) The development of children during their first few years can prepare them to acquire a wide range of skills later in life and be productive adults, or those early years can be a hindrance to their later success.\(^5\) ECD programs begin the continuum of support that children need from birth until they reach adulthood. Programs in low-income areas are even more effective as economic drivers because without intervention, children living in poverty have a lower chance of acquiring the proper skills to grow into productive adults.

Counties provide essential services to families with young children, but many counties struggle with insufficient funding.\(^6\) Service sharing is one solution that enables counties to work together with other counties, municipalities, school districts, nonprofits, private corporations, or other entities to provide early childhood services more efficiently. Intergovernmental service sharing occurs when two or more local government entities cooperate to provide a single service or set of services to residents. Service sharing can also occur between a local government entity and a nonprofit, private corporation, or philanthropic foundation.

This report shows different ways that counties provide high-quality services to children...
and families by sharing service provision with partners. The analysis examines the role of counties in ECD, challenges, and the relationship of counties with state and federal governments around ECD. The ECD programs featured in this report work to break cycles of multigenerational poverty and prepare the youngest generation for future academic and economic success. The case studies feature Dakota County (Minnesota), Idaho North Central Public Health District, Cuyahoga County (Ohio), Durham County (North Carolina), and Bedford County (Pennsylvania); these stories showcase just a few examples of how counties across the nation are caring for their most vulnerable residents.

THE ROLE OF COUNTIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In both low- and high-income areas, counties play a significant role in ECD activities, which include a wide range of health, educational, and childcare services for children, especially those from birth to age three, and their families. Some of these services start prior to a child’s birth with prenatal screenings for expectant mothers; others include home visits to families with newborn babies or school preparedness services up through a child’s entry into kindergarten. Prekindergarten educational programs, such as Early Head Start, are one example of programs designed specifically for children from birth to three. These types of programs focus on the social, physical, and emotional development of young children.7

FIGURE 1: MOST PREVALENT TYPES OF ECD PROGRAMS ADMINISTERED BY COUNTIES
According to a 2017 National Association of Counties (NACo) survey of state associations of counties (referred to as “the NACo survey” in this report), the number one ECD service that counties provide is food and nutrition assistance.\(^8\) Other county services that respondents mentioned include prekindergarten programs, home visits, healthcare, and childcare services (see Figure 1). An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that their states do not mandate these services. Of the states that mandate these services, most dictate that counties must provide food and nutrition assistance, childcare services, and healthcare.\(^9\)

The delivery of ECD services by counties varies both across and within states. In some cases, counties are responsible for designing, delivering, and administering these services on their own. For example, Los Angeles County, California, established the Steps to Excellence Project (STEP), a childcare quality rating and improvement system, in 2007. As part of STEP, parents receive information on the quality of child development programs within the county. Additionally, childcare facilities that serve children younger than five are provided with workshops and fiscal incentives to improve the quality of the services they provide.\(^10\)

Counties also partner with other governments, nonprofits, philanthropic groups, or private-sector companies to deliver ECD services. The Read with Me program in Hamilton County, Tennessee, is an example of this type of partnership. The program aims to improve literacy rates for young children by promoting reading. The county operates the Readmobile, a van that travels to locations throughout the county to engage children in read-aloud sessions.\(^11\) The county also partners with the local school district and area day care centers to offer incentives and rewards that encourage young children to read and prepare for kindergarten.\(^12\)

Some counties are the delivery arms of federal programs focused on ECD. For example, counties in at least 33 states administer food and nutrition assistance through the federally funded Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).\(^13\) This program offers benefits, such as supplemental food and nutrition screenings, to low-income populations. Counties in 10 states administer benefits through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, which provides cash assistance to needy families so that parents can better care for their children and maintain stable two-parent family structures.\(^14\) Other examples of federal
programs that counties administer range from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides nutritional assistance to millions of low-income individuals and families, to Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBGs), which help low-income families receive childcare services. Because of their proximity to the communities and families these federal programs serve, county governments are the most effective delivery arm for these programs on the ground.

**FIGURE 2: MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR ECD SERVICES**

Despite the prevalence of ECD programs, significant challenges exist for counties in delivering ECD services. The number one challenge facing county ECD programs is a lack of funding, according to the NACo survey (see Figure 2).\(^{15}\) Most often, the main source of funding for county ECD services is the state (see Figure 3).\(^{16}\) State funding, however, is not sufficient. For example, Wisconsin has not increased its “children and family aids” allocation in nearly a decade, despite an increased need for child and family services.\(^{17}\) Some counties fund ECD programs with general fund money or through dedicated taxes. The caps that states place on counties’ ability to raise revenue, however, make the general funding option increasingly difficult.\(^{18}\)
Some counties have created special districts that fund and deliver ECD services. Nearly one-third of state associations responding to the NACo survey said that counties in their state use children’s services councils.\(^{19}\) For instance, Palm Beach County, Florida, put on the ballot in 1986 a proposal to create an independent special district dedicated to children’s services, which would fund early intervention programs for young children ranging from parenting classes and maternal nutrition support to childcare and early childhood screenings.\(^{20}\) The Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, currently funded by a 0.6833-mill property tax, was approved by voters in 1986 and last reauthorized in 2014. In fiscal year 2015–2016, the council served nearly 27,000 children and families through its Healthy Beginnings maternal/child health programs, over 38,000 through childcare and after-school programs, and nearly 72,000 through special initiatives and other outreach efforts.\(^{21}\)

With lack of funding as the number one challenge for county ECD services, strengthening the funding partnership between the federal government, states, and counties is crucial.

Federal funding plays an important role in the ECD services provided by counties.
Between 2013 and 2015, more than 1,500 counties invested over $129 billion of federal funding in services that affect young children and their families. This amount represents only a portion of federal funding for county ECD services; it includes only counties that used more than $500,000 in total federal dollars during any year between 2013 and 2015. Nearly 50 federal grants fund programs for young children, varying from grants such as CCDBGs—which include funds for childcare subsidies for lower-income families—to programs that impact their family well-being, such as Section 8 housing choice vouchers. One-third of the federal grants that affect infants, toddlers, and their families are also programs for low-income populations. Most often (in 91 percent of cases), counties receive this funding through the state, which makes it difficult to differentiate between state and federal dollars for county ECD services.

MAP 1: FEDERAL ECD FUNDING FOR COUNTIES

Notes: This analysis reflects only county governments that invested more than $500,000 in federal funds annually for at least one year between 2013 and 2015. Counties marked in yellow reflect county governments that did not file a single audit report between 2013 and 2015. Amounts as reported by the county government in the Single Audit report submitted to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB).
The top three county-level programs funded by the federal government for ECD services—Medicaid, TANF, and the Title IV-E Foster Care Program—are classified as health and human services programs. Medicaid serves several demographics, including low-income children, and is the largest federal grant program that targets ECD, with more than $85 billion distributed to 1,000 counties between 2013 and 2015. Over 870 counties reported benefiting from more than $17 billion in TANF during that same period. TANF gives needy families assistance to pay for food, utilities, and other nonmedical expenses. Between 2013 and 2015, more than 900 counties reported benefiting from $6.5 billion for the Title IV-E Foster Care Program. Title IV-E provides care for children in the foster system before they are reunited with their family, adopted, or otherwise placed with other agencies. In total, these three grants represent 85 percent of the federal funding for ECD to the more than 1,500 counties that reported spending federal dollars on ECD.

Counties provide ECD services that are critical for low-income families and children to break the cycle of poverty. However, state limitations on counties’ ability to raise revenue—coupled with federal and state mandates—make it a challenge for counties to generate adequate funding for their ECD programs. Funding from federal programs and state revenues are insufficient to meet the growing needs of these programs. By sharing the provision of early childhood services, counties can increase efficiencies and decrease costs while maintaining the high level of quality services families and children need.

This is a shortened version of Counties Care: County Service Sharing for Early Childhood Development. To get the full version, please visit NACo’s website: http://www.naco.org/featured-resources/counties-care.

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ABOUT NACO

The National Association of Counties (NACo) unites America’s 3,069 county governments. Founded in 1935, NACo brings county officials together to advocate with a collective voice on national policy, exchange ideas and build new leadership skills, pursue transformational county solutions, enrich the public’s understanding of county government, and exercise exemplary leadership in public service.

ABOUT THE COUNTIES FUTURES LAB

The NACo Counties Futures Lab brings together leading national experts to examine and forecast the trends, innovations, and promises of county government with an eye toward positioning America’s county leaders for success. Focusing primarily on pressing county governance and management issues—and grounded in analytics, data, and knowledge sharing—the lab delivers research studies, reports, and other actionable intelligence to a variety of venues in collaboration with corporate, academic, and philanthropic thought leaders to promote the county government of the future.
ENDNOTES


12. Ibid.


15. NACo, NACo-NCCAE poll, August 2017.

16. Ibid.


18. Griffith, Harris, and Istrate, Doing More with Less.

19. NACo, NACo-NCCAE poll, August 2017.


23. This number reflects only grant programs and does not include federal tax expenditures. It is based on an analysis of the federal grants that impact infants, toddlers, and their families, as identified in “What’s in the Budget for Babies,” Zero to Three, September 29, 2016, https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1526-what-s-in-the-budget-for-babies.


