# Early Childhood Leadership Commission
# October 23, 2025 ~ 9:00 am-12:00 pm

# MINUTES

**Meeting Objectives:**

- Continue conversations related to higher education policy changes and support for the early childhood workforce
- Hear updates on the CDEC Evaluation and understand next steps
- Discuss the sustainability information shared from CDHS and CDEC related to programs that serve families
- Provide feedback to ECLC Subcommittees and Working Groups to guide their work
- Review final materials related to the Preschool Development Grant and celebrate all of the successes accomplished through the grant
- Advance the goals of the ECLC Strategic Plan

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**Attendees (all virtual):** Happy Haynes, Sam Fogleman, Heather Craiglow, Angie Shehorn, Chelsea Carver, Shelley Smith, Michael Cooke, Sue Renner, Joanna Bruno, Jasmin Ramirez, Maria Tarajano Rodman, Rachel Hutson, Nicole Riehl, Jake Williams, Liz Denson, Susanna Snyder, Vanessa Fewell, Minna Castillo

**Welcome and Introductions**

Co-Chair Happy Haynes called the meeting to order at 9:03 am. ECLC members introduced themselves. Happy then asked for a motion to approve the August 28, 2025 meeting minutes. Michael Cooke moved, Shelley Smith seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

**Independent Evaluation of CDEC Update**

Taylor Dunn, Watershed Advisors, reminded the ECLC about the legislative requirement to conduct an independent evaluation of the functions and operations of CDEC. Taylor noted the intent of the evaluation is to serve as a reflective and continuous improvement report to drive future work and priorities. The evaluation report will be submitted to the legislature by November 1, 2025. She walked through the legislative requirements that were outlined to guide the evaluation process and findings and provided a high level overview of what will be included in the report. Child Trends and Watershed Advisors worked together to deeply analyze a large amount of data and information to develop findings across the legislative requirements, and then provide higher level recommendations to support continuous improvement opportunities for CDEC and the larger early childhood systems.

Sue Renner, who is serving as a member of the CDEC Evaluation Steering Committee and the Research Advisory team, noted that the teams have come together extremely quickly and thoughtfully to ensure a high integrity, high quality, and comprehensive report. She recognized Mathu Subramanian and Jennifer Stedron who have provided additional support as a Research Advisory team, and thanked the Steering Committee for their work and guidance along the way.

**Higher Education Policies and the Early Childhood Workforce Follow Up**
Sam Fogleman, CDHE, reminded everyone that at the August ECLC meeting there was a discussion with Michael Vente from CDHE related to the Minimum Value Threshold. Minimum Value Threshold is a calculation to determine the cost of earning a degree vs. the earnings a person receives in the workforce as a result of earning that degree. Micahel and his team are digging into the data related to these thresholds and what they mean for various areas of workforce development, especially in the early childhood space. The ECLC also heard from Mary Harill with NAEYC on their analysis on changes to the federal student loan eligibility, and what impact that may have on those seeking early childhood degrees.

CDHE has been digging into these new shifts and working to understand how these policy changes will impact the early childhood workforce. The federal timeline for negotiated rulemaking is expected in December 2025 and January 2026, with a federal public comment period expected after draft regulations are released in 2026.

Angela Ben-Zekry, CDEC, shared that CDEC has been working to understand the financial debt that exists in the field, noting a recent survey indicated an average of $20,000 in outstanding financial loans for early childhood educators. The department is also trying to determine how best to support individuals who may lose their financial aid, including those who have already graduated as well as those who are currently in school. She then shared a list of Questions about Federal Student Loan Changes, and walked the ECLC through the current set of questions that have been raised. Commission members provided feedback on the questions, to ensure the list of questions and potential areas for solutions are included. CDHE and CDEC will work together to find answers to the list of questions and begin to think about how best to find solutions and communicate options back to the field.

Michele Stillwell-Parvensky, CDEC, noted that as the changes referenced by Sam and Angela move forward, it is important to understand the current compensation levels within Colorado. Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab has been analyzing compensation scales across the state through an Evidence-Building hub, and found that only 11% of current early childhood educators are at scale. The ultimate goal would be to ensure all early childhood educators meet a livable-wage salary that reaches parity with K-12 teachers on the higher end of the scale. Currently though, there is a significant gap between that desired state and current salaries. As a potential interim step, Michele shared the beginnings of a Compensation Initiative Framework, that would allocate funding as a program-level grant to increase wages for highly qualified teachers and provide coaching, scholarships and stipends to facilitate recipients to continue advancing within the early childhood professional credential levels. Michelle noted that funding availability and amounts would determine how much would be available and whether all programs could utilize the funding or if it would need to be more targeted.

**Subcommittee and Working Group Updates**
Sue Renner thanked Angie Shehorn for serving as a new co-chair of the Program Quality Alignment and Access Subcommittee, and Joanna Bruno for serving as a new co-chair of the Data Subcommittee. She then reminded everyone that the Subcommittee and Working Group Updates document was shared to provide updates on the activities of the groups. She encouraged everyone to review the updates in the document, and then welcomed representatives from a few of the groups to gather feedback on specific work:

- CCCAP Rule Rewrite Committee Update: Shelley Smith shared that the CCCAP Rule Rewrite Committee is meeting on Friday to discuss developing customer service requirements. She asked for feedback on a Copy of Developing Customer Service Requirements, noting the vote will occur later in the year.

- IECMH Council Update: Behavioral Health Administrative Service Organizations (BHASOs) Model and Colorado LIFTS Network: Joey Pachta, BHA, and Judith Tieku, BHA, joined to introduce a new model for behavioral health systems for individuals who are uninsured or underinsured. Previously, behavioral health services were fragmented with crisis providers, mental health providers, and substance use providers operating independently. The CDHS Behavioral Health Task Force developed a blueprint to streamline behavioral health services in a BHASO model. Now, BHA oversees 4 regional BHASOS, who then contract with regional behavioral health providers, to directly serve individuals. This coordinated system is now known as the Linking Individuals and Families To Services (LIFTS) Network. Colorado LIFTS is responsible for providing aligned crisis, mental health, and substance use services. BHASOs oversee the LIFTS Network as well as care coordination. Judith shared a map of the four BHASO regions across Colorado. Individuals can enter the coordination system through three ways: BHASO Care Navigation Phone Line, CO LIFTS Website (ownpath.co), or provider screenings. Anyone in Colorado can access the LIFTS network regardless of insurance status. There is no eligibility criteria. Care coordination is divided into three tiers of support, from brief, temporary support to regular, frequent support from a more robust clinical team. Members asked about reach/service across the state, as well as connection with other coordination providers such as 211.

- ECWD Update: Care Worker Tax Credit Update: Michele Stillwell-Parvensky reminded everyone about the Care Worker Tax Credit, which is a $1,200 refundable state tax income tax credit for qualifying child care workers, including family, friend and neighbor (FFN) providers, and direct long-term care workers. For 2025 only, eligible providers can receive both the Early Childhood Educator Tax Credit and the Care Worker Tax Credit. An individual is eligible for the Care Worker Tax Credit if they provide care for at least 720 hours during the tax year as an operator or employee of a licensed program or a FFN child care worker who provides care for children other than their own who are five years or younger. In addition, individuals must meet adjusted income limits of $75,000 (single) or $100,000 (jointly). To receive the credit, individuals complete the Care Worker Tax Credit attestation in PDIS prior to filing, and then file Colorado State Income Taxes in the Spring. Michele shared flyers for ECE Tax Credits for Licensed Educators and for FFN Providers. More information is available on the CDEC Website.

**Review Request for Information (RFI): Colorado Child Care Assistance Program CCCAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Child Welfare Sustainability Strategies and Recommendations**

Danielle Greer, CDEC, provided background on the Request for Information that came from the Joint Budget Committee (JBC), which asked CDEC and CDHS to provide information concerning the impact of state funding and local decision-making on Colorado's Child Care Assistance (CCCAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Child Welfare programs. The report is required to include an evaluation of state and local expenditures related to administration of the programs, analysis of budget practices, recommendations that delineate state and local responsibility as it pertains to funds management and cost containment, and regarding CCCAP,

consideration of how other states are or are not implementing federal regulations and potential penalties. CDEC and CDHS engaged community partners—including counties, families, providers, and advocates—in the development of this report. This included surveys, open forums, and committee meetings to gather feedback on the proposed cost containment strategies. Danielle reviewed the CCCAP-specific recommendations included in the response document, such as streamlining processes for counties to contract with each other for CCCAP program administration and examining all federal funding flexibilities for CCCAP direct services.

Minna Castillo, CDHS, talked about the approach their department took to addressing the request for information given the uniqueness of a dual-department request. TANF and Child Welfare have different allocation requirements and processes, which differ from CCCAP, so in order to think about these three processes together, the Joint Alignment Committee (formerly the Joint Allocation Committee) was created. The programs are very interconnected, such as parents needing to be able to afford child care in order to be able to try to find work. Minna walked through the recommendations related to TANF and child welfare, noting areas where there was agreement or disagreement from different community or county groups. CDEC and CDHS are working collaboratively to continue to provide context related to the response document and recognize the opportunities and differences among counties in serving their communities. The Governor's Budget, which will be released in the next week, may reflect some of these recommendations, and the departments will work with legislators in the upcoming legislative session.

**Preschool Development Grant Final Deliverables**
Kristen Lang provided an overview of some key deliverables that were accomplished through the 2025-2025 Preschool Development Grant Birth-5. The goal of Colorado's grant was that families with children birth to five can access quality early childhood services and supports resulting in children who are healthy, thriving and ready to enter kindergarten. Over $4.8 million was invested in Colorado's early childhood system and 19 strategies implemented including landmark events and projects carried out by ECLC subcommittee and working groups. Kristen highlighted several activity areas such as supporting family leadership, elevating tribal engagement, building business practices and coaching, and aligning and strengthening systems. This work creates a foundation and a starting point for meaningful innovation within Colorado's broad early childhood system, ensuring its sustainability beyond the conclusion of this grant. Kristen encouraged everyone to visit the CDEC PDG Website to review all of the material and the final report.

**Commissioner Updates and Public Comment**

- Commissioner Minna Castillo, CDHS, shared that because of the federal government shutdown, as of November 1, SNAP benefits will not be available for families across the state. This entirely federally-funded $120.5 Million comes into Colorado every month to support 604,000 individuals, 50% of whom are children. Governor Polis is pursuing a $10 Million emergency fund to support food assistance to programs throughout Colorado. Minna encouraged donations to food banks and other local food assistance programs and communication with families who may not receive benefits to provide alternative resources for food assistance. Families can still use any money saved on their EBT cards from prior months and should also lean on school meal programs.

- Commissioner Susanna Snyder, HCPF, noted that the department is collecting information to help inform Colorado's response to changes in federal policies related to health care

coverage. She asked everyone to complete a survey in English or Spanish and share with partners.

- Commissioner Heather Craiglow shared that Colorado has four Head Start Grant recipients that have a November 1 funding Cycle. At this time, they have funding support to keep services operating through November at a minimum and some beyond.

- Commissioner Rachel Hutson shared that an update went out to local public health agencies regarding WIC, noting that services were still available and they are exploring ongoing funding solutions.

**Next Steps and Final Thoughts**
The next ECLC meeting will be held on December 18, 2025 and will be fully virtual.

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*Note: Any presentation requested by the ECLC does not constitute or imply an endorsement of the product, process, service, or organization by the ECLC.*