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Embracing Provider Voices: Oregon Co-Design Team Crafts Plan to Reinvent Child Care Sector

By Megan Irwin and Heidi East McGowan

Across the State of Oregon child care providers have endured massive disruptions to their businesses and livelihood. In March 2020 all programs—except those offering emergency child care for essential workers—were ordered to close their doors. Since that time, child care programs have struggled to manage health and safety protocols, secure protective equipment, weather temporary closures caused by outbreaks, and manage fluctuating enrollment due to parental fear of contagion. While these challenges are universal, the impact has disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous and communities of color and low-income families.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic small child care programs owned and

operated by women—many of whom are Black, Indigenous and women of color—faced systemic challenges, and these disparities widened as the pandemic progressed. Even when federal disaster relief was available, small, independent child care providers struggled to access it.

The [Oregon Community Foundation](#) recognized that rebuilding the child care industry required more than money, and that lasting change is rooted in shared decision-making focused on innovation. To this end, the foundation engaged a statewide Co-Design Team focused on rebuilding Oregon’s child care industry with a Shared Services lens. Co-Design Team members represented rural and urban small center- and home-based child care providers, staff from Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and community-based organizations led by Black, Indigenous and people of color, as well as leaders from the Oregon Early Learning Division.

Over six months, the Co-Design team planned a Shared Services Alliance (SSA) aimed at building the capacity and infrastructure to enable providers, working together, to secure sustainable business practices, increase program profits and provider well-being. The ultimate goal is to ensure that child care practitioners can not only forge meaningful relationships with children and families but also attain financial security doing the work they love.

The Team consistently kept child care providers at the center of their design and decisions. They viewed challenges with an equity lens to ensure that providers who face the greatest barriers, with the least support, benefit most. They also remained flexible, making adjustments based on the ever-changing world and provider feedback.

Core Services

The aim of Oregon’s SSA is to centralize and automate as many business functions as possible, focusing on tasks that are repetitive, can be completed virtually, and achieve economies of scale. [Wonderschool](#) technology was selected by the team to power this aspect of the work. Centralized business services will be linked to a local navigator (in a Child Care Resource and Referral Agency or community-based organization) with close ties to providers—another key component of the plan.

Priority core services identified by the Co-Design Team include marketing, online application, enrollment and waitlist management; automated invoicing and collections for public and private funding; bookkeeping and recordkeeping support; business coaching (linked to use of child care management software); shared purchasing with easy home delivery to reduce shopping time; and

customizable templates for forms, program policies and procedures, with translation services available. Additional services to be phased in over time include: accounting and tax preparation services; assistance applying for loans and grants; automated payroll support; and shared staffing for administrative tasks.

The Co-Design Team recognized that some priorities were particularly challenging and required further research. These include sustainable staffing services for substitutes and teacher recruitment as well as pooled retirement and health insurance benefits.

Alliance Leadership and Staffing

The Co-Design team crafted a Request for Applications to guide selection of a statewide 'backbone' organization for the Alliance and is currently interviewing applicants. The Oregon Community Foundation recently funded launch of the SSA pilot in three regions of the state. Child Care Resource and Referral agencies will identify providers in their region who are interested in participating in the first SSA pilot cohort and will provide relationship driven coaching to ensure providers maximize Wonderschool technology and manage to the [Iron Triangle](#) of early childhood program finance. The aim is to step down philanthropic funding and achieve a self-sustaining SSA within a five-year time period.

Oregon is excited to launch a plan for statewide expansion of Shared Services to strengthen the child care infrastructure and to retain and reinvent Oregon's child care industry.

[CLICK HERE for a copy of the full Co-Design Team Report](#)

Megan Irwin, from [Brave Ideas Consulting](#), and Heidi East McGowan, from [East Consulting & Associates](#), led the SSA planning process with support from their fiscal agent, [Social Venture Partners](#).



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