



## Baker Child Care Project

JANUARY 2025

# LOCAL VOICES UNITE TO OVERCOME A CRISIS



### A Case Study in Community Innovation

The last child care facility in the rural town of Baker, Montana experienced closure in 2018. It's here that the broader Fallon County community faced a pivotal choice: do nothing or do everything. At the plea of a former child care business owner, the county's economic development board answered the cry – recognizing the impact this child care crisis would have on the local economy and workforce. Spearheaded by the board's (current) Executive Director Vaughn Zenko, the community rallied together to seek change – conducting a comprehensive research study, gathering local feedback, pursuing legislative action, and ultimately setting out to establish a 96-slot child care facility. This is the Baker Child Care Project, an ongoing initiative to bring available and affordable child care to Baker, Montana.

## BACKGROUND



**LOCATION:**  
Fallon County, Montana



**ORGANIZATION:**  
Baker Child Care Project



**POPULATION:**  
2,994 people



**FACEBOOK**  
[@BakerChildCareProject](#)

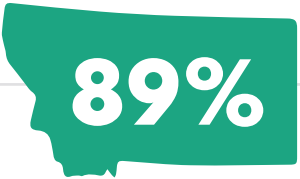


# THE CHALLENGE

Vaughn Zenko,  
SMART Executive Director

## Building a reliable infrastructure.

At its start, a child care facility requires two key pieces of infrastructure – a physical location and financial support. As the Baker Child Care Project was formed in response to a crisis, the initiative was in immediate need of both. Despite momentum early in the form of donated land (by the county) and a grant for architectural design, the project came to a halt in 2020 due to a lack of funding. Over the years, the Baker Child Care Project would continue to face hurdles with property acquisition – a challenge not unique to a rural community like Baker, however, one that continued to unify and strengthen support.



**89%**  
**OF MONTANANS AGREE**  
the economy is impacted when working parents don't have access to child care.



**122**  
**RESIDENTS**  
**IN FALLON COUNTY**  
were in immediate need of licensed child care.

# THE SOLUTION

## Remaining resilient in the face of setback.

When the community lost its last licensed child care facility, a passionate resident fought for her beliefs and, as a result, an impact study was conducted. When the Baker Child Care Project came to a stall, Vaughn Zenko worked to reignite the project with the help of a small grant from Zero to Five Montana. In 2022, when the program team learned of the powers of a bond initiative, they worked tirelessly to gather the signatures needed to place it on the ballot. And though the bond (and following mill levy) fell short, instead of throwing in the towel, the team ramped up its engagement with local and legislative partners – pivoting their plans to now leverage six plots of donated land to build a modular child care facility.

In response to the positive outreach around child care in Baker, Action for Eastern Montana's Head Start Program has additionally expanded preschool into the community, occupying one of the modulares.



*Our \$7.2M bond for a child care facility was the first time since the 1970s that a bond issue had been on a ballot in Fallon County. So, no – we didn't win the vote. But we did win in getting people to think about child care differently.*

Vaughn Zenko, SMART Executive Director,  
Baker Child Care Project



# STEPS TO SUCCESS

## 1. LAUNCHING AN IMPACT STUDY

Previous EMEDA Executive Director, Shanny Spang Gion worked with the team to conduct a needs assessment early on to reveal the issues hindering adequate child care.

## 2. REEVALUATING PROJECT SCOPE

Recognizing the dire necessity for a child care facility (and letting that be their driving force), the team remained willing to readjust their initial plans – thereby channeling focus and new resources to meet the community’s most critical need.

## 3. SEEKING COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Fostered by the support from Zero to Five Montana, HeadStart, and other crucial local partners, the initiative placed an emphasis on deepening its community roots – ensuring a broader investment in the project’s success.

## 4. PURSUING LEGISLATIVE ACTION

The legislative efforts pursued by the Baker Child Care project are groundbreaking for a rural community. In addition to an infrastructure bond, the group also pursued a levy ask and established intentional partnerships with their local commissioners.

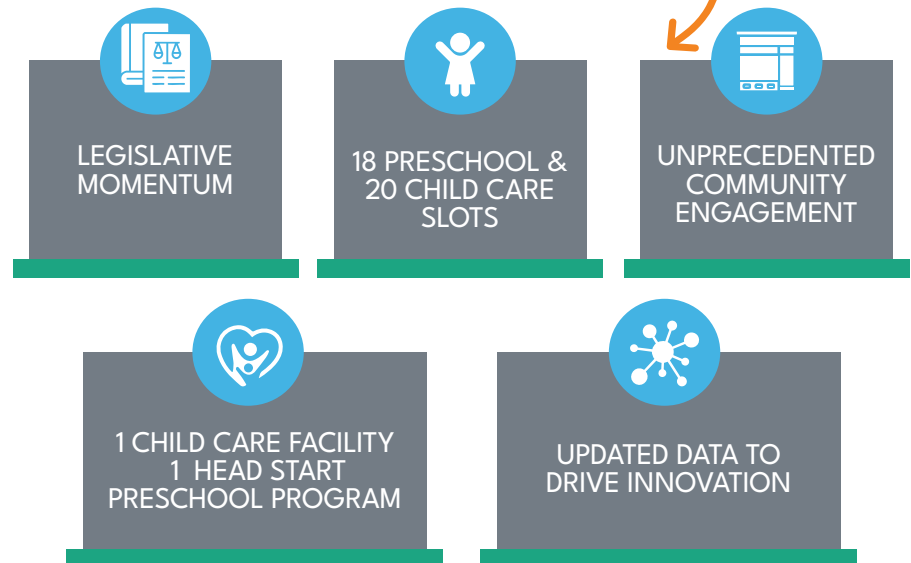
## 5. INNOVATIVE FINANCING & SUPPORT

The project’s progression is highlighted by innovative funding solutions, including donations from local landowners and support from the Eastern Montana Economic Development Authority. Never underestimate the power of collaborative financial strategies.

# PROGRESS

Real change doesn’t happen overnight, but when a determined community leads with passionate voices, resiliency, and heart – success is sure to follow.

TAKE A LOOK!



*Multiple community partners are working together to make a great impact on the community of Baker.*

Shawna Sargent, Director of Action for Eastern Montana Head Start

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the success of the Baker Child Care Project, the following key takeaways can help guide other communities in spearheading change:

- ✓ **Be flexible in your plans.** The ability to reassess and modify project scopes is crucial. As a project or initiative evolves, so might a community's needs and opportunities. Let the end goal be your driving force – always being willing to go back to the drawing board or pivot mid-way.
- ✓ **Put community first.** Never forget the "us." If your challenge is community-focused, then the solution should be as well. Pursuing a project with broad community buy-in and active participation also ensures a solid foundation for lasting impact.
- ✓ **Consider collaborative financing.** Exploring diverse funding avenues and taking the time to foster partnerships can unlock potential pathways that you may have otherwise not considered. Don't hesitate from making "the ask."
- ✓ **Lead with passion.** You don't have to be a parent to be passionate about child care. Many of Montana's counties are considered child care deserts, and that affects us all. If you're passionate about making a difference, speak up and step out!

## TAKE YOUR NEXT STEP

Whether you're a business owner, parent, current child care provider, or long-time resident, you have a role to play – because better child care systems mean thriving communities. And that matters for everyone.



### DOWNLOAD FREE RESOURCES

Planning tools, step-by-step guides, blog posts, and more!



### JOIN US AT OUR NEXT EVENT

From annual summits to training workshops, we'll save you a seat.



### GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

There's power in unity. Let's talk about the opportunities in your community.

## CONNECT WITH US!



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## LEARN MORE

about Montana Child Care Business  
Connect and take your next step.

