



## Jefferson's Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative

### Jefferson Educational Society and Erie Community Foundation Launch Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative

February 2024

The Jefferson Educational Society and Erie Community Foundation launched the Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative at a media conference at ABC 24hr Child Care, 1325 State St., on Wednesday, Feb. 7. This is a new JES initiative supported by grant funding from the Erie Community Foundation to address Erie's early childcare challenges. The JES has contracted with a team of policy experts representing local and statewide command of the complex issue to assess Erie's child-care challenges and propose recommendations for practical remedies to confront this nationwide crisis with local solutions.

As we, the team of policy experts (introduced below), begin publishing throughout this six-month project – providing updates, offering insights, sharing articles and reports, and announcing upcoming events – on behalf of the team, I am sharing two things: First, my remarks from the media conference, and second, the media release issued to local and regional outlets sharing this news. I share them here as a means of starting what our team hopes will be an initiative that includes a robust dialogue with residents as we set out with the mission to recommend policy solutions to increase access to quality, affordable care in Erie – needs that presently face our community, state, and nation. Both also include hyperlinks to data, reports, and sources valuable in informing this conversation.

The JES's commitment to childcare was seeded by its 2021 publication, [Caring for Erie's Economy: Childcare is Economic Development](#). The publication, which I wrote, asked: "What if Erie became the leading U.S. city where childcare is universal?"

That is just the sort of call to action this initiative embraces, and we look forward to heeding the call.

Court Gould

*Facilitator, JES Erie Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative*

A featured JES contributor, Gould served 20 years as founding executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh. After three years with the Erie Community Foundation as vice president of Community Impact, he is a sustainable solutions consultant and certified professional coach.

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Court Gould remarks

Media Conference

Hats off to the JES for connecting the dots on why early childcare is so critical to Erie – particularly to our children, families, businesses, and overall economy. And thanks to The Erie Community Foundation for funding vital work to address what is, indeed, a challenging problem in Erie, in Pennsylvania, and throughout the nation.

It is well said that child-care measures loom large as the workforce behind the workforce. Another too often missed contribution is that childcare is akin to economic infrastructure on the order of, say, broadband, energy, and airport service. As is the case with any community, Erie's economy and the success of individual companies depend on working families. And working families depend on quality childcare. If parents don't have access to it, they can't go to work.

All is not well in this economic sector. The child-care system is not adequately supporting our workforce and thus our economy, and too many children and their families are struggling to find and afford quality care when they need it most – the first thousand days of life.

One of the many pinch points in this child-care system is staffing. A year ago, the [Start Strong PA campaign conducted a survey](#) of 1,082 child-care programs across Pennsylvania. About 85% reported staffing shortages with more than 3,600 open positions. This resulted in more than 1,500 closed classrooms and more than 35,500 children on waitlists. In Erie County, 18 providers reported 90 open staffing positions resulting in 29 closed classrooms and 1,732 children sitting on waiting lists.

The toll on the economy is staggering. According to a report from this time in 2023, from the nonprofit [ReadyNation and the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission](#), gaps in Pennsylvania's child-care system are stressing the state's working parents and costing families, employers, and taxpayers about \$6.65 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity, and tax revenue.

So, the JES has mobilized a team to tackle the issues. The name of the effort is the Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative.

To maximize prospects for impact and to develop solutions that are scalable, the team will focus on access to childcare for the most difficult and arguably formative years – infants and toddlers up to age 3, the critical first thousand days of development; and we will focus strategically on the city of Erie.

ABC 24hr Care, where we are being graciously hosted today, is an example of a provider for this age group that is so hard for many to find. And for many, by the time a newborn makes it through the waiting list for a place that cares for under 3-year-olds, they have waited so long that they are ready for pre-kindergarten, 3 years and up!

Parents who have been through this know that birth to age 3 is a twilight zone and a sort of free-for-all when it comes to childcare. New parents scramble to decode the care system. Particularly for working parents, the challenge is to find, let alone enroll in a scarcity of slots in childcare, or turn to family and friends. Most parents have weathered many sleepless nights with their infants and also laid awake worrying about finding safe, enriching, and affordable care. Good luck if the parent is a second- or third-shift employee as care at those hours is even more scarce. ABC is among the choice few that cover these off hours to aid working parents.

An expert team has been assembled for this Erie Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative. We have a series of incremental tasks.

The challenges to be surmounted in this six-month Phase 1 initiative are to quantify the demand, supply, and then gaps in access to quality childcare for infants and toddlers in the city of Erie with special attention to possible childcare deserts among our neighborhoods.

The next challenge is to identify the most impactful ways to intervene in the complex childcare system, again focused on the first thousand days of life of infants and toddlers. For example, would the best bet be to increase pay earned by caregivers, or increase second- and third-shift slots, or build more child-care centers, or provide more financial assistance to parents, or bring more providers up to high-quality standards? With such triage to arrive at most impactful remedies, the next task is to come up with the estimated cost, and then identify realistic and maybe innovative ways to generate the financial means.

The bold proposition is to come up with practical recommendations that are ripe to be implemented in a Phase II effort aimed to improve the economy through smart policy and investment in today's young children. Together we can lift the city of Erie and provide an example for others to replicate and scale – all positioning Erie to grow and compete and serve as a role model in access to quality, affordable childcare.

So, we give you the expert team:

- **Elana Como, director of PA's Early Learning Resource Center Region 1 and chief executive officer, Northwest Institute of Research, Inc.**
- **Michelle Harkins, executive director, Early Connections, Inc.**
- **Rina Irwin, chief executive officer at Child Development Centers, Inc.**
- **Tiffany Lavette, founder of Her P.O.W.E.R. Inc., which owns and operates ABC 24hr Childcare, and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Black and Brown Childcare Providers.**

Additionally, Lavette is holding the 10th Annual “200 Women United Empowerment Conference” in Erie on Saturday, April 6, and is partnering with Elana's Early Learning Resource Center to provide a programming for parents and child-care providers. Our Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative will conduct a panel session and solicit input.

While at it, I'll mention another forum with the team to be held on Friday, Feb. 16, at the JES at noon. The team of six will be present, including two who were not able to join us today, when the team will examine the work already done, work that lies ahead, and solicit input and feedback from the community.

Team members not able to join us today are:

**Karen Grimm-Thomas**, Early Childhood Education strategy adviser with the Creative Child Care Solutions program of The Pennsylvania Key, and **Andrea Heberlein**, executive director, Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.

Also with us are Jefferson Leadership Academy fellows **Sarah Morrison** and **Anna Tishinko**, among others, who are among the team members who will

present their study: “Raising the Next Generation: Exploring Childcare in Erie County” at the Thursday, Feb. 8 graduation at the JES at 6 p.m.

For insights to this child-care issue, keep an eye on the Jefferson's website ([jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)), where the team will regularly publish biweekly articles.

Now please spend a little time with these experts who are available for comment.

Lastly, after speaking with the experts, you are welcome to tour the facility with Tiffany Lavette.

Thank you.

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MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Jefferson Educational Society and The Erie Community Foundation Announce Launch of Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative**

**Erie, Pennsylvania** (Feb. 7) – On Wednesday, Feb. 7, the Jefferson Educational Society and The Erie Community Foundation announced at a joint media conference, held at **ABC 24hr Child Care, located at 1325 State St.**, the launch of the JES’s **Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative** supported by grant funding from The Erie Community Foundation.

As research indicates, access to quality, affordable childcare is directly linked to the well-being of Erie's children, families, communities, businesses, workforce, quality of life, and overall prosperity. A team of policy experts, led by Erie-based consultant Court Gould, will assess Erie’s childcare challenges, and propose recommendations for practical remedies to confront this nationwide crisis with local-level solutions.

“Our goal at The Erie Community Foundation is to bring together diverse perspectives to tackle community challenges,” said Patrick Herr, Vice President of Community Impact, The Erie Community Foundation. “Supporting parents with quality childcare is a double investment in our workforce and our children, which aligns with our vision of a united, vibrant and thriving region for all.”

"JES, in its role as a driver of community progress, will engage those who are invested in Erie's progress in exploring the power of early childcare with its many positive ripple effects through a team of policy experts our think tank has

contracted with thanks to the generous support of The Erie Community Foundation,” said Dr. Ferki Ferati, JES President. “We look forward to the practical policy solutions this team will offer coming out of their extensive research over the coming months.”

As those speaking at the conference noted, there is precedence for the JES examining childcare. The think tank published “[Caring for Erie’s Economy: Childcare is Economic Development](#),” in July 2021, written by Gould. Most recently, the JES’s [Civic Leadership Academy](#) 2023 cohort spent more than seven months exploring the issue, and will produce the forthcoming “Raising the Next Generation: Realities of the Childcare Landscape in Erie County,” a report of their findings.

On **Thursday, Feb. 8**, the JCLA 2023 cohort will publicly present a brief overview of its findings during the Academy’s graduation ceremony, which will be held at the JES (3207 State St., Erie, PA 16508) from **6 to 7:30 p.m.** [The public is invited to attend the event](#), which is free of charge.

Working over the first six months of 2024, the **Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative Team** features the expertise of:

**Elana Como, Early Learning Resource Center Region 1 Director and CEO, Northwest Institute of Research, Inc.**

The [Northwest Institute of Research](#), Inc. (NWIR), is a non-profit research and social services corporation which manages the Child Care Works (CCW) subsidized child care program for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, operating as grantee for [Early Learning Resource Center \(ELRC\) Region 1](#), serving Erie, Crawford, Mercer, and Venango Counties. [Early Learning Resource Centers](#) (ELRCs) are hubs of child care information. ELRCs provide information on quality child care and personalized child care referrals to child care providers based on specific needs or preferences. ELRCs also administer the [Child Care Works](#) subsidized child care program. Funded by state and federal governments, the CCW program helps low-income families pay their child care fees.

**Court Gould, Initiative Facilitator/Lead**

Court Gould, a featured JES contributor who authored the [Caring for Erie’s Economy: Childcare is Economic Development](#) report, is serving as facilitator and project lead. He served 20 years as founding executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh. After three years with the Erie Community Foundation as vice president of Community Impact, he is a sustainable solutions consultant and certified professional coach.

**Karen Grimm-Thomas, Creative Child Care Solutions of The Pennsylvania Key**

[Creative Child Care Solutions](#) (CCCS) is a Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) initiative (of the nonprofit The Pennsylvania Key) that helps employers identify and address the child care needs of their employees. In her role at The Pennsylvania Key, Karen leads CCCS focusing on building the business community's capacity to support their employee's child care needs and invest in local early learning systems as a means to attract and retain staff and create positive work environments. [The Pennsylvania Key](#) works collaboratively with partners and community organizations on behalf of OCDEL to deliver educational, professional, and administrative services to early childhood educators and leaders to support the enhancement of early learning experiences for young children in Pennsylvania.

**Michelle Harkins, Executive Director - Early Connections, Inc.**

[Early Connections](#) is a leading organization in Northwestern Pennsylvania for early care and education, providing direct service as well as training and planning leadership for a wide geographic region. Direct service is provided to children and their families in five high-quality childcare locations throughout Erie County, serving children from birth through school age. Early Connections is the Intermediary for the Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program and Sponsor for the Registered Early Childhood Pre-Apprenticeship Program, serving 18 counties within the Northwest Region. Early Connections also administers Erie's Future Fund. Created in 2011, this community initiative assists low-income families in preparing their children for kindergarten by providing a scholarship to attend high-quality programs throughout Erie County. Formerly the YWCA, Early Connections has been serving children and families in our community since 1895.

**Andrea Heberlein, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission**

[The PA Early Learning Investment Commission](#) was created by an Executive Order in 2008 for the purpose of mobilizing business leaders across Pennsylvania to secure support for investments in early learning. The Commission has 50 members, all senior business leaders from across the Commonwealth, representing many of PA's leading industries. It informs thousands of business and civic leaders annually about the critical importance of preparing all young children with the knowledge and skills required for success. It works to improve tomorrow's economy through smart policy and investment in today's young children by fostering public and private sector investment in high-quality early learning programs. These investments are essential to Pennsylvania's edge in the national and global marketplace. A particular focus is



on working with the Executive and Legislative branches to provide advice and support for policies and investments that serve an increased number of at-risk children.

**Rina Irwin, Chief Executive Officer at Child Development Centers, Inc.**

In her role as CEO, Irwin oversees an organization that provides child care and early childhood education to nearly 2,000 children across 15 centers in Venango, Crawford, and Erie counties. With founding in 1969 and with more than 400 employees, CDC's enrollment now tops that of some local school districts. CDC's growth is part is tied to assuming responsibility for federal and state Head Start programs in Erie, Crawford, and Venango Counties.

**Tiffany Lavette, Founder of Her P.O.W.E.R. Inc. which owns and operates [ABC 24-Hour Childcare](#) , Founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Black and Brown Childcare Providers and co-owner of LaVette's Enterprises**

Tiffany is a highly regarded social equity advocate, childcare provider, consultant, coach, friend, teacher, and leader. She is surrounded by a team of individuals who firmly believe in impacting the lives of families one child at a time. Tiffany currently serves on the Erie County DEI Commission where she is the immediate past chair, serves on the advisory board for Pre-K for PA/Start Strong PA, Trustee at Greater Calvary F.G.B.C. and is committed to helping others reach their highest level of success personally, professionally and in business.

On **Friday, Feb. 16**, the media and public are invited to a special JES Community Conversation event, "[Tackling Erie's Childcare Crisis](#)," where the Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative team will explore the high stakes of early childcare, the challenges, and approach to identify lasting solutions. The public is invited to share ideas and experiences at the event, which is free of charge and begins at noon.

The team will be making a series of public presentations throughout the county. Those interested in hosting a conversation regarding the initiative are welcome to contact Gould directly at: [courtlandgould@gmail.com](mailto:courtlandgould@gmail.com)

**More from the experts upon the announcement of the launch of the Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative:**

For too long childcare's profound contributions, particularly to the economy, have been under-appreciated. And now, the provision of childcare services in Erie, like the nation over, is in crisis.



The childcare system is at a breaking point. Problems include low and uncompetitive pay for childcare workers and thus staffing shortages resulting in empty classrooms that could be serving children, rising costs of running childcare centers, working families that cannot find or afford childcare and thus must forgo reporting to work. The latter places childcare squarely at the center of Erie's prospects for economic growth as employers struggle to sustain their workforce. Early learning has a lasting positive effect on kids and our economy. It is time to act.

The Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission reports that 55% of Pennsylvania parents pre-pandemic reported they missed work due to issues of childcare which led to a \$3.7 billion impact in lost revenue. [According to the Commission's updated, 2023 report](#), that impact figure has nearly doubled to \$6.65 billion in just a handful of years. Covid-19 has sensitized the nation and Erie, again, to the economic ramifications of childcare.

Whereas the federal government suggests that families should not pay more than 7% of a household's income on childcare, in Pennsylvania, [ChildCare Aware of America](#) reports that single parents pay 43.9% of their income for center-based infant childcare. Married parents of two children pay 21.7% of their household income for center-based childcare, while families living at the poverty line pay 84.1% of their household income. This is of course contingent on their ability to even find and enroll in quality services.

The situation in the city of Erie is no doubt extreme. [Census Reporter](#) indicates 34% (2022 census data shows improvement due to ARP funding) of youth under 18 years live in poverty. No doubt, children in low-income families are most affected by scarcity and the high cost of quality childcare. Every child in Erie deserves the best nurturing. Early childcare must be a fundamental right for all. Erie is small enough to put its arms around all its infants and has a pocketbook big enough to bank a modest down payment on its future.

Erie, like other cities and metros, cannot wait for federal or state solutions. With Erie's modest size and with its oversized resources, it is well-positioned to become a national role model for eliminating lack of childcare as a barrier to work.

Science makes clear that a person's foundation of cognitive and social skills necessary for success in school, health, and career are largely nurtured in the first three years of life. The link between quality care in these first 1,000 days and lifelong mental health and well-being is widely recognized. Despite the high stakes for individuals and collectively society, quality childcare for the ages 0-3 is increasingly hard to find, let alone afford.

Children who experience high quality care in their first few years require fewer supports in school, are more likely to complete high school, earn higher wages, and avoid unhealthy and disruptive behaviors. Accordingly, investment in early learning generates an estimated [return of 13 percent a year for the economy](#). Pat Herr, VP of Community Impact for the Erie Community Foundation asserts, "Erie cannot afford to deny a single infant or toddler access to excellent childcare. Furthermore, working families depend on quality childcare. It's among the smartest investments on economic progress our community can make. Childcare is workforce development."

Additionally, to learn more about early childcare and this initiative, visit: <https://www.jeserie.org/early-childcare-investment>, which will feature updates from the team.

For comments, please contact:

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*The Jefferson Educational Society of Erie is a nonprofit and nonpartisan institution founded to promote civic enlightenment and community progress for the Erie region through study, research, and discussion. The JES offers courses, seminars, and lectures that explain the central ideas that have formed the past, assist in exploring the present, and offer guidance to enhance the civic future of the Erie region. As an Erie think tank, the JES promotes knowledge and civic pride through research, the publication of policy papers on public issues, essays, reports, and the sponsorship of civic forums. To learn more, visit [www.JESerie.org](http://www.JESerie.org).*

*The Erie Community Foundation's mission is to inspire, engage and empower donors and communities across the region, today and tomorrow. We envision a united, vibrant, and thriving region for all. The Foundation signed the Nonprofit Partnership's Diversity Equity & Inclusion Pledge in 2019 to demonstrate our commitment to our community. To learn more visit [www.ErieCommunityFoundation.org](http://www.ErieCommunityFoundation.org).*

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