

ALLIANCE FOR KIDS QUARTERLY REPORT

YEAR 1 | QUARTER 3

January 1 – March 31, 2026



STRATEGIC PLAN 2025-30

Alliance for Kids, El Paso County's
Early Childhood Council is housed under the
Foundations program of Joint Initiatives for Youth + Families

THRIVING FAMILIES



FAMILY RESOURCE NAVIGATION

Family Resource Navigation offered steady support to families trying to make sense of complicated early childhood systems. Many families asked for help **understanding their choices, adapting to new processes, finding child care, or just figuring out where to start.** By providing personalized guidance, AFK helped parents feel connected, informed, and supported as they worked to access services for their children.



OUTREACH + FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

AFK's outreach this quarter aimed to help families stay connected to resources and services during times of transition and uncertainty. The team continued to **collaborate with McKinney-Vento liaisons, school districts, military-serving groups, and other partners to support families facing housing instability, relocation, or obstacles** that make it hard to access care.

Family outreach and engagement centered on **healthy child development, trauma-informed care, and parenting support**, making resources accessible to all. Through events, partnerships, and one-on-one connections, AFK made sure families in tough situations could easily find the help and information they needed.

FAMILY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE HIGHLIGHT SHARING STORIES

Through the Family Friendly Initiative, AFK brought family voices into important community conversations about child care access and affordability. **The 130 stories collected over the quarter highlighted families' real-life experiences,** keeping future planning and public awareness efforts connected to what families actually face every day.

GOAL 1

Strengthen families by providing parents with essential support.



NAVIGATING UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL

Helping families navigate Universal Preschool was a major focus in Quarter 3. Many parents contacted AFK with questions about **enrollment, placement, provider participation, and what to do next after signing up.** The ongoing need for follow-up shows how valuable local guidance is, especially when systems feel confusing or overwhelming.

Impact

AFK's family support this quarter helped families feel less alone as they navigated complex systems. By serving as a trusted local resource, AFK **broke down barriers, improved access to support, and gave families someone real to turn to** for guidance and next steps.

THRIVING FAMILIES

GOAL 2

Increase families' access to resources and information to support them in successfully parenting their children.



250

ECMH CONSULTATION

From January to March, consultants delivered **250 hours of direct Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) services**, supporting classroom teams, children, and programs with growing behavioral and social-emotional needs. These services impacted an average of 109 children each month, addressing classroom challenges, providing individual support, and overall program stability. **Consultation also helped lower the risk of suspension and expulsion** by fostering strong relationships and thoughtful responses to challenging behaviors.



BUILDING ECMH CAPACITY

AFK focused on building local ECMH capacity and workforce development as demand for support increased. This quarter, one new consultant joined the team, and another began onboarding, expanding local consultation capacity. The approval of the UCCS IECMH certificate pathway was also a big step forward, strengthening long-term workforce development and increasing local access to ECMH professionals.



OUTREACH + RESOURCES

AFK **supported families** by sharing **resources**, making **referrals**, and **reaching out directly** to caregivers to keep them informed and connected.

This outreach offered information about **child development, trauma-informed care, parenting, and early learning**, making it easier for families to meet challenges and feel part of the community.



133

133 FAMILY CONNECTIONS

AFK took part in **three family-focused outreach events** this quarter, connecting with **133 families** and sharing information to help them access support for **healthy child development, trauma-informed care, early learning, and parenting**.



COLORADO CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Families also faced **uncertainty about child care affordability and access** as Colorado communities dealt with **CCCAP enrollment freezes**. In response, El Paso County applied for and **received approval to switch from a full freeze to a waitlist**. This change will help lower barriers for families seeking child care assistance, while still allowing the county to manage funding limitations and growing demand.

Challenges + Needs

As demand for ECMH support grows, programs also face barriers that affect how these services are delivered and how educators feel at work. Some programs struggled with limited chances for staff collaboration, support, and time for reflection. These issues highlight just how important **relationship-based leadership** and **supportive work environments** are for long-term social-emotional and mental health support in early childhood settings. There's also been a **slight rise in requests for parent training**, prompting us to connect families with other organizations for help.

THRIVING CHILDREN



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT SUPPORT

JI partnered with 42 programs on Quality Improvement efforts this quarter. Seven programs moved from Colorado Shines Level 1 to Level 2, and another seven earned new Level 3 to 5 ratings, including five active MOU holders. An additional 33 programs are still awaiting ratings, showing providers' ongoing commitment to quality, even during a time of transition and uncertainty.



**7 PROGRAMS MOVE
FROM LEVEL 1 TO LEVEL 2**



**7 PROGRAMS ACHIEVE
HIGH QUALITY
LEVEL 3-5 RATING**



33

33 AWAITING RATING

GOAL 3

Increase access to a coordinated mixed-delivery model of affordable quality early childhood education.



COACHING + TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Coaching and technical assistance were key to these efforts. AFK's relationship-based approach helped programs better understand Colorado Shines, make progress on quality goals, and use resources in ways that fit their daily needs. This kind of support was especially valuable for providers new to the system or juggling several operational and staffing challenges.



CHILD CARE EXPANSION EFFORTS

AFK also worked closely with new and expanding providers as part of larger mixed-delivery and child care expansion efforts. During the quarter, **four programs received targeted help with licensing, quality systems, operational planning, and sustainability**. AFK also helped providers use over **\$29,000 in quality improvement funding and classroom materials** to strengthen learning environments and boost program quality for children and families.

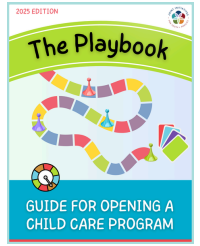


\$29,000

FAMILY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

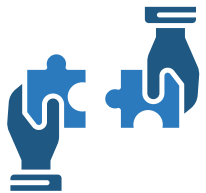
PROVIDER PLAYBOOK

Work on the **Early Childhood Provider Playbook** also moved forward this quarter, as part of the Family Friendly Initiative's focus on expanding child care access and long-term sustainability in the mixed-delivery system. The Playbook aims to **make complex processes simpler and give clear, step-by-step guidance** to anyone interested in starting a child care program, including details about licensing, staffing, financing, zoning, and running day-to-day operations.



KEY PARTNERSHIPS

The Family Friendly Initiative also continued to bring community partners together to work on long-term strategies for increasing child care supply in El Paso County. Several focused workgroups formed this quarter, moving specific expansion efforts ahead, including **faith-based partnerships, southeast Colorado Springs initiatives, and military funding opportunities**. These collaborations are driving practical, community-driven solutions to improve access and sustain the early childhood system.



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Community conversations through the Family Friendly Initiative highlighted the big gap between the **need for care, especially for infants and toddlers**, and what's currently available. Right now, only about 10% of the local demand for infant and toddler care can be met, underscoring the need for long-term expansion and sustainability. In response, early **discussions have started around new funding strategies** for early childhood education in El Paso County, including a **possible ballot measure in April 2027**. AFK and partners also began meeting with city and county commissioners to talk about **child care access, workforce impacts, and long-term needs**.



Outreach was also a key part of these efforts. This quarter, AFK joined **four provider-focused outreach events, three Pikes Peak Region Family Child Care Home meetings, and eight Fountain Valley Communities that Care meetings** to help providers stay connected to resources, technical assistance, and community conversations that shape the early childhood field.

Challenges + Needs

In addition to ongoing workforce and operational challenges, providers continued to face **uncertainty about the statewide QRIS refresh process** and evolving discussions about the **future structure of Colorado Shines**. Questions about future expectations, timelines, and quality pathways added additional stress to programs already managing **staffing shortages and financial strain**. Throughout the quarter, AFK continued helping providers stay informed, connected, and engaged in quality improvement efforts.

THRIVING CHILDREN



HIGHLIGHTS

- **37** programs engaged in support to move from Level 1 to Level 2
- **7** programs that increased from Level 1 to Level 2
- **42** active MOUs
- **33** programs currently queued for rating
- **7** programs achieved new Level 3–5 ratings this quarter (5 are MOU holders)
- **9** GAE coaching hours
- **4** new or expanding providers supported
- QI funds spent on materials: **\$29,463.30**

THRIVING COMMUNITY



UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL (UPK)

Throughout the quarter, AFK supported local Universal Preschool implementation by offering families and providers **ongoing guidance, troubleshooting, and personalized help** with enrollment, participation, and other processes.

As statewide systems and expectations kept changing, many families and providers counted on local support to get answers, resolve issues, and figure out what to do next.



FAMILY NAVIGATION

Family engagement and navigation were a big focus this quarter.

The UPK team responded to **928 contacts** from families and providers seeking help with enrollment, placement, participation, application questions, and troubleshooting. This steady increase in requests shows just how **valuable local guidance and clear, responsive communication** are as families try to access care and keep up with changing systems.

GOAL 4

Facilitate the implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) and promote UPK and early childhood education to the business community.



UPK PARTICIPATION

During the quarter, **232 early childhood programs** took part in UPK across El Paso County, including 73 school district-based programs (representing all 15 districts), 103 center-based programs, and 56 family child care providers. Of these, **66 programs accepted CCCAP**, making it easier for families using child care assistance to find options.

UPK participation and applications kept growing through the quarter. By March, families had submitted **5,657 active applications for Year 3**, while **Year 4 applications rose to 3,938**, showing strong community interest and engagement. More providers also signed up to participate in Year 4.



5,657

YEAR 3 APPLICATIONS



232 PROVIDERS

Challenges + Needs

Even as UPK participation and awareness grow, families and providers still face challenges, such as **limited care availability, system changes, and the complicated statewide implementation process.** Providers are also looking for more clarity about changing expectations, timelines, and how UPK participation will affect their day-to-day operations.

This quarter also brought new conversations about **Senate Bill 25-019 and the state's long-term plans to combine the roles of the Early Childhood Council and the Local Coordinating Organization.** As communities learn more about what's expected and how funding might change, there are still questions about how these shifts will affect local capacity to provide support, outreach, and guidance for families and providers. **Keeping strong local connections and trusted relationships will be key as things continue to change.**



UPK OUTREACH

Outreach this quarter centered on **helping families better understand UPK opportunities and connect with early childhood resources.** AFK also kept an eye on community data on childcare access and availability, which continues to show gaps in areas such as Districts 2, 20, and 49. These trends are shaping bigger conversations about expansion, mixed-delivery planning, and long-term strategies to improve access across the county.



AFK's UPK work this quarter **helped families and providers stay connected** to resources and opportunities during a time of statewide transition. Through responsive guidance, relationship-building, outreach, and collaboration, AFK made it **easier for families to access early childhood programs and supported providers as statewide systems evolved.**

GOAL 5

Support recruitment, qualification, and retention of professionals within the Early Childhood Field

THRIVING WORKFORCE



**43 TRAINING HOURS
FOR 48 PROFESSIONALS**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

AFK facilitated **six professional development trainings this quarter**, totaling 43 hours of learning for early childhood professionals in the community. In all, 48 professionals took part, focusing on classroom practices, leadership, and program quality.

THRIVING WORKFORCE



WORKFORCE TRAINING + SUPPORTS

Professional development this quarter included targeted training on developmentally appropriate practices, leadership, and creating positive workplaces. AFK led two trainings on **developmentally appropriate practices** (engaging 23 professionals) and offered **leadership-focused sessions** for 13 professionals, totaling 3 hours of leadership content. There were also **conversations and supports focused on staff retention and building healthier workplaces** in early childhood settings.

AFK also supported workforce pathway development through **personal guidance, scholarship connections, and community partnerships** to help reduce barriers for those entering or advancing in the field. This quarter, **six individuals were connected with scholarships** to support ongoing education and credentialing.



**6 INDIVIDUALS
CONNECTED TO
SCHOLARSHIPS**

AFK also **supported broader workforce pathway efforts** tied to higher education and credentialing, like CDA pathways, leadership development, and expanding access to training for early childhood professionals across El Paso County.



**45 EARLY-CHILDHOOD
FOCUSED MEETINGS**

COLLABORATION + PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration and community partnerships were at the heart of workforce development this quarter. **AFK team members joined 45 early childhood-focused community meetings**, building strong ties with higher education, workforce agencies, mental health, school districts, providers, and other organizations.

These partnerships continue to support ongoing **conversations about recruitment, retention, career pathways, and sustainability in the field.**

Challenges + Needs

Recruitment and retention challenges continue to affect early

childhood programs throughout El Paso County—especially as programs face low pay, burnout, staffing shortages, and rising demands. Providers say they **need more accessible professional development, stronger leadership support, and sustainable workforce solutions** to help educators stay in the field for the long haul. These shortages also make it harder to expand childcare access and to maintain high-quality learning environments for children and families.



AFK's workforce development this quarter helped **strengthen professional growth and support systems** for early childhood educators across the community.

Through training, leadership development, scholarships, and partnerships, **AFK made educators feel more supported, connected, and prepared to stay and grow in the field.**

PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

GOAL 6

Empower ECE providers and families to engage in public policy advocacy.



LEGISLATION, POLICY + ADVOCACY

AFK kept a close watch on legislative developments and statewide policy conversations that affect children, families providers, and the broader early childhood system. As communities across Colorado responded to changes in child care funding, Universal Preschool, workforce challenges, and shifting systems, AFK helped providers, families, and partners stay up to date on important updates and advocacy opportunities.



Policy and advocacy efforts this quarter stayed focused on community needs like child care access, workforce sustainability, affordability, and long-term capacity. AFK joined cross-sector conversations and collaborative efforts to find practical, community-driven solutions to the challenges facing children, families, and providers in El Paso County.



AFK also helped providers and families stay in the loop about policy changes that could affect access to care and early childhood services. Communication efforts aimed to share information in clear, practical ways, grounded in what families and providers are actually experiencing.



Members of the Foundations team took part in Speak Up for Kids Day at the Capitol, learning more about advocacy, connecting with statewide partners, and seeing how local stories and community needs can shape policy at the state level.

FAMILY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE

Through the Family Friendly Initiative and broader community collaboration, **AFK also kept local leaders and partners involved in discussions about long-term early childhood sustainability and public investment.** Topics included childcare expansion, workforce impacts, access to infant and toddler care, and how childcare shortages affect families and the local economy.

Challenges + Needs

As statewide systems and funding change, providers and families are uncertain about how new policies will affect care, workforce sustainability, and system stability. Many providers also have little time or capacity to get involved in advocacy while managing daily demands. Finding ways to make advocacy more accessible and meaningful for families and providers will be important going forward.

Impact

Throughout the quarter, AFK continued strengthening awareness, collaboration, and engagement around policy issues impacting the early childhood field. Through communication, partnership-building, advocacy, learning opportunities, and ongoing community conversations, AFK helped ensure that local provider and family experiences remain connected to broader systems and policy discussions affecting children and families across El Paso County.

SUMMARY

Throughout the third quarter, **Alliance for Kids balanced meeting immediate community needs with long-term efforts to strengthen the early childhood system in El Paso County.** Families, providers, and community partners faced challenges like workforce shortages, limited child care access, affordability concerns, changing statewide systems, and rising mental health and behavioral health needs among children. AFK responded by providing practical, relationship-based support and helping move important community conversations and solutions forward.

This quarter highlighted the **importance of trusted local connections and collaboration for families and providers.** Families needed help understanding their options, figuring out next steps, and connecting to services within systems that often feel overwhelming.

Providers looked for guidance on quality improvement, staffing, sustainability, and shifting expectations. Meanwhile, community conversations gained momentum around childcare expansion, shortages in infant and toddler care, workforce development, Universal Preschool, and long-term sustainability planning.

The quarter reinforced how closely these challenges are connected. Workforce shortages affect childcare availability. Limited access impacts family stability and economic mobility. Mental health needs continue to influence children, families, and educators. Through it all, **AFK remained a trusted community partner, keeping local families, providers, and educators at the center of planning, collaboration, and decision-making as our community navigates change together.**

