

KANSAS EARLY CHILDHOOD RECOMMENDATIONS PANEL

Monthly Meeting Minutes
Friday, December 19, 2025



Visit the [Children's Cabinet website](#) for meeting materials and the [YouTube recording](#).

Members Present

Nichelle Adams, Kansas Department for
Children and Families

Cathy Gray, Butler Community College

Brenda Bandy, First 1,000 Days

Kansas/Kansas Breastfeeding Coalition

Rebecca Clancy, Russell Child

Development Center

Kim Kennedy, Kansas Department for
Children and Families (DCF)

Karen MacCrory, Mitchell County
Partnership for Children

Patty Peschel, KCCTO

Bethany Samuel, Kansas Department for
Children and Families

Malissa Martin, SparkWheel, Inc.

Marites Altuna, Kansas State School for
the Blind

Tammie Benham, Southeast Kansas
Library System

David Brock, McPherson USD 418

Pshyra Bedell, USD 231

Janelle Dean, Asbury Child Development
Center

Kelly Frantz-Langford, TARC

Rebekah Meitler, USD 323/ Kansas State
University

Trina Morgan, Kansas Children's Service
League

Tabatha Rosproy, Kansas Parent
Information Resource Center

Cornelia Stevens, TOP Early Learning
Centers

Lisa Schmidt, Women's Community Y of
Leavenworth, Kansas

Melissa Schoenberger, Chair, Kansas
Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund

April Shuman, Gigi's Child Care Home

Desiree Streight, Little Explorers

Playschool and CCPC Secretary

AbdulRasak Yahaya, Open Minds Child
Development Center

Christi Smith, Child Care Aware of Kansas

Talia Juiliano-Myers, Child Care Aware of
Eastern KS

Audrey Waid, Little Learners Childhood
Connections

Mandi Waugh, Child Start

Sarah Behrens, University of Kansas
Medical Center

Sara Bloom, Kansas Department of
Commerce

Minutes

Welcome

Melissa Schoenberger, called the meeting to order with a quorum present, described processes for a remote meeting, and directed participants to the [Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund website](#) for meeting materials.

Ecosystem Update

An ecosystem update was provided, including congratulations to Christi Smith on her appointment as the inaugural Deputy or Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood. Christi Smith shared brief remarks, expressing gratitude for the appointment and enthusiasm for advancing the state's mission. She emphasized her commitment to working collaboratively with partners and state agency staff to move the work forward and drive success.

- The panel was encouraged to review the Governor's announcement for a detailed overview of Christi's professional background.
- Appreciation was expressed for Christi's openness as a thought partner and for her continued engagement with the panel.

ECOSYSTEM UPDATE

Governor Kelly Appoints Christi Smith as Inaugural Director of the Kansas Office of Early Childhood

TOPEKA — Governor Laura Kelly announced today that she has appointed Christi Smith as the inaugural director of the newly established Kansas Office of Early Childhood (KOEK). For more than two decades, Smith has dedicated her career to strengthening Kansas' early childhood and family service systems. In this role as director, she will help guide the transition to establish the new office and lead the state agency as it launches on July 1, 2026.

"The establishment of the Kansas Office of Early Childhood marks a transformative step for our state in building the most robust, comprehensive early childhood system in the nation," **Governor Laura Kelly said**. "I am confident that Christi's years of impressive experience along with her passion will provide the leadership necessary to ensure the office successfully delivers on its charge. I look forward to her work to align our early childhood investments, develop a world-class early childhood system that benefits Kansas children and families, and secure a brighter economic future for our entire state."

December Meeting Agenda

Desiree Streight moved to approve the agenda and April Shuman seconded, with a unanimous vote to approve the agenda as presented.

November 21, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Marites Altuna moved to approve the November minutes, and Tammie Benham seconded, with a unanimous vote to approve the minutes as presented.

Kansans' Open Forum - Written and Verbal Comments

Kansans are encouraged to submit comments through the [Kansans' Open Forum Comment Form](#) by 5:00pm the day preceding each meeting to share written comments or to sign up to share verbal comments with the Panel during this portion of the meeting. No comments submitted.

Kansas In The News

Melissa Schoenberger provided an update on current happenings in Kansas during a segment called *Kansas in the News*. The update highlighted efforts to monitor and elevate Kansas-related news through a variety of local sources, including social media, radio, and community-based outlets. Ad Astra Radio, a consortium of hometown radio stations, was specifically mentioned as an example of valuable local media that complements commonly used streaming platforms.

Ad Astra Radio recently shared a press release regarding the Zones grantees, helping to amplify information about the grantees and their work. Appreciation was expressed for the role local news outlets play in disseminating information, as well as for the importance of continuing to issue local press releases to reach communities through diverse and sometimes overlooked channels.

KANSAS IN THE NEWS

<https://www.adastraradio.com/adastra-news/kansas-child-care-zones-program-supports-communities-working-to-address-local-child-care-issues/>

AD ASTRA RADIO
YOUR HOMETOWN RADIO STATIONS

Map of Kansas with callouts to:
McPherson County Community Foundation (McPherson)
Salina Area United Way (Salina)
Geary County Child Care Coalition (Junction City)
Stafford County Economic Development, Inc. (St. Jo)
City of Kingman (Kingman)
Legacy Regional Community Foundation (Winfield)
Grow at Eden (Ponca)

For more information about the highlight on what's happening in Kansas and other relevant details, please refer to the [December's Early Childhood Recommendation Panel](#) time stamps 10:23-12:03.

Help Me Grow KS

Madeline Wegner from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, State Lead for Help Me Grow Kansas, presented an overview of the initiative and how it responds to family feedback gathered in prior work.



Families reported difficulty accessing basic needs and child care, navigating complex and inconsistent systems, and relying on personal connections to find services. Families expressed a need for clear information, simple navigation, local entry points, and a coordinated, family-centered system. Help Me Grow Kansas was described as a coordinated approach designed to strengthen and connect existing programs rather than create new services. The model focuses on access, relationships, and follow through.

- The four core components of Help Me Grow Kansas include child health and community provider outreach, a centralized access point through 1-800-CHILDREN offering 24/7 navigation and warm referrals, family and community outreach that centers family voice and systems change, and data collection and analysis to identify gaps and guide continuous improvement.
- Strategic priorities include expanding developmental screening access, improving referral follow through, supporting the early childhood and health workforce, embedding family voice in decision making, and advancing a no wrong door approach across settings.
- Help Me Grow Kansas is housed within KDHE's Bureau of Family Health and supported through multi agency partnerships and shared data systems. In 2024, 96 percent of families reported that their needs were met through 1-800-CHILDREN, reflecting strong performance within the national Help Me Grow model.

- Collaboration occurs at the systems, program and service, and community levels to ensure families experience a coordinated and accessible early childhood ecosystem.

Help Me Grow Kansas Implementation Examples

The panel received implementation examples illustrating how the Help Me Grow Kansas framework has been applied across the state in recent years. Rebecca Benson, Professional Development Specialist with KCCTO Infant Toddler Specialist Network, shared collaborative work supporting child care providers through developmental screening using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ). KCCTO provides free training, coaching, technical assistance, and resources to providers statewide, with a focus on child development and social emotional supports.

- A spring ASQ pilot began with larger child care centers and expanded through collaboration with Help Me Grow Kansas and the Books, Balls, Blocks initiative. This partnership braided grant funding to provide provider training, family engagement strategies, screening implementation support, and follow up actions. The work later expanded to include family child care homes and ongoing developmental monitoring. Pilot year results included five events, 82 completed ASQ screenings, and broad geographic reach. Early results from the current grant year showed continued growth in participation and screenings.
- Ali Braun, Family Systems Consultant at KDHE, presented the Family Leadership Training initiative currently in development. The training is designed to build family advocacy and leadership skills and was co-developed with family leaders from diverse regions of the state. Participants will complete a community service project, receive compensation for their expertise, and have opportunities to serve in Help Me Grow leadership roles.
- A recorded interview highlighted a Family Advisory Council early childhood work group special project focused on identifying gaps in developmental screening availability, particularly in rural counties. The project involves mapping existing resources, identifying access gaps, and developing next steps to expand screening availability through local community partners.

The presentation concluded with a summary of how the Help Me Grow framework addresses family needs for simplicity, trust, follow-through, and consistency by aligning statewide and local partners. To hear this entire presentation please refer to the [December's Early Childhood Recommendation Panel](#) time stamps 12:10-1:04:07.

Bright Spots:

Melissa concluded the meeting by sharing several heartwarming stories and highlights that celebrate the great work happening across the state. Below is a visual presentation showcasing various bright spots from across the Kansas region, with accompanying notes that provide context and illustrate how these efforts align with broader early childhood initiatives.



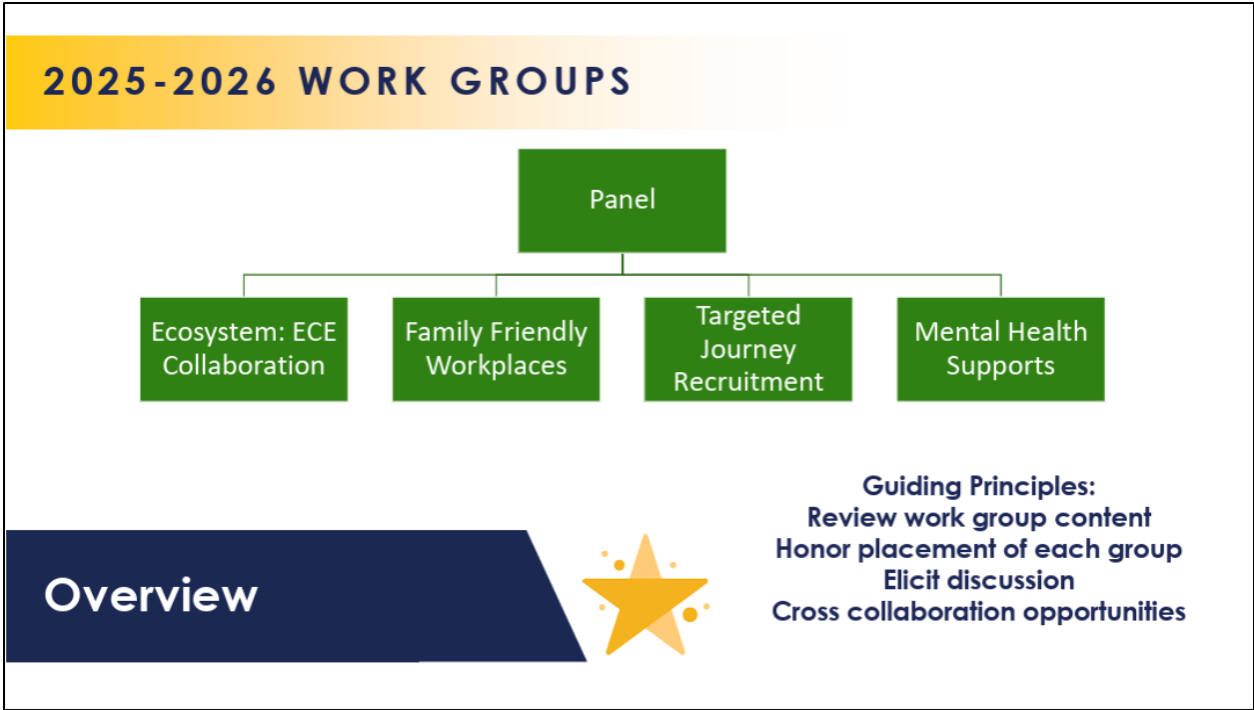
Bright Spot and Coalition of the Willing Summary

- A bright spot was shared at the start of the discussion to set the tone for work group conversations. The panel was described as a “coalition of the willing,” highlighting that participation is voluntary and driven by shared commitment to ecosystem work.
- Reflections were shared from participation in a Coalition of the Willing meeting focused on workforce initiatives.
 - A key takeaway from the meeting was a quote from Keith Lawwick of Law Inc.: “Quit admiring the problem,” emphasizing the need to move from problem identification to action.
 - This message was connected to recent leadership developments and the broader charge to advance systems work.
- This bright spot was shared to encourage work groups to focus on actionable steps, collaboration, and system improvement moving forward.

If you would like to hear about this month’s bright spots that were highlighted please check out [December’s Early Childhood Recommendations Panel](#) timestamp: 1:04:53-1:08:40.

Work Group Summary & Reports

Melissa Schoenberger introduced updates from each work group. Please refer to the [December’s Early Childhood Recommendation Panel](#) time stamps 1:08:40-1:14:00 to hear more about what was discussed.



AIFKK Strategic Plan Monitoring Dashboard

Melissa Schoenberger introduced Sara Gardner of KU-CPPR, noting the importance of the presentation for understanding current progress and future direction, including upcoming asks of the panel and dashboard growth in 2026. Sara Gardner presented an overview of the All In for Kansas Kids strategic plan, a statewide comprehensive early childhood plan in place for six years and updated in 2024, originally developed through the Preschool Development Grant.

- The strategic plan reflects Kansas’ long-standing vision that every child thrives and builds on the state’s leadership in early childhood systems, workforce supports, Head Start, home visiting alignment, and resource and referral networks.
- The monitoring dashboard was created to ensure the plan remains a living tool rather than a static document, supporting transparency, shared accountability, and continuous learning. The dashboard is a publicly accessible, web-based tool housed on the All In for Kansas Kids website and supported by KUCPPR through PDG funding.
- The dashboard is designed to:
 - Track progress toward strategic plan goals.
 - Support decision making at state, regional, organizational, and community levels.
 - Highlight what is working well and where gaps remain.
 - Elevate bright spots, promising practices, and local innovation.
 - Establish shared measurement and shared language around success
- The dashboard is organized by actionable priority areas rather than the original strategic plan pillars, with two pages per priority area:
 - “What we’re doing,” aligned to plan goals and initiatives.


- “How we’re doing,” featuring indicators, data points, narratives, maps, and trends.
- Current dashboard content is not comprehensive and is intended as a starting point to prompt feedback and contribution from partners. Data included may consist of quantitative measures, narrative insights, maps, charts, and links to live data blocks that dynamically update wherever they are embedded.
 - The platform integrates publicly available data sources through My Sidewalk and allows for storytelling alongside data to provide context and reduce misinterpretation.

The dashboard will be updated quarterly, with new insights added to each cycle, and is intended to evolve based on partner feedback and system needs. Partners are encouraged to submit feedback, bright spots, initiatives, stories, and de-identified aggregate data through the dashboard’s “Collaborate with Us” form at any time.

DASHBOARD FEEDBACK

- **ANY partner can share de-identified aggregate data, stories, initiative highlights at ANY time** (via the online collaboration button – leads to data submission form).
 - Partner Agreement Form (one-time)
 - Data or Information Submission Form (ongoing) – [FORM LINK](#)
- **MVP Feedback (current stage through EOD January 6, 2026)**

AIFKK Strategic Plan



To hear this entire presentation please refer to the [December’s Early Childhood Recommendation Panel](#) time stamps 1:14:13-1:43:27.

Panel Input for Early Childhood Governance Summit

During this section, an update was shared regarding the upcoming summit which is scheduled for early part of this year. Note: The upcoming 5th Governance Summit will be held in February and is being redesigned to be more interactive and transactional, rather than a one-way information session.

GOVERNANCE SUMMIT FOLLOW UP

- **February 20, 2026**
- **Invitations to all groups represented on current EC Governance structure**
 - How does your work support the KS EC system?
 - Please share an example of cross collaboration of your work in the EC system?
 - What are barriers and/or gaps you are experiencing that the Panel may help facilitate?
 - **Based on the work you are doing today, what would a headline and secondary headlines look like of your work in 10 years?**

Panel Tasks



The focus will be on the current early childhood (EC) governance structure in Kansas. Invitations and preparatory questions were sent to all representatives within the EC governance structure, asking them to:

- Explain how their work supports the Kansas early childhood system.
- Provide specific examples of cross-collaboration within the EC system.
- Identify barriers or gaps their work encounters.

Participants are also being asked to think futuristically, proposing potential “headlines” for their work and the EC system in 10 years.

Upcoming Meetings: (all via Zoom)

- Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund meeting – Friday, February 3, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
- Early Childhood Recommendations Panel meeting – Friday, January 16, 9:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Adjournment

Meeting was adjourned at 10:50 a.m.