Impacting Young Lives Throughout Arizona

State Fiscal Year 2024 Annual Report

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Dear Fellow Arizonans:

As early childhood supporters in Arizona, we recently had a step in the right direction with the Arizona Legislature's investment of $12 million in child care assistance through the Arizona Department of Economic Security. Despite a challenging budget process, the legislature's acknowledgment of the importance that early care and education play in the lives of Arizona's youngest children and the state's economy is reassuring.

Historically, it's been 15 years since the legislature invested in child care assistance for low-income, working families. As Arizona's early childhood agency, First Things First will continue to work with our partners to inform policy leaders, business and community leaders about the critical importance of early childhood investments. Ensuring babies, toddlers and preschoolers get a strong start and supporting working families is the key to our state's success. Investing in quality child care is investing in our future.

Over the past year, FTF and partners have worked to bring light to the child care crisis through community forums across Arizona. These forums have been held as far north as Fredonia and Lake Havasu City south to Yuma and Thatcher and many more communities in between. We've sat alongside families as they told stories about their struggles to find child care. We've heard from business leaders who say that finding workers is their number one challenge and that finding affordable, high-quality child care is a significant barrier for current and potential employees. We will continue to help businesses and families find solutions because we know that if child care works, Arizona works.

Today's babies, toddlers and preschoolers are our state's generation next - the generation that in just a couple of decades will be entering the workforce and beginning their own families. Addressing early childhood needs is our best opportunity to ensure a solid foundation is set from the start.

In this year's report, you will read about the outcomes of work First Things First has done in collaboration with partners statewide. For example, you will read about home-based programs that supported families' engagement in their child's health and education (Page 32). And you will read how family resources centers support a family's wellbeing (Page 42), along with many other programs.

Now that pandemic relief funds directed to child care over the last three years have ended, we are starting to see the impacts such as child care providers shutting their doors permanently and families losing scholarships for their children to attend quality child care. It is vital that business and community leaders and policymakers work with early childhood partners like FTF to continue to make the case for early childhood investments. As always, we appreciate your partnership in those efforts and look forward to the day when all children in Arizona are ready for school and on the road to success.

Steven W. Lynn
Board Chair

Melinda Morrison Gulick
Chief Executive Officer

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About First Things First

Created by a 2006 citizen's initiative, First Things First (FTF) is one of the critical partners in building a family-centered, comprehensive, collaborative and high-quality early childhood system that supports the development, health and early education of Arizona children from birth to age 5. FTF's work focuses on seven main areas, including:

Quality Child Care and Preschool

Children with access to quality early learning do better in school and are more likely to graduate from high school. FTF funds research–based quality improvement supports for regulated child care and preschool programs that help children thrive. These include assistance for programs to provide healthy and safe learning environments that help children develop emotionally, physically, socially and academically; coaching for early learning professionals to better engage young learners; and selecting and using developmentally appropriate learning materials. Scholarships also are funded to help more babies, toddlers and preschoolers access quality early learning.

Strengthening Families and Early Literacy

Families are a child's first and most important teachers. FTF-funded programs give parents options for supporting their child's health and learning. Services are voluntary and provided at levels that meet families' needs. For example, family resource centers are community hubs where families can access parenting classes, information and referrals and connect with other families in their neighborhoods. FTF also funds voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs that promote overall child and family health and well-being through regular home visits from a trained professional who responds to families' complex and unique needs. Literacy approaches include providing information to families and caregivers about the importance of language and literacy development, as well as access to books and opportunities for families to engage in language and literacy workshops.

Teacher/Workforce Training and Development

Children's relationships with teachers and caregivers impact brain development in ways that can promote learning. Children age 5 and younger learn differently than school–age children and the quality of early learning depends on the knowledge and skills of the teacher. FTF funds college scholarships and other professional development support to expand the knowledge and skills of professionals working with babies, toddlers and preschoolers. In addition, FTF funds a variety of evidence-based consultation models to help early childhood educators improve health practices in early care settings, better support children's mental and behavioral health, and provide more inclusive settings in which all children can participate.

System Coordination

Collaboration among system partners maximizes resources and effectiveness. At the state and regional levels, FTF works with early childhood system partners – like state agencies, tribal governments, philanthropic organizations, businesses and providers of services to kids and families – to maximize funding, reduce duplication of services and ultimately improve outcomes for young children. These collaborations also promote the ongoing development and continuous quality improvement of a statewide early childhood system that supports the health and development of all young children in Arizona.

Parent and Community Engagement

We all have a shared responsibility to help children arrive at school prepared to succeed. FTF works with families, caregivers and community leaders to build awareness of the importance of early childhood and steps they can take to support the education and health of young children in their communities.

Preventive Health

Undetected or untreated health issues in the early years can impact learning later on. Left unaddressed, developmental delays and chronic medical conditions can become serious learning problems that require costly interventions. FTF funds preventive developmental and sensory screenings, health education for parents and children and referrals to existing services to ensure that kids arrive at kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed. In addition, FTF funds strategies to connect families to health care options in their communities, as well as efforts to coordinate the services children receive for maximum benefit.

Research and Accountability

Measuring effectiveness and promoting continuous quality improvement relies on robust, accurate data. Data collected by FTF through research studies and grant or system partners are used to inform decision–making, monitor FTF-funded grant partner performance, enhance program effectiveness and measure the impact of FTF-funded strategies or the collective investments of Arizona's early childhood system.

Our Impact By the Numbers

The data below detail the number of young children, families and early childhood professionals who had access to programs and services as a result of First Things First investments in State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY24). Decisions about which programs to fund are informed by recommendations from volunteer regional councils after thorough study of the needs in their communities. As such, not all FTF programs are available in every region. The numbers below reflect the impact of various programs across all the regions that fund those strategies. FTF grant partners reached thousands of families and professionals statewide with quality programs that will give the young children in their care the opportunity to start school healthy and ready to succeed!

Early Learning

1,434

Child care and preschool providers statewide were committed to continuous quality improvement of their early learning programs through Quality First. Of that total, 404 providers participated in Quality First through funding made available from federal pandemic relief funds.

8,775

Quality First scholarships helped the families of babies, toddlers and preschoolers afford a quality early education for their kids. Of that total, 2,066 young children received QF scholarships through funding made available from federal pandemic relief funds.

464

Early childhood educators received college scholarships to pursue credentials and degrees that expand their knowledge and improve their qualifications for working with young children. In addition, 466 early childhood educators received college scholarships through funding made available from federal pandemic relief funds.

1,080

Relatives and other community caregivers attended educational sessions and received support and resources to increase their understanding of children's development and strategies to promote young children's health and learning.

Family Support

13,538

Parents and caregivers attended community-based language and literacy workshops. This number includes parents and caregivers who may have attended more than one workshop.

21,325

Parents and caregivers received flexible, family-focused and culturally-responsive information, resources and referrals to services and parenting activities family resource centers. 10,559 parenting activities were conducted and 46,827 referrals to needed services were given to families.

59,903

kits containing important information, resources and tools for families of newborns were distributed to hospitals to help families support their child's health and learning.

886

Parents and other caregivers participated in a series of evidence-informed parenting education classes designed to improve knowledge of effective parenting practices and children's development.

2,936

Families with young children participated in voluntary home visiting programs proven to reduce parental stress levels, increase connections to community supports and improve children's cognitive, motor, behavioral and socio-emotional development. Of those families, 249 families successfully graduated from home visiting programs. In addition, children received screenings to detect vision, hearing and developmental issues through home visiting programs:

- 1,043 children screened for vision concerns.
- 1,049 children screened for hearing concerns.
- 2,554 children screened for developmental concerns.
- 2,382 children screened for socio-emotional concerns.

Also, 1,668 caregivers participating in home visiting were screened for depression.

Health

12,743

Children received screenings to detect vision, hearing and developmental issues and prevent learning challenges later on.

958

Children received referrals to further assess for developmental delays/sensory issues and possible treatment or early intervention services.

4,867

Children received a screening to detect tooth decay, which when left undetected and untreated could cause damage to permanent teeth, impaired speech development and failure to thrive.

2,684

Children received fluoride varnish applications to protect against early childhood tooth decay.

367

Child care providers, other caregivers and early childhood service providers received mental health consultation proven to enhance teachers' confidence in dealing with students' socio-emotional needs, improve teacher-child relationships and prevent expulsions. In addition, 267 child care and preschool providers received mental health consultation through funding from federal pandemic relief funds.

1,051

Child care and preschool providers received child care health consultation or support in maintaining health and safety standards in early learning settings.

A Promising Strategy: Language, Literacy and Culture in Tribal Communities

One emerging strategy that is implemented in several FTF tribal regions is focused on language, literacy and culture in tribal communities. Ensuring that Arizona's youngest kids arrive at kindergarten prepared to succeed requires that the "whole child" be nurtured, which includes supporting the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of young children. One way to work toward that goal is supporting early language and literacy development through the use of native languages. The intention is that by providing children with opportunities to engage with their culture, they can better understand who they are, where they come from, and how they relate to the world around them.

FTF funds three pathways under this strategy:

1. Create or identify and distribute Native language and cultural materials to increase families' access and exposure to books and resources that are reflective of the native language and culture.

2. Conduct community events to provide opportunities for families to participate in community events to learn about language and literacy through the context of native language and culture.

3. Coaching to early childhood professionals to increase the use of Native language and culture materials with children in early care and education settings, and enhance the ability and confidence of early childhood education professionals to integrate native culture and language materials in the classroom or home-based setting.

For example, in the FTF White Mountain Apache Tribe Region, the grant partner is working with Apache language teachers to create materials for families. This will provide parents and caregivers with tools to promote their children's language development that are appropriate for their children's age and culture. Apache language library kits with handouts that translate common vocabulary such as colors, body parts, days of the week, food and animals have been distributed to families at community events.

The FTF Pascua Yaqui Tribe Region also funds the strategy. The Pascua Yaqui Tribe is funded to distribute Native language and cultural materials and host community events for families. In SFY24, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe hosted 20 community events with 854 parents and 1,413 children birth to age 5 in attendance. The Tribe hosted events in partnership with the Dr. Fernando Escalante Tribal Library to provide materials to families including recipes, activities, a Yaqui/English dictionary, cultural images and teachings of greetings.

The community events are intended to increase opportunities for families' exposure to Native language and culture. For example, the Family Easter gathering featured Yaqui lifeways and materials to help families celebrate. The library team featured activity stations, one of which focused on confetti and the purpose of its use during Sabado de Gloria or Holy Saturday during the Easter season.

Long-term Solutions Needed as Tobacco Funding for Early Childhood Programs Continues Decline

First Things First is the only state funding source dedicated exclusively to the beginning of the education continuum, from birth to age 5. Services are delivered directly to children, families and professionals who work with young children through a network of community providers (See list of grant partners pg. 51).

In State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY24), FTF received approximately $200,439,696 in revenue, with tobacco tax revenues accounting for approximately $102,331,875. Additionally, FTF received $6,792,655 from investment earnings and $91,315,167 from gifts, grants and donations. Investments in early childhood development and health programs and services that help prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond constituted approximately 95% of spending in SFY24. Administrative expenses remain low at 5%.

Most public revenue sources fluctuate from year to year and are impacted by a variety of factors, including economic conditions, state and federal policy decisions, and changes in consumer spending.

Tobacco revenue – the primary source of funding for FTF's early childhood investments – is one example of this. Over the past 15 years, FTF revenue has decreased dramatically due to a variety of factors, including the Great Recession, declines in the number of people smoking, and the advent of smoking alternatives, such as vaping, for which FTF receives no revenue as they do not contain tobacco. In SFY24, the annual resources available to FTF to fulfill its vital mission are $62.5 million less per year (37.9%) than in 2008. See Table 1.

The latest estimates from the Seidman Research Institute at Arizona State University show that, although the rate of decline will slow slightly, the decrease in revenue will continue over the next decade. The Institute compiles regular tobacco revenue estimates for FTF to assist the state Board with fiscal management and strategic planning. Historically, FTF revenues have landed close to the expected levels in ASU's estimates. For SFY24, actual revenues were about $13 million below the expected level. Revenue is expected to decline by an additional 7.1% by 2032. If that occurs, over the next decade, FTF will have almost $70 million less per year to invest in programs that promote healthy child development and learning than in 2008 (See Table 1).

Table 1: Tobacco Revenue for Early Childhood Continues to Decline

State Fiscal Year	FTF Tobacco Revenue Collections	+/- Change from Prior Year	% Difference from Baseline	$ Change from Baseline
2008	$164,805,113			
2009	$159,974,131	Decrease	-2.9%	-$4.8 million
2010	$132,269,028	Decrease	-19.7%	-$32.5 million
2011	$130,701,444	Decrease	-20.7%	-$34.1 million
2012	$128,314,293	Decrease	-22.1%	-$36.5 million
2013	$125,768,040	Decrease	-23.7%	-$39.0 million
2014	$124,621,734	Decrease	-24.4%	-$40.2 million
2015	$122,115,615	Decrease	-25.9%	-$42.7 million
2016	$125,856,241	Increase	-23.6%	-$38.9 million
2017	$125,338,281	Decrease	-23.9%	-$39.5 million
2018	$121,746,973	Decrease	-26.1%	-$43.1 million
2019	$115,337,473	Decrease	-30%	-$49.5 million
2020	$120,672,218	Increase	-26.8%	-$44.1 million
2021	$118,117,184	Decrease	-28.3%	-$46.7 million
2022	$116,456,931	Decrease	-29.3%	-$48.3 million
2023	$101,247,800	Decrease	-38.6%	-$63.6 million
2024	$102,331,875	Increase	-37.9%	-$62.5 million
2032 Projected	$95,000,000		-42.4%	-$69.8 million

The revenue decline means that FTF's organizational fund balance is decreasing faster than anticipated and current spending levels in administrative and programs cannot be sustained past the current funding cycle, which goes through SFY27.

The FTF state Board has been strategic and intentional in its efforts to ensure the sustainability of its current early childhood investments by commissioning the aforementioned revenue projections; continuing its successful investment strategy; monitoring and revising its adopted sustainability plan, as needed; and working with both public and private entities to leverage funds and maximize the resources available for early childhood programs. This proactive and conservative approach to sustainability earned the Board high marks from state auditors in a 2017 report.

For almost a decade, the FTF Board has been able to backfill the revenue shortfalls and keep spending stable by utilizing its sustainability fund. However, the revenue decline for SFY23 saw the greatest decrease in tobacco tax revenue since 2010.

To address this budget challenge, the Board's Finance and Audit Committee – composed of Board and regional council members, as well as community experts in public financing – who review historical spending, as well as the latest revenue projections, provided recommendations that included: the Board change the funding plan cycle length from four years to three years for the SFY28 cycle, offsetting allocation by a one-time savings of unplanned regional carry forward, which is estimated at $29.8 million for SFY25 compared to the $20 million that was originally estimated.

Another recommendation was to reduce spending by up to 15% beginning in SFY28, specifically from $116.6 million to $100 million on the programmatic side and from $16.4 million to $14 million on the administrative side.

Although this will mean tough decisions for FTF regional councils statewide, it ensures FTF will be able to maintain some funding level stability for communities and families for the next funding cycle starting in State Fiscal Year 2028.

Despite these declining revenues, the Board has worked to maximize impact by prioritizing work in six major areas and encouraging regional councils statewide to fund strategies within those areas.

FTF continues seeking public and private investments in early childhood by sharing the success of its funded programs and providing opportunities for businesses, philanthropy and policymakers to leverage this infrastructure to quickly and efficiently expand services to babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

FTF recently commissioned a vaping tax revenue study from Arizona State University. Although there is little data around vaping because it is an item that states are just beginning to tax, ASU provided an estimate of potentially $50 million in revenue if Arizona were to approve a tax similar to other states.

Recently, the early childhood community also saw a step in the right direction with the Arizona Legislature's investment of $12 million in child care assistance through the Arizona Department of Economic Security for the SFY25 state budget. Gov. Katie Hobbs championed the child care investment in her proposed budget.

To help inform the community about the need to find long-term solutions, FTF will continue to work with our partners to share with our policy leaders, business and community leaders the critical importance of early childhood investments. Ensuring babies, toddlers and preschoolers get a strong start and supporting working families is the key to our state's success. It's important that all Arizonans understand that investing in quality child care is investing in our future.

In April, FTF, in partnership with the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry, gathered about 100 business leaders and early childhood leaders to discuss solutions to Arizona's child care crisis, which costs the state $4.7 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity and revenue.

Over the past year FTF has hosted community forums across the state. The FTF Yuma Region along with the Greater Yuma Economic Development Corporation brought together leaders from sectors including business, higher education and the faith community and announced a child care taskforce to brainstorm innovative solutions for child care in Yuma County.

Community forums in Globe-Miami and Payson jump-started talks about the challenges that working families face to find quality child care that is affordable and available when and where they need it.

And community forums in Coconino, La Paz, Mohave, Graham and Greenlee counties have been held to explore ways to strengthen the child care workforce.

The courage and foresight of local leaders and organizations is helping to expand access to quality early childhood programs throughout the state. But with current revenues totaling just $226 per young child – and the needs of babies, toddlers and preschoolers increasing – it is going to take significant investment from all sectors to ensure that Arizona is able to realize its vision of ensuring all kids are prepared for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Investing in Quality First Means Investing in Arizona's Future

Research from the past 50 years shows that kids with access to quality early learning are more prepared for kindergarten, do better in school and are more likely to graduate from high school. As adults, they tend to be healthier and less likely to be involved with the criminal justice or social welfare systems.

"Knowledgeable and skilled teachers in quality early learning programs engage young learners through interactions with the environment and with others," said Ginger Sandweg, First Things First senior director of early learning. "These teachers intentionally set up learning experiences that support the development of language and literacy, social, emotional and cognitive skills to ensure that babies, toddlers and preschoolers thrive."

Other hallmarks of quality programs include:

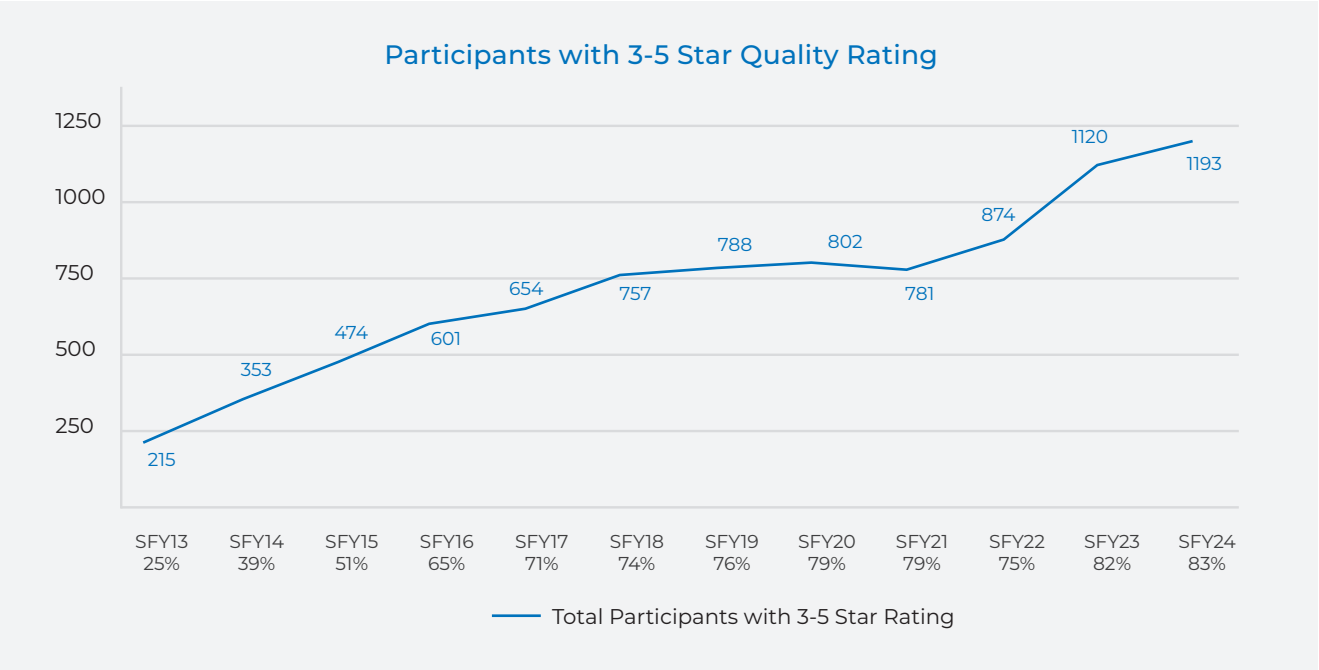
- predictable and balanced daily schedules and routines.
- evidence–based, culturally responsive and relevant activities and intentional instruction.
- regular monitoring of kids' developmental progress to inform teaching.
- ample opportunities for family involvement in their child's education.

"Achieving quality in child care and preschool settings isn't easy," Sandweg said, adding that this is the reason FTF created Quality First – Arizona's Quality Improvement and Rating System. Quality First provides a unified, measurable standard of care and informs parents of how their local providers rate on those standards.

Participating providers, which include a mixed service delivery approach such as public, corporate, faith-based and home settings that support families' choices for accessing quality, receive support to improve the quality of their programs and embed a continuous quality improvement process to sustain quality. This support may include: individualized coaching and specifically targeted technical assistance; funding to make improvements to their classrooms, play spaces or to acknowledge the work of qualified staff; and referrals to resources such as college scholarships so staff can expand their knowledge and skills in engaging young learners, inclusion coaching and early childhood mental health consultation help to expand staff skills in engaging with young learners.

Rating data shows that Quality First significantly improves the quality of early learning options available to Arizona's families. When programs were first rated (2013), 25% of 857 participating rated providers met or exceeded quality standards (3- to 5-star rated). Over the next seven years, enrollment increased and quality levels improved among providers participating in Quality First. At the end of state fiscal year 2024, 83% of 1,434 participating rated providers met or exceeded quality standards. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Quality Improvement and Rating System Progress and Outcomes



The end of State Fiscal Year 2024 saw the conclusion of significant federal resources made available to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on child care in Arizona communities. The $1.3 billion in federal relief funds over the last three years had a considerable impact on child care providers in Arizona.

One unique collaboration between FTF, DES and Valley of the Sun United Way provided furniture and materials to 1,420 early learning providers in SFY23. This initiative provided support to struggling programs, already stretched thin from the pandemic. Federal pandemic funding through the Quality First Incentives Expansion allowed Quality First providers to place over 1,700 orders for materials through Lakeshore, a national retailer of early learning materials. All items available were vetted to make sure they were designed to serve children birth to age 5 and aligned with FTF's mission.

Relief funds helped in many ways, including: hundreds more providers were able to enroll in Quality First for a limited time, the number of QF scholarships was able to be increased and reimbursement rates were increased to better match what it costs to provide quality child care. But that federal funding ended June 30.

It's too early to know the true impact on providers, but Sandweg suspects that some child care providers might have to close their business as the rising costs of running a child care center and the loss of financial support proves too much. In SFY24, 23 Quality First participants closed their businesses, resulting in a loss of over 1,000 spaces for children birth to age 5.

As Arizona agency leadership looked at ways to support working families with federal relief funding, they turned to successful programs already in place at FTF.

Expanding Quality Early Learning Options: Although FTF spends almost $21 million to support approximately 1,100 providers in 26 regions statewide through Quality First, these resources are not sufficient to give all providers access to quality improvement support. When the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) was looking to use federal COVID relief dollars to expand children's access to quality child care, they turned to Quality First. Through Federal Fiscal Year 2024, DES invested $74 million to expand Quality First up to an additional 450 providers. At the end of SFY24, a total of 635 child care and preschool providers were engaged in Quality First since the inception of this funding, with 71 of those having moved into regionally-funded slots in SFY22 and 23. Providers caring for kids in the state's child care subsidy program also were paid 50% more for the care they provided, if they participated in QF and met or exceeded the program's quality standards. All Quality First expansion participants had access to technical support in early childhood mental health – to help their teachers improve their classroom climate, enhance child-teacher relationships, support children exhibiting challenging behaviors and encourage the social-emotional development of every child.

Beginning July 1, 2024, the 394 programs enrolled in Quality First through federal funding in SFY24 transitioned to one of the following:

FTF Regional Funding: 67 expansion programs were moved into FTF regionally-funded openings. Selection was limited and based on regional funding availability, regional priorities and equity considerations—with an emphasis on programs serving children in high-need communities.

A recent Quality First model revision provided the ability to enroll and maintain many of those 67 providers because the program costs FTF less as the providers increase their star rating. For example, a 2-star rated program likely needs more support and coaching vs. a 5-star program, which requires less cost-intensive services to maintain the rating.

"Most of the financial support is focused on the 1- and 2-star programs, because the goal is to help move them to quality (which begins at the 3-star rating)," Sandweg said. "As we see programs increasing quality practices, they cost less and those vacancy savings allow us to add more providers."

External Funding: A handful of programs will be able to continue their participation through an external funding option as a part of their participation in the Preschool Development Grant or High-Quality Early Learning program through the Arizona Department of Education.

Waiting List: The rest of the child care programs were placed on a waitlist until there is an opening through FTF regional funding. Programs received a resource guide and a newsletter that shares free or low-cost opportunities to support them in their continued quality improvement journey.

SUCCESS STORY

Phoenix North Region

For one Quality First child care business owner, the waiting to see if one of her Quality First centers, which was funded through federal expansion dollars, would be transferred over to regional funding or placed on a waitlist was nerve wracking.

Preschool director Lupita Guerrero invited FTF to see firsthand the brain-building that she and her staff do with the children daily at her preschools.

Inside a small room at Little Giants Spanish Immersion School in central Phoenix, a dozen toddlers scurry about, each grabbing a placemat and setting it on two pint-sized tables where they sit for lunch. Both hands on head, they sing in a chorus about scrumptious homemade meals as they wait for everyone to be served.

"¡Gracias!" the children shout in unison after a teacher's cue – buen provecho – to enjoy their meal. For the next few minutes, the room turns quieter as the children munch on fruit, pasta and sandwiches.

It's a routine that teachers have emphasized since preschool director Guerrero, who has extensive experience in early childhood education, founded the preschool in 2022 to provide the type of child care that nurtures the healthy development of children – including her two grandchildren, Santi and Noah. Based on the success of the first program, Guerrero founded a second Little Giants in 2023 in midtown Phoenix.

To ensure optimum services for children in her care, the preschools take part in Quality First. This voluntary program helps improve the quality of child care and preschool for children and families in Arizona. However, with the end of federal pandemic relief funding, one of the preschools faced the impending loss of the program.

Little Giants in midtown Phoenix was one of about 400 child care providers that would possibly lose access to professional development coaching, scholarships for families and other benefits provided under Quality First after the federal pandemic relief funding that allowed FTF to expand the program and ease high demand for quality child care ran out June 30. Luckily, her second program was also pulled into Quality First regional funding for SFY25.

Losing enrollment in Quality First would have been a detriment for families with small children, Guerrero said. From the beginning, the program was part of her vision for Little Giants as a safe environment that could provide children with a high-quality, positive early learning experience anchored in the Spanish language and its cultural connections.

Research shows that the younger children are, the easier it is for them to learn more than one language. At Little Giants, children from different backgrounds can be heard speaking Spanish or singing in Spanish during play time and lunch time.

The bustling preschool, housed in a small building owned by an adjacent church, currently enrolls 39 children, from newborns to age 5.

Guerrero, a native Spanish speaker who has worked with families and children for more than two decades, was familiar with Quality First. She applied to participate in it soon after opening Little Giants in August 2022. She was elated when the preschool achieved 3 out of 5 stars in a rating system that measures progress.

A provider has met or exceeded the standards of the Quality First program at 3- to 5-stars, with 5 being the highest rating. Star ratings are calculated from valid assessment tools that measure key components of quality including the teaching practices/instruction and the learning environment.

"It's a foundation for better things," Guerrero said of Quality First. "And I knew from the beginning the importance of having quality for the teachers, for the children."

Quality First coaching provides invaluable support to include quality and professional development.

The program provides training for teachers who are at the center of children's learning experience during the essential early years of their development. A Quality First coach worked with teachers in previous months, Guerrero said, and the staff is now setting goals with another coach for the coming months.

"Before Quality First I was already training the teachers, but now that we have Quality First, we have the benefit of having a nurse come in and train them on how to change diapers, the importance of hygiene – there are many topics that the program can help us with," Guerrero said.

Teacher Nadia Ornelas said the positive feedback received from a coach who observed her and her co-workers interacting with children reinforced her desire to keep striving to provide the best care for youngsters.

"She would give us feedback and guide us and give us strategies to help our children in the areas of social and emotional cognitive development," Ornelas said.

During one activity, the coach saw that the children were repeating words that Ornelas was using and encouraged her to continue.

"They were expanding their thinking," Ornelas said. For example, she points to the social and emotional learning that takes place when toddlers are learning to share. "It was just taking turns with toys because at one year old, everything is 'mine, mine, mine,' right? It was good that we were able to do the activity and they were all focused," she said.

In another activity, Ornelas put a large piece of paper on the floor and the children began drawing themselves, because they remembered that one of their lessons had their teacher pointing out which part was their head, their feet, their legs. They started doing the same.

"So they were doing that to each other," Ornelas said. "Even though they were using smaller words, they were still mimicking."

As the Quality First coach observed the activity, Ornelas said it made her feel more confident in her teaching.

"It's rewarding when somebody recognizes, 'Hey, you're doing wonderful,' and you might be thinking that you're not doing that good because a couple of our kids need a little bit of support with their social and emotional areas. But according to her, we're doing good. We're helping them in the appropriate way. We're guiding them. We're redirecting positively. We're staying focused. We explain to them according to their age what we're doing."

In addition to the coaching and consultations, FTF provides a limited number of Quality First Scholarships to eligible families who meet income limits - up to 300% of the federal poverty limit - to send their child to a Quality First participating program.

Guerrero said Quality First scholarships are crucial for working families that struggle to make ends meet and may not otherwise be able to afford child care.

Parent Meagan Marmon said the scholarship that her son and daughter received to attend Little Giants provided much-needed financial relief for her family. And knowing that her children, infant Santana and 3-year-old Mila, are getting high-quality care while she's at work gives her peace of mind.

Marmon said her daughter's development is noticeable and she's quickly picking up Spanish.

"The teachers are amazing and the center really aligns with our values," she said. "My husband is Hispanic, so it was really important that we brought in Spanish language to their everyday learning."

Without the scholarships, Guerrero said, "families who need it most would not be able to receive these high-quality services."

She was grateful her two programs will continue to be enrolled in Quality First.

"We need external support so that we can improve services for the children," Guerrero said. "It's important for the benefit of the children because they are the future."

Rising to the Cost of Quality for Early Learning

Quality First Scholarships are intended to help children whose families earn low wages to access quality early learning through tuition reimbursement for programs that align with the cost of quality.

The scholarships also support providers in maintaining quality once they have reached the 3-5 star levels.

In SFY24, an estimated $42.4 million was used from the federal pandemic relief funds to support additional Quality First child care scholarships. This resulted in approximately 1,300 slots for more children to attend quality early learning programs. When providers were awarded these scholarships, they were told that funding for these scholarships would end on June 30, 2024.

In addition to the end of funds for the 1,300 slots, the number of scholarships is further reduced because FTF is increasing the reimbursement rate for each scholarship it provides. For SFY25, FTF has maintained its $45.2 million budget for scholarships. However, because FTF will now reimburse scholarships at a higher level, due to the significant cost of providing quality care, the total number of scholarships being used by children will decrease on average by about 50%.

The higher level for scholarship reimbursements is due to the FTF Board raising the reimbursement rate to the 2021 cost of quality beginning in SFY25. FTF had been using federal relief funds since 2022, in partnership with DES, to provide a scholarship reimbursement at the 2021 cost of quality rate through June 30, 2024 for DES-contracted Quality First participants. The decision to continue scholarship reimbursement at the 2021 cost of quality approximately doubled the previous FTF rate which was at the 2010 cost of quality. This means that FTF will serve fewer children who receive Quality First scholarships because of the increased cost with no additional FTF dollars allocated for scholarships.

SUCCESS STORY

Navajo Nation Region

Parents across Arizona say Quality First gave their children a strong start for success in school

Rosa Esquivel was in the eighth grade and already a mother to twins. And she wanted her babies to have a good start in life.

Her twins, Sky and Sage, had just turned 1 when she enrolled them in the Kayenta Unified School District's Child Occupation Parent Education (COPE), a child care center on the campus of Monument Valley High School.

COPE participates in the Quality First program, which provides research-backed support that helps children thrive. These include training for teachers to expand their skills and incentives to help create learning environments that nurture the emotional, social and academic development of every child.

The FTF Navajo Nation Regional Partnership Council funds Quality First in the Arizona portion of Navajo Nation. The COPE child care center recently achieved the highest level of quality rating in the Quality First program.

Once enrolled in 2021, Esquivel quickly noticed that her twins were learning differently. Her son Sky was very active and always wanted to be moving, while Sage was a bit more sensitive and would cry if he wanted something. But despite their differences, they were both learning very quickly. Esquivel made sure to talk to them often, play patty cake with them and take them on walks.

COPE director Helen Clitso provided the teen mom with support and peace of mind. Esquivel knew her boys were safe and learning in a nurturing environment. She also took advantage of the classes offered at the center and was happy the center was available for her to focus on her education.

With the support of her family, friends and the COPE child care center, Esquivel was able to give her kids the best opportunity to become successful and happy.

"The program provided me a lot of information on how to interact with my children and Sky and Sage are my priority," Esquivel said. "I knew I did the right thing in enrolling them at the child care center, they're both learning and I have peace of mind they are in a safe environment."

SUCCESS STORY

Phoenix South Region

As Marquisa Regnier toured Sky Preschool in Phoenix, she knew right away that it would be a good fit for her toddler.

"The student-to-teacher ratio was really appealing," Regnier said of the home-based program. "It was a very colorful place, very nice and organized."

Her daughter, Maren, who is now 5, has been attending the preschool for more than two years and Reigner couldn't be happier with her child's growth and development.

"Maren's really improved a lot," her mother said. "She's really learned how to share much better and talk to friends and make friends. That's also super important. So academically and socially, we've seen a lot of impact."

Regnier said the emphasis that Arielle Deloney, the family care provider who owns the preschool, places on reading aligns with her family's love of literature. In fact, it is a priority for her and husband, Jesse, she said.

Deloney's preschool is enrolled in Quality First, a program designed to help early care and education providers improve the quality of their programs in ways that help young children learn, grow and thrive.

The FTF Phoenix South Regional Council funds the program so families in the community have access to centers that provide quality care and education.

Deloney said she wants to foster a love of reading among children in her care so they can explore books as a fun activity that can allow them to build different reading skill sets, such as identifying letter sounds, blending sounds and reading sight words.

“Often, reading can be portrayed as punishment,” she said. “I wanted to change the narrative so that you can engage in a story, make it fun and get creative.”

Deloney’s promotion of reading practices isn’t limited to the classroom. Reading books at the park began with her own family during the pandemic, which has grown to the preschool’s annual Story Time in the Park. The March event brings together families in her program, as well as relatives and friends.

Regnier said she has been impressed with the reading program that Deloney has developed for children – called “scholars” by the care provider. “Reading is really the most important skill that a child can develop, and no one can really take that skill away from you,” Maren’s mother said.

Maren loves books and has shown much improvement as she learns to read fluently, along with other skills. “She’s been really focusing on her sight words and her writing,” Regnier said.

Another bonus for Regnier is that her child is in a diverse setting that also includes her African American heritage. “I just feel like culture in raising kids is super important,” she said.

All in all, Regnier said she is confident that Maren’s learning experience at the preschool will serve her well when she enters kindergarten next year.

“I feel pretty confident about her skills,” the mother said.

SUCCESS STORY

Southeast Maricopa Region

In fall of 2022, Julia Payan and her husband faced a difficult decision.

Payan was due to have her second child in early 2023 and was working as a preschool teacher at Bridges Preschool of Queen Creek down the hall from her then 2-year-old daughter Logan.

Payan was also enrolled in a college program studying for her bachelor's in family and marriage service.

Payan wanted to be home with her newborn, Santiago, which required her to quit a job she loved, but with only one income, the family would no longer be able to afford to send Logan to preschool. This was devastating to Payan because she would have to stop her studies and put on hold her dream of working to support families with young children.

Having worked for a preschool program, Payan was aware of the Quality First scholarship program which offers scholarships funded through the FTF Southeast Maricopa Regional Council. The scholarships are designed to help eligible families afford quality early care and education for their young children.

Bridges Preschool of Queen Creek participates in FTF's program, Quality First. The Payan family submitted their application and were approved to have Logan receive a scholarship.

"The Quality First scholarship program is a program that can help you parent," Payan said. "That's amazing! There should not be a stigma around getting scholarships or asking for help. As a community, we should work together to make things better for all of our children. First Things First does that."

Since receiving the scholarship, Logan has thrived in school.

“Logan was non-verbal and received intervention through the state, but now she is talking so much,” Payan said. “I attribute a lot of that to school and the teachers and peers. She’s a really good girl, and I just want the best for her because she deserves it.”

Not only has the scholarship program benefitted Logan, but Payan was able to continue her college courses.

”This has made a huge difference,” she said. ”We can talk to our daughter and she can talk back to us. I waited three years for her to call me Mama! A whole network of opportunities has opened up for her.”

The Payan family are truly grateful for this opportunity to give their daughter the social interaction and academic foundation she needs.

“If Logan didn’t get the scholarship, she would have been in front of the TV all day because I am a full-time student and have baby Santiago,” she said. “I would have horrible mom guilt.”

Instead, Payan marvels at Logan’s confidence.

“Each passing week, we see her confidence increase as she learns how to problem solve in social situations, how to use her imagination in dramatic play, as well as a foundation of mathematics, literacy and self-expression,” Payan said. “This early education opportunity is beyond what I could offer her if she had stayed at home with me.”

She is confident that Logan will be ready for kindergarten.

“It is definitely because of this program that I have no fear in her readiness for kindergarten,” Payan said. “Her teachers and program directors are the real heroes by fostering her education with an abundance of empathy, play and exploration. Even though she has a speech delay and is needing additional services now, her words have slowly turned into sentences. Finally, after three years she is getting her voice.”

Supporting Child Care Staff Through Professional Development Opportunities

Like other states across the nation, Arizona continues to suffer a child care workforce shortage. But, "when child care practitioners were given the opportunity to increase their education, they took it," Sandweg said. She was referring to the over 350 practitioners who enrolled in an online program pathway to gain their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. In addition to the online CDA pathway, the scholars received a laptop, headset and a year of access to internet connectivity to remove barriers that typically exist in accessing online learning. This program was part of the federal relief funding and came to an end on June 30, 2024.

"We know we had a lot of practitioners without the background knowledge and education of child development and working with families of young children," Sandweg said. "The professional development program leads to a credential that is accepted across the nation. It is professionalizing the early learning field and providing practitioners with the knowledge that they have the skills to support young children."

In addition, in SFY24, a contract between FTF and DES allowed FTF to expand its early childhood college scholarship program through June 2024 to 115 scholars. The expansion was made possible through federal COVID relief funds dedicated to early care and education. It allowed any early childhood practitioner pursuing bachelor's level coursework towards a degree in early childhood education to apply for a scholarship covering tuition, books and fees, which expanded the availability of scholarships beyond FTF's funding in specific regions.

FTF Investments Help Preserve Half a Billion Dollars in Federal Child Care Funds

FTF's ongoing investments in quality improvement also continued to ensure that Arizona is able to make full use of all available federal child care funds.

In Arizona, many children access early learning through federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) dollars. CCDF funds are administered by the Arizona Department of Economic Security, which is the State's primary funding source devoted to supporting families with low incomes to afford child care.

Thanks to time-limited federal pandemic relief funding, the amount of child care assistance funds available to support struggling families increased dramatically from March 2020 to September 2024. But one thing stayed the same: Arizona cannot claim a $47 million portion of the total CCDF grant ($268 million) unless the State expends $30 million in non–federal dollars on child care–related activities, of which FTF sets aside the total amount for DES to use.

Historically, the State met this requirement with State General Fund dollars appropriated by the Legislature to DES. State funds approved by the legislature for child care subsidies reached a high point of $84.5 million in fiscal year 2008. Those funds were reduced during the Great Recession, then eliminated in 2012. This resulted in the State's inability to meet the CCDF's requirements and threatened the loss of tens of millions of dollars for child care vouchers annually.

Although some funding has since been restored (the SFY24 state General Fund contribution for child care subsidies was $7.1 million to the Arizona Department of Child Safety), this amount cannot be used as even a partial match for federal child care funds, since it is being used as a match for federal child welfare funds.

In order to continue to access Arizona's full allotment of CCDF dollars, FTF collaborated with the Governor's Office and DES in establishing a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to count FTF investments as the required match.

These expenditures have included the various components of quality improvement efforts – including assessing programs, coaching providers on quality improvement and professional development for early educators to expand their skills working with young children – as well as Quality First scholarships to allow young children to access quality programs.

Throughout the 13 years this MOA has been in place (see Table 2), Arizona has been able to leverage more than half a billion dollars in federal child care funds that otherwise would have been lost. By ensuring that Arizona is able to draw down all available CCDF funds, FTF is helping to ensure today's parents can keep working. Through this effort, FTF is also improving the quality of care in licensed and certified child care and preschool settings and providing access to care through scholarships so that more young children arrive at kindergarten prepared to succeed.

Table 2

Federal Fiscal Year	FTF Match Provided from FFY2011-FFY2022	Total Federal Child Care Subsidy Dollars Drawn Down as Result of FTF-DES MOA from FFY2011-FFY2022
2011-2023	TOTAL FTF match $374 M	TOTAL federal drawdown $511.7 M
2024	$30 M	$47 M
2025*	$30 M*	$47 M*

*projected

Source: Arizona Department of Economic Security

SUCCESS STORY

Northwest Maricopa Region

Home visitation most benefits babies and toddlers in families who face challenging circumstances

When Courtney Grell had her first daughter Delaney in 2017, she knew that something was different. Delaney was always a very active toddler, going non-stop. When asked to complete daily tasks such as putting on her socks or brushing her teeth, she would have tantrums. Even though tantrums are a normal part of child development, the tantrums grew more intense and there was nothing that seemed to help.

Grell and her husband, who live in Surprise, tried a developmental pediatrician and then occupational therapy for Delaney, but neither helped. At age 3, Delaney jumped off of a rock climbing wall, breaking both her arm and leg.

The behavior issues continued when Delaney started preschool. She wasn't able to sit still, which created challenges for her and her peers.

"In the classroom with the other children, Delaney would start to grab or kick them so she ended up sitting at a table by herself, which just broke my heart," Grell said. "Delaney did have remorse for the things she did but was unable to stop herself."

Teachers told Grell that her daughter showed early signs of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, also called ADHD.

When Delaney was 4, Grell became pregnant with her second daughter. She was desperate for help when she started having thoughts about Delaney "being too rough or hurting her sister."

She started looking into resources for her daughter and an ad for Parents as Teachers popped up on Facebook.

The FTF Northwest Maricopa Regional Council funds the evidence-based Parents as Teachers program under the Family Support Children with Developmental Concerns Strategy. In the program, families can get individualized support and coaching through a home visitor who helps identify and address developmental concerns early, respond to challenging behaviors and support a child's physical, social and emotional development.

Grell's experience is just one example of the thousands of families across Arizona who have benefited from FTF-funded home visitation programs.

There were three home visiting models funded in 18 FTF regions in SFY24: Healthy Families (HF), Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) and Parents as Teachers (PAT). These three models have been evaluated nationally, and each has been proven to significantly improve child and family outcomes (see Table 3).

Table 3: Home Visitation Outcomes

	Improved Outcome	HF	NFP	PAT
Short-Term Outcomes	Child cognitive, motor, behavioral, socio-emotional development	x	x	x
	Maternal mental health and depression	x	x	
	Parenting stress levels	x	x	x
Intermediate Outcomes	Connection to community supports	x	x	x
	Home environment	x	x	x
	Mother employment	x	x	
Long-Term Outcomes	Reduced child maltreatment	x	x	x
	Economic self-sufficiency		x	x
	Decreased substance abuse	x	x	

All of the home visitation programs that FTF funds provide personalized support for expectant parents and parenting families with children from birth to age 5, not yet in kindergarten, who face a variety of risk factors. Services are voluntary, free and primarily provided in the families' home. Although the models vary, each involves regular home visits administered by trained professionals such as nurses, social workers, early childhood specialists or paraprofessionals.

For the Grells, that meant that each week, home visitor Reina Bobadilla would meet with the family. Although Delaney was too young to be diagnosed with ADHD, Bobadilla determined she was struggling with sensory processing disorder, meaning Delaney's body has a hard time regulating her environment. She tended to be aggressive. Also, she was fixated with putting things directly in her mouth.

One of the main things the home visitor worked on was the overall family dynamic. Delaney looked for a negative reaction from her mom when she acted out. Bobadilla worked with Grell to implement positive discipline. She told the parents that some negative behavior had to be ignored until Delaney calmed down. After, Grell or her husband would revisit the situation. Over the months, Delaney learned to improve her self-regulation, calm down and return to her mom and apologize.

Helping Delaney regulate her behavior around the baby was important. She was given a warning if she pushed her sister, then removed from her sister and given time to regulate her emotions. Grell learned to enforce follow through with discipline. The same action was taken when Delaney pulled the dog's tail or didn't want to get out of the pool. Grell ignored the tantrum behavior until Delaney calmed down and made a good choice with her actions.

For further support, Bobadilla also sought to improve family communication. One of the activities they would do was an active moving game where the family would throw a ball back and forth and each time they released the ball they would say, "I love it when you..." or "I don't like it when you..."

Grell remembers fondly a time when Delaney said, “Mom, I love it when you play with me.”

As Delaney got more comfortable vocalizing her feelings she said, “I don’t like it when they talk about me like I am not in the room.” This helped her parents understand why she acted out at times. Grell and her husband changed the way they talked when she was in the room to make sure they were speaking to her and including her in the conversation.

Although Delaney aged-out of the home visitation program, the tools from the program continue to be used daily. Grell is happy to report that now Delaney sits at the table and does her homework.

“Parents as Teachers not only provided tools for my daughter, but also tools for myself and my husband,” she said. “They helped multiple aspects of our lives.”

While many families could benefit from home visitation, research shows the families who benefit most are those with infants and toddlers who are facing adverse or challenging circumstances.

Families prioritized for enrollment in home visitation programs include those who, for example:

- Are pregnant or who have an infant.
- Earn less than the federal poverty threshold.
- Are parents under 21.
- Are single parents.
- Have less than a high school education.

Data collected in SFY24 shows that FTF-funded programs are consistently reaching at-risk families at levels that mirror Arizona’s population, and oftentimes, greatly exceed those levels. See Table 4.

Table 4: Home visitation reaches at-risk families

Risk Factor	Arizona	Healthy Families	Nurse Family Partnership	Parents as Teachers
Teen Parent	5%	11%	24%	1%
Single Parent	37%	30%	42%	12%
Less than a high school education	12%	25%	23%	11%
Low-income (150% FPL or less)	31%	74%	66%	43%

FTF-funded home visitation programs continue to reach a diverse group of families, with participants' racial makeup largely mirroring the state's diverse population. All three program models also continually reach a similar or larger percentage of Hispanic, African American and Native American families than reflected in the general population (African American, 4-9% depending on program model, compared to 5% statewide; Hispanic, 60-61%, compared to 32% statewide; and Native American, 3-5%, compared to 4% statewide). This is significant because ethnic families in Arizona are disproportionately poor, which places them at higher risk for poor health and education outcomes.

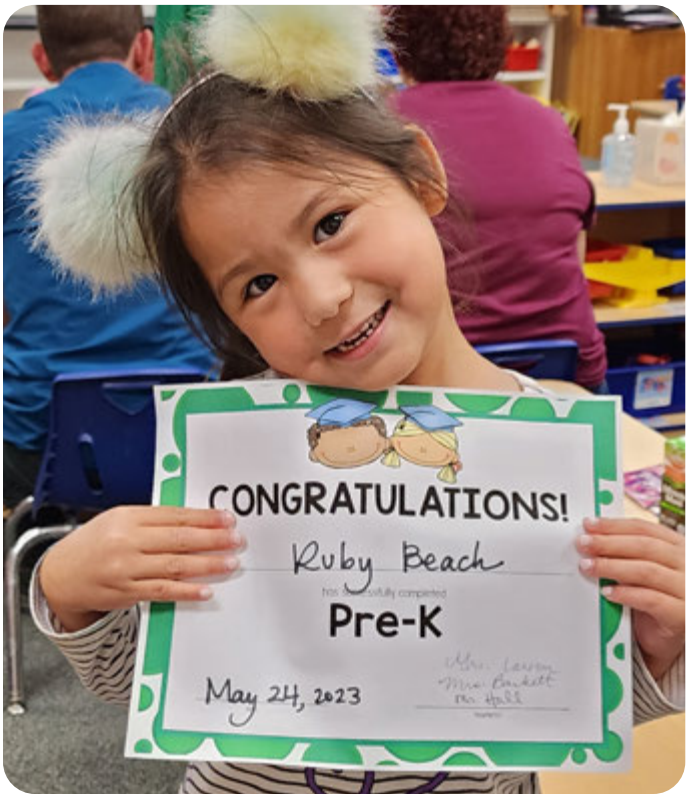
In addition to enrolling the families most in need, research suggests various factors that promote positive outcomes for families. Each program model has established guidelines in these areas, including screening and referral, and retention of families in the program. SFY24 data show that FTF program models are performing well in these areas, too.

One-on-one visits with trained home visitors have been shown to support and empower families and children experiencing challenges, as well as to improve bonding and the relationship between parents and children.

Home visitation can be described as an intensive service because home visitors meet with families frequently and collect extensive information to learn about the family's needs and to set family goals. The home visitors also have to feel comfortable and confident with the screenings and assessments that they're doing, and why they are doing them.

For example, a home visitor might be the first to talk to a family about healthy relationships and intimate partner violence, which can have adverse effects on children and families. These are hard conversations, and it's important that skills, roles and expectations are established.

"It's not the home visitor's role to be the solver of all challenges families face," said Christine Waldbeiser, FTF program specialist for family support and literacy. "But they should feel confident in their role as a professional, advocate and coach that helps the family feel supported and have access to the resources they need. They are not only experts of their program, but also know where to go outside their program to refer families. They really are opening the door to challenging conversations and explaining to families why they are asking these questions."



SUCCESS STORY

East Maricopa Region

When parents Adrianna and Josh Beach had their fifth child, Ruby, they felt their family was complete and knew they wanted the best for all of their kids. To the Beach family, that included providing each child what they needed to thrive and be healthy and happy. During her hospital stay, mom Adrianna learned about a program to help support her as a parent as well as the health and development of her new baby.

Beach enrolled in Healthy Families which is a home visitation program funded by the First Things First East Maricopa Regional Partnership Council. Even as an experienced mom of five, Beach was open to opportunities to learn more and be the best parent possible.

The Beach family welcomed Healthy Families family support specialist Wendy, into their home to help guide them and understand important milestones to look for as Ruby grew and developed. Around age 2, Beach noticed Ruby was not using words to communicate.

“She would mainly point at what she wanted and relied on the older children to help interpret her needs,” Beach said. She also felt that the pandemic had affected Ruby by limiting her ability to observe and learn to speak from others around her.

During weekly visits, Wendy provided mom with strategies that encouraged Ruby to learn and use words and express herself more. Young children learn through play, so using a variety of fun, creative activities like matching and color games and paint play for Ruby helped her progress. Wendy also shared early learning and preventive health information which helped Beach to set and accomplish goals with Ruby around behaviors such as potty training and thumb sucking. The whole family got involved to help support a consistent learning environment for Ruby. They saw Ruby becoming more confident and engaged with those around her.

Wendy was also instrumental in helping Beach find other supportive resources to help Ruby prepare for kindergarten. Ruby began preschool at 3 and a half, where she continued to thrive and develop her speech. Ruby and her family participated in the Healthy Families program for five years which provided a foundation for learning, helping Ruby to arrive at kindergarten this year ready and healthy.

"I feel everyone should have a family support specialist as soon as they have a baby," Beach said. "It was so important to know about developmental milestones and I am so glad we caught Ruby's speech development issues early. I'm thankful for the program and guidance we received."

Another feature of home visitation is that home visitors provide developmental screenings to all participating children at regular intervals (a minimum of one screening per program year after the child reaches 2 months of age is required), and they may provide mental health screenings to participating caregivers, based on the specific needs and circumstances of the family. In addition to providing developmental screenings, home visitors offer equipment-based hearing and vision screenings to children. Access to regular screenings allows for the early detection of children's developmental, vision and hearing impairments, and may help identify resources and supports that could benefit overall family well being.

In SFY24, 6,571 developmental screenings were conducted on children across all three program models.

- 885 young children with developmental concerns were identified.
- 285 young children received referrals for additional supportive services.

Depression screening also was conducted for 1,668 caregivers (59%) during the program year across models.

- 12-31% of caregivers showed indications of concern, depending on the program model.
- 47% of those were referred for additional services.

In order for families to optimally benefit from home visiting, they need to participate in services for a specific length of time, as articulated by the program model and national research. The number of families who did not complete these specified time frames - the attrition rate - varied across models: 37% in HF; 32% in NFP and 25% in PAT.

While low attrition rates are always strived for, the observed attrition rates seem to be in alignment with national research that are reflective of the on-the-ground reality of program implementation with vulnerable families.

In a landmark issue of the Future of Children – a scholarly journal that provides research and analysis to promote effective policies and programs for children – national research across home visitation models showed that families' attrition rates can vary from 20-67%. More recently, researchers examining the Nurse Family Partnership program specifically noted that approximately 35% of families participating in the program go on to complete the 2.5 year program nationwide while in another study that included HF, NFP and PAT programs, researchers found that 42% of families exited within a year of enrollment. Families participating in FTF-funded home visiting programs are showing participation lengths between 16-19 months, on average, depending on the program model.

Parents As Teachers Study Shows Significant Improvements for Families in Key Areas

A recently released study shows that the Parents As Teachers (PAT) home visitation program is positively impacting Arizona children and families who participate in the program. In 2018, FTF partnered with the Parents As Teachers national office and a Tucson-based research, evaluation and consulting firm, to conduct a trial focusing on four Blue Ribbon, FTF-funded PAT sites in Arizona that meet high quality standards for program implementation fidelity.

The study involved 767 primary caregivers and their youngest child, with data collected at multiple points based on key program outcomes. One group of families was assigned to either the PAT intervention group (that receives PAT programming) or a control group (that does not receive PAT, but that can access any other services in the community). The study outcome measures evaluated four domains: child development, parenting practices and family functioning, family health and safety and resource usage.

Of the 461 families that completed both baseline and 6-month data collection, significant differences were observed between the intervention and control groups. After a year, significant outcomes were sustained for the 435 families that completed this time point. Overall, data suggests PAT home visiting programming is positively impacting participating youth and families in these key areas over time:

- Parenting practices: Significant improvements were found in PAT families' parenting practice in the areas of parenting efficacy, which describes a parent's belief in their ability to successfully perform their parenting role and hopefulness at six months.
- Health and safety: Safety practices measured by the Infant Toddler-Home Safety Scale, which measures the caring environment where the infant is being raised, were documented at significantly higher rates for the PAT intervention group than the control group at six months. The same group also had significantly lower signs of depression and parenting stress.
- Child development: The PAT intervention group showed a significant positive impact on children's talking, listening and understanding skills at six months. The same group of parents also showed significant improvement to reading to their child daily at six months.

FTF continues to explore ways to assess the lasting impact of Parents As Teachers for families and youth through kindergarten and beyond. Currently, 18-month follow-up data is being analyzed and follow-up data when the children reach ages 4-6 is being collected to look at kindergarten readiness.

Family Resource Centers Connect Families to Services and Information They Need

Family resource centers may be the best-kept secret that shouldn't be. The community hubs provide flexible, family-focused and culturally-responsive information, resources, referrals to services and parenting activities. The centers, often known by the acronym FRC, connect families to the information they need to support their child's optimal health and development.

"Family resource centers are so unique because they offer so much," said Katherine Willard, FTF senior director of family support and literacy. "They offer space and activities for families to build social connections with one another, opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about child development and how to support the social and emotional competence of their children. They offer concrete supports, and resources and referrals to meet their needs."

FTF funds family resource centers in Maricopa, Pima and Santa Cruz counties.

A closer look at the Family Resource Center Strategy shows how a place that normalizes the concept that families need support is the perfect climate to support child safety and family well-being.

In SFY24, FTF funded family resources centers in eight regions to help support parents as their child's first teacher. At these one-stop centers for families of kids birth to age 5, families and caregivers can attend parenting classes on topics such as early literacy, the importance of play to children's learning and how to deal with challenging behaviors.

“FTF is the largest funder of FRCs in Arizona,” Willard said. “We have built the foundation and now others are coming to the table to support FRCs. FTF is working with our sister agencies and other partner organizations in the child well being space to uplift the foundation of FRCs that FTF has created and to expand to offer more support to more families across Arizona.”

Research shows that children are more likely to thrive when they live in safe, stable environments where families have what they need and family resource centers help families find those needs.

“Within our FTF-funded FRCs, we’ve seen families help each other get jobs, we’ve seen families become one another’s support system, filling in with child care needs or a ride to the doctors office,” Willard said. “We’ve seen families become each other’s chosen families, all because they met at an FRC and built a much needed social connection.”

Given the nature of family use, it can sometimes be challenging to measure outcomes, Willard said. For example, a family might go to a center because they need a car seat for their baby and never return, while another family might attend parenting classes three days a week. “There’s a spectrum because families’ needs vary at any given point in time.”

Still, recent data shows that since the start of the current fiscal year, 121,316 duplicated parents visited FTF’s 46 centers throughout the last year. Many providers report that parents are using the center over and over.

“We know that families are going back,” Willard said. “They’re getting something out of it. Parents consistently need support. It’s the hardest job in the world and it’s ever changing and evolving.”

A survey conducted in December 2023 aimed to identify the landscape of current FRCs in Arizona. For the past several years, FTF has partnered with the Arizona Department of Child Safety Office of Prevention, Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, Arizona Family Resource Network, Arizona Department of Health Services and the Arizona Department of Economic Security with the primary goal to establish a strategy to develop a robust, comprehensive and sustainable system of FRCs accessible to all families with children birth to age 18 across the state.

The statewide team established a definition of: Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are hubs of resources providing a range of formal and informal supports to families across the state. These centers offer services such as parenting support, opportunities for families to build social connections, and assistance with accessing resources, like child care, through the Arizona Department of Economic Security. FRCs play a crucial role in enhancing school readiness, preventing crises and promoting family stability.

The findings of the study provide valuable insights for stakeholders, funders and policymakers to support and strengthen Arizona’s family resource centers and plans to use the information to enhance support for families across the state.

SUCCESS STORY

Pima South Region

The FTF Pima South Region opened a series of FRCs in SFY24. In Sahuarita, family resource center coordinator Mia Ruiz chatted with the parent aid who was a few minutes away from leading a Zumbini class at the Sahuarita Family Resource Center. Parents and caregivers gathered in a modified classroom/playroom. Ruiz greeted each family with a friendly hello, some with their baby in a stroller, others holding the hand of their son or daughter as they entered the room.

The kid-friendly dance music soon had babies and toddlers, along with adults, moving and shaking. Some used colorful scarves to gain attention, while others shook maracas and banged on mini bongo drums, creating community as the beat went on.

“It helps parents have interactions with their little ones without feeling stressed,” Ruiz said. “Today is a fun class.”

A look at the month’s parenting education classes included sessions on brain waves and how a baby learns, a virtual support group for divorced parents, parental self-care, building financial security and an introduction to baby sign language.

A lot of families didn’t know each other before they started attending classes at the Sahuarita center. But now Ruiz said she has watched as families become friends and start offering each other rides to the grocery or share hand-me-down clothing that their child has outgrown.

Family support like this inadvertently serves to promote child safety by building protective factors that contribute to stronger family and community relationships and empowering families to thrive in challenging situations.

Two decades ago, the Center for the Study of Social Policy introduced the five protective factors that help families eliminate stress more effectively and that can mitigate and reduce adverse childhood experiences.

These five protective factors are:

1. Parental Resilience – Families who are resilient are more likely to manage stress and function well when faced with challenges.

2. Social Connections – Positive relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, community members, and service providers can help provide emotional, informational and spiritual support.

3. Concrete Supports – Concrete support in times of need helps to ensure families receive basic necessities and help minimize stress.

4. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development – Understanding parenting strategies and child development helps families know what to expect and how to provide what children need during each developmental phase.

5. Social and Emotional Competence of Children – Positive interactions help children learn to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and build healthy relationships.

SUCCESS STORY

Santa Cruz Region

Jennifer Quiñonez's son was just a few months old, but the first-time mother felt it would benefit his development to start socializing with other children his age.

"There were no other children in my house, so I wanted to find a place where he could be around other children," the Nogales resident said.

A friend told her about the Rio Rico Family Resource Center, which helps families with children up to 5 years old to prepare for kindergarten through free classes, activities and social events.

The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Council funds family resource centers in the region to provide families with the information, services and support they need to help their children achieve their fullest potential.

The resource center turned out to be a place that offered much more than what Quiñonez expected. Not only could her baby engage in child's play with other children, but she also could pick up valuable parenting tips to support his healthy development.

Her son, Gilberto, was 4 months old when the two started visiting the center.

“We played, he shared with other children, he saw other children his age,” she said. “It was a very nice experience.”

The visits became routine and as Gilberto got older, he engaged in various age-appropriate activities, his mother said. When her twins, Jorge and Julian were born, Quiñonez said, the resource center became like a second home for the growing family.

Quiñonez said she was learning along with her boys. Realizing that the time between birth and age 5 is a critical period for brain development was a key factor in her decision to keep her children enrolled at the center. She also liked that she could take parenting classes in her native Spanish and connect with other mothers of young children.

Over the years, Quiñonez said she noticed changes in her firstborn son. It took time, but his initial shyness gradually gave way to a more outgoing personality. “Now I can say that he is a child who is more open, he is more social, he tells me what he feels and what he thinks,” she said.

Gilberto is now 5 years old and this is his last year attending the resource center. He will be entering kindergarten in the fall and his mother has no doubt he is well-prepared to start his school education.

Twins Julian and Jorge, who are 3 years old, will continue to attend the resource center until they start kindergarten, their mother said.

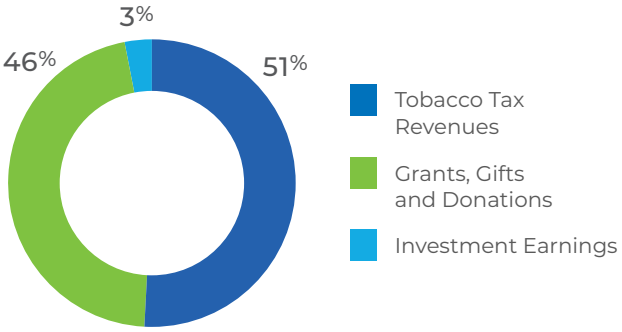
“I think that taking them from such a young age has also been a great help, because now I see that they speak very well and they understand the stories I read to them very well. And they get really excited when we go to the center.”

Statewide and Regional Expenditures

SFY24 Revenues/Expenditures

SFY24 Revenue by Source

Tobacco Tax Revenues	$102,331,875
Grants, Gifts and Donations	$91,315,167
Investment Earnings	$6,792,655
TOTAL	$200,439,696



Note: Financial data presented are based on a modified accrual accounting methodology and are unaudited at time of publication and, as such, are subject to change.

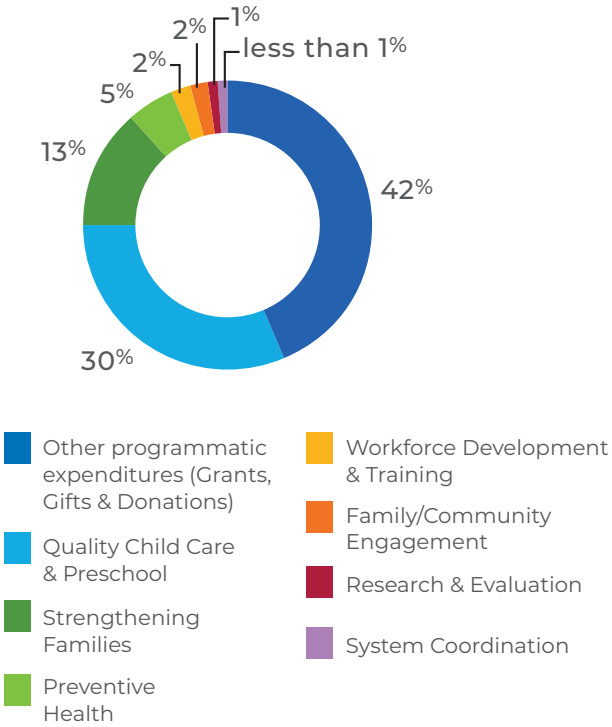
SFY24 Expenditures

Programs and Services

Other programmatic expenditures (Grants, Gifts & Donations)	$91,785,038
Quality Child Care & Preschool	$65,515,483
Strengthening Families	$28,021,225
Preventive Health	$11,969,668
Workforce Development & Training	$4,053,865
Research & Evaluation	$3,005,744
Family/Community Engagement	$3,602,767
System Coordination	$206,516

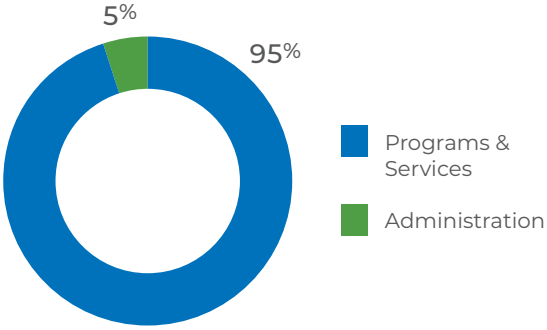
Support Activity

Administration & General	$11,626,997

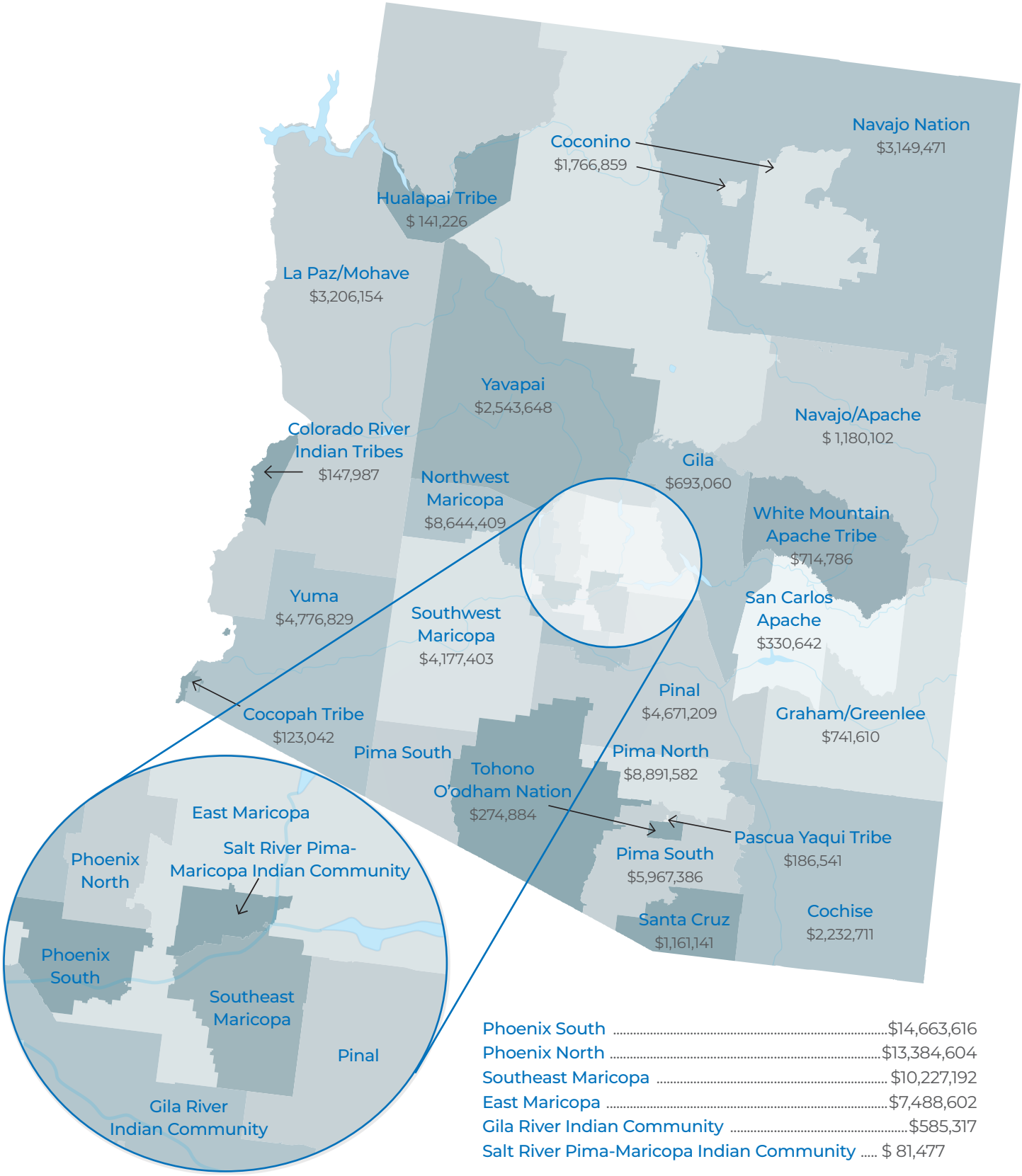


SFY24 Expenses by Category

Programs & Services	$208,160,305
Administration	$11,626,997
TOTAL	$219,787,302



SFY24 Investments Across Arizona



Phoenix South	$14,663,616
Phoenix North	$13,384,604
Southeast Maricopa	$10,227,192
East Maricopa	$7,488,602
Gila River Indian Community	$585,317
Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community	$ 81,477

*This does not include $10,550,097 in statewide programmatic expenditures.

Statewide Partners

First Things First strives to promote efficacy and promote efficiency by leveraging the successful efforts and experience of existing early childhood system partners. Programs and services funded by First Things First are delivered primarily by community based non-profit organizations, school districts, local governments and institutions of higher learning who have been awarded contracts through a competitive grant process and by governmental entities with demonstrated expertise in a specific field of work. The almost 70 organizations listed below represent only FTF's contracted services. FTF regional partnership councils and staff work with a myriad of additional state and local community partners to maximize our collective work and impact through coordination and collaboration.

Non-Profit Organizations

- Arizona Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- Arizona Children's Association
- Candelen (formerly Association for Supportive Child Care)
- Chicanos Por La Causa Inc., dba Parenting Arizona
- Child and Family Resources Inc.
- Child Crisis Arizona
- Cochise Health and Social Services
- Dignity Community Care dba Chandler Regional Medical Center
- Easterseals Blake Foundation
- High Country Early Intervention, dba Karen A. Fay, Inc.
- Make Way for Books
- North Country HealthCare
- Southwest Human Development
- The Learning Center for Kids, dba Root for Kids
- United Way of (Pinal County, Tucson and Southern Arizona
- Valley of the Sun United Way

School Districts

- Buckeye Elementary School District
- Chandler CARE Center (Chandler Unified School District)
- Cottonwood-Oak Creek School District
- Creighton Elementary School District
- Deer Valley Unified School District
- Glendale Elementary School District
- Isaac ElementarySchool District
- Paradise Valley Unified School District
- Peach Springs Unified School District
- Pendergast Elementary School District
- Peoria Unified School District
- Tempe Elementary School District
- Washington Elementary School District

Cities/Towns

- Apache Junction Public Library
- City of Avondale
- City of Mesa
- City of Phoenix Human Services Department
- City of Scottsdale
- City of Surprise
- Safford City-Graham County Library
- Town of Gila Bend

County Government

- City of Phoenix Library
- Coconino County Public Health Services District
- Gila County Library District
- Maricopa County Department of Public Health
- Maricopa County Juvenile Court
- Navajo County Public Health Services District
- Pima County Health Department
- Santa Cruz County School Superintendent's Office

Other

- Arizona Youth Partnership (Teen Outreach Pregnancy Services)
- Maricopa County Special Health Care District, dba Valleywise Health, formerly Maricopa Integrated Health System
- Summit Healthcare Association

Tribal Nations

- Cocopah Indian Tribe
- Colorado River Indian Tribes
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation
- Gila River Health Care Corporation
- Hualapai Indian Tribe
- Navajo Nation Department of Dine Education
- Navajo Nation Library
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community
- Tohono O'odham Nation

Institutions of Higher Learning

- Arizona Board of Regents for and on behalf of Arizona State University (La Paz Cooperative Extension)
- Arizona Board of Regents for and on behalf of Arizona State University – PBS 8
- Arizona Board of Regents on for and behalf of Northern Arizona University
- Arizona Board of Regents for and on behalf of University of Arizona – Cooperative Extension (Gila, Graham/Greenlee, La Paz, Pinal, Santa Cruz, Yavapai and Yuma counties).
- University of California – Berkeley

Private Organizations

- Callie Pediatrics, P.C.
- Enhancing Early Childhood, LLC

Celebrating a Decade of Service to Arizona's Young Children

At FTF, decisions about which early childhood programs are funded locally are informed by recommendations to the state Board from volunteer regional partnership councils. These dedicated citizens represent the many facets of our community that have a stake in our young children's success, including parents, educators, child care professionals, health care providers, tribal communities, faith representatives, business leaders and philanthropists. Each member dedicates an estimated 120 hours each year to study the needs of their communities and work with local stakeholders to identify priorities for funding.

However, being a regional council member goes beyond the work done in meeting rooms. Each member – in their professional and personal lives – works to connect others in their community with the work of FTF. They do this by building awareness of the importance of early childhood among audiences ranging from families to policymakers. They can also build community partnerships that help to expand or enhance the local support for young children or their families. Although members serve staggered four-year terms, many individuals apply for and are selected to serve additional terms. In SFY24, there were 12 individuals statewide who celebrated 10 years of service to young children in their communities. They join 99 individuals acknowledged for this milestone since 2018. This year, FTF thanks and celebrates the following 10-year champions for children.

10-years of service

- Anthony Reed, Philanthropy Representative FTF Cochise Region
- Charles Proudfoot, Business Representative FTF Gila Region
- Deborah Chadwick, Educator Representative FTF Gila River Indian Community Region
- Kasey Ekman, Health Services Representative FTF Graham/Greenlee Region
- Victoria Begay, Philanthropy Representative FTF Navajo Nation Region
- Dawn Yazzie, Chair, Parent Representative FTF Navajo Nation Region
- Kimberly Avery, At-large Representative FTF Navajo/Apache Region
- Wendy Resnik, At-large Representative FTF Phoenix North Region
- Susan Shinn, Chair, School Administrator Representative FTF Pima North Region
- Elliott Taglo Sr., At-large Representative FTF San Carlos Apache Region
- Chris Ciruli, Business Representative FTF Santa Cruz Region
- Erika Garcia Montano, Vice Chair, At-large Representative FTF Santa Cruz Region

FTF asked the 10-year regional council members to share what they appreciated most about serving on the regional council and why they would recommend council participation to others in their community. Below are a few of their answers.

Kimberly Avery, At-large Representative, FTF Navajo/Apache Region

"As a member of the Navajo/Apache Regional Partnership Council, I have been able to advocate for families in our community, which is among the poorest in the state. This experience has shaped the course of my life. I am now an adoptive parent and look forward to helping provide much needed services to our community in the near future through the networks that our regional council has built."

"This has been an extremely rewarding experience! Being a council member allows one to advocate while learning about needs and resources at the local level where change happens."

Wendy Resnik, At-large Representative, FTF Phoenix North Region

"Besides all the wonderful people I've met, what I appreciate most is learning about the challenges, issues and potential solutions for families of young children."

"If you care about the future of our state, it must begin with caring for our children. FTF is the nexus for this work."

Deborah Chadwick, Educator Representative,
FTF Gila River Indian Community Region

"I appreciate the opportunity to work collaboratively with a group of community members who focus on the youngest in the Gila River Indian Community and their families. It is great that the FTF Gila River Indian Community Regional Partnership Council is made up of people who have diverse backgrounds (professional and personal), which helps in our discussions as we make decisions with funding. It is nice that our regional council is supported by an FTF regional director, who is available to answer any questions we may have."

"Participation in the FTF Gila River Indian Community Regional Partnership Council is a way for community members to share ideas and work collaboratively in making a stronger community support system for families and their children. I think it is important to bring together all stakeholders who focus on early childhood education and health. It is through community collaboration that ideas are formed and acted upon for the benefit of the Community. The FTF Gila River Indian Community Regional Council and FTF are a nice/fun group of people to work with."

15-years of service

The following members completed 15 years of service:

- Debbie Winlock, FTF Coconino Region
- Gloria Flores-Lopez, FTF Colorado River Indian Tribes Region
- Amalia Reyes, FTF Pascua Yaqui Region
- John Jensen, FTF Pascua Yaqui Region
- Melisa Lunderville, FTF Santa Cruz Region
- Cheryl Conde, FTF Tohono O'odham Nation Region
- Joseph Mease, FTF Tohono O'odham Nation Region
- Mario Ybarra, FTF Yuma Region

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First Things First is an essential leader and partner in creating a family-centered, equitable, high-quality early childhood system that supports the development, well-being, health and education of all Arizona's children, birth to age 5.

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