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## New California State Report Names Santa Barbara County a Leader in Expanding Childcare Access

*A Budget Center case study credits a countywide coalition, including the Santa Barbara Foundation, backed by federal recovery dollars, with the fastest childcare enrollment growth of any California county*

**(SANTA BARBARA, CA)** — A new case study from the nonpartisan [California Budget & Policy Center](#) names Santa Barbara County a statewide model for expanding access to childcare, crediting a coordinated effort among local nonprofits, public agencies and funders.

Between 2021 and 2024, the county increased enrollment in publicly funded childcare by 160 percent, the highest rate of any of California's 58 counties.

The report, [How Santa Barbara County Made Strides in Addressing the Unmet Need for Child Care](#), released July 29, examines how the county moved so quickly and what other regions can learn. In 2024, 23 percent of eligible children in the county were enrolled in publicly funded care, up from 13 percent in 2022 and nearly 50 percent above the statewide rate of 16 percent.

"Santa Barbara County demonstrates that expanding access to childcare takes more than funding alone," said Laura Pryor, research director at the California Budget & Policy Center. "By investing in providers, centering family choice, focusing on facilities, using data to guide decisions, and building strong partnerships across sectors, the county made meaningful progress in increasing access to publicly funded childcare. As California counties continue working to address its childcare shortage, policymakers can draw on these lessons to strengthen childcare programs across the state."

The report attributes much of that progress to a cross-sector partnership that took shape after the pandemic when early care and education system faced deep disruptions, including closed classrooms, lost workforce and a critical shortage of infant and toddler care.

The [Santa Barbara Foundation](#) partnered with [Children's Resource & Referral of Santa Barbara County](#) (CRR), the [Santa Barbara County Education Office Child Care Planning Council](#) (SBCEO) and [Eileen Monahan Consulting](#) to implement a childcare initiative to increase the number of infant and toddler childcare spaces and strengthen the county's childcare infrastructure. The work drew on the County of Santa Barbara's \$2.125 million investment of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, including \$1.125 million administered by Santa Barbara Foundation.

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“We’re proud to have been part of this work alongside so many committed partners,” said Liz Thasiah, vice president of programs at the Santa Barbara Foundation. “The results belong to the providers and the organizations doing this work every day. What the county has shown is that when childcare is treated as essential infrastructure, access grows.”

From 2023 to 2025, the initiative’s partners created 1,599 new licensed infant and toddler spaces, a 540 percent increase over the original goal. CRR’s coaching and licensing support helped 98 new family-based, in-home providers open their doors, provided \$325,265 in grants to fund facilities start-up and expansion, and trained 240 early childhood educators.

“Providers are more likely to expand and sustain their programs when they are connected to consistent, trusted support and mentorship,” said Michelle Graham, chief executive officer of Children’s Resource & Referral of Santa Barbara County. “This work is further strengthened by long-standing relationships with community partners and funders who continue to invest in and believe in this shared vision.”

The effort produced the county’s first [Child Care Facilities Master Plan and Toolkit](#), informed by work with local planning departments to assess how land-use policies, zoning, permitting, fees and development standards affect the development and expansion of childcare facilities.

The report identifies several strategies behind the county’s progress: cross-sector relationships, data-informed planning, a focus on childcare facilities and provider recruitment and retention. Rather than duplicating efforts, the report notes, partners built on infrastructure already in place.

Workforce development was central to that effort. “The Santa Barbara County Education Office (SBCEO) works in close partnership with Children’s Resource & Referral to strengthen our county’s early care and education workforce through ongoing professional development opportunities, support for permit attainment, and access to continued education,” said Christian Patterson, manager of Early Care and Education at SBCEO. “Together, these efforts help educators grow their skills, advance along their career pathways and contribute to stronger retention across the field.”

The approach is now expanding beyond Santa Barbara County. In 2025, CRR and Santa Barbara Foundation secured a \$550,000 Uplift Central Coast grant to share the model with San Luis Obispo, Ventura and Monterey counties, and CRR is training childcare leaders across the region to adapt strategies proven in Santa Barbara County. Locally, CRR has helped create an additional 1,310 childcare spaces in the past 10 months.

Also, as part of a six-county effort to expand childcare access through local land use policy and community investment, the Santa Barbara Foundation serves as a lead member of the Central Coast Child Care Facilities Action Network, which is pursuing additional funding to sustain and extend the work, including a proposal to train childcare facilities specialists in each county.

The county’s Child Care Facilities Master Plan sets a target of 3,000 new spaces by 2030. Even so, partners caution that significant needs remain: the shortage of infant and toddler care is still severe, and affordability continues to strain working families.

This initiative was part of a broader collaboration based on ARPA funding received by Santa Barbara County and administered by First 5 Santa Barbara County. The county’s ARPA funding allocation included \$1 million received by United Way of Santa Barbara County to build out other aspects of the county’s childcare infrastructure, including developing an emergency childcare action plan for essential workers in times of crisis, and offering facility grants that provided start-up and expansion capital to increase the availability of care for children ages zero to five.

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The case study is available at [calbudgetcenter.org](https://calbudgetcenter.org). In addition to the [Child Care Facilities Master Plan](#) & [Child Care Facilities Master Plan Toolkit](#) and the Santa Barbara Foundation's [ARPA Child Care Impact Report](#), which details the work completed from 2023-2025, more about the local effort can be found at [SBFoundation.org](https://SBFoundation.org).

#### **About Santa Barbara Foundation**

Founded in 1928, the Santa Barbara Foundation actively connects donors, nonprofits, government, businesses and the people of Santa Barbara County to take on the most challenging needs facing our region's communities. Recognizing that its work depends on the strength of the social sector, the Foundation is committed to the health and vitality of local nonprofits. Knowing that together we can do more, the Foundation mobilizes charitable giving and connects their expertise to that of donors, nonprofits and residents to create meaningful impact on the communities of our county. [SBFoundation.org](https://SBFoundation.org).

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