



# Opportunities Exchange

## STAFFED FAMILY CHILD CARE NETWORKS: Lessons from a National Community of Practice

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The pandemic and its devastating impact on family child care (FCC) operations and finances, and the federal and state relief funding intended to mitigate that impact, created a level of change and disruption in the early care and education (ECE) field that enhanced interest in Staffed Family Child Care Networks (SFCCNs). SFCCNs are designed to strengthen program quality and financial sustainability of small, home-based child care settings, which, [according to a 2020 Home Grown fact sheet](#), is the most prevalent child care placement for infants and toddlers.

While SFCCNs share this foundational goal, they differ greatly in terms of the strategies that they employ. Opportunities Exchange (OppEx) convened a 7-team Community of Practice (CoP) in 2021, and from this experience, identified best practices among SFCCNs. A summary of lessons learned, structured around key issues, is included below.

### 1. Flexibly meet provider member needs.

Providers are most likely to join, or deepen engagement with, an SFCCN if services offered are relevant to their needs. Networks that provide members with current updates on policy issues, evolve services in response to provider need and context, and connect the dots between regulatory and policy change and business and automation issues offer FCC providers a pathway to sustainability during this particularly tumultuous time.

For example, Maryland Child Care Boost offered training, coaching, and automation support to provider members around strategic expenditure and tracking of American Rescue Plan Act grants. Some Networks that held the license for the ECE Knowledge Hub ([www.ecesharedresources.com](http://www.ecesharedresources.com)) were able to use the platform as a conduit for the distribution of state CARES or ARPA grants.

While agility is critical, SFCCNs have to remain fixed in foundational elements of services, roles, and expectations. All of the Networks that participated in the CoP were using Child Care Management Software (CCMS) however, those with specific requirements around the timing and level of software usage were more successful in deepening provider engagement with technology. For instance, Networks that created incentives (or required) full use of CCMS (including daily electronic check-in of children, electronic family billing, and parent communication tools), were generally more successful in achieving participation and helping providers realize their business goals.

### 2. Design a data collection plan in alignment with project goals.

The most effective SFCCNs have a laser focus on provider outcomes and a means to access data to measure progress (or lack thereof). Best practice dictates a through line from the services offered to the desired outcome. The Theory of Change graphic below makes these linkages clear, underscoring that services and Network actions (strategies), are designed to influence specific provider skills and practices (targets), in pursuit of the ultimate goals (outcomes).



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The Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative's SFCCN team developed an excellent Theory of Change with defined outcomes linked to a menu of services and data collection plan. While SFCCN staff review individual provider member data regularly to measure progress and ensure that providers reach their pedagogical and business goals, each quarter the team also reviews aggregated data within the context of the Theory of Change to determine any corrective changes that might be needed based on patterns and trends identified.



### 3. Use technology to benchmark progress—among individual providers as well as across the Network.

Successful Networks embrace Child Care Management Software and other technology to not only boost provider capacity but also benchmark progress. CCMS data can guide individual provider coaching as well as track overall progress (among a Network of providers in a particular cohort, county, region or state) in marketing, enrollment, fee collection, revenue, and other key metrics. In best practice, these data are used to drive the menu of services delivered, training and coaching offered, and policy agendas for the Network as a whole.

Network staff typically need support in developing the skills needed to effectively analyze data and: 1) assess provider needs and progress; 2) assess regional or other subsets of data; 3) identify trends over time; and, 4) design course corrections when needed. Support from a data expert and partnership with the CCMS vendor can help ensure that Network staff understand and scope each element of a provider dashboard, continue to modify the dashboard over time, filter the dashboard in ways that are meaningful to the project design and intended outcomes, and effectively message data to report to funders and otherwise maximize use of its findings.

### 4. Promote the SFCCN value proposition and communicate regularly with members, funders, and other key audiences.

SFCCNs in the CoP agreed that messaging matters and shared communication strategies—often linked to technology—were essential to Network success in recruiting and retaining both members and funding. Strong value propositions, designed to promote and scale the Network, include key messages based on outcomes identified in the Theory of Change written from the provider perspective. *What difference will participation make for me? Will I save time? Will I earn more money?* Successful Networks also consistently highlight member success, communicate with members regularly, and aim to build a sense of community. Through regular communication, SFCCNs can serve as an important resource for curated, vetted, timely information that their members need.

A variety of communication channels and strategies can be effective. For example, a Pennsylvania Network participating in the CoP created a member portal to share resources and information. A Network might: create a website or page on an existing website to recruit members and offer to keep the public informed of Network progress; establish an online social media group to build community and post reminders about use of the CCMS; create a special member section on their agency website for access to SFCCN-specific information, events, and resources; create and promote the use of a targeted Slack channel; and/or, issue an electronic newsletter.



## **5. Use SFCCN experience and data to inform public policy.**

Effective SFCCNs not only include public policy messaging, but also seek to advance policy change. The Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network (WEESSN) is an excellent example. When WEESSN was launched, family child care providers were required to use state supplied paper forms for all licensing documentation, essentially prohibiting providers from taking full advantage of automation tools. The WEESSN team raised this issue with licensing staff, received approval to operate an FCC automation pilot, and subsequently presented pilot project success in order to justify a permanent fix. The state published new licensing commentary to include equity for family child care programs, who are now able to use software solutions for licensing documentation and compliance.

Excessive paperwork is a key reason many providers seek to avoid licensing, resist serving families receiving subsidy, or close their businesses. Encouraging electronic documentation—and ensuring that it is an approved strategy for licensing, quality rating or funding documentation—is one way that SFCCNs can help participating providers save time and money.

## **6. Collaborate with community partners and trusted messengers.**

A range of organizations can serve as effective Hubs for SFCCNs—including Child Care Resource and Referral entities, provider associations, state affiliates of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, large child care providers, and other community-based organizations. Each organization offers a range of services, experience and expertise, and can effectively partner and collaborate with other organizations to fully meet provider member needs.

The Wisconsin experience is a case in point. Given that WEESSN is a statewide Network, collaboration with local partners is essential to their success. In the City of Madison, WEESSN partners with Reach Dane, a nonprofit organization with extensive expertise in FCC quality improvement and accreditation support.

SFCCNs in other states have tapped local expertise – often pro bono. Frequently, key services are available free-of-charge or at reduced rates, such as retirement planners, credit union representatives, certified financial counselors, health navigators, benefits brokers, insurance agents, and tax preparers. FCC providers typically lack connections to these experts. SFCCNs can play a key role in brokering relationships as well as helping collaborators understand the unique nature of home-based child care businesses. The result is a win-win—providers get access to key supports and local business experts are better able to build meaningful relationships with clients, children and families.

## **7. Ensure a strong and consistent provider voice in Network services, decisions and leadership.**

SFCCNs exist to benefit family child care provider members. Membership voice, in identifying service needs and priorities, identifying key leaders, messaging the value proposition, and evaluating Network performance, is key to success.

Strategies to engage providers in leadership roles vary widely. A Vermont SFCCN, operated by Let's Grow Kids, includes a provider on the project staff. Maryland Child Care Boost is creating leadership roles for providers as mentors and coaches, so that they can share their experience as well as build buy-in and scale. Nebraska recruited a Latina provider to help guide their work with Spanish-speaking providers.

While SFCCNs have existed for decades, their traditional role has been in the sphere of pedagogical supports. As Networks develop robust services to address the business challenges of providers, it will be important to identify and amplify strategies with meaningful impact on the sector—and to ensure the resources are available to scale the practices in all communities. 