

## “Journey to Becoming Early Childhood Facilities Champions”

*April 2021*

Detroit is the largest and most populous city in the State of Michigan, the largest US city on the United States-Canada border, and the seat of Wayne County. Despite historical municipal, economic and social challenges, Detroiters—the people—have persisted and been resilient amidst the inconsistency of strong and visionary leadership. The civic commitment of Detroit (with the highest percentage of African American citizens of any city in the country) continues to fuel its resilience.

### Hope Starts Here

In 2015, the IFF Research and Evaluation team collaborated with leaders throughout Detroit on an analysis concluding that nearly 28,000 of the city’s children needed but did not have access to quality early care and education. The study compared the number of slots available at licensed and registered facilities with the number of children in need of care, breaking down the supply-and-demand estimate by individual neighborhoods and program types.

Catalyzed by the study, Hope Starts Here—Detroit’s Early Childhood Partnership—has engaged families, businesses, child education and health experts, and the larger community in creating a vision to ensure that children are born healthy, prepared for kindergarten, and on track for success by third grade and beyond. Since it’s 2016 inception and moving forward, Hope Starts Here aims to, at last, make Detroit a city that puts children first.

Hope Starts Here partners drafted six imperatives—articulating what must be done to make Detroit a city that puts young children and families first. IFF’s Early Childhood Services and Real Estate Solutions team provides leadership related to the fourth imperative, including:

- Guaranteeing safe and inspiring learning environments for our children
- Improving facilities quality across Detroit
- Aligning, increasing, and better leveraging existing resources

Safe and inspiring learning environments lay the foundation for high quality early childhood experiences. The physical location and environment of early childhood programs has a

tremendous influence on children, families and providers. The quality and design of these environments should not only ensure safety and comfort, but promote active development, learning and positive social interactions.

Locating programs near where parents live and work is fundamental to their ability to access childcare, allowing them to work and support their families. Unfortunately, too many Detroit families lack a safe, inspiring place to send their children for early care and education.

### Why Quality in ECE Facilities Matters

Historically, childcare providers have sought facilities that are affordable and that meet licensing standards. They simply do the best they can with what they find, juggling many aspects of the work including staffing, fiscal management, curriculum fidelity, enrollment, and parent and community engagement. Facilities management and maintenance is not within their typical scope of expertise. In addition (in many states), there is a disconnect between the Quality Rating Improvement System and facilities quality. Many providers have achieved four and five stars in facilities that do not reflect their programmatic quality. It can be challenging to reconcile credentialing from the state with a push to improve facilities. Programs like Learning Spaces are reframing the approach, co-designing facilities through the lens of programming with the users at the center.



Believing that early childhood facilities (internally and externally) should be reflective of the dignity that those entering deserve, IFF supports early childhood education providers in re-imagining and renovating space to reflect best practice. We start with best practices related to Indoor Environmental Quality: air quality, natural and artificial lighting, proper temperature and temperature controls, classroom size, space, and furnishings. We are working to support these types of facility transformations by using research, data, and our expertise to be the driver of our investments.

- 1. Research:** Strategies informed by hyper-local research play an important role in responding to geographically specific nuance and need. More granular qualitative<sup>1</sup> and quantitative assessments<sup>2</sup> such as those completed by Reinvestment Fund in Philadelphia and IFF in Milwaukee are a necessary complement to national research and tailor macro-level responses to meet local need.
- 2. Equity in Practice:** For too long the voices of women and people of color who represent an overwhelming majority of providers<sup>3</sup> have not been centered in policy and funding conversations. There are multiple examples from across the country of ***tables that have been set for system investment and redesign centered in equity and provider voice***, including the Playbook in St. Louis<sup>4</sup> and Hope Starts Here<sup>5</sup> in Detroit. These provider- and parent-centered frameworks provide a fresh perspective on coordinated and aligned systems investments.
- 3. Expanded Networks:** Funds typically flow through established program structures and specific networks for efficiency, however, ECE systems in many states are siloed and require more innovative and intentional approaches to support a paradigm shift toward mixed delivery models. NCFN's membership of ***nonprofit financial and technical assistance intermediaries play an important role in stitching together funding sources, leveraging philanthropy, tailoring innovative financing tools, and leading facilities solutions***. Moving beyond the traditional networks and structures supports innovation, leverage, and a holistic strategy which will yield longer term results with staying power such as SELF-HELP's Childcare Business Resources<sup>6</sup>.
- 4. Plans that are Nimble and Responsive:** NCFN members have created and tailored programs over time that continue to evolve in service to the ECE sector such as LISC's Rhode Island Early Child Care and Early Learning Facilities Fund<sup>7</sup> and LIIF's Child Care Facilities Fund.<sup>8</sup> NCFN members responded throughout the pandemic with Paycheck

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reinvestment.com/research-publications/getting-back-to-care-findings-from-a-philadelphia-survey-on-restarting-early-childhood-education/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://greatermilwaukeefoundation.org/early-childhood-education/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/policymakers-can-redesign-early-childhood-and-education-system-root-out-structural-racism>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wepowerstl.org/the-playbook/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://hopestartsheredetroit.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.self-help.org/business/accounts-services/business-resources/child-care-business-resources>

<sup>7</sup> <https://rilisc.org/riccelff/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.liifund.org/products/grants/grants-for-child-care/ccff/>

Protection Program access, emergency grant creation and administration, and tailoring technical assistance to support providers. Members remain engaged in ongoing partnership with philanthropy to innovate, informed by deep place-based relationships, to support the right now phase, the recovery phase, and the resiliency phase post pandemic. Ideation beyond state agencies is critical for long-term success.

## Two Women's Vision for Detroit Children

The building at 14050 East Eight Mile on Detroit's east side was an illegal marijuana shop that the city had shut down until the fall of 2019 when it reopened as Blessed Beginnings Learning Center, a 5-star quality rated childcare business.

Starting her childcare business out of her mother's home in 1999, LaShawn Bridges received a \$75,000 cash grant from the Motor City Match program to open a second location of her business in a neighborhood that was in desperate need of quality childcare. In partnership with IFF, LaShawn was able to scale up and expand her program from her original two children to now 60 children, all housed within a 5,000 square foot quality facility that includes four classrooms with developmentally appropriate furniture, materials, equipment and an outdoor playground. Blessed Beginnings Learning Center has spawned economic opportunity as well, putting 12 full-time employees to work, along with a number of other part-time workers and other staff.

"It takes a village to raise a child and Blessed Beginnings is the village," said Bridges, who is a graduate of Detroit Martin Luther King High School and has a master's degree from Oakland University. "In this neighborhood, you see plenty of liquor stores, gentlemen's clubs, and all the places that are not helping families better themselves. When parents bring their children here, they are going to be blessed."

Founded in 2006 by Zina Davis, Children of the Rising Sun achieved 5-star rating status from Excellent Schools Detroit—an entity that produces a yearly scorecard measuring the quality of Detroit's schools. Today, Children of the Rising Sun draws parents from throughout the metro Detroit region who are seeking an inclusive, interconnected, holistic and whole child approach to their children's care and education. Zina's youngest of three daughters attended her program as well. It became a dream of Zina's to raise her own child in her center, but running an exemplary early childhood center wasn't always among her aspirations. Years ago, she had a career mapped in the corporate world.

Zina left the corporate world and began working at a childcare program run by her family and in her home. In partnership with IFF, Zina was able to scale up and expand her program to three vibrant classrooms, a gross motor room and an outdoor play space for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

There's no looking back for who the children and families affectionately refer to as "Mama Zina." IFF is now working with Zina and the Children of the Rising Sun program to develop a 12,000 square foot center on the east side of Detroit. The program might include co-location with another community organization and have a strong relationship with local elementary schools.

“When I wake up in the morning, it’s a joy, for one, to work for myself – and to do something that I love,” Zina says. “It’s not a job to me. This is fun. This is exciting because every day I’m creating something new.”



## Safe and Inspiring Learning Spaces for Generations of Detroit’s Children

A window into projects like the work done in partnership with LaShawn Bridges at Blessed Beginnings Learning Center and Zina Davis at Children of the Rising Sun offers a picture of the potential and power of excellent early care and education facilities in nurturing stronger outcomes for generations of Detroit’s children.

These projects demonstrate the importance of investing in authentic relationships; elevating knowledge based upon research and best practices; the possibilities and solutions created by bringing capital to communities via facility improvement grants; and access to real estate and design expertise that honors the integrity of the vision and voices of women-owned childcare businesses. They also provide a roadmap for other community development entities to engage in transformational work that potentially transcends the historic issues that plague communities across our country.

## What Role Does a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Play?

“Community development financial institutions (CDFIs) are private financial institutions that are 100% dedicated to delivering responsible, affordable lending to help low-income, low-wealth,

and other disadvantaged people and communities join the economic mainstream. By financing community businesses—including small businesses, microenterprises, nonprofit organizations, commercial real estate, and affordable housing—CDFIs spark job growth and retention in hard-to-serve markets across the nation.”<sup>9</sup>

Detroit has an active CDFI community and organized coalition<sup>10</sup> with 15 CDFI members and 11 partner members. CDFIs have been active in supporting the ECE community in Detroit through collaboration and intentional partnerships, including:

- New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) allocation from Capital Impact Partners and Cinnaire on the new construction of a state-of-the-art early childhood center<sup>11</sup> developed by IFF in northwest Detroit in addition to IFF’s comprehensive ECE programs
- Small business lending to ECE providers for operational and facilities needs from Invest Detroit and Detroit Development Fund’s Entrepreneurs of Color Fund
- Early childhood facilities grants through LISC to support providers in IFF’s Learning Spaces program

In addition to providing important flexible financing solutions, CDFIs are business development, capacity building, technical assistance and policy and advocacy partners to for-profit and nonprofit home and center based ECE providers. This role is even more vital as providers and states gear up for an infusion of capital and federal investment into early childhood infrastructure and facilities.

***Making Space: Leading Perspectives on Child Care Facilities:*** “*Journey to Becoming Early Childhood Facilities Champions*” is the first in a series of thought leadership pieces produced by National Children’s Facilities Network (NCFN) Members. The *Making Space* series explores the importance of high-quality child care facilities, challenges to financing and accessing this vital infrastructure, and the role of intermediaries in achieving innovative solutions to increase the quality and affordability of child care facilities.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://ofn.org/what-cdfi>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.detroitcdficoalition.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.starfishfamilyservices.org/marygrove-ece/>



## **About IFF**

[IFF](#) is a mission-driven lender, consultant, and developer that helps communities thrive by creating opportunities for low-income populations and individuals with disabilities. Since 1988, IFF has provided \$1 billion in flexible, affordable financing to nonprofits serving a variety of sectors – affordable housing, health care, education, community development, and more. These investments have leveraged \$3 billion, developed more than 27.8 million square feet of real estate, and impacted communities by creating more than 7,200 childcare slots, 54,000 school seats, 371,000 new patient visits, and 12,000 units of affordable housing.

IFF has extensive ECE experience and has developed/improved over a hundred ECE facilities across its Midwest footprint with various scopes and challenges. IFF has produced a series of ECE research reports including the development of an ECE design manual – [The Building Blocks of Design: A Handbook for Early Childhood Development Facilities](#). For more information, visit [www.iff.org](http://www.iff.org) and follow IFF on Twitter @IFFcdfi.

## **About NCFN**

The National Children's Facilities Network (NCFN) is a coalition of more than 30 nonprofit Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), financial and technical assistance intermediaries, and childcare stakeholders dedicated to helping ECE providers develop high-quality physical learning environments and sustainable business models. By providing technical assistance and financing to early learning providers, we seek to address capital needs and business capacity challenges that limit working family's ability to gain equitable access to high-quality ECE programs.

NCFN works to generate federal resources that support the development and improvement of early childhood facilities in underserved communities nationwide. The Network collaborates with other children's advocacy leaders concerned with addressing the supply and quality of early childhood facilities across the country. For more information, visit [www.ncfn.org](http://www.ncfn.org) and follow NCFN on Twitter @ECEFacilities.

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