

## Evaluation of Programs to Strengthen Home-Based Child Care

### Request for Services

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation (Blue Cross NC Foundation) requests the services of a consultant to conduct an evaluation of our home-based child care (HBCC) grantmaking to better understand how we can strengthen the early care system for HBCC providers and identify the supports needed by HBCC providers to create high-quality environments for children.

**RFS Release Date:** April 17, 2023

**Full Applications Due:** May 19, 2023, by 11:59 p.m. ET

**Response Format:** [Online portal](#)

**RFS Contact:** **Chelsey Hurt**  
Learning and Evaluation Officer  
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation  
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### Budget & Timeline

Up to \$450,000 is available for this work.

Deadline or Activity	Date(s)
Official release and application form opens	April 17, 2023
Deadline to submit questions and to sign up for optional pre-application call	May 5, 2023
Optional pre-application calls	May 8-12, 2023
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**Background**

In North Carolina, as well as across the nation, HBCC is the preference of many families due to its myriad of strengths and ability to meet the needs of families. HBCC is broadly defined as child care in the provider’s home and includes both licensed family child care (FCC) and unregulated family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. HBCC offers consistent relationships between children and providers; can provide flexible hours for parents working second and third shift jobs; and can foster a child care environment that shares the family’s cultural norms and values. Many parents’ preference for HBCC has been amplified throughout the pandemic due to the smaller number of children in these settings, increased flexibility, and ability to respond to enhanced concerns about safety.

Unfortunately, the number of licensed FCC has been diminished over the past two decades due to the policy, economic, and practice environment. Over the past 20 years, the number of FCC providers in North Carolina has dropped from nearly 5,000 to just over 1,000. Compared to their center-based peers, the workforce in FCC settings has less access to professional development opportunities, less support from the state’s child care infrastructure, and is subject to a licensing process that often alienates, discourages, and disqualifies potential providers. Furthermore, the average hourly wage for FCC providers in North Carolina is substantially lower than that of other educational professionals including center-based staff. At only \$9.09 per hour, there is no county in the state where this average is considered a living wage.

FFN care providers are also in need of enhanced support. The majority of young children in North Carolina – approximately two-thirds –are in FFN care, which includes everything from grandparents and other relatives to friends, neighbors, nannies, and other small, informal providers. The widespread use of unregulated FFN care results from a combination of family preference, barriers to licensure for some providers, and lack of access to regulated settings. Even though data shows that more children are in FFN care than any other type of child care, FFN providers receive virtually no support from the systems that provide professional development and direct support. It’s critical that the state’s array of FFN providers receive the support they need to provide high-quality and developmentally appropriate care. Resources should also be in place to address barriers to licensure for FFN providers whose quality and ability to care for children would benefit from being part of the regulated system of care.

One promising approach to strengthening all types of HBCC in North Carolina is the development of local HBCC networks that connect independently operated HBCC providers. Home Grown – a national organization committed to improving the quality of and access to HBCC – defines an HBCC network as, “an interconnected group of providers and families that come together to enhance supports for HBCC, including quality, access to services, and sustainability.” In addition to the supports offered to providers, HBCC networks are also positioned to advocate for policy change at the local, regional, and state levels. The advocacy function of HBCC Networks can be deepened when providers are trained in advocacy skills and are compensated for their work in the policy space. Supporting these networks, the connections between them, and the provider-leaders will help create a powerful voice for HBCC statewide and critical infrastructure for improving its sustainability and quality.

Another strategy to strengthen HBCC in North Carolina is to develop and/or implement professional development and technical assistance strategies that are specifically tailored to HBCC providers. While there are similarities to their center-based peers, HBCC providers have distinct strengths and challenges that should be taken into account when trying to support their operations and pedagogy. There is a need to test and replicate such strategies to show what is possible for children and providers when HBCC receives tailored support.

In response to the current conditions surrounding HBCC and in support of the goal to improve its supply and quality in North Carolina, Blue Cross NC Foundation has initiated the following grant opportunities:

1. **Supporting Home-Based Child Care Networks:** Financial support and technical assistance for seven local HBCC networks and a statewide Community of Practice (CoP) made up of these HBCC networks that develops strategies for improving the policy, economic, and regulatory environments for HBCC in North Carolina. Grantees were selected in February 2023.
2. **Home-Based Child Care Provider Leadership Development:** A policy leadership program designed to support HBCC providers in identifying and addressing policy and systems issues related to HBCC. Grantees to be selected summer 2023.
3. **Quality and Sustainability:** We are currently developing a third funding opportunity focused on deepening our understanding of what contributes to quality and sustainability in HBCC. Though details are not yet available, grantees are expected to be selected in late 2023.

These grant opportunities are being implemented in partnership with [MDC's Home Based Child Care Initiative](#), which will serve as the Community of Practice and Leadership Development Program facilitator, and [Home Grown](#), which will provide technical expertise to MDC and the HBCC networks. Home Grown will also partner with MDC to collect data from the HBCC networks within the CoP to assess network impact and inform Home Grown's efforts at the national level. Given the collaborative nature of these grantmaking opportunities, the evaluation team should expect to collaborate and work closely with representatives from MDC, Home Grown, and the Foundation to ensure the evaluation is informed by those implementing the work and useful to all stakeholders.

### **Description of Evaluation Services Requested**

Blue Cross NC Foundation is seeking proposals for an evaluation partner to look across our HBCC grantmaking and help us better understand effective strategies for supporting HBCC providers in North Carolina, as well as how we can help strengthen the early care system for HBCC providers in North Carolina.

Through this evaluation, we hope to test and learn more about the following hypotheses around strengthening the early care system for HBCC providers and identifying supports that help create high-quality environments for children:

- If HBCC networks are provided focused support, leadership development, and technical assistance, the supports will strengthen the environment for HBCC providers and FFN care.
- If a community of practice of staffed HBCC networks exists, it will lead to stronger individual networks, alignment around priorities, and collective action.
- If HBCC leaders are resourced and trained in policy and systems, they will be able to fill a gap in provider-led advocacy.
- If HBCC networks are provided resources to staff their networks and opportunities for peer connections to facilitate learning and best practices, those networks will create more favorable conditions for the providers they serve.

While we anticipate refining the following in collaboration with the evaluation partner, our initial questions include:

Home-Based Child Care Evaluation Questions	
Provider-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the advocacy issues that HBCC providers prioritize?</li> <li>• What are the supports HBCC providers need to feel confident and effective as advocates?</li> <li>• What types of supports are most important for improving the economic stability and wellness of HBCC providers?</li> <li>• What types of supports are most important for improving the quality of care provided to children?</li> <li>• What are the impacts of a provider’s participation in the CoP?</li> </ul>
Network-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the conditions that contribute to or inhibit a <a href="#">strong</a> HBCC network?</li> <li>• What types of supports are most valuable in strengthening HBCC networks?</li> <li>• How can HBCC networks support a strong provider voice on policy and systems issues related to caring for children and operating successful businesses?</li> <li>• How can HBCC networks support improved working conditions, quality of care, and sustainability among providers in their networks?</li> <li>• How can HBCC networks support provider well-being?</li> <li>• What are the impacts of a network’s participation in the CoP?</li> <li>• What are the differences in approaches between networks supporting informal, unlicensed care, and licensed family child care?</li> </ul>
Field-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does it take to build a vibrant community of providers and networks?</li> <li>• What types of supports within the CoP are most valuable in strengthening HBCC networks?</li> <li>• What is the impact of a network or provider’s participation in these grant opportunities?</li> <li>• What are the challenges and opportunities in facilitating peer learning and alignment among a cohort of Family, Friend, Neighbor and Family Child Care providers?</li> </ul>
Systems-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does it take to build unity around policy and system priorities, and take collective action on those priorities?</li> <li>• How does the current early childhood infrastructure, specifically the North Carolina Child Care Resource &amp; Referral System and Smart Start Networks, support or hinder the development of HBCC networks?</li> <li>• What system-level changes are occurring?</li> </ul>

**Please note:** We are in the process of designing the technical assistance opportunity and do not yet have questions specific to this grant. Instead, we would like to work closely with grantees and the selected evaluator to develop these questions as the work emerges.

### Grantee Engagement

It is important that grantees not only inform the evaluation, but that they are able to indicate how the evaluation can best support them in advancing change in their work. As such, this evaluation will include engaging with grantees to determine their evaluation needs, specifically the questions they would like to explore and/or deliverables that are useful in their work. We are open to creative approaches based on the evaluators experience and expertise.

## Work and Deliverables

Over the course of three years, the evaluation partner will work closely with the Blue Cross NC Foundation, grantee organizations, and other partners (e.g., MDC, Home Grown, community partners, etc.) to explore and answer the evaluation questions outlined above.

We anticipate this work will include:

- Leading the Blue Cross NC Foundation, grantee organizations, and other partners in a collaborative process to refine the evaluation questions, methods, and workplan.
- Revised and/or additional evaluation questions based on conversations with grantees.
- Ongoing communication and collaboration with the Blue Cross NC Foundation, grantee organizations, and other partners over the course of the project.
- A literature review and/or other activities to ensure a shared understanding of the supports that lead to better care and education of children to inform the evaluation design and data collection.
- Primary data collection focused on grantee experiences in the field, business and industry needs, advocacy capacity, and grantee experiences in the community of practice and leadership development cohort.
- Secondary data analysis and/or synthesis as appropriate on licensed Family Child Care and Family, Friend, Neighbor Care to provide context to the evaluative findings and generate insights into the external environment.
- Designing sense-making sessions to engage the Foundation, grantee organizations, and other partners in the evaluation findings.
- Anticipated Deliverables:
  - Refined evaluation plan based on collaboration with the Blue Cross NC Foundation, grantee organizations, and other partners.
  - Baseline report(s) documenting the current state of the HBCC networks and providers in the Policy Leadership Development Program; the questions grantees are exploring in their work; assumptions and hypotheses to test; and the sociopolitical context surrounding and influencing HBCC providers.
  - Interim products to support ongoing learning of grantees as well as Blue Cross NC Foundation and other partners.
  - Final report(s) elevating evaluation results including the strategies and practices HBCC networks are using to support providers, the conditions that support strong HBCC networks, impacts of the Policy Leadership Development Program on providers, and recommendations for increasing support for and expansion of HBCC in North Carolina.

- As we work with the selected evaluator to develop evaluation questions for the future technical assistance grant opportunity, we will identify what, if any, additional deliverables are necessary and/or how to incorporate findings into the existing deliverables.
- We anticipate there will be opportunities to produce resources identified by, and in service of, grantees for use in their work. We foresee this being explored with grantees during year one, with the deliverable(s) identified thereafter.

**Desired Skills, Qualities, and Attributes**

- Committed to, and demonstrates the values of, [equitable evaluation™](#).
- Experience with and knowledge of home-based child care, including Family, Friend & Neighbor Care, and early childhood.
- Experience evaluating learning networks or community of practice, including the use of network mapping.
- Experience leading collaborative evaluation processes.
- Employs qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Demonstrated ability to engage with diverse audiences in complex initiatives with multiple stakeholders.
- Strong facilitation skills.
- Proposed project team reflects the diversity of the grantees.
- Bilingual in English and Spanish, or experience collaborating with interpreters to ensure effective bilingual communication.

**Budget and Timeline**

Up to \$450,000 is available for this work.

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Deadline to submit questions and sign up for optional pre-application call.	May 5, 2023
Optional pre-application calls <i>See the 'Submission and Deadline' section below to learn more.</i>	May 8-12, 2023
Proposals due in web portal	May 19, 2023
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### Proposal Requirements

Please include the following materials in your proposal:

1. **Cover sheet.** Include organization name, primary location, length of time in operation, contact information for the key contact for this RFS, and two references. Please note, references should be individuals outside your organization with whom your team has worked and who can comment on your organization's skills, experience, and work style.

#### 1. Proposal narrative

- a. **Values and approach.** Describe the values that guide your organization and how they show up in the way you approach evaluative work.
- b. **Approach to services.** Please describe your proposed approach to this work, including:
  - i. How you would engage the Blue Cross NC Foundation, grantee organizations, and partners in a collaborative process to refine the evaluation questions, methods, and workplan.
  - ii. How you would surface questions and insights from grantees.
  - iii. How you would navigate multiple components and timelines of the overall grantmaking strategy.
  - iv. Strategies to ensure effective communication and collaboration with multiple stakeholders over the course of the contract.
  - v. The methods you would use to explore and answer the evaluation questions included in this RFS.
  - vi. How your approach to this evaluation would align with our organizational value to center communities and people most impacted by inequities in the early care and education system.
  - vii. Approach to proposed methods would help to generate insights and lessons learned for the broader field and systems change efforts.
  - viii. Anticipated challenges and how you might navigate these over the course of the work.

- c. **Proposed timeline.** Provide a work plan and timeline that identify key activities and deliverables.
  - d. **Organizational history and qualifications for this project.** Elevate information on the desired skills, qualities, and attributes outlined above, particularly experience with home-based child care and early care systems. Please include information regarding the proposed project lead and team members.
2. **Sample of work.** Please provide a sample of your work to demonstrate experience and qualification for this project.
3. **Cost proposal.** Up to \$450,000 is available for this work. Please submit a budget based on your high-level work plan that shows how you would allocate this budget among your suggested evaluation components. Specify major budget categories such as staff, data collection/analysis, and indirect costs. Incentives and stipends for participation in evaluative work should be included in the evaluator's budget at a rate of \$150 per hour.

**Please note:** We do not have specific proposal formatting requirements or page limits for the proposal. It is important to us that we give applicants space to reflect their values and elevate aspects of their approach to services. While there is not a page limit, we think the best evaluation proposals are digestible and engaging for a broad audience – not just formal evaluators or researchers – as we seek out a variety of perspectives from people with different experiences in evaluation throughout our review process.



### **Pre-Submission Questions**

Pre-submission questions are welcome until May 5. We will respond in as timely a manner as possible to questions as they come in. Please refer to the contact section below to submit questions.

### **Application Submission and Deadline**

Please submit your proposal via the [web portal](#) by May 19, 2023, by 11:59 p.m. ET.

Applicants are invited to schedule an optional **30-minute pre-application call** with Blue Cross NC Foundation staff to discuss any questions regarding their proposal. These calls are not required as a condition to apply and do not impact an applicant's scoring. Dates are available May 8-12, 2023. Please see contact below to schedule a call if desired.

### **Contact**

Please contact Chelsey Hurt, Learning and Evaluation Officer at [chelsey.hurt@bcbsncfoundation.org](mailto:chelsey.hurt@bcbsncfoundation.org) to submit questions or to schedule a 30-minute pre-application call.

### **Proposal Review & Evaluation**

Proposals will be reviewed based on the requirements of this RFS. Up to three finalists will be invited to participate in an interview with Foundation staff and external reviewers in mid- to late-July. We anticipate a decision by August 4.

### **Assumptions**

The Blue Cross NC Foundation is not liable for costs incurred by any firm or individual associated with the preparation of a response to this RFS.

### **About Learning and Evaluation at the Blue Cross NC Foundation**

Blue Cross NC Foundation's Learning and Evaluation team develops and implements practices and projects to help clarify programmatic and organizational goals and assumptions, assess progress, evolve and adapt strategies based on what we are learning, and share insights with the broader field. We are committed to the practice and principles of the [Equitable Evaluation Framework](#)™ and center our learning and evaluation work on three core tenets: how we work, what we are working on, and our values and principles. Our organization believes evaluative work should inform learning, decision-making, and action and recognizes that a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods are necessary due to the complex and dynamic environment in which our work takes place.

### **About the Blue Cross NC Foundation**

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation is a private, charitable foundation established as an independent entity by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina in 2000. Over the past two decades, the organization has worked with - and supported - nonprofit organizations, government entities, and community partnerships across the state, investing \$200 million into North Carolina through more than 1,300 grants. Within its focus areas of access to care, early childhood, healthy communities, healthy food, and oral health, the Foundation strives to address the key drivers of health, taking a flexible approach designed to meet identified needs in partnership with the community.

### **Appendix**

#### Key Readings and Resources on Home-Based Child Care Networks

- Erikson Institute & Home Grown. (2022). [Strengthening home-based child care networks: An evidence-based framework for high-quality.](#)
- Katie Fallin Kenyon for Child Care Resource Center (2022). [Family Friend and Neighbor Care \(FFN\) Final Report.](#)
- Stoney Associates. (2022). [Growing Home-Based Child Care: An Important Opportunity for North Carolina.](#)