

**ASSESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD
COALITIONS IN MONTANA
TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR
IMPACT AND INFLUENCE**



Across Montana, local early childhood coalitions (ECCs) coordinate partners and lead efforts to improve the health and well-being of children and families in their communities. ECCs demonstrate what is possible when community members coalesce with structure, resources, and collective power and influence. ECCs are a part of the broader early childhood system in Montana; therefore, understanding their structures, resources, and efforts unlocks greater potential to move community-based early childhood initiatives forward.

To better understand the structures, needs, and assets of ECCs across Montana, the University of Montana Center for Children, Families, and Workforce Development (Center) developed and disseminated surveys and conducted interviews with coalition coordinators. The survey was sent to the coordinators of the 18 coalitions active at the time of data collection, and 11 surveys were fully completed and 2 partially completed. Following the survey, the UM Center completed semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 14 coordinators.



LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD COALITIONS IN MONTANA

The following list includes all early childhood coalitions that currently operate in Montana. Not all listed coalitions participated in the assessment process.

- Anaconda Deer Lodge County Best Beginnings Coalition
- Best Beginnings Early Childhood Community Coalition
- Best Beginnings Yellowstone County
- Big Horn County Best Beginnings Community Coalition
- Bitterroot Childcare Coalition
- Butte Community Council
- Carbon County Early Childhood Coalition
- Central Montana Coalition for Family Health
- Dawson County Best Beginnings Coalition
- Early Childhood Coalition of Beaverhead County
- Early Childhood Coalition of Flathead County
- Early Childhood Collaborative of the Greater Helena Area
- Family Connections Collaborative
- Gallatin Early Childhood Community Council
- Great Falls Early Childhood Coalition
- Healthy Granite County
- Healthy Start Missoula
- Park County Early Childhood Coalition
- Zero to Five Flathead Reservation – Lake County
- Zero to Five Lincoln County
- Zero to Five Missoula County

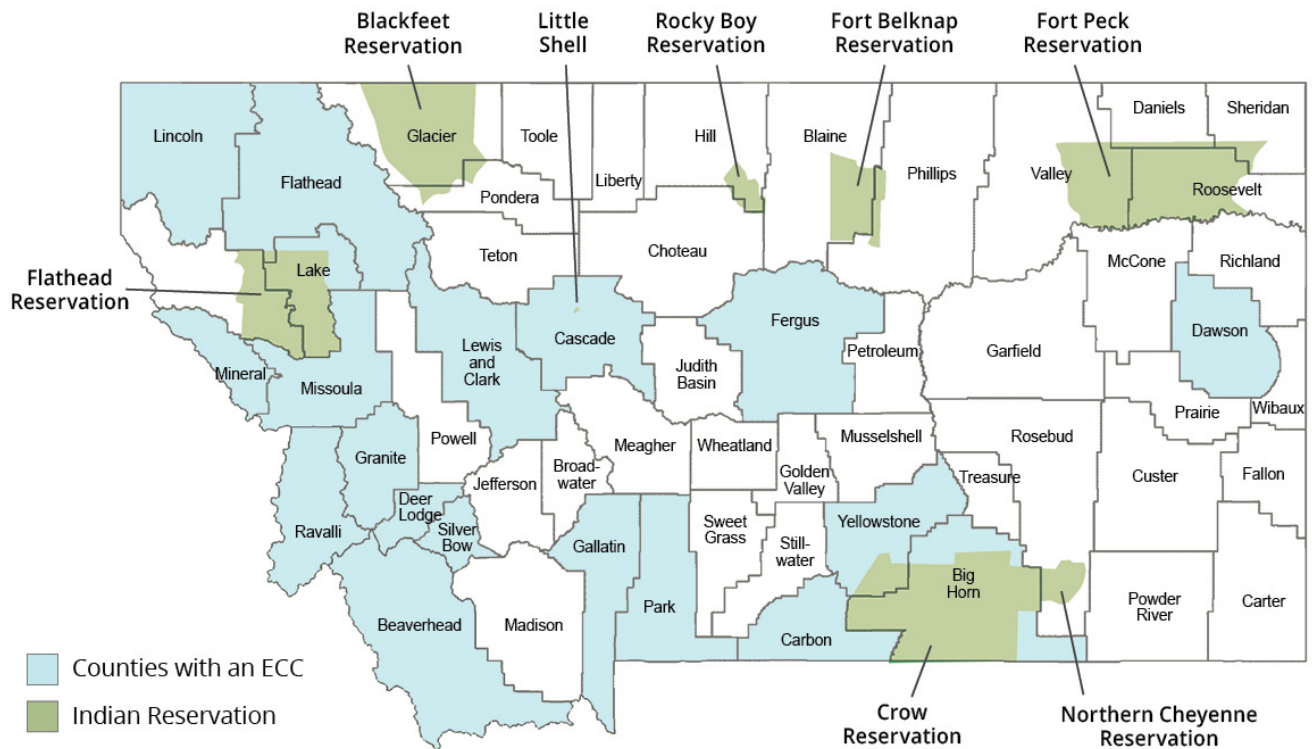


Figure 1. Map of communities with an early childhood coalition

HISTORY OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD COALITIONS IN MONTANA

The origins of ECCs in Montana largely begin in 2013 when the State of Montana was awarded funding that supported systemic investments into Montana’s early childhood system. The Early Childhood Services Bureau was awarded the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant and the Family and Child Health Bureau was awarded the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Infrastructure Grant. The two bureaus combined efforts to co-lead the implementation of the Best Beginnings Initiative, a comprehensive effort to advance Montana’s early childhood system. As part of this initiative, funding and capacity were provided to establish the Best Beginnings Coalitions at the local level and Best Beginnings Advisory Council at the state level, which included dedicated representation from local coalitions. Since its establishment, the Best Beginnings Advisory Council has since become the Montana Early Childhood Advisory Council, and Best Beginnings Coalitions have either folded or those that remain in operation have changed their names. As a result of these changes and varied terminology, the coalitions are referred to as “ECC” within this report.

In the early years of establishing an infrastructure for ECCs, the Montana Department of Health and Human Services (DPHHS) issued grants to support ECCs’ capacity to coordinate early childhood stakeholders in communities throughout Montana. Federal grants, including the Preschool Development Grant awarded in 2014 and the Preschool Development Planning Grant Birth to Five in 2019, funded these efforts. DPHHS was unsuccessful in securing the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five Renewal Grant in 2020, which ended consistent, dedicated state funding for ECCs.

The Montana Early Childhood Coalition

The Montana Early Childhood Coalition (MTECC) was originally facilitated by DPHHS and established to coordinate ECCs throughout Montana. Due to shifts in capacity, funding, and priorities, DPHHS ultimately stepped back from the facilitator role. At the request of DPHHS, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies (HMHB) assumed facilitation duties and has consistently convened the MTECC since 2016.

As the convener of the MTECC, HMHB has worked to secure funding for ECCs. HMHB coordinated with the DPHHS Injury Prevention Office to distribute funding to ECCs for prevention-oriented projects, including the development of the LIFTS Resource Guide and the implementation of Positive Childhood Experiences training. The Overdose Data to Action Grant (OD2A) administered by the federal government’s Health and Resource Services Administration (HRSA) funded these prevention efforts. Each award was typically no more than \$5,000 per year for each coalition. Though minimal, these grants funded coalitions so they could convene local stakeholders, establish common goals, and advance collective systemwide efforts. As an example, this funding provided ECCs with the capacity to comprehensively document all available resources for families in each ECC’s respective community. The results of this effort created Linking Infants and Families to Supports (LIFTS), an online resource guide that identifies community-specific services and events for families throughout Montana. LIFTS is managed by HMHB and continues to be a valuable and often referred to tool for families and early childhood providers. In 2023, the OD2A grant parameters changed, which eliminated this funding source for ECC activities.

In 2023, existing early childhood stakeholders formed a new partnership to address the OD2A funding gap, strategize more efficient and responsive support for local communities, and reduce silos. Zero to Five Montana and the Center partnered with HMHB to restructure the MTECC. The three stakeholders now serve as co-conveners of the MTECC. The Center and Zero to Five Montana had pre-existing relationships with ECCs, particularly those in the Zero to Five Network, which were seed-funded by the Headwaters Foundation (Headwaters) beginning in 2019. Headwaters also funded Zero to Five Montana to advance early childhood systems change on a state level and the Center to provide capacity-building support and technical assistance to members of the Zero to Five Network. Headwaters funds health and social initiatives in Montana's fifteen westernmost counties, so the Zero to Five Network included only a portion of the state's ECCs within western Montana. As most ECCs in the Zero to Five Network also participated in the MTECC, ECC stakeholders recognized the opportunity to avoid duplicative efforts and further leverage collective resources by aligning with existing statewide efforts. With that goal in mind, the Zero to Five Network voted to restructure in June 2023. Below is a description of the role each co-convening entity plays within the current structure:

Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies

- Long-time host organization of the MTECC
- Facilitates monthly meetings and distribution of meeting materials
- Advocates for and facilitates local coalitions' engagement with relevant opportunities, initiatives, and partnerships

University of Montana Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development

- Provides technical assistance to local coalitions, both individually and collectively
- Expands convening and implementation capacity of HMHB and local coalitions
- Advocates for and facilitates local coalitions' engagement with relevant opportunities, initiatives, and partnerships

Zero to Five

- Facilitates policy updates and engagement opportunities
- Advocates for and facilitates local coalitions' engagement with relevant opportunities, initiatives, and partnerships

Most existing ECCs regularly participate in the MTECC. Monthly meetings bring coalition representatives and other early childhood stakeholders from both local and state levels together to share information, build relationships, and leverage resources to advance ECCs' individual and collective goals. Participation in the MTECC is informal and all coalitions are encouraged to attend meetings.



RESULTS

The following sections of this report discuss the data captured via surveys and interviews of ECC coordinators.

STRUCTURE

Overview

Respondents provided information about the basic structure and organization of their local coalition. Respondents indicated a variance in the longevity of their coalition, with most having been established for more than 10 years (38%, n=5). While each coalition has a host organization to provide backbone support, such as payroll or grant administration, the type of organization hosting ECCs varies. Most respondents indicated that their coalition was hosted by a nonprofit organization (46%, n=6), followed by a local public health department (15%, n=2), a healthcare agency (15%, n=2), a Child Care Resource & Referral Agency (15%, n=2), and local government (8%, n=1). Most respondents agreed (46%, n=6) or strongly agreed (38%, n=5) that their coalition's host organization is committed to hosting the coalition long-term. Results indicated that most ECCs have a stable and supportive host organization that will continue facilitating coalition work.

Respondents reported on the areas of early childhood-related work their coalition focuses on. Respondents named early learning and development (100%, n=13), family support (100%, n=13), health (77%, n=10), trauma/resilience (54%, n=7), child welfare / foster care (38%, n=5), and other (31%, n=4). Written responses within the "Other" category included work related to advocacy and positive childhood experiences.

Most ECCs do not directly or independently administer services or programs. Instead, ECCs facilitate coordination and strategic alignment across partners to raise awareness, increase engagement, and expand the capacity of early childhood initiatives. One coordinator epitomized this approach: "We coordinate and communicate to create the conditions so that you can collaborate." In interviews, many coordinators further emphasized the importance of having a nimble and generalist approach that enables the coalition to serve as a hub for community-based efforts and to fill existing and evolving gaps within their community's early childhood system.

All but one respondent indicated that their coalition has a mission statement, vision statement, and documented goals related to these areas of work. Most respondents (80%, n=8) indicated they periodically reassess and update the coalition's mission, vision, and goals. However, interview results suggest that coalitions with stable funding pathways are significantly more likely to have up-to-date organizational mission, vision, and goal statements. Steady funding equips coalitions with greater capacity to envision a strategic future by providing resources to support planning efforts and requiring coalitions to develop and execute deliverables that align with long-term goals and outcomes.

“We coordinate and communicate to create the conditions so that you can collaborate.”

— Coalition Coordinator

Membership

Coalition membership practices vary widely across communities. Most respondents indicated an active membership of 11 – 20 members (36%, n=4), followed by 0 – 10 members (27%, n=3), 31 – 40 members (18%, n=2), 41 – 50 members (9%, n=1), and 21 – 30 members (9%, n=1). Most respondents agreed (64%, n=7) that their coalition has about the right number of active members. The comparison of this response to the number of active members reveals a diversity of opinions regarding the ideal size of a coalition but indicates that most respondents prefer a coalition with more than 0 – 10 active members. In interviews, all coordinators emphasized the intentional and significant effort needed to maintain engagement with coalition members.

As community-based entities, ECCs rely on the participation of community stakeholders to advance their efforts and ensure those efforts are responsive to community needs. Most respondents either agreed (64%, n=7) or strongly agreed (9%, n=1) that members of the coalition reflect the cultural makeup of the community the coalition serves. Most respondents (82%, n=2) reported that their coalition has active committees or workgroups, the majority of which were related to different programs or initiatives facilitated by the coalition.

Respondents also reported on the sectors of the community represented by coalition members. Figure 2 describes the prevalence of community sectors that participate in ECCs. All respondents indicated that their coalition includes members representing public health (100%, n=11) and education (including child care) (100%, n=11), followed by social services (91%, n=10), physical health care (64%, n=7), behavioral health care (64%, n=7), parents (64%, n=7), community members (55%, n=6), government (45%, n=5), and faith-based organizations (27%, n=3). Responses related to the " Other " category included businesses and other social services. Respondents further indicated a desire to have more representation from parents, caregivers, and businesses, as well as more marginalized populations, including rural residents, migrant workers, and Spanish speakers.

**Which sectors of the community do the coalition's members represent?
(Choose all that apply) (n = 11)**

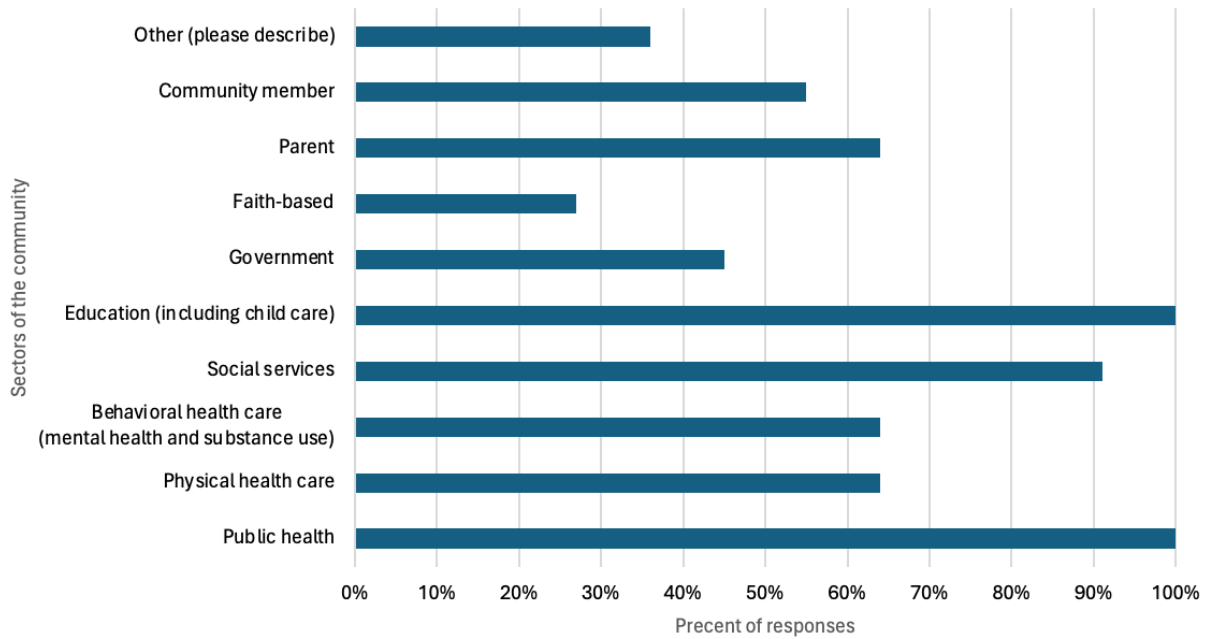


Figure 2. Representation of community sectors amongst early childhood coalition members

Meetings & Communications

Most respondents indicated that their coalition meets monthly (64%, n=7), followed by quarterly (18%, n=2), bi-monthly (9%, n=1), and weekly (9%, n=1). Interview results further revealed that ECCs without significant or consistent funding often meet sporadically or on a case-by-case basis depending on community needs. Respondents indicated a high degree of effectiveness of meetings facilitated. All respondents indicated that: (a) coalition members that need to attend meetings are usually present (100%, n=11), (b) coalition members actively engage in discussions and provide input during meetings (100%, n=11), and (c) the coalition generally accomplishes its agenda and goals during meetings (100%, n=11).



RESOURCES

Leadership

As leaders of their local coalitions, coordinators play a critical role in organizing and advancing the group's collective efforts. Respondents answered a series of questions aimed at understanding the leadership capacity and resources among local coalitions. Respondents reported their tenure as coordinators, with the majority indicating they have been in the role for 1-2 years (36%, n=4), followed by less than 1 year (27%, n=3), 3-5 years (27%, n=3), and more than 10 years (9%, n=1). Results indicate no correlation between the tenure of coordinators and the tenure of the coalition, indicating that even well-established coalitions experience a degree of coordinator turnover. Most respondents are paid within their role (82%, n=9), while one respondent is a volunteer (9%, n=1), and another respondent is in the process of establishing a paid role (9%, n=1). Most of those who are compensated earn an hourly rate of \$21 – 30 (67%, n=6).

Respondents also reported on their education and professional experience. All respondents obtained a bachelor's degree, and more than half obtained a master's degree (55%, n=6). Respondents have served in a variety of roles, many of which have been at a leadership level in nonprofits and businesses related to child care, education, public health, and healthcare, including behavioral healthcare.

Dedicated coordinator capacity is a critical component of a coalition's success. Just over a quarter of respondents (27%, n=3) indicated that their role as coalition coordinator is a 0.76 – 1.00 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) position. Most respondents indicated that their role as coalition coordinator is limited to a 0 – 0.25 FTE (64%, n=7) or 0.26 – 0.50 FTE (9%, n=1) position. Part-time coordinators are often employees of the coalition's host organization and fulfill other roles within that organization in addition to their role as coalition coordinators.

In interviews, part-time coordinators consistently reported that their dedicated coordinator capacity was insufficient for the role's demands. One coordinator exemplified the challenges this creates by stating, "And when I look at the action plan, I just want to cry because I'm like, I don't know who's going to do all of this because there's nobody to. We just need more person-power. And I think that funding for the coordinator positions would be huge. I've heard across the state that people like us are all doing this our spare time or extras or in addition to, and it's just, I think it's really making it very difficult for people to be as successful as they would hope." Other coordinators also expressed susceptibility to burnout and difficulty juggling competing demands when a larger percentage of their FTE is dedicated to work outside of the coalition.

“And when I look at the action plan, I just want to cry because I'm like, I don't know who's going to do all of this because there's nobody to (do the work). We just need more person-power. And I think that funding towards the coordinator positions would be huge . . .”

— Coalition Coordinator

Funding

All but one respondent indicated that their coalition receives funding to do its work (91%, n=10), but the amount of funding received varies widely. Of the 10 respondents that receive funding, **most reported that their coalition operates on an annual budget of either \$0 – 20,000 (40%, n=4) or more than \$100,000 (40%, n=4)**, while the remaining respondents indicated an annual budget of \$40,001 – 60,000 (20%, n=2). When asked what most of the coalition’s funding is used for, respondents named staffing (60%, n=6), followed by programs (20%, n=6), events (10%, n=1), and supplies (10%, n=1).

While respondents indicated some diversity of funding sources, including private donations/fundraising, county funding, and state grants, responses indicated that private foundation funding remains the preeminent source of funding for ECCs. However, the availability of private foundation funding is often based on specific criteria that do not unilaterally apply to all coalitions, such as geographic location. An example of this includes Headwaters, who has made significant investments in ECCs within the foundation’s 15-county catchment area, resulting in a concentration of better-resourced coalitions in western Montana.

More than one-third of respondents either strongly disagreed (9%, n=1) or disagreed (27%, n=3) that their coalition has the necessary resources and infrastructure to function effectively.

Despite most respondents indicating that their coalition plans for long-term sustainability (64%, n=7) and includes members with grant writing expertise (73%, n=8), more than one-third of respondents either strongly disagreed (9%, n=1) or disagreed (27%, n=3) that their coalition has the necessary resources and infrastructure to function effectively. Figure 3 describes the relationship between a coalition’s annual budget and the respondent’s belief that the coalition has the means to operate successfully. Respondents more frequently disagreed with the statement, “The coalition has the necessary resources and infrastructure to function effectively,” when their coalition has an annual budget of less than \$80,000. In contrast, respondents with an annual budget of more than \$100,000 largely expressed agreement. Results displayed in Figure 3 highlight the importance of adequate funding in supporting a coalition’s ability to effectively function and make meaningful advancements within the community.

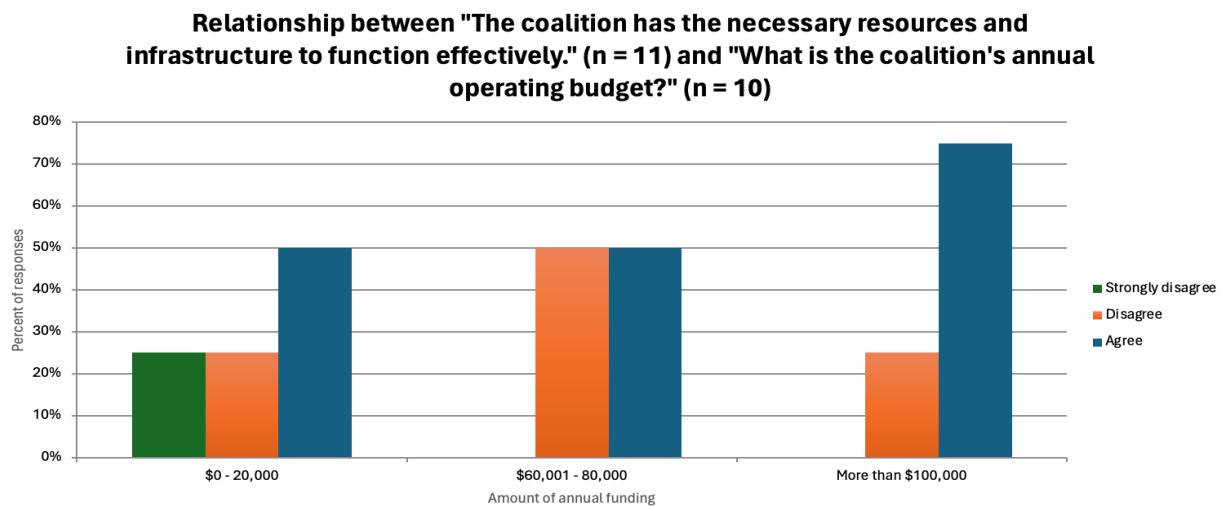


Figure 3. Perceptions of access to resources and infrastructure in relation to annual budgets

Without dedicated funding, coalitions must use a significant portion of their limited capacity to secure resources, rather than working to address community needs.

All interviewed coordinators cited a need for sustained, adequate funding to increase the impact and scope of their coalition's work. One coordinator shared, "It feels like 80/20 and I wish it was the other way around [so] that we could spend 20% of our time getting the money and resources and hiring our people and building infrastructure and 80% of the time working on relationships that are helping people get the knowledge and information they need to be better parents... better practitioners... [and] to work with us on supporting the community gaps." The coordinator's statement highlights a continual challenge faced by local coalitions. Without dedicated funding, coalitions must use a significant portion of their limited capacity to secure resources, rather than working to address community needs.

Respondents were further asked to indicate what amount of annual funding they think the coalition needs to function effectively. Responses varied from as little as \$5,000 to as much as \$600,000. **More than half of respondents (55%, n=6) indicated that an annual budget of at least \$80,000 is necessary to support adequate staffing at a livable wage and to facilitate some programming.** All respondents indicated a desire to continue the coalition in perpetuity, but some noted that current funding levels would sustain the coalition for only another six to eighteen months.

The perception of what constitutes adequate funding underscores the varying degree of resources available to ECCs. While coordinators regularly referenced the need for additional funding, how much additional funding and for what purposes was relative to the funding coalitions already receive. Coordinators of coalitions with a budget of less than \$20,000 often cited the need to have funding to, at a minimum, sustain coordinating capacity and outreach efforts. One coordinator shared that their ECC had not regularly met over the past year because they no longer had access to the \$5,000 grants previously facilitated through Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, which had historically resourced the ECC's limited convening capacity. Alternatively, coordinators of coalitions with a budget of more than \$100,000 discussed the need to expand initiatives to serve more children and families in their communities, such as support groups, resource centers, and educational classes and campaigns.

Regardless of funding levels, interviewed coordinators strongly reiterated that there are "limited resources to do an infinite amount of work." Adequate funding for basic coalition operations is essential and can ensure coalitions maintain an effective presence within their communities. However, well-resourced coalitions demonstrate the potential and expansive impact coalitions can have when they can fund both significant coordinator capacity and innovative initiatives to meet identified community needs.

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Strategies

Outreach and Communication

Coordinators were asked a series of questions to better understand how their coalitions engage with the community and key stakeholders. Nearly all respondents indicated that their coalition members regularly share information with the community through emails, websites and/or social media (72%, n=8), participate in community-wide events (100%, n=11), attend important community meetings (91%, n=10), actively collaborate with other coalitions and community organizations (82%, n=9), and meet with local officials and community leaders (91%, n=10). Interviewed coordinators consistently referenced the convening and coordinating of various stakeholders as a strength of their coalition and an important strategy that expands the reach of both the coalitions and its partners' impact within the community.

Data-Informed Decision Making

Coalitions vary in their use of data to inform coalition efforts. Most respondents reported that their coalition knows where and how to access relevant data (73%, n=8) and uses data to inform its decision-making (73%, n=8), while a smaller majority reported that the coalition has members with experience in collecting and analyzing data for evaluations and reports (55%, n=6). Despite these resources and strategies, most respondents disagree that the coalition regularly evaluates its own efforts to inform continuous quality improvement (64%, n=7). In interviews, coordinators frequently reported that internal capacity hindered data utilization rather than a lack of data literacy among members.

When asked what data sources inform the coalition's decision-making, respondents named local provider data (100%, n=11), parent or community surveys, focus groups, and/or interviews (91%, n=10), county/city reports (91%, n=10), state reports (73%, n=8), and federal reports (45%, n=5). Respondents further described notable data sources, most frequently describing the value of the Kids Count Data Center and Community Health Needs Assessments.

Planning and Implementation

Respondents use a variety of strategies to advance their work. Most respondents reported that their coalition has a strategic plan that guides its overall efforts (91%, n=10), develops an annual work plan that lists goals and activities (72%, n=8), and engages community members to inform its planning efforts (82%, n=9).

Despite employing planning and implementation strategies, answers varied in response to the statement, "The coalition generally accomplishes its annual goals and activities." Results were compared with the coalition's annual budget to understand how a coalition's resources may contribute to its ability to accomplish annual goals and activities. Figure 4 demonstrates that a higher proportion of respondents reported a general inability to accomplish goals and activities if their coalition had fewer financial resources. Most respondents with an annual budget of more than \$100,000 either strongly agree (50%, n=2) or agree (25%, n=1) that their coalition can achieve its goals. As budgets decrease, so does confidence in the coalition's ability to meet the coalition's goals. Half of respondents (n=1) with a budget of \$60,000 – 80,000 indicate that their coalition can achieve its goals and that rate further drops to only 25% (n=1) for respondents with an annual budget of less than \$20,000.

Relationship between "The coalition generally accomplishes its annual goals and activities." (n = 11) and "What is the coalition's annual operating budget?" (n = 10)

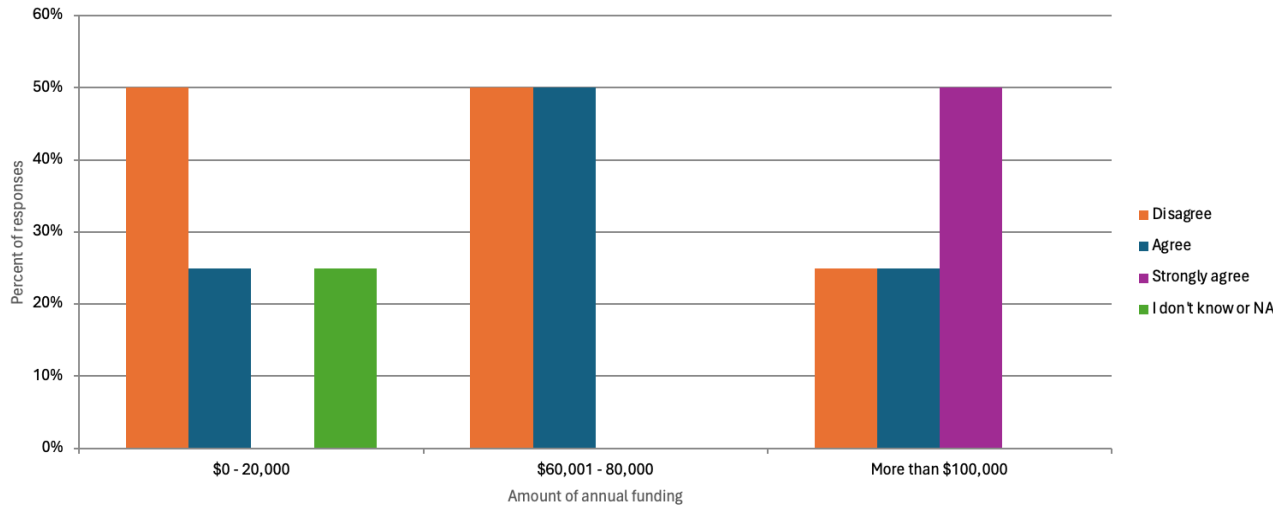


Figure 4. Perceived ability to achieve goals in relation to annual budgets

As funding pathways have become more variable and unpredictable, coalitions struggle to substantively strategize beyond brief grant cycles

In interviews, several coordinators shared that their coalition has struggled to maintain the momentum they originally experienced when funding was first distributed from DPHHS in 2013. The initial years of guaranteed funding provided some assurances to coalitions as they planned their work. As funding pathways have become more variable and unpredictable, coalitions struggle to substantively strategize beyond brief grant cycles, particularly when grant deliverables are administratively burdensome or require the coalition to focus its efforts away from a community need outside the grant's parameters.

Systems Integration and Policy Engagement

Local early childhood coalitions ultimately aim to contribute to system improvement efforts that will benefit children and families in Montana. This requires both an understanding of, and engagement with, the early childhood system and its decision-making mechanisms on the local and state level. While most respondents (91%, n=10) reported that they meet with local officials and community leaders, respondents indicated a split on their understanding of local government. Most respondents either agreed (55%, n=6) or strongly agreed (9%, n=1) that they understand the power structure and decision-making structure of local government, while the remaining respondents disagreed (36%, n=4). Respondents indicated more confusion at the state level. When asked if coalition members understand the power structure and decision-making process in state government, few agreed (18%, n=2) and most indicated disagreement (45%, n=5) or not knowing (36%, n=4). Figure 5 shows the comparison of responses between local and state government.

Coalition members understand the power structure and decision-making processes in local (n=11) / state (n=11) government.

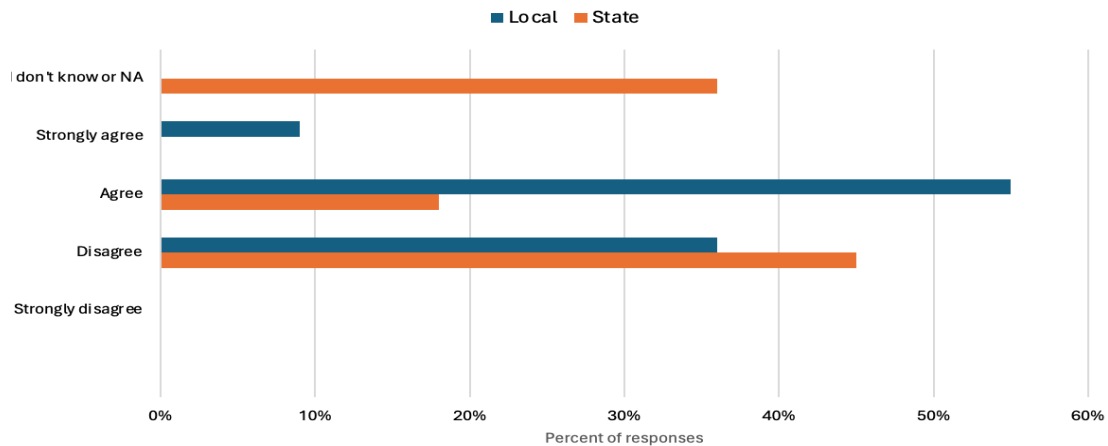


Figure 5. Comparison of perceived understanding of the power structure and decision-making processes in local and state governments

Respondents expressed similar perspectives when asked about their coalition’s understanding of early childhood-related priorities. Figure 6 compares responses associated with an understanding of the priorities of both local and state governments. Most respondents (55%, n=6) indicated that they understand local government’s early childhood-related priorities. Respondents expressed a more mixed understanding of early childhood-related priorities at a state level. Responses included agree (45%, n=5), disagree (36%, n=4) and I don’t know (18%, n=2).

The coalition understands the local (n=11) / state (n=11) government's early childhood-related priorities.

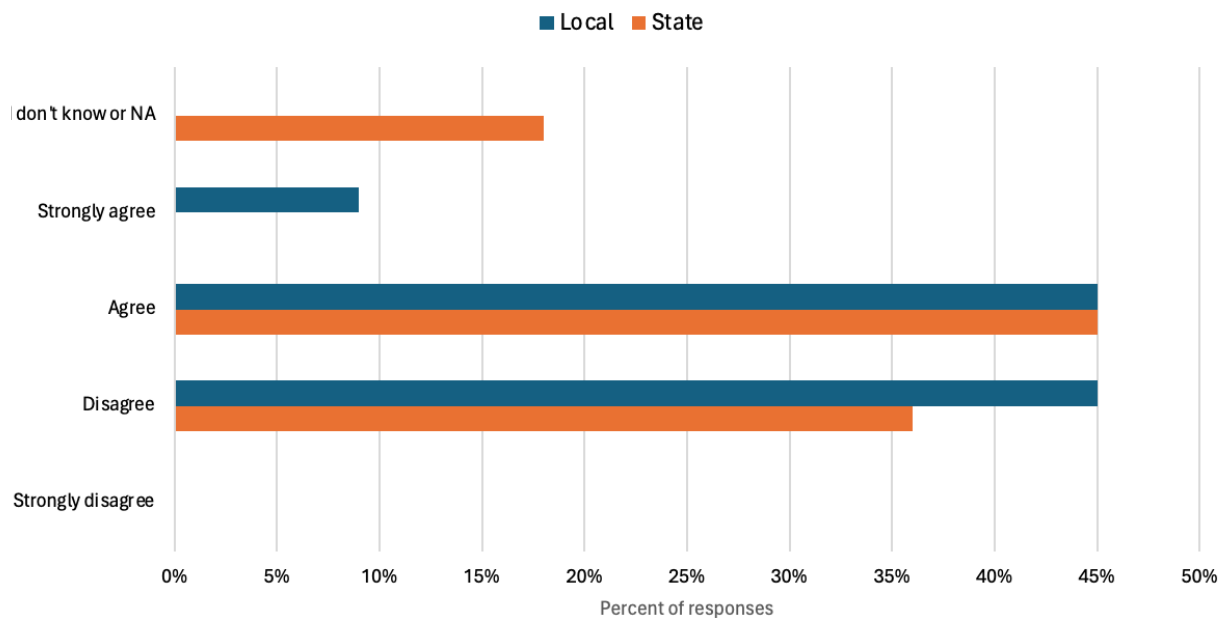


Figure 6. Comparison of perceived understanding of early childhood priorities of local and state governments

Most respondents (64%, n=7) agreed that their coalition has the power to influence decision-making on a local level.

Despite mixed responses regarding their coalition's understanding of local power structures, decision-making processes, and early childhood-related priorities, most respondents (64%, n=7) agreed that their coalition has the power to influence decision-making on a local level. Respondents' perceptions shift when asked to consider their impact beyond their local community, with most reporting they don't know (45%, n=5) if their coalition has the power to influence decision-making on a state level. Figure 7 compares respondents' perceptions of their ability to impact decision-making on both the local and state level.

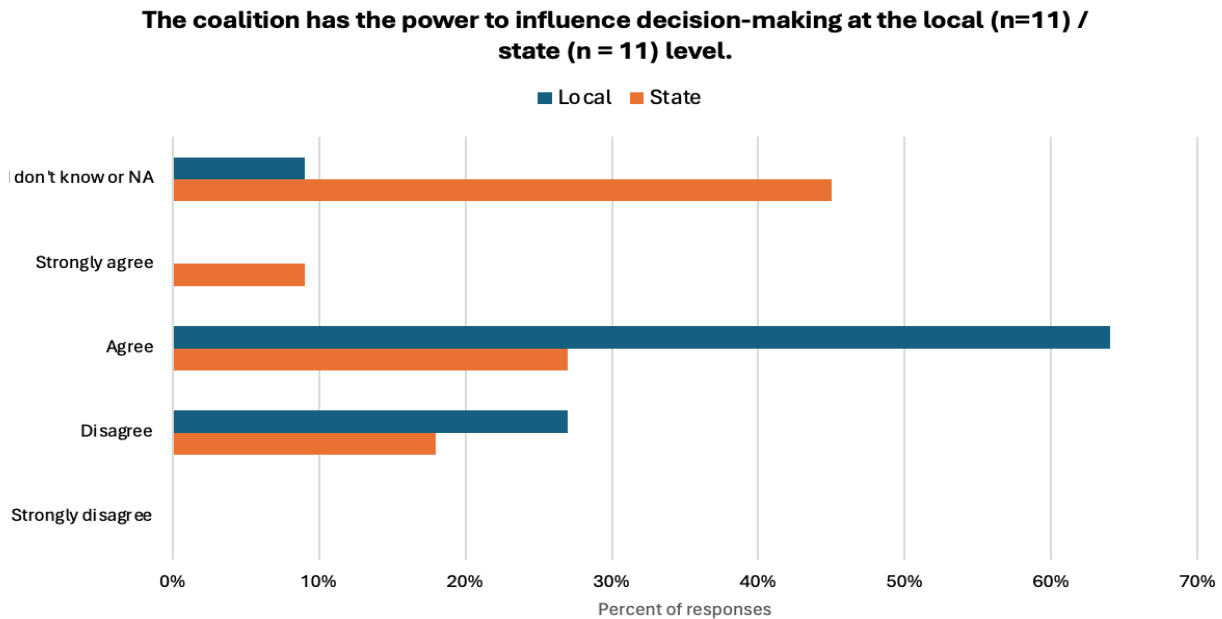


Figure 7. Comparison of perceived power to influence decision-making at local and state levels

As coalitions are inherently community-based, their increased understanding of and ability to influence processes and priorities at a local level as opposed to a state level is unsurprising. However, DPHHS and other statewide organizations regularly seek input and engagement from local stakeholders and those with lived experience, such as parents, caregivers, and providers, who typically participate in local coalitions. Coalition coordinators' reported disconnection and confusion toward state infrastructure and efforts demonstrate an opportunity to strengthen the communication and coordination across the continuum of early childhood stakeholders.

MTECC Participation

When asked if coalitions benefit from participating in the MTECC, most respondents either agreed (36%, n=4) or strongly agreed (45%, n=5). Respondents expanded upon these sentiments with open-ended responses. One respondent stated, "[The MTECC] allows us to hear what is going on in other coalitions statewide. It allows for updates from statewide early childhood priorities. By way of 0-5 statewide, it allows for an avenue for advocacy work in a less overwhelming way. It helps me feel less alone at work, which sometimes feels unvalued in our state." Other respondents consistently reiterated the benefits of regularly connecting with a community of stakeholders, receiving timely updates and information about prescient topics, leveraging opportunities to share resources and lessons learned, and receiving validation that their efforts are worthwhile.

“[The MTECC] allows us to hear what is going on in other coalitions statewide . . . It helps feel less alone in work that sometimes feels unvalued in our state.”

— Coalition Coordinator

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Despite challenges, coalitions continue to implement initiatives that meaningfully support children, families, and the systems that serve them across Montana.

Stated accomplishments over the past year include:

1. increasing collaboration with other community organizations,
2. developing advisory groups,
3. furthering the integration of community-based early childhood initiatives,
4. participating in statewide work groups and cohorts,
5. facilitating community activities and events,
6. providing family support programming,
7. securing grant funding,
8. engaging in the legislative policy process, and
9. developing the organizational structure of the coalition.

The existing infrastructure of ECCs, including the statewide coordination and resources provided by the MTECC and its co-conveners, creates a ready-made opportunity for improved coordination and communication between local and state partners.

SUMMARY

ECCs provide a local infrastructure for systems-level work. Individual organizations often lack the capacity to engage in system improvement efforts, which typically require significant collaboration and coordination across partners. Survey and interview results reveal that Montana’s ECCs are deeply integrated within their communities, are led by effective and passionate coordinators, and have diverse and committed members. Furthermore, ECCs have maintained meaningful engagement with partners to improve circumstances for children and families despite losing historical funding. The existing infrastructure of ECCs, including the statewide coordination and resources provided by the MTECC and its co-conveners, creates a ready-made opportunity for improved coordination and communication between local and state partners. This increased collaboration can ensure that efforts to improve Montana’s early childhood system are informed by and relevant to those that are most greatly impacted—children, families, and providers in communities throughout the state.

While ECCs exemplify the ability to do a lot with little, the lack of consistent funding limits their potential impact. At a minimum, coalitions require funding to support dedicated coordinating capacity to ensure the coalition has the infrastructure to regularly convene and organize partners. Many coalitions continue to patch together small grants to support this backbone infrastructure, which detracts from the coalition’s capacity to focus on meeting the needs of children and families. Coalitions that have benefitted from substantial investments from private foundations provide an example of the broader impact each existing coalition could have if equitable funding were made available. By removing the unpredictability of maintaining coordinator capacity and equipping coalitions with resources to identify and implement solutions, dedicated funding can empower ECCs to create the change they know their communities need.

"I keep going because I believe in this so much. I think it's been a great thing for our community and there isn't anybody else doing these things that we do."

— Coalition Coordinator