



The Story Continues

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF IMPACT

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

DEDICATION

We remember with gratitude the service and dedication of April Porter, a valued member of our Board of Directors, who passed away September 30, 2025.



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PROLOGUE

A Story of 25 Years of Growth and Transformation

Dear Friends,

Every great story is shaped by the people who help tell it. As the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) celebrated 25 years of ministry in 2025, we found ourselves reflecting not just on how far we've come, but also on the many individuals, families, and partners who have helped write each chapter along the way. This milestone is not ours alone; it is a shared story of growth and service to our community.

Our tale began humbly. Like the tiny protagonist we all know and love from Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, we had a big appetite for change. This simple but powerful desire led us to nurture early learning and empower educators throughout our community. But we didn't stop there.

Over time, as our hunger to support children and families grew, so did our vision. Like the turning of a page, each new year brought with it added purpose, and we grew steadily, sustained by new programming and strengthened through collaborative partnerships.

New chapters were written in the form of new grant projects and professional development initiatives, and as our scope of work expanded, so did our service area. New settings were revealed as our team of passionate changemakers grew and we found new spaces to call home. New storylines were introduced to deepen our impact.

Throughout 2025, we celebrated a quarter-century of service to the community, culminating in an anniversary celebration that brought together the many organizations and individuals who have helped shape our story. In that moment of reflection and connection, we were reminded just how many people have been part of this journey.

It was heartwarming to be surrounded by so many in our community as we looked back on ECRC's accomplishments—ones you've helped make possible—including recent high points, such as expanded fatherhood programming, a focus on empowering family child care providers, growing the reach of our SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) kindergarten readiness program, the launch of a Unified Early Learning System pilot project, and so many more. Each achievement representing a new page in our shared story.

And just like that hungry little caterpillar we mentioned, we've become known for our incredible transformation.

Our tale has been one of remarkable change. From our early beginnings to an organization now serving six counties and thousands of families, we have evolved while staying grounded in what matters most: **the child is the center of everything we do.**

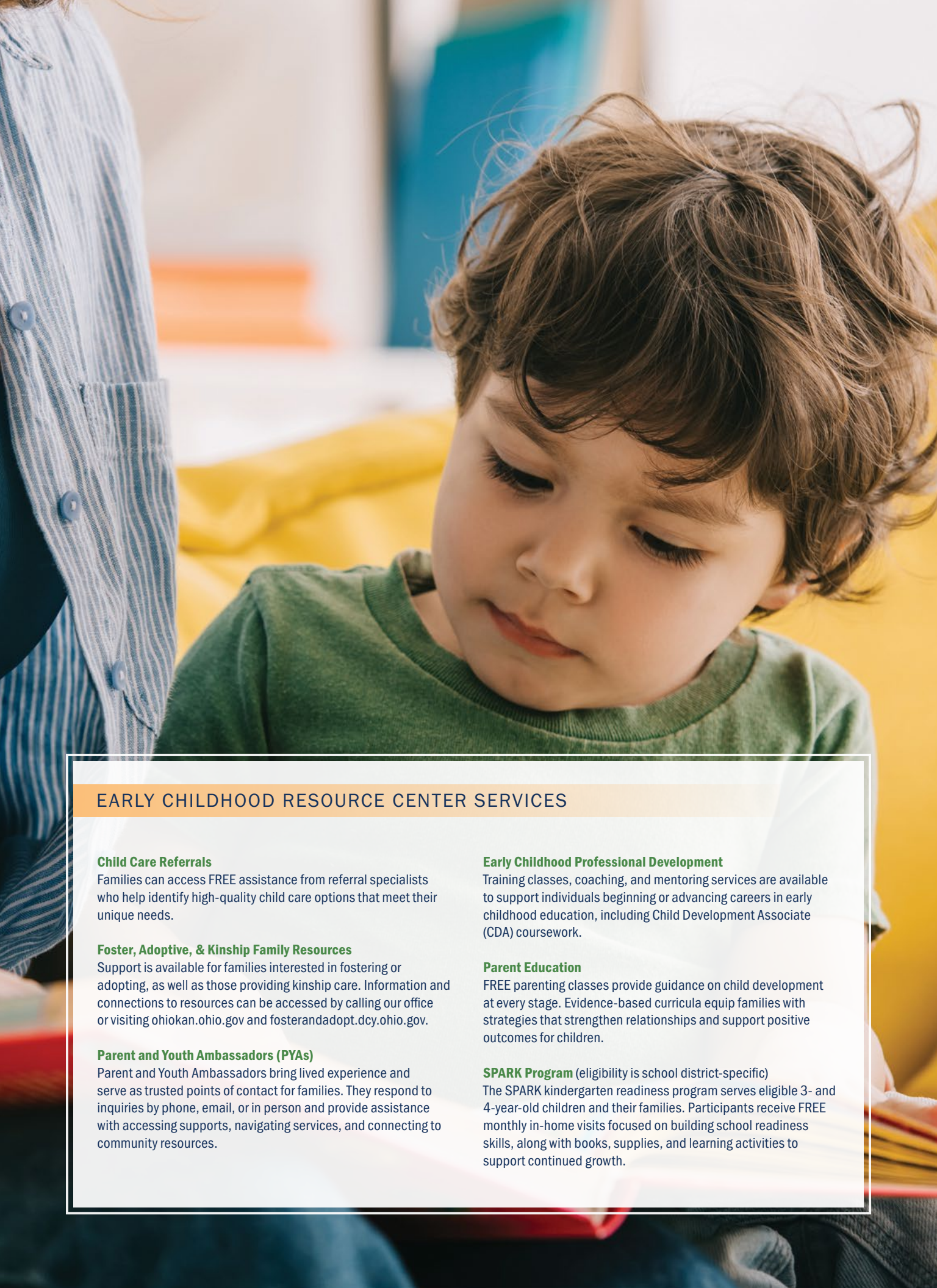
As we turn the page to our next chapter, we do so with gratitude and purpose. The story of the Early Childhood Resource Center is still being written—and with your continued support, the chapters ahead will be even more impactful!

With heartfelt thanks,

Joseph Luckring, 2025 Board Chair

Angela Moses, Executive Director





INTRODUCTION

Our Story at a Glance

For 25 years, the Early Childhood Resource Center, a ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System, has been part of a larger story—one centered on the healthy development of young children. At the heart of that story is a simple, guiding theme that the child is the center of everything we do.

That belief continues to shape every chapter of our work. Through a holistic and ever-evolving approach, we support children by strengthening the adults and systems around them, improving kindergarten readiness by helping parents embrace their role as their child’s first and lifelong teacher, equipping early childhood educators, and offering parent education to empower families. At the same time, we work to inform businesses, policymakers, and community partners so they can better understand and support the needs of young children and their families.

Together with our partners, we are helping write a story where families have the knowledge and resources to nurture their children’s development, where early learning environments are high-quality and led by skilled professionals, and where children enter school ready to learn and thrive.

We collaborate with schools to ensure they are ready to welcome, engage, and support every child and family, and we advocate for communities and policies that prioritize early childhood.

And throughout it all, we remain committed to creating a welcoming, inclusive environment that honors, respects, and celebrates the unique perspectives that strengthen our shared story.

As we reflect on 25 years of impact, we invite you to turn the page with us, looking back at where this story began and the moments that have shaped who we are today.

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER SERVICES

Child Care Referrals

Families can access FREE assistance from referral specialists who help identify high-quality child care options that meet their unique needs.

Foster, Adoptive, & Kinship Family Resources

Support is available for families interested in fostering or adopting, as well as those providing kinship care. Information and connections to resources can be accessed by calling our office or visiting ohio.kan.ohio.gov and fosterandadopt.dcy.ohio.gov.

Parent and Youth Ambassadors (PYAs)

Parent and Youth Ambassadors bring lived experience and serve as trusted points of contact for families. They respond to inquiries by phone, email, or in person and provide assistance with accessing supports, navigating services, and connecting to community resources.

Early Childhood Professional Development

Training classes, coaching, and mentoring services are available to support individuals beginning or advancing careers in early childhood education, including Child Development Associate (CDA) coursework.

Parent Education

FREE parenting classes provide guidance on child development at every stage. Evidence-based curricula equip families with strategies that strengthen relationships and support positive outcomes for children.

SPARK Program (eligibility is school district-specific)

The SPARK kindergarten readiness program serves eligible 3- and 4-year-old children and their families. Participants receive FREE monthly in-home visits focused on building school readiness skills, along with books, supplies, and learning activities to support continued growth.



CHAPTER 1

Where It All Began

While the Early Childhood Resource Center's story officially began just over 25 years ago, the mission that guides the organization's work actually traces back to 1851, when the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine (CSA) first arrived in Cleveland, Ohio from France to serve as the city's first public health nurses. From those earliest days, their calling was clear: to bring healing, hope, and compassionate care to communities in need.

As the Sisters' ministry grew, so did their response to the changing needs of the times. Their calling grew into a broad legacy of service, and across generations, they established hospitals, schools, orphanages, and social service ministries throughout Ohio and South Carolina, building a legacy rooted in care for the whole person and attention to those most in need.

To support and sustain this expanding mission, the Sisters of Charity Health System (SCHS) was formally established in 1982. Created to provide governance and coordination for this growing family of ministries, SCHS carries forward the Sisters' mission today, overseeing a diverse array of ministries, programs, and

initiatives dedicated to health, human services, housing stability, education, and spiritual care, as well as grantmaking foundations in Ohio and South Carolina focused on reducing poverty, working to end homelessness, and improving educational and health outcomes in underserved communities.

As a ministry of SCHS, the Early Childhood Resource Center shares a commitment to a holistic approach to health. Guided by the spirit and values of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, we view early childhood education and family support not as isolated services, but as critical building blocks for healthy children, strong families, and resilient communities.

Rooted in the Sisters' legacy of compassion and charisma, the Early Childhood Resource Center was founded in 2000, following a community needs assessment led by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton. The organization was established to address a critical need for accessible, high-quality child care and early learning opportunities in Stark County, Ohio.

Since its inception, the Early Childhood Resource Center has grown significantly, while remaining committed to supporting young children and all those who care for them.

HOW THE MISSION HAS UNFOLDED

To show how this mission has unfolded over time, the following timeline highlights key plot points that reflect the expansion and evolving impact of our work in recent years.

- 2000** With funding from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, the Early Childhood Resource Center was established in 2000, as an integral part of the Foundation's Quality Child Care Initiative. The Center was initially created to increase the amount of high-quality early childhood education and care available in Stark County. Upon its formation, ECRC's primary offerings focused on professional development courses; child care accreditation courses; and technical assistance and mentoring to those working in the early care and education field.
- 2011** The Center began serving families with young children. Parent engagement, education, and support services included parenting courses and mentoring, which were offered both at the Center's new building and in the surrounding neighborhoods/throughout the community.
- 2013** The Center became the parent organization managing and operating the SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) kindergarten readiness program. SPARK is a free, family-focused program, where a participating parent and child meet monthly with a specially-trained SPARK parent partner, typically in the family home. The SPARK parent partner empowers the parent to engage his/her child in learning, and SPARK families receive books, supplies, and resources needed to support school readiness.
- 2014** The Ohio Division of Child Support partnered with the Center to provide parenting education for noncustodial fathers who were behind on their child support. This prompted an emphasis on serving fathers and a 2016 partnership with the THRIVE infant mortality prevention project.
- 2017** The State of Ohio designated the Center as the Child Care Resource and Referral agency serving Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, and Trumbull counties. In this role, the Center equips early childhood professionals with the knowledge and resources needed to provide high-quality education and care; helps families find high-quality early childhood programs that meet their needs; and raises public awareness about the importance of early childhood development. Additionally, in 2017, satellite offices were opened in Mahoning and Summit counties.
- 2019** Fatherhood programming offered by the Center was expanded throughout Stark and Summit counties.
- 2020** Community support enabled the Center to expand its Canton presence by creating an early childhood campus that includes a new building for the training, mentoring, and coaching of early childhood professionals.
- 2021** The State of Ohio awarded the Center additional funding to continue serving as the Child Care Resource and Referral agency serving Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, and Trumbull counties. As part of this renewed award, the Center became the Children Services Hub for Service Delivery Area 4, leading regional work to provide support to foster and adoptive families and agencies.
- 2023** The Early Childhood Resource Center SPARK program was recognized as a Best Practice by the Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP).
- 2025** The Early Childhood Resource Center joined with more than a dozen community partners, including the City of Akron, to launch phase one of a Unified Early Learning System pilot project in Summit County.

CHAPTER 2

Increasing School Readiness

Rewriting the Beginning: Riley's Path to Kindergarten Readiness

If you met Riley today, you'd be surprised to learn that her story began very differently. When she was 4 years old, she struggled to hold a pencil, couldn't identify letters or numbers, and was unable to write her name. She also showed signs of echolalia—repeating the words said to her instead of an original response.

But every story has a turning point. For Riley, that moment came when her parents enrolled her in the Early Childhood Resource Center's Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) program. Riley looked forward to her monthly visits with her SPARK parent partner, Miss Kelley, and hated to see her go at the end of each lesson. Throughout the program, Riley worked hard on her SPARK learning activities, earned plenty of stickers, and met Jesse Bear, her favorite book.

When the doors to kindergarten opened last fall, Riley stepped confidently into her next chapter. Her motor skills, focus, academic preparedness, and joy of learning were ready to meet the challenge.

"Her teacher says she's one of the smartest kids in the class," Riley's mom Cindy proudly shared. "She loves school. SPARK laid the foundation."

Without the program, Riley's story might have followed a very different path. She likely would have been among the majority of Ohio kindergartners, entering the classroom unprepared to learn.

The latest Kindergarten Readiness Assessment results from the Ohio Department of Education show an overwhelming 63.4% of all Ohio kindergartners fail to demonstrate school readiness. That number increases to 75% when looking at children from economically disadvantaged families. Additional research shows that oftentimes, those who enter kindergarten behind suffer academically throughout their school years and beyond.

That is why SPARK is so critical. It helps to rewrite outcomes for children and families every day.

Created in 2003, SPARK is a voluntary, in-home visitation program serving 3- and 4-year-olds and their families. The program works with both parents and schools to increase children's readiness for kindergarten, increase parents' effectiveness as their child's learning advocate, and improve that initial transition to

starting school. The program is offered at no cost to families and aims to serve families who live in under-resourced communities.

Grounded in practice-based evidence, SPARK was designated a Best Practice in 2023 and is included in the Innovation Hub Database of the Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs. Riley is just one of thousands of Ohio children who were enrolled in SPARK last year and one of the 20,000+ whose stories have been shaped by this program since its inception. In 2025, the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) and other SPARK replication sites served 24 school districts across nine Ohio counties.

"To me, one of the greatest joys of this program is to witness where a child starts and to be able to see the gains they achieve [throughout the program year]," said Kelley Moffett, ECRC's Summit County SPARK program supervisor and Riley's SPARK parent partner. Riley, for instance, moved up to an average math skill level and above average in literacy. "It's really giving them that solid foundation," Kelley said. "They can start school ready or already ahead, and we continue to see their growth."

Kelley, a veteran early childhood classroom teacher who holds a master's degree in social work, has seen firsthand the impact ECRC's commitment to the highly effective SPARK model has in helping children develop the 16 skills needed to be kindergarten ready.

"One of the things I love about SPARK is that we meet each child right where they're at and really home in on the skills," she said.



When the doors to kindergarten opened last fall, Riley stepped confidently into her next chapter.



“Having one-on-one time with a child is every teacher’s dream.”

Each SPARK family is assigned a specially trained home visitor, a “parent partner” like Kelley, who conducts lessons with the family once or twice a month. Following each lesson, the family receives a SPARK kit with a new book, activity card, and educational supplies so parents can continue working with their child between visits. Parent partners model teaching behaviors to demonstrate how everyday moments, like reading together or narrating daily routines, can become powerful learning opportunities.

Behind each child’s progress is a team working together to help shape their story. SPARK utilizes a Responsive Services Team that includes parent partners, a child psychologist, behavioral health professionals, an early childhood specialist, and school-based personnel to ensure learning and behavioral health challenges are identified and addressed long before kindergarten begins.

An independent team evaluates program effectiveness annually, looking at each

child’s progress and analyzing performance trends. The evaluation results clearly show participating in SPARK gives children an advantage that leads to success, as program completers have consistently outperformed their non-SPARK peers on the state-mandated Kindergarten Readiness Assessment year after year.

“We’re very thankful for SPARK,” Cindy said, “and we can’t thank Miss Kelly enough. She was absolutely wonderful, and even now still checks in on Riley. I can’t recommend the program enough.”

Riley’s story is still unfolding. She is still best friends with Jesse Bear, hiding the book to keep it out of the hands of her 2-year-old brother, Cain. That’s okay, her mom said. Cain will meet his own storybook friends when he becomes a SPARK kid!

And just like that, the story continues—one child, one family, one chapter at a time—each one shaped by the support, connection, and care that define the Early Childhood Resource Center’s work every day.

CHAPTER 3

Improving Quality Early Learning Experiences

Turning the Page in Early Care: Angelette’s Story

According to Angelette Sanchez, when your grandma has 13 children and your extended family springs from that baker’s dozen, you learn early on that caring for children is part of your story.

“I grew up in a huge, growing family and I love kids, so I thought, this is it. This is what I want to do,” she said, referring to her Vic’s Angels Learning Daycare, which opened in 2025.

Now a grandmother herself, Angelette credits the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) for helping her write the next chapter in her life.

ECRC Early Childhood Specialist Dorothy Gray helped Angelette navigate each step from initial interest to becoming a licensed family child care provider.

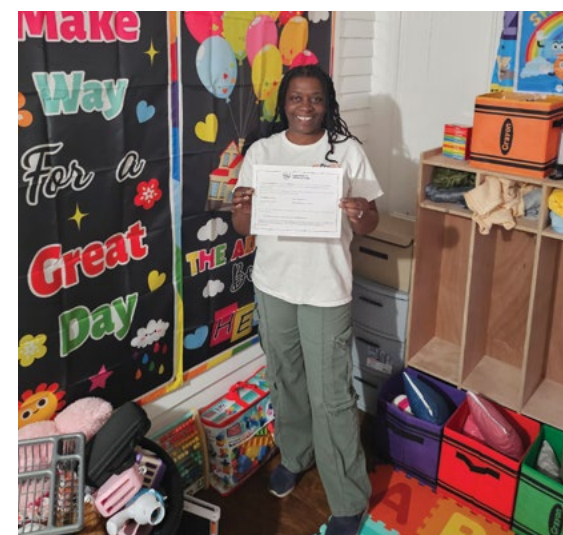
“They helped me make sure I was doing everything right to become licensed. Believe me when I say these are phenomenal women.”

—Angelette

She supported Angelette in completing required documentation and applications, offered guidance on walk-through inspections, and assisted in creating an Ohio Professional

2025 SPARK ACCOMPLISHMENTS

2,030 CHILDREN SERVED
18,968 HOME VISITS COMPLETED 20,300 BOOKS DISTRIBUTED
24 OHIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS SERVED



(Left) Angelette proudly displays her family child care provider license; (Right) Children in Angelette’s care spend their days learning, playing, and growing in a nurturing home-based child care setting that supports early development and school readiness.

Registry account. Dorothy remained alongside her every step of the way as this new chapter took shape.

“Some things are commonsense, some you just do not know,” Angelette said. “Dorothy told me to write down my questions, and I took her advice. She offered all kinds of tips that helped along the way.”

Before the official inspection of Angelette’s Mahoning County business, for instance, Dorothy did her own walk-through, pointing out “a lot of things I would never have thought I needed,” Angelette said. “It was so helpful, and I am so grateful. When the inspectors came, there were only three things they noticed out of their very long checklist, and before they even left, we were ordering what we needed.”

“Angelette demonstrated both passion and diligence in meeting every requirement to establish her licensed program,” Dorothy said. “Her commitment and dedication were evident throughout the process.”

With her program now open, Angelette’s story continues to unfold—and ECRC continues to play a role in what comes next. The team is now helping her prepare to apply for a Step Up to Quality rating, which is Ohio’s three-tier system that recognizes and promotes programs

meeting and exceeding high-quality standards in early care and education.

“Dorothy has given me so much knowledge even beyond licensing requirements—things relating to the business, the kids, the parents,” she said. Angelette, who also made sure to give a shout-out to her husband for his teamwork in the process, is grateful to ECRC for helping make her dream come true. Their support has not only shaped her path as a provider—it is already influencing the stories of the children and families she now serves.

“ECRC even provided resources for my families in domestic violence shelters. One mother, for instance, was able to move into her own home. She brought me a gift, thanking me from the bottom of her heart. I said, ‘girl, God is good, all the time.’”

Because of ECRC’s support, Angelette isn’t just building a business—she’s helping write stronger beginnings for every child and family who walks through her doors.

“I wake up every morning with a smile on my face knowing the kiddos are coming in and knowing I have the skills to handle things even better now,” Angelette said. “The ECRC team was there to help. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be doing this today.”

2025 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

5,696 COACHING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SESSIONS

PROVIDED TO **709** CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

8,610 EDUCATORS PARTICIPATED IN **631** TRAINING

CLASSES OFFERED BY ECRC STAFF

HELPED **326** FAMILIES FIND HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE





CHAPTER 4

Strengthening Families

Changing the Fatherhood Narrative: Iron Clad Dads

Strapping on one chunk of heavy Kevlar body armor after another, Randy Jellison, an Iraq War veteran, takes it off again, piece by piece. It's a visual aid, he said. But it's much more than that. It's also a powerful way to tell a different story about fatherhood.

Through his “lion and lamb” philosophy, Randy helps fathers understand there are times to provide and protect, but there are also times that call for setting the armor aside and showing up with gentleness to engage on an emotional level.

“We learn to get beyond just enforcing boundaries and discipline,” Randy said. “We learn to check in with your kids and your partner. To do heart checks to say, ‘What’s going on in there?’ And to be transparent and vulnerable with them.”

It’s just one of the valuable themes explored through Iron Clad Dads, a program recently launched by the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) that aims to build a brotherhood of fatherhood. Randy, ECRC’s fatherhood project manager, facilitates the group, which meets at the organization’s Canton office on the first and third Wednesdays

of the month. During the bimonthly meetups, dads come together to learn what it means to lead with both “unbreakable strength and unshakeable love”—and to begin writing a new narrative for their families.

Randy, a father of five who in his youth “never wanted kids,” said the meetings benefit him as much as any other participant. His own story continues to be shaped alongside the men in the group, fueled by a passion for the program and the transformation he sees in himself and others.

“I’ve gotta be honest,” he said. “I feel like God threw me into fatherhood. My oldest son was the first baby I ever held, and I thought he’d be the only kid I ever had.”



ECRC Fatherhood Project Manager Randy Jellison (standing at right) leading an Iron Clad Dads meetup.

Over time, that unexpected beginning grew into a calling. Today, Randy is deeply passionate about helping fathers show up for their children. His goal is simple: to reach all fathers, regardless of background, and help them become more intentional, engaged, and aware of the impact they have on their children's lives. "I want dads to have their sons and daughters on their mind, ready to engage and make the sacrifices necessary to see them survive and thrive," he said.

For many Iron Clad Dads attendees, their own childhood stories shape how they show up as fathers today—and often, those patterns can be hard to break. Randy understands this on a personal level. Growing up, he saw a version of fatherhood that was not uncommon; one marked by a strong work ethic, but limited presence at home.

Before joining the ECRC team, Randy admits he "was just kind of existing and not present, repeating the same patterns." He continued, "When I was offered this job, part of it was getting educated, feeling some of my own deficiencies. I really started growing in fatherhood with these guys; a brotherhood sharpening each other."

That growth through refining is what makes Iron Clad Dads so impactful. The two-hour meetings that start with connecting over a home-cooked meal often overflow into another hour or two of "just hanging out, soaking up time together, sharing experiences and take-aways," Randy said. Conversations center on everything from co-parenting and emotional awareness to breaking cycles and building stronger relationships with their children. "We've always got a lot more to talk about than time to do it."

Is it difficult for any "lion" fathers in the group to touch base with their "lamb" side?

"I think them feeling genuine, authentic love from me allows them to let their guard down," Randy said. "Real recognizes real."

And in that space—where armor comes off and connection takes its place—new stories begin to take shape. Stories where fathers are present, children feel seen and supported, and families grow stronger together.

Because when fathers are given the tools and support to show up differently, it doesn't just change their story—it helps shape the stories their children will carry forward.

2025 OUTREACH & PARENT EDUCATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

690 INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATED IN EVIDENCE-BASED PARENT EDUCATION CLASSES

546 INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATED IN PARENT CAFÉS **450+** FATHERS PARTICIPATED IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING **130** CAR SEATS WERE DISTRIBUTED TO FAMILIES IN NEED **1,801** VISITS TO THE INSPIRATION STATION AND CHILDREN'S LIBRARY **67** FAMILIES REFERRED TO FOSTER/ADOPTIVE AGENCIES

183 KINSHIP/ADOPTIVE FAMILIES WERE CONNECTED TO SUPPORT RESOURCES



Iron Clad Dads participants come together as a brotherhood, supporting one another as they write a new story of fatherhood and family connection.

EVERY DAD HAS A STORY: INSIDE IRON CLAD DADS

You'll find just about every kind of dad at any given Iron Clad Dads meetup—because there's no single story of fatherhood. New fathers. Grandfathers. Father-son combos. Those with a house full of kids. Blended family dads. Estranged dads. Work-a-lot-of-hours dads. No matter their background, they all say they've already become better, more confident fathers thanks to the group. Every dad has his own story.

Take **WAYNE**, for instance. As the group opened up about fatherhood, vulnerability, and the courage to repair what's been broken, Wayne was moved to reach out to a son he hadn't spoken to in a long while. He wrote to him about the disconnect, expressed his unchanging love for his children, and opened the door to healing. It was a breakthrough that brought father and son (and soon, a grandchild) together.

The biggest takeaway **IZZY** has so far from his Iron Clad Dads involvement: "I've got a lot of work to do." Izzy and his wife of 18 years have two boys and two girls, ages 8-14. He's noticed lately that his family has become used to a lot of yelling. "I thought, 'Why am I doing this? I don't like to yell. There are better ways to handle things.'"

As a Christian father, he said, he wants to hold himself to higher standards and Iron Clad Dads is helping him do that. Breaking bad habits and implementing new ones isn't always easy, he said. "It's tough, but I look at my kids and say we are going to do this differently, not go down a path that's not working."

An unhealthy early relationship with his own father led Izzy to leave home before age 15, "and I don't want that for my kids," he said. "I want what's best for them." The program has "changed the trajectory in our house," Izzy said. "I can apologize when I fail and keep trying."

Iron Clad Dads meetings are a powerful ally. "We all want to do better. The information empowers you, and you know they've got your back. Randy has a great way of explaining things where he says, 'Hey, I'm in this, too.'"

Eight years ago, **AARON**, a father of three girls, turned his life around so much that he was named Ohio parent of the year in his intensive parenting class. But he knew he could learn more.

"I thought I knew what a good dad was—feed them, clothe them, put a roof over their heads."

Through Iron Clad Dads, he's expanding that understanding and reflecting on how his own upbringing shapes his parenting today. The dads in the group bond, Aaron said, "because we're all there for a common goal."

Each story is different, but together they reflect something bigger: fathers showing up with intention, breaking cycles, and building stronger futures for their families.

To learn more about Iron Clad Dads, reach out to Randy at rjellison@ecresourcecenter.org or visit ecresourcecenter.org.

CHAPTER 5

Building Stronger Systems

Writing the Next Chapter in Early Learning

It was eye opening, Danyell Allen said, when her story as a child care professional took a new turn and she went from a home-based family child care provider to operating a child care center.

“It’s the same field, but a totally different aspect,” said the owner of Crowned Crayons Academy in Akron. Her home business, Lil Kings ‘n’ Queens, typically served up to a dozen children with the help of one assistant. Now, she’s managing all the moving parts of a 5,000-square-foot facility licensed for 55 children, with four teachers on staff and three more preparing to onboard.

The transition marked a new chapter for Danyell that required not only passion and experience, but new systems of support. And through her involvement in the Greater Akron Unified Early Learning System (UELS), she has found the guidance and support needed to help bring this next chapter to life.

According to Danyell, the coaching and assistance provided through the UELS project have been invaluable in helping her jumpstart the Academy, which opened its doors in 2025.

Crowned Crayons Academy is one of a select group of Akron and Barberton child care providers participating in Phase 1 of the UELS initiative, which launched in September 2025 to improve quality and access to care across Greater Akron.

Through her experience in the cohort, Danyell has seen how UELS works to strengthen providers from the inside out, supporting everything from staffing and operations to long-term sustainability. Goals of Phase 1 include increasing enrollment, reducing staff turnover, improving program quality, and strengthening referrals to family resources—all key building blocks in a larger story unfolding across the community.

“They’ve helped me know the right questions to ask in hiring, managing staff, and meeting qualifications while aligning with the essence of our center,” Danyell said of the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) team members helping to lead the UELS work.

“They coach me in what to look for and require, how to prevent turnover, dealing with pay structure, and even managing break time.” The project also has provided peer coaching, staff training, and curriculum support to



The 2025 grand opening of Crowned Crayons Academy marked a new chapter in Danyell Allen’s evolving story as an early childhood educator and center owner. Danyell, pictured fourth from left, proudly displays her opening certificate while surrounded by ECRC team members and other community supporters.

ensure the Academy stays aligned with the latest state requirements.

Danyell, who has a degree in early childhood education and a deep love for working with children, appreciates the support UELS provides with both overwhelming operational requirements and the everyday classroom challenges that arise.

“The support from the Unified Early Learning System is a bridge helping you find what works for your circumstances,” she said. She credits ECRC’s assistance with helping Crowned Crayons Academy reach its objective

of becoming a gold-rated center earlier than planned—an important milestone in her ongoing story of transformation and growth.

The project also connects families to resources such as parenting classes and other supports, strengthening outcomes beyond the classroom.

“Parents are excited about what their kids are learning and how to help at home,” Danyell said. “They’re reading the books we share in class.” UELS resources even helped one mom further her education and career, which allowed the family to move into their own apartment.



Danyell (center) along with fellow UELS participant Destiny (left) and her ECRC Specialist Brittany Young.

Not only does the initiative serve as a connector for families, it also helps providers like Danyell collaborate rather than compete.

“With the Unified Early Learning System, you’re part of a network of people who have insight and experience with issues,” she said. “They help you think outside the box, or say, ‘have you tried this?’ We’re not in competition. We want to produce a well-rounded child who is going to succeed in and out of school.”

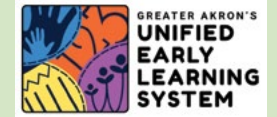
Danyell is hoping that this pilot project becomes permanent. “It’s just amazing all the different avenues they support, all the way around, from the beginning,” she said. “I’m learning ways to be a better boss, business owner, and administrator, and it’s the kids who benefit.”

Her experience reflects a much larger need for quality child care across the community. Last school year, only 47% of children across Summit County entered kindergarten demonstrating readiness in language and literacy, far below the 80% goal set by Summit Education Initiative. At the same time, child care providers face unstable business models and workforce shortages that limit access for families.

That’s why this work is about more than any one program or provider; it’s about shaping what comes next. Phase 1 of the Greater Akron Unified Early Learning System reflects the work of more than 20 early childhood professionals who designed a framework addressing workforce stability, provider capacity, and family support. By helping providers keep classrooms open, retain and upskill educators, and expand family access to quality care, the initiative is helping write the next chapter of a stronger, more connected early learning system.

Because when systems change, it doesn’t just impact child care programs—it rewrites the story for children, families, and entire communities.

THE BIGGER STORY BEHIND THE WORK



The Greater Akron Unified Early Learning System was created with a long-term vision: a more connected early learning community where every family can access high-quality care, no matter what type of child care setting they choose.

In many ways, the initiative is helping write a new chapter for early learning in Greater Akron—one where providers are supported, families are connected, and children have a stronger foundation from the very beginning.

The first phase of the work focuses on three key areas:

- 1. Integrated Wraparound Services** — connecting families to developmental support, mental health supports, health care, and family assistance resources so their needs are met holistically.
- 2. Business Support** — equipping child care operators with tools, training, and back-office support to stabilize finances, improve sustainability, and reduce administrative burdens.
- 3. Professional Development** — offering educators ongoing coaching, training, and career pathways that strengthen classroom quality, reduce turnover, and build a pipeline of skilled early learning professionals.

“The Unified Early Learning System intends to bring together the many separate programs, services, and providers that currently operate in isolation,” said Richelle Wardell, education and health strategist for Akron Mayor Shammal Malik, “transforming what has long been a patchwork of supports into a coordinated, intentional quilt that will cover every child and family in our community.”

The initial project includes eight child care providers representing the full spectrum of licensed early learning settings, from home-based care to large centers and the school district. Public and private partners have come together to fund the roughly \$950,000 pilot, supporting staffing, training, shared services, and evaluation.

In addition to the Early Childhood Resource Center, partners behind the effort include, but are not limited to, the City of Akron, the Greater Akron Chamber, GAR Foundation, Summit Education Initiative, Akron Community Foundation, Barberton Community Foundation, United Way of Summit and Medina, and the County of Summit.

Together, we are helping create a stronger foundation for all the stories still to come for children and families across the region.



Akron Mayor Shammal Malik and Education and Health Strategist Richelle Wardell speak at the September 2025 launch of the Unified Early Learning System.



Child care providers participating in Phase 1 of the Unified Early Learning System pilot represent a range of early learning settings working together to strengthen quality, stability, and access for families.

Photos courtesy of the City of Akron/Patricia Porter

CHAPTER 6

Impact in Action: Service Beyond the Pages

While giving is a consistent thread throughout our story, our impact extends beyond formal programs and services. During 2025, Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) team members also played active roles in strengthening the broader community through volunteerism, collaboration, and support of partner organizations working to improve outcomes for children and families.

These efforts reflect a shared belief that meaningful change happens when the whole community works together. In that spirit, our team can be found supporting initiatives that advance the well-being of children and families, both within and beyond our core programs.

Throughout 2025, these are just a few of the many ways the ECRC team supported community efforts across the region:



Sharing smiles: Enshrinement Week is a cherished tradition in Canton, and the ECRC team was proud to be part of the energy and excitement by coordinating volunteers for the Pro Football Hall of Fame's FirstPlay KidsFest event. Despite the summer heat, staff helped create fun, engaging experiences for area children and families. We were honored to partner with Employers Health, PNC, Jackson Local Schools, Perry Local Schools, and Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health to support this community celebration.



Rounding up food for those in need...and packing it up to go: Early Childhood Resource Center staff and community members donated 161 pounds of food, equaling 134 meals for the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank. And because we're regular volunteers at the Foodbank, last summer our professional development team helped pack 4,278 pounds of food to make up 3,565 meals for those in need in our community.



ECRC team members (from left) Allison and Carissa team up with volunteers from Employers Health to help create a fun and welcoming space for children and families at KidsFest.



Spreading caring and warmth: As part of the Refuge of Hope's Layers of Hope coat drive, we joined our community in donating coats, hats, and gloves to help wrap our neighbors in need in comfort and compassion.

Distributing donations: The ECRC team regularly volunteers to help collect and/or distribute donated items, partnering with local organizations such as United Way, Clothes Mentor, and more. In Winter 2025, for instance, we joined with United Way of Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley to

distribute meal kits to local child care programs for families in need. We also routed two carloads of children's clothing and toys from Once Upon a Child in Boardman to families in need in the Mahoning Valley area.



ECRC leaders Amy Wise (left) and Maria Spencer join voices from across the state at Groundwork Ohio's #AdvocacyDay2025 to speak up for policies that strengthen child care access, quality, and workforce stability.

CHAPTER 7

Shaping the Future: Changing the Narrative

Advocacy is a vital part of our mission and a consistent thread throughout our work. By informing public policy and elevating the needs of children, families, and early childhood professionals, the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) helps ensure that decisions made at the local, state, and national levels reflect the realities of those we serve.

Throughout 2025, the ECRC team continued to represent the interests of children and families across our communities and beyond. Some of the ways staff added to this narrative include:

Advocacy Day 2025

The Early Childhood Resource Center staff loved being part of #AdvocacyDay2025, organized by Groundwork Ohio. Joined by the team of Akron family child care providers participating in ECRC's Shifting the Child Care Industry project that is funded by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, staff talked with Ohio legislators about critical issues facing the child care industry.



Supporting area educators

ECRC sponsored the Great Start for Great Futures Early Childhood Advantage symposium, which gathered early childhood educators from across Stark County and beyond to promote school readiness. The event featured keynote speaker Sonia Manzano of "Sesame Street," as well as training sessions that focused on ensuring children are prepared for kindergarten.

Speaking up for school readiness

Twice during 2025, Early Childhood Resource Center Senior Program Director John Neidert

joined other organizations across the state in providing testimony in support of the SPARK kindergarten readiness program. John went to Columbus to address the Ohio House of Representatives Children and Human Services Committee and the Ohio Senate Education Committee, asking legislators to approve critical SPARK funding.

Amplifying real needs through storytelling

In 2025, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released a powerful video spotlighting ECRC's work to strengthen family child care in Akron. The video highlights how investing in family child care providers opens doors for working families and helps entire communities thrive, and it features the impact the ECRC team is making right here in Northeast Ohio.



Advancing workforce solutions

Child care access and stability continue to play a critical role in workforce participation, economic growth, and community

well-being across Ohio. Throughout 2025, ECRC helped elevate this conversation across policy, business, and community spaces, bringing together leaders to explore how early childhood systems directly impact workforce strength.

ECRC Director of Early Care and Education Services Maria Spencer moderated a panel discussion titled *Child Care Crossroads: Where Policy Meets Community* at the 2025 Mahoning Valley Regional Impact Ohio Conference. The session brought together providers, business leaders, and community members to examine the urgent link between child care access and workforce development. The discussion underscored the barriers facing families and employers alike, while elevating the role nonprofit partners can play in strengthening local systems and leveraging funding to expand access.

ECRC also supported regional dialogue through a sponsored breakfast focused on the child care landscape in the Mahoning Valley. The conversation highlighted how child care challenges continue to limit workforce attraction and retention. During the event, Joel Potts, chief government and external affairs officer with the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, discussed a newly piloted Early Care and Education Business Partnership Grant designed to bring together state agencies, employers, child care providers,

and nonprofit organizations to share the cost of expanding access for working families.

In addition to convenings and sponsored events, ECRC contributed to broader workforce discussions through regional collaboration efforts. Maria Spencer participated in a panel at the Portage Development Board Workforce Development Workshop, where leaders explored how immigration, recruitment, and child and adult care intersect with workforce dynamics. She also joined a Mahoning Valley workforce solutions committee convened by Youngstown Area Goodwill Industries, focused on turning data into action to address barriers to employment.

To further amplify this message, Maria shared insights about the long-term value of investing in early education on the “Good Community” podcast, and she was featured in a video produced by *The Business Journal* highlighting the direct connection between child care access and workforce stability.



Serving at the state level

ECRC staff are helping shape policies that impact children and families across Ohio. In 2025, ECRC Parent and Youth Ambassador

George Beatty was appointed to Governor Mike DeWine's Children and Youth Advisory Council and ECRC Director of Early Care and Education Services Maria Spencer was selected to serve on the Ohio Department of Children and Youth Advisory Council's Early Care and Education Subcommittee.

[Across these efforts, one message remains clear: strengthening child care systems is essential to building a stronger workforce and a more resilient economy.](#)

Co-leading a Unified Early Learning System in Summit County

ECRC joined more than a dozen community partners and the City of Akron in launching a Unified Early Learning System in Summit County. Phase 1 of this initiative includes a year-long pilot designed to stabilize child care businesses, support early childhood educators, and expand family access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

Shaping regional responses to the child care crisis

ECRC joined community partners at the Workforce Solutions in a Child Care Crisis: Regional Summit, a convening focused on the growing impact of child care shortages on Ohio's economy and workforce stability.

Economic research shared at the summit highlights the scale of the challenge: the lack of access to quality child care for children under age 3 results in an estimated annual loss of \$5.48 billion in earnings, productivity, and revenue across the state.

The summit brought together employers, policymakers, and community leaders to examine the current child care landscape, explore policies and pathways for change, and elevate real-world stories illustrating the impact on families and businesses. Discussions also highlighted how communities and employers are beginning to respond—and where additional collaboration is needed.

ECRC continues to be part of these conversations as stakeholders work to build a more sustainable and accessible child care system for working families.



(Top image) ECRC staff and board members gather outside the Canton office during the organization's March 2025 25th anniversary kickoff celebration and commemorative ribbon cutting. (Bottom image) A ceremonial ribbon cutting helped open a new chapter of celebration as the ECRC kicked off its 25th anniversary year in Canton. Executive Director Angela Moses (center) does the honors, alongside Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce President & CEO Jeff Dafer and staffer Molly Romig.

CHAPTER 8

Celebrating Together

Every meaningful story includes moments that make us pause and reflect. And the best stories are those that change us and allow us to celebrate how far we've come.

As the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) marked 25 years of service, we had the privilege of doing just that. It was an honor to gather with so many who have helped shape our journey along the way. Throughout 2025, we had the opportunity to honor the milestones, relationships, and shared commitment that continue to move our work forward.

Together, we celebrated not only what has been accomplished, but the community that makes it all possible through a number of special events:

25th Anniversary Kickoff

We opened our 25th anniversary year in March with a kickoff celebration that included a commemorative ribbon cutting and open house. Partners, community members, board members, and staff came together to shine a spotlight on the many ways the Early Childhood Resource Center has supported the healthy development of young children and strengthened families across our community.

Night at the Ballpark

In June, staff, families, and community partners came together to cheer on the Akron RubberDucks during the Early Childhood Resource Center's Night at the Ballpark outing. Under the heat of the summer sun, attendees rallied to raise support for our SPARK

Kindergarten Readiness Program, all while celebrating 25 years of ECRC's impact. Proud SPARK participant Evelyn took the field to throw out the game's first pitch.



Five-year-old Evelyn, a graduate of ECRC's SPARK kindergarten readiness program, throws out the ceremonial first pitch at the Akron RubberDucks game during one of the 25th anniversary celebration events held throughout 2025.

25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Our official 25th anniversary celebration, held in October 2025, served as the culminating moment of our milestone year. Surrounded by nearly 300 supporters, partners, and friends, we reflected on 25 years of impact and honored those who have helped shape our story. What a meaningful way to close this special chapter of celebration.

The evening raised more than \$75,000 to support children and families across our region, ensuring the next chapters of our story continue to be filled with opportunity, growth, and impact.

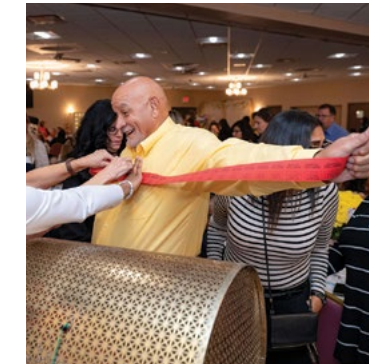
We are deeply thankful to the sponsors, honorees, guests, and volunteers who helped bring this evening to life. Your generosity and support made this milestone event one for the books!



EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER
A Ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System

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- United Way of Greater Stark County**



As this milestone chapter comes to a close, we are reminded that the most meaningful stories are never finished.

Here's to 25+ incredible years—and to all the stories still waiting to be written.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Donor Honor Roll: *With Gratitude*

Every meaningful story is shaped by those who choose to be part of it. We are deeply grateful to each of you who share our vision and support our mission. Our work would not be possible without you. Your generosity makes a lasting difference in the lives of children and families, and we are honored to have you as partners in this ministry.

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(Left) ECRC team members and fellow volunteers with Pro Football Hall of Fame mascot Goldy the GOAT during KidsFest 2025.

(Center) Guests mingling at the reception that followed the UELS launch announcement.

(Right) From the left, Joe Schauer, Senator Jane Timken, ECRC Executive Director Angela Moses, and ECRC board member Brad Belden pictured in the Canton office ECRC children's library.

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EPILOGUE

The Story Continues

The pages behind us tell a powerful story, but the ones ahead hold even greater promise.

As we reflect on 25+ years of service, we are filled with gratitude for the people, partnerships, and shared commitment that have brought us to this moment. Together, we have supported children, strengthened families, and empowered those who care for and educate our youngest learners.

But this is not the end of the story.

The needs of children and families continue to evolve, and so will the Early Childhood Resource Center. With each new day comes an opportunity to listen, to learn, and to respond in ways that deepen our impact and expand what is possible. The chapters ahead call us to build on what was started long ago, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

A Legacy That Continues to Guide Us

As we look ahead, we do so grounded in a legacy far greater than our own. In 2026, our founders, the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, celebrate 175 years of service rooted in compassion, justice, and a deep commitment to those most in need.

What began in 1851 has grown into a ministry that has touched countless lives through health care, education, and community-based services. Today, as a ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System, the Early Childhood Resource Center is honored to carry that

legacy forward, continuing a tradition of faith in action that strengthens families and builds more equitable, hopeful communities.

This milestone is a reminder that we are part of something enduring. We are part of a story that began long before us, and one that will continue through the work we do together.

Be Part of the Next Chapter

The future of this work depends on a community that believes in it. If you would like to support the Early Childhood Resource Center in 2026, consider making a gift.

Every gift helps move this story forward. Generous support from donors allows the Early Childhood Resource Center to reach more families, provide additional parenting education and resources, prepare more children for kindergarten success, equip more early childhood educators with high-quality training and coaching, and strengthen the systems that help children and families thrive.

The story continues, and we are grateful to write what comes next together.

When you give to the Early Childhood Resource Center, you become part of a larger story. Each contribution—whether monthly, quarterly, or one-time—helps ensure that more children, families, and early learning professionals receive the support they need to thrive.

Your support can help:

- Expand parent education and family support services
- Prepare more children for kindergarten success through SPARK
- Train and coach early childhood educators across our region
- Strengthen access to high-quality child care and early learning
- Support advocacy and partnerships that improve outcomes for children and families

You can make a one-time or ongoing contribution via credit card or direct debit by scanning the QR code below or visiting ecresourcecenter.org/donate.

Contact Taylor Weaver at 330.491.3272 or tweaver@ecresourcecenter.org for more information about additional giving options, such as:

- Charitable gift annuities
- Gifts of appreciated stock
- Deferred gifts from your estate
- Distributions from a retirement savings account

Your support helps ensure that the next chapters of our work continue to make a lasting difference for local children and families.

In Closing

Every page in this report reflects lives impacted and moments of hope made possible through collective commitment. As we close this volume celebrating 25 years of ministry, we do so knowing the story is still being written every day in classrooms, homes, and communities across our region. Thank you for helping bring these pages to life.



OUR MISSION

The mission of the Early Childhood Resource Center is to promote the healthy development of young children by strengthening families, improving the quality of early learning experiences, increasing school and community readiness, and informing public policy.

OUR COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY

The Early Childhood Resource Center provides a welcoming atmosphere, inclusive of all people, that honors, respects, and celebrates everyone's unique perspective. We encourage diversity and the sharing of thoughts and ideas to create a learning environment that is responsive to the needs of all young children and those who educate and care for them.



EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

A Ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System

877.691.8521 ecresourcecenter.org



The Early Childhood Resource Center has three regional offices located throughout the organization's service area:

Canton Office: 1718 Cleveland Avenue Northwest, Canton, OH 44703

Akron Office: 915 N Main Street, Akron, OH 44310 (*Inside the 915 N Main Community Connection Center*)

Boardman Office: 6414 Market Street, Boardman, OH 44512