

Grants Received By VCDC Tackle Childcare Challenges In Vermillion

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Jim Peterson, president and CEO of the Vermillion Chamber and Development Company (VCDC), hopes that the recent awarding of grant funds will help the community make progress on improving childcare access.

He expressed those hopes while addressing the Vermillion Rotary Club at its luncheon meeting June 5.

Last March, the Governor's Office of Economic Development (GOED) announced multiple awardees of the state's Investment Plan for Child Care. The VCDC was among the recipients.

The VCDC and over 40 other entities across the state applied for this round of implementation grant funding with 13 awardees named, totaling over \$3.7 million.

There are several types of projects that were awarded funding to expand the number of slots available in communities. These include projects aimed at improving the childcare workforce, strengthening coalitions and partnerships to create after-school programs, and creating a business accelerator for potential owners.

These plans, along with the work of these communities, will retain over 595 current slots and will allow for over 2,460 new childcare slots.

The VCDC was also among the recipients of GOED grant funding for the same program awarded last November.

Twenty-eight planning grants were awarded across the state late last year, totaling \$1.13 million for these entities. The funds will be used



Jim Peterson Courtesy Of Vermillion Rotary Jim Peterson, president and CEO of the Vermillion Chamber and Development Company (VCDC) describes how grant funding is being used to address childcare challenges in the community. He spoke at the June 5 meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club. Courtesy Of Vermillion Rotary Club

to expand childcare opportunities across South Dakota through innovative strategies and detailed plans.

Applicant ideas included creating career pathways to improve the childcare workforce, creating coalitions and partnerships, offsetting costs and creating a business accelerator for potential owners of childcare centers.

"It's actually some COVID money that the Governor's Office of Economic Development had to spend," Peterson said. "We were fortunate.

"There were 50 applicants and 28 got awarded a planning grant," he said of the funds awarded last November. "We came together as a community. Our partners were Head Start, USD Vucurevich Center, the Boys and Girls Club and the Vermillion School District."

Other partners include Pulse of Life Daycare, Sue Galvin, former principal of Jolley Elementary and the Center for Children and Families.

“I would be remiss today. It’s kind of bittersweet because, as you know, Carmen Stewart passed away yesterday,” Peterson said at the June 5 Rotary meeting. Stewart had a rich background in early childhood education and education administration and eventually became the director of USD Head Start, which provides free inclusive comprehensive services to eligible children and families by supporting nutrition, health, disability, education, mental health and family services.

“She was instrumental in these two grants,” he said, “and just a great advocate for kids.”

The VCDC contracted with USD’s Government Research Bureau to explore the best ways to use the grant funds it had been awarded.

“We had surveys and focus groups,” Peterson said. “We had 390 responses from the public. We went to childcare providers and staff and received 32 responses and we went to about 30 businesses and we had 10 responses.”

Four focus groups were also formed to receive input from local residents of various demographics.

“It was very fast paced. We did this in about six weeks and it usually takes about a year. Anything can be compressed – as my college professor said, ‘there’s nothing you can’t do over a weekend,’” he said with a laugh.

The details of the VCDC’s findings can be found on its website at <https://livevermillion.com/economic-development/childcare-development/>

“We’ve also held a couple community meetings to educate people,” Peterson said. “Most (people seeking childcare) would prefer a licensed childcare center or school-based center, so we did go to both unlicensed and licensed childcare centers. They want more options in Vermillion and they want lower cost childcare, but then when you talk with the owners of childcare, they want to pay more. You can’t have both; something has to give.”

The VCDC learned that 80% of parents are satisfied with the childcare options they have

chosen and providers want more in compensation and training.

“Businesses are dissatisfied. They (childcare centers) don’t open early enough; there are not enough options; it affects the recruitment; it affects the retention (of employees),” he said, “so these are common sense responses that validated what we knew.”

The VCDC summarized Vermillion’s childcare challenges into three needs: parents want more accessibility; they want more affordability and they want high quality care.

“After we won that (November 2023) award, we used that data to apply for an implementation grant,” Peterson said. “It was through the Governor’s Office of Economic Development to get the money out.”

The GOED awarded 13 grants among approximately 40 applicants and the VCDC fortunately was a recipient. The grants were awarded from a total of about \$3.7 million.

“We asked for \$500,000; the max you can get is \$400,000, so we’re very fortunate,” he said. “We have a great, creative, innovative solution and we call it Vermillion Cares. Carmen (Stewart) laid the framework for how we did all of this.”

Vermillion Cares addresses all four priorities of the GOED, according to information Peterson shared with Rotarians in a slide presentation. Its first priority is to find solutions to the workforce shortage in Vermillion with a goal to retain and attract employees through professional development.

Priorities 2 and 3 are to increase accessibility to high-quality affordable childcare across early childhood, but especially for infants and toddlers.

Goals of these two priorities are to (1) support three existing licensed centers in the Vermillion community to expand slots for infants and toddlers and (2) support employer-sponsored programs/childcare partnerships to expand the number of childcare slots.

The hoped-for expansion includes eight slots in the Center for Children and Families, five slots at Pulse Childcare and a potential of 16 slots at the Vucurevich Center.

“We have 46 pre-school slots that we can get, so we have a total of about 75 slots with everyone working together and offering some training,” Peterson said. “We can get that many more for our community.”

HeadStart will be moving from Trinity Lutheran Church to the soon to be vacant Austin Elementary School building. The Boys and Girls Club will be utilizing the Austin building and grant funds will be used to prepare four classrooms at Austin for childcare use.

“At the Austin School, we’ve spent a lot on the sprinkler system and on locks to make everything safe there,” he said.

Grant funds were also used to purchase equipment and supplies.

“We put money into training and certificates,” Peterson said. “Even the unlicensed home childcare centers wanted to make sure all of their staff is trained appropriately, so we’re coming together to do that.”

The VCDC is also working with the United Way of Vermillion with the goal of having vouchers available for families to use to help pay for childcare.

“We’re doing some things with marketing, so people know what childcare is available and what options they have,” he said. “We can defer some salaries, so we’re trying to make it sustainable, long term.”

The VCDC is also seeking the help of former Jolley Elementary principal Sue Galvin and her company to provide a STREAM lab to train teachers.

Another priority is to improve the childcare landscape by addressing an ‘outside of the norm’ challenge in Vermillion.

“We talked about a STEM lab. Remember how we have one at Jolley School?” Peterson asked. “We really want to work on the quality of

training of teachers and then take that on to the kids.”

The local childcare landscape, according to data collected by the VCDC, notes that 26% of people in Clay County live in poverty and approximately 362 children in the county live in poverty. The county has approximately 75.2% (487) children under the age of 6 with all parents in the workforce.

The Vermillion community has been identified as a childcare desert and families pay about 20% of their income for childcare.