Ready, Set, Grow!

LINCOLN littles
elevating early childhood

2025 – 2026
Impact Report

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A Note From Our Executive Director and Board Chair

Anne Brandt
Lincoln Littles
Executive Director

Eric Buchanan
Lincoln Littles
Advisory Board Chair

Ninety percent of brain development occurs before age five.

That reality drives our work at Lincoln Littles:
Quality early childcare is not a luxury – it is essential human and economic infrastructure.

When parents have reliable, affordable care, they can work and build stability, while children gain the foundation needed to enter school ready to thrive.

From 2025 to 2026, Lincoln Littles has moved from providing immediate relief to driving systemic, long-term change. Fiscally sponsored by the Lincoln Community Foundation and aligned with Prosper Lincoln 3.0, we are actively identifying strategic public financing sources to transform early childhood systems across our community.

Together, we've achieved transformative milestones.

big wins!

- **$850K in Tuition Assistance in 2026**
- **60 Certified Family-Friendly Workplaces**
- **$210K in Quality Enhancement Grants**
- **LB304 Became Law**
- **54 Tuition Assistance Providers**
- **Centralized Emergency Communication System**

Tuition Assistance reached a record **$850,000** in 2026. Tuition Assistance eligible programs from 11 to **54 active partners**. Quality Enhancement Grants for providers rose from **$148,000 in 2025 to $210,000 in 2026**.

Sixty local businesses signed on to the new Lincoln Family-Friendly Workplace Certification. And as part of a statewide coalition, we celebrated the **passage of LB304**, which protects vital childcare subsidies for working families.

As Rev. Juan Carlos Huertas shared at the launch of Prosper Lincoln 3.0, *"Hope increases with imagination."* Thank you for imagining a brighter future for Lincoln's littlest learners.

Helping Families Access Care

Tuition assistance makes early childhood education more affordable so families can work, continue school and build stability.

For many families, the cost of child care is one of the biggest challenges to balancing work, school and everyday life. In Lincoln:

- The annual cost of care can take up a significant portion of a family's income.
- On average, parents are paying $296 weekly for one child in child care.
- Many families earn too much to qualify for state subsidy – but still struggle to afford quality care.

Lincoln Littles partners with childcare providers across our community to help connect families with tuition assistance and support options. In November 2025, Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird and the City of Lincoln directed $250,000 of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to Lincoln Littles for tuition assistance.

"We believe that access to high-quality, affordable childcare is fundamental to supporting working families and to giving our littlest residents the best possible start in life."
– Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird

2026	**54 providers enrolled**	**$850K allocated**	**352 children served**
2025	**35 providers enrolled**	**$458,785 utilized**	**257 children served**

Strengthening Early Learning Programs

Childcare providers receive support, resources and guidance that help improve quality and expand opportunities for children.

Through the **2026 Quality Enhancement Grant Program**, Lincoln Littles – in partnership with City-County Joint Budget Committee funding and donor Rosalind Carr – awarded 25 grants totaling $210,000 to strengthen local center-based and family childcare programs across nine Lincoln ZIP codes.

These investments directly enhanced daily learning for 1,931 children, including nearly 500 receiving state childcare subsidies. The grants funded essential classroom upgrades, including curriculum packages, STEM learning tools, classroom furnishings, facility flooring and playground shade structures.

Alongside classroom quality, Lincoln Littles prioritized childcare safety by establishing a centralized **Emergency Preparedness System** to bridge critical communication and training gaps across local centers.

In collaboration with Lincoln Police Department dispatchers, the local health department and Lincoln Public Schools, **Associate Director Suzanne Schneider** helped build a centralized notification alert system paired with quarterly emergency response trainings.

This alignment ensures educators feel confident navigating severe weather or urgent crises using protocols and safety language that remain consistent with our school system.

To learn more, go to the "Lincoln Littles: Forging pathways and partnerships to protect our youngest residents" story at lincolnlittles.org.

Partnering with Employers

Businesses play an important role in supporting working families. Community engagement and family-friendly workplace efforts help create a stronger future for children, families and employers alike.

> ***"The reason that the Family Friendly Workplace Certification is so important is because child care and early childhood enrichment programs are an essential part of talent development programs."***
>
> **– Jason Ball, Lincoln Chamber and Lincoln Partnership President & CEO**

Led by Lincoln Littles in partnership with the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development (LPED) and the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, the Lincoln Family-Friendly Workplace Certification Program recognizes local employers that implement supportive workforce practices. To earn certification, organizations complete a self-assessment meeting at least 7 of 10 criteria – such as paid parental leave, flexible scheduling, dependent care resources and private lactation spaces.

The program has certified dozens of diverse local employers, including corporate anchors, cultural institutions and nonprofits like the Lincoln Children's Zoo. At the Zoo, leadership supports staff with paid parental leave, flexible work options and 100% employer-sponsored health coverage. As Zoo Operating Officer Sarah Wood noted, taking care of employees enables them to better care for the community.

To learn more, go to the "Recognizing Workplaces Showing Up for Lincoln Families" story at lincolnlittles.org.

Building a Stronger Future

Lasting change takes advocacy, collaboration and thoughtful policy efforts that help more children and families access the support they need – now and in the future.

Building a stronger future for Lincoln's children requires long-term policy alignment, collaborative networks and grassroots advocacy. Driving the work behind **Prosper Lincoln 3.0's Early Childhood focus area**, Lincoln Littles is leading systemic change across early care and education.

To secure sustainable public financing, Lincoln Littles appointed **Strategic Initiatives Director Emily Kluver** to align public-private investments so quality care remains accessible over the long term.

Supporting this systemic vision, the **Lincoln Early Childhood Network** workgroups coordinate community partners across three focus areas – Family Support, Quality Education and Health – to streamline developmental resources and address early childhood gaps.

While the network is driven by early childhood providers and supporters who volunteer their time, it is powered by Lincoln Littles. As the convening organization, Lincoln Littles provides the strategic backbone, administrative support and funding that allows these diverse professionals to stop working in silos and start working together.

Elevating Early Childhood Priorities

At the grassroots level, advocates like local barber Sam Dov elevated the reality of Lincoln's "childcare math" during public panels, illustrating how rising tuition strains working parents and small businesses alike.

At the same time, Lincoln Littles and a coalition of mobilized partners helped **pass LB304** into law, protecting state child care subsidies for thousands of families.

Together, these interconnected initiatives prove that when Lincoln invests in early childhood infrastructure, parents can build careers while every child enters school ready to succeed.

big efforts!

- Hired Strategic Initiatives Director
- Grassroots Advocacy
- Coordinate & Streamline Resources
- Helped Pass LB304

The Impossible Math of Child Care

For Sam Dov and his partner, the struggle isn't a lack of drive; it's the impossible math of child care for two kids. Before they became a combined household, his spouse qualified for Nebraska's Child Care Subsidy Program.

Now, because Sam is a successful barber, they earn "too much" to qualify for state aid under old standards, yet the cost of quality care – which can exceed $15,000 a year per child in Lincoln – would nearly swallow his partner's entire potential income.

"The public generally doesn't know what's going on; they just know they can't afford it," Sam shared.

On paper, a family might seem stable, but the reality is a trap: "We make too much to get childcare assistance, but we don't make enough to pay for it either."

Even though LB304 was passed, legislative change can still feel distant to a parent staring at a monthly bill they can't pay. As a Parent Ambassador with Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, Sam uses his barber chair as a hub for "guerrilla advocacy," translating complex policy into real-world action.

He recalls a recent moment at the shop when a customer mentioned the struggle of finding care. Sam didn't just offer sympathy; he pulled up the Unicameral's website right then and there. He walked the customer through the form to contact their local senator, helping them find their voice.

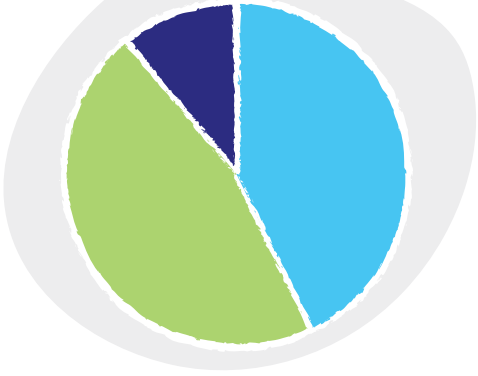
It's a quiet, powerful example of a neighbor taking matters into his own hands, ensuring that those most impacted by the child care crisis are the ones leading the conversation.

"This is what I'm about," Sam says. "Don't try to fit in to what others around you are doing. Fight the fight you believe in."

To learn more, go to the "A Red Apron and High-Stakes Math: Sam Dov's Fight for Lincoln's Families" story at lincolnlittles.org.

2025 Financials

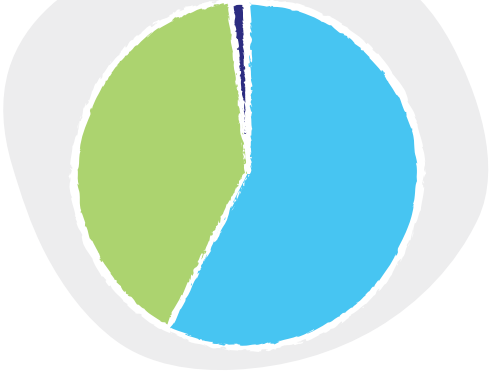
Fundraising:



- **Individual and Corporate Donors:** $862,000 – 43%
- **Foundation Grants:** $909,000 – 46%
- **Public Dollars:** $221,000 – 11%

TOTAL: $1,991,278.17

Expenses:



- **Direct Programming:** $658,000 – 58%
- **Tuition Assistance:** $459,000 – 41%
- **Fundraising/Marketing:** $13,000 – 1%

TOTAL: $1,129,566.61

Parents Say Thank You

"This means so much to my family and I'm grateful for the work that you do and the donors that support your mission. I promise to pay it forward in the future as our circumstances change." **– S.R.**

"We are just so grateful and don't even know what to say. This will make such a huge difference for our family as we try to get back on track... Thank you again for your help and the help of all of the generous donors. We hope to pay it forward someday." **– S.J.**

"You guys have been a lifesaver for us. You have no idea how much this helped us and allowed our boys to stay at [their childcare center] with their friends... Forever grateful for Lincoln Littles." **– V.**

big gratitude!

When a community invests in young children, it invests in its future.

Thank you to our donors for helping create stronger opportunities for local children, families and early childhood programs.

LINCOLN littles

215 Centennial Mall S, Suite 512
Lincoln, NE 68508

Support Lincoln's littlest learners and the families, providers and community helping them grow!

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