

Sandhills First Steps: Our Story

The story of Sandhills First Steps began in the fall of 2019, when our board began to notice the number of expectant working mothers in Burwell, compared with the number of available childcare spots. It seemed that every day, there were new inquiries on social media and by word of mouth for infant and toddler childcare openings. It became evident that the options were extremely limited. Having experienced the hardship of finding available childcare firsthand, the board was compelled to think outside of the box and search for ways to help resolve this issue. So, in September of 2019, a small group of determined individuals met for the first official meeting and Sandhills First Steps was formed.

As the board began having conversations about ways to serve the community's childcare needs, the most natural place to start was with existing childcare providers. In Burwell, we are fortunate to have several providers, some licensed and some license exempt working hard day in and day out to care for our community's children. In conversations with these providers, we inquired to see if anyone was interested in or able to expand their childcare capacity. While some were willing to consider the idea, there are many challenges that come with expansion. Additionally, even with current providers expanding, there would likely still remain a gap of available childcare spots. Thus, the idea of building a new child development center emerged.

To begin proposing a project of this size and scope to the community, the board began to research what other communities had done to meet their childcare demand, collect community data, and bring outside partners into the organization. In January of 2020, Sandhills First Steps was accepted as a Communities For Kids (C4K) community through the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. This partnership opened the door for Sandhills First Steps to network with childcare experts across the state and provided startup funding to begin educational efforts and hire community coordinators to conduct further research and feasibility studies. The C4K partnership also allowed Sandhills First Steps to gather a broader scope of data and in July of 2020, a C4K survey of Burwell and the surrounding area revealed there are at least 39 children under age 6 not enrolled in a private licensed or public preschool, representing the gap in available childcare options.

In the fall of 2020, Sandhills First Steps received its status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. We have since been focusing on raising community awareness of the importance of the early years in a child's life, as well as the economic impact that quality childcare and the lack thereof can pose to a community. Additionally, we are seeking ways to support our current childcare providers. The dedication and stability that is offered to families by these caring individuals is extremely valuable.

We at Sandhills First Steps understand that this project is not necessarily about or for our families. We are passionate about the creation of a quality child development center in Burwell for all of our community's children. Without adequate childcare, many parents and young families that work outside of the home will no longer be able to help support their families or may even be forced to leave our community in order to seek childcare resources. We believe the development of a new center must be a community effort and are committed to ensuring it is sustainable for the long run. As we continue to pursue this vision, we believe everyone in our community has something to bring to the table. Let's work together to see our children and the community of Burwell thrive long into the future!