
Making Progress:

Evaluation Findings of First 5 Monterey County's Policy and Advocacy Efforts

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About This Report

This report focuses on First 5 Monterey County's core role of championing early childhood issues, with the goal of improving policies and increasing awareness. The Social Policy Research Associates team drew on interviews with twenty key influencers in Monterey County to evaluate First 5 Monterey County's policy and advocacy efforts.

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Executive Summary

National and state policymakers have increasingly focused on early care and development (ECD) issues, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already fragile child care system. First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) remains steadfast in their pursuit of expanding and deepening ECD supports at the local level, thus they've identified early childhood advocacy and awareness as an integral part of their strategic plan. As F5MC continues its policy and advocacy efforts, they also remain dedicated to being intentional and strategic. This report outlines findings from an evaluation drawing on twenty interviews with key influencers from Monterey County, including elected officials, public sector leaders, community partners, business leaders, and one philanthropic leader. F5MC was particularly interested in the degree to which their efforts contributed to an increased awareness of and commitment to addressing early childhood development issues.

Findings

Findings are broken down into two themes, 1) Early Childhood Development as a Top Policy Issue,

and 2) Role and Impact of F5MC. These findings are followed by opportunities for F5MC to consider, as identified by key influencers.

Early Childhood Development as a Top Policy Issue

Findings below summarize key influencers' responses on the overall policy landscape within Monterey County and their thoughts and experiences with ECD as a top policy issue.

- **Early Childhood Development (ECD) identified as a top priority issue, second only to Housing.** Housing was the most commonly identified policy issue in the County. ECD was the second most identified issue and water was the third. Child care was frequently identified as important because it allows adults to work, especially during the pandemic.
- **Local political will to invest in ECD was described as medium to high.** However, some key influencers are skeptical and/or uncertain of the strength and depth behind local political will.
- **Many key influencers noted ECD has been included in local strategic plans and community assessments more often in recent years.** And several (n=7) mentioned that F5MC

has been an important player in spreading awareness and prioritizing ECD.

Role and Impact of First 5 Monterey County

Key influencers reflected on their personal and organizational experiences with F5MC and shared their perceptions of the organization as experts and a resource for early childhood in Monterey County.

- **F5MC is seen as the lead key agency in the early childhood landscape.** When asked about key players in the ECD landscape, influencers most frequently (n=15) identified F5MC. Key influencers see F5MC as an “expert” they rely on for ECD information and resources.
- **F5MC’s Executive Director is known by many as a vital leader and representative of the organization.** Francine Rodd, F5MC’s Executive Director, was frequently described as a strong leader and impassioned advocate who effectively communicates the importance of ECD.
- **Many see F5MC as a positive and important partner in the field.** Words like “openness,” “open-minded” and “thought-partner”

were used to describe F5MC’s collaborative approach.

- **F5MC is known for its bold leadership and action, as demonstrated by their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.** Several key influencers described F5MC’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic as impressive, thoughtful, and quick.
- **F5MC’s visibility has increased over the years.** Many key influencers felt that F5MC’s visibility and standing in Monterey County has increased due to their hard work.

Opportunities

Key influencers gave recommendations and identified areas for growth and opportunity in hopes of supporting and adding value to F5MC’s work, recognizing F5MC is already doing great work providing important services and resources to the community.

- **Increase funding amount and sustainability.** Key influencers shared that they were impressed by the work and impact of F5MC and, thus, would like to see F5MC doing more of it. Some also noted their concern that F5MC relies on funding from California’s cigarette

tax, which has dwindling coffers, and noted that they'd also like to see F5MC find a more sustainable funding source.

- **Increase collaboration between F5MC and those in and at the margins of the ECD field.** They encouraged F5MC to collaborate with Chambers of Commerce, the business community, the health care community, and other sectors that touch ECD but are at the margins.
- **Increase outreach and connection, especially with families.** Several influencers shared that they think the public is less aware of F5MC, especially compared to policymakers. They noted that people may only be aware of F5MC through its anti-smoking campaigns or billboards and thus do not know the full extent of services and resources they provide.
- **Lead more bold action.** They commended F5MC on their ability to spread awareness and would like to see F5MC take a larger leadership role in advancing ECD supports. One key influencer encouraged F5MC to lead a collaborative project, initiative, or campaign.

- **Center equity, recognizing divides in access to resources and power in Monterey County.** Key influencers commented on the inequities of Monterey County. One specifically noted the need for supports for indigenous communities in the southern parts of the County.

Conclusion

The combination of these recommendations and key findings suggest that Monterey County may be at a point where a policy window is opening (if it has not already), meaning the environment is fertile for new ECD policy solutions to take hold. While it is impossible to predict these policy windows with certainty, results from these interviews suggest that key influencers are looking to F5MC as an ECD expert and leader to respond proactively and equitably when the opportunity arises.

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Introduction

First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) advocates for child-friendly policies and raises awareness of Early Childhood Development (ECD) at the local level. F5MC focuses on supporting ECD in the County, which encompasses children's development from birth through age five and looks at the development of the child holistically, including but not limited to family context, health, mental

health, nutrition, play, and learning. F5MC's efforts are vital to supporting young children and their families, and the need for these types of efforts has become more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, many families are feeling the impacts of the pandemic on the child care system; a system that many deemed broken long before this global health crisis.¹

ECD has also been at the forefront of state and national policy agendas in recent years, as well as locally in Monterey County. Governor Gavin Newsom ran for governor on a platform that prioritized young children and their families. Once in office, Newsom quickly moved forward with creating his own Master Plan for Early Learning and Care that lays out plans for building an equitable system in California over the next decade.² On the national stage, many 2020 Democratic presidential hopefuls shared their plans for early education and supports for families with young children. Once in office, President Joe Biden released his American Families Plan that included free universal pre-school and investments in quality, affordable

¹ PBS News Hour, Associated Press, "Worsened by pandemic, child care crisis hampers broader economy," available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/worsened-by-pandemic-child-care-crisis-hampers-broader-economy>

² California State Department of Health and Human Services Agency, Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, available at: <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/master-plan-for-early-learning-and-care/>

child care and paid leave.³ Most recently, early care and development advocates, families, and child care providers rallied behind Biden's Build Back Better Act, hopeful for the critical changes it promised.⁴ Locally, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors has included early childhood development policy priorities as part of the County's Legislative Platform for several years. Finally, in 2021, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors elected to allocate one-time American Rescue Plan Dollars towards improving the County's child care system.

F5MC contracted with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to evaluate their policy efforts in order to document their current impact and inform their strategic decisions moving forward. This study is the fifth evaluation of F5MC's policy efforts.⁵ This report explores how F5MC is increasing the awareness of community stakeholders—including key influencers—about ECD issues.

Purpose of Report

One of F5MC's core roles is championship of early childhood issues, in pursuit of improving legislation and policies to support ECD, increasing awareness of ECD issues, and advancing F5MC as a ECD expert and resource in Monterey County. F5MC does this by promoting emerging strategic opportunities for policy change; pursuing sources of new funding for ECD; communicating regularly about ECD and its importance to policy/systems leaders, school districts, organizations, and the general public; and enhancing F5MC's brand awareness.

CORE ROLE

Champion Early Childhood
Raising awareness and advocating for
child-friendly policies and practices.

³ The White House, FACT SHEET: The American Families Plan, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>

⁴ EdSource, "Child care providers rally in support of Build Back Better bill," available at: <https://edsources.org/updates/child-care-providers-rally-in-support-of-build-back-better-bill>

⁵ Previous studies were done in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2016, as referenced in: Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

Findings detailed in this report are drawn from interviews with 20 key influencers, most of whom were identified by F5MC, for this evaluation.⁶ Interviews were conducted virtually in late summer and fall of 2021. Key influencers included elected officials within the County, leaders of civic groups and philanthropy, business owners, leaders of varying initiatives throughout the county, and staff from County agencies. The interview asked them about top policy issues in the County, key individuals, and organizations in ECD, their perspective on the political will to invest in ECD, the use of ECD in strategic plans, and their experience with F5MC (see Appendix B for the protocol). Our analysis summarizes the perspectives and experiences of key influencers as shared during interviews. One caveat to our findings is that many key influencers mentioned their limited knowledge of the issues at hand. Thus, we recognize a limitation of these findings is that it presents the sole perspective of this sample of key influencers, who have varied understandings of the broader ECD landscape. Despite this limitation, these findings provide insights and opportunities for reflection for F5MC as they continue their policy and advocacy efforts.

This report details findings related to F5MC's policy efforts, engagement with stakeholders, and F5MC's brand awareness. It also outlines opportunities for F5MC as they continue to advocate and spread awareness. The report is organized around two themes: ECD as a top policy issue and the role and impact of F5MC. The report also includes a section on opportunities for F5MC to further its work and an appendix with additional detail around the evaluation design.

Early Childhood Development as a Top Policy Issue

ECD has been emerging as a top policy issue in Monterey County. Understanding the story of that emergence and the current policy landscape can help F5MC shed light on how ECD issues are perceived. Our first set of key findings summarizes responses key influencers provided on the overall policy landscape within the County and their thoughts and experiences with ECD as a top policy issue.

⁶ In one instance, the key influencer recommended by F5MC was transitioning out of their role and recommended that we speak to their successor, which we did. SPR also recommended one of the key influencers to interview, because their organization was frequently referred to by other respondents.

Early childhood development was identified as a top priority issue, second only to housing. To understand the policy landscape, key influencers were asked to identify the top three priority issues for the Monterey County community. Issues were then ranked by how often key influencers identified them (Exhibit 1). In 2021 interviews, housing was the number one issue identified as a priority for residents. “Housing” included issues of affordability, supply, quality, rent supports, eviction moratoriums, homelessness, and the rising population of unhoused residents in Monterey County. Some key influencers connected housing issues to child care, child development, families, and water.

ECD⁷ was the second most cited issue, with many key influencers (n=7) specifically noting challenges with child care. Comments related to child care noted issues of affordability, supply, and quality. Many noted the importance of safe and reliable child care to families’ ability to work, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few (n=3) discussed the importance of strong early childhood policies for families, a holistic approach to caring for children and families, and high-quality experiences for children’s healthy development.⁸

“I recognize early childhood, even if it doesn't impact me directly, it certainly impacts me in other ways, when we talk about the long term economic and workforce development [implications].” -Key Influencer

Water was the third most cited issue. “Water” included access to clean water, reliable sewer service, and a long-term stable water source. Key influencers noted how water issues intersect with housing, economic development, population, and child care.

Other issues key influencers identified included: education, health, workforce issues, COVID-19, food security, public safety, transportation, political

⁷ “ECD” included mentions of ECD and/or child care. This is in line with the previous F5MC policy evaluation report: Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

⁸ Of the 8 respondents who are categorized as listing ECD as a top priority, 5 mentioned child care only, 1 mentioned broader ECD issues, and 2 mentioned both child care and broader ECD issues.

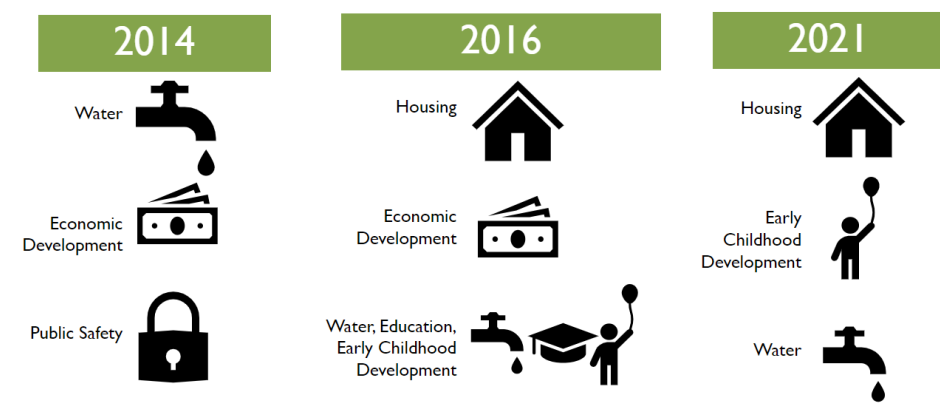
representation, government finances/transparency, equity, and family-friendly spaces.⁹

Exhibit 1. Top Priority Issues in Monterey County Ranked, (n=18)¹⁰

Ranking	Top Priority Issues in Monterey County	Frequency
#1	Housing	14
#2	Early Childhood Development	8
#3	Water	7

To explore how policy priorities have changed over time, we looked at the findings from discussions with key influencers in 2014 and 2016, in which they were also asked to identify three policy areas that were top priority in the County.¹¹ As shown in Exhibit 2, housing was the top issue in 2016 as well. Water has been a top priority across the years, even as it has dropped from the biggest priority issue in 2014 to third most important in 2016 and 2021. In contrast, economic development was ranked second in both 2014 and 2016, but not in the top three in 2021.

Exhibit 2. Top Priority Issues Identified by Key Influencers, by year¹²



⁹ These issues are in order of the frequency in which they were identified, from most mentions to least.

¹⁰ Note that the total number of responses (n=18) in this table is less than the number of interviewees because not all interviewees were asked this question, directly commented on this topic, or provided a direct answer to this question.

¹¹ In 2016, key influencers mentioned ECD and/or childcare; no key influencers mentioned child care in 2014. Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

¹² 2021 results are based on interviews with 18 key influencers who directly responded to the question, “Which three policy issues are of the highest priority in Monterey County?”

Looking at the past three studies (Exhibit 3), ECD has increased in its importance since 2014 when it was the sixth most cited issue.

Exhibit 3. Early Childhood Development Ranked as a Top Priority Issue in 2014, 2016, & 2021



Early childhood development was identified as the top priority for Monterey County families. Influencers were also asked to share their perspectives on the priorities of Monterey County families. Priorities were then ranked by how often they were identified (Exhibit 4). ECD¹³ was mentioned the most, more than housing. Specifically, five key influencers discussed the broader topic of ECD as a priority, noting the importance of social emotional wellbeing and development of children and families, children being kindergarten-ready, access to supports and resources for families, and support systems for raising healthy children. Child care was also discussed by many (n=7) as vital to families and touched on issues of quality, safety, affordability, and access.¹⁴

The top priorities cited after ECD included housing and food, ranked in that order. Housing included discussions of stability, access, and affordability related to both owning and renting. And key influencers discussed food security and access as a priority for families, specifically access to healthy and affordable food items. Other priorities included employment, health care, education, transportation, family-friendly spaces, diapers, adult literacy, and COVID-19 vaccinations for children returning to K-12 schools.¹⁵

¹³ “ECD” included mentions of ECD and/or child care. This is in line with the previous F5MC policy evaluation report: Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

¹⁴ Of the 9 respondents who are categorized as listing ECD as a top priority, 4 mentioned child care only, 2 mentioned broader ECD issues, and 3 mentioned both child care and broader ECD issues.

¹⁵ These priorities are in order of the frequency in which they were identified, from most mentions to least.

Exhibit 4. Top Priorities for Monterey County Families Ranked, (n=13)¹⁶

Ranking	Monterey County Families' Priorities	Frequency
#1	Early Childhood Development	9
#2	Housing	6
#3	Food	5

Child care was frequently identified as important because it allows adults to work. As shared above, key influencers often specifically discussed child care as a policy issue and a priority for families. One noted that families from across Monterey County are currently voicing their challenges with finding quality child care so they can work. Child care was also described as critical to the local economy and workforce, not only to a family's ability to support itself. One key influencer remarked on the importance of child care for women, especially women of color, and how that relates to increased upward mobility in Monterey County. Several key influencers connected child care to the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing the detrimental impact the pandemic has had on the child care system or noting that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing issues in the child care system. One key influencer shared:

"There seems to have been a shift into focusing on child care because of COVID and all the challenges that people are having coming back to work. Child care was basically shut down during COVID and that suddenly made it a big issue for people that were able to afford some sort of child care solution in the past, who tend to be a little better off and more politically active and now that they can't have it-- suddenly it's like, oh, it's a big issue."

This quote illuminates how access to child care is often tied into families' socioeconomic status, and the unresolved tension in our society between work and child care. Indeed, a lot of influencers focused on the intersection and

¹⁶ Note that the total number of responses (n=13) in this table is less than the number of interviewees because not all interviewees were asked this question, directly commented on this topic, or provided a direct answer to this question.

interdependence of child care and work/economic development. Influencers brought up issues relating to child care access, affordability, and quality, while also identifying flexibility and a living wage as important features of sustainable employment.

Local political will to invest in Early Childhood Development was described as medium to high. A majority of key influencers felt that the current political will to invest in ECD was relatively favorable (Exhibit 5). Several (n=6) specifically noted that they thought F5MC has positively influenced local political will and increased the County's understanding of the importance of ECD. Moreover, four key influencers also shared that the community's will to invest is strong.

"We're really coming together, prioritizing early childhood. I think a lot of this became more evident when First 5 brought in a presenter, [...] Heckman. And then you start looking at the return on investment, so that's when people who are counting the dollars, they're realizing, 'Oh, we need to invest early so we don't have to invest so much more later.'" -Key Influencer

Many key influencers (n=10) felt that the County has been growing in their willingness to invest and feel that ECD has been gaining traction over the past few years. One key influencer noted that there is growing understanding that it is important for the County to invest resources early on in children's lives. Several (n=6) believed that the will to invest has grown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has brought to light and exacerbated the many weaknesses and challenges of the child care system. However, two key influencers felt that the pandemic has decreased the political will in Monterey County.

Exhibit 5. Degree of Local Political Will to Invest in Early Childhood Development, (n=18)¹⁷

Degree of Will	Frequency
High	6
Medium	7
Low	3
Don't Know	2

Some key influencers are uncertain about and skeptical of the strength and depth of local political will to support ECD. Three key influencers noted that while those in the local political environment are vocalizing their support, they are not willing to follow through and invest. Two noted that there is a will, however, locating and/or generating the funding makes follow through difficult.

"This requires generational investment and change. So that's kind of counter intuitive to sort of the political universe, and especially the public funding universe, where [...] the wins don't come fast enough.

And so, it's always an uphill battle." – Key Influencer

Finally, two key influencers shared that the will to invest in ECD is dependent on specific ECD champions that are pushing for investment – “a reflection of who happens to be in office,” rather than it being engrained in the political culture of Monterey County. A similar theme emerged in the 2017 F5MC policy report, where key influencers stressed the importance of specific organizations and entities as leaders in elevating ECD as a political issue for local governments and nonprofits.¹⁸

¹⁷ Note that the total number of responses (n=18) in this table is less than the number of interviewees because not all interviewees were asked this question, directly commented on this topic, or provided a direct answer to this question.

¹⁸ Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

Early childhood development has been included in local strategic plans and community assessments more often in recent years. A majority (n=13) of key influencers believed that in recent years they have seen ECD in more local strategic plans and community assessments (Exhibit 6). Many noted that ECD has become an important issue in the County and that more people are talking about it. For example, one key influencer noted many cities have been including ECD in their general plans over the past three or four years. Three key influencers mentioned that ECD came up as a top priority in United Way's past two community assessments. They shared that the results of those community assessments resulted in increased awareness of the importance of ECD and led to United Way including it in their strategic plan. And, once again, over a third (n=7) mentioned that F5MC has been an important player in spreading awareness and prioritizing ECD. One key influencer shared that F5MC has integrated themselves in the community strategic plan process resulting in early learning being included in "County, City, and education" strategic plans.

Exhibit 6. Visibility of Early Childhood Development in Strategic Plans and Community Assessments, (n=19)¹⁹

Response to question: <i>Have you seen early childhood included in more strategic plans or community assessments?</i>	Frequency
Yes	13
No	2
Don't Know	4

Section Summary

Early childhood development has become a more prominent policy priority in the County. While housing was seen as the top policy issue, our findings show that there has been an increase in key influencers naming ECD as a top policy issue over

¹⁹ Note that the total number of responses (n=19) in this table is less than the number of interviewees because not all interviewees were asked this question, directly commented on this topic, or provided a direct answer to this question.

prior years. They describe child care as a basic necessity that families need, recognize the importance of child care for economic development of the community and prosperity of families, have noticed more discussion of ECD in strategic plans, and generally agree that there is medium to high political will to invest in ECD. Still, some key influencers are skeptical of the strength and depth of local political will to prioritize and invest in ECD supports.

Role and Impact of First 5 Monterey County

Beyond understanding perspectives of ECD as a local policy issue, F5MC was interested in learning about the efficacy of their advocacy and efforts to strengthen relationships across the County. To help F5MC assess their core role of championing early childhood development, key influencers were asked about their relationship with the organization, how they see F5MC show up in meetings, and F5MC's role in the community. Key influencers reflected on their personal and organizational experiences with F5MC and shared their perceptions of the organization as experts and a resource for early childhood development information and supports in Monterey County.

F5MC is seen as the lead key agency and a committed “expert” in the early childhood development landscape. Key influencers were asked to identify key agencies in the ECD landscape within the County. In Exhibit 7 below, actors are ranked by how often they were identified. Key influencers most frequently (n=15) identified F5MC. School districts, Bright Beginnings, and the Monterey County Office of Education came in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, respectively. Four actors were tied as the 5th most mentioned, having been mentioned four times.²⁰ F5MC was also named by several key influencers as an important influencer in the 2017 F5MC policy report.²¹

²⁰ Other actors identified include: Head Start, Monterey County Children's Council, Regional Policy Network, Early Learning Network, City Governments, Advocates/Organizers, Child Care Providers, Early Development Services, Monterey County Child Care Planning Council, family resource centers/community based organizations, Chambers of Commerce, public libraries, Quality Matters Program, County Social Services and Health Departments, Natividad Medical Center, ACTION Council of Monterey County, and Community Foundation.

²¹ Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

Exhibit 7. Key Actors in the Early Childhood Development Landscape Ranked, (n=18)²²

Ranking	List of Key Actors in Early Childhood Development Landscape	Frequency
#1	First 5 Monterey County	15
#2	School Districts	8
#3	Bright Beginnings	7
#4	Monterey County Office of Education	6
#5	Bright Futures	4
#5	United Way	4
#5	Mexican American Opportunity Fund	4
#5	Community Colleges and Universities	4

Key influencers see F5MC as a respected “expert” that is available when stakeholders need information or resources and frequently at policymaking tables to “share their perspective.” One key influencer noted that they turn to First 5 whether it’s a policy-level issue or an issue at an individual level, like someone in need of a car seat. Another key influencer shared their appreciation that F5MC is always informed and uses data to support their messaging. Finally, another key influencer noted how passionate F5MC is, noting that F5MC sometimes must be asked to shorten their presentations because “they’re so enthusiastic about what they do and what they have done.” As one key influencer noted the work and knowledge of F5MC is unique and vital to the County:

“There's a lot of people that are operating around youth and such, but [F5MC is] really focused on those formative years and there's not really another organization that I can identify that's doing that type of work.”

²² Rankings are based on the frequency in which the entity was identified by key influencers when asked “Who do you consider to be the key individuals, organizations, or networks in the early childhood landscape in Monterey County?” Note that n=18 as not all key influencers were asked this question, directly commented on this topic, or provided a direct answer to this question.

So, I think their information is invaluable. I mean, they give a perspective that most don't have and they back it up, like I said, with data and you can't argue with that. They know our community really well.”

F5MC was often described as persistent and unwavering in their efforts to spread awareness. Key influencers overwhelmingly agreed that F5MC is consistently and constantly reminding everyone about the importance of ECD and the impact of policies on children and families. This finding was also identified in the 2017 F5MC policy report.²³ Many noted that F5MC is “extremely active” and frequently present at various types of meetings, both educating and advocating.

F5MC’s Executive Director is known by many as the face and force behind F5MC. When asked to describe their relationship with F5MC, key influencers often spoke of their relationship and interactions with the Executive Director, Francine Rodd. She was frequently described as a strong leader and impassioned advocate who effectively communicates the importance of ECD. Many shared that they have a high opinion of her and that she is a great representative of F5MC. One key influencer noted that she has “considerable influence,” and another described her as a “north star for [early childhood education].” A few key influencers specifically noted that her “strong voice” has been instrumental in F5MC’s pursuit to amplify and lift up ECD. One key influencer noted that she always has great recommendations for where one can go to deepen their understanding of ECD. Finally, one key influencer noted that Rodd not only represents F5MC but makes efforts to integrate herself into and represent the community, specifically the Black community.

²³ Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

“I think that [F5MC’s] messaging is really, really clear in the community and Francine primarily is everywhere. She's always out there. She's the face of the organization. She's very clear on her beliefs and very strong when it comes to racial equity, inclusion and things like that, which I really respect her for.” -Key Influencer

A few key influencers touched on the interrelatedness between Rodd and F5MC. One expressed worry for the organization if she were not leading the organization, while another expressed confidence that if she were to leave, they would expect her to set F5MC up for success with a good succession plan and successor. Finally, another believes that it is difficult to separate personal relationships from organizational or programmatic relationships, thus they were not concerned that Rodd is a prominent bridge to and representative of F5MC.

F5MC's Response to COVID-19

Several key influencers described F5MC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as impressive, thoughtful, and quick. F5MC remained open during the pandemic to address the needs of the community. They became a drop-off center for other organizations and a place for families and providers to pick up various items, including personal protective equipment. One key influencer noted that F5MC was "methodical" in getting resources out to the community to ensure they were meeting the needs of all constituents while also being "fair and equitable."

F5MC was described as quick to respond to and center the needs of families. F5MC joined County planning efforts to support families' access to food and developed information for their website to answer families' questions and address their needs. A key influencer said, "[F5MC's work] was critical with the COVID response."

Beyond addressing food insecurity and helping to meet families' basic needs, F5MC never lost sight of the importance of child care within the pandemic context. Through Bright Beginnings, F5MC "championed an early childhood work group that was meeting weekly" to ensure essential workers had child care and discuss how to prevent child care programs from closing indefinitely. At these meetings, they also discussed the issue of early educators not being prioritized as essential workers. This led to F5MC partnering with another organization to set up clinics where early educators could get vaccinated. One partner noted, "They're very much 'get it done' kind of people."

Key influencers described their relationship to F5MC as a partnership, noting that F5MC is "always willing to work with everybody around the table." Words like "openness," "open-minded" and "thought-partner" were used to describe F5MC's collaborative approach. One key influencer noted that F5MC ask questions like "How can we support you?" and "How can we work closely together?" Key influencers also described moments when they worked together with F5MC and how the partnership made a "very big difference."

“I think they're also very collaborative. So, they know that they need everyone else's support to really be successful, so they don't try to go it alone, but they try to collaborate with other organizations that can help them achieve their mission.”

-Key Influencer

F5MC's visibility has increased over the years. Although a couple of influencers felt that F5MC's visibility has always been high, many others felt that F5MC's visibility and standing in Monterey County has increased due to their hard work over recent years to expand supports for and raise awareness of ECD. F5MC was identified as well-known amongst early childhood educators, school districts, families, K-3 teachers, and policymakers. One key influencer shared that F5MC has a lot of “clout” with policymakers and that policymakers are interested in understanding F5MC's position on ECD policies and programs before making their own decisions.

“I would say they've continued to raise their visibility because of their efforts to be out there in the community more, to be visible, to be present, to be at the table, to share their mission with others.” -Key Influencer

Key influencers made note of several factors behind this increase. Several pointed to F5MC's work and initiatives, such as their funding of community-based organizations, sponsorship of community engagement sessions, advocacy work with Bright Beginnings and the Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network, as well as their distribution of the Kit for New Parents²⁴. One key influencer was impressed with F5MC's marketing, noting that they see F5MC brochures at their local restaurant that is frequented by families. Another noted that the F5MC

²⁴ F5MC offers free kits to new parents, filled with important information and resources on health, nutrition, safety, and positive discipline. <https://www.first5monterey.org/kit-for-new-parents.htm>

Executive Director's persistence and presence as an advocate has elevated F5MC's profile in the County.

Although most felt that F5MC was very visible, a few identified this as an area for development, specifically as it relates directly to families. More details and recommendations about this can be found in the "Opportunities" section.

Section Summary

F5MC's expertise, advocacy, and visibility in the community are all important drivers to supporting ECD within the County. F5MC aims to advance themselves as experts and a resource for ECD in Monterey County as part of their efforts to promote family-friendly policies. Key influencers identified F5MC as the lead agency in the County devoted to ECD, describing it as an advocate, thought partner, and expert in ECD that has influence and clout throughout the County. F5MC's Executive Director was frequently cited by key influencers as a positive and effective leader and representative of the organization. Finally, interviews show that stakeholders view F5MC as a partner willing to work with others, and that they believe the organization's visibility has increased over the years thanks to F5MC's hard work.

Opportunities

The discussion with key influencers also provided a chance to gather insight from these stakeholders on areas of improvement for F5MC, or as we describe below opportunities to move the organization and work forward. Many stated that they were making recommendations in hopes of supporting and adding value to an organization that is already providing important services and resources to the community. Thus, these recommendations were meant to build off the good work F5MC is already doing. Recommendations below are ranked by how frequently they were identified.

Increase amount and sustainability of funding for F5MC (n=8)

Key influencers shared that they were impressed by the work and impact of F5MC and would like to see F5MC doing more. Some noted their concern that F5MC relies on funding from Proposition 10 - an additional cigarette tax, but as smoking has decreased, funding for F5MC has also decreased. They noted that they would also

like to see F5MC find a more sustainable funding source. One key influencer noted that this could come in the form of a ballot measure and recommended that F5MC test the political waters to determine if policymakers would support it and whether voters would receive it well.

“I think they’ve done a great job and I would just say do more of it and find more funding and try to expand those and scale their organization if possible.”

-Key Influencer

Two key influencers noted that they would like to see increased funding invested in F5MC’s staff, both to increase current staff bandwidth and to increase the depth of personnel. One specifically shared that they’d like to see more powerhouses “like Francine.”

Finally, a key influencer shared that more funding and intentionality would help F5MC “have the right data, the right people with the right knowledge and connections, and the knowledge to know where the resources exist so they can make the ‘right ask.’” Another encouraged F5MC to track their progress and impacts, then use this data to tell a story in a way that will help F5MC obtain more funding and enhance the stature of their programs.

Increase collaboration between F5MC and those in and at the margins of the ECD field (n=5)

As detailed above, key influencers shared appreciation for F5MC’s collaborative approach. When asked to identify ways for F5MC to improve, five shared that this is also an area where the organization could build on or expand their existing collaborative work. Several key influencers identified opportunities where F5MC could directly increase their efforts; some noting how their own organizations would benefit from partnering with F5MC in new or deeper ways. They encouraged F5MC to collaborate with Chambers of Commerce, the business community, the health care community, and other sectors that touch ECD but are at the margins. The recommendation to engage with the business community also surfaced in the

2014 and 2017 F5MC policy report.²⁵ However, 2021 interviews indicate that the business community is much more aware of the importance of ECD and its impact on the economy and workforce than in previous years.

Key influencers also recommended that F5MC collaborate with organizations that may have different values, noting that F5MC has a lot of integrity and consistently centers equity but at times this can hold them back from working with organizations “who aren’t there” or do “not live into their values the same way.” This can result in a friction that makes it difficult to partner and collaborate. One key influencer noted that there may be times that F5MC will need to collaborate with these partners to advance family-friendly policies and practices in the County:

“How tight should they hold to their values at the expense of relationship? They’re so relationship-focused, but with people that it’s easy to get along with. When it starts getting tougher, that’s a growth area for them. I think in order to do what’s on the horizon for early childhood, that’s an important muscle.”

Two key influencers discussed the importance of ensuring efforts are not duplicated and organizations have “clear lanes,” an issue one noted as true across the non-profit sector. This underscores the importance of communicating across organizations, developing relationships, and building trust to effectively coordinate. Authentic engagement takes time, as one key influencer described an example when F5MC dedicated extra time to engage in dialogue and build trust necessary for cross-organizational collaboration.

Note that these recommendations must be taken in tandem with the understanding that collaboration and relationship-building is complex and must also be balanced with an organization’s values, capacity, goals, mission, etc.

Increase outreach and connection, especially with families (n=4)

While as noted previously, many influencers indicated that F5MC’s visibility had increased over the years, others identified this as an area for development. One was specifically concerned that the public is not fully aware of the important services

²⁵ Harder+Company Community Research. (2017). *Gaining Momentum: Early Childhood Development Policy & Advocacy in Monterey County (First 5 Monterey County: Year 4 Policy Evaluation Report)*.

and resources that F5MC provides and thus families are unable to access them. Another key influencer noted that if they were asked to identify services that F5MC provides the community, they would not be able to name any.

“So, there's a lot of things that they do have, but the community don't know. So, I think that's one of the areas, I think, going back to your other question, but I just feel like there's a huge gap of knowing, taking advantage of the resources that they have available for families.” -Key Influencer

Similarly, several shared that they think the public is less aware of F5MC than are policymakers. One key influencer noted that people in the public often are not aware of F5MC until they have a child or are interested in learning about policies that impact young children. Key influencers noted that people may only be aware of F5MC through its anti-smoking campaigns or billboards. Another key influencer shared that only families that are served by F5MC partners are aware of them and that is thanks to the terminology that they use, “First 5 Collaborative.” Finally, one key influencer noted that there is work to do to ensure that the community is aware of what F5MC offers and can access it.

This is especially important because key influencers overwhelmingly believed that F5MC’s work was “extremely relevant” and “necessary” to the community. One key influencer identified specific work and resources that have had a positive-impact and have been in response to the needs of the community, including COVID-19 information, trainings, reflective practice workshops for providers, and community events.

Lead more bold action (n=3)

While most influencers commended F5MC on their ability to spread awareness, a few would like to see F5MC take a larger role in advancing work. One noted that they often see F5MC at the table and pushing for the insertion of ECD into other organization’s projects or work, but rarely do they see F5MC “at the head of the table.” Another raised concern that “awareness alone isn’t enough to make the change.” Key influencers noted that they would like to see F5MC not only share

ECD data and research, but actionable solutions that could “move the needle” to support young children and families.

“I do think there’s opportunity to be a little more bold and to actually be the leader instead of being the partner.” –Key Influencer

For one such influencer, bold action looks like leading a collaborative project, initiative, or campaign. As this influencer described, F5MC could consider

“... generating a community commitment to something, and then bringing a networked group of people together to see that that gets accomplished, either through policy changes or again, it could be the building of a[n] early childhood center or partnerships between school districts with early childhood providers.”

For another key influencer bold action meant F5MC should assess community needs and use that assessment to develop actionable strategic goals that they put into action to create change rather than solely raising awareness.

“What do we literally need? How many X numbers of what do we need happening where, and what's the price tag for that? And what will it take? And then decide, given that, what's the level of resources that we can devote to it? And what percentage of the larger problem then can we [in] fact solve with this resource allocation and set some goals? And they go about doing something to change things. I don't see them doing that, that I'm aware of.”

This key influencer also recognized that F5MC, like many nonprofits, may have limited capacity or technical skills and suggested the organization take advantage of outside experts or resources, specifically organizational capacity workshops run by Community Foundation for Monterey County.

Finally, one key influencer talked about the importance of pushing ECD forward in the political realm, especially as new opportunities arise. They noted,

“We're competing with folks who have a paid lobbyist. So, we've gone out and we brought in people who are passionate about early childhood education and that's absolutely necessary, but we've got to figure out how to bridge over into that space of political action.”

Center equity, recognizing divides in access to resources and power (n=3)

Key influencers commented on the inequities of Monterey County. These inequities included not only differential access to resources, but also to power within the County. One key influencer recommended ensuring supports and funding are provided to South County, and specifically the indigenous communities of the area. Another encouraged F5MC to ensure North County receives sufficient funding to meet its needs and that urban and rural voices are heard. A third key influencer shared that the County is like a “mini model of California,” describing the coastal regions as “better resourced and much more affluent” and inland regions as “challenged for resources.” They urged F5MC to keep this inequity in mind as they center equity.

Summary and Conclusion

Key influencer interviews indicate that F5MC has made significant progress in their role of championing early education. They consistently identified ECD as an important issue to the County and F5MC as a critical driver of the growing awareness about family-friendly policies and practices. Interviews also indicate that there is a growing urgency for investing in ECD, partly fueled by pandemic's impact on the child care system and the local economy, and partly fueled by the tireless work of local ECD leaders. Moreover, F5MC was described as a well-respected expert of ECD and a dedicated partner that is committed to the Monterey County community.

While important progress has been made, key influencers also identified several ways that F5MC can build on their work. Most notably, influencers described the importance of increased funding for F5MC so they can expand their current efforts and services, while continuing to do so equitably across Monterey County. Key influencers would also like to see F5MC increase collaboration and outreach efforts. Finally, a recommendation emerged for F5MC to take on a more proactive leadership role in the policy advocacy space and be “at the head of the table.”

The combination of these recommendations and key findings suggest that Monterey County may be at a point where a policy window has opened or will soon, meaning the environment is fertile for new ECD policy solutions to take hold. Windows of opportunity occur when three “streams” (problem, policy, and political) intersect.²⁶ In interviews, key influencers describe these three streams as potentially crossing at the intersection of ECD. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated problems around access to child care system, impacting a larger group of families and employers. It also highlighted the needs of many families from communities that have been historically excluded or targeted as they work to raise and support their children. Key influencers described an increased political will by local lawmakers to support ECD. As one key influencer noted, “I think it's our time to pounce. It's our time to be like, “This is who we are, and this is what we do.” The third stream – the policy – or solutions to the problem, may be an area for F5MC to leverage its expertise and deep connection to the community to help develop effective solutions, and use their influence to support policy outcomes in service to improved ECD. A key influencer discussed the importance of ECD actors taking advantage of political opportunities, “you have to act, and you just have to have it and be ready to hit go.” While it is impossible to predict these windows with certainty, key influencers’ responses suggest a policy window may be opening in Monterey County to better support ECD and are looking to F5MC to respond effectively and equitably.

²⁶ See John Kingdon's 1984 book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* which describe these windows of opportunities for policymakers and advocates.

Appendices

Appendix A. Methods

Instrument Development

F5MC was interested in learning about their policy efforts, which includes efforts by F5MC to promote strategic opportunities for policy change, pursue new sources of funds for ECD, communicate regularly about ECD and its importance to policy/systems leaders, as well as publicly enhance their brand awareness. The interview protocol was developed, then, to capture data around the outcomes for policy efforts and relevant indicators as articulated in F5MC's *Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) for Strategic Plan 2017-23* and to provide opportunities for comparison across prior policy reports.

The protocol was developed spring 2021 with feedback obtained from F5MC staff and F5MC's Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC). Protocol development included several rounds of iteration and refinement to ensure the protocol would properly address the research questions, outcomes, and relevant indicators. The final protocol included questions about top policy issues in the County, key organizations in ECD, influencers' perspective on the political will to invest in ECD and prevalence of ECD in strategic plans, and their experience with F5MC (see Appendix B for the protocol).

Sample

The sample sought to include key influencers from across the County. Key influencers are defined as leaders of various agencies and organizations throughout the County and included elected officials within the County, leaders of civic groups and philanthropy, business owners, leaders of varying initiatives throughout the county, and staff from County agencies.

F5MC identified 21 individuals to participate in interviews, two of which declined due to time constraints. In one instance, the key influencer recommended by F5MC was transitioning out of their role and recommended that we speak to their successor, which we did. SPR also recommended one of the key influencers to interview, because their organization was frequently referred to by other respondents. Given COVID-19, all interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom.

Interviews were between 45–60 minutes and conducted at times convenient to participants. Key influencers were from the public sector (50%, n=10), community partners (25%, n=5), local businesses/business groups (20%, n=4), and from philanthropy (5%, n=1).

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was informed by grounded theory.²⁷ The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then uploaded into the qualitative software, Dedoose. We began by coding each interview by question in the protocol, as each question represented different areas of interest we wanted to capture. We used an iterative process for analysis of the data. After the initial round of coding, SPR staff met to discuss emerging findings. We also discussed emerging findings with the EAC and shared a draft of this report with F5MC staff. This iterative engagement with the data informed the synthesis of emerging findings presented here by supporting interpretation of the findings, highlighting areas for clarity, providing opportunities to have findings interrogated externally from the SPR analysts, and ensuring that the findings are relevant and reasonable. Questions that lent themselves easily to counts (e.g., top three policy issues in the County) were tallied for reporting. For other questions, we summarized recurring patterns and themes across key influencers. In addition, we coded and reported on instances of counternarratives. A core part of ensuring equity in evaluations is reporting not only the major themes shared across many respondents, but also telling that counternarrative – the experiences not of the majority. In addition to reporting major themes and counternarratives, we also share reflections that represent only one or a couple of respondents. We did so, because for this study, respondents were purposefully sampled due to their unique insight about the County. To ensure we captured their voice fully, we provide a thorough presentation of their responses, even if it represents only a small perspective.

While replicability of qualitative analysis is not feasible or appropriate, we recognize the importance of ensuring our findings are transparent and

²⁷ Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

trustworthy.²⁸ As such, we share quotes throughout the report to both illuminate key findings and to present evidence of our findings. As with all our quotes, we only include quotes that allow us to protect confidentiality of respondents. We also provide additional quotes in Appendix C to further illustrate our findings.

Limitations of study

As noted in the main body of this report, an important note to make is this report presents the perspectives and experiences of key influencers as shared during interviews. Many key influencers noted their own limited assessment and knowledge on the issues at hand. Our analysis summarizes the perspectives and experiences of key influencers. The data are not meant to be representative of the County or even of all County leaders. In addition, we accept the data as their impressions and do not interrogate their comments for accuracy. For example, if a key influencer reports that F5MC does not engage in a particular activity, we do not assess that remark to determine if it is accurate or not. Rather, our analysis and this report captures their point of view. Nor did we interview relevant F5MC staff to include their perspective on the work they are doing and its impact. Thus, we recognize a limitation of these findings is that it presents the sole perspective of this sample of local key influencers. Still, we are confident that these findings provide useful and actionable insights and opportunities for F5MC to reflect as they continue their policy and advocacy efforts.

²⁸ Pratt, M.G., Kaplan, S., & Whittington, R. (2020). The tumult over transparency: Decoupling transparency from replication in establishing trustworthy qualitative research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (65)1, 1-19.

Appendix B. Key Influencers Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. In a few sentences, please tell me a bit about yourself and the organization or business that you represent.

Policy Issues

2. Which three policy issues are of the highest priority in Monterey County?
3. How is early childhood development connected to the work that you do, if at all?
4. Now thinking about families with children 0-5. What do you think is most important for families and children 0-5?

ECD System Alignment

5. First, who do you consider to be the key individuals, organizations, or networks in the early childhood landscape in Monterey County?
6. How would you characterize the current political will around investing in early childhood development? How has this changed over the past five years?
7. Have you seen early childhood included in more strategic plans, and community assessments?
8. Within your own work, have you made any changes to your work regarding early childhood development?

Role of First 5 & Wrap Up

9. What comes to mind when you think of First 5 Monterey County?
10. What is your relationship with F5MC?
11. What meetings, if any, do you participate in where F5 Monterey County is at the table?
12. What has been your experience with having F5MC in those meetings?
13. To what extent do you think First 5's resources and content are relevant to the community?
14. What is First 5 doing well? Where could they improve?
15. Please feel free to share any additional thoughts about First 5 that you feel would be important for me to know.

Appendix C. Additional Quotes

Below we provide additional quotes to illuminate the report findings. As with all our quotes, we only include those that allow us to protect confidentiality of respondents and that provide depth and are illustrative of the theme. As such, the number of quotes we provide vary across themes.

ECD as top policy issue

Early childhood development was identified as a top priority issue, after housing.

Housing

“Housing is a deep concern and that touches our families. [...] when you look district wide, Monterey County has some of the highest rates of student homelessness. That's dangerously overcrowded housing conditions and really precarious lack of stability for kids. So, I think that that bigger, broader issue touches everything. And it's not just any housing is good housing. There's that narrative, but really what we need is we need housing that's going to meet the needs of the families and the workforce who are living here now. You can overlay that with the concerns about homelessness, which I think in many cases tie that back directly to lack of housing for people.”

Early Child Development

“And then I'm also thinking of the early childhood policies that relate to having really strong early childhood supports for families. [...] there's definitely inequities in access to child care, quality daycare, the supports for friends, family, neighbors network. And if we were able to reduce those inequities, we would make a huge difference for a large portion of the families in the County.”

“Well, certainly early childhood is very important and related to that it was very important is child care, a big issue and it's not just here really, it's nationally. I think that would do a lot first to help households but also to help children and be better prepared for school, no question.”

“Access to affordable child care, high quality child care, access to high quality child care, so multiple issues. Quality, access in general and affordability of child care, those are all major issues.”

“Social emotional wellbeing and development of child and the family. There's a lot of trauma that happens in our communities of color, specifically in Monterey County where there's a lot of racial trauma and that trickles down to the youth.”

Water

“A long-term stable water source, which ties into housing and affordability, which then ties into child care, which is a tremendous issue. And I think the pandemic exposed it. And there was a thought that it was for an X income level that was really struggling with this. It's the recognition that not having housing tied to water means we don't have people to be able to take care of kids.”

Early childhood development was identified as the top priority for Monterey County families.

ECD

“Social emotional wellbeing and development of child and the family. There's a lot of trauma that happens in our communities of color, specifically in Monterey County where there's a lot of racial trauma and that trickles down to the youth. And we have seen studies, I mean, data study and research have told us the impact that it has to the brain development of students, the generational trauma. So that's one of the main areas.”

“There have to be supportive social networks that families can be part of because raising children is not easy and people can't do it alone and there's always going to be the need to learn more in different ways on how to healthfully raise your children and parent them. And parents need support because it's hard work.”

“Access to child care obviously is number one, I'd say that preparation and really the professional childcare would be mixed in there somehow, it's hard to pinpoint it in, but making sure that the development of our kids is prioritized in a beneficial way.”

“We definitely have a real challenge with having enough childcare. And then for the family, they're very busy to be able to have the time with their children, to spend the time with their children, to have the education for educating their children. Having that readily available and having a support system around for that. And again, there's the inequities of who can access that and who has access to that and who doesn't.”

Housing

“Well, basic needs first and foremost. They need shelter. They need to make sure that they have a roof over their head because if they don't, nothing else matters, really. They don't have that security that a lot of us take for granted.”

“What I see with my friends with children who are zero to five, the expense of living here is just really difficult. I mean, there's no question about it. It's very expensive. Paying the rent or trying to buy a home is just costly.”

Food

“Same question, with if you needed onions and carrots for soup, are you going to grab that box of mac and cheese, right? That health decision being made based on where you live in the distance to a grocery store, you call them food deserts.”

“One is that they have to have access to healthy food and they have to be able to just get the fundamentals of the right types of nutrition for these children, for their physical and intellectual, their brain development.”

Employment

“So, again, it's almost like you've got to have a healthy community to be able to support all of the families in having basic needs met. And then they have to have the ability to access some source of income, right? So there have to be adequate jobs in the community so that families can provide for themselves.”

“I think that employment flexibility, finding work that allows you to be a parent, right?”

Health

“And then healthcare, I'm sure healthcare is a concern. It's not the one that jumps immediately to my mind when it relates to children zero to five, but I'm sure that's in there, too.”

“So, if the basic needs are not met, the shelter, the food and then basic medical, whether it's mental health or physical health.”

Child care was frequently identified as important because it allows adults to work.

“And then child care, to be able to afford child care so that you can go to work. I would say high quality child care so that parents can go to work and have that peace of mind that their child is safe and being well cared for and getting an education.”

“And one of the reasons they're not able to get workers is that, perhaps appropriately, people have to pay so much to be able to find child care, that it isn't worth it. They can make more money by being at home, at least at this point, with their unemployment and some other supplemental income they may have, to take care of their children rather than having to put their kids in child care that can cost as much as their rent in some spaces. So those are the things that I hear, and those are the things that are very important of have great concern to me.”

“I think one of the big things that doesn't get talked about sometimes is what it does for women and especially for women of color. So, if we are trying to have kind of upward mobility in our community, child care really is essential for that. And I think the research shows that there are a lot of family outcomes. And so, they'll say, the children are less likely in the future to depend on social services or something like that. And I think a lot of that has to do with increasing family stability by having care for the children. So, I think that would be one side. And I say that side first because I feel like the developmental side is more obvious. That if we have high quality experiences for young children, obviously that means that they're going to be more successful in school. But I think it's more than that. I think it's also the impacts that it has on families. But especially I think giving opportunities for especially women to work or go to school.”

Local political will to invest in ECD was described by key influencers as medium to high.**High**

“I think there's strong will. Every meeting I'm in, it's a major focus. [...] And definitely there's a ton of support for the early childhood needs. [...] I think the awareness of the challenges have become very, very apparent in these last few years.”

“I think it's huge. I think the political is huge. I think it's just a matter of limited resources overall to use for investment.”

"I'd say it's pretty strong. It's pretty high, yeah. I think it's high and has been consistently strong for, I'd say, five years. 10 years maybe. I think it has gotten stronger as well."

Medium

"So, the attention is there. I think COVID is really sidelined a lot of those, any momentum that was there. [...] I think in conversation, strong, in dollars, I think it could be stronger. So, I would say that a lot of people see the need. I think it's a bigger part of the national conversation now, but I think we could be dedicating more dollars to it, definitely."

"It's in their initial stage of conversation, there's still some will around integration to the bigger picture of what this really is in regard to community health outcomes as a whole. So, a lot of education that has to be done, a lot of rethinking and re-strategize by the system. I will say that county itself, it's a little bit more furthered and advanced than the schools itself."

"So, I think the political will is recognizing that it's important that we invest our resources early on. [...] have become more comfortable with the idea [...] And that's a long-term commitment."

"Well, much better than it was even five years ago, so that's a good thing. [...] So, I think we're at a really critical point locally where we can start to build upon some of the changes and infrastructure that we've started to develop in that arena."

Low

"Not well, but I do want to emphasize with that answer, that that's frankly kind of the norm. So even at a local level, when we think about politics and where a lot of public funding comes from for early childhood, people like to have immediate wins that they can kind of look to and/or some kind of, 'Well, look what we did in a year or two years.' And that's not how the early childhood universe operates."

"It's at the incipient stages that it's early. I don't hear tons of talk about that being a priority, given the other things going on right now. Businesses are struggling to survive the pandemic and to adjust to things and whatnot. And the cities, the city of Salinas, in particular, has a lot of focus on homelessness and then housing. I don't really hear the city of Salinas talking about early childhood development."

Unsure

“Politically among elected officials, I mean, I like to think that at the federal level there's this conversation about human infrastructure and... But I don't know how that plays locally. I don't know.”

“I don't know. I would hope that it's high. That's my hope, I don't know if it's true or not.”

Some key influencers are uncertain about and wary of the strength and depth of local political will to support ECD.

“There's lip service given to it, but when push comes to shove and they're trying to make funding decisions, I think they get a carrot here and there. And I would say, and also some of it, it's not so much it's a culture change, it's more like based on who happens to be in office in these different places. [...] I wouldn't say it's necessarily embedded in any kind of cultural way.”

“So just locally, I have been in conversation with local governments that really bring early learning at the center of conversations, I would say just conversations.”

Many key influencers noted ECD has been included in strategic plans more often in recent years.

“Well, at least from the standpoint of those that I have awareness of/or involvement in, yes.”

“I want to say like 6, 7, 8 years ago, that we weren't really having this conversation. It started about five or six years ago. And again, it was, from my perspective, I might not be correct on this but from my perspective, it started through that whole community assessment, the first one that was given. That's what I think really lifted up these concerns.”

“So yeah. And it is included, but only because somebody makes sure it is. [...] People are tuning in more. Persistence pays, and again, one of the reasons is that there has been sort of a newer batch of policymakers that are probably more inclined to want to listen and understand the nature of these investments and for the future of these people and for our communities. And so, yeah, I would say that it's a better environment than it was. People are paying more attention.”

“Yeah, we're extremely successful in that [...] it was that trend much at the same time as we were having the conversations around equity and governing for racial equity that I think this really took root and people understood the need for the equitable investments in our early childhood space.”

“Yes, definitely. [...] I would say government, private, public entities are trying to work together to come up with better solutions.”

“From our community-based organizations, I think they do consider it because it's something that parents and family and residents bring up all the time. [...] Oh, I think in the last five years, an overall community-wide understanding of the importance of early childhood has gone up.”

Role and Impact of First 5 Monterey County

F5MC is seen as the lead key agency in the early childhood development landscape.

“It's First 5. They're the number one, the most profound advocate [...] But First 5 is without question. I mean, they are the most prominent voice in the field.”

“I would say you have like First 5 and Bright Beginnings really guiding, and then many, many partners as part of a collective impact approach to align efforts.”

“Number one by far is First Five. Every time there's a discussion around early childhood development, they come up first and foremost. They're known as the experts, the leaders, the policy makers, the drivers in that area.”

The Executive Director is known by many as the face and force behind F5MC.

“Francine comes to mind first. [...] I think Francine has a really bold leadership style, where like she's willing to do things that I think other people are more cautious about. And I think that she's willing to let it take the time that it takes to do it well. And so, I think that she's a leader on equity work and trying to measure systems. [...] So, I think that Francine is one of the boldest leaders in the community. And I think that, that means that First 5 is.”

“I mean, as soon as I hear First 5, I just see [Francine Rodd], presenting to the board of supervisors or at community meetings and that sort of thing. A planned parenthood meeting and a child abuse prevention council meeting. First 5 is everywhere. And I must admit, I feel Francine is the face of it, in some ways. But I see the work that she

and her wonderful team have been able to do just throughout the years, and I'm very thankful for it."

"Francine is present, and her persistence in being present has really elevated the profile of First 5. She's a very strong advocate, but she doesn't do it sitting in a dark closet. I mean, she's out there."

Many see F5MC as a positive and important partner in the field.

"When I think of First 5 and the people who are currently in positions of decision making in our Monterey County First 5, there are people that are not only my colleagues that share the passion for the needs of this portion of our community. But I know that they're in it with me. They are my partners in this and so I feel like I could just reach out at any moment and engage with them in anything and that's really valuable, right? Not every partnership or relationship between community organizations is like that."

"They really are innovative. They really try to put themselves out there and look to see who else can they partner with. So, they're very collaborative, which is really a great thing, and easy to work with."

"I think they're also very collaborative. So, they know that they need everyone else's support to really be successful, so they don't try to go it alone, but they try to collaborate with other organizations that can help them achieve their mission."

F5MC is known for its bold leadership and action, as demonstrated by their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"With COVID-19, so they were right away there early on, like, "What are we going to do for families? How are we going to support families?" And they created information out there on websites. They were part of right away at the table with any planning at the County level, helping with access to food. And then through Bright Beginnings, championed an early childhood work group that was meeting weekly to try to ensure that we didn't lose as much childcare and that there was childcare for essential workers. And it was critical with the COVID response, their quick response and thinking of how to get there and be there."

"They're very much get it done kind of people, which I like, I like. The planning people, oh my God, drive me bananas. First 5 is like, "What do we need? Let's plan, let's get it done. Okay." They're get it done people."

F5MC's visibility has increased over the years.

"I feel that there's a heightened awareness of the community and concern for children, that I think First 5 has been both driving that importance, but also now being the recipient of people paying more attention to First 5 because of that."

"It's gone up. I think it's gone up because of their hard work and finally having tipped the scales of trying to get out into the community."

"Oh, gosh, over the last five years, I think quite a tremendous amount. [...] Well, a couple of things, right? They're funding a lot of community-based organizations to really get out and provide more services and then they themselves are sponsoring so many types of community engaged sessions to enrich people's knowledge base and skill set that... I mean, hundreds and hundreds of people have benefited from what they've been doing over the last five years locally."

Opportunities

Key influencers would like F5MC to increase their funding and ensure its sustainable.

"Grown stronger, seen as central, imperative. Recognizing that the funding for First 5 is based on the cigarette tax, and as less people smoke there's effects on that. And how do we continue to fund it strongly to find opportunities to do that? So, I hear that conversation happening."

"I would really like them to continue the work that they're doing. If possible, expand their reach try to serve more, have a better depth in their personnel so that there's more of them out there besides Francine, who just bears a lot of the weight of that organization. Continue to communicate and spread the word and get people engaged in the importance of those formative years, those early years for children. Because I do believe that that's really important for their whole foundation."

"I think there's an opportunity for them to demonstrate, when people see data that shows the effectiveness, the positive effectiveness of a program like that, they're going to support it. And so that's really, and maybe they're already doing that. I don't know, but I'm guessing if they're not, that would be a really, a huge opportunity for them to enhance the stature of their programs and get more funding, get a lot more funding."

"And also, how do we sustain the fabulous work that they do? Because I know there was a shortage of like cutting funding, and things like that."

Key influencers would like increased collaboration between F5MC and those in, at the margins, and outside the ECD field.

“There are those folks who work together very closely, and then there's those folks who are on the fringes. As...[they]... infiltrate with early childhood development into other sectors, there can be a tension between those who have been working together forever who have a common vocabulary, high levels of trust, can finish each other's sentences to integrating those who haven't, who have been on a different journey, and so there can sometimes be tension there or hard to integrate. That's some observation about collaboration. I think there's definitely need for more integration across sectors and disciplines.”

“But moreover, they could also reach out to our staff and ask them for other partner organizations, or maybe they say, ‘Look, here's different organizations that we are working with. Are there others that of that you think we should be talking with? Here are our goals. Here's what we're doing and who we're working with. Is there someone else that we should be talking to?’ [...]? So, I think that First Five could be more effective in just making sure that they are talking to the right people. And I'm assuming they are, because I know they're smart people, but you never know.”

“I think there are resources in the business community that could support what they do, even if it's smaller satellite information places.”

Key influencers recommend increased outreach and connection, especially with families.

“I do think there's opportunities for them to increase their visibility. [...] It's like buying a new car. You have to change the oil. If you don't change the oil, you're going to ruin the car. If you do change the oil, then your car can really be effective. In that sense, spending money on engaging with the public and raising the profile of the organization, and making sure that when accomplishments are achieved, that they're noted beyond the small circle of people who attend the supervisors' meeting. I think it's oil change money, but [it] can have a huge effect. I'm a believer in that.”

“They have so many layers of what they do. I just feel like it needs to be more intentional about connecting that with ... Be more visible in the community and finding systems that really allows families to take advantage of those resources. [...] I think there's space for improvement, specifically when it comes to what they offer to the community and how they offer and how community access to it. There's work in

progress to do, because I just feel there's a lot of value that zero to five brings to the community, I'm just not sure it's quite there, the community knows how to access those resources.”

“It sounds like at a general public level they're not very visible. But they are at these specific policy meetings or policy spheres.”

“They [the community] don't understand ... I don't believe, understand all the work that First 5 does, they think there are commercials on TV that encourage your kids to read, and they sent me a book and a beach ball and [...] that's how much they know, right? And I think all that other work needs to be elevated in a way that the community can hold onto it and hold it close to them, which they haven't been able to yet.”

Key influencers encourage F5MC take more bold action.

“And again, whether it's just out of necessity, given their funding streams, I just think that they're so reporting heavy and systematized and it just, I mean, there's nothing particularly bold that comes from First 5....This sounds contradictory, but even though the voice is strong, it's not one that generally leads. [...] It's just this constant, "Remember this, remember early childhood. We've got to get the early childhood voice in there." It's like, "Okay, well, why don't you actually initiate and bring something that sparks everybody's interest and brings clarity around the issues." So, for me, First 5 just seems to be something that kind of grinds along, and I don't have a real strong sense of it being a very entrepreneurial or sort of creative organization. [...] And so, there's kind of the chutzpah, courage, boldness to just recognize [...] if you really want early childhood to be front of people's minds, then that seems to be something that I've never seen First 5 do.”

“She has the ability to insert an early childhood perspective into these different processes. But I don't see sort of a bold, unique initiative around early childhood. [...] it's more of the insertion of an early childhood piece into work that other people are doing. Francine's never at the head of the table.”

Key influencers noted the divides in access to resources and power in Monterey County and recommend F5MC ensure that they are centering equity.

“So just one more point that kind of jumped into my mind is we really have two conversations within Monterey County. Much like California, we're a mini model of

California in the coastal side of us is much better resourced and much more affluent and has access to more, where our inland much like the rest California is challenged for resources. And so, we get a lot of perspectives that are based on the needs of the coast which are much different than the needs of our inland communities. And for me, that gets back to the conversations around equity [...] And so I think that might be an issue that rears its head at some point that you have to be aware of.”

“Spread equitably the money that they do get to make sure north county [...] gets sufficient resources and that key players in north county also have a voice and not just the ones that usually hear about [on the] east side, Salinas.”

“And definitely I will be interested to see their evolving in this in South County, more than anything, [...] especially with their indigenous community.”