

Last Vote to First Dollar Toolkit

Policy and Program Design

Planning for a New Voter-Approved Children's Fund

November 2024

CHILDREN' 
FUNDING PROJECT

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Authors

Marina M. Mendoza, senior manager of early childhood impact, Children's Funding Project
Olivia Allen, co-founder and vice president of strategy and advocacy, Children's Funding Project
Kristen Loschert, communications director, Children's Funding Project

Co-authors

Emma McCarthy, strategy and programs advisor, MetrixIQ
Emmy Liss, founder, Emmy Liss Strategies

Editors

Kristen Loschert, communications director, Children's Funding Project
Julie Nicholson, vice president of implementation and impact, Children's Funding Project

Designer

Keisha Rivera, Kuroko Creative

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- Cristal Cisneros, PhD, senior director of evaluation and impact, Denver Preschool Program
- Teresa Falgoust, director, data and research, policy/advocacy, Agenda for Children
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Introduction

Congratulations! The final votes have been tallied, and the members of your community have approved your measure to create a new [voter-approved children's fund](#). This is an exciting time for you and your community. Admittedly, though, shifting from a successful campaign to the process of establishing and activating your new children's fund may feel daunting. Fortunately, you are not alone. This toolkit offers resources, guidance, and advice for equitably implementing a voter-approved children's fund—starting after the final winning vote on election night through the distribution of the first fund dollar. This guide can support the transition teams and interim founding staff members tasked with launching new voter-approved children's funds. Initially, this toolkit will address four main areas—(1) program and policy design, (2) operations, (3) communications, and (4) evaluation and impact—but we hope to add additional guidance over time.

Establishing a voter-approved children's fund involves deeply engaging with the democratic process, building a strong and diverse coalition of support, and addressing the needs brought about by systemic inequities within communities. While local children's funds do not fully finance cradle-to-career systems on their own, they offer the flexibility and infrastructure communities need to maximize multiple funding sources and fill some of the gaps left by insufficient federal and state funding.

Once voter-approved children's funds win at the ballot, they face an intense implementation period. That intensity stems from the relatively short timeframes to launch a new fund and the sheer volume of work needed to get money into the community. The timeframe for distributing the first dollar can range anywhere from nine to 18 months. In that timeframe, children's funds need to create the systems and infrastructure necessary to administer funding effectively and equitably. That can include creating new agencies or independent nonprofit organizations, building fiscal and technological infrastructure, creating governing boards, and so much more.

In some cases, existing organizations or government agencies administer newly approved children's funds. These types of situations don't require a community to create an entirely new organization; however, even an existing organization may still face challenges if asked to dramatically expand an existing program or adopt the task of administering significant new dollars. For instance, [Agenda for Children in New Orleans](#) had

to scale its budget from \$6 million (\$3 million in local revenue and \$3 million in state matching funding) for the City Seats child care program to about \$42 million after voters approved a new local tax to expand the program. The new local tax revenue increased the City Seats budget by \$21 million and was also eligible for [an additional \\$21 million in matching funds from the state](#) of Louisiana. While Agenda for Children had existing infrastructure for administering the program funds, it needed to scale six times more than the original budget!

Voter-approved children's funds also are often under a unique amount of public scrutiny during the set up and implementation processes. It takes an enormous amount of public education and attention to pass an initiative on the ballot, and that attention does not always fade after a campaign wins. In some cases, scrutiny will intensify, particularly when well-funded opposition existed during the campaign or when voters are particularly concerned about accountability for government spending. Being in the public limelight can exacerbate any challenges and pitfalls you may encounter during implementation. However, it also can rally continued enthusiasm for your fund's work and ensure the creation of a fair, equitable, community-centered program.

“A document like this implementation toolkit can help establish goals and objectives with the focus on children, based on solid community data and input, that provides the foundation for success.”

– **Cindy Arenberg Seltzer**, president/CEO, Children's Services Council of Broward County

Children's Funding Project created this toolkit in direct response to requests for support from the communities transitioning from campaign to implementation mode, including members of our [ballot measure cohort](#) and [voter-approved children's fund community of practice](#). We created this resource through collaboration with leaders of established voter-approved children's funds and the experts who have supported them through the most pressing implementation challenges. “A document like this implementation toolkit can help establish goals

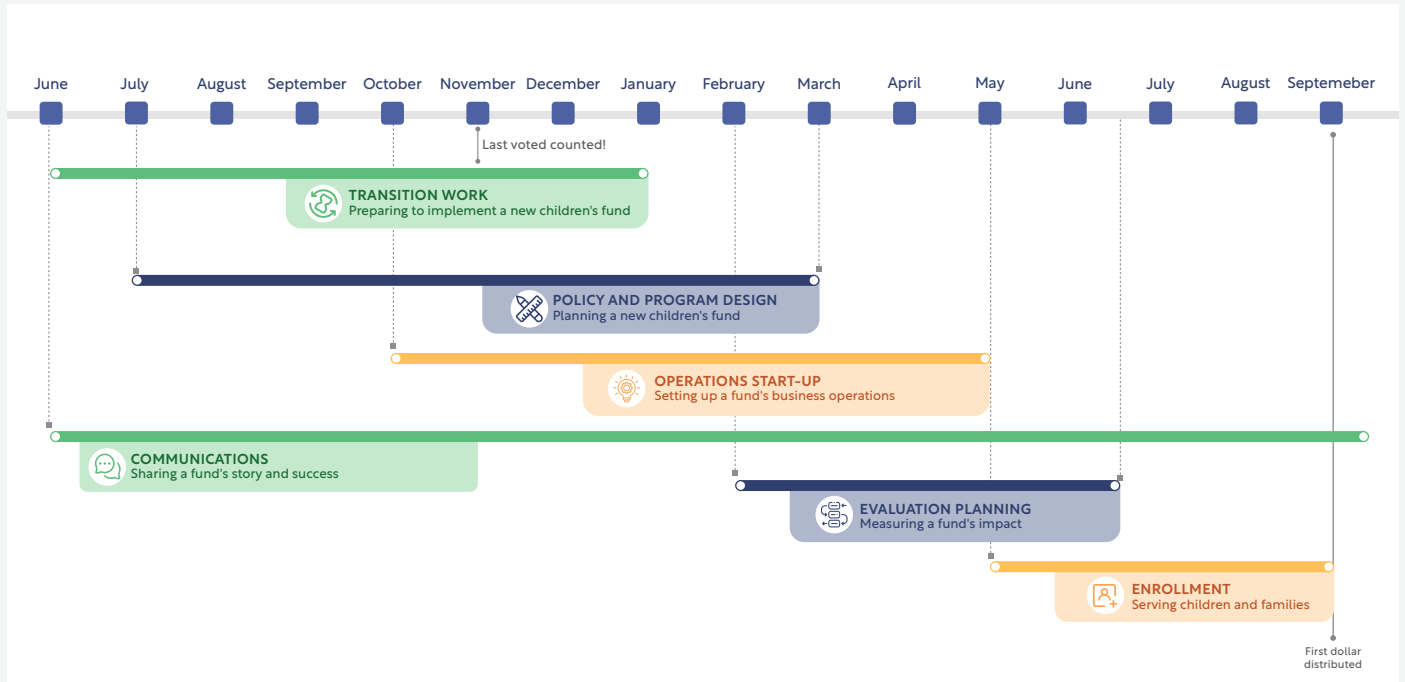
and objectives with the focus on children, based on solid community data and input, that provides the foundation for success,” says Cindy Arenberg Seltzer, who has served as the president/CEO of the Children’s Services Council of Broward County, FL, since 2000. We hope to continue building additional resources for this toolkit as we learn more about the needs new voter-approved children’s funds face as they establish their programs.

Timeline for Implementing a Children’s Fund

This timeline reflects the accelerated timeframe many of you may face if your fund aligns with a November ballot measure election. The timeline would be different if your ballot measure initiative takes place during a different time of year. Others may have up to 18 months to implement their fund before distributing the first dollar for direct services. In those cases, the timeline is expanded.

- Transition Work (eight months): Starts five months before election night
- Policy and Program Design (eight to 10 months): Starts four months before election night through four to six months after winning
- Operations Start-Up (seven to eight months): Starts one month before election night through five to six months after winning
- Communications (ongoing): Consistent from pre- to post-election and through the first dollar distributed
- Evaluation Planning (five to six months): Starts two or three months after election night and lasts about five to six months

Figure 1: Timeline for Implementing a Children’s Fund



Planning a New Voter-Approved Children's Fund

Section 1: Policy and Program Design Overview

The success of children's funds nationwide demonstrates that [voters support making investments in children](#). Communities and elected officials are proposing and winning with ideas that resonate with their community members. However, good ideas alone aren't enough—local leaders need a clear strategy and implementation plan for their goals. Planning is crucial but challenging, especially with time constraints and the pressure to show impact quickly. Maintaining voter confidence is essential, and voters often want a say in the planning process or to know that their interests are represented.

Strong planning and policy design should begin well before a ballot measure is approved. Community leaders can design robust, inclusive, and decisive processes in advance, which will enable the implementation teams to start their work immediately after the election. While additional planning will be needed after a measure passes, the groundwork laid beforehand is vital for the initiative's success.

This section outlines the steps leaders should take for structuring and running effective planning processes, both before and after bringing their proposed children's fund to the ballot.

Section 2: Key Questions to Answer

WHAT LEVEL OF PLANNING NEEDS TO HAPPEN BEFORE A MEASURE REACHES THE BALLOT?

In most cases, community leaders need to meet a minimum threshold of planning before presenting an idea for a new children's fund to voters. This includes addressing key questions such as the purpose of the children's fund, the amount of money needed, and anticipated outcomes. Additional details, like the anticipated number of children a fund will serve, increase voter support and require early work. Leaders should start by outlining the essential elements of the programs the proposed children's fund will support, deciding what they must finalize before the election and what they can plan later. For example, the National Institute for Early Education Research has a helpful [framework for planning a new city preschool program](#).

WHO WILL LEAD THE PLANNING PROCESS?

If an existing agency or organization will administer the approved funds, it is wise for that team to lead planning for implementation. If the ballot measure creates a new entity, then an established organization or team—such as a municipal agency, executive staff, or a local nonprofit—may be best suited to manage the planning process. In cases without a clear leader for the planning process, the group advocating for a ballot measure will need to convene a team or committee that operates separately but in parallel to the campaign team.

WHO WILL BE INVOLVED IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

Inclusive planning processes lead to better outcomes. Engaged community members, whose feedback shapes plans for what the fund will support, are more likely to champion the fund at the ballot box and sustain it long term.

To design an inclusive planning process, community leaders should consider the following questions:

- Who will the initiative impact the most?
- Whose voices have been historically underrepresented among the individuals and groups most impacted? For example, child care providers are affected by new early childhood education investments, yet they have historically lacked access to policymaking processes. Similarly, youth programs and services have not always authentically included youth voices in program or policy design, so engaging youth in the process and adopting a [youth bill of rights](#) to help guide the planning work can go a long way.
- How can you maximize community engagement in the planning process? Consider your meeting times; offer virtual and in-person opportunities to provide input; and provide translation services and other supports like child care, stipends, or meals.
- Can the planning team compensate participants for providing input?
- Does the group of community members selected to represent the community during the planning process reflect the community? Do you need to use surveys to maximize the range of perspectives gathered?
- Does your community require healing, trust building, or acknowledgment of past harm before it can begin an inclusive planning process?

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT THE PLANNING PROCESS?

Good planning starts before the ballot measure passes, but funding during that period is often limited. The planning process requires resources to support staff or consultants, compensate community members for their participation, and gather feedback from the community through surveys or focus groups. If the ballot measure intends to expand a program, the existing program can dedicate staff time and internal resources to drive the planning work. Local nonprofit partners can also contribute capacity, even without leading the planning effort. Many can raise philanthropic dollars for planning processes; small discretionary grants go a long way to support planning activities.

WHAT KIND OF PLANNING PROCESS DOES THE TRANSITION TEAM NEED TO SET UP AFTER THE BALLOT MEASURE PASSES, AND WHAT GROUNDWORK CAN HAPPEN IN ADVANCE?

Once a ballot measure is approved, leaders must swiftly transition to implementation. If possible, leaders should recruit a transition team before Election Day and determine who will lead implementation once voters approve the ballot measure. If the transition team is different from the planning team, a handoff is essential to ensure continuity. The planning team may still serve as an advisory group on unresolved decisions.

Section 3: Potential Problems/Pitfalls to Avoid

- There will always be tension between thoughtful, inclusive planning and timeline pressure. Leaders should challenge those assumptions without losing the urgency to act to create plans that will support a strong implementation process.
- Trying to make everyone happy will never make anyone happy. But you can take meaningful steps to make the implementation process inclusive and build collective understanding about how the process will unfold.
- Even with good implementation plans, the ballot measure may fail. Often, the planning will still prove to be worthwhile since it requires planners to create concrete action steps for implementing solutions in their communities.

Section 4: Action Step and Case Study

ACTION STEP: CREATE A BROAD COALITION AND ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS WHO WILL BE IMPACTED BY THE PROGRAM YOUR CHILDREN'S FUND WILL SUPPORT.

Effective planning processes include a diverse group of community members and leaders and involve them in meaningful and authentic ways. For example, community members can serve as organizers and champions as the measure goes to the ballot.

Photo Credit: Preschool for All





Case Study: Preschool for All

Multnomah County, OR, secured new revenue in 2020 with the passage of a new personal income tax on high-earners to support **universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the county**, following a robust planning effort rooted in years of grassroots and community work. In 2018, Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson established the Preschool for All Task Force, including county government, community leaders, and the Parent Accountability Council—a group formed in 2014 to represent the voices of parents of color. The task force addressed challenges like limited access to preschool programs, especially for more marginalized families; a shortage of early childhood educators, exacerbated by poor compensation; a shortage of preschool facilities; and a lack of connected systems to address these issues. After issuing a 2019 report, the task force developed the **Preschool for All Plan** and launched a ballot measure campaign in 2020.

Simultaneously, Universal Preschool Now, led by a broad coalition of community groups, had also developed a plan for a new tax to fund preschool. The two groups merged to bring one proposal forward for voters' consideration. Since the measure's passage, Multnomah County is implementing a preschool program that will grow to universal by 2030 and is designed with an equity focus to support the needs of children and child care professionals—now nationally recognized as an example of practical **community-based policy work**.

Photo Credit: Preschool for All

Section 5: Action Step and Case Study

ACTION STEP: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF KEY MOMENTS IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS TO JUMP-START PLANNING EFFORTS.

In policymaking, there is always a question of whether now is the right time to move an initiative forward.

Effective planners leverage key moments when public and political attention are focused on an issue to drive new strategies forward. These moments can be unexpected, such as following a failed vote or stalled legislation, but the key is to recognize them and use whatever opportunities present themselves to motivate action.



Case Study: Allegheny County Department of Children's Initiatives

In 2018, an Allegheny County, PA, ballot measure to increase property taxes for a range of child well-being programs narrowly failed despite significant voter support. However, local leaders remained determined to address gaps in early care and education, out-of-school time programs, and community health.

Soon after the failed ballot vote, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald convened the Allegheny County Children's Fund Working Group. (County Executive Fitzgerald had supported the overall concept of dedicated funding for early learning and out-of-school time programs, but opposed funding a department through the revenue increases proposed in the original tax measure.) The Children's Fund Working Group was tasked with gathering additional data and input from the community to identify a path forward for the children's fund. The group included policymakers, nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, educators, representatives from the public school system, providers of child care and out-of-school time programs, representatives from institutions of higher education, and members of faith-based organizations. The group conducted a six-month planning process, organized six community meetings, and launched a bilingual survey to gather input. The group's 2019 report recommended creating a new **Department of Children's Initiatives** with a \$20 million budget.

County Executive Fitzgerald's 2021 budget proposal included very modest funding to establish the new department. The launch of the department, plus the clarity of the working group's plan, laid the foundation for subsequent investment. When the new County Executive Sara Innamorato came into office in 2024 she had a focus on children and families. One of her first acts was to **allocate an additional \$500,000 to the department to expand child care options**. Although the department is not yet funded at the full amount recommended by the working group, there has been major progress toward additional investments. As of October 2024, the County Executive **proposed an additional \$5 million** to bolster the investment in child care subsidies.

Photo Credit: The Allegheny County PN-3 Collaborative

Children's Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities, states, and Native nations expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing. childrensfundingproject.org

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