

# North Country Community Comes Together to Transform Former Bank into a New Child Care Center

## *Transforming Spaces: A Community's Efforts to Address Childcare Needs*

**04/2024** -Expanding physical child care resources is a complex, multi-faceted endeavor. It requires securing appropriate space, obtaining the necessary funding to outfit it for children from infancy to preschool age, and navigating various regulatory requirements. All of this must be achieved while maintaining quality and affordability for families in need of child care services..

The [Gorham Community Learning Center \(GCLC\)](#), has established itself as a thriving business committed to providing high-quality childcare to North Country families. GCLC is one of three centers in the Berlin-Gorham area, where some families travel over an hour each way for child care. Known for its high-quality early care and education program and nurturing work culture, GCLC has long sought to expand its available child care slots. Despite its stability and positive environment, the Center faces significant challenges at its Main Street location, including capacity limitations, financial constraints, a waiting list of 66 families in 2024, and a scarcity of suitable real estate.

Recognizing the community's urgent need for more childcare options, GCLC is working to expand its program to meet growing demand. This initiative is crucial as the community is one of New Hampshire's many child care deserts, where access to high-quality care is limited. However, this ambitious vision required more space and expert assistance. In response, the [Coos County Childcare Directors Network](#) stepped in to offer support. This network promotes access to high-quality childcare for all Coos families and provides the guidance and resources needed to help child care providers overcome barriers and improve their operations.

Seeing GCLC's potential to impact more lives, the Coos County Childcare Directors Network seized the opportunity to nurture its expansion aspirations. Led by Airole Warden, the Network took proactive steps to overcome numerous barriers. Warden connected with several community leaders, including Harrison Kanzler, Executive Director of [AHEAD, Inc.](#), to assist GCLC. By leveraging connections across various fields—from business to housing—Warden significantly advanced GCLC's efforts, demonstrating how collaboration can drive meaningful change.

The path to expansion or improvement begins with identifying suitable funding sources, a process fraught with complexity. Grants, loans, and private investments each come with their own set of stringent criteria, requiring meticulous documentation and often, an

urgent response. The pressure to meet these requirements can be daunting, especially as owners simultaneously manage day-to-day operations.

Moreover, formalizing plans involves detailed feasibility studies, architectural designs, and compliance with regulatory standards—each step necessitating substantial investment and expertise. Acquiring the right space adds another layer of difficulty, as suitable properties must meet specific safety and accessibility guidelines while remaining financially viable.

For child care business owners already stretched thin by their demanding roles, the additional burden of securing funding and formalizing expansion plans can feel insurmountable. It requires relentless perseverance, strategic networking, and a keen understanding of both the intricacies of child care needs and the complexities of financial management. Without robust support systems and community backing, achieving these foundational steps remains a significant hurdle.



Like many complex challenges, multiple puzzle pieces needed to fit together. Community leaders began the process knowing that some funding options were available but required quick action to leverage them. The immediate need was for formalized planning and funding for core project components like defining the scope of work and acquiring space, which, despite being secured promptly, required navigating a labyrinth of logistical and financial challenges.

Organizations such as the [NH Charitable Foundation](#) and [Tillotson Fund](#) provided early, critical support. Key partners, including [Granite United Way](#), the [Town of Gorham](#), [Coos Economic Development Corporation](#), and the [NH Business Finance Authority](#), helped bring this model together, with champion support from US Senator Jeanne Shaheen and US Congresswoman Annie Kuster.

The primary challenge was finding a suitable physical space, and a few local options were identified. One promising site was a former branch of Northeast Credit Union in Gorham. After a space and needs analysis, it was determined that this location could accommodate up to 49 additional children. Given their expertise in running a larger childcare center, GCLC, with substantial community support, entered into a lease-to-purchase arrangement for the building. [Northeast Credit Union](#) made the model more affordable by ensuring the financial terms for leasing and buying the building were feasible.

With some key puzzle pieces in place, a few more were needed to make the effort financially viable. Converting a bank into a childcare center is a significant task, and efforts are underway to connect with local contractors, hardware stores, and entities such as banks that make grants for community projects such as this.



Ensuring that the center remains affordable requires proactive attention. Efforts are underway to develop a model that encourages eligible families to enroll in New Hampshire's Child Care Scholarship Program, a historically underused public resource. This model will enable GCLC to increase tuition fees slightly to match the maximum rate allowable under NH's scholarship program, thus maximizing the available scholarship dollars.

To further support families with greater financial needs, a new Affordability and Sustainability Fund is being established. This fund will be managed by the Coos County Director Network and supported through these slightly higher tuition fees. Additionally, another component to address affordability involves seeking contributions from local businesses, many of which will benefit from an increased workforce as more child care becomes available. The collaboration with local businesses is designed to bolster the fund and ensure its sustainability.

Plans are set for GCLC to open the new center in early 2025, addressing a significant portion of the child care needs across this largely rural region. The benefits will ripple through the community as more families secure reliable child care, enabling individuals to enter the workforce, fill key positions, and potentially improve their quality of life.

Numerous community organizations collaborated quickly to piece together this solution. Though complex, this model promises lasting impact and exemplifies the power of community collaborations. It highlights how local and statewide partnerships and collective efforts can effectively address critical needs, demonstrating that together, we can achieve meaningful and transformative change.



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