



**Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab**  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

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## ► CDA Support Specialist Program

### AUTHORS:

**Clara Prish, MPH**

Research Assistant II, Butler Institute for Families

**Meg Franko, PhD**

Director of Early Childhood Initiatives,  
Butler Institute for Families

*with actionable insights,  
synthesis, and editorial support  
from the Colorado Lab*



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*This evaluation is being conducted on behalf of CDEC under the coordination of the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab's Early Childhood Evaluation Hub to build evidence for stimulus-funded early childhood activities.*



For inquiries contact: Colorado Lab | [admin@coloradolab.org](mailto:admin@coloradolab.org) | [ColoradoLab.org](https://ColoradoLab.org)

# Overview



The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) used federal and state stimulus funding to implement the [Child Development Associate \(CDA\) Support Specialist Program](#) to build capacity to more directly recruit and support early childhood workforce from under-represented communities. This activity supports [CDEC's strategic goal #2](#) to recruit, support, and retain highly competent, caring, and diverse professionals across early childhood care and education settings.

CDA Support Specialist positions are based out of one Institution of Higher Education (IHE) and one Early Childhood Council (ECC) who administer the program: Red Rocks Community College (RRCC) and Mesa County Public Health (MCPH). The main purpose of the program is to recruit members from under-represented and under-served communities to the early childhood workforce, and to offer support that helps them navigate and complete the CDA credential. The stimulus funding also includes scholarship funding for CDA training programs, funding for the CDA test, and a new cash stipend for CDA candidates. The CDA is a nationally recognized credential that is an alternative to the traditional higher education pathway to earn credentials to become an early childhood lead teacher. It allows individuals to earn a credential through professional development training, work experience, the creation of a portfolio, observed teaching, and a final test.

A number of states have different CDA programs that offer support for candidates. For example, those training to earn their CDA credential with Care Courses in New York State are eligible for funding through the SUNY Educational Incentive Program. However, the specialized coaching that Colorado's program provides for its candidates is unique.

CDEC partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to coordinate the evaluation of stimulus-funded activities. The Colorado Lab selected the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver to evaluate the CDA Support Specialist Program.



## What We Will Learn by the End of the Evaluation

- The strategies CDA Support Specialists used to reach candidates and barriers to outreach.
- The type of support CDA candidates need from CDA Support Specialists to complete their credential.
- Who was ultimately served by CDA Support Specialists and whether this engagement was critical for CDA completion among candidates.
- Challenges and barriers CDA Support Specialists encountered in their work.

This brief represents early insights from the initial phases of evaluation work. Interim findings will be communicated in Spring 2024 and final findings will be delivered in Fall 2024.





## Actionable Insights

- The CDA candidate pool has grown since the pandemic, nearly doubling the recruitment goal at the outset of funding.
- CDA Support Specialists are hard to recruit, particularly those with non-English speaking skills. Early insights point to low pay and variation in training expectations as potential factors contributing to staffing problems.
- CDA Support Specialists are supporting candidates who are brand new to the early childhood field, a primary goal of the role. This group of candidates requires intensive engagement and support to navigate and complete the CDA process.
- IHE and ECC administrators have been developing the training and job expectations for the CDA Support Specialist role over time. The lack of structured and consistent training may provide insight as to why CDA Support Specialists are difficult to hire and retain.
- The critical question to answer is whether the CDA pathway would be utilized and completed at the same rate with or without the CDA Support Specialist in place.

## Evidence-Based Decision-Making

**Evidence-Based Decision-Making (EBDM)** recognizes that research evidence is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions. EBDM is the intersection of the best available research evidence, community needs and implementation context, and decision-makers' expertise. Actionable insights across these domains are highlighted in the box above, with supporting evidence and additional information detailed for each in the sections that follow.



### Best Available Research Evidence

Data in this section come from applicant pool information shared by CDEC and interviews with IHE and ECC program administrators.

**The CDA candidate pool has grown since the pandemic, nearly doubling the recruitment goal at the outset of funding.** The goal at the start of the program was to recruit 260 new CDA candidates each year during the stimulus-funded period. To date, 406 CDA applications have been received, 257 new candidates awarded, and 99 CDAs have been completed by candidates in 23 counties across Colorado. Almost half of the awardees spoke Spanish. How much this growth is attributable to the CDA Specialists is not yet known. However, the general perception among IHE and ECC administrators is that the CDA Support Specialists have increased outreach both within the early care and education sphere as well as into the greater community, with perceived success particularly among young people starting to explore careers.



*...with the specialist specifically, they actually are in the community. We have printed thousands of flyers. We do...career fairs at high schools and lots of them.*

- IHE Program Administrator

# Community Needs & Implementation Context

Data in this section come from interviews with IHE program administrators, CDA Support Specialists, and CDEC stimulus program leads.

- **CDA Support Specialists are hard to recruit, particularly those with non-English speaking skills. Early insights point to low pay and variation in training expectations as potential factors contributing to staffing problems.** Most CDA Support Specialists are English-speaking only and experience delays accessing translators. This has impacted their ability to communicate with and support diverse, non-English speaking CDA candidates. According to interviewees, CDA Support Specialists need to be trained on how to successfully reach and recruit a more diverse population, and recruitment of CDA Support Specialists needs to focus on bilingual candidates. Most CDA Support Specialists only stay in the position for one year, and a huge barrier to retention is pay. Time management is also a challenge, as the position is hybrid and includes travel.
- **IHE and ECC administrators have been developing the training and job expectations for the CDA Support Specialist role over time. The lack of structured and consistent training may provide insight as to why CDA Support Specialists are difficult to hire and retain.** CDA Support Specialists go through training and must have a coaching credential within six months of hire. However, due to the timing of program implementation, IHE and ECC administrators have been developing the training and job expectations for the role over time. For instance, the frequency of meetings for CDA Support Specialists to discuss successes and challenges has decreased over time, as this was deemed more important when the program was in its beginning stages. CDA Support Specialist interviews also indicated that their caseload varied across RRCC and MCPH, with anywhere between 12 to 40+ candidates, which likely influences the level of engagement a CDA Support Specialist can have with any one candidate.
- **CDA Support Specialists are supporting candidates who are brand new to the early childhood field, a primary goal of the role. This group of candidates requires intensive engagement and support to make it through the CDA process.** In particular, it's challenging to find and connect CDA candidates with the limited number of Professional Development (PD) Specialists who conduct verification visits, a fundamental part of achieving the CDA credential. This ultimately delays candidates in moving forward with their application.



*And if needed, we have some of our coaches, our PD reviewers as well, so [they] can go out into programs that they're not working with and actually provide that support if needed because there's a huge deficit of PD reviewers in our state.*

- IHE Program Administrator

- **Burdensome administrative processes.** Administrative processes at RRCC and MCPH can extend the time it takes for CDA candidates to begin and complete their credentials. This causes many CDA candidates to lose interest during these long waiting periods. While a fundamental purpose of the CDA Support Specialist role is to help candidates overcome such challenges, Specialists simply cannot overcome infrastructural realities, such as the shortage of PD Specialists.



*My biggest success, I think, in my role is just when I'm able to help these people succeed and get through it. It's a success for me because it is a long process.*

- CDA Support Specialist

## Decision-Maker Expertise

Data in the section come from meetings with CDEC stimulus program leads.

**The critical question to answer is whether the CDA pathway would be utilized at the same rate with or without the CDA Support Specialist in place.**

- **Unclear if CDA Support Specialists contribute to utilization of the CDA pathway.** While data from the [Council for Professional Recognition](#) show an increase in CDA applications since the pandemic, it is not clear yet if the CDA Support Specialist position was a contributor to this growth or whether this would have happened regardless of this role being in place. CDEC program leads recognize that the challenge partially lies in the CDA being a federal program that relies on a limited number of PD Specialists, authorized by the Council for Professional Recognition, available to verify CDA candidate work. According to CDEC program leads, requiring CDA candidates to work with a CDA Support Specialist may add an additional layer of complexity. CDEC is particularly concerned that the program is not seeing growth in the diversity of the CDA candidate pool.
- **Difficulty filling positions.** It's hard to find both CDA Support Specialists as well as PD Specialists to do observations required for the CDA credential, especially for non-English speaking candidates. CDEC has indicated that this challenge delays candidates in moving forward with their application, and in some cases, causes applications to expire. If the CDA Support Specialist positions continue after stimulus funding ends, it will require careful attention to recruitment strategies and revisiting what will attract individuals to these roles in order to consistently support CDA candidates.