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Groundbreaking Ceremony Held for Childcare Business Initiative Project in Manhattan

Manhattan, KS - The Greater Manhattan Community Foundation (GMCF), in partnership with the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce and Ascension Via Christi, proudly celebrated the groundbreaking of the highly anticipated Childcare Business Initiative Project on October 9, 2024. The ceremony, held at 2423 Kimball Avenue, marked the beginning of a crucial initiative aimed at addressing the local childcare shortage, which has been a significant barrier for workforce re-entry and economic growth in the region.

"It has been both an honor and a pleasure to steer this ship! High quality early care and education are monumentally important not only to the children and families of our communities, but to the future of our workforce," said Lisa Sederlin Issacson, Executive Director, FHCA/CBI and Director of Early Childhood Education, MATC. *"Family childcare that is embedded within our neighborhoods is the answer to sustainable childcare that is beneficial for all. Lest we never forget the African proverb, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' An entire community of people is needed to provide a safe and healthy environment for children. We are very fortunate to live in a community where children and families are valued and prioritized by so many. The immense support we have received for this project is exhilarating!"*

The project, made possible by \$5.6 million in grants from the State of Kansas and land lease from Ascension Via Christi, was designed to tackle the urgent need for additional childcare capacity. Currently, an estimated 1,400 childcare slots are needed in Riley County. The Childcare Business Initiative aims to provide a sustainable solution to this problem by creating a unique space for entrepreneurial childcare providers to start and grow their businesses.

The groundbreaking ceremony featured remarks from key community leaders, including:

- U.S. Senator Jerry Moran
- Sara Bloom, Quality Places Manager, Kansas Department of Commerce, representing Governor Laura Kelly
- Lisa Sederlin Isaacson, M.S., Executive Director, FHCA/CBI, Director of Early Childhood Education, MATC
- Jason Smith, CEcD
President/CEO, Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce
- Melissa Bowles, Owner/Director, Happy Hearts Childcare

These community and state leaders emphasized the importance of the initiative for both economic development and family well-being. The event also included a symbolic groundbreaking moment, with children from Happy Hearts Childcare participating alongside the project's key supporters.

"So, we have safe children," said Senator Jerry Moran at the groundbreaking ceremony. "Parents who understand that their children are in good care. We are educating and training new owners of businesses and new workers, and we are creating an environment in which businesses decide they can afford to stay or can come to Manhattan for purposes of doing business. And by that, we mean putting people to work and providing jobs, something we generally call the American Dream. This [Flint Hills Community Accelerator] is a great combination of so many things that matter so much. It is so important that we recognize this accomplishment."

The Childcare Business Initiative Project will operate similarly to a business incubator, helping new childcare providers establish their businesses while offering training, mentorship, and operational support. Over time, these providers will graduate to run independent childcare businesses, either from their homes or at new locations, creating a dynamic flow of new childcare options in the region. The facility will be equipped to launch up to eight new childcare businesses every year, significantly expanding the number of available slots for children in the Manhattan area.

This initiative comes after extensive planning and collaboration between local business leaders, childcare providers, and community organizations. A task force, assembled by the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce in 2021, identified the childcare shortage as a key obstacle for workforce attraction and retention. Surveys conducted by the Chamber revealed that childcare access was one of the top concerns for local employers and employees, with existing childcare facilities only meeting about 50% of the demand in Riley County and 56% in Pottawatomie County.

With the capacity to provide 96 childcare slots, CBI addresses this shortage while fostering a stronger childcare ecosystem. CBI's model ensures each business can thrive within the program and transition smoothly into the broader community after 12-18 months, continuing to alleviate the childcare shortage long term.

The Childcare Business Initiative is part of the larger Flint Hills Community Accelerator (FHCA), a collaborative effort composed of four key partners:

- **Childcare Business Accelerator:** Provides information, training, and support for childcare providers and professionals, helping them establish and grow their businesses.
- **Manhattan Area Technical College (MATC):** Developed a new childcare program with dedicated faculty to provide hands-on training and education for future childcare professionals.

- **KANSASWORKS Manhattan Workforce Center/Heartland Works, Inc.:** Offers space in the Flint Hills area to support individuals seeking employment and education opportunities.
- **Manhattan Free Clinic:** Expands clinical services to the western part of Manhattan, making healthcare more accessible for families in the region.

The Childcare Business Initiative will also support early care and education students through hands-on practicums and training opportunities, fostering the next generation of childcare professionals. In addition, it will collaborate with health and wellness professionals to support families during prenatal and post-natal care, helping to alleviate the financial and workforce stress caused by the lack of affordable childcare.

As part of the project's broader impact, the initiative will engage the business community in training programs supporting employee childcare benefits, while also facilitating workforce recruitment events and outreach to recruit family providers. The project aims to serve as a model for sustainable childcare solutions across Kansas.

The Childcare Business Initiative Project represents a collaborative, innovative approach to addressing Manhattan's childcare crisis, creating long-term benefits for children, families, and the local economy. For more information and future updates, visit our Facebook page, @ChildcareBusinessInitiative or website at childcarebusinessinitiative.org. You can also reach out directly to Lisa Sederlin Isaacson, Director of Early Childhood Education, at lisaisacson@manhattantech.edu or 785.320.4435.