



## FRONTIER COMMUNITY RESOURCES (ID): LINCOLN COUNTY YOUTH CENTER

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***Meeting the Childcare Challenge: Opportunities for Economic Development Districts***

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Lincoln County, a 5,500-person community in South-Central Idaho, has long struggled with a problem common in many rural communities: inadequate after-school care for its children, many of whom come from economically disadvantaged families. Because the county has a limited economic base, three in four of its residents commute outside of it for work each day, often taking on long commutes that keep them out until the evening. Its school districts lack the scale or financial resources to support extensive after-school care programs; therefore, many young people are left unsupervised for hours after school gets out. The effect of this missing service is reflected in the county's unusually high youth crime rate and teen pregnancy rate: until recently, there was simply not enough positive programming to keep kids out of trouble.

Recognizing the problem, the county began to look for ways to stand up an after-school program and youth center. In 2021, it reached an agreement to buy a suitable property in the small town of Richfield, a vacant former church with an outbuilding that could serve as office space.

To cover the capital costs, the county enlisted Frontier Community Resources/Region IV Development, the region's Economic Development District (EDD). Frontier, a trusted regional partner and economic development advocate, routinely puts its planning grant dollars to work by writing and administering funding proposals at little or no cost to local governments. For the youth center project, Frontier secured a \$225,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Idaho Department of Commerce and, when construction expenses climbed, obtained an additional \$60,000 in CARES Act CDBG funds to close the gap.

A range of community partners came together to support what would become the Lincoln County Youth Center. The center's operations are funded in part by county, city, and federal grants as well as by generous support from residents through fundraisers and volunteering. In fact, all staffing was provided by volunteers in its first year. Construction support was provided by Americorps fellows, sponsorships from local businesses helped pay for programming and food, and the program received funding from the Boys and Girls Club to offset costs. One local resident even raffled off a spec house to help fundraise for its operations.



Construction underway at the youth center.  
Photo via Idaho Mountain Express

The center opened in 2021 and was a vital resource for the county's kids during the pandemic. Initial programming included after school care for kids of all ages and a summer activities program. The next year, it added a preschool for 4-5 year olds for a nominal daily fee, and just recently received grant funding from the [Idaho Workforce Development Council](#) to add a childcare center and eventually an infant care program. During the day, the facility is open to adults as a community center. It has become an important neighborhood hub.

The center faced one additional challenge upon opening: transportation. Lincoln County's three school districts and respective towns are each at least six miles from each other, so students needed a way to get from school to the after-school programs. Fortunately, Frontier was able to leverage a position on the state's Public Transportation Committee to secure two buses that were leaving service from a transportation agency and have them donated to the program.

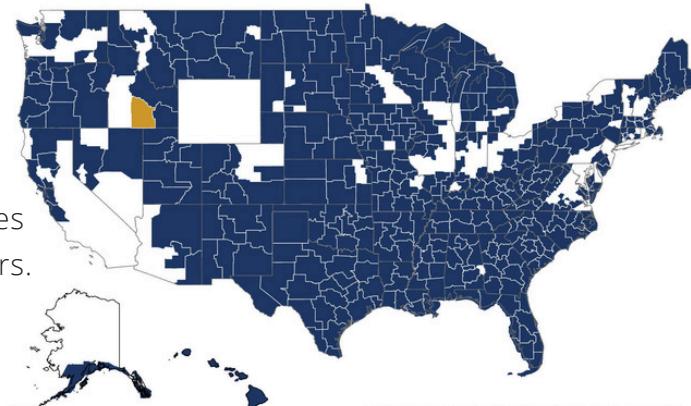
After four years of continuous programming expansion, the center now serves dozens of the county's youth and families throughout the year. Far from just being a safe place to hang out, its youth programming provides life skills, helps students with homework, and offers activities for families outside of parents' working hours.

Its success, Frontier Community and Economic Development Manager Michele McFarlane believes, reaches far beyond simply providing childcare. "So many people think all economic development is about is trying to attract multimillion dollar businesses, but there's a lot more that goes into it from workforce training, to mental health, to providing a community all the things it needs to be prosperous and a place where people want to live. And if you don't have somewhere safe for your kids to go, you're not a great worker. Either you're not there or you're mentally thinking about your kids. So having this kind of program is an essential element of our economic development strategy."



The exterior of the center. *Photo via Lincoln County Youth Center.*

### Frontier Community Resources Service Area:



Sources: Esri, U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Ocean Service (NOS), National Geodetic Survey (NGS)

## Key Takeaways:

### **Get creative to fund projects.**

Despite growing recognition of the childcare challenge, funding can still be difficult to obtain. Funding the new center involved patching together revenue from a number of sources and partners, including public, private, and foundation support. The state had no dedicated childcare CDBG funds, so Frontier worked creatively to incorporate community uses favored by the program and then later to acquire buses that were moving out of service. Asked what could be learned from their experience, McFarlane commented, "Think outside the box; sometimes it takes an innovative, creative solution. Just because 'childcare' isn't spelled out as an eligible activity doesn't mean you can't make it fit. The grant guidelines say 'community center,' not 'childcare.' But by working creatively with the funding agency, we met every grant requirement and still gave the community exactly what it needed."

### **Solving community problems requires community support.**

One of the key reasons that the facility succeeded and continues to grow is that its planners and developers gained broad public support. People in the community understood the challenge and invested in solving it. "It starts with community support," says McFarlane. "I think this was successful because they had the community behind them, and the entire community was willing to pitch in." At each stage, the involvement of additional community partners helped make the facility a success.

### **EDDs are a vital regional resource.**

Asked about the success of the program, McFarlane commented, "This is a prime example of why EDA and the Economic Development Districts are so vital. We're talking about a community where there's only 5,500 people in the entire county. They have just three cities, which range in size between 350 to 1,500. These are tiny towns with part-time clerks and part-time mayors that have a ton on their plates, and to ask them to take on writing a grant and managing all the strings that come with it, it's beyond their capacity. That's why we exist, is to make these projects happen and to help them." As economic development experts and trusted regional convenors, EDDs are ideally situated to bring stakeholders together, identify cross-cutting challenges, and propose and execute strategies to solve them.

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