

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Heywood Healthcare

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United Way of North Central MA in Partnership with Heywood Healthcare Awarded State Grant to Expand Child Care Access, Strengthen Workforce in North Central Massachusetts

Gardner, MA - June 16, 2026 - The United Way of North Central Massachusetts has been selected as a recipient of the Commonwealth Employer Childcare Innovation Fund (ECCIF) in partnership with Heywood Healthcare, the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts, and Upwards. [ECCIF](#) is a competitive statewide initiative announced by the Healey-Driscoll Administration.

The funding will support a regional effort to expand access to affordable, reliable child care, one of the most significant barriers to workforce participation in North Central Massachusetts. Through this initiative, Heywood Healthcare will provide fully subsidized child care for employees with the greatest financial need while working with community partners to build long-term, sustainable solutions.

As a 24/7 healthcare provider and one of the largest employers in North Central Massachusetts, Heywood Healthcare has spent years analyzing workforce challenges. Internal data revealed that child care is a leading factor impacting attendance, retention, and recruitment. Across Massachusetts, the urgency of this issue is further underscored by the [Economic Policy Institute](#), which reports the average annual cost of infant care at \$26,709.

“Access to affordable, reliable child care is one of the most significant challenges facing our workforce today,” said Rozanna Penney, President and CEO of Heywood Healthcare. “I have seen the incredible people of Heywood Healthcare face impossible choices, not because of a lack of dedication, but because child care has become unaffordable and out of reach. Too often, employees are forced to step away from the workforce because they cannot make ends meet. With an overwhelming majority of our workforce made up of women, many balancing work and family responsibilities, this is deeply personal to our organization. This is also a regional economic issue, impacting our ability to recruit and retain a strong healthcare workforce. We are grateful for this investment, which will allow us to fully subsidize child care for those with the greatest financial need and better support our employees and community.”

The initiative is supported by a generous matching gift from a private donor through the North Central Massachusetts Foundation and reflects more than three years of collaboration through the

Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Massachusetts. Together, partners will implement employer-supported child care solutions that include direct financial assistance, coordination with local providers to increase capacity, and technology to better connect employees with available care.

Through a platform powered by Upwards, employees will be connected with licensed child care providers based on location, schedule, and availability, while the program also supports placement, enrollment, and administration of tuition subsidies. Data gathered through the platform will help partners identify gaps in care and work with providers to expand services where they are needed most.

Regional partners emphasized the importance of collaboration in addressing this challenge.

“Access to affordable, high-quality childcare is essential to the strength of our workforce, the success of our families, and the future of our communities,” said Kory Eng, President & CEO of United Way of North Central Massachusetts. “United Way of North Central Massachusetts is proud to partner with the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts and Heywood Healthcare to address one of our region’s most pressing challenges. Together, we are investing in solutions that expand childcare capacity, support providers, and create more opportunities for children and working families throughout North Central Massachusetts.”

“All of us have a stake in solving the childcare crisis facing working families,” said Steve Adams, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts. “We believe that this partnership with the United Way, Heywood Healthcare, their employees, and the Commonwealth has the potential to be a game-changer for working families and employers across Massachusetts.”

This work builds on more than three years of regional collaboration through the Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Massachusetts, which brings together employers, providers, and community stakeholders to develop sustainable, scalable solutions. The coalition has researched national best practices, engaged local families and providers, and developed tools such as a return-on-investment model to demonstrate the value of employer investment in child care.

“In preparation for this opportunity, the Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Mass have been working for three years reviewing best employer-supported childcare practices tailored for the unique needs of our region,” said LeaAnn Scales, Project Director of the Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Mass. “The expertise and support provided by our employers and providers was critical to informing the process.”

“For the past three years, our research of innovative shared funding childcare models from across the country position us well for success on this grant,” said Kat Deal, Project

Analyst/Coordinator of the Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Mass.

“Collaborating with technology partners and industry experts to create real childcare solutions for working families while strengthening our regional workforce is so rewarding.”

Technology partners also emphasized the importance of data and scalable solutions in addressing child care access.

“Shared-funding child care works when several things come together: families reliably connected to care, providers supported so supply can grow, funding coordinated across every partner, and rigorous measurement of what’s working. Upwards administers these programs across the country, and we’re proud to bring that experience to North Central Massachusetts. By pairing the region’s years of research with real-time data on utilization, access, and outcomes, this partnership can serve families today and help show what’s possible for child care across the Commonwealth. We’re grateful to the Commonwealth Corporation, the Department of Early Education and Care, United Way of North Central Massachusetts, Heywood Healthcare, and the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts for coming together around a shared commitment to supporting families and building a resilient workforce,” said Jessica Chang, Co-Founder and CEO of Upwards.

The ECCIF program is designed to test innovative models that expand access to affordable, high-quality child care while building capacity within the sector. Priority is given to initiatives that support workers in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, expand access in underserved areas, and benefit families with the greatest need.

Additional details on program implementation will be shared as the initiative progresses.

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About Heywood Healthcare:

Heywood Healthcare is a non-profit, community-owned health system serving north central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire. The system includes Heywood Hospital, a 134-bed acute care hospital in Gardner, MA; Athol Hospital, a 25-bed Critical Access hospital in Athol, MA; Heywood Medical Group; and multiple regional satellite facilities.

Heywood Hospital and Athol Hospital provide a full range of inpatient and outpatient services, including emergency care, surgery, imaging, rehabilitation, and specialty services. Heywood Medical Group, a non-profit physician organization with more than 75 providers, delivers primary and specialty care across a broad range of disciplines.

Together, the system provides coordinated, patient-centered care focused on expanding access and improving health outcomes across the region. Our mission is To be our region's first choice for quality, compassionate, patient-centered care. heywood.org

About United Way of North Central Massachusetts

United Way of North Central Massachusetts' mission is to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of our community to advance the common good. We focus on three foundational blocks to a better life: education, health, and financial stability. Through the support of volunteers and donors, we create positive, lasting change across the 22 communities we call home. <https://uwncm.org/>

About The Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts

The Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts, is the leading community foundation in the region, managing charitable funds established by individuals, families, businesses and other non-profit organizations.

The Foundation promotes philanthropy in the region and helps philanthropists invest in the communities and causes they care about.

In addition, the Foundation makes grants to local nonprofits in the areas of the childcare, environment and animal welfare, education and career readiness, community enrichment, organizational development, racial equity and community health. cfncm.org

About Upwards

Upwards is a whole-family care platform with a mission to make quality child care and elder care accessible and affordable for working families nationwide. The company connects families

with licensed, vetted caregivers, helps them afford care through government subsidies and workplace benefits, and powers care benefit programs for employers and governments at scale, including state-funded child care programs in California and Utah and programs serving military families through the Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve. Founded in 2017 and led by Founder and CEO Jessica Chang, Upwards has supported over 3 million families. Learn more at upwards.com.

This project is funded by a grant from the Employer Child Care Innovation Fund (ECCIF), a pilot program designed by the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in collaboration with the Executive Office of Education (EOE), the Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED), the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), and Commonwealth Corporation, and funded by the Massachusetts Legislature and the Healey-Driscoll Administration. The grant program is administered by Commonwealth Corporation Foundation.