Early care and education (ECE) settings (childcare centers, family childcare homes, preschools, and Head Start programs) present a critical window for healthy development and obesity prevention. ECE settings are a priority setting for CDC’s obesity prevention efforts in the United States. CDC supported the 2019-20 ASPHN Obesity Mini-CoIIN, which focused on a Farm to ECE strategy, as an effective way to teach healthy habits at a young age. Research confirms that the healthy habits supported in a Farm to ECE strategy lead to children increasing their consumption of or preference for fruits and/or vegetables and lead to related parent behavior changes, such as buying and cooking more local produce.

Five states were competitively selected to participate in the 2019-20 ASPHN Obesity Mini CoIIN: Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota and Ohio. These states have successfully employed the CoIIN process to progress their states’ Farm to ECE initiatives, ultimately improving ECE nutrition environments in their states. The ASPHN Mini CoIIN offers these states technical support in the form of trainings and guidance, including:

- Farm to ECE and CoIIN related monthly webinars
- Networking opportunities with other states
- Access to diverse national experts
- Leadership training for state team leads
- Small annual stipend to support each state’s Mini CoIIN plan
- Annual 2-day in-person learning sessions
- Regular updates on new materials and resources

All five states are working on comprehensive Farm to ECE programs that include buying and serving local food in ECES, growing edible gardens, and embedding food and agricultural literacy into the ECE curriculum. The CoIIN method has helped states quickly identify barriers in their Farm to ECE work, modify strategies to address barriers, adapt Farm to ECE initiatives to the needs of diverse ECE types, and optimize new resources or assessment tools. Importantly, the
CoIIN approach has also helped states strengthen their collaborations and partnerships – within their states, with experts, and among other states to help accelerate states’ progress in addressing one of the nation's most pressing health challenges — curbing childhood obesity.

**Alabama** has developed and disseminated an AL-specific Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) survey, created a Farm to ECE focus group guide, and outlined an in-depth Farm to ECE Learning Collaborative (LC) that will launch Spring 2020. ECE trainings, materials, and incentives will be created and piloted in the peer-to-peer LC. Equity has played a big part in AL’s Mini CoIIN. They have assessed their Farm to ECE Coalition to make sure it is diverse and equitable. AL’s Coalition has agreed to engage small and minority farmers, as much as white farmers. AL has also embedded equity into multiple aspects of the LC.

**Alabama Success!** Already, AL has had 3 focus groups with 34 providers, 60 survey respondents, and is organizing their first LC. The AL Coalition is poised to pilot the LC and launch the LC more widely in AL, after that.

**Alabama’s Key CoIIN Tip:** The CoIIN process “has been helpful to reach diverse audiences and seek various levels of input and feedback.”

**Arizona** is developing and testing an in-depth Farm to ECE online training program with a comprehensive training on buying local food, agriculture and nutrition education in ECEs, and gardening. These online trainings will offer ECE Providers professional development credit and will align AZ’s Early Learning Standards and SNAP Ed approved curriculum and resources. As a part of the Mini CoIIN, AZ created a substantial Farm to ECE coalition, applied the CoIIN process to improve Farm to ECE training accessibility and utility, and will test embedding the state’s Farm Fresh Challenge into their Mini CoIIN project in varied ECE settings.

**Arizona Success!** As of March 2020, the AZ Farm to ECE Coalition is growing and now has 2 strong co-leads, 3 online Farm to ECE trainings have been developed, and trainings will begin the provider review process in Spring, 2020.

**Arizona’s Key CoIIN Tip:** The CoIIN process “gave us the time and methods to ensure our trainings and materials were relatable and relevant to our audience. It helped foster relationships with ECE providers.”

**Colorado.** As a result of the Mini CoIIN, CO established a Farm to ECE Team with diverse, multisector partners and stakeholders representing several areas of the state. CO created a CSA pilot to optimize ECEs ability to procure and use local foods from a regional food hub. The CSA pilot included surveys that identified real time ECE barriers, that were addressed incrementally as able. The survey also unveiled opportunities and other challenges to study with local food procurement. CO continues to apply the CoIIN method to determine if removing additional barriers will lead to increased local food procurement among participating ECEs. In addition, CO
is exploring farm to ECE lesson plans that are relevant to what is grown locally to aid ECEs interest and use of new foods purchased from the food hub. CO applies all these tools to help determine how Farm to ECE programs can increase local produce access and help address inequities of nutrition security among young children.

**Colorado Success!** Through targeted messaging, recipes, and local food promotion, the CO Team created resources to help ECE directors and cooks buy and use local foods. They, also, provided culinary workshops and food safety training for ECE staff. As a result, the Mini CoIIN team successfully delivered over 2,300 lbs of local food to two ECEs, impacting over 175 children.

**Colorado’s Key CoIIN Tip:** The CoIIN process “helped us identify what were true barriers to ECEs getting local foods and not just what we had assumed. This has helped us identify the next steps in optimizing local food delivery systems for ECEs.”

**Minnesota** has been strengthening the Farm to ECE strategy option for grantees of the Minnesota Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) as part of a strategy to embed Farm to ECE into existing state infrastructure and diseminate Farm to ECE further in MN. MN optimized and distributed a survey for SHIP grantees. The surveys were followed with more detailed focus groups to gather feedback on what support materials are needed and what barriers SHIP grantees faced when trying to implement Farm to ECE initiatives in their areas of the State. Based on the findings from this process, MN is working on updating SHIP grantee training materials to include Farm to ECE content and planning to develop “grab and go” curriculum materials that grantees can supply ECE providers to use in diverse settings.

**Minnesota Success!** MN’s survey had a high response rate and received feedback from 18 grantees and several key informant interviews. As of March 2020, MN has strengthened Farm to ECE guidance in the 2020 SHIP Implementation Guide making it easier for grantees to implement Farm to ECE.

**Minnesota’s Key CoIIN Tip:** The CoIIN process “helped us create a meaningful survey and interview guide for SHIP grantees that provided us with actionable information. It is also helping us develop a strategic plan to expand the Farm to ECE coalition and explore what collaborative work will progress Farm to ECE in Minnesota.”

**Ohio** capitalized on the Mini CoIIN to optimize a Farm to ECE inventory and needs assessment for OH’s ECE providers. In 2018, a similar survey only received 23 responses from OH ECE providers, which left the OH Farm to ECE Mini-CoIIN group with little baseline data to use. The OH 2019 Farm to ECE survey had a great response rate. It was very successful in providing more data, helping identify a more accurate percentage of OH ECE providers’ participating in Farm to ECE, perceived barriers of starting Farm to ECE, and data related to the use of CACFP dollars for Farm to ECE. This information was important to creating a Farm to ECE professional development training for ECE providers. OH also continues to expand their Farm to ECE “Great Apple Crunch” program. They increased the 2019 participation rate and will build an accompanying curriculum
with activities linked to specific ECE learning standards. This will offer ECE providers small steps towards a full comprehensive Farm to ECE program. OH is now further building their Farm to ECE coalition, their long term plans, and the creation of an online Farm to ECE training for providers living in remote areas.

**Ohio Success!** As of March 2020, OH had over 1,680 ECE providers respond to their Farm to ECE inventory and needs assessment. Ohio had 341,510 participants in the 2019 OH Great Apple Crunch and grew their Farm to ECE coalition to 12 people who represent multiple state agencies and local health departments across the state.

**Ohio’s Key CoIIN Tip:** The PDSA process “helped OH identify the need to plan a roadmap for the future of the team with equity in mind. The CoIIN process helped us understand how to implement and expand Farm to ECE in the most effective and equitable way possible.”

To support the work in these five impressive states, ASPHN has held 9 Mini CoIIN webinars, 2 networking calls and 4 days of in-person meetings. ASPHN is working closely with multiple partners, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Farm to School Network, Policy Equity Group and W.K. Kellogg Foundation to create a strong foundation of technical assistance tailored to these states’ needs. ASPHN and CDC are delighted by the interest, passion and support the 2019-20 ASPHN Obesity Mini-CoIIN has received; and are looking forward to a continued, productive Mini COIIN.

For more information contact Emia Oppenheim, PhD, RD, LD, at emia@asphn.org

Founded in 1952, ASPHN is a non-profit membership organization that provides state and national leadership on food and nutrition policy, programs and services aimed at improving the health of our population. ASPHN’s membership is composed of more than 400 public health practitioners in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and five U.S. territories. Visit ASPHN on the web at www.asphn.org and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/asphn.

*The 2019-20 ASPHN Obesity Mini CoIIN is made possible by a Cooperative Agreement with CDC (Number CDC-RFA-OT18-1802). The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.*