F or California’s working parents, quality early learning programs often are not convenient, affordable, or even available for their young children. To provide California parents with more choices of quality programs and care, First 5 California and its partners work with the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF). A $6 million First 5 California investment helps LIIF administer the Affordable Buildings for Children’s Development (ABCD) Initiative. The initiative supports child care providers and communities in their effort to develop quality child care facilities. “Lack of facilities continually arises as one of the major barriers in providing quality programs in California,” states Sarah Neville-Morgan, deputy director of programs at First 5 California. “This creates large pockets without licensed care—often leaving the families who would benefit the most from quality programs without options.”

An ABCD strategy, Constructing Connections works with 10 county-based lead agencies to assist public and private child care providers and community partners to create and improve early learning program facilities. Through these partnerships, providers such as the California Department of Education (CDE) and Head Start contractors improve their facilities development process from planning through construction. Constructing Connections’ lead agencies assist by facilitating local land-use policy reform, by providing child care operator and intermediary training and technical assistance, and by helping communities increase financial investments.

Constructing Connections’ lead agencies provide technical assistance and resources in many areas: assessing market demands, preparing a business plan and budget, meeting licensing requirements, ensuring quality design, expediting land use permitting processes, identifying

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capital resources, finding a child-care center site, and understanding development processes.

**Constructing Partnerships**

The long-term goal of Constructing Connections is to build the capacity of the state’s communities to sponsor, secure, and sustain the hundreds of thousands of child-care spaces needed over time. The ABCD Initiative near-term objective is to support the development of 15,000 child-care spaces between the years 2004 and 2010. A key strategy of Constructing Connections is to form collaborative partnerships among financial institutions, child-care coordinators, public law attorneys, architects, retired licensing analysts, affordable housing developers, and local representatives. By removing barriers such as unfriendly building ordinances, these partners work to ensure that more quality child-care centers are built to meet the needs of communities, families, and children.

In its work, Constructing Connections partners with local Head Start grantees and agencies and assists them with construction-related issues. In the Palm Springs Unified School District (PSUSD), the Julius Corsini Head Start and Bubbling Wells Head Start facilities in Desert Hot Springs needed numerous repairs, including new floors and other facility-related health and safety issues. Both schools serve approximately 51 three- to five-year-old preschool children annually. Head Start program staff members approached the First 5 Riverside Constructing Connections Project, seeking help to obtain funding for their facilities’ repairs. Both Head Start programs received technical assistance with securing local funds, facility renovation guidance, and support with their health and safety repairs. Today, PSUSD early childhood education staff are active members of the Riverside Constructing Connections Task Force and serve as peer mentors/trainers during provider training on facility development.

First 5 Riverside Executive Director Harry Freedman says that the Constructing Connections Task Force’s greatest accomplishment has been bringing people together around the need for child-care facilities and “having all areas represented, having both the provider and business perspectives.”

In Orange County, the Constructing Connections project works with the Head Start facilities manager, Leisha Bundy. As a member of the county’s Constructing Connections collaborative team, Ms. Bundy contributed to the development of the popular publication, the *Orange County Plan to Overcome Child Care Facilities Development and Financing Barriers*. In Orange County, the Constructing Connections project provides the Head Start program with technical assistance and training to obtain capital, mitigate land-use barriers, and obtain referrals to experienced architects.

**Creating Spaces**

A head of its short-term objective to create 15,000 child-care spaces by 2010, already the ABCD Initiative has assisted with the development of 18,718 planned spaces. More than 11,000 spaces are being developed through the support of local Constructing Connections sites; the balance of the spaces were assisted through planning grants, loans, and developer partnerships. This year, local Constructing Connections’ lead agencies continue to form partnerships with intermediary agencies, enhance existing services, and work to increase local public/private financial investment for developing facilities. In addition, lead agencies support local CDE and Head Start contractors navigating the facility development process by providing technical assistance, training, and resources.