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## **New Sixpence grants connects child cares, public schools to promote early childhood development**

LINCOLN, NE—The Trustees of the Sixpence Early Learning Fund announced this week that six new grants totaling \$1,302,322 will be awarded to school districts in partnerships with local licensed early care and education providers for infants and toddlers at risk. Partnerships in North Platte, Kearney, Falls City, and a consortium serving multiple communities in the Nebraska through hubs in Chadron, Gering, and Sidney, were selected for grant awards after a competitive application and review process. Sixpence, a collaborative funding structure involving the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Department of Education and private sector investors has issued grants to community partnerships statewide since 2008, now totaling 35 communities. Traditionally, these Sixpence grants are awarded to school districts working with other local agencies that meet the statutory requirements governing the use of Sixpence funds providing either center-based or home-based family engagement programs. This latest round of grants is the first time Sixpence funds have been made available to partnerships including licensed child care providers with a different set of statutory requirements specifically supported by Nebraska's *Step Up to Quality* rating and improvement system.

According to recent data, approximately 30,000 infants and toddlers, or more than 40 percent of Nebraska children between birth and age 3, face risk factors that threaten their chances of arriving at kindergarten developmentally on par with their peers. These children are more likely to struggle in the K-12 system, attain a lower level of education, enter the criminal justice system as offenders, develop

chronic health problems and earn less as working adults. Neuroscientific, sociological and even economic evidence suggests that stimulating and supportive experiences in the first years of life encourage the emergence of cognitive skills, behaviors and character traits that drive academic success and steer children toward healthier, more productive life outcomes.

While child development experts agree that parents play the most important role in children's earliest learning and developmental experiences, it is also true that child care is a reality for Nebraskans who must participate in the workforce to provide for their families. The new Sixpence Child Care Partnership grants ensure that more infants and toddlers are being cared for in environments that provide the kinds of early learning experiences known to narrow the achievement gap.

"The success of Sixpence over the past decade shows Nebraskans understand the value of programs that help parents put kids on the path to success early in life," said Amy Bornemeier, Sixpence Administrator and Associate Vice President of Early Childhood Programs at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, which administers the grant program under the direction of the Sixpence Board of Trustees. "Connecting licensed child care providers with school districts and other local partners allows communities to make better use of the existing resources, facilities and early childhood workers available to them."

The latest round of grants was made possible through 2015 legislation addressing the urgent need to grow the state's quality early childhood workforce. "Working with parents to support our state's youngest children's early development requires professionals who are experienced and skilled," said Bornemeier. "Right now, Nebraska's skilled early childhood workforce can only reach about 7 or 8 percent of our infants and toddlers at risk. If we are going to get ahead of that problem, we need to find new ways to attract, cultivate and retain more professionals in this field. These new grant awards move us in the right direction by using Sixpence's blended public-private funds to deliver professional development, technical assistance and other resources to the child care providers that Nebraska's working parents rely upon."

The growing focus on Nebraska's early childhood workforce also created common ground between the latest Sixpence grants and the state's newly launched *Step Up to Quality* child care rating and improvement system. *Step Up to Quality*, a collaboration between the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and the Nebraska Department of Education, provides training and professional development, formal education and coaching opportunities to participating child care providers and their staff. The initiative assists providers in understanding and meeting accepted quality standards, and conducts assessment and data analysis for quality improvement. *Step Up to Quality* also gives parents the information they need to identify and choose quality care environments for their youngest children. Licensed child care providers involved in the new Sixpence partnerships are required to be enrolled in *Step Up to Quality* and achieve a Step 3 rating on a 5-step quality scale by end of the third year of their Sixpence grant.

A second round of Sixpence Child Care Partnership Grants will be announced in 2017.