



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 21, 2020

Contact: Beth Moore
Communications Director
803-734-0153
bfmoore@scfirststeps.org

FIRST STEPS GRANT TO EXPAND CHILD CARE ACCESS IN SPARTANBURG

City and local partners awarded \$300K for Highland Community Early Learning Center

SPARTANBURG, S.C.— Local efforts to turn a vacant public building into a new community child care center will get a major boost from South Carolina First Steps.

The state’s early childhood agency held a press conference Wednesday announcing a \$300,00 grant to the Bethlehem Center in Spartanburg. The funding aims to address an unmet need for child care and early education in the city’s Highland community.

“Community leaders in Spartanburg and all across the state have come together to envision what it would look like if the public sector and the private nonprofit sector partnered together to ensure that all were ready for kindergarten,” said Georgia Mjartan, Executive Director of First Steps.

State lawmakers and local leaders joined First Steps for the grant announcement. Included were Representative Rita Allison, Senator Scott Talley, Senator Vincent Sheheen, Spartanburg Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy, and Patrena Mims, Executive Director of the Bethlehem Center.

South Carolina First Steps awarded the state funds competitively based on the community’s plans to renovate an underutilized, city-owned building and establish First Steps 4K program serving children from the Highland community and surrounding areas.

Located on Spartanburg’s southside, Highland is a historically African-American neighborhood with approximately 1,500 residents and one of the most concentrated areas of poverty in the city.

The building at 400 Highland Avenue was originally constructed as part of the now-demolished Cammie Clagett public housing complex. Recently donated to the City of Spartanburg by the Spartanburg Housing Authority, the facility is now managed by the neighboring Bethlehem Center, a nonprofit organization that has served the Highland area for 90 years with afterschool and summer youth programs, senior adult services, food pantry, and adult education programs.

Director Patrena Mims said that Highland is both a child care desert and a food desert. Other challenges include a lack of access to transportation and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

“This one program won’t solve it all, but it does address the early childhood accessibility challenge,” said Mims. “The benefits of engaging kids and families early—to help with brain development, to build trust with families, to build relationships, to create community trust—are all needed to impact school readiness and school achievement.”

When the building reopens later this fall as the Highland Community Early Learning Center, it will include a classroom for 18 First Steps 4K children. South Carolina First Steps will support the 4K program by providing tuition, coaching, instructional and family support. The grant will also provide needed bus transportation for students.

The program will advance an ongoing local effort to revitalize the Highland community, said Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy.

“Early childhood education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty,” Kennedy said. “This grant enables us to invest in people . . . When you invest in people, you help create hope, you help create opportunity, you help create sustainability, and you help build community.”

First Steps 4K Director Martha Strickland says she expects the Highland Community Early Learning Center to become a national model for expanding access to four-year-old kindergarten in underserved communities.

“The support of our legislators and the partnering of First Steps 4K with the City of Spartanburg and Highland community is just the beginning,” said Strickland. “Many other partners are ready to chip in and help make this vision a reality.”

The vision, officials say, is to expand the center to serve children from birth through age five in a manner similar to the blending of early childhood programs and funding sources that created the nearby Franklin School.

Spartanburg First Steps, operator of the Franklin School, will provide training and technical assistance to the project and will explore adding Early Head Start classrooms to the site for children 0-3.

During Wednesday’s press conference, state lawmakers touted the project’s collaborative process.

“It is amazing what people can do and what communities can do when they work together,” said Rep. Rita Allison.

Sen. Scott Talley agreed. “It takes partnerships to really impact change, particularly in education” he said. “It takes the same in the General Assembly. We come across the aisle and we work together on things that truly matter for the future of South Carolina.”

#

ABOUT SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST STEPS

South Carolina First Steps is both a nonprofit and state agency and is the only statewide, dedicated comprehensive early childhood agency in South Carolina focused on getting children ages birth through five ready for school and life success. Last year, First Steps directly served 28,427 children across all 46 counties.

Established in 1999 by the South Carolina General Assembly to close the gap on students’ preparedness for success in school, South Carolina First Steps takes a holistic approach to accomplishing its mission of preparing all children for success in school, work and life, offering services that improve children’s

health, strengthen families, expand access to quality child care, increase participation in four-year-old kindergarten programs and help transition rising kindergartners into school.

ABOUT FIRST STEPS 4K

As part of the Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP), First Steps 4K provides tuition-free, full-day 4 year old kindergarten – “4K” – to children across South Carolina in private, nonprofit, and faith-based childcare centers. South Carolina First Steps works closely with providers in an intensive program that includes training and mentoring for the 4K teachers and center directors and rigorous standards that ensure the programs are educational and high-quality.

Learn more at **[SCFIRSTSTEPS.ORG](https://www.scfirststeps.org)**