



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

## **Region 4**

(Boone & Winnebago Counties)



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## Introduction

In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decisionmakers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and Early Childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decisionmakers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

## Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments

Between August 2022 and May 2023, Regional Teams throughout the State met with their local Action Council and Family Council to talk about Early Childhood (EC) data and hear about their experiences with ECEC programs and services. They also conducted focus groups, interviews, held community listening sessions, and conducted surveys to gather additional feedback from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and priority populations in their Region. A community report, the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, was completed in June 2023. However, recognizing that not all community members had a chance to provide their feedback on data or share their experiences in the original Regional Needs Assessment, additional feedback was collected through community events and meetings, and this Addendum was created to complement the existing report. The new information provided by community members, agencies, organizations, and other community stakeholders is listed below.

## Local Community Collaborations

One community member suggested the Winnebago County Health Department change the name of their home visiting program (which serves as the county's ECEC Collaboration) to the Winnebago County Health Department's Coordinated Intake. This would help to clarify the role they play in the community and across both Boone and Winnebago Counties.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Some of the additional feedback from the community included a note that there is a lack of information and data regarding private and religious Early Childhood programs and child care

spots available. Another community member noted that they were saddened to see there were not greater numbers of Black female child care owners or ECEC professionals; however, they also discussed how systemic racism hinders minoritized individuals from accessing the business supports they need to become successful business owners. After hearing about the findings from the report, one Business Chamber leader from the Region expressed a desire to assist local businesses in adding child care supports (designated seats for employees at a particular EC program, stipends for child care costs, etc.) into provided employee benefits.

Below are some of the quotes collected through the online survey and in dissemination meetings.

- “It is wonderful to see the numbers confirm the lack of ECEC and resource availability. I was surprised transportation was not higher on the list.” - Health Department Representative (Boone County)
- “After speaking with you, my wheels are spinning in my head about creating space in our new apartment complex for therapists, care managers and a drop-in [EC] care center. Homeless youth aged 16-24 need child care options. Part-time care and ‘regular’ centers with pre-registration do not always work for them. They need reliable care.” - Homeless Youth Liaison (Boone and Winnebago Counties)
- “What you made abundantly clear is that child care/preschool is a workforce issue as well as a family or household concern. If a family cannot find adequate child care services, they can’t accept jobs or employment. Consequently, including child care services as part of economic development plans is essential.” - Northern Illinois Outreach Coordinator (Congressman LaHood)

## Slot Gap

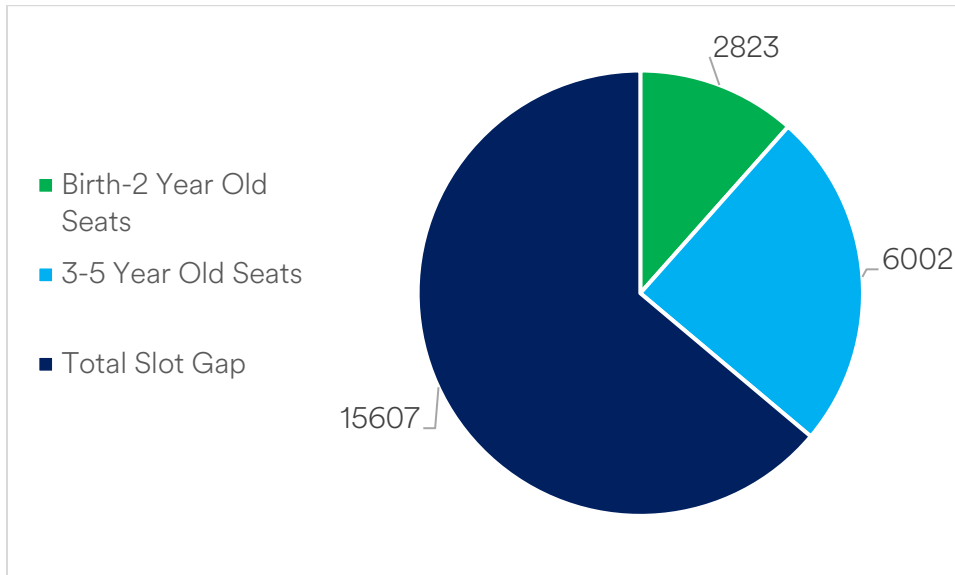
New information was also provided by community about the slot gap in Region 4. A Department of Child and Family Services representative from Winnebago County explained how the exceedingly high gap in infant and toddler care is affecting foster care placements. She described how in the past, infants were high priority for foster families. However, in the current environment, “People are not requesting babies, we cannot place them for the life of us; because foster families are not able to find child care, they are requesting older children. We [DCFS] even pay for care, but that doesn’t help in this situation.”

As one Early Intervention provider serving Boone and Winnebago counties explained, “Our agency does not have a maximum capacity, so we cannot be counted in terms of “slots”, meaning that the agency is charged with serving all children who qualify for services. Therefore, the actual number of children served can fluctuate based on access to services.

There are also a few corrections in the Slot Gap section to the previously published Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment for Region 4. There are 24,432 children aged birth to five years old in the Region. If we were to assume that every family in this category desired to place their child in care, then the overall slot gap for child care is 15,607 (Figure 6 in the original report; Figure 1 below). These numbers include Head Start programming, home visiting options, Early Intervention services, center-based child care (licensed and license-exempt), Preschool for All and

Preschool for All Expansion, and licensed family child homes. This number does not include license-exempt child care homes or friend, family, or neighbor care.

Figure 1: Number of Seats by Age Group, Total Slot Gap



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The gap in service delivery is further exacerbated when considering specific groupings like infant and toddler care options. IECAM reports there are 12,477 birth-to-two-year-old children in the Region, and only 1,887 full-time child care slots (i.e., Early Head Start, licensed child care centers, and licensed family child care homes) available for this age group. Therefore, only 15% of this age group has access to full-time care.

Further adding to the gap are publicly funded slots. Of the 24,432 children aged birth to age five, 12,499 of those children live at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or less, making them eligible for enrollment in a publicly funded program. However, regional capacity for publicly funded programs provides only 3,911 slots. This leaves 8,588 eligible children (or 69%) without access to programs (should their families choose). One Head Start representative explained how families are deterred from programs when their children are placed on long waitlists; so many end up waiting for access until the child enters Kindergarten.

As presented in the report, the number of children eligible for child care far exceeds the available slots. This fact is maintained when considering all specific groupings: three to five aged children, birth to two population, and publicly funded program options. The community does not have the capacity to serve 64% of children aged birth to five, 77% of children between birth and age two, and 69% of children who qualify for publicly funded programs.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

One EC administrator and leader in Winnebago County commented on the dire state of the EC Workforce, stating that the problem is so vast, wide, and deep that there is “no one solution.” That is, teachers are retiring or leaving the field all together and are not being replaced at appropriate levels. Moreover, professionals serving children with Individualized Education Plans are becoming more difficult to secure. This is due to a lack of entry to the field and arduous state educational requirements for EC service providers. Adding to the complexity of staffing is the substitute system; that is, short-term versus long-term substitutes. There are currently not enough of either type of substitute. Finally, ‘Grow-Your-Own’ programs are a sliver of the resolution, including the benefit of having a qualifying degree paid for by a district as enticement, but there is such low entry into the field that the program is not currently meeting future needs.

## Additional Community Feedback

“I’m surprised that more EC Center owners do not have college degrees; however, there is a difference between business acumen and EC education.” - Family Support Supervisor (Winnebago County)

“I now better understand that the role you play is to bridge communities and policymakers so that family, caregiver, and professionals can make decisions to either expand or enhance services across Illinois. You don’t ‘build’ the facilities – you connect communities and people and groups that are interested in doing so.”

## Next Steps

As Regional Teams continue their conversations with caregivers, ECEC professionals, and community stakeholders, their stories and experiences with ECEC programs and services will be recorded and shared with state and local agencies, legislators, funders, and decisionmakers. We hope our work will contribute to reimagining an Early Childhood system that is more equitable for all families and support the incredible work ECEC professionals do every day.