



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 11

(Clark, Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Edgar,
Moultrie, & Shelby 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 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

Community members expressed their desire to see more information on informal, local Early Childhood Community Collaborations. There are three to highlight in the Addendum.

Moultrie County Board came together to assist their current and incoming ECEC providers. With the help of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and Jeff Andrews at Business of Child Care, Moultrie County Kids has been created to increase the support for ECEC. For example, a dinner was hosted to thank current providers in Moultrie County. ARPA funds were also separated into two categories: new providers and current providers. Current providers could apply for funds to

improve their program. For example, one provider was awarded some money to fix their windows to be Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) compliant. The other category of funds was set aside to help get new ECEC providers in Moultrie County.

The Shelby County Early Childhood Planning Group was created to address the challenges of ECEC in Shelbyville and Shelby County. The group combines community stakeholders including representatives from the major employers of Shelbyville, representatives from the Child Resource Center at Eastern Illinois University, representatives from the Shelbyville Community Unit Schools, a major bank, and other concerned citizens. They also work with other governmental agencies who assist with support and guidance. After hearing about the lack of child care slots impacting both families and major employers, the group decided to investigate and dig more into this issue. To date, they have visited many child care facilities where they spoke with providers about challenges like child-to-staff ratios, hours of operations, and the high expense of child care. Their main goal is to increase the amount of infant and toddler care slots in Shelby County, specifically Shelbyville, by creating an Early Childhood facility. Their hope is to create a safe and affordable place for children to stay and is of utmost importance to parents, employers, to the school system, and to the City of Shelbyville. They are currently working towards becoming a formal Collaboration through Illinois Action for Children.

A group of community members are currently working on a child care project. This project is being spearheaded by two individuals that identified a need for ECEC services in Clark County. Both co-founders have felt the impact of the lack of child care slots in Marshall, Illinois. One co-founder conducted a feasibility study in 2021 to determine the needs of the community. The group now has a board of community stakeholders, and they are pursuing the non-profit route. Their goal is to build a child care center that will have seven classrooms serving 111 children ages birth through age five with an additional before/after classroom that will provide before/after school care for school age children. Currently, they are trying to independently raise funds due to missing requirements for grants and other funding opportunities. Project implementation is dependent on funding to get going as the community has shown immense support for the project.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

One strength of the Region to note is that all Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All-Expansion (PFA-E) programs in the Region are rated either gold or silver quality in the ExceleRate program.

Some community members discussed the need to include unlicensed child care homes and programs that are abundant in the Region. DCFS standards mandate that anyone caring for more than two children unrelated to them for four or more hours per day must be licensed. However, there is a concern that there are several unlicensed child care providers operating in communities across the Region, meaning that they are not monitored or required to meet minimum health and safety standards, have CPR or First Aid training, or attend child care training. Typically, this type of care is found in homes but may also be found in unlicensed preschools that keep children for more than four hours.

Prevention Initiative (PI) workers noted two challenges not mentioned in the report include lack of marketing and not enough programs in Region 11. Often families are unaware of PI and home visiting programs until the child is too old for their program. One suggestion noted by PI programs is to increase marketing to better serve the families in their communities sooner. Another highlighted issue was the lack of a PI program in Cumberland County and the need for more programs in Douglas County.

- “I mean I would have loved to participate in a home visiting program, but I didn’t know about it until my son was too old. I think they used to provide that information at the doctor’s office or even come visit new moms at Sarah Bush [Lincoln Hospital].” - Parent (Douglas County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Many providers, current and future, noted challenges with the long wait time for background checks conducted as part of their employment by DCFS. Some also noted the long wait times for responses and for hearing about paperwork they have submitted. A provider in Mattoon, Illinois (Coles County) noted that the DCFS-approved service for background checks is only available once per month for three hours in Coles County. Once background checks are completed by the hiring individual, it can take up to six weeks to receive the results. When turnover rates are high like they are currently, these long wait periods can exacerbate hiring issues. It was noted that DCFS licensing representatives also struggle with staffing, making communication between providers and DCFS more complicated.

Clarity is a large issue for many new providers, specifically those who are trying to build a facility. One provider in Moultrie County noted issues when trying to receive clarity regarding the fire code for centers.

- “So, one of the challenges that I’ve had is defining the fire code. So DCFS just put something in their code, I think 407, and it says it just has to be up to code. So, then I call the Fire Marshall’s office, and they’re like well, we don’t have anything exactly and then they refer you to an architect. My biggest thing, and this is like throughout the whole process is, I don’t want something left up for, like one person’s interpretation, and that’s what I feel like.” - Provider (Moultrie County)

Providers in Region 11 have noted they feel supported by their local Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) office where they can call and get clarification. The local CCR&R office has voiced its concerns about misinformation and the lack of clarity from local licensing representatives, but little has been done to resolve this issue. Additionally, providers feel that their licensing representatives are not educated on ECEC programming administration. A provider in Mattoon noted that her licensing representative told her just to “close a room” during a staffing crisis and was unaware of the consequences of that action including parental upset and added staffing issues. Rather than feeling supported by their licensing representative, many providers feel threatened and are constantly reprimanded. According to providers, licensing representatives only highlight issues and do not offer reasonable or educated solutions on how to fix them.

Other Early Childhood professionals discussed the difficulties they have faced in attaining the Child Development Association (CDA) certification due to the lack of local professionals qualified to conduct the observation component. The alternative licensure is for ECEC professionals that have their bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education and have a Level 5 ECE Credential through Gateways. However, Early Childhood professionals noted that individuals must pass the ECEC Content Area Test for full licensure. The problem is that many ECEC professionals are having difficulty passing the Content Area Test to obtain their Professional Educators License (PEL). According to the Licensure Officer and Testing Administrator at the Regional Office of Education #11, there is a 25% pass rate for the Early Childhood Content Area Test, with individuals needing to retest multiple times. These issues are amplified by the long turnaround times for background checks from DCFS, preventing quick start times for staff.

Providers also shared that recent graduates are entering the workforce underprepared for the actual work. For example, hands-on experiences lacked for students studying ECEC at a higher level. While they are provided ideas and a “toolbox” for their work in ECEC, they have limited experience utilizing them in real life, creating issues in work performance when they enter the workforce. It was recommended by ECEC providers that a better collaboration between ECEC higher education and the workforce is needed to thoroughly prepare the incoming ECEC workforce.

Another area providers discussed was the food program reimbursements. Child care centers and homes are reimbursed for meals they serve to children ages birth through age 12. To participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), an ECEC provider must sign an agreement with a sponsoring organization before participating and receiving monies for serving nutritious meals in the CACFP. The reimbursement rates for participating providers for qualifying meal reimbursement are updated annually each year. However, providers expressed that they do not believe the current reimbursement rates accurately reflect the increase in food costs at the grocery store due to inflation.

The United States Department of Agriculture utilizes the Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of economy-wide inflation; according to the most recent data available, the CPI rose 3.2 percent between July 2022 and July 2023. The food-at-home CPI (grocery store or supermarket food purchases), which is utilized more often for ECEC providers, increased 3.6 percent from July 2022 to July 2023. Since food costs are not expected to decline over the next year, providers would like to see the reimbursement rates raise to meet the costs they have faced.

Below is some new data that compare reimbursement rates for both licensed family and center-based child care providers. Tier 1 rates are based on income, qualifying school, or Census eligibility; Tier 2 rates apply to anyone who does not qualify for Tier 1.¹

Table 1: Family Child Care Homes Reimbursement Rates

Year	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
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¹ <https://www.illinoischildren.com/reimbursement-process/>

Fiscal Year 2021-2022	Tier I: \$1.40 Tier II: \$0.51	Tier I: \$2.63 Tier II: \$1.59	Tier I: \$0.78 Tier II: \$0.21
Fiscal Year 2022-2023	Tier I: \$1.66 Tier II: \$1.66	Tier I: \$3.04 Tier II: \$3.04	Tier I: \$0.97 Tier II: \$0.97
Fiscal Year 2023-2024	Tier I: \$1.65 Tier II: \$0.59	Tier I: \$3.12 Tier II: \$1.88	Tier I: \$0.93 Tier II: \$0.25

Source: Illinois State Board of Education Nutrition Department
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Table 2: Center-Based Reimbursement Rates

Year	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Fiscal Year 21-22	Paid: \$0.33 Reduced Price: \$1.67 Free: \$1.97	Paid: \$0.35 Reduced Price: \$3.26 Free: \$3.66	Paid: \$0.09 Reduced Price: \$0.50 Free: \$1.00
Fiscal Year 22-23	Paid: \$0.45 Reduced Price: \$1.91 Free: \$2.21	Paid: \$0.47 Reduced Price: \$3.63 Free: \$4.03	Paid: \$0.19 Reduced Price: \$0.64 Free: \$1.18
Fiscal Year 23-24	Paid: \$0.38 Reduced Price: \$1.98 Free: \$2.28	Paid: \$0.40 Reduced Price: \$3.85 Free: \$4.25	Paid: \$0.10 Reduced Price: \$0.58 Free: \$1.17

Source: Illinois State Board of Education Nutrition Department
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Table 3: Increase/Decrease in Reimbursement Rates for Child and Adult Care Food Program: Family Child Care Homes

Tier	Years	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack	CPI – All Food	CPI – Food-at-Home
Tier I	2021-2022 to 2022-2023	19%	16%	24%	3.2%	3.6%
	2022-2023 to 2023-2024	-1%	2%	-4%	5.9%	5.2%
Tier II	2021-2022 to 2022-2023	225%	91%	362%	3.2%	3.6%
	2022-2023 to 2023-2024	-64%	-38%	-74%	5.9%	5.2%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education Nutrition Department. U.S. Department of Agriculture
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Table 4: Increase/Decrease in Reimbursement Rates for Child and Adult Care Food Program: Centers

Type	Years	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack	CPI: All Food	CPI: Food-at-home
Paid	2021-2022 to 2022-2023	36%	34%	111%	3.2%	3.6%
	2022-2023 to 2023-2024	-16%	-15%	-47%	5.9%	5.2%
Reduced Price	2021-2022 to 2022-2023	11%	11%	28%	3.2%	3.6%
	2022-2023 to 2023-2024	6%	6%	16%	5.9%	5.2%
Free	2021-2022 to 2022-2023	12%	10%	18%	3.2%	3.6%
	2022-2023 to 2023-2024	3%	5%	-1%	5.9%	5.2%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education Nutrition Department. U.S. Department of Agriculture
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Providers, caregivers, and families voiced their concerns about and discussed the challenges they face in accessing ECEC programs and services for children who have disabilities.

- “Children with disabilities really have additional barriers accessing child care especially in our child care centers.”
- “Finding a slot in early childhood education and care is extremely difficult for a child with a disability. Many providers are hesitant due to the increased need for these children and the continuous lack of help, especially in child care centers.”
- “Trying to find a local provider who is comfortable with taking care of my child with their additional needs has been a nightmare. I know they have to take into consideration the other children in their care, but I wanted to give my child some sense of normalcy and social interaction by enrolling them in a center or even home. It would also give me a little break so I can take a break.” – Parent (Clark County)

One parent noted how happy they were to see discussions about child care happening in their community, saying, “I’m happy to see people coming together, even if it’s “informally. That’s what I love about our area and our small towns, we come together in times of need. Clark County is in big trouble with providers retiring, so I’m hoping to see their idea come to fruition.” - Community Member (Clark County)

Additional Regional Needs

- Families want hands-on and available resources for individualized care support for children with disabilities.

Additional Regional Recommendations

There were some additional recommendations made by community members.

- Increase food program reimbursements to providers to reflect the increase in actual costs at the grocery store due to inflation.
- Increase awareness of accessibility and amount of socio-emotional and behavioral coaches for ECEC programs.
- Increase amount of mental health programs in Region 11, not only for the ECEC workforce but families as well.

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.