



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

## **Region 35**

(LaSalle, Marshall, & Putnam 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.

## Regional Community Landscape

New information was provided by the Illinois Valley PADS Homeless Shelter via their annual report, which covers August 15, 2021, to July 31, 2022.<sup>1</sup> The report highlights the work of both the Ottawa and Peru locations, including how many clients were served, the amount of resources they utilized in the shelter, and how donations were utilized. Below is a chart built from data in the report, highlighting the referrals the shelters provided.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ivpads.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2022-Final-Year-end-Report-Card.pdf>

Table 1: Number of Service Referrals Provided by IV PADS

Service Referrals Provided	Number of Referrals Provided
Health and Dental Referrals	127
Housing Referrals	401
Legal Referrals	66
Mental Health Referrals	58
Substance Abuse Referrals	51

Source: IV PADS 2022 Final End Year Report

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Illinois Valley PADS describe the reasons for the housing insecurity as “loss of job/insufficient income, family disputes, no affordable housing, and eviction/overcrowding”; the barriers they list are “few mental health and rehab inpatient services, lack of income for housing and medical care, high poverty levels — in our three counties, 12% of the population are living at severe poverty levels, and transportation limitations”. These reasons and barriers have led to an overall increase in clients served from 2017 to 2022, with an all-time high in 2022.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Both caregivers and providers gave feedback on ECEC programs during dissemination.

Families reiterated the difficulty in finding care.

- “Child care is not just difficult to find — it is impossible.” - Parent (LaSalle County)
- “I am ashamed to be receiving assistance, but I have no other option. There is literally no child care here!” - Parent (LaSalle County)
- “I have been dropping my children off at a home center that I know is not good. I wait for the day that DCFS comes in and shuts them down. That finally happened and, fortunately, we found a center near us that is so wonderful! My stress level used to be so high while at work, but now I can drop off my kids without that stress!” - Parent (Marshall County)

One provider discussed visits from DCFS compliance, noting that visits can be stressful and like an attack instead of helpful or educational. Complicating the visits are the expectations that neither teachers nor children engage with the DCFS worker, something the provider said was difficult since the children in their care are curious and want to talk with the visitor. Community members said they would rather have a connection with the worker conducting the compliance visit, because it would feel more like a “feeling educated” conversation at the end of the visit rather than being told what they were doing wrong.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The lack of ECEC workforce prompted a conversation with business leaders to provide an insight into why they may be struggling to find help. This also led to conversations about how large and small businesses can help their employees by looking into child care options as part of the job offering/benefits.

One program that was not included in the previous report was the Indian Valley Vocational Center in Sandwich, Illinois. The Center provides college credit for high school students attending their programs and offers hands-on experience through the preschool sited at the Center.

Another program that was not included in the original report was the Illinois Valley Single Parent Connections, who partners with Starved Rock Associates for Vocation & Technical Education (SRVTE) and Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC). IVCC has employed a bilingual professional, Aurora Medina, since 2006. Aurora is also the Single Parent Coordinator for SRVTE and an advocate for single parents, displaced homemakers, single pregnant people, and a parent at age 19 or younger. She meets with families to provide resources, support, hope, and reinforcement in their ability to be successful.

### **Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice**

One parent discussed the need for more and better community supports for parents and caregivers.

“Since we cannot get any child care here, I would like to have a neighbor or friend that I could vent to, it can be overwhelming at times. I take a prescription to help ease my anxiety from the stress of being home and caring for all my kids.” - Parent (LaSalle County)

### **Additional Community Feedback**

Some governmental offices, such as the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), and Child Support Enforcement in the Region are still following COVID-19 regulations, which has created frustration and hopelessness within families that are already struggling on a day-to-day basis. To add to the difficulty, it has been shared by a community member that some of the offices are also understaffed, leading to an even more difficult and daunting task to keep their offices open.

Another notable connection within Region 35 is C5-Rural. C5-Rural is a collaborative healthcare network with members from LaSalle, Bureau, Marshall, and Putnam Counties that brings together primary care providers, mental health providers, complementary care, and community-based providers in order to develop integrative care strategies that bridge gaps in rural mental health and substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery in new and innovative ways. C5-Rural is a group dedicated to coordinating and improving the quality of behavioral healthcare services, and expanding access to services that treat social determinants of health. Using all available options, they plan to expand the type of currently available behavioral healthcare for rural people, by providing person-centered care that focuses on the whole person, emphasizing wellness and lifestyle while addressing the range of complex biological, social-emotional, psychological, cultural, and spiritual/religious factors that are determinants of mental health.

### **Additional Regional Needs**

Some additional needs were identified by community members during dissemination.

- Parenting classes offered to families.
- Transportation to and from meetings.

- Training for families.
- More healthcare services.

## **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.