

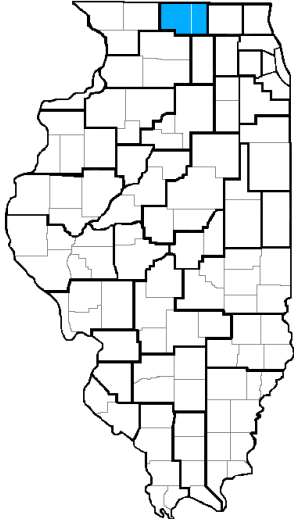
ACTION PLAN



Region 4

Boone & Winnebago Counties

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Letter from Family & Action Council Members

The communities throughout our Region helped lead discussions by providing information through focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys, and we are grateful for their help in developing our Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment and Addendum, both produced in 2023. Their voices and passion for improving the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system to make it more equitable for all children, caregivers, and families are the driving force behind our work and are evident in this Region 4 Action Plan.

Council members and others in the community had a chance to share their experiences with ECEC programs and services and add their input to the next steps, detailed in this Action Plan, to move the needle on several recommendations identified in our Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

We especially want to thank the following community members for their support in developing our Regional Action Plan:

- Teresa Fillers, Rockford Public Schools EC Department Director
- Alignment Rockford

It is our hope that the Action Plan will elevate community awareness of critical family resources and potential funding avenues available to child care providers, thus, equipping our community with the necessary knowledge and skills to enact meaningful change.

We are excited to present our Regional Action Plan to our community partners and families and look forward to working with everyone to implement the recommendations included in the plan.

With gratitude,
Birth to Five Illinois: Region 4 Family & Action Council Members

Action Plan Development

Between fall 2022 and spring 2023, the Action Council, Family Council, and Regional Birth to Five Illinois Team reviewed quantitative and qualitative data related to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, programs, and supports and worked together to create an [Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment](#) to highlight the experiences of families and caregivers in the Region. The report includes recommendations to improve ECEC opportunities at both the local and state level to make the system more equitable for all children. Councils developed an Action Plan based on several prioritized recommendations that will be used to help communities across the State raise awareness of ECEC services, expand the reach of services and resources to families, and advocate for better access to programs.

This Action Plan is aimed primarily at caregivers, community stakeholders, policymakers, elected officials, state agencies, and potential funders. It is our hope that caregivers find opportunities to talk about their experiences and become advocates for ECEC to help drive long-term, sustainable change in their communities. We also hope that community stakeholders build off the results of the Action Plan and help lead the efforts as we reimagine the ECEC system at the local level. We hope these plans provide an easy entry point for policymakers, elected officials, state agencies that administer ECEC programs, and funders to support community-led efforts, lending their expertise and support to bringing the plans to fruition.

How this Document is Designed

Each recommendation has an Action Plan that is rooted in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI),¹ a method that involves setting SMART goals, gathering feedback, evaluating progress on a regular basis, and making data-driven decisions. SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.² Council members developed SMART goals for each recommendation they chose and identified key partners who could help implement each goal. They determined how long it might take and the steps needed to achieve the goal.

Councils were asked to think about the potential risks, barriers, and solutions for each recommendation. They also considered who else needed to be engaged in the work to be successful and what funding may be needed to fully implement the Action Plan. In this document, only state agencies, elected officials, and state agency representatives in public service roles are listed by name. This list only identifies those individuals who may be instrumental in pushing the Action Plan; it does not imply their commitment or obligation to do so. Local and regional organizations and individuals were considered but are not listed, which allows Regional Teams and Councils to engage with community members in a collaborative manner.

¹ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559239/> for more information.

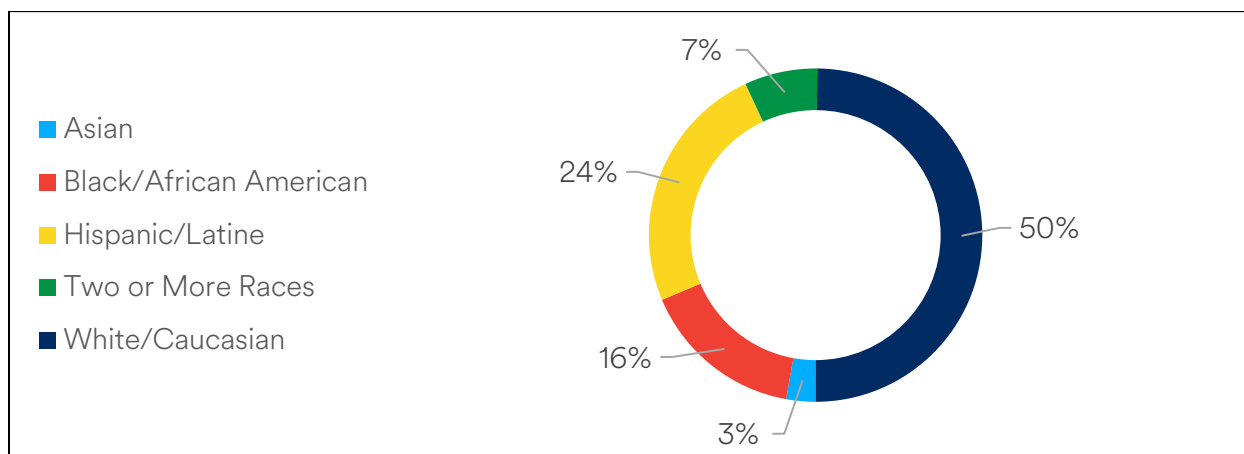
² See <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nc-smart-goals-fact-sheet.pdf> for more information.

Action Plans will be reviewed in the summer with the community to discuss progress toward the SMART goals, potentially identify new goals and steps to meeting them, and talk about next steps for implementing the recommendations.

Region 4

Region 4 is located in north-central Illinois, bordering Wisconsin and including Boone and Winnebago Counties. In 2022, the total population of the Region was 337,616; 24,392 were children birth through age five. The largest racial/ethnic groups in the Region, in order of prevalence, are white, Hispanic/Latine, and Black/African American (Figure 1). Most people who self-identify as Hispanic/Latine and Black/African American live in and around the cities of Rockford (Winnebago) and Belvidere (Boone County).

Figure 1: Percentage of Children Aged Four and Under by Race/Ethnicity³



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Across the Region, there are 9,092 slots in publicly funded, licensed, and license-exempt child care centers and homes for children birth through age five (Table 1). Currently, Region 4 does not have enough spots available for families who might want to enroll their young child in an ECEC program.

³ Other races/ethnicities have too small of numbers to be represented in the chart: American Indian and Alaska Native, 1 person; Other, 63 people.

Table 1: Number and Capacity of Early Childhood Education and Care Programs

| Program Type/Name | Ages Served | Number in Region | Capacity/ Funded Enrollment |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Early Head Start | Ages Birth to Three | 4 | 180 |
| Head Start | Ages Three to Five | 4 | 534 |
| Preschool for All | Ages Three and Four | 12 | 2,514 |
| Preschool for All Expansion | Ages Three and Four | 4 | 280 |
| Licensed Child Care | Ages Birth to Twelve | 29 | 3,223 |
| Licensed Family Child Care | Ages Birth to Twelve | 190 | 1,868 |
| License-Exempt Child Care | Ages Birth to Twelve | 10 | 501 |

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

For additional data and information, please access Region 4’s Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment at: www.birthtofiveil.com/region4/#report.

Recommendation 1



Travel: increase transportation options for all families who need it.

Families and caregivers expressed the need for expanded access to transportation services and supports. Many discussed the challenges navigating the Region’s fragmented transportation system, a challenge compounded for those who identify as members of priority populations. Parts of the Region have experienced public and school bus driver shortages, and few Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs offer transportation options to families. These, along with other factors, have left many families and caregivers unable to access the services, supports, programs, and resources they need.

“Many of our families experiencing risk factors are unable to attend without transportation, disproportionately impacting those of lower socioeconomic status.” - ECEC Leader

SMART Goals

| SMART Goals | What steps will be taken to meet the SMART goal? | How will you know when the SMART goal has been achieved? |
|---|--|--|
| In collaboration with families and ECEC stakeholders, create an awareness tool to inform the community on Boone and Winnebago County's current state of transportation options for preschool aged families. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather information on transportation entities in Boone and Winnebago counties. Create tool. Disseminate awareness tool into the community. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the transportation awareness tool is complete and disseminated to the public. |

Risks & Barriers

| Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation | Proposed Solutions to Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation |
|--|---|
| Ensuring the tool is made available in multiple languages, especially Spanish. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify community partners who can help support the translation of the tool. |

Additional Engagement with State Organizations, Agencies & Individuals

Council members and Regional staff identified additional community organizations, agencies, and individuals and what role they might need to play in implementing the Action Plan SMART goals and/or recommendation. Local organizations, agencies, and individuals are still being contacted and their specific role is being defined at this time, so they have not been listed as a part of the Action Plan.

Possible Funding Sources

The Council members did not identify additional possible funding sources needed to support this recommendation at this time.

Community

Council members identified community groups who have been, and are currently, working on similar goals and recommendations: Alignment Rockford and iGrow.

These entities shared three important lessons they have learned while doing this work:

- Collaboration plays a pivotal role in this work. The more individuals dedicated to a shared goal, the greater the opportunity for collective brainstorming, effective problem-solving,

and enhanced communication across diverse sectors of people. Together, we can achieve more and create a positive impact.

- Staying on top of current resources and trends is crucial. This proactive approach not only deepens our understanding of the community landscape, but also prepares us to tackle new challenges more effectively.
- To keep our group focused and ensure a clear understanding of expectations, it is essential to designate specific duties to not only streamline our efforts, but also to foster a more organized and efficient collaborative environment. Each member knows their role, contributing to a cohesive and successful outcome.

Recommendation Implementation

Council members said they will know the recommendation is fully implemented when the tool has been completed and disseminated to the public, there is an increased awareness of available services among community members, and there is increased awareness and understanding of the challenges families must navigate to access ECEC services.

Council members also predict that by fully implementing the recommendation there will be potential advocacy for more and better ECEC transportation services and an increase in engagement and collaboration between local agencies and organizations to enhance ECEC transportation services.

Recommendation 2



Workforce: investments including education, compensation, recruitment, and retention.

The Region has significant Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce challenges. Council and community members agree that publicly funded, licensed, and license-exempt ECEC providers require an investment to encourage workforce retention, specifically in regards to pay, which has been identified as a driver of program closures, the growing number of children placed on waitlists, children not receiving services for which they are deemed eligible, decreased quality programming, and families forgoing services altogether.

“I... think there should be more stipends and the state should help pay our qualified teachers who leave us for better paying jobs. No one can afford to live off an ECE degree alone.” - Early Childhood Area Director

SMART Goals

| SMART Goals | What steps will be taken to meet the SMART goal? | How will you know when the SMART goal has been achieved? |
|--|---|---|
| By November 2023, assess current ECEC staffing retention challenges within the Region to better understand the retention challenges as understood by ECEC employers and employees. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop two surveys, one for employers, one for employees. • Disseminate survey to ECEC providers. • Organize data, assess survey results, determine retention “theme” within Region. • Share results with workgroup to determine next course of action. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When responses have been received, reviewed, and a clear theme has emerged. |
| Throughout FY25, community partners will host a series of trainings, focused on building awareness, being prepared, and advocating for increased funding streams. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate training series on topics that include available funding sources, applying for grants, how to advocate for needs, and more. • Collective impact: How to align the work of ECEC stakeholders for the advancement and sustainment of ECEC. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When multi-session trainings based on identified workforce topics have been held. |

Risks & Barriers

| Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation | Proposed Solutions to Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation |
|--|---|
| Asking ECEC stakeholders for more of their time and dedication, when they may be unsure that the trainings will be worth the investment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with ECEC stakeholders to ensure trainings are relevant, well-organized, and not duplicative of what is currently offered. |
| Finding trainers and presenters who are able and/or willing to engage with stakeholders. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue engaging with community leaders and content experts and utilize existing relationships to facilitate trainings; then look for additional trainers who can fill in training gaps. |

Buy-in from ECEC leaders and community stakeholders.

- Continue to engage and re-engage with community partners and connect them with other partners who can support the work in which they are engaged.

Additional Engagement with State Organizations, Agencies & Individuals

Council members and Regional staff identified additional community organizations, agencies, and individuals and what role they might need to play in implementing the Action Plan SMART goals and/or recommendation. Local organizations, agencies, and individuals are still being contacted and their specific role is being defined at this time, so they have not been listed as a part of the Action Plan.

Possible Funding Sources

While funding may be needed to support the development of tools and resources, engaging community members and partners, the development and distribution of marketing materials, and other activities related to the recommendation, the Council members did not identify additional possible funding sources at this time.

Community

Council members identified two community groups who have been, and are currently, working on similar goals and recommendations: Alignment Rockford and the Provider Services Department within the local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R). Through insight and ongoing data analysis, both organizations have shared that the most effective approach to supporting families and educators involves a multi-tiered system of ECEC resources and a strong community collaboration mindset. The community is responsible for supporting and creating positive ECEC experiences for our children and their families.

Recommendation Implementation

Council members said they will know the recommendation is fully implemented when the training series on workforce retention supports have been organized, scheduled, and ready for ECEC professions to attend.

Long-term, Council members expect to see an increase in ECEC staff compensation, leading to a reduction in staff turnover and child waitlists over time, and enhanced program resources and quality for the over 24,000 children in the Region. By equipping leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can feel empowered to: 1) identify underutilized federal, state, or local grants, 2) be better prepared for grants as they become available, 3) effectively advocate for

increased funding allocations, and 4) build stronger partnerships with each other. This collective investment in knowledge and advocacy has the potential to have a transformative impact on the Regional ECEC system, securing a robust and more fairly compensated workforce.

Next Steps



Birth to Five Illinois Regions will continue to use the CQI process and meet with stakeholders this summer to discuss the community's progress on implementation and continue bringing stakeholders together.

As pieces of the Action Plan are implemented, stakeholders will be encouraged to build on those efforts and develop new SMART goals to expand access to ECEC services, programs, and supports, and continue this important work in making Illinois the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation's best Early Childhood Education and Care system.

For more information on Birth to Five Illinois, please visit: www.birthtofiveil.com.



Birth to Five Illinois is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and is a department of the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA).

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