

# ACTION PLAN



**Region 56**

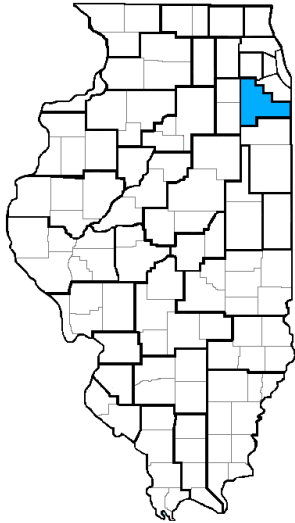
Will County

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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 56 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 diverse stakeholders who serve as partners in our community for their support in developing our Regional Action Plan. They have been an integral part of this process by providing both feedback from sources throughout the community, and insight into their lived experiences.

It is our hope that this Action Plan will bring attention to the specific plans our community can implement that will facilitate the collaboration of decision-makers, including elected officials and others who typically may not be involved in ECEC improvement. Additionally, we hope it will bring awareness to the effectiveness of having a State, Regional, and Community system to streamline communication and the use of resources and create meaningful changes to policy and funding to better align with the needs of those in Will County.

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 56 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),<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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, 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.

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

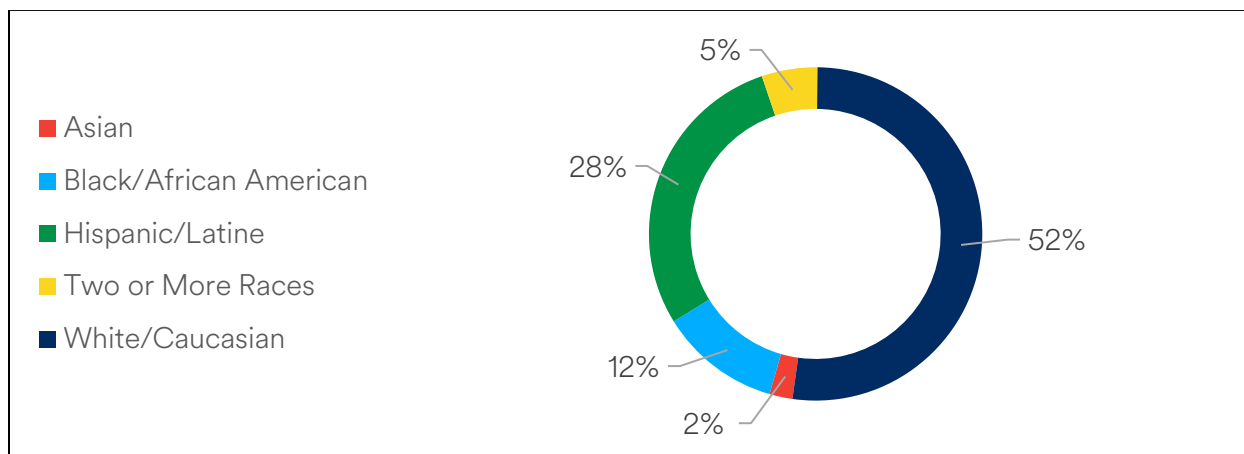
<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nc-smart-goals-fact-sheet.pdf> for more information.

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 56

Region 56 is located in northern Illinois and includes Will County. In 2022, the total population of the Region was 620,086; 42,205 were children birth through age five. While most of the children in the Region age four and under are identified as white, since 2010 there has been a significant increase in the number of children aged four and under identified as Hispanic/Latine (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of Children Aged Four and Under by Race/Ethnicity<sup>3</sup>



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Across the Region, there are 15,275 slots in publicly funded, licensed, and license-exempt child care centers and homes for children birth through age five (Table 1). Currently, Region 56 does not have enough spots available for families who might want to enroll their young child in an ECEC program.

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<sup>3</sup> Other races/ethnicities have too small of numbers to be represented in the chart: American Indian and Alaska Native, 13 people; Other, 84 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	5	249
Head Start	Ages Three to Five	6	506
Preschool for All	Ages Three and Four	20	1,786
Preschool for All Expansion	Ages Three and Four	7	282
Licensed Child Care Centers	Ages Birth to Twelve	87	8,748
Licensed Family Child Care	Ages Birth to Twelve	161	1,647
License-Exempt Child Care	Ages Birth to Twelve	19	2,057

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

For additional data and information, please access Region 56’s Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment at: [www.birthtofiveil.com/region56/#report](http://www.birthtofiveil.com/region56/#report).

## Recommendation 1



### Reduce preschool child care deserts in Will County.

This recommendation was made based on feedback from caregivers that there is a lack of child care options available throughout the Region. One community member shared, “Our town had one child care program that my child attended, but now it’s gone. Now I don’t have any other child care options left in our area.” Additionally, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) identified 16 preschool child care deserts in the Region in May 2023, indicating that at least 80% of the three- and four-year-olds in an area do not have an available spot in a publicly funded preschool program. Local providers and caregivers have continuously expressed their concerns about these deserts and the general impact of school readiness.

## SMART Goals

<b>SMART Goals</b>	<b>What steps will be taken to meet the SMART goal?</b>	<b>How will you know when the SMART goal has been achieved?</b>
<p>By the close of the FY25 ISBE Request For Proposals (RFP) grant period, Birth to Five Illinois: Region 56, in partnership with local stakeholders, will encourage at least one Early Childhood program from each preschool desert to apply for the RFP.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use ISBE list to identify preschool child care desert locations in the Region.</li> <li>• Use the Sunshine database to identify Early Childhood program contact information in the preschool child care desert locations.</li> <li>• Meet with the local Regional Office of Education (ROE) to create a list of all preschool child care desert school district contact information in Will County.</li> <li>• Notify listed preschool child care desert school districts and Early Childhood programs of the opportunity so they understand programming and are aware of upcoming grant opportunities.</li> <li>• Identify which Early Childhood programs/school districts are open to applying for grant opportunities.</li> <li>• Notify interested applicants about grant writing resource(s) from ISBE and others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preschool child care desert is list in hand.</li> <li>• Early Childhood program list is in hand.</li> <li>• When a list of preschool child care deserts is complete.</li> <li>• When all Early Childhood programs have been successfully informed.</li> <li>• When Early Childhood programs have confirmed yes or no to receiving more grant information.</li> <li>• When all interested applicants have been successfully informed.</li> </ul>

## Risks & Barriers

<b>Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation</b>	<b>Proposed Solutions to Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation</b>
<p>Early Childhood programs do not always maintain updated contact information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with Early Childhood programs, including child care directors and owners, to secure updated contact information.</li> <li>• Ensure multiple people from that entity are at meetings and receiving communications.</li> </ul>
<p>Early Childhood programs may not have the resources, space, or workforce to support increased enrollment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide support to help manage current workforce/enrollment.</li> </ul>
<p>Early Childhood programs may not be interested in applying.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand barriers and deliver feedback to appropriate parties.</li> </ul>

Data relevant to child care deserts, funded enrollment, slot gaps, and enrollment qualifications that may be incomplete or unavailable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use qualitative data to supplement incomplete data.</li> </ul>
Preschool For All (PFA) programs may struggle to find an experienced organization to partner with due to the current workforce shortage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PFA programs that partner with awardee will receive financial award from the State.</li> <li>• The State should provide specifics on all that is needed for PFA success after receiving grant funding.</li> </ul>
There may be workforce shortages in desert areas, and staff may experience a delay in fingerprint/background checks or not have the credentials/education necessary to meet classroom needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) should continue to grow and expand the workforce to meet the needs of completing timely fingerprint/background checks.</li> </ul>
Early Childhood programs may be able to support the professional development of staff but may have to close care due to staffing needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The State could provide daily stipend to cover daily income so providers can attend required professional development days.</li> </ul>
There is a limited pool of funding from both state and local resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reiterate preschool child care desert funding needs in Will County.</li> <li>• Work locally to locate County resources to support this goal.</li> </ul>

## 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 identified the additional possible funding sources to support this recommendation: grant writers who provide in-kind support and private philanthropic organizations to support providers with grant writers during the RFP process.

## Community

Council members did not identify any other community groups who have been and are currently working on similar goals and recommendations.



## Recommendation Implementation

Council members said they will know the recommendation is fully implemented when at least one Early Childhood program from each preschool desert in Will County applies for the RFP.

They also predict that by fully implementing the recommendation families and children will have greater access to high quality programming in Will County/Region 56.

## Recommendation 2



**Advocate for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce grant and educational scholarships.**

This recommendation is based on feedback from local ECEC providers about how to maintain the current workforce and expand provider networks. ECEC providers emphasized the need for continued workforce investments through state-funded programs such as the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program, Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants, and Great START grants to attract qualified professionals to the field and retain current staff.

### 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 December 2024, Birth to Five Illinois will advocate that Will County ECEC professionals and providers apply for ECACE, Strengthen and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Send emails to all identified Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) licensed child care providers about workforce investments listed in the terminal goal.</li> <li>Send emails to all Regional Office of Education (ROE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When emails have been sent to community partners.</li> <li>When institutes of higher education have been connected to ROEs and CCR&amp;Rs.</li> </ul>

Grow Child Care, and Great START grants.	<p>superintendents about workforce investments listed in the terminal goal, as they will be distributed to individual school districts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect all higher education institutions to the local ROE and Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&amp;R) to continue the promotion of all workforce investments listed in the terminal goal.</li> <li>• Encourage staff to continue their education using these funding opportunities.</li> </ul>	
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**Risks & Barriers**

<b>Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation</b>	<b>Proposed Solutions to Anticipated Risks/Barriers to Meeting Goals/Recommendation</b>
There may not be interest in working in the ECEC field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight the State’s investments in ECEC.</li> </ul>
People may not believe they have the time to complete the requirements for the ECACE scholarship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure all course offerings can be accessed virtually, during the day and evenings to accommodate flexibility.</li> </ul>
There may be a lack or an elimination of funding for workforce investments available from the State.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to advocate with elected officials on the importance of the workforce investments and for continued funding of scholarships.</li> </ul>

**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 activities related to the recommendation, the Council members did not identify additional possible funding sources at this time.

## Community

Council members noted that local providers have been advocating for workforce investments, meeting with community agencies and organizations, as well as elected officials.

Council members shared that fostering strong relationships across all sectors to advocate for change reduces silos and aligns common goals, including investments in ECEC workforce. Additionally, ensuring there is a state, regional, and local conduit of community feedback has a greater impact on funding and policy that better aligns with all families and community members.

## Recommendation Implementation

Council members said they will know the recommendation is fully implemented when Birth to Five Illinois and regional partners have advocated so members of the Will County ECEC workforce apply for the ECACE Scholarship, Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grant, and Great START.

They also predicted that by fully implementing the recommendation there will be an increase in enrollment in local higher education institutions with the focus on ECEC/educational credentials that would lead into an overall growth in ECEC 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](http://www.birthtofiveil.com).



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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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