



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 19
(DuPage County)





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In Memoriam

Darby Pool (1979-2023)

Associate Director of Early Childhood Education,
Metropolitan Family Services DuPage

Leader, Fierce Advocate for Early Childhood Education & Care,
Mother of Two

Region 19 Action Council Members

Louise Dimick

Sylvia Espino

Theresa Forthofer

Jill Garbaliuskas

James Ineh

Candace McCarthy King

GINNA LARROTA

Katherine Layden

Marianne Pokorny

Darby Pool

Ruby L. Rodriguez

Emily Ropars

David Sabathne

Vickie C. Trotter

Jennifer Vega

Jeanine Woltman

Region 19 Family Council Members

Mariam Abbas

Lara Alexander

Africa Anderson

Sandra Beiza

Kimberly Choate

Amy Crowther

Rosangel Galvez

Rachel Kay

Grace Keller

Lane Melchor

Colleen Riley

Marilyn Rodriguez

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Region 19 Executive Summary

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 decision-makers 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 decision-makers 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.

An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. Throughout the process, regional barriers were documented, and recommendations were developed based on identified needs of families. This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from the development of the Region 19 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

Region 19 has a robust landscape of ECEC services supported by a community of dedicated individuals and organizations who promote the well-being of all young children. However, despite its attributes, Region 19 does not currently have the capacity to ensure equitable outcomes for all. Though community collaborations and networks of professionals are doing their best to compensate for these lapses in opportunity, until state-wide systemic issues and local discriminatory practices are corrected, vulnerable populations will continue to be left behind.

Parents and caregivers across the Region expressed the need for not only more accessible services, but also opportunities to participate in them without fear or judgement. Programs and services are needed that account for and accommodate individual circumstances, such as language and developmental needs. Embedded throughout this approach is authentic family engagement that provides respect and the opportunity for parents to become knowledgeable advocates for their children and families. Additional funding and training are also needed to ensure an ECEC workforce that is able to meet the ever changing dynamics within the community. Through these strategies, Region 19 can continue to be an innovative leader in the world of ECEC and guarantee each child has an opportunity for success.



Region 19 Needs

- Increased access to ECEC services and assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.
- Federal and state funding policies that are easy to navigate, align to ensure a continuum of care, and take into account additional qualifying factors.
- Authentic parent/caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family, with special consideration of culture, language, ethnicity, education level, ability, and socioeconomic status.
- Improved language supports for Spanish-speaking families and the addition of resources to assist the wide array of other non-native English-speaking families.
- Technical assistance to uphold existing collaborations and investments to establish new collaborations.
- Decreased barriers to accessing publicly funded programs, including inconvenient schedules, lack of transportation, and criteria that prevent children in a family from attending the same program.
- An appreciation for the value of the ECEC workforce that provides equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development.
- A system that supports children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities through inclusive and adaptive environments.
- Consumer education that empowers families to acquire the necessary knowledge to navigate the ECEC system.

Region 19 Recommendations

- A tiered approach to publicly funded program qualification criteria for families and individuals that accounts for outlying factors like the cost of living.
- Restructured state funding that incorporates region-specific considerations based on actual numbers rather than population percentages.
- Professional development for the ECEC workforce to increase awareness and knowledge regarding working with families from different backgrounds with an emphasis on embracing diversity and authentic engagement.
- State portals and resources should be available in all languages, not just English and Spanish.
- Create a coordinated system to collect, house, and disseminate quantitative data across Region 19 early childhood collaborations and networks.
- Adapt qualifying criteria for publicly funded programs to allow all siblings under one household to participate in services if one child qualifies.
- Financial supports for existing child care programs to support inclusive environments through physical environment accommodations, the purchase of appropriate classroom materials, and compensation for specialized teaching staff.
- Embed reflective supervision practices into all aspects of ECEC, with opportunities to engage in mental health and wellbeing supports.
- Region-wide and community specific parent support and play groups that are accessible to all families.

For more information or to learn how you can become involved with Birth to Five Illinois, please contact:

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REGION 19 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

Using a Collective Impact Model, between September 2022 and June 2023, we led our Action and Family Councils through data discussions to identify gaps and needs for children and families.

We coordinated focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather input from community members across the Region.



66,000

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 19



13,200

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



8,187

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

63%

Percentage of focus group participants who indicated that their child or family experienced discrimination in ECEC

“I applied for various services and didn’t receive any even though I did not have a stable income or home and was a single mom. I feel it was because of my race.”

- Parent

After identifying the most common and pressing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) needs of their communities, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.

REGION 19 NEEDS

- Assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.
- Authentic parent and caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family.
- Support for ECEC professionals that includes equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development.
- A system that supports children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities.

REGION 19 RECOMMENDATIONS

- A tiered approach to publicly funded program qualification criteria for families and individuals.
- Increased state funding to support educational advancement and compensation for the early childhood workforce.
- Region-wide/community specific parent support and play groups.
- Expand grant opportunities to support capital investments for both new and existing private early child care centers and homes.
- Create a coordinated system to collect, house, and disseminate quantitative data between collaborations and networks.



“If the ultimate goal is to place more children in programs appropriate for them and their families, we need to understand why there is such a large gap between available services and the children who need them.”

- Community Member

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment presents data on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from multiple state and local sources throughout Illinois. It is a collaborative data report that relies on the expertise of entities that collect and analyze ECEC data, Birth to Five Illinois staff, Birth to Five Illinois Action Council and Family Council members, and a variety of cross-sector stakeholders in all 39 Regions across the State.

Through these Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments, Birth to Five Illinois seeks to amplify the voices of those who have historically been minoritized, marginalized, or not invited to the decision-making table. Each Regional Needs Assessment offers parents, families, caregivers, ECEC providers, and other community stakeholders a platform for sharing valuable insights about their experiences within their local ECEC system. Additionally, it provides local, regional, and state decision-makers with qualitative information about each Region, adding critical context to the quantitative data that is available.

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

First, each Region's Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils will use it to identify gaps in data that is needed to best understand ECEC in their area. Birth to Five Illinois Council members and Regional Staff will also use this report as a basis for making recommendations on how to increase enrollment in, and access to, ECEC programs and services, as well as to determine what additional services/programs and resources may be needed to support families and caregivers throughout the Region.

Second, this report will be made available to parents and caregivers so they can have a fuller picture of what is happening in their community and Region. It is our hope that families will learn more about the available programs and services, share the resources with other caregivers with young children, become advocates for ECEC, and help to drive long-term, sustainable change in their communities.

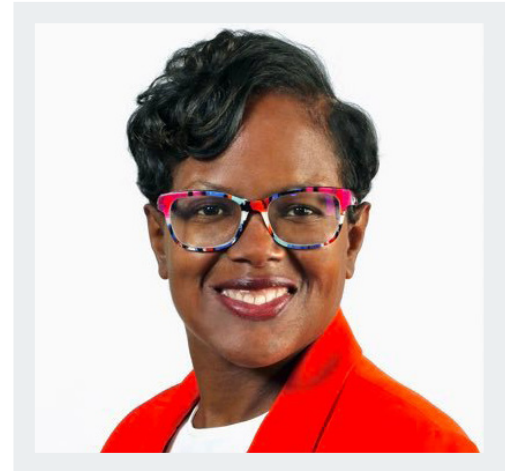
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand data related to ECEC indicators and direct funding to the under-resourced areas across the State based on the feedback received from ECEC system users.

Lastly, the report will be shared with local government bodies, early childhood providers, and organizations so they can use the findings to assess and demonstrate the need for services as funding opportunities become available. Additionally, the data can be used to identify where ECEC services may need to be expanded to support the caregivers and children in the Region.



Letter from State Leadership

In under two years, I have had the privilege of partnering with the State’s ECEC community to build Birth to Five Illinois, an extension of decades of foundational efforts that led to the creation of this statewide community system. In true collective impact modeling, we set out to design a system that respects and builds on the work of numerous local organizations that are working hard (often underfunded) to support children, families, and providers’ access to our State’s confusing and hard-to-navigate ECEC system.



While our work is not perfect, it is genuine and ever-evolving, and I am proud of the effort our Team has made to bring the vision of this equity-focused infrastructure to life. Birth to Five Illinois, while still in the development stage, has made great gains in bringing community members together under one goal, to make Illinois “the best state in the nation for families raising young children”. Our Team has gone above and beyond to make meaningful community partnerships and create space for the prioritization of family voices. My extended gratitude goes to each of the 128 people who shared the vision, brought their passion, and have worked tirelessly every day to improve ECEC experiences for the children and families in their communities.

In collective impact, nothing is done alone. We have many champions to thank, including:

- The Governor, staff in the Governor’s Office and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), and the dedicated members of the Early Childhood Funding Commission for their early childhood visioning and dedication to racial equity.
- The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) for their generous funding and commitment to building this community system with families and caregivers at the center.
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) for providing the institutional, technical, and organizational support needed to launch the Birth to Five Illinois department and infrastructure.
- Illinois Action for Children (IACF) and the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) for training and technical support. Many of the visualizations in this report were developed by staff from both organizations based on data they collected and analyzed on our behalf.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the hundreds of community members who signed up to serve on their Region’s Action and Family Councils. It is their perspective and passion that have inspired us and made this report possible. Thank you to the countless parents who trusted their Council peers with vulnerable stories; providers who emanate passion for the children in their care; business owners offering creative solutions for the identified needs; elected officials who are fierce advocates; faith leaders who opened their doors for care and are now encouraging others to do the same; and various ECEC systems partners who offer families step-by-step support through the enrollments process, blending together the supports families need.

These Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments are a compilation of community members’ experiences; not ours. We thank them for sharing and hope we have represented them well.

Cicely L. Fleming (she/her)
Director, Birth to Five Illinois

Letter from Regional Leadership

On behalf of the Region 19 Team, I want to take this opportunity to express our gratitude for the communities and individuals within DuPage County. From the start, our Birth to Five Illinois Regional Team formed strong connections with community partners and families from all over the county. Without their welcoming spirit and willingness to be vulnerable, we would not have been able to develop a well-informed and robust Regional Needs Assessment. Although we cannot personally name everyone who made this happen, we do want to thank key partners in our work.

Thank you to the members of our Action Council and Family Council. We appreciate your commitment and dedication to our work. Your authenticity and enthusiasm allowed us to genuinely capture the strengths and needs of families and children in our communities. Family and community voice is at the heart of our work. Without you we would not have been able to capture the spirit of Region 19 communities and lift them up as voices of change.

Thank you to our community partners. Many organizations are already doing wonderful work to support families and young children. Through their relationships, we at Birth to Five Illinois were able to connect with key stakeholders and families who we may not otherwise have had the potential to speak with. We are thankful for the opportunity to join community meetings, attend local events, and utilize their space to meet families where they are. Not only have these organizations and partners contributed to our success, but they have also paved the way for our work to move forward. Our community partners have been providing invaluable services and funding opportunities to the early childhood community, especially our many local early childhood collaborations, for many years and will be instrumental in providing these supports in the years to come.

Thank you to the individuals who took the time to share their stories during interviews, focus groups, and surveys. From chambers of commerce to faith leaders, the success of each young child is dependent upon the input of diverse voices from a variety of backgrounds. Your experiences helped to shape our community's narrative and will help to inform the future early childhood landscape for children and families across DuPage County.

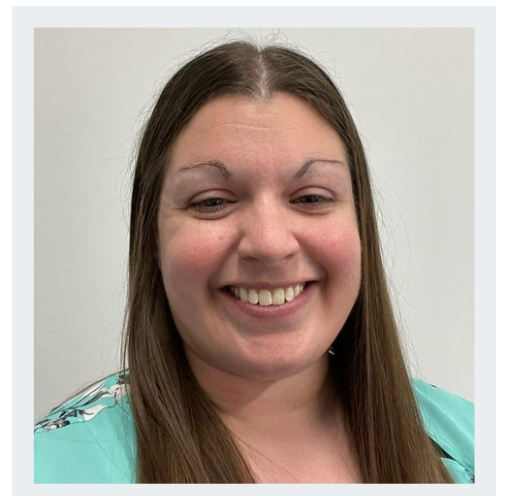
Thank you to the State Team, Birth to Five Illinois colleagues, Area Coordinators, Illinois Action for Children coaches, and the Region 19 Team. From the initial startup and all along the way, it was a collaborative effort. The ability to share ideas and collectively come together proved to be a pivotal aspect of our work.

Our mission to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families is possible because of you! We look forward to continuing our partnerships and leveraging our relationships to move forward together towards positive change.

Thank you,

Valerie Varju (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 19
Birth to Five Illinois



Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois

ECEC in Illinois is made up of several programs, including publicly funded programs such as Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, home visiting, preschool, and center- and home-based child care. ECEC also exists within a larger system of services and supports for families, including pediatric health care, mental and behavioral health care, child welfare, and family-focused economic supports. When available, these services and supports can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

While programs and services for families and children exist across the state of Illinois, they are not accessed equitably. For example, families in rural areas oftentimes live in child care deserts and are forced to travel long distances to place their child in any program, regardless of its quality. Another example is families who speak a language other than English who may live in an area without programming in their home language, making it difficult to find educational options. A family that has little to no access to economic or material resources may live in a city with many programs but be unable to enroll their children due to the excessive cost of tuition and long waitlists for access to publicly funded slots.

Additionally, funding for ECEC has been siloed across multiple state agencies and has lacked a cohesive process for distributing funds to providers. Decentralized funding has led to unintended equity issues, leaving some areas of the State with nominal public funding for ECEC programming and others without enough funding to meet the demands of communities.



In 2019, Governor JB Pritzker declared, “Illinois will become the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and child care. My promise is this: our work won’t be complete until every child in this state enters kindergarten with the cognitive skills to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems, but also the social-emotional skills to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, self-regulate, display kindness and cope with challenges.”

To honor this commitment, the Governor’s Office formed the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding to study and make recommendations on funding that would provide more equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children ages birth to five. Work groups met throughout 2020 and published a report of findings and recommendations in March 2021.

The Commission made the following recommendations to address the racial, geographic, and economic inequities found in Illinois’ ECEC system:

1. Increase public investment to help better subsidize the cost families pay out of pocket.
2. Create a coordinated funding approach by centralizing state and federal funding and distribute funding in new, more targeted ways.
3. Provide a single source for information and funding for ECEC with designated regional structures to make the system easier for families and providers.

Following these recommendations, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) established the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) to help centralize and streamline the State’s existing child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention programs.

Additionally, after the Commission report recognized, “community input and data can fuel distribution of funds more effectively and equitably” and urged for the creation of a community and regional infrastructure to ensure input from families and providers is included in the state level decision-making process, the State partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch our equity-focused regional system. Named Birth to Five Illinois, the goal of this new infrastructure is to create a network of community Councils across the State tasked with identifying the service needs in each region.

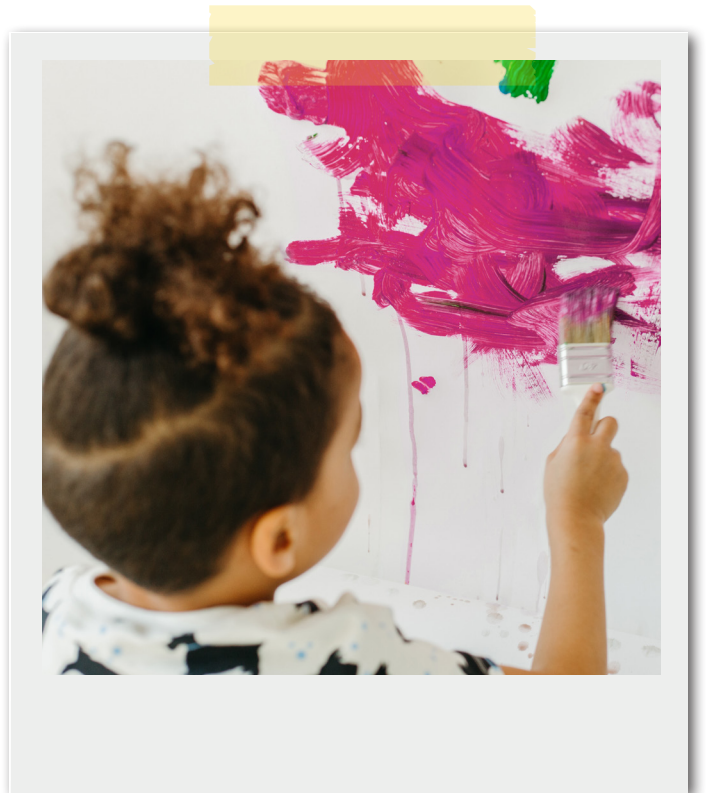
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the state of Illinois.

Our **vision** is reimagining a more equitable ECEC system that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at every level of decision-making in Illinois.

Our **values and goals** are:

- **Family Voice:** Through this transformation centered on authentic family and community engagement, we will address the inequitable distribution of resources and services and rebuild our State’s ECEC system.
- **Racial Equity:** In an effort to move our ECEC system to one where racism no longer impacts a child’s success, we will work to dismantle barriers that have limited access to high-quality services for minoritized children in every corner of our State.
- **Collective Impact:** Birth to Five Illinois will build a system that harnesses knowledge directly from families and providers and encourages decision-makers to ensure new and/or expanded services are created to meet community needs. This community-driven framework will directly influence policy/funding at the local, regional, and state level.

Staying true to our mission and vision, Birth to Five Illinois has standardized the use of pronouns to affirm all genders and has included a land acknowledgement in each Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments to honor the Indigenous Peoples who were forcibly removed from their land.

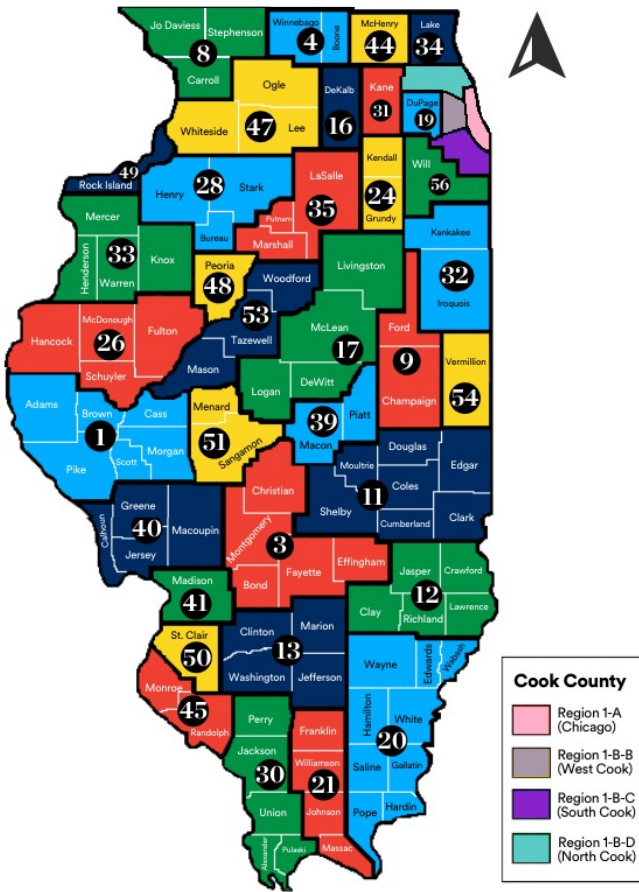


Timeline

- **March 2021**
Early Childhood Commission Report Published
- **September 2021**
Birth to Five Illinois Director, Cicely Fleming, Hired
- **February 2022**
Official Public Launch of Birth to Five Illinois
- **March 2022**
Held Regional Community Engagement Live Webinars
- **April 2022**
Established Partnerships with Existing Regional Early Childhood Collaborations
- **May – July 2022**
Hired 39 Regional Council Managers across the State
- **August – November 2022**
Hired Additional 78 Regional Support Staff
- **September 2022**
Awarded \$2.6 Million to 24 Implementation Grantees
- **October – November 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Action Councils
- **December 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Family Councils
- **January 2023**
Awarded \$575,000 to 9 Planning Grantees
- **January – April 2023**
Council Meetings & Ongoing Community Engagement (Focus Groups & Interviews)
- **June 2023**
39 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments Released
- **July – August 2023**
Report Dissemination & Public Input



Birth to Five Illinois Regions



To provide a structure for communities, families, and caregivers to engage with the data and share their experiences, our new statewide infrastructure was created across 39 Regions. The Regions align with existing Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Regional Offices of Education (ROE) boundaries. To better match demographic data to the needs for ECEC programs, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), along with the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), provided maps that reflect the true boundaries of the Birth to Five Illinois Regions. Birth to Five Illinois regional boundaries align with school districts instead of strictly following county lines, which can be a challenge for gathering and interpreting data because many early childhood services are provided by, or tied to, school districts.

After the Regions were established and staffed, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils were created by Regional Selection Committees. To ensure diverse perspectives, outreach efforts focused on community members who might be new to this type of work. Action Councils are comprised of ECEC professionals, healthcare providers, faith leaders, elected officials, and other community members. Each Action Council reserved two seats for parents/caregivers to ensure

family voices were included in every discussion. Family Councils are comprised of parents/caregivers from a wide variety of family types: single parents, adoptive and foster parents, caregivers of relatives, underage parents, two parent families, multi-generational families, and more. Each Regional Selection Committee reviewed Interest Forms, and recommendations were made based on a full consideration of a submitter's role/sector, location within the Region, race/ethnicity, gender, and answers to open-ended questions.

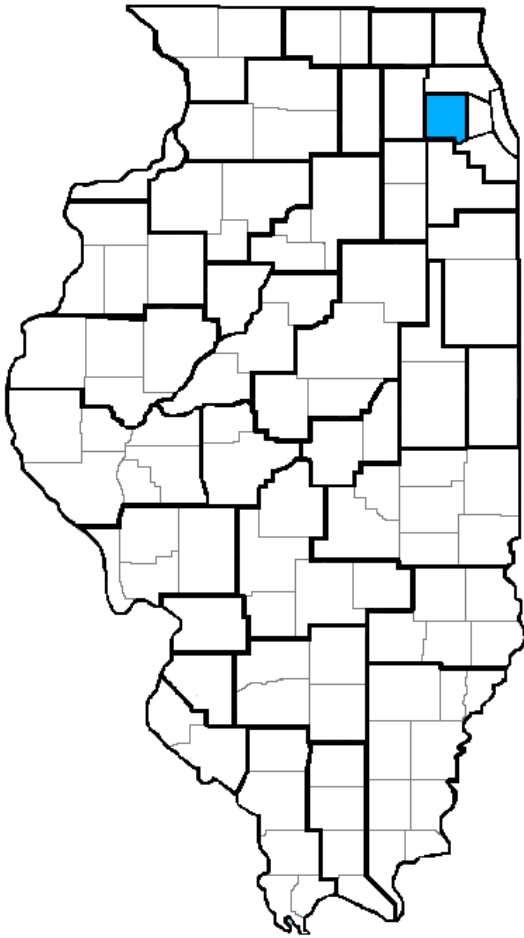
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise noted. Some Regions included additional data collected during Community Based Planning or from state and/or local organizations and agencies. Action Council members were invited to bring additional aggregated data on programs and services provided by their agency/organization to complement IECAM data, while Family Council members brought their stories and experiences with the ECEC system to help contextualize quantitative data presented and discussed during meetings.

Additional qualitative data was collected community-wide through focus groups and interviews, and all Council members were invited to provide input on their Region's report. Council members developed the strengths, needs, and recommended next steps that are unique to each Region. Regional Teams, along with the support of their Action and Family Council members, created a dissemination plan and are holding community meetings virtually and in-person to share their report's findings. Throughout the fall of 2023, Regional Teams will lead their Councils through implementation planning based on the recommendations made in their report.

Spotlight on Region 19

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

As one of the five collar counties, DuPage County is located 20 miles west of the City of Chicago. It is the second largest county in Illinois, with close to one million residents and growing. DuPage County is home to 39 municipalities, over 90,000 businesses, and 19 accredited colleges and universities. Featuring top ranking public and private schools and 12 local Early Childhood Collaborations, DuPage County community members have the highest graduation rates and subsequently the highest educational attainment in Illinois.

These features, along with a diverse population, mean we have communities rich in culture. Home to a plethora of museums and galleries, including the Mexican Cultural Center in West Chicago, DuPage County encompasses the heritage of its community members. Families have ample opportunities to immerse themselves in history by traveling back to the 1800s to Naperville’s Naper Settlement and walking among mighty battle tanks in Cantigny Park in Wheaton. Miles of hiking trails and acres of forest preserves culminate in a celebration of nature at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle. Additionally, those looking for playful and educational experiences can visit the Cosley Zoo in Wheaton or the DuPage Children’s Museum in Naperville.

At the intersection of these educational and cultural opportunities sits two national laboratories. Fermilab and Argonne are at the forefront of particle physics and energy research. With top scientific research facilities and a strong transportation landscape, including four major interstates, Region 19 supports a wide array of industry and commerce. Behind each vibrant aspect that makes DuPage County a one-of-a-kind place to live are the many individuals and service organizations that ensure a continuum of care on all fronts.

It is because of these attributes that many communities within Region 19 are nationally ranked among the safest and best places to raise a family. DuPage offers Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) environments that support the whole child, ensuring healthy growth and development. Yet, as with all communities, the attributes of DuPage County present both opportunities and challenges for the children and families within.

Land Acknowledgement¹

On behalf of Birth to Five Illinois: Region 19, we acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by the Indigenous Peoples who cultivated the land on which we conduct our work. We would like to honor the ancestral contributions from the Peoria, Bodewadmi (Potawatomi), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), Kaskaskia, and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Tribes. We further offer our gratitude to the tribal leaders and members, both past and present, whose stories inspire us to improve outcomes for all children and families living in DuPage County.

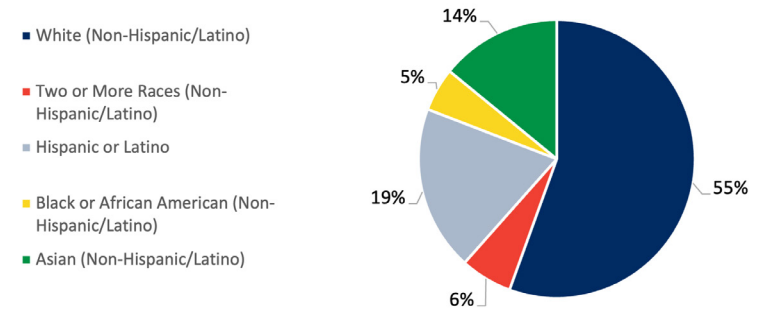
¹Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>

Regional Demographics

Region 19 is home to approximately 66,000 children under the age of six. As a Region with communities ranked among the top places to live and raise a family in both the State and the country², DuPage County has seen a steady increase in population growth. Although predominantly white (non-Hispanic/Latine), the racial and ethnic identity of Region 19 has steadily become more diverse with increases in both the Black and Asian communities.

Region 19 has also seen an increase in our number of immigrant and refugee neighbors; approximately 20% of the population is foreign born, the second highest percentage in Illinois. With almost 150 new arrivals aged birth to five in the spring of 2023, organizations like World Relief are working to aid refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Additionally, there are large populations of families who have immigrated from Latin America and India. Of the 28% of families who speak a language other than English, the top three are Spanish, Urdu, and Polish. Although most of these households have settled in the Bloomingdale and Winfield Townships (Appendix D), individual families have scattered across the Region due to a lack of available housing and transportation.

Figure 1: Children Under 6 By Race and Ethnicity³



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Federal Poverty Level Guidelines by Family Size³

Family Size	50% FPL	100% FPL	150% FPL	200% FPL
Monthly Household Income	\$ 1,250	\$ 2,500	\$ 3,750	\$ 5,000
Annual Household Income	\$ 15,000	\$ 30,000	\$ 45,000	\$ 60,000

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

As part of Region 19, DuPage County is considered an affluent community because only 20% of children birth to five years old live in households with income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL), which is well below the state average of 36%. The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. These guidelines illustrate a set minimum amount of income that an individual or family needs for food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other necessities. Most community programs, including the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) use the 200% FPL level as a benchmark for service qualification. This measure of income means that a family of four is considered to be living in poverty if their annual gross income is below \$60,000. However, what the FPL fails to consider is a family’s net income and subsequent living expenses. With affluence and popularity comes a higher cost of living. This leaves those living just above the threshold, especially the 38% of families identified as single-parent households, with the need to make sacrifices in exchange for family-friendly neighborhoods and top-ranking school districts. Despite an abundance of resources and social service organizations willing to provide assistance, these compromises ultimately have a detrimental impact on Early

² <https://www.niche.com/places-to-live/search/best-places-to-live/s/illinois>

³ Some Census categories not included due to small number of respondents: Some other Race (Non-Hispanic/Latino); Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Non-Hispanic/Latino); and American Indian or Alaska native (Non-Hispanic/Latino)

Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) access. For example, to navigate the high cost of living and lack of affordable housing, some families in Naperville and West Chicago have made the decision to cohabitate, with as many as three or four families living under one roof. According to one family “we tried to get help, but I didn’t understand it and I was scared they would take my kids if I didn’t do this or didn’t do that, so it was easier just to not involve myself with any birth to three supports.” Although qualified for the home visiting program, some families have declined enrollment for fear they will be reported to child protective services or evicted based on their living arrangements.

These instances and many like them make it apparent that Region 19 is not a simple monolith. Despite its reputation as an affluent Region with a plethora of opportunities for young children and their families, there are still large pockets of disparity. For instance, areas within the Region that have high rates of poverty and minoritized communities are not afforded the same amenities as other more prosperous, predominantly white neighborhoods. For example, in communities such as West Chicago, public transportation is non-existent. Although Region 19 identifies as diverse, those from traditionally marginalized populations would disagree citing, “my friends who are white say DuPage is so diverse, so I ask them to define diversity. They say because they have a neighbor who is Brown, and they have another neighbor who is Black.” Subsequently, it is the feeling of some Region 19 Black and Brown communities that anything that interferes with the affluent aesthetic and reputation rests upon their shoulders. Although representing just under 1% of the population, those experiencing homelessness shared that they are often strongly encouraged to move just across the border to Cook County for services. According to a parent enrolled in transitional housing services, “they treat us different because we are here... we get all this friction.” Because of this, it is very important to understand how the demographics and subsequent assumptions create barriers to access to Early Childhood services. Only then can Region 19 truly move forward towards equitable access to ECEC services for all.

The purpose of identifying priority populations⁴ is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the Illinois Early Learning Council priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

⁴ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Local Community Collaborations

Region 19 Early Childhood Community Collaborations include:

- Addison Partners for Play, Learning, & Education (APPLE)
- All Our Kids Network (AOK)*
- Bensenville Early Learning Supporters
- Birth to Five Community Coalition (Bloomingdale, Carol Stream, and Hanover Park)
- Bloomingdale Township Children’s Network
- DuPage Early Childhood Collaboration (DECC)*
- DuPage Home Visiting Network*
- Glenbard Early Childhood Collaborative (Glendale Heights, Glen Ellyn, Lombard, and parts of Addison, Bloomingdale, Carol Stream, and Wheaton)
- Villa Park Area Early Childhood Collaborative
- We Go Together for Kids (West Chicago)
- Wheaton/Warrenville Early Childhood Collaborative (WWECC)
- Willowbrook Corner Coalition

* Denotes county-wide collaborative

Region 19 has been a model for cross systems work for decades and with 12 formalized Collaborations it is one of the largest Early Childhood collaborative landscapes in the State. Within this Early Childhood Education and Care system, a local Early Childhood Collaboration member stated that the “local Collaborations are very deeply embedded in their communities.” By operating at a micro level, they serve as a bridge to larger regional community systems, connecting them to what is happening locally. Thanks to funding of philanthropic support, investments from local school districts, and fiscal oversight by various social service organizations, Region 19 Collaborations have been able to implement initiatives that improve outcomes for young children and families. This coordinated system can serve as a reference and guide to other parts of the State looking to establish local collaborative practices.

What began as one community’s commitment to increasing the number of Early Childhood providers in their area quickly became the blueprint for other Region 19 Collaborations. At the heart of this work is the ability to connect children and families with the wide array of services and programs available throughout the Region. The Collaborations have been the leaders in administering much needed developmental screenings and subsequent referrals to programs such as Early Intervention (EI). Beginning with the Home Visiting Network and continuing with All Our Kids Network (AOK), the DuPage collaborative landscape has been able to utilize the Integrated Referral & Intake System (IRIS) to ensure that all families are connected with the organizations that can best meet their needs.

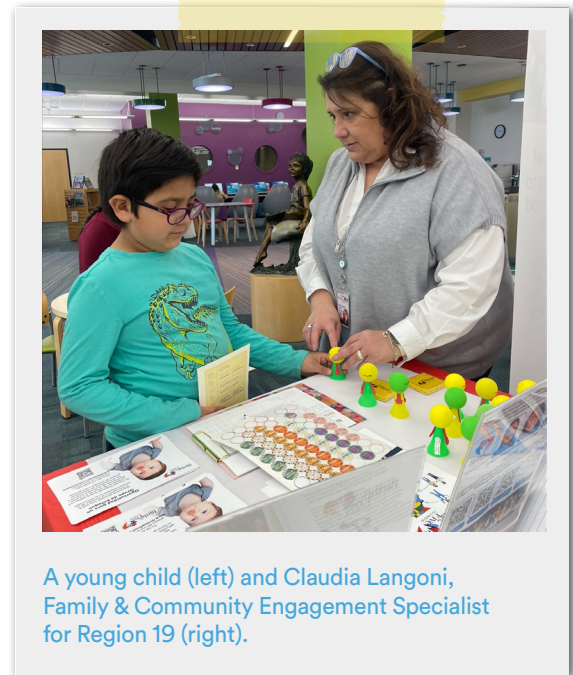
“At their core, existing Collaborations and community groups are working out the best way to reach and connect with families and help connect them with services once trust is gained. Collabs also connect partners and resources, making it easier to reach out to different community groups.”
- Early Childhood Collaboration Member

Embedded into this work is a systematic approach to providing parent and caregiver support. For instance, when one parent expressed concerns regarding a need for EI, it was the local Collaboration's parent liaison who helped advocate for a referral. "If it were not for her listening to my concerns, I don't know where I would be." Through initiatives like parent ambassadors and family outreach navigators, caregivers are given the opportunity to be an active part in their child's care. Collaborations make it so that parents and caregivers are treated as partners in decision making and are given the tools to be knowledgeable advocates for their children.

Not only do the Collaborations bring together a multitude of sectors to address local needs, but they also serve as a network to support one another. In what would otherwise be considered a competitive environment, with many programs having to vie for the same resources, the true spirit of collaboration contributes to Region 19's success. During grant season many come together to support and review each other's applications to ensure maximum funding for the entire Region. Informally, a group of family child care providers in Addison work in tandem to support their enrollment. With many communities establishing their own collaborations, there became a need for a regional approach to technical assistance and networking. As a result, county-wide ventures such as the DuPage Early Childhood Collaboration (DECC) were established. With the recent addition of AOK and support from the DuPage Health Department, the collaborative landscape is stronger than ever.

Yet despite these collective efforts, additional support is needed to not only maintain existing collaborations but also initiate new opportunities across all communities. Even with the number of community specific collaborations and county-wide initiatives, there are many communities within Region 19 that could benefit from their own collaboration. Local efforts led by the DuPage Foundation Bright and Early Committee and partnerships with organizations such as the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago and Metropolitan Family Services are only one piece of the funding puzzle. Supplemental grants from Birth to Five Illinois have been able to provide additional funding to support the continued efforts of the Glenbard Early Childhood Collaborative and Willowbrook Corner Coalition, as well as the start-up of the new Villa Park Area Early Childhood Collaborative. In order to ensure continued progress, investments must be made by local school districts.

While many existing collaborations have established strong partnerships, they must constantly justify their place within the school system. In one instance, an Early Childhood Collaboration was asked to provide individual information on every child who is birth to five that lives within the school district so the school district could evaluate if collaboration was necessary. "Just shy of knocking on every single door, it was an impossible ask." It is important for leaders to recognize the necessity of partnering with one another. Once all school districts appreciate the value of Early Childhood services in preparing young children for later school success, the system can more seamlessly improve outcomes for all. In conjunction with the local Regional Office of Education (ROE), collaborations can help school administrators appreciate the benefits of continued partnerships and begin to establish new supportive networks.



A young child (left) and Claudia Langoni, Family & Community Engagement Specialist for Region 19 (right).

Additionally, within the complexity of the collaborative landscape, there is a need for more than just fiscal oversight. Despite local investments and the ability to support one another, Collaboration leaders have expressed the need for more cohesive and comprehensive technical assistance. “I wish there was a manual I could use. Other collab leaders have been great help, but they don’t have the capacity to lead me every step of the way.” Region-wide initiatives have provided ample opportunity for Collaboration members to share ideas and network with one another. However, it is up to each individual Collaboration to seek out professional development in order to carry their work forward. Although philanthropic investors have tried to fill in the gaps, they do not have the capacity to meet the various needs. As each Collaboration is at a different stage of development, they require targeted guidance to navigate through their own challenges. An integral component to this potential technical assistance system is the ability for Collaborations to easily collect and share data. One of the barriers in demonstrating their worth to school districts is the little research that is available to illustrate their benefits. A joint effort between the DuPage Foundation and the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform demonstrated a direct correlation between the presence of Local Community Collaborations and an increase in the availability of Early Childhood services⁵. Yet outside of their report, there is not space available for Collaborations to share concrete evidence of the positive impact on their communities. Although it may be hard to measure success, it can be seen through the families and children they serve. As such, the ability to showcase the quantitative data will allow others not entrenched in the work to also appreciate the benefits for children and families. Through these improvements, the Region 19 collaborative landscape can continue to break ground on innovative solutions to collectively improve outcomes for the communities within.

⁵ <https://www.dupagefederation.org/communityprofiles>

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

With more than 320 licensed child care programs and 60 publicly funded Early Childhood program sites, Region 19 offers a variety of options to meet the diverse needs of children and their families. Unlike areas of the State where child care is sparsely located, Region 19 can offer programs close in proximity that allow families to work or go to school and children to receive specialized services if they qualify. However, the challenge for parents and caregivers is knowing where to start.

Child Care & Family Child Care

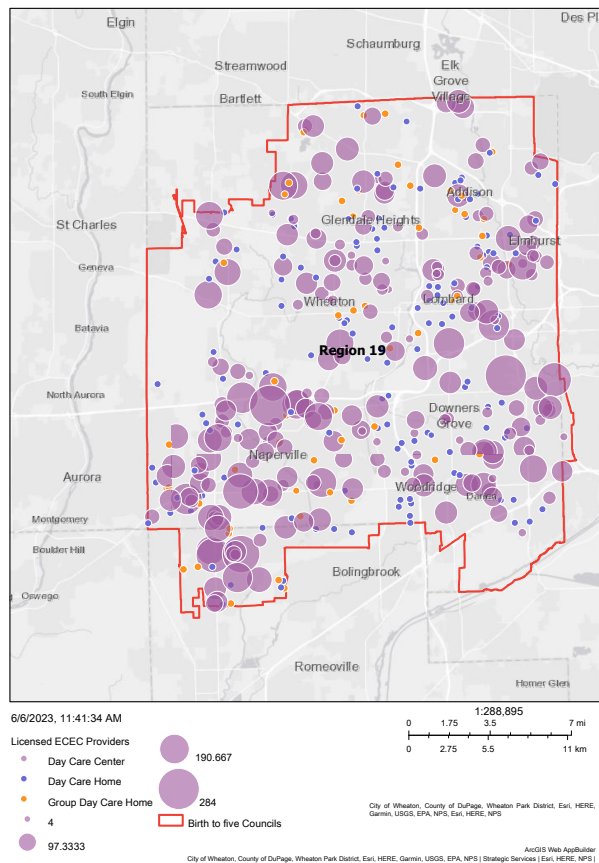
Families have the choice between licensed child care centers, licensed child care homes, and licensed exempt care. Licensed programs are overseen by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to ensure compliance with health and safety policies and often include an educational component. As seen in Figure 4, the child care landscape is broad with locations scattered throughout the Region. However, more programs and larger capacity exists predominantly in the southwestern portion, with less availability in the northern areas such as Bensenville and Bloomingdale.

Figure 3: Number of Region 19 Child Care Programs

Licensed Centers	Licensed Exempt Centers	Licensed Family Child Care	Licensed Exempt Homes
185	29	140	146

Source: IECAM Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 4: Map of Licensed Child Care Centers and Homes



There are many licensed programs, but capacity and operating hours vary. For a family of four in West Chicago, the task of finding child care was daunting as both parents/caregivers worked non-traditional hours. Programs with availability required families to enroll for five days a week, and industrial companies in communities such as Carol Stream have difficulty finding employees since most child care programs do not offer evening or weekend care. Licensed child care homes and licensed exempt providers offer care during these non-traditional hours, but it is a big ask without providing additional support for these individuals. One family care provider stated, “We need the community to see the value in family child care. We will send hundreds of kids into the school district, so if we get support, we can ensure the kids are ready.” Offering home-based care can mean sacrificing balance between work and family life. “It results in too much stress and not everyone is able to find a balance,” said another provider.

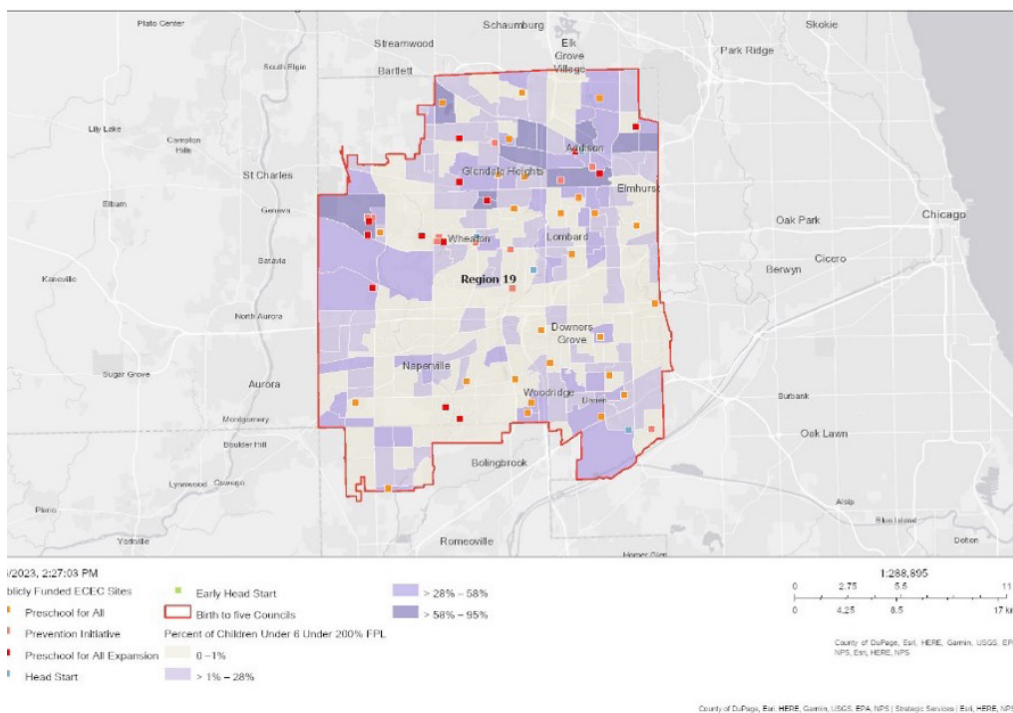
Source: IECAM Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

Families in need of financial assistance to help cover the costs of child care may be eligible for CCAP. Based on their income and family size, the State will reimburse their providers a portion of the cost and assign the family a monthly copay. However, the current system does not take into account family living expenses. This leaves those living just beyond the qualifying threshold at a crossroads. Those that qualify for CCAP can utilize their family, friends, or neighbors as license-exempt care. Although not monitored by DCFS, this distinction does offer accountability on the provider's part and support through the local CCR&R. However, this can force families to make compromises. A single mother of two from Naperville drives almost 50 minutes to South Holland to drop off her children with family and travels back in the opposite direction for work each day. Although this means more time away from home and increased travel expenses, she has no other options. She said, "I am the only parent, what can I do?"

According to the federal government, the child care affordability threshold should be no more than 7% of a family's income. On average, DuPage community members pay 11% of their income towards child care.

Figure 5: Map of Publicly Funded ECEC Programs



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Some children in Region 19 require additional assistance outside of basic child care. For those who fit the eligibility requirements, services are provided through publicly funded opportunities: Prevention Initiative (PI), Home Visiting, Early Intervention (EI), Preschool for All (PFA), and Head Start (HS). PI, EI, and Home Visiting allow for specialists to visit children under age three in their natural environments, providing education and support for the entire family. PFA and HS offer learning environments for children ages three to five. Programs identify outlying factors that can negatively impact a child's development and implement interventions to ensure they are on par with peers prior to starting school.

Publicly funded programs are primarily located in the northern and southeastern portions of the Region. The locations are contingent upon different qualifying factors and are funded through various state and federal grants with little consistency between them. This forces programs to combine funds from various sources to accommodate the needs of children within priority populations. For a program in West Chicago, this means blending federal grants for Head Start and state grants for PFA, with supplemental payments from CCAP in order to pay their staff a competitive salary.

“ It is a constant puzzle. We hear from the feds about these criteria but don’t know if the State will follow suit.
– Child Care Center Director ”

Additionally, funding allocations are based on the percentage of children considered at-risk rather than the actual number of those that potentially qualify. For example, although less than 20% of children aged from birth to five years old live at or below the FPL, the actual number exceeds the total population of many Illinois counties combined. As a result, although present throughout Region 19 (Figure 5), the publicly funded programs lack the capacity to fully support all children and families requiring services. Accordingly, the Illinois State Board of Education has named 15 school districts within Region 19 as being unable to accommodate at least 80% of the children eligible for PFA (Appendix D).

Figure 6: Number of Region 19 Publicly Funded Program Sites

Preschool for All	Preschool for All Expansion	Head Start	Early Head Start
31	13	10	6

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool for All and Head Start

Although child care programs and other organizations can qualify to offer PFA and Head Start programs, most in Region 19 are housed within local school districts. The goal of both programs is to ensure high-quality preschool experiences for children ages three to five, with an emphasis on those that are considered at risk for academic failure. However, the programs vary in that PFA programs are funded by the Illinois State Board of Education and Head Start is funded through grants from the federal government. As a result, their qualifying criteria and curriculum differ greatly.

For those fortunate enough to receive a slot in a publicly funded program, the developmental and educational opportunities serve as conduits to later school and life success. Despite these positive outcomes, many families face undue hardships as they tackle logistical challenges. PFA and Head Start are often part-time, so families must arrange for care before or after and parents/caregivers have to choose between work and intervention services. As one parent stated, “the times are inconvenient. It is every day for only three hours. If it was only three days a week but full day, I could get a job.” Those that have no other choice but to work must make a similar decision for child care. As availability is already limited, families are challenged to find affordable child care programs that are willing to enroll on a part-time basis. For families with multiple children, one child may qualify but one or more of the siblings may not. Unlike child care programs, publicly funded programs have qualifying criteria to ensure that those most in need are given priority enrollment. However, these criteria vary from program to program.

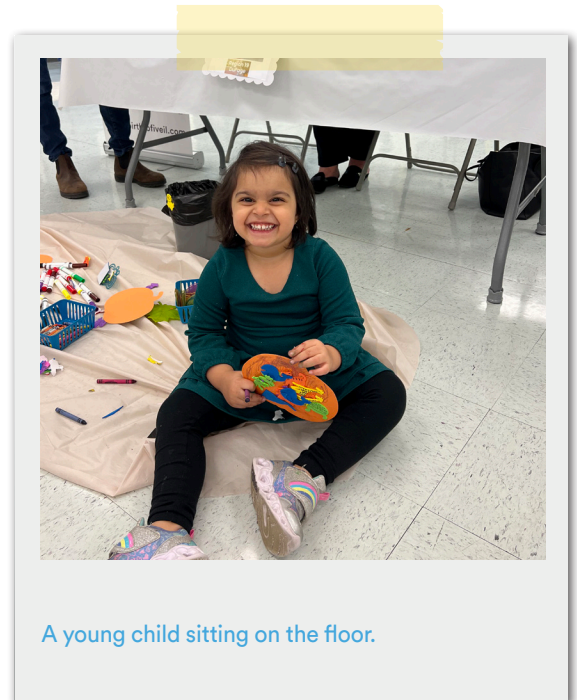
Although some factors allow for family circumstances to qualify whole households, in some cases a child may qualify due to an individual medical or developmental diagnosis. Parents/caregivers are then forced to navigate the logistics of having children in multiple programs at multiple locations. Yet, even if a family is able to persevere and successfully secure child care, there is no guarantee that transportation will be available to transition the child from one program to the other. Although most programs are housed within school districts that offer bussing, they may not provide transportation if the child care program is outside of the district boundaries. Those child care programs that do provide transportation often have age limits that prevent them from transporting children under the age of five. Without this essential piece of the puzzle, many children are unable to receive the services they need. In one instance, a refugee family who did not have access to a car had to disenroll their three-year-old son from a PFA program as they no longer were going to be receiving bus services.

Prevention Initiative (PI), Early Intervention (EI) & Home Visiting (Birth to Three Programs)

For children ages birth to three, publicly funded programs are offered in the form of PI, EI, and Home Visiting. While PI and Home Visiting programs take into consideration qualifying criteria such as income level, EI services specifically assist children who have demonstrated at least a 30% developmental delay. The goal is to provide the necessary services to ensure future success. Children enrolled in these programs often transition to the school districts for continued services at the age of three.

Because of common worker shortages, children are placed on waitlists during their most crucial periods of development. A mother from Downers Grove, whose son was diagnosed with autism at an early age, advocated to have her three-year-old daughter screened as well. Although she qualified in March, she was told that the school district could not provide services until August due to staffing. If not for her persistence, her child may have gone months without assistance. Many other parents have had to act as advocates for their children and proactively search for services. Several caregivers indicated that they took the initiative to reach out to Early Intervention or the school districts on their own.

Unfortunately, caregivers in similar situations may not have been able to connect with Early Childhood services without the help of social service organizations. Those without these connections may not fare as well. It is therefore essential that strategic planning take place to ensure that not only are these services available to families, but that they are able to freely access them.



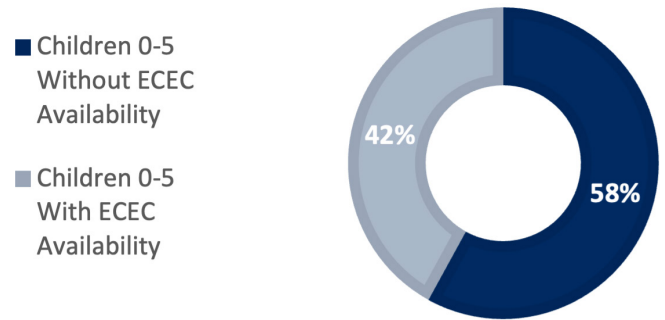
A young child sitting on the floor.

“Parents who have children with lots of developmental delays literally have to fight for every service they receive.”
– Parent (Wheaton)

Slot Gap

One of the greatest barriers to access for young children and families is ECEC program capacity. As with access, capacity is determined by the type of program. Most child care programs are governed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Based on classroom metrics, programs are licensed to care for a certain number of children by age. As the name implies, publicly funded program capacity is determined by state or federal grant dollars. Programs such as Head Start or Preschool for All are given a predetermined number of spaces in which they can enroll. When determining equitable access within the community, it is important to understand slot gap, which is the difference between the total number of children eligible for ECEC enrollment and the enrollment capacity. In DuPage County, there are only 28,657 available slots for 66,098 children ages five and under. With a slot gap of 37,441, nearly 58% of young children do not have access to ECEC programs simply due to capacity.

Figure 7: Slot Gap



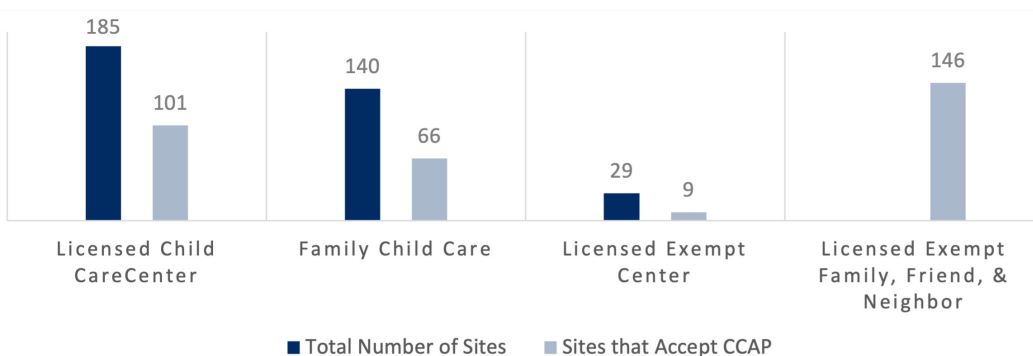
Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“If the ultimate goal is to place more children in programs appropriate for them and their families, we need to understand why there is such a large gap between available services and the children who need them.”
- Community Member

However, these numbers do not accurately reflect the true capacity of programs. Licensing and funding capacity does not necessarily equate to the number of enrollment slots that are available at each ECEC site. In some cases, a child care program may be licensed for 100 children, but only has the availability to offer care for 80 children. This is largely due to workforce shortages. Without highly qualified teachers to staff classrooms and maintain appropriate ratios, centers cannot enroll to their program’s capacity. Although this is not a new challenge for programs, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue. With emergency rules that lowered classroom capacity, many programs were not able to

reopen classrooms once restrictions had been lifted. Teachers previously laid off have not returned to the profession and very few new candidates are entering. A program in Downers Grove that used to receive multiple resumes has had a job posted for weeks with no applicants. During COVID they made more. I feel we pay well but COVID has had a lot of effects. They came back wanting more.”

Figure 8: Number of Child Care Programs Accepting CCAP



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

This gap in availability is compounded by several additional factors that negatively affect equitable access in Region 19. For example, those who qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) have fewer options compared to other families within their community. Of the 185 licensed child care centers, only 101 accept CCAP. Even within those centers, there is reduced capacity, as some programs have a self-imposed limit on the number of CCAP participants they are willing to enroll. Alarming, 63% of focus group participants indicated that their child or family experienced discrimination as part of their ECEC journey (Appendix B).

Although these groups were comprised of different ethnicities, this, alongside the fact that more than half of DuPage County CCAP recipients identify as Black presents additional barriers. Not only do families that qualify for financial assistance need to combat low availability, but they also must concern themselves with the threat of not finding care due to their race. Such was the case for a parent from Wheaton who shared, “I called a center and asked about their diversity. The person told me they could not share that information and that I should look somewhere else.” Families of all ethnicities and backgrounds have circumvented this shortage by employing their family, friends, or neighbors to care for their children. Although these individuals can provide a warm and loving environment, their care is not monitored like it would in a DCFS licensed program. A parent said, “My family is trying to work together to save money, to make it work, but I think the quality of care for children is not the focus.” Regardless of the situation, families approved for CCAP often find themselves having to compromise quality for availability.

“ I felt the teachers were very bothered by any parent that was different than them... I feel like things were very rigid and I did not feel comfortable with that. ”

- Parent (Addison)

Families of all ethnicities and backgrounds have circumvented this shortage by employing their family, friends, or neighbors to care for their children. Although these individuals can provide a warm and loving environment, their care is not monitored like it would in a DCFS licensed program. A parent said, “My family is trying to work together to save money, to make it work, but I think the quality of care for children is not the focus.” Regardless of the situation, families approved for CCAP often find themselves having to compromise quality for availability.



Two children participating in arts and crafts.

Regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, families with children diagnosed with a disability or medical complexity also experience limited access to ECEC programs. Not only do they have to combat low enrollment availability, but also discriminatory practices. Whether it is outright refusal to make accommodations or a lack of resources to support children with disabilities, many programs in Region 19 are unable to enroll children with medical or developmental diagnoses. A mother in Warrenville had an especially challenging time finding care for her 6-month-old son diagnosed with hydrocephalus. Although certain accommodations were needed to ensure his well-being, his interventions did not require medical training. She was constantly met with statements akin to “this place is probably not for your family” or “we don’t take kids with special needs.” The end result was an unplanned, extended leave from work. Despite eventually getting a job working at a child care center so that she could better monitor her child’s care, she made the financial sacrifice to stay at home to homeschool her family. Although this mother wanted her son to learn and grow alongside his peers, the programs in the area could not or would not provide quality care to meet his needs.

A simple solution to combat the slot gap challenges would be to increase the number of ECEC programs in Region 19, especially in areas like West Chicago, Bensenville, Addison, and Willowbrook where the population of young children outnumbers enrollment availability. However, that presents a wide variety of challenges. Despite increases in payment rates for CCAP providers, pay inequities continue to make it difficult for providers to operate their businesses. A Family Child Care provider in Addison stated that if it were not for her husband's income, she would not be able to pay her staff or purchase food for the children's meals. Not only are CCAP providers paid on a reimbursement basis for care, meaning they are paid the month after, in January 2023, the payments were an additional three weeks late due to system error. To increase child care programs in the Region without addressing these payment issues and overall workforce would further burden the ECEC landscape.

Not only are there systemic challenges for child care providers, but publicly funded programs also have their fair share of barriers. A large contributor to the low number of slots in DuPage County is the way funding decisions are made at the state and federal level. Based on the overall socioeconomic status and lower-than-average rates of poverty, many DuPage communities do not qualify for funding to support programs like Prevention Initiative or Early Head Start. Although there is some flexibility in publicly funded program eligibility criteria to alter the FPL requirement to accommodate regional demographics, changing the requirement from 100% FPL to 150% FPL does little to assist those who are struggling with the high cost of living. This puts those that normally would qualify for these programs at an even bigger disadvantage as not enough slots are available. This is evidenced by the availability of Home Visiting in Naperville.

Since the city includes several different school districts, there is the possibility that moving one block over within a neighborhood could result in a change of schools for families. District 203 has a long-standing Home Visiting program that has been providing invaluable services to families. However, its neighboring School District 204 does not qualify for this funding opportunity based on the Illinois State Board of Education's measure of adequacy and subsequent tiered funding system. Using their funding allocation formulas, District 204 does not have enough students within prioritized populations to receive additional financial assistance, leaving those in need to go without. In several cases, families have moved, leading to a change in school districts. To improve circumstances for their family, they had to give up the advantages of participating in the 203 Home Visiting program. In another example, DuPage PADS, which offers overnight accommodation for families experiencing homelessness, acquired a hotel in Downers Grove. On any given night, about 100 families with young children take up residence in this hotel. However, despite this specific group meeting the criteria for many publicly funded programs, this community lacks the availability to provide these programs for young children. As the hotel is situated in an area where the median income far outweighs the population experiencing homelessness, the area does not qualify for funding according to the systemic funding tiers.

Although some Region 19 communities qualify for publicly funded programs under the current funding tiers, many are not able to fully service those children and families due to systemic barriers. For example, within the Downers Grove Township (Appendix C) just south of Darien and Willowbrook, there are approximately 162 children under the age of six living at or below 100% FPL. However, of the three publicly funded programs bordering this Census tract, the capacity to serve preschool age children sits at only 91 and the capacity to serve children under the age of three at only seven. This leaves more than 60 children eligible for services without a program. This area in the southeastern corner of DuPage County also lacks the capacity to supplement this gap through privately funded care as there is only one child care center available. Similar situations are also present within Addison and Bloomingdale Townships at the northern end of the County.

As a result, many families in need of both child care and Early Childhood services are placed on waiting lists. If programs are not able to accommodate the capacity of need within Region 19, it is ultimately the children who are put at a disadvantage. They may go through long periods without crucial interventions, be shifted from caregiver to caregiver with little consistency, or their family may endure financial hardships as the lack of care negatively impacts their employment. It is therefore critical that the challenges contributing to slot gap be addressed at both a state and local level.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

There are almost 500 child care directors, 2,600 teachers, and 2,000 teacher assistants working to support families within Region 19. The ECEC workforce is multifaceted with varying roles and qualifications across the professional landscape. This is a major contributor to the challenges and barriers that affect access to Early Childhood education and services within Region 19.

Race and Ethnicity

The workforce's racial and ethnic demographics are representative of children ages birth to five in Region 19. This is especially evident in the teaching staff of both licensed centers and licensed home providers when looking at the total percentages. Despite this advantage, the racial makeup of individual program staff varies by location. Additionally, as with most managerial positions across other professions, the percentage of ECEC workforce identified as directors is disproportionately white.

Figure 9: Number of Region 19 Publicly Funded Program Sites

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	White
Center Directors	5%	7%	7%	3%	2%	75%
Teaching Staff	7%	9%	20%	2%	2%	58%
Licensed Providers	14%	13%	21%	*	*	51%

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Education and Gender

Of the nearly 5,000 staff working in licensed child care centers and homes, over 50% have an associate degree or higher. Of these, close to 500 individuals have achieved a graduate degree. Although some members of the ECE workforce have obtained some college credit and certificates, 34% of the workforce only meets the minimal requirement of a high school diploma or GED. In a field that is made up of mostly women, the Region closely aligns with state and national averages with 98% of the workforce identified as female.

Compensation and Demanding Schedules

At the center of the ECEC workforce issue is a lack of pay. Despite high educational and credentialing requirements, most Early Childhood professionals are not paid a living wage. On average, Early Childhood teachers in Region 19 only make \$15.25 per hour, the equivalent of less than \$29,000 annually.⁵ For perspective, Kindergarten teachers within the same Region make double that salary. Many ECEC positions lack essential benefits such as medical insurance or retirement packages. With a workforce in which 42% of staff identify as a race other than white, the salary disparity continues to perpetuate racial discrimination.

In many cases, individuals bring with them additional skillsets that go uncompensated. For instance, 30% of the early childhood professionals in Region 19 offer bilingual services, yet their salaries do not reflect this invaluable skill. Additionally, unlike teachers employed in the local school districts, those working in child care programs work the majority of holidays and throughout the summer months.

Shortage of ECEC Professionals

With the lack of pay, minimal benefits, and less desirable schedules, there are very few individuals entering the ECEC profession. According to Early Childhood professionals, those that are passionate about entering the field are often discouraged. Despite having eight high schools in the Region offering child development credentials, some school guidance counselors tried to dissuade students from pursuing careers in ECEC.

“The system is not broken but shattered.”
- Family Child Care Provider

With the low numbers of new teachers entering the workforce and the large number leaving the profession, there is an extreme ECEC staffing shortage that extends throughout Region 19 and across the State. This lack of highly qualified staff reaches all facets of the ECEC system, including licensed Family Child Care (FCC) and publicly funded services such as Early Intervention (EI).

Burnout and Lack of Respect

Pay and benefits aside, according to an Early Childhood Center Director, many ECEC educators, especially those in FCC, are looked down upon as “glorified babysitters.” Providers expressed a need to feel valued, especially since “not all children have stay-at-home moms or are able to go to big centers.” Likewise, teachers from licensed child care centers do not feel respected by the families of the children in their care and the administrative staff. For one teacher from Aurora, the lack of feeling appreciated is evident in the absence of staff morale and pride in their center.



A young child reading a book.

In another instance, the staff who open the center arrive an hour prior to their shift to ensure everything is set for the day as they know many of the other teachers will arrive late. There is no accountability on management’s behalf as the center cannot afford to lose staff. In turn, this has a negative impact, causing stress and burnout. As a result, this “cyclone of a lot of things” is causing one Early Childhood teacher to consider leaving a 35-year long career she is passionate about for a job in an unrelated field. Even if things were to change, she is unsure it would do any good because of the overwhelming weight of past experiences.

Impact of COVID-19

Many of these experiences and the subsequent challenges to the ECEC workforce were only compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs that were able to reopen as emergency child care programs after the state-wide shut down did so at a reduced capacity. Many ECEC professionals were without work for months as either their classrooms or employers closed. Those that remained working had to do so with very little support, shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), and ever-changing policies. As restrictions were slowly lifted and children started to return to care, programs were left without teachers to appropriately staff their classrooms.

Early Intervention therapists also left to pursue other careers or enter clinical practices. For service coordinators employed through local Child and Family Connections, funding is based on an average case load of approximately 55 to 60 children. However, in Region 19, most carry a load of between 75 and 90. For many therapists, the clinic allowed for a balanced case load and gave them more control over their environment. Therapists who transitioned no longer had to concern themselves with the safety of visiting a multitude of home environments or the lack of financial reimbursement for travel. However, in doing so, many young children have been left at even more disadvantage.

COVID-19 also pinned a spotlight on the inconsistencies regarding policies and procedures placed upon the ECEC landscape. The constantly changing restrictions and protocols were overwhelming to those trying to care for young children. For years, administrators fought to lower the qualifications for teacher-qualified staff to help with the workforce shortage. During the pandemic, temporary measures were put in place for licensed child care centers to allow teacher assistants to assume additional responsibilities. This increased frustration and confusion as many of these temporary policy changes are set to expire. As a result, some licensed child care programs are having to reduce their hours as they cannot properly staff their classrooms.

“

Working in child care is not what it used to be. The pandemic changed us.

- Early Childhood Teacher

”

“

It is impossible to have two shifts of teacher-qualified staff to accommodate early and late hours. Not only can we not find candidates, but we can't afford to pay them.

- Program Director

”

Need for Behavioral and Mental Health Training and Supports

With shelter-in-place restrictions, many children were unable to participate in developmentally pivotal social experiences. An Early Intervention provider elaborated that providers are finding themselves working with children “with multiple needs, more so than in the past.” These children ultimately require additional social-emotional support while in group care and the more needs a child demonstrates, the more services need to be coordinated. Although some larger corporate child care centers have regional inclusion services, according to teachers, they often do not offer realistic solutions.

Before the pandemic, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the state government passed regulations to prevent suspension and expulsion in Early Childhood settings. Although this mandates a more appropriate response to children’s needs, there was very little guidance on how to implement these new policies. Although it is not in the best interest of the child, for the safety of other children within the classroom and the well-being of the teachers, many feel they have no other choice but to exclude that child from the program. Providers expressed a need for higher level professional development, especially in this area.

There also needs to be more communication regarding what trainings are available, how to access them, and any changes to DCFS required professional development. For one FCC provider, this miscommunication resulted in a DCFS citation as she was not properly informed about a new mandated reporter training. Accordingly, “this added stress can’t help but be reflected in care and quality.” For the benefit of the workforce and young children within the community, a robust support and resource system needs to be implemented.

Education and Professional Development Initiatives

Federal and state funding has allowed for new initiatives to help enhance the ECEC workforce. Teachers working in a licensed program can now register for college coursework at no cost through the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program. A Higher Education Navigator in the Region stated that this opportunity will have a “ripple effect as teachers elevate themselves, they will elevate their programs and in turn elevate their communities.” Teachers who participate in the ECACE scholarship program are given support by their local CCR&R to help them find a program that fits their needs. Coaches from the college or university then work with the students throughout their academic career to ensure success.

With over 40 ECEC staff within Region 19 taking advantage of this opportunity, community members are hopeful that this program continues. Yet, as with all aspects of the profession, the idea of going to school can cause undue stress and pressure. The concept of having to manage a full-time job, being parents/caregivers themselves, and going to school leads to concern about an unmanageable workload. Although there are many participating colleges and universities statewide, the College of DuPage is the only early childhood program physically located in Region 19. For others, added barriers such as the inability to access past transcripts and language barriers mean there is still more work to be done.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Region 19 has many opportunities for parents and caregivers to become involved in their child[ren]’s ECEC. Most publicly funded programs offer the opportunity to participate in a parent advisory committee, while others offer on-site family activities and events. Child care programs make a concerted effort to include families as partners through parent-teacher conferences, newsletters, and annual surveys.

“It’s emotional labor when trying to figure out what’s best for everybody when you have multiple kids or you’re balancing different needs.

– Parent (Naperville)

”

“Family engagement... is an interactive process of relationship building that is mutual, respectful and responsive to a family’s language and culture.

- National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement

”

However, many families do not feel they are valued partners in their child’s development. Historically, family’s voices and opinions have not been recognized, especially for families from socioeconomically and culturally diverse populations. Discriminatory practices have prevented them from not only engaging in their child’s programming, but also accessing them equitably. A parent from West Chicago cited, “I applied for various services and didn’t receive any even though I did not have a stable income or home and was a single mom. I feel it was because of my race.” Consequently, the perceived negative experiences have led to a consensus of fear among families and mistrust in early childhood programs and services throughout the Region.

This common thought stems from both overt discrimination within the early childhood system and microaggressions due to a lack of awareness, implicit bias, and systemic racism. For some people, there is a lack of cultural mindfulness that gives off a sense of indifference.

Although it can be assumed that most ECEC programs operate with the best of intentions, they sometimes make decisions that do more harm than good. For example, a mother from Warrenville was asked not to send her Black daughter to care with beads in her hair as it was a distraction to the other children, and teachers sent the young girl home with a rubber band in her hair which had to be removed by cutting it out with scissors. This experience communicated a lack of understanding and cultural appreciation to the family.

This is also true for immigrant and refugee families because the repercussions of speaking up may lead to deportation. The very real fear that immigration status can be hampered “makes me want to keep them with my family... it feels like rolling the dice,” as a parent from Carol Stream said.

“How are you supposed to parent successfully with so much stacked against you?

– Parent (Downers Grove)

”

“I felt the cultural differences sometimes clash. I think sometimes some child cares tend to be very Americanized, like this is what we do at this time, and this is what we believe in.

– Parent (Addison)

”

For some parents and caregivers, experiences related to age or a child’s diagnosis have led to instances which negatively impacted access and engagement. When becoming a parent at the age of 16, one father stated he “was treated as an older brother or uncle, anything other than her dad.” In another instance, a parent from Westmont was told that even though her son qualified for occupational therapy, they would not provide him with services based on his foster care status. “I was told in an unkind way that my son was not going to develop. Because he is a foster child and a drug baby, he will be like this for the rest of his life.” If it were not for the mom’s tenacity and advocacy for trauma informed care, her son may not be the thriving five-year-old boy he is today.



A family sitting and smiling together.

Although some programs lack the knowledge and resources to make certain accommodations, by ensuring authentic family engagement, they can work as partners with caregivers to ensure each child has the opportunity to grow and develop alongside their peers. This was one parent’s wish as they continually encountered refusal to let their child join group care based on the fact that she was not toilet trained and had a developmental delay. By failing to engage the family in problem solving conversations, the program further hindered the child’s early learning experience.

Similarly, according to non-native English-speaking families, some policies and procedures deny the richness of being bilingual. When asking for bilingual services for her daughter experiencing hearing loss, a mother was met with resistance by the school district PFA program. As her father was a native Spanish speaker, these accommodations were integral to the young girl’s development. Yet, since she was already receiving speech services, the school did not agree with the parent. The ability for bilingual parents and caregivers to communicate with ECEC teachers and administrators can also negatively impact engagement. When one school district did not have certified bilingual supports, they utilized their janitorial staff to help interpret questions from a Spanish-speaking family. Even when bilingual support is available, translated materials can come off as unapproachable or too formal. Bilingual parents often have to seek out their own translation/interpretation mechanisms.

An important step in combating this unjust system is parent and caregiver education. Not only do families not know where to find resources, but they also need more information to advocate for their children. In other instances, a parent from Downers Grove elaborated that “teachers may say wrong things and make us think something is wrong with our child.” All families need to be given the tools to understand their rights and be able to apply them to their interactions with ECEC services.

“

During the initial explanation of our IEP [Individualized Education Plan] we sat for hours with a group of six different professionals who had been evaluating our son for months over multiple different sessions and honestly I felt I needed a master’s degree to understand.

– Parent (Naperville)

”

ECEC staff must also engage in robust professional development opportunities to reduce their contributions to negative family experiences. It should not be, as one parent from Wheaton puts it, “my responsibility to educate the school.” Rather, through a series of education and learning on topics such as implicit bias, culturally responsive practices, and authentic parent partnerships, the Region 19 ECEC landscape can become more inclusive and welcoming to all young children and their families.

Cost can also be a major barrier for families needing to access ECEC services. For a pair of underage parents, this meant downsizing to one car and the mother postponing college coursework. With two incomes, the family did not meet the financial qualifications for the CCAP. The difference between what the mother would be making at work and the cost of child care did not justify enrolling their baby into a program.

Some sacrifice time together as parents/caregivers and take on alternating shifts at work to save money. A new mom in Naperville works overnight while her partner cares for their six-month-old son. With only a couple of hours of sleep, she cares for their baby while the dad works during the day. Those fortunate enough to have family or friends willing to watch their children can circumvent the issue of cost.

However, this solution comes with its own set of challenges. As such, this mom often found herself without care at the last minute due to her parents’ unavailability. This can often result in children being shifted from one caregiver to another or the parents missing work.

Despite resources like the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency and the Illinois Cares for Kids website, many families rely on friends and other family members for referrals and advice. Others turn to internet search engines. The subsequent information overload can cause additional confusion and lead to unconventional methods. In one instance, a parent arrived at Educare in West Chicago for a tour and when asked how she heard about the program she replied, “I asked the taxi driver to take me to the best school for my daughter.” Regardless of the source, families are at risk of getting misinformation that can negatively impact their decision-making process. This is even more so for priority populations, especially those who may be non-native English speakers.

“When you rely on family for child care, particularly when you don’t pay them, you have a lot less control over it.”
– Parent (Downers Grove)

Regional Strengths and Needs

Based on the available data, conversations with community stakeholders, and in-depth discussions with families, it is apparent that Region 19 is at the forefront of providing ECEC services to the young children and families living within DuPage County. The ability for the community to come together and show their support for the ECEC system makes it a desirable place to live in the state of Illinois. However, even with the abundance of strong attributes, there are plenty of opportunities for continued improvement. Although great care is implemented in connecting families with support, until all children, regardless of their circumstances, can equitably access ECEC opportunities, the work is not complete.

Strength: Region 19 is home to a plethora of service organizations working together to connect families with an abundance of resources.

Need: Increased access to ECEC services and assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.

As a community rich in civil engagement, an emphasis has been placed on those priority populations that are most in need of services. The needs of those that miss qualifying for assistance by a small margin also need to be considered. For example, to be considered for Early Intervention services a child must demonstrate, at minimum, a 30% delay. Those that fall just short are still experiencing challenges in reaching their full development potential. Yet they are left to sort it out on their own. Much in the same way, programs that use Federal Poverty Level (FPL) indicators do not take into consideration the cost of living, leaving families struggling to gain access to ECEC services. Even those families that are considered to be making a living wage make compromises and sacrifices in order to pay for child care.

Strength: Social service organizations, school districts, and early childhood programs have been resourceful when blending funding sources to support ECEC work throughout the Region.

Need: Federal and state funding policies that are easy to navigate, align to ensure a continuum of care, and take into account additional qualifying factors, such as the unique characteristics within each community.

Educare in West Chicago is an example of what happens when dedicated professionals come together to make change happen. Through hard work they have been able to blend funding from programs such as, but not limited to PFA, Head Start, and CCAP. As a result, Educare is able to provide critical services to almost 200 children in what would otherwise be considered a child care desert. Although they have been able to ensure high-quality, dual language programs with low teacher-to-student ratios, it is a constant struggle to juggle the differing funding streams. State and federal funding opportunities are complicated webs woven together using differing qualifications for not only the organizations seeking grants, but also the families in need of services. For those programs that are already struggling, the idea of trying to manage that system is daunting and most avoid it all together.

Strength: The Region 19 ECEC landscape prides itself on providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to be involved in their child[ren]'s experiences. From parent councils to special family events, caregivers have ample opportunity to participate.

Need: Authentic parent/caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family, with special considerations for culture, language, ethnicity, education level, ability, socioeconomic status, and the like.

For almost 60 years, the Hobson school in Naperville has operated a preschool program rooted in parent participation and engagement. As a one-of-a-kind parent co-op, Hobson school operates a parent advisory board and requires each family to take an active role in not only their child's education, but also the program operations. While not every program can operate in this manner, the lessons learned from this set-up can help ensure that families feel welcomed and included. Whether programs knowingly or unknowingly create barriers for families, fear and mistrust have become an important factor for many parents and caregivers considering child care.

Strength: As a Region with families from all over the world, early childhood programs and services recognize the need for comprehensive language support, and many have implemented them to improve communication and service coordination.

Need: Improved language supports specific to Spanish-speaking populations and the addition of resources to assist the wide array of other non-native English-speaking families.

As can be expected, moving to a new country can cause confusion and fear as families navigate different environmental and cultural differences. The Glenbard home visiting system does their best to help immigrant and refugee families adjust to these new expectations using visual representations and easy-to-understand references such as Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development for more comprehensive communication, some programs have employed bilingual staff or utilized the Language Access Resource Center out of the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform. However, not all programs can access bilingual support. And even when translations are available, they often are too formalized and difficult to understand.

Strength: Region 19 has one of the most robust collaborative landscapes within the state of Illinois, with 12 established Early Childhood Collaborations. Through this work, hundreds of young children have received developmental screenings, publicly funded slots have increased, and more children have been set up for success.

Need: Technical assistance to uphold existing Collaborations and investments to establish new collaborations.

The Region 19 Early Childhood Collaborative landscape would not be what it is without investments from local philanthropical agencies such as the DuPage Foundation. Their appreciation for the importance of building a supportive network and subsequent financial contributions have been instrumental in laying the foundation for community engagement in ECEC. However, as the field of early childhood continues to advance and encounter new challenges, existing Collaborations require opportunities for technical assistance and guidance beyond what networking meetings can provide. Through these opportunities and additional investments from entities such as local school districts, the collaborative system within Region 19 can thrive and expand.

Strength: Top rated school districts and a vast array of child care programs, including licensed child care centers, family child care, and publicly funded preschools.

Need: Increased access to publicly funded programs, recognizing inconvenient schedules, the lack of transportation, and disqualifying criteria that separate families.

Led by the same passionate and knowledgeable District Superintendent for 30 years, the DuPage Regional Office of Education (ROE) has dedicated itself to supporting the youngest learners as they enter the school system for the first time. With programs such as the Teachers as Parents and Preschool for All, the educational foundation has been strengthened to ensure school success. Nonetheless, if not a stay-at-home parent or one with a flexible work schedule the ability to physically get your child to a publicly funded program is a burden in itself. Accommodations need to be made to alleviate the task of having to find alternative care when only half-day options are available, transportation is lacking, and siblings are not allowed to attend the same program.

Strength: An ECEC workforce that is well educated and demographically representative of the birth to five population.

Need: An appreciation for the value of the ECEC workforce that provides equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development. This includes intentional solutions to address workforce shortages and retain qualified staff.

The local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency, facilitated through the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago, has recognized the need for ECEC workforce interventions and has implemented innovative solutions to not only retain child care providers but recruit them as well. With specialized staff who can provide on-site support and professional development opportunities, the CCR&R serves as a resource hub for the child care community. Yet, even with this dedicated support, many ECEC staff continue to be overwhelmed and underpaid. Without additional interventions to alleviate classroom challenges and an increase in pay and benefits, the field will be unable to sustain itself much longer.

“It’s such a circular problem – paying workers more makes programs more expensive which then limits access.
- Community Member”

Strength: Region 19 is an affluent community with many residents able to secure private insurance, allowing for a comprehensive system of both public and private specialized services.

Need: A system that supports children from varying levels of family income, development, trauma, and medical complexities through inclusive and adaptive environments.

Easterseals DuPage and Fox Valley is one of the few programs within Region 19 that offers inclusive child care options that support children of differing developmental and physical needs. Their Lily Garden Child Care Center employs a team of specialists and therapists to support the whole child and their family while engaging in a supportive and educational environment. However, many private child care programs lack the resources to employ specialized staff or make environmental accommodations. A lack of appropriate training/skill-building and fiscal support make it almost impossible for child care programs to enroll children that require additional support.

Strength: A collective of families that are resilient and resourceful when faced with adversity. The communities encompass parents and caregivers that are fierce advocates for their children.

Need: Consumer education that empowers families to acquire the necessary knowledge regarding their options and the ability to navigate the ECEC system.

Through a joint effort between multiple school districts and community stakeholders, Glenbard School District 87 offers weekly opportunities for parents, caregivers, students, and professionals to engage in learning opportunities. The Glenbard Parent Series (GPS): Navigating Healthy Families seeks to empower individuals to “collaborate, communicate, embrace diversity, create and think critically”⁶. Although presentations focus on varying age groups, GPS includes guest speakers who specialize in ECEC. This and a multitude of other resources are key pieces to helping parents and caregivers understand the many facets of the ECEC system. Yet, despite these efforts many families are left to sort through professional verbiage and at times an overload of misinformation.

Recommendations

The work to address the varied needs of Region 19 is vast, but as a community collective they are achievable. While, as a community member said, we live in a society where “there are always people in the system looking for a reason to say ‘no’”, DuPage community organizations and the boots-on-the-ground individuals are committed to finding the “yes.” Based on feedback from families and community stakeholders, Region 19 recommends the following to ensure equitable access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services:

- Increased access to ECEC services and assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.
 - Early Intervention services for children birth to age three who demonstrate a developmental delay below the required 30%.
 - A tiered approach to publicly funded program qualification criteria for families and individuals that accounts for outlying factors such as cost of living and gross versus net income.
 - Implement marketing and support strategies to recruit new child care providers and staff, with a focus on stay-at-home parent populations.
 - Expand grant opportunities to support capital investments for both new and existing private early child care centers and homes, regardless of profit status and CCAP, participation to build capacity.
 - Increase monetary incentives for program CCAP participation and implement improved payment processing systems.
- Federal and state funding policies that are easy to navigate, align to ensure a continuum of care, and take into account additional qualifying factors, such as the unique characteristics within each community.
 - Restructured state funding that incorporates region-specific considerations based on actual numbers rather than population percentages.
 - Increased ability for cities and/or zip codes with multiple school districts to coordinate publicly funded services to ensure equal opportunities are available to all residents, regardless of qualifying demographics (e.g., if one school district qualifies for services, they are automatically applicable to any other districts within the same community).
 - State supports to manage braided funding opportunities ensuring that local organizations have consistent, long-term funding.
- Authentic parent/caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family, with special considerations for culture, language, ethnicity, education level, ability, socioeconomic status, and the like.
 - Professional development for ECEC professionals to increase awareness and knowledge regarding working with families from all different backgrounds with an emphasis on embracing diversity, authentic engagement, and implicit bias.
 - Regulatory policies that require all early childhood programs and services to develop and implement equity, diversity, and inclusion plans that include a system for reporting incidents and subsequent corrective interventions.

- Improved language supports specific to Spanish-speaking populations and the addition of resources to assist the wide array of other non-native English-speaking families.
 - Hire and retain bilingual staff within all early childhood programs and services.
 - Offer audible communication services in addition to written materials (e.g., voice recordings of newsletters).
 - Create and maintain state portals and resources in multiple languages, not just English and Spanish.
- Technical assistance to uphold existing Collaborations and investments to establish new Collaborations.
 - Create a coordinated system to collect, house, and disseminate quantitative data between Region 19 Early Childhood Collaborations and networks.
 - Develop a system of reflective practice that incorporates technical assistance for new and existing Collaborations.
 - Organized alignment tools to prevent the duplication of services and define/distinguish the roles of local organizations, especially those that cover multiple regions.
- Increased access to publicly funded programs, recognizing inconvenient schedules, the lack of transportation, and disqualifying criteria that separates families.
 - Expand Home Visiting services to ages three to five years old.
 - Adapt qualifying criteria for publicly funded programs to allow all siblings under one household to participate in services if one child qualifies based on individual circumstances.
 - Create and expand transportation to and from publicly funded programs.
 - Expand half-day programing to accommodate the needs of working families.
- An appreciation for the value of the ECEC workforce that provides equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development. Intentional solutions to address workforce shortages and retain qualified staff.
 - Embed reflective supervision practices into all aspects of ECEC, with opportunities to engage in mental health and well-being supports.
 - Expand teaching staff regulatory qualifications across all environments to give credit for proven competencies and work experience.
 - Proactively address staffing transition plans at an organizational level to ensure a continuum of care, including the development of region-specific substitute staffing pools.
 - Increased state funding to support educational advancement and compensation for the early childhood workforce.

- A system that supports children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities through inclusive and adaptive environments.
 - Universal developmental screenings for all children birth to age five, implemented in the child’s native language.
 - Expand current early childhood mental health supports, including the employment of additional Infant/Toddler Mental Health Specialists.
 - Financial support for existing child care programs to support inclusive environments through physical environment accommodations, the purchase of appropriate classroom materials, and compensation for specialized teaching staff.
 - Professional development for ECEC professionals to increase awareness and knowledge regarding working with children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities.



The system needs to adapt to the needs of families and logistical barriers should not be a reason a child cannot access needed services.

- Community Member



- Consumer education that empowers families to acquire the necessary knowledge regarding their options and the ability to navigate the ECEC system.
 - Region-wide and community-specific parent support and play groups that are accessible to all families. Present opportunities in a manner that engages caregivers in their own environments and is communicated in a manner that is in line with their level of understanding and engagement.
 - Offer formal orientation practices to all families entering ECEC programs for the first time and at all stages of transition. Present resources that are easy to understand, available in multiple languages, and include detailed information regarding parental rights.
 - Engage the healthcare field to ensure consistent messaging and increase partnerships between early childhood professionals and pediatricians.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 19, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services and National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (2013). *Raising Young Children in New a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development*. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: Washington, DC. Site name: <https://brycs.org/clearinghouse/5075/>
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Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: Family, Parent, and Caregiver Focus Group Poll Results

Survey Question	Yes	No
Do you plan to or have you enrolled your child(ren) in a child care program?	80%	20%
Was it hard to find child care?	64%	36%
Were you happy with your choice of child care?	80%	20%
Was/is your child care close to home?	67%	33%
Is/was your child(ren) enrolled in a separate preschool program?	77%	23%
Were you happy with your options for preschool?	83%	17%
Are/were you happy with your child(ren)'s teacher?	83%	17%
Do you feel your child(ren) is Kindergarten ready?	74%	26%
Do you feel there is something missing from your child(ren)'s Early Childhood program and/or preschool?	53%	47%
Did you or your family experience discrimination as part of your Early Childhood experience?	63%	37%

Source: Birth to Five Illinois
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Township Areas Defined:

- Addison Township includes Addison, Bensenville, Itasca, and Wood Dale, with portions of Elk Grove Village, Elmhurst, Lombard, and Villa Park. (Northeast Corner)
- Bloomingdale Township includes Bloomingdale, Carol Stream, Glendale Heights, and Hanover Park with portions of Addison, Itasca, Lombard, Roselle, Schaumburg, and Winfield. (North)
- Downers Grove Township includes Clarendon Hills, Darien, Downers Grove, Hinsdale, Westmont and Willowbrook with portions of Bolingbrook, Burr Ridge, Lemont, Oak Brook, Willow Springs, and Woodridge. (Southeast Corner)
- Lisle Township includes Bolingbrook, Downers Grove, Lisle, Naperville, and Woodridge. (South)
- Milton Township includes Glen Ellyn and Wheaton, with portions of Carol Stream, Downers Grove, Glendale Heights, Lisle, Lombard, Naperville, and Winfield. (Middle)
- Naperville Township includes Naperville and portions of Aurora and Warrenville. (Southwest Corner)
- Wayne Township includes portions of Bartlett, Carol Stream, Hanover Park, St. Charles, Wayne, and West Chicago. (Northwest Corner)
- Winfield Township includes portions of Aurora, Batavia, Naperville, Warrenville, West Chicago, Wheaton, and Winfield (West)
- York Township includes Elmhurst, Lombard, Oak Brook, Oak Brook Terrace, and Villa Park with portions of Downers Grove, Glen Ellyn, Hinsdale, and Westmont (East)

Figure 2: FY24 ECBG Priority List of Preschool Deserts

School District	City	Zip
Indian Prairie CUSD 204	Aurora	60504
CUSD 200	Wheaton	60189
Elmhurst SD 205	Elmhurst	60126
Darien SD 61	Darien	60561
Villa Park SD 45	Villa Park	60181
Center Cass SD 66	Downers Grove	60516
Marquardt SD 15	Glendale Heights	60139
Addison SD 4	Addison	60101
Westmont CUSD 201	Westmont	60559
Lisle CUSD 202	Lisle	60532
Maercker SD 60	Westmont	60559
Bloomingtondale SD 13	Bloomingtondale	60108
Com Con SD 180	Burr Ridge	60527
Glen Ellyn Com Con SD 89	Glen Ellyn	60137
Butler SD 53	Oak Brook	60523

Source: ISBE

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Throughout the development of the Regional Needs Assessment, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others. In the interest of time and space, only select questions are included.

Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the child care services you are using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
6. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
7. What services do not currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parent/caregivers, specifically?
8. Is there anything else you think I should know about Early Childhood education, care, or services in your community, our Region, or in the state?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
2. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
3. What services do not currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
4. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
5. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
6. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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