



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 1-B-B
(West Cook County)





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Region 1-B-B Executive Summary

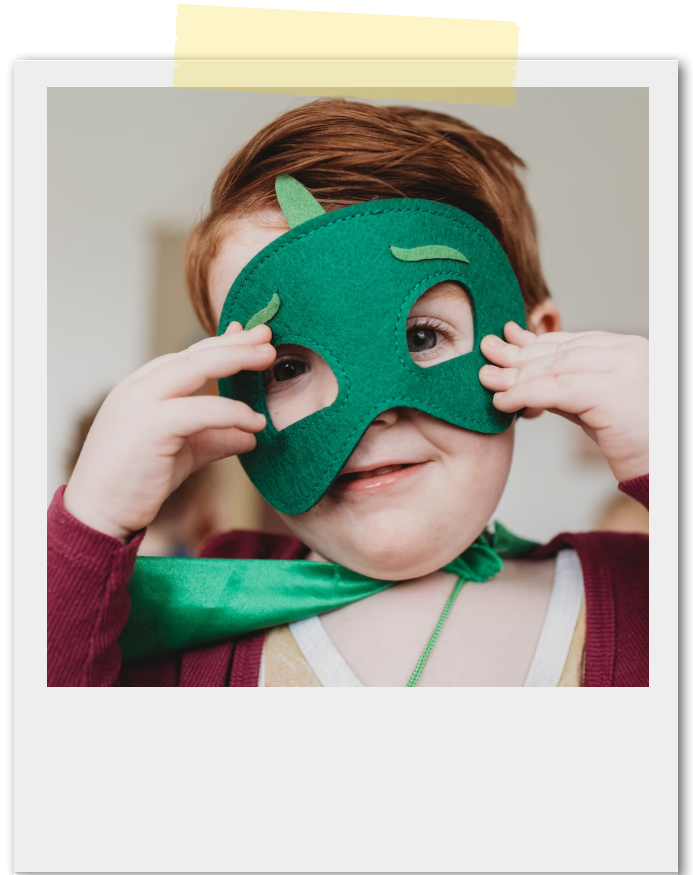
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 1-B-B 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 1-B-B is popular for its vitality, diversity, and proximity to Chicago. There are approximately 39,636 children under the age of six in the region, and in recent years have experienced growth in demographics of those considered to be a priority population. While there are several options for child care in the eastern and central areas of the region, including publicly funded programs, center-based, and home-based providers, there are still 24,465 (61.72%) of children without a space in an ECEC program. There is a need for high-quality, affordable, full-day programming to support working families. There are two established community collaborations in the region that support parents, caregivers, and supporters of ECEC, and many other organizations that support families with unique needs. The ECEC workforce is not representative of the racial and ethnic demographics of children in the region, and face several challenges including being underpaid, unsupported, and therefore understaffed. Barriers facing parents, caregivers, and families in the region include transportation, communication, and affordable child care.



Region 1-B-B Needs

1. ECEC Workforce recruitment and retention.
2. Affordable, quality child care.
3. Support for children/families with developmental delays/ disabilities.
4. Child care Assistance Program Support.
5. Support for Newcomers (Immigrants, Asylum seekers, Refugees).

Region 1-B-B Recommendations

1. Funding for the expansion of publicly funded ECEC programs.
2. Wage Increase for ECEC workforce and/or targeted incentives.
3. Increase service offerings and delivery for specialized services (children/families with developmental delays/disabilities).
4. Improvement in the processes for CCAP approval/payments (for families and centers).
5. Increase in trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support for Newcomers-(transitional/individual education plans).

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

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REGION 1-B-B 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.



39,636

Children Under
the Age of 5
in Region 1-B-B



15,061

Children 0-6
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



24,465

Children 0-6
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

38%

The percentage of children ages birth to five with limited means and resources.

Most self-identify as Black/African American and Hispanic/Latine, and live on the eastern side of the Region.

“It is imperative to bring awareness to the landscape of ECEC in Region 1-B-B to emphasize the barriers families face with access to ECEC programs.”

- Community Member

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 1-B-B NEEDS

1. Recruitment and retention of ECEC workforce.
2. Affordable, quality child care.
3. Support for children and families with developmental delays and/or disabilities.
4. Support for new community members such as immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

REGION 1-B-B RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Funding for the expansion of publicly funded ECEC programs.
2. Wage increase for the ECEC workforce and/or targeted incentives.
3. Increase service offerings and delivery for specialized services (children/families with developmental delays/disabilities).
4. Increase trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support such as transitional and individual education plans.



“Therapies are far away. I have to go 50 minutes away because there are no local places that can support his needs.”
- Parent

“There is a shortage with the labor force, we are struggling to find employees. We don’t know what to do!”
- Center Child Care Provider

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.

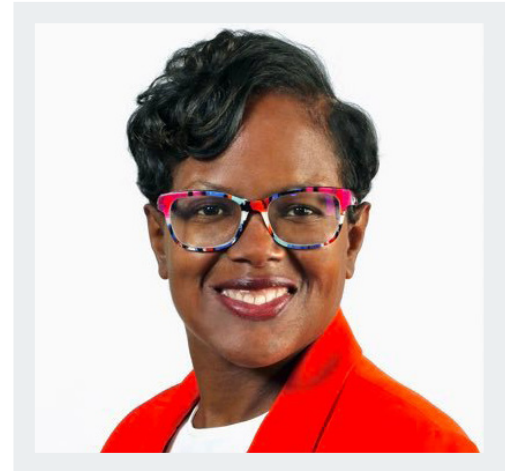
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand 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

First and foremost, we would like to express gratitude to the Birth to Five Illinois: Region 1-B-B Action Council and Family Council members. Your dedication to our bi-monthly meetings and willingness to share your professional expertise, personal experiences, and thoughtful analysis of the data contributed so much to not only the completion of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, but also to the growth, development, and positive change for young children and their families in West Cook County. The work of our Council members has been an invaluable part of our efforts to improve Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across the Region. We are humbled and inspired by your commitment to improving the lives of the children and families in our community.

We would also like to acknowledge the participants in our focus groups and interviews. Their input was critical to gathering voices from across the many neighborhoods in West Cook County, and we were impressed by their passion for improving the outcomes for the young children and families in our Region.

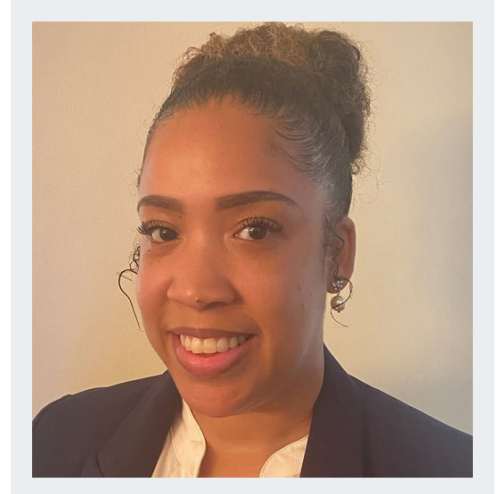
In our community, we were not only supported but embraced by numerous organizations and businesses. Thank you for supporting our mission and vision, providing us with space to host our Council meetings and focus groups, inviting us to your events to connect with the community, and providing us with resources.

We would also like to acknowledge and express gratitude to the Birth to Five Illinois State Leadership Team. Without their constant support, this report would not be possible.

Thank you,

Tiffany Draine (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 1-B-B
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.

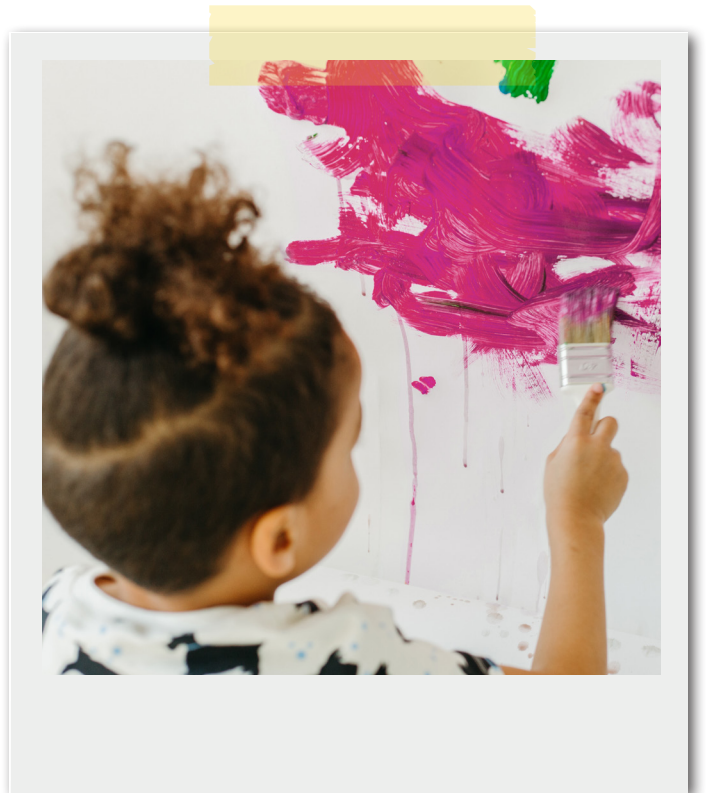
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

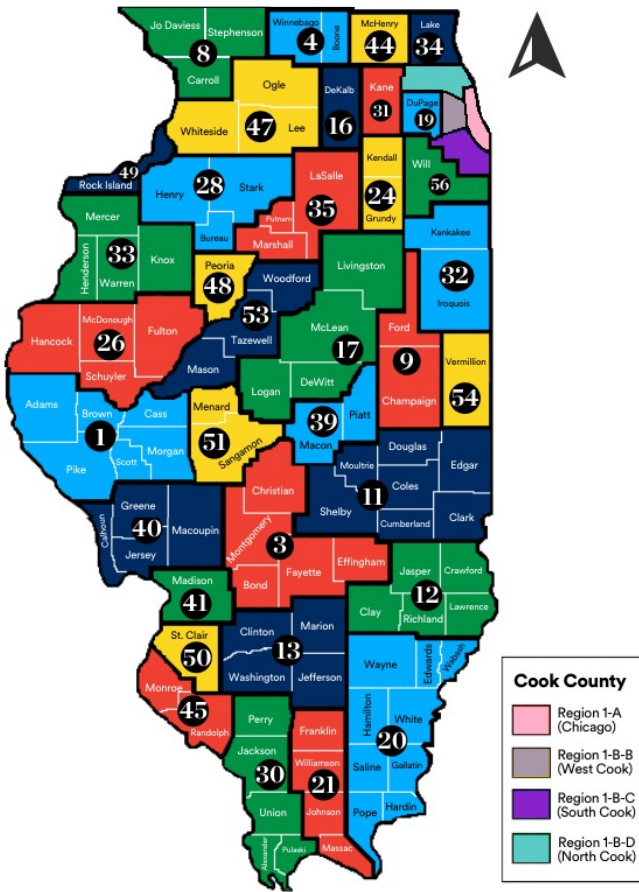


Timeline

- **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 (IACF), 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.

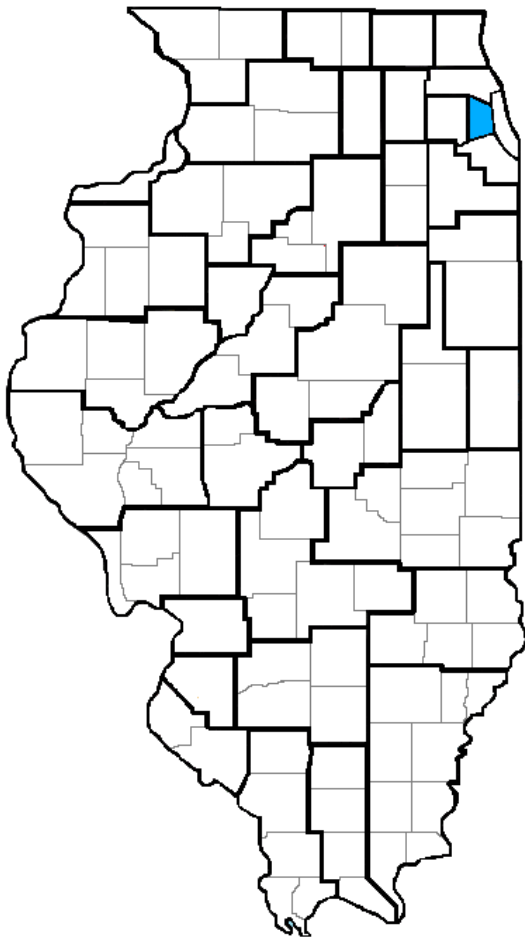
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 1-B-B

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 1-B-B is in the northeast area of the State; it is the first group of suburbs to the west of the city of Chicago. The West Cook County Region includes Bellwood, Berkeley, Berwyn, Broadview, Brookfield, Burr Ridge, Cicero, Countryside, Elmwood, Forest Park, Franklin Park, Harwood Heights, Hillside, Hines, Hodgkins, La Grange, La Grange Highlands, La Grange Park, Lyons, Maywood, McCook, Melrose Park, Norridge, North Riverside, Northlake, Oak Park, River Forest, River Grove, Riverside, Rosemont, Schiller Park, Stickney, Stone Park, Westchester, and Western Springs.

Popular for its vitality, diversity, and accessibility to Chicago, the West Cook Region is a popular destination for those who enjoy green spaces, architecture, and cultural attractions. Region 1-B-B is a part of Cook County, which is the most populous county in the state of Illinois, and the nation's second most populous county, with more than five million residents. Landmarks in West Cook County include the Frank Lloyd Wright homes, Earnest Hemingway's birthplace, and the Brookfield Zoo.

Region 1-B-B is also home to the Cernan Earth and Space Center, the Italian American Veterans Museum, Ferrara Pan Candy Factory, and Vulcan Materials Company, which is the nation's largest producer of construction aggregate. Another major landmark is the World's Largest Laundromat, located in Cicero, which is complete with a bird enclosure!

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 1-B-B acknowledges that the land that we live on and enjoy is the homeland of the Peoria, Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskaskia, Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), Ojaaakiiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk), and Meškawahki·aša·hina (Fox) Tribes. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and express our appreciation and respect to Indigenous Peoples who came before us and continue to contribute to our Region.

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

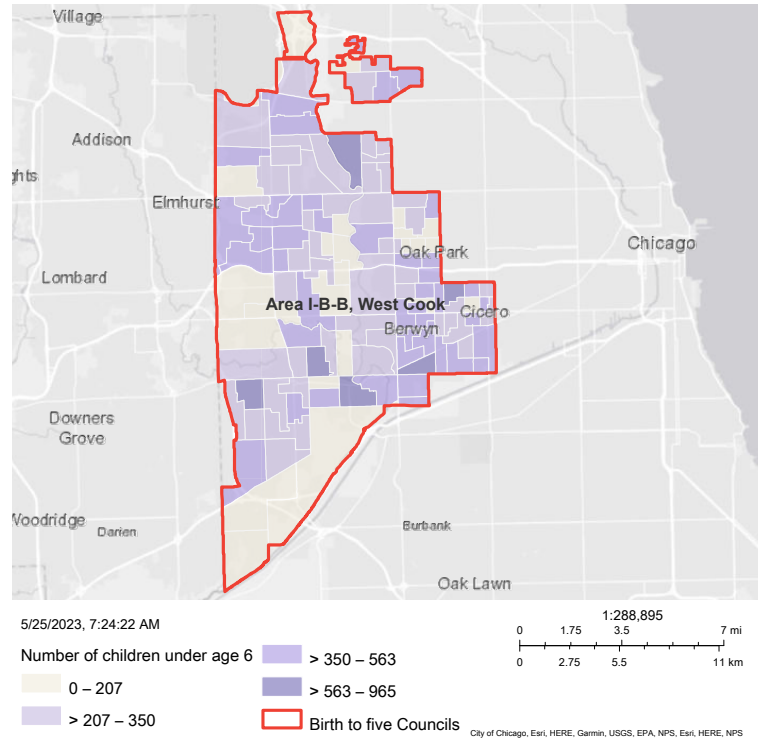
Regional Demographics

According to IECAM approximately 39,636 children under five years of age reside in Region 1-B-B. Broken down by age: 18,283 are zero to two years old and 21,353 are three to five years old. Figure 1 shows the concentration of children under the age of six across the Region.

We acknowledge that while families are labeled by these Census categories, in fact family identities go beyond these limitations. We also recognize there are more gender-inclusive terms used instead of Hispanic/Latino, such as Latinx or Latine; for the sake of inclusion and respect for the spectrum of gender identities represented in our communities, we are using the term “Latine” where the U.S. Census and other reports would use “Latino.” In Region 1-B-B, IECAM data from 2021 reports that .03% of the community members identify their children under six years old as being American Indian or Alaska Native (Non-Hispanic/Latine), 1% as Asian (Non-Hispanic/Latine), 10% as Black, 51% as Hispanic or Latine, 0% as Native Hawaii or Pacific Islander (Non-Hispanic/Latine), 34% as white, 3% as being two or more races, and .30% as Another Race (Non-Hispanic/Latine) (see Figure 2).

There are communities in the eastern part of the Region near Berwyn and Cicero, as well as the northwestern part of the Region near Northlake, Franklin Park, and Melrose Park that are comprised of those who self-identify as Hispanic or Latine (Figure 3). Additionally, in the central part of the Region, in and around Maywood, Hines, Hillside, and Westchester, there are communities where the predominate self-identified race is Black or African American.

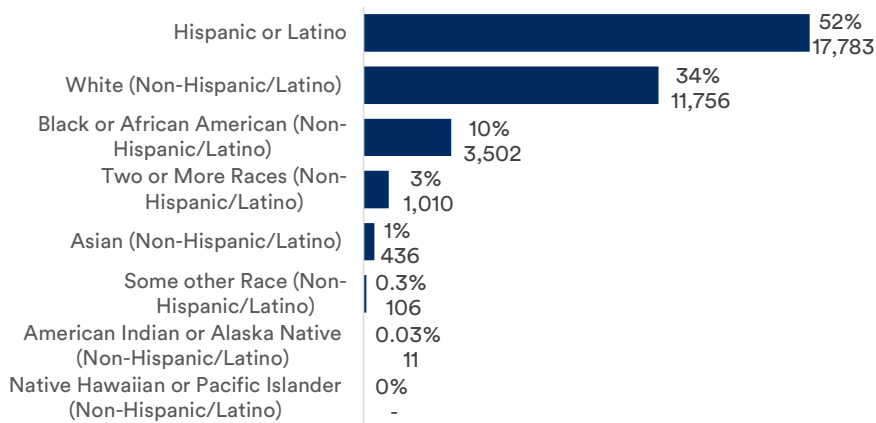
Figure 1: Location of Children Ages Six and Under



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 2: Children Under six by Race and Ethnicity²



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

²Birth to Five acknowledges that identities go beyond the categories that the U.S. Census provides. There are additional terms used instead of Hispanic/Latino, such as Latinx or Latine, but for reporting purposes remain aligned to the Census-provided categories.

Region 1-B-B has seen an increase in individuals with limited to no access to economic and/or material resources. The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed by a family to cover their basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities (see example of income bands in Figure 4). In many cases, it is used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be living in “deep poverty”; someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line.”

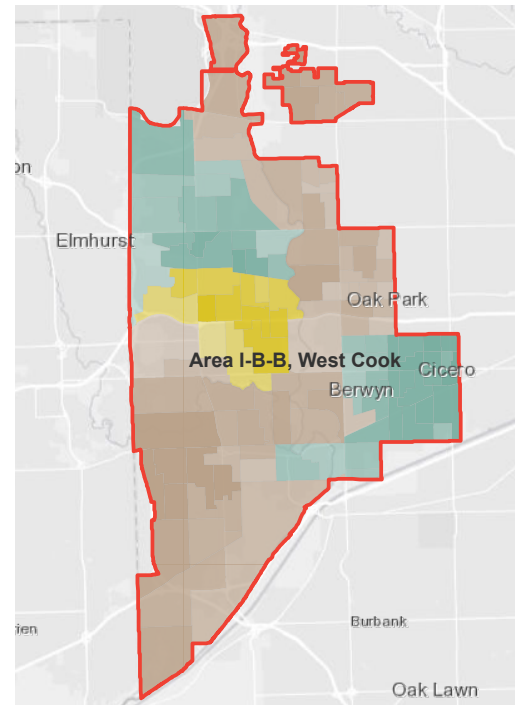
Suburban Cook County has an overall poverty rate of 10%. In 2019 (the most recent U.S. Census American Community Survey estimate), 247,737 suburban community members were living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). A family of four with an annual household income of \$30,000 falls in the 100% FPL category, and a \$55,000 annual household income falls in the 200% FPL category. In Region 1-B-B, 38% of children under the age of six years live below 200% FPL (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Federal Poverty Levels at 50%, 100%, 185%, and 200% for a Family of Four

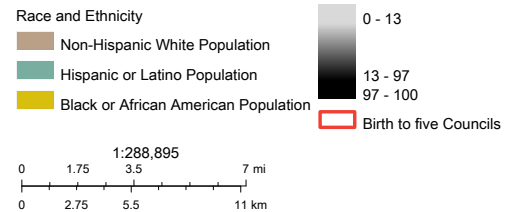
	50% FPL	100% FPL	185% FPL	200% FPL
Family of 4	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$48,470	\$52,400

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

Figure 3: Location of Children Ages Six and Under by Race/Ethnicity

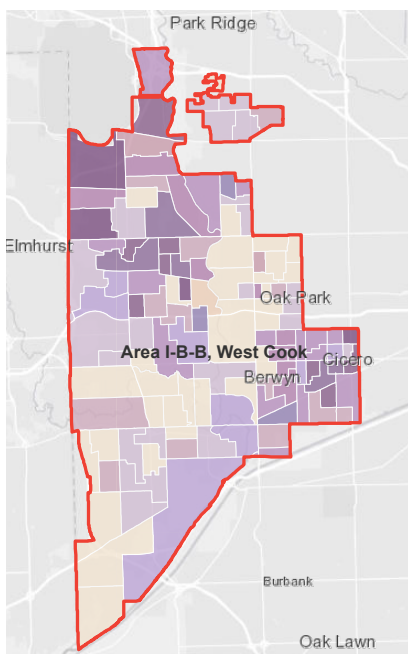


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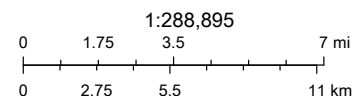
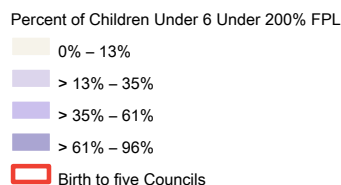


Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 5: Geographical landscape of children under six at the 100% & 200% FPL



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Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Children and Families in Priority Populations

The Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) used the following criteria for determining a population to be a priority³:

- Risk: Children and families who face economic disadvantage and a lack of a support system.
- Under-served: Children and families who do not receive equitable resources compared to other students in the academic pipeline and do not have adequate access to early childhood programs due to the programs' location, cost, enrollment requirements, or capacity to serve the comprehensive needs of families.
- Measurable: Programs can identify and track the population for the purpose of evaluating changes to a population's access to programs and services.
- Timely: Children and families whose needs or challenges are particularly relevant to the current landscape and/or conditions, and
- Distinctive: A population that is well-defined and standalone.

Of the twelve priority populations determined by the ELC to meet the criteria, the following were identified as priority populations that bear significance in Region 1-B-B.

Housing & Shelter Needs in Region 1-B-B

The Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County reports a significant increase in individuals who are experiencing homelessness in 2021 compared to 2022 in Region 1-B-B. There was a 27% increase in the homeless population, 30% increase in the sheltered population, 35% increase in the number of individuals who are chronically unhoused, and a 35% increase in families experiencing housing instability with children. However, not all individuals who are experiencing homelessness in Region 1-B-B show up in the statistics. According to McKinney Vento, the October report for the 2020-2021 school year had 943 students identified in West Cook County that fell under the category of unhoused. Unfortunately, there is no specific organization that serves these children in our Region. Most emergency shelters in suburban Cook County are not children or youth-specific, are volunteer-run, and consist of pads on the floor at rotating locations. As a result, children and youth are often undercounted.



Wonderworks Children's Museum.

Children of Migrant/Seasonal Workers

The 2021 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics provides data on foreign nationals who are admitted as temporary nonimmigrants, granted asylum or refugee status, or are naturalized. Data is only available for all of Cook County, not separated by our Region. Twenty percent of community members in Cook County are foreign born, and 5% are children under the age of 16 (with 27 children under 1 year old, 944 children one to four years old, and 1,519 five to nine years old). The total number of children under 19 years old comes to 11,454. We would like to note the challenges in acquiring data for undocumented individuals, as public data is largely unavailable.

³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

“

Tenemos que prestar a este tema, la educación, la atención que necesita. Como comunidad, no estábamos preparados para esta afluencia. Las escuelas están superpobladas y hacen todo lo que pueden, pero podrían hacerlo mejor. Deberían tener más estructura para estos niños refugiados/inmigrantes, como un plan de servicios individualizado que no sólo apoye su educación, sino su estado de salud emocional y mental para que puedan aprender y prestar atención en la escuela.

- Miembro de la comunidad

Translation: We need to give this topic, education, the attention it needs. As a community, we were not ready for this influx. The schools are overpopulated, and they might be doing all they can, but they can be doing better. They should be having more structure for these refugee/immigrant children like an individualized service plan that not only supports their education but emotional and mental health state so they can learn and pay attention in school.

- Community Member

”

Children with Disabilities

According to Erikson’s Risk and Reach Report, in Cook County in 2019, there were 11,573 children (6%) who were three to five years old receiving Early Childhood Special Education services. According to the Bureau of Early Intervention (EI) via IECAM, 4,837 children received EI services in 2022 to help children under age three reach their developmental milestones.

It is important to include the above information in this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment because we need to understand the demographics of the community members of our Region, including cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic makeup to identify both existing systemic barriers and what resources and supports families in our Region may need. Caregivers described this information as, “Vital to ensuring there is equity in the allocation of resources throughout the Region and to prevent funneling resources to the wrong areas, where the resources are not needed.” The Family Council shared how families desire transparency, inclusion, and equity. Demographic data helps to provide this transparency, and it “lets the State know we need action not just promises and words.”

Additionally, the purpose of the priority populations list 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 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.

Local Community Collaborations

Local community collaborations are one part of the overall Early Childhood landscape, which provides support, services, and resources to children and families. A local early childhood collaboration is a formalized group of stakeholders working together to improve their local early childhood system, focusing on programs and services for children from birth to age five or birth to age eight. There are two established community collaborations in Region 1-B-B: All Our Kids Network of Cicero (AOK) and The Collaboration for Early Childhood that supports families in Oak Park and River Forest.

AOK Networks are collective impact collaborations that utilize systems change framework with a human-centered design to create strategies that lead to equitable change. The AOK Network: Cicero is a community-based collaboration promoting healthy pregnancies and the positive-growth and development of all children birth to five by assuring a high-quality, well-coordinated, easily accessible system of services and supports that leads to children in Cicero entering Kindergarten developmentally and social-emotionally ready to learn. The Cicero AOK creates goals for network capacity, information and referral, and child and family outcomes to fill gaps of service in the community and improve family and child outcomes. They involve stakeholders who represent a holistic and comprehensive set of services and supports, including health, mental health, early learning and care, social services, parent support, basic needs, and more. By utilizing systems change and human-centered design, AOK Network: Cicero is working to create equitable and lasting change for children and families in their community.



Birth to Five Illinois Region 1-B-B Team.

The Collaboration for Early Childhood is a community-driven organization that cultivates the development of the whole child, birth to age five, by engaging families, local organizations, early childhood educators, caregivers, and health providers to create an equitable, nurturing, and interconnected systems of support. The

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Al final del día te enteras de nuevas cosas, de lo que está pasando, de nuevas pólizas, de todo lo que hay en la comunidad que a veces uno mismo vive en la comunidad y uno no sabe que ay. Debo reconocer que antes de entrar a la colaboración si entre como madre, y llegaba porque necesitaba información de un servicio y después me entere del entrenamiento de liderazgo para padres y me ayudo a crecer.

- Miembro del Comité Familiar y Embajadora Comunitaria de La colaboración para la primera infancia

Translation: At the end of the day, you find out about new things, what's going on, new policies, everything in the community you live in and don't know what's going on. I must admit before joining the Collaboration I did enter as a mother. I came because I needed information about a service and then found out about the parent leadership training and it helped me to grow.

- Community Ambassador from The Collaboration for Early Childhood

”

Collaboration for Early Childhood envisions communities where every young child has the care, relationships, and resources they need to thrive to begin school safe, healthy, and empowered to succeed. The Collaboration for Early Childhood also works on the following service areas: Early Learning, Health and Development, Family Engagement, and Community Engagement, making an impact beyond their borders within Region 1-B-B.

Additionally, The Collaboration for Early Childhood is focusing on transportation issues to and from child care for children receiving Early Intervention services at public school sites, piggybacking on similar work done to break down transportation barriers for the elderly.

There are many areas of the Region without official community collaborations. The two recognized Collaborations currently serve only four of the 35 municipalities. Family Council members discussed how imperative it is for community agencies to come together and build upon each other's work.

It is important to include this information in this Regional Needs Assessment so Birth to Five Illinois can build on the work of the existing collaborations and not duplicate their work. Also, we can work together to identify solutions for problems identified by the community.

“The agencies go above and beyond to stretch whatever funds they receive to make sure they help as many families as possible.
- Parent”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs are an integral part of the Early Childhood landscape. They are comprised of publicly funded programs, as well as licensed and license-exempt providers.

Publicly Funded Preschool

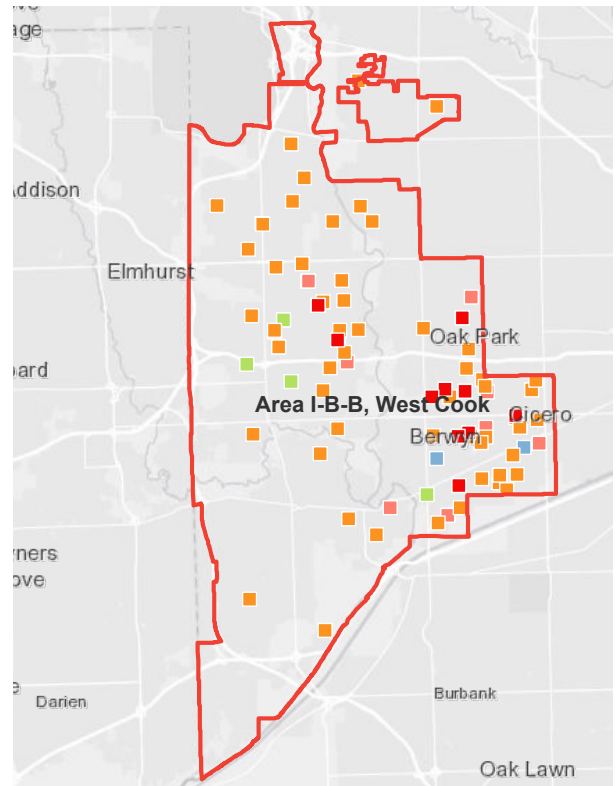
Under funding provided by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Region 1-B-B has programs providing Prevention Initiative (PI) and Preschool for All (PFA) services. PI provides comprehensive child development and family support services for children from birth to age three and their families. PFA expands early childhood opportunities for children whose family's income is less than four times the poverty guidelines and three-to-five-year-old children who are determined by ISBE as those who might benefit from additional academic support through at least 2.5 hours per day of high-quality preschool education. The HHS Poverty Guidelines and Section 645 of the Head Start Act are used to determine income eligibility for participation in Head Start and Early Head Start programs, establishing a threshold of the family's income equal to or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). A program offering PI and PFA is required to establish an eligibility criterion to meet the needs of the community. Programs offering these models use a weighted eligibility selection criteria that includes a scoring system to identify each child's exposure to risks/barriers to prioritize enrollment. Additionally, family income for those served by PI or PFA must be equal to or below 400% FPL.

The Early Head Start and Head Start preschool programs include parent engagement, comprehensive developmental screening, and high-quality, research-based curriculum for children to develop a solid foundation of knowledge and skills that supports them to be successful throughout their school experience. Figure 5 shows the location of publicly funded preschool programs in Region 1-B-B. There are 57 Preschool for All sites, 11 Head Start sites, and nine Preschool for All Expansion sites (Figure 6). There are 18 Early Head Start sites, with a capacity of 518, and 14 Prevention Initiative sites, with a capacity of 890.

Tuition Based Child Care

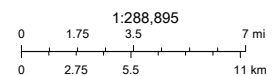
There are 93 licensed child care centers, 186 licensed-exempt child care homes, and three license-exempt child care centers in the Region. Figure 7 shows the location and number of licensed providers, but also provides visual insight into the disproportionate placement of child care centers. There are a high number and variety of child care options in the eastern part of the Region but highlights a lack of licensed child care in the south-central and southwestern parts of the Region, namely in and around Countryside, Hodgkins, and Burr Ridge.

Figure 6: Location of Publicly Funded Sites



5/25/2023, 8:05:15 AM

- Birth to five Councils
- Publicly Funded ECEC Sites
 - Preschool for All
 - Early Head Start
 - Prevention Initiative
 - Head Start
 - Preschool for All Expansion



County of DuPage, Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, EPA, NPS, Esri, HERE, NPS

Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Home Visiting

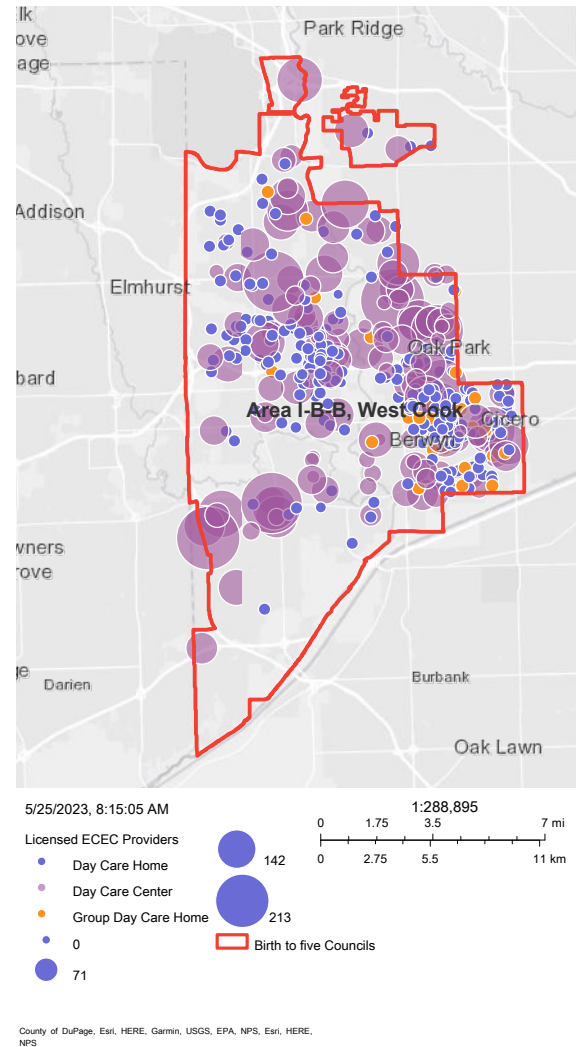
Home visiting supports pregnant people and new parents to promote infant and child health, foster educational development and school readiness, and help prevent child abuse and neglect. There are currently four home visiting providers that serve Region 1-B-B: Easter Seals, New Moms, Kids Above All, and Children's Home & Aid Society. These programs collect demographic and income information and track the developmental, health, and mental health needs of the families in their care. Unfortunately, we do not have enrollment or service data for these programs.

Available Program Supports

In Region 1-B-B there are several supports for programs, including funding sources for ECEC services. These were compiled by the Action Council, and include:

- Gateways to Opportunity, administered by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), provides scholarships, wage supplements, and credentials free of charge to ECEC professionals.
- Oak Park and River Forest Collaboration for Early Childhood offers free professional development opportunities.
- AOK Network: Cicero offers recruitment support and training, free of charge, to ensure quality.
- Triton College offers courses with pathway certificates to earn Gateways Credentials.
- West 40 offers services to the workforce including biometrics, training, professional license registration, renewals, support with compliance (including building and occupancy permits), curriculum reviews, mandated training, recordkeeping, and compliance. West 40's funding comes from grants and contracts from and with the state of Illinois.
- STAR NET is operated through a grant awarded by ISBE; 100% of the annual funding for the project is from federal sources and supports ISBE's goals and the Illinois State Performance Plan (SPP) for IDEA Part B. STAR NET provides free training, consultation, and resources to the early childhood community and families in Illinois.

Figure 7: Location of Licensed Providers



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

“It is imperative to bring awareness to the landscape of ECEC in Region 1-B-B to emphasize the barriers families face with access to ECEC programs.”

- Parent

- Early Intervention (EI) is a federally funded program administered by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). With the support of EI providers, ECEC staff help families of infants and toddlers reach the goals they set for their children.

Community feedback widely suggests that improving education is a strategy for fighting barriers to accessing economic resources. We must identify the barriers preventing access to high-quality ECEC experiences for families. Feedback from the community on those barriers includes cost, quality of care, and conditions of the centers.

Slot Gap

Important to the discussion of the Early Childhood landscape is the slot gap. Slot Gap is a term used to describe the difference between the number of children who might need childcare and the capacity (or slots) across childcare options. There were several slot gaps that were identified for this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment: the overall child care capacity slot gap, which measures the capacity of all licensed child care, licensed family home care, and license-exempt child care centers against the total number of children ages five and under in the Region; and, the publicly funded program slot gap, which measures the number of slots in publicly funded programs against the number of children living at or below 200% FPL.

The slot gap can be a useful quantitative marker to help understand the needs for expanded ECEC service delivery in the Region; however, like other data points, it does not give the full story. The slot gap only counts publicly available data sources and therefore misses children being cared for by non-licensed providers, family members, or caregivers who have chosen not to engage with the ECEC system. It is difficult to capture the rate at which families and parents in the labor force utilize or look for formal child care.

Currently, there are about 39,636 children under the age of five in Region 1-B-B and 15,171 available ECEC slots reported, resulting in a slot gap of 24,465 children without ECEC services via a licensed or license-exempt child care program. This number represented 62% of the population of children under age six in Region 1-B-B. The largest number of available slots are in licensed child care centers (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Number of Available Slots in Licensed and License-Exempt Centers

	Number of Available Slots
Licensed Child Care Centers	7,175
Licensed Family Child Care Homes	1,979
License-Exempt Child Care Centers	200

Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Illinois publicly funded preschool programs, which are funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) include Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E). Head Start is federally funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Each of these programs serves young children ages three to five, either via center-based or home-based service delivery, and had the following breakdown of child care capacity by type: PFA (3,845) and Head Start (495). Programs serving our youngest children, birth through age two, include Prevention Initiative (PI, funded by ISBE) and Early Head Start (EHS, funded by HHS). PI in the Region has a capacity of 959, and there are 518 slots in EHS. Across the Region, most children who qualify by income for publicly funded programs and services do not have access to the programs if their families wished to enroll them (Figure 9).



Tiffany Draine and Rep. Emmanuel Chris Welch at the Back-to-School Fair at Proviso East High School.

Figure 9: Children by Age Group, Publicly Funded Slots, Slot Gaps

	Total Number of Eligible Children	Number of Funded Slots	Slot Gap
Children Ages Birth to Two	18,283	4,499	13,784
Children Ages Three to Five	21,353	8,645	12,718

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Region 1-B-B Family Council identified that the communities in the north, northwest, and southeast areas of the Region lack services for expectant families, such as EHS, PI, or the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program—communities with families who potentially qualify for these services. Communities in the northwest have seven EHS programs and four PI programs, all in different communities. With the Family Council, we were able to identify only one MIECHV program in the Region, serving primarily Cicero and Berwyn. The program can provide services to families in surrounding communities, such as Stickney and Lyons, when a family is referred and is eligible for services as outlined in MIECHV’s Program Performance Standards, or if an enrolled family moves to any of the surrounding communities.

The slot gap is critical in identifying the number of children who are eligible but not receiving ECEC services in Region 1-B-B. The pandemic has exacerbated many existing financial problems for families experiencing lower income who rely on child care. Families are often caught in a troubling cycle, where neither work obligations nor child care needs are fully met.

“ Finding a child care center in Oak Park was very difficult. In Chicago, there are many locations accessible to parents. There aren’t big centers in Oak Park, and finding a home provider was a struggle.
- Parent ”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The ECEC workforce consists of professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers who promote the healthy growth, development, and learning of young children under the age of eight. It includes those who train, educate, supervise, and support the workforce. According to the Illinois' Early Childhood Education Workforce Report⁴, suburban Cook County's ECEC workforce is not representative of the communities it serves, as 43% of licensed center teaching staff identify as Black, 25% identify as white, 21% identify as Hispanic/Latine, and 11% identify as other. In Region 1-B-B, 174 family child care providers identify their race as Hispanic/Latine, 110 identify as Black, and 29 identify as white (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Percent of Teachers, Children by Race and Ethnicity

	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	White	Other
Teachers	43%	21%	25%	11%
Children	10%	51%	34%	5%

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Men continue to be underrepresented when it comes to employment in the ECEC field. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), the national percentage of men employed as child care workers was 5%, 20% as teacher assistants, and 1% as preschool or Kindergarten teachers. Gender data for the Region also shows an overrepresentation of women, with 313 family child care providers identifying as female, and only 12 identifying as male.

There are a significant number of children in suburban Cook County who are English Language Learners (ELL), with an increase of 41%, according to data from ISBE. In suburban Cook County, 30% of center-based teachers and 38% of center-based assistant teachers reported being bilingual. Community feedback indicated that the teaching staff are not equipped to meet the needs of the ELL community. A focus group participant shared “Curriculum considerations are important, too. A kid was asked to identify a white picket fence in her homework, but that is not something that they have ever seen! What they are learning reflects their environment”. She went on to say “The language barrier is a huge issue, as well as cultural competency. Not everyone has computers, not everyone has internet access, and the environment is not fostering education or tasks”.

“ Language is a barrier within the Spanish-speaking population. People think that because we all speak Spanish, we all relate to each other, but the countries are so different. The words and intonation are different. They [new students] have to adjust to that.

- Community Member ”

According to the Illinois' Early Childhood Education Workforce 2020 Report, in suburban Cook County, 70% of lead teachers and 27% of assistant teachers in a licensed center have attained a college degree. One hundred and five family child care providers reported high school as their highest level of education, 13 reported achieving some college, 35 reported attending community college, 55 holding an associate degree, 44 hold a bachelor's degree, and 23 holding a graduate degree. A total of 167 reported holding an ECE credential while 158 did not.

⁴ https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

Initiatives to support the workforce in Region 1-B-B include:

- Illinois Cares for Kids, which is a website described as the one place parents, grandparents, caretakers, teachers, and child care providers can access all things related to early childhood in Illinois.
- ExceleRate, a quality rating and improvement system, gives the ECEC workforce a process for pursuing quality efforts that will help them improve developmental skills among the children they serve.
- INCCRRA's Great Start Wage Supplement program rewards eligible ECEC and school-age care practitioners for receiving higher education and remaining at their current place of employment.
- INCCRRA also has a scholarship program, which pays a portion of tuition for eligible professionals working in ECEC or a school-age program who want to earn college credit, credentials, or degrees.
- The RISE (Retention of Illinois Students & Equity) Act aims to help students who are undocumented afford college by permitting Illinois public universities to award them financial aid. Many undocumented students are wary about sharing their personal information with the federal government or do not fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form because they are not eligible for federal higher education financial aid. The RISE Act removes a requirement that students complete a FAFSA form to be eligible for a State Monetary Award Program (MAP) grant.

Ninety percent of children's brain development occurs before age five. Investment in adequate training and development of ECEC staff maximizes young children's growth, social/emotional skills, and self-regulation. Professional development must be a priority to ensure young children in ECEC programs attain critical skills and meet developmental milestones. The following trainings, certifications, career development, and higher educational opportunities are available for the ECEC workforce in Region 1-B-B:

- NAEYC Learning Lab
- Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC)
- STAR NET
- The Early Childhood Professional Education (ECEP) Program
- Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE)
- Illinois Early Learning Project

Community feedback recognizes the ECEC workforce is underpaid and undervalued. When asked why they think it is difficult to retain the ECEC workforce, a parent shared, “¡Personal mal pagado y sin apoyo!” (Translation: Workforce underpaid and not supported!). There was also feedback from the community on the lack of workforce staff. A parent who utilizes private care acknowledged how the lack of staff for centers impacted her choice of child care, sharing, “I acknowledge my privilege, my family’s privilege of having dual income, which allows us to access private care. But I also recognize that this is not the case for many women. For many families.”

“ I acknowledge there is a shortage with the labor force, we are struggling to find employees. We don't know what to do! We have children and there is no staff. We can't open a classroom if there is no teacher or an assistant. This is a worrisome situation.

- Focus Group Participant

”

This information supports the needs assessment by identifying significant gaps and barriers that inhibit the recovery and growth of the ECEC workforce. Action Council members reported in addition to threats to safety the ECEC workforce faces, there is also an abundance of work-related stress including class sizes, ratios, difficulty working with families, lack of professional respect, and the most impactful barrier—inadequate salary.

ECEC teachers earn significantly less than their primary school counterparts. Illinois early educators with a bachelor's degree are paid 49% less than their colleagues in the K-8th grade system. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nationally:

- Lead teachers in ECEC settings with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$30,210 per year, or \$14.52 an hour.
- Lead teachers in elementary school settings with a bachelor's degree earn \$61,350 a year, or \$30.68 an hour.
- Assistant teachers in ECEC settings with an associate degree earn an average of \$23,900 a year, or \$11.95 an hour.
- Assistant teachers in primary school settings with an associate degree earn an average of \$29,360 a year, or \$14.68 an hour.

The impact of this disparity can be seen in the poverty rate for early educators in Illinois (18%), which is much higher than Illinois workers in general (8%) and 8.5 times higher than for K-8th grade teachers (2%).

Home-based child care providers face unique challenges, including frustration with licensing requirements, competition from center-based programs and school districts, lack of support, unequal and fluctuating pay, and challenges maintaining a healthy work/life balance as their professional and personal space is the same. One provider called for more involvement of agencies to contribute to the growth and development of children and families, sharing, "We need training on specialized services. The surface level training that Gateways provides is not enough to meet the needs of the children." Another provider shared, "It is difficult to recruit teachers and harder to retain them. The pay is too low, and we compete with the school districts."

“As home care providers, all the requirements that we are mandated to do are a lot! It's unjust for providers who do not have a licensed setting and don't meet the education requirement but get paid the same as me?!”
- Focus Group Participant

“I am concerned about the mental strain on the staff, and how the lack of training on how to handle behaviors from the kids is taxing.”
- Focus Group Participant

“Home providers need to be included in planning and decision-making so we can stay in business.”
- Home Child Care Provider

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Family experiences with access to ECEC in Region 1-B-B include an array of experiences that lift the veil to a variety of barriers.

Barriers Due to Transportation

Inadequate transportation is a consistent barrier identified by caregivers, especially to and from part day programs and specialized services. Due to the lack of services in the Region for children with developmental delays and disabilities, many families report having to travel long distances to receive services.

A parent who shared her input said, “Where I live, the school is not far but I am not within the range to qualify for bus services so my kids cannot get bussed to school. I cannot drive because I have a problem with my vision. I would like to have more accessibility to transportation for my kid, to and from school”. The northwest area has programs dispersed across communities where families find themselves having to commute to find a program that meets their needs. One of the Council members who resides in Northlake faced the same concern, “When my son was 2 years old, I had to drive an hour across my Region, to the City of Chicago for him to receive therapy along with being in an early childhood education setting.

When he turned 3, I was able to transfer him to a school in Maywood, my third neighboring community. It is now a 30-minute drive, but it was the only school able to provide for his needs.”

“Therapies are far away; I have to go 50 minutes away because there are no local places that can support his needs. I know it is a complex case, but I would like for the community to have services accessible for children with Autism. It’s tough because I want to work, and I can’t because I need to dedicate myself to him 100%. It is very frustrating! I love him, he is my son, but me—as a person—I cannot grow professionally. I want to work to help at home financially, but I can’t. And it is very frustrating.

- Focus Group Participant

”

“Transportation is a challenge because families do not have transportation from the school districts to bring the eldest children to after school care and they are forced to get off early from work to pick up all the children, including those who are in the child care center.

- ECEC Provider

”

“I see families come to tour the center, and I often see them waiting for an Uber or a Lyft outside with their kids after the tour. I get concerned about their safety.

- Child Care Provider

”

“There are always more resources in areas of higher income.

- Parent

”

Transportation is an average household's second largest expense behind housing. While there are some public transportation options in some areas of the Region, such as the Blue and Green lines that services some of the northeastern and east-central part of the Region, the Metra that has train lines that run east to west across the Region, and PACE bus routes, many families still struggle with transportation. A lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable public transportation options in the Region creates reliance on a vehicle, and spending money on a car, fuel, and upkeep to access their children's services is a major stressor.

The proliferation of rideshare (Uber, Lyft, etc.) provides an option for families without access to cars, but it is an expensive option and is not affordable for day-to-day transportation needs. With limited access to transportation, lost income, and possibly lost employment, a parent/caregiver searching for child care without transportation may further destabilize the family's financial situation.

Communication Barriers

Community members expressed the need for a centralized communication system or more opportunities to learn about ECEC resources across the entire Region, and not just in their community. Additionally, communication is a serious barrier for those who speak a language other than English.

“ Batallo un poco...no hablo nada inglés y que en muchas oportunidades no me han colocado una intérprete y ahí si me cuesta mucho porque no me se explicar no entiendo nada y si eh batallado en oportunidades, pero ya las demás si me han colocado un intérprete, pero tengo que esperar. Lo he solicitado.

- Participante del grupo de enfoque

Translation: I struggle a little bit...I don't speak English at all and in many opportunities, they have not provided me with an interpreter, and I have a hard time because I don't know how to explain myself and I don't understand anything. I have struggled in some opportunities, but in others they have provided me with an interpreter, but I have to wait. I have requested it.

- Focus Group Participant

In addition to the language barriers, community feedback also indicates the need for the return of in person communication following the pandemic. Focus group participants shared:

“ COVID has left a digital imprint and does not provide in-person parent engagement activities.

- Focus Group Participant

Cost of Care

Lack of affordable child care options is a barrier for families. According to the National Database of Child Care Prices, in 2022 the average cost of child care was \$16,506 per year, which comes to 20% of the average income in Cook County. This mirrors a typical year's tuition and fees at a state university (for an in-state student), as the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's yearly tuition comes to \$17,138 per year. Illinois' Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides financial assistance for families who experience low incomes, and the value of the benefit varies by income, household size, and the number of children receiving child care. Feedback from the community indicates CCAP is not enough, as child care can still be unaffordable with CCAP. There are 36,636 children ages five and under in the Region, and in 2021, 15,693 children qualified for, and their families utilized, CCAP to help them pay for child care.



Bilingual Parents Conference

However, there is a “cliff effect” causing challenges for families. When a household’s income increases above the threshold for CCAP eligibility, they no longer qualify for any assistance with child care expenses. It would not be unusual for a modest raise in income to push a family out of the program. Although the Census data shows the growth in suburban poverty, public perception and policy are not always aligned with reality. In our Family Council meetings, the Birth to Five Illinois Team heard from community members who feel their municipal government inaccurately allots community funds, investing in projects of lower importance, ignoring the needs of its occupants with limited to no access to economic/material resources. Depending on the community, community members witness funds allocated for street maintenance, development of commercial buildings, or other projects. As a result, those with limited to no access to economic/material resources in these areas feel abandoned and isolated from services and benefits that may help them regain economic autonomy.

“ I think about the times I looked for care for my children. I visited a center and saw children strapped to their car seats, crying, not nurtured, and staff disregarding their social-emotional needs. It’s not right! Children should not have to go through that, and parents should not have to conform.

- Parent

Family Council members additionally expressed frustration with not being able to find ECEC services in certain communities. Family Council members were unsettled thinking about children whose parents/caregivers may have no other option but to leave them in what to some may be considered low-quality care settings because it is convenient and most affordable.

The information in this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment demonstrates service provision in all Regions is not equal. We want to show the disparity in equity, access, and inclusion for programs and services across the Illinois ECEC landscape. Historically, parent and provider voices, especially those who have been marginalized, have been excluded from conversations and decisions that drive policy reform for ECEC. Decision-makers need to know the impact of their decisions on families. We want them to hear the concerns and needs of families directly from those families that are most impacted.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 1-B-B has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC needs to be more accessible and equitable to families and where it needs to better support providers.

Strengths

- **Bilingualism/multilingualism throughout the communities:** The community promotes the acceptance of speaking a native or second language, bringing validation to family language and cultural heritage.
- **Cultural responsiveness and inclusion:** Parents and caregivers feel ECEC providers are not only gradually improving their cultural responsiveness to harness inclusion, but also strengthening their efforts to be developmentally inclusive.
- **Diversity:** The Region is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse.
- **Support for families with children with developmental delays and disabilities:** Community feedback from parents and caregivers of children with a developmental delay/disability highlighted the benefits of Early Intervention and specialized services that have had a positive impact on their families. There are support groups in virtual spaces for the Region and programs (park districts/public play spaces) that are accommodating and supportive of their children's needs.
- **Variety in child care options:** Within the ECEC landscape, there are several options for child care in the eastern part of the Region, including publicly funded programs, center-based programs, and home-based child care providers.

Needs

- **Accurate data to depict the Region's landscape:** The Action and Family Councils voiced concerns with the validity of Census data, reflecting on the negative experiences of their family and community members when completing the Census. For some community members, there is a deeply rooted mistrust of government entities, which leads to inaccurate data and information being collected.
- **Affordable Housing:** In Region 1-B-B, the rising cost of housing, and scarcity of subsidized housing has a huge impact on families, and therefore early learners. The CEDA Needs Assessment reports that in our Region, described as the "West Region", 92% of households of families with limited to no access to economic/material resources are paying over 30% of their income on housing. Fifty eight percent of these households are paying over 50% of their income on housing.
- **Support for Newcomers (Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees):** There are not enough organizations in the Region that support the unique needs of these groups.
- **Support for children/families with developmental delays/ disabilities:** There is feedback of an immense need for expanded service delivery.

- **Affordable, quality child care:** Council members expressed how the communities in the east and southeast of the Region are living under the 200% FPL and have the highest concentration of publicly funded programs serving children from birth to age five. However, in the northwest area of the Region, there is a similar concentration of children living under 200% FPL but a scarcity of federally funded programs to serve these children.
- **ECEC workforce recruitment and retention:** Action Council urged for increased acknowledgement and respect for Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care. During and since the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have been using FFN care providers because their typical care provider had closed, and never reopened, or they do not feel safe having their child cared for in a congregate setting. FFN providers are continuing to take on additional responsibility, and they deserve support in providing quality early education experiences to children they serve.

Recommendations

Through the process of gathering family opinions and engaging local stakeholders, we have identified recommendations to address early childhood needs within Region 1-B-B. These recommendations are based on input we received from families, community members, and business stakeholders who are living in and using the ECEC system in our Region.

- **Fund full-day ECEC programs like PFAE with transportation:** Working families from priority populations cannot sustain full-time employment with 2.5 hours of Preschool for All (PFA). Families are utilizing Family, Friend, and Neighbor care for many reasons, including lack of availability of PFA/Head Start programs and language barriers that limit their capacity to access critical services.
- **Launch ECEC workforce recruitment and retention efforts, including wage increases and/or targeted incentives:** Efforts should include mental health support; incentives to attract new and keep experienced early childhood practitioners; supports for Family, Friend, and Neighbor care; and co-pairing and training with specialized service providers to ensure ECEC teachers are versed in behavioral practices and equipped with a “toolbox” of supports.
- **Increase service and delivery options for children with developmental delays/disabilities.**
- **Improve CCAP processes by reviewing the eligibility requirements to meet the unique needs of families and improving processing and payment systems for providers.**
- **Support Newcomers (Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees) by including trauma informed, culturally responsive supports and transitional education plans for children.**
- **Expand Community Collaborations:** Currently, there are only two ECEC Community Collaborations serving two out of the 36 municipalities in the Region. We recommend the implementation of mentoring programs and incentives for communities interested in start-up. An increased presence of Collaborations in the Region would provide access to critical resources and increase the likelihood that families will be connected to necessary community services.
- **Expand federally funded child and adult food programs (SNAP, WIC), affordable housing, and housing assistance programs.**
- **Streamline comprehensive data systems to ensure there is equity in the allocation of resources across the Region.**

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 1-B-B, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: References

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Appendix A: References

Figure 1 shows the landscape of income demographics of children living in region 1-B-B, by municipality. The Council members felt it important to note that there are a variety of factors that impact the poverty rates demonstrated in the chart, including but not limited to high property tax rates are causing more families to live in multigenerational households, and this may skew how this data is viewed.

Figure 1: Region 1-B-B by Municipality, Population, Poverty Rates and CSBG Eligibility

Municipality	Total Population	Poverty Rate	CSBG Eligible (Number below 125% FPL)
Bedford Park	613	3%	20
Bellwood	18,812	10%	3,331
Berkeley	5,106	5%	368
Berwyn	54,973	13%	9,972
Bridgeview	15,545	17%	3,389
Broadview	7,755	8%	825
Brookfield	18,621	7%	1,801
Burbank	28,475	10%	4,586
Burr Ridge	10,726	4%	395
Cicero	81,472	16%	20,426
Countryside	5,956	5%	516
Elmwood Park	24,271	8%	3,158
Forest Park	13,717	10%	1,587
Forest View	943	3%	65
Franklin Park	17,943	9%	2,405
Harwood Heights	8,487	12%	1,410
Hillside	7,723	8%	875
Hodgkins	1,743	12%	345
Indian Head Park	3,522	3%	94
Justice	12,800	17%	2,708
La Grange	15,117	3%	687
Lemont	16,796	5%	974
Lyons	10,446	112%	2,009
Maywood	23,377	16%	4,629
McCook	279	4%	12
Melrose Park	25,495	17%	6,852
Norridge	14,299	5%	1,116
North Riverside	6,604	6%	571
Northlake	12,069	16%	2,969

Municipality	Total Population	Poverty Rate	CSBG Eligible (Number below 125% FPL)
Oak Park	51,839	8%	5,202
River Forest	10,068	4%	609
River Grove	10,076	10%	1,548
Riverside	8,759	5%	454
Rosemont	4,255	10%	645
Schiller Park	11,604	16%	2,180
Stickney	6,634	8%	897
Stone Park	4,894	14%	1,283
Summit	11,217	17%	3,088
Westchester	16,258	5%	1,106
Western Springs	13,272	4%	669
Willow Springs	5,604	4%	427

Source: U.S. Census
Created by: U.S. Census

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.

Parents, Families, and 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 childcare services you're 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 don't 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 childcare 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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