



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 1-B-C
(South Cook County)





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Region 1-B-C 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.

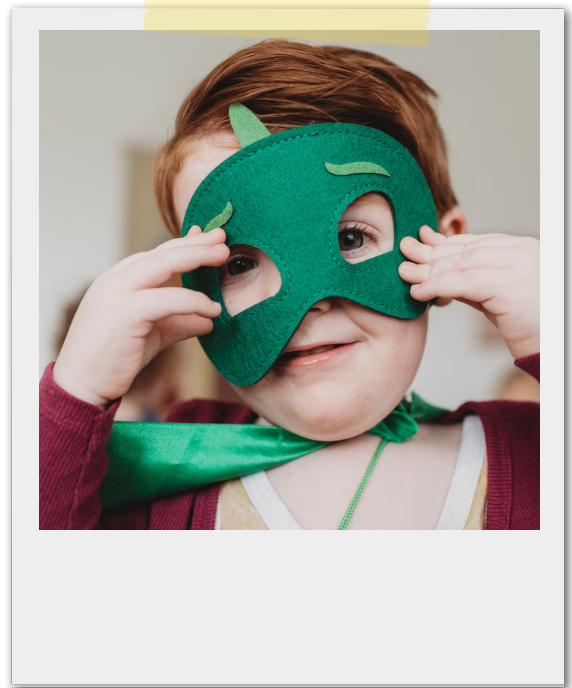
An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, 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-C 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

Highlighted in this Needs Assessment are efforts to understand the need for a new community system that will better serve young children and families. Action and Family Councils discussed the Region's demographics, local community collaborations, ECEC programs, the deficit of ECEC slots in the Region, and the ECEC workforce. Time was also spent reflecting on challenges that families in the Region face when accessing ECEC programs and making their voice a strong part of this narrative.

The Region is racially and economically diverse, with a population of 60,328 children under age five. ECEC programs and services are most concentrated on one side of the region, leaving a significant portion of children underserved. In fact, Region 1-B-C is highly segregated with most Black and Brown families living on the eastern side of the Region. Region 1-B-C has 9,903 publicly funded slots across 195 sites. However, the high number of children living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level indicates a need for more publicly funded ECEC sites and licensed programs. This Regional Needs Assessment emphasizes the importance of ECEC programs in supporting children's development and kindergarten readiness, along with the need for ECEC workforce support and development.

It was important to keep equity at the forefront of this needs assessment. Our Region is comprised of people from different ethnicities and racial backgrounds. Families do not live in monolingual households, and the



needs of each household can be very different. Significant hurdles for families when accessing ECEC programs are cost, lack of awareness about programs, restrictive eligibility criteria, and time and location barriers. The Regional Needs Assessment concludes by acknowledging the strengths and needs of the communities within Region 1-B-C and highlights the importance of addressing these issues collaboratively. While changes will take time, this document is a starting point for understanding the region's unique challenges and outlining the path forward.

Region 1-B-C Needs

- Community navigators that can connect families and providers to programs and resources and provide support when applying for ECEC services.
- Affordable quality care with extended hours for families that work non-traditional hours.
- Early Intervention services, Home Visiting, and easier access to special needs supports.
- Increased program capacity, especially on the west side of the Region, and more full-day classrooms.
- Stronger support for immigrant families and all families that speak languages other than English.
- Transportation support for families, caregivers, and ECEC providers.
- Recruitment of a racially diverse ECEC workforce with better pay and benefits, and initiatives to support educational and career advancements.

Region 1-B-C Recommendations

- Program funding to support families that speak languages other than English, to hire interpreters or give stipends to parent educators who are willing to interpret for other families.
- Establish community navigators to support intentional outreach efforts that target marginalized and under-resourced communities and families.
- Increase publicly funded program capacity, locations, home visiting programs, and hours of care to provide a more equitable ECEC landscape.
- Enable publicly funded programs to partner with child care providers to assist with/provide transportation.
- Implementation of child care cost caps/limits or relaxed income restrictions that will allow all children, regardless of family income, the ability to attend a high-quality program.
- Optimize community partnerships and Community Collaborations to develop unified mechanisms to connect families across the Region with resources and ECEC programs.
- Engage license-exempt providers in home-based coaching programs that will supplement the educational development of children in their care.
- Encourage programs to hire specialized staff and provide professional and educational development at little or no cost to staff.
- Create statewide salary guidelines for ECEC staff to ensure equitable living wages and annual increases, and establish incentives for early learning professionals.

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-C 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.



60,328

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



9,903

Total Number
of Publicly
Funded Slots



50,425

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

42%

Percentage of children ages birth to five that live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level

"A child's ability to have quality education and care should not be affected by income level, race, ethnicity, or zip code. Is it not a basic human right to have a good education?" - 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 1-B-C NEEDS

- Increased number of affordable programs with full-day hours
- Stronger support for immigrant families and families with English language learners
- Transportation support for families and ECEC providers
- Recruitment of a racially diverse ECEC workforce with better pay and benefits, and initiatives to support educational and career advancements

REGION 1-B-C RECOMMENDATIONS

- Program funding to support families who do not speak English
- Enable publicly funded programs to partner with licensed and license-exempt providers to assist with/provide transportation
- Implementation of child care cost caps/limits or relaxed income restrictions that will allow all children, regardless of family income, the ability to attend a high-quality program
- Establish long-term benefits and compensation incentives for early learning professionals



"Strengths and needs for some families are different for others in the region; depending on your location, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, what is a benefit or a challenge will look different. This is highly important to consider when striving for change." - ESL Specialist

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.

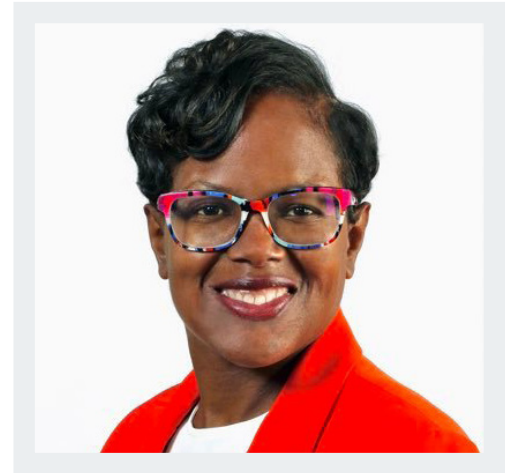
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

Region 1-B-C, also known as Cook County South, would first like to acknowledge all the hard work of our Action Council and Family Council members. To our Action Council members, your detailed analysis of our Region's data and your shared experiences have been instrumental in developing a narrative for the Region's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape. With your help, we have been able to develop a rich understanding of the ECEC needs of Cook County South. As for our Family Council, thank you for using your voice as a catalyst for change. If we genuinely want to support families, we must know what families need. Family Council members, you made it clear what Cook County South needs and showed how important it is to keep children and families at the table when creating policies of change. We are truly grateful for all the insight shared by both Councils.

We express our deepest gratitude to all the educators, providers, families, and caregivers that participated in online surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Your willingness to allow Birth to Five Illinois to amplify your voice is deeply appreciated. Thank you for your devotion to developing a new community system to serve our youngest community members.

We would like to acknowledge all the community partners and stakeholders that engaged in and supported our work across the entire Region. Such partnerships have been tremendous in helping us understand the actual needs of our community. We would like to give a special thanks to Yvonne Spurlock from Illinois Action for Children for your diligence in organizing providers for focus groups. In addition, we would also like to thank Manal Zoubeydi of North Palos School District 117; we deeply appreciate your willingness to be a liaison for us and allowing us to amplify the perspectives of Arabic-speaking families in our Region. The Cook County South Team would also like to acknowledge the support of Cuddle Care of Riverdale, Under Carrey's Care Child Development Center of Riverdale, Oak Lawn Children's Museum, and Echo Enrichment Center of South Holland. Thank you for allowing us to use your space and partnering with us to reach families.

We have gained incredible insight from so many trusted partners in our community, including mental health professionals, family resources service centers, health care professionals, chambers of commerce, and countless others. While we cannot thank you all individually, we want to acknowledge the importance of your voices in understanding the strengths and needs of our Region.

Lastly, we extend a hearty thank you to the 60,328 children in our region. We are working diligently to reimagine an ECEC system that keeps you at the center. Every one of you brings purpose to the work we are doing. Birth to Five Illinois and the Region 1-B-C team will continue to be advocates and champions for you. Thank you so much!

Thank you,

Ashonti Jackson (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 1-B-C
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.

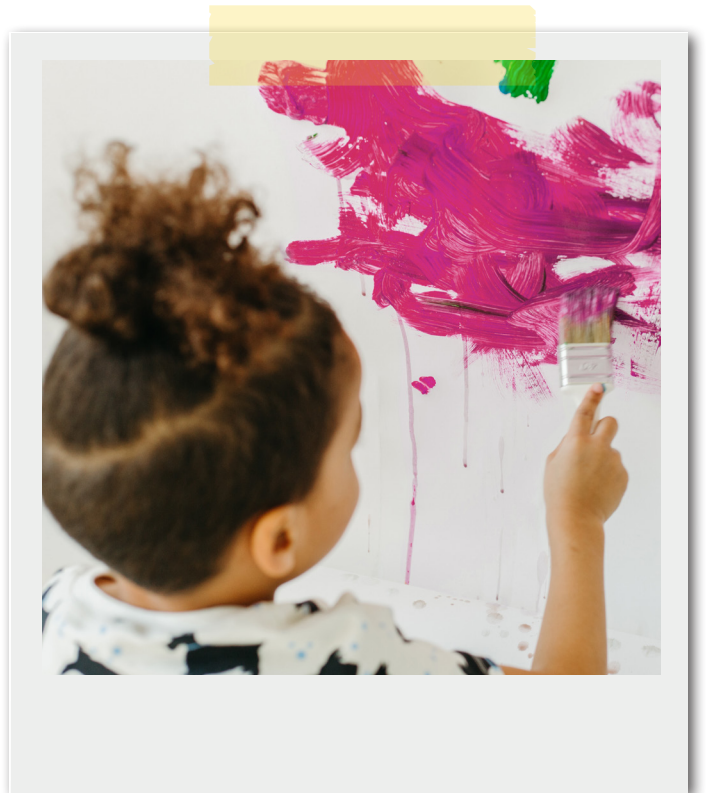
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

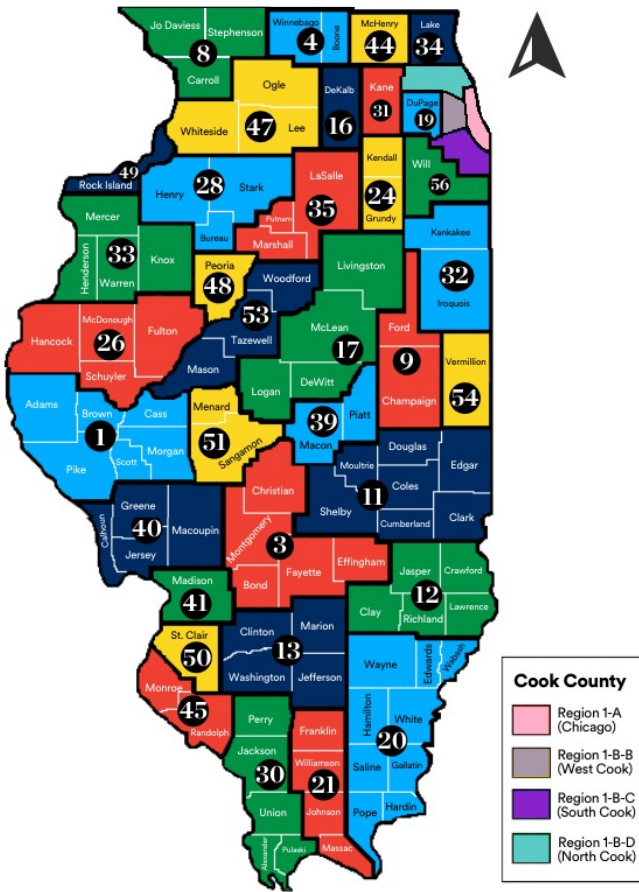


Timeline

- **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.

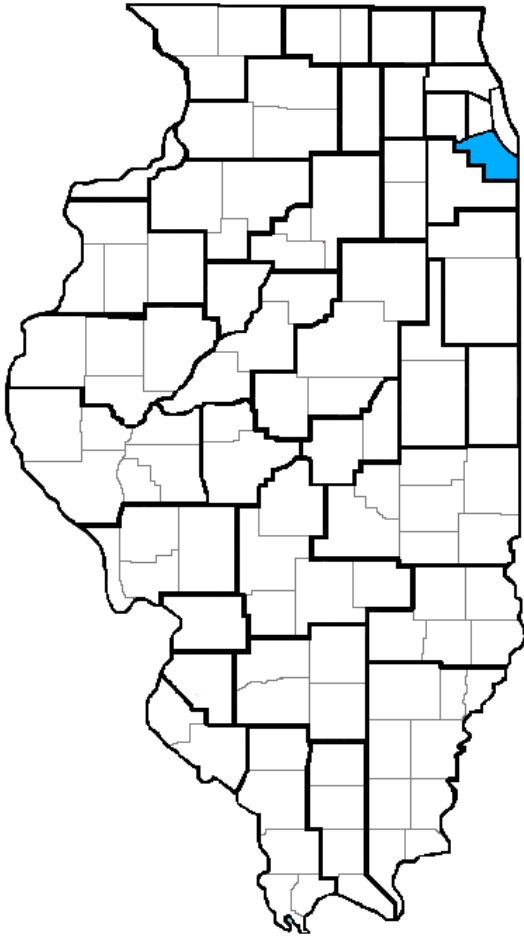
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 1-B-C

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 1-B-C is in northeastern Illinois and is one of four Birth to Five Illinois Regions in Cook County. Cook County is the largest county in the state of Illinois and the second largest county in the United States. Region 1-B-C is the suburban region that shares the south, southwest, and southeastern borders of the City of Chicago. Region 1-B-C is comprised of 55 municipalities, 22 unincorporated communities, and 10 different townships. This large Region spans over 50 miles going as far west as the City of Lemont and as far east as the Indiana state line. Will County borders the south of Region 1-B-C. The Region is accessible by Interstate 57, Interstate 294, Interstate 80, and Interstate 55. Cook County South offers a lot to the 854,430 people in the Region. A strong sense of family and community is woven into the fabric of the area with many opportunities for people of all backgrounds.

While Cook County South is primarily a suburban area, it has pockets of farmland and industrialized areas. Family-owned farms such as Taproot Farms of Tinley Park offer seasonal vegetables to local restaurants, farmers' markets, and consumers. Other farms in the area supply families with beautiful fresh-cut trees for the holiday season and plants for home gardens. In addition to farms in the Region, Chicago Heights has several plants, factories, and freight companies.

The Region is known for its focus on family. Each season, family-focused events are offered by just about every municipality. The Region hosts food festivals, community dances in the park, holiday parades, and bike-o-thons. One of the highlights of the area is the Credit Union One Amphitheatre, which is located right off Interstate 80. This outdoor music venue is in Tinley Park and is one of the largest music venues in the Chicagoland area. It has a capacity of 28,000, offers amazing indoor and outdoor seating, and is a popular place during the summer months for people around the area to visit.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 1-B-C would like to acknowledge the following Peoples whose land we inhabit. The Council of Three Fires: the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi), as well as the Peoria, Myaamia (Miami),



Adult women and child smiling while engaged in learning.

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

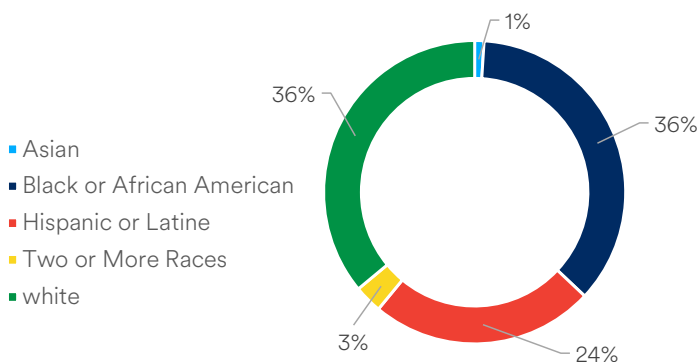
Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kaskaskia, and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Nations are the Native Tribes whose land we walk on. We acknowledge the history and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and continue to contribute as a part of our communities in South Cook County.

Regional Demographics

Region 1-B-C is racially and economically diverse. The 2020 Census-estimated population of this Region is 866,006; 60,328 are children ages birth to five. The largest racial populations are white and Black/African American; the third largest is Hispanic/Latine. Additionally, the Region has a growing population of Middle Eastern families.

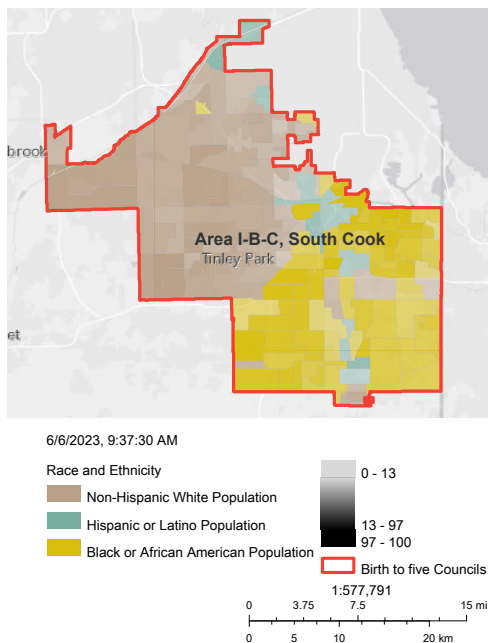
However, this population is not clearly defined in the demographic data available because Middle Eastern Families only have “white” to choose from when identifying their race and non-Hispanic when identifying their ethnicity. Many Arabic families in Palos Hills expressed their concern in not being counted properly in demographic data. Inadequate and incorrect definitions of race and ethnicity can negatively impact services and resources families may need in our Region. Additionally, many asylum seekers from countries such as Venezuela have been bussed from border states (such as Texas and Florida) to Chicago and Cook County. Many asylum-seeking families are housed in towns like Matteson and Harvey, which have minimal immigrant services.

Figure 1: Population of Children Under the Age of Five by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census, 2020
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Predominant Race, Ethnicity by Census Tract



Source: INCRRRA
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The Region is highly racially and economically segregated, with concentrated pockets of people from similar racial and economic backgrounds scattered throughout communities (Figure 2). For example, the town of Thornton has a largely white, non-Hispanic population enclosed by towns such as Harvey, Glenwood, and South Holland, which are over 90% African American.

The 2020 Census estimated that Region 1-B-C had 60,328 children five years or younger: 18,573 (31%) of those children identified as white alone. Most white families in the Region live in the towns of Orland Park, Tinley Park, Oak Forest, Oak Lawn, Burbank, and other western suburbs. Most of the 17,229 children (29%) identified as Black or African American live in the Region’s eastern suburbs, with substantial concentrations of Black families in towns such as Harvey, Dolton, Riverdale, and Calumet City, towns east of Interstate 57 spanning to the Illinois/Indiana border. The Region also has 12,577 (21%) Hispanic children, which has grown over the past few years. Most Hispanic families and children are in towns such as Blue Island, Posen, Chicago Heights, and between 171st Street and 157th Street in the South Holland and Harvey areas.

Children in Priority Populations

It is important to also consider priority populations in the Region. The Illinois Early Learning Council defines priority population as a community group living within one or many different risk factors that have been historically underrepresented and underserved.² Priority populations are not limited to gender, race, nationality, age, income, or education level. 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 ECEC stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

Data on most priority populations is limited, but qualitative data was collected from members of priority populations and those who serve them throughout the development of this report. While there is not a lot of detailed information on whom in Region 1-B-C falls into every priority population, the Action and Family Councils focused on: children in families living on poverty or deep poverty incomes, children experiencing homelessness, children of underage parents, children/families with Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) involvement, and children in families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion.

“As a teen mom, I had my challenges and did not do everything right, but I knew I wanted the best for my child.”
-Community Member

The Region has median income ranges starting at the lowest of \$15,436 annually to around \$119,712 dollars annually, meaning that the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) across the Region varies quite a bit. 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 Figure 3). Some ECEC programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, use FPL to determine if a family qualifies for services. Out of the 60,328 children in the Region under the age of five, 25,180 live at or below 200% FPL (Figure 2), meaning 42% of children birth to five years old live with limited means and resources. Most of the children living at or below 200% FPL are Black or Hispanic and live on the eastern side of the Region (Figure 2).

Figure 3: Federal Poverty Levels at 50%, 100%, and 200% for a Family of Four

	At or Below 50% FPL	At or Below 100% FPL	At or Below 200% FPL
Family of Four	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$52,400

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

Ford Heights, located on the eastern side of Region 1-B-C, has the lowest median income (\$15,436) and a population of 2,705 that is over 90% Black or African American; of the 200 children under the age of five, a majority live at or below 100% FPL (Figure 4). Lemont, located on the western side of the Region, has the highest median income (\$119,712) and a population of 17,131 that is over 90% white; of the 992 children under the age of five, only 33 live at or below 100% FPL (Figure 5).

It is also important to note that most children in this Region live with one working parent (Figure 6). Many may need extended care hours outside the half-day or even full-day ECEC programs, along with a strong need for transportation and other supportive services, yet that may not be available to them.

² <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Figure 4: Number of Children in Poverty in Ford Heights, Illinois.

Children in Poverty in Ford Heights						
Federal Poverty Levels	0%-100% FPL		101%-200% FPL		201%-400% FPL	
Children 0-2 Years	76	57%	15	11%	39	29%
Children 3-5 Years	63	61%	10	10%	30	29%
Total Children	139	58%	25	11%	69	29%

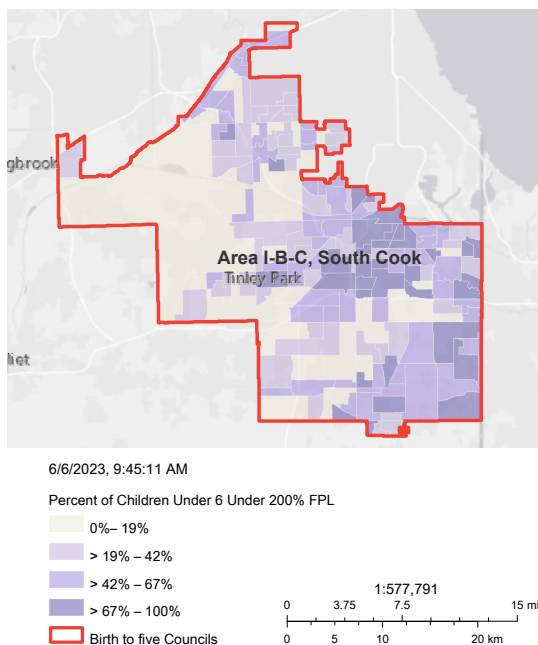
Source: U.S Department of Health and Human Services
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 5: Number of Children in Poverty in Lemont, Illinois.

Children in Poverty in Ford Heights						
Federal Poverty Levels	0%-100% FPL		101%-200% FPL		201%-400% FPL	
Children 0-2 Years	19	3%	1	0.18%	118	21%
Children 3-5 Years	14	3%	0	0.00%	88	21%
Total Children	33	3%	1	0.10%	206	20%

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

Figure 5: Location of Children Ages Birth to Five at or Below 200% FPL



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

In 2020, 60% of Illinoisans experiencing homelessness or who were unhoused lived in Cook County and 8% of those live in Suburban Cook County.³ Three percent of those in Suburban Cook County are youth experiencing homelessness. While these numbers provide an idea of the scope of housing insecurities in the Region, it would be beneficial to have data that is specific to Region 1-B-C since, currently, most of the available data is aggregated at the county level.

According to the Cook County Health Atlas⁴, areas such as Justice, Robbins, Riverdale, Harvey, Markham, Steger, South Chicago Heights, Ford Heights, and Sauk Village all have underage birth rates (defined as children born to mothers under the age of 19) between 30% and 53%. The lower numbers are reported in Sauk Village and the higher numbers are reported in Ford Heights. Thornton Township High School (District 205) offers an Infant Care Center where underage parents can bring their children while they are at school. However, outside of this program, there are no other programs or services in the Region specifically designed to support underage parents.

³ <https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/trauma-informed/trauma-informed-yeh/>

⁴ <https://cookcountyhealthatlas.org/>

There are also places in the Region that have reported children involved with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). For example, the town of South Holland has 41 children recorded with DCFS involvement in 2020: Oak Lawn has 56 children and Park Forest has 55 children. Unfortunately, data on DCFS involvement across the Region has been difficult to find.

The last priority population the Action and Family Councils identified were children in families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion. They specifically focused on families that may face barriers accessing ECEC programs and services because they speak a language other than English. Region 1-B-C has a large population of limited English-speaking households. According to the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), there are an estimated 4,948 Spanish-speaking households and 7,680 households that speak other languages. Other languages are mostly Indo-European languages, which are languages spoken in most of Europe and areas of European settlement along with much of Southwest and South Asia.⁵ In the towns of Palos Heights and Justice, Indo-European languages, such as Polish and Arabic, are spoken second to English.

While there are other priority populations found in the Region, those listed here are several for which quantitative data was available. Qualitative data for other identified priority populations has been woven throughout this report to truly amplify the ECEC resources needed for all families in the Region.

It is essential to understand the demographics of the Region so that children and families who need services are included. Currently, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs and services have a higher concentration in just one area of the Region, even though the need for programs and services are found throughout the Region. Additionally, understanding the changing demographics of this area will help to plan for and provide services that support our current and future community members of the Region.

“ We must be aware of the unique population we are serving and their ethnic background before we can adequately provide support services in these areas.
- Community Member ”

⁵ Indo-European languages: Definition, Map, Characteristics, & Facts

Local Community Collaborations

A Local ECEC Community Collaboration is designed to bring partners, stakeholders, and community members together at a local level. Collaborations comprise a diverse spectrum of people, programs, and services that all aim to improve young children's and families live in their communities. Together they address complexities in a community's ECEC landscape while finding ways to support families and children. An ECEC Collaboration aims to share the goals of keeping children safe, healthy, and on a path to success.



State Team visiting Region 1-B-C Team during Halloween. From left to right, Jaime Garibay (FACE Specialist), Ashonti Jackson (Regional Council Manager), Cicely Fleming (Department Director), Dena Chapman (FACE Manager), and Leah Armour (Regional Administrative Support).

In January 2023, the Birth to Five Forum of South Cook County was awarded a Birth to Five Illinois Planning Grant. The grants fund the establishment of new ECEC Collaborations in areas that do not currently have them. This grant encourages a systems-level approach to improving ECEC. Birth to Five Forum of South Cook County goals for this grant are to establish Coordinated Intake so that families can be connected to available resources, provide developmental screening for 300 children in the Region, and to increase enrollment in ECEC programs by 25%

The rest of Region 1-B-C, however, is a Collaboration desert. There are no known locally recognized and established Early Learning Collaborations in the Region. The lack of established Local Community Collaborations is due to many different factors. One of the most

significant themes shared by Action Council members is the lack of funding for Community Collaborations. Organizations such as Southeast Childcare Association (SECA) and the Preschool Owners Association struggled with getting adequate funding to support Early Learning work in the Region. Region 1-B-C previously formed Collaborations, but they are no longer in existence due to a lack of funding.

When a Collaboration ends, the community is left with the question, "Now what?" The inconsistency of establishing long-term partnerships has left families and community stakeholders mistrusting organizations that come into the Region. Many feel that these organizations profited from them without providing support or the promised help. Organizations promised partnership but partnership was never truly established.

Another common theme in conversations with community members is the varied and opposing interests in the Region. With the Region being so racially and economically segregated, many organizations work in silos to address the needs of their immediate community. This approach leaves many in the Region needing more resources and services, especially communities of color and those part of priority populations. Organizations working in silos create a competitive nature between them instead of a collaborative one.

Blue Island, Posen, Calumet Park, Markham, Country Club Hills, Midlothian, and Riverdale are areas in the Region that have a higher need for Community Collaboration. It was shared during an Action Council meeting that these areas have various families that are in different priority populations. An Early Childhood Collaboration with diverse stakeholders from all over the Region would break down the racial and socioeconomic segregation of the Region, while allowing the area a more unified voice and potentially removing barriers to access for those families with lower incomes or that have been historically minoritized by lack of resources.

“Wouldn't it be nice to have a Collaboration representing all the Region 1-B-C communities?”
- Retired ECEC Educator”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Figure 7: Early Childhood Education and Care Programs, Funding, Description

ECEC Program	Funding Source	Description
Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS)	U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services	Provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to income-eligible children from birth to age five and their families.
Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion (PFA)/(PFA-E)	Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Provides high-quality educational programs for children ages 3-4, who are determined to face barriers for academic achievement.
Prevention Initiative (PI)	Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Provides home visiting and center-based services for infants and toddlers from families facing barriers.
Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)	Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)	Assists income-eligible parents with child care payments while working or engaged in education or training activities.
Early Intervention (EI)	Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)	Provides resources and supports to infants and toddlers, from birth to age three, with diagnosed disabilities or developmental issues.

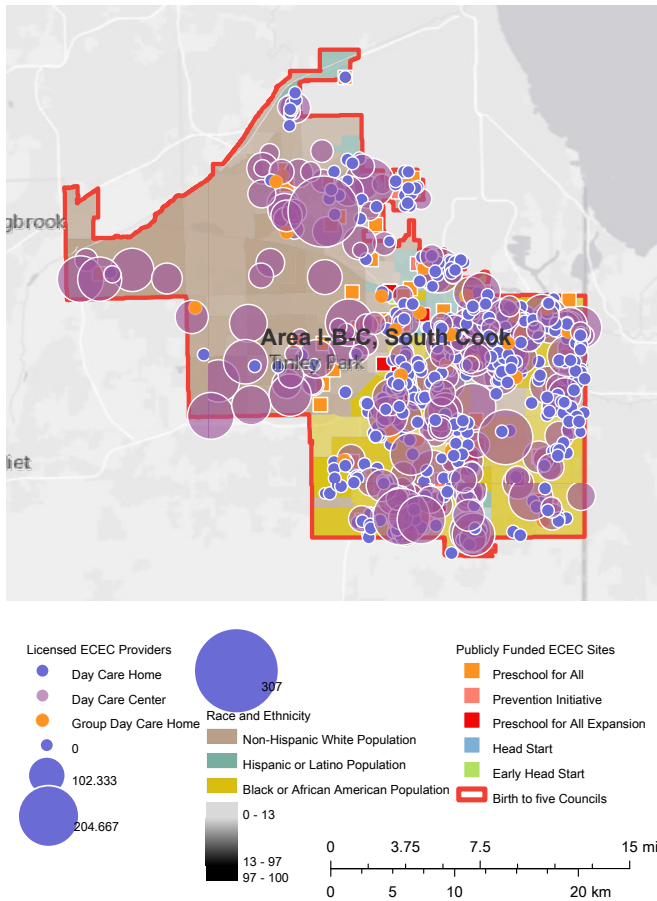
Source: IDHS, ISBE, IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

ECEC programs service our youngest learners. These programs support the needs of children birth to five years of age to reach developmental milestones, obtain and maintain access to quality care, and become Kindergarten ready. These programs aim to allow children, regardless of economic status, race, or ability, the opportunity to learn in a caring environment.

Region 1-B-C has 9,903 publicly funded slots at 195 sites. Based on the 2020 Census data, the Region has 60,328 children under the age of five. Of the children under the age of five, 12,572 live at or below 100% FPL, which qualifies many of these children for programs and demonstrates that Region 1-B-C has a high need for more publicly funded ECEC sites and licensed ECEC programs.

As mentioned, Region 1-B-C is segregated by race and socioeconomic status. This separation is also found when examining the locations of ECEC programs in the Region, however, this division does not coincide with the racial and income divides. Communities in the northwestern and western edges of our Region have very few programs and child care centers, while the eastern and southeastern communities are saturated with programs (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Location of ECEC and Publicly Funded Programs, Children Ages Birth to Five by Race, Ethnicity



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There is also a lack of programs and services found in predominantly white communities with higher incomes. In conversation with our Action Council, we determined that not everyone in these communities has a higher income and there are children that would benefit from programs in these areas. Most of the Region’s Preschool for All and Preschool for All Expansion programs are on the eastern side of the Region in towns such as Dolton, Riverdale, Calumet City, and Harvey; Calumet City has the highest number of PFA slots with 468. These towns also have 70-85% of children under six living at 200% of the FPL. In contrast, there are fewer areas of publicly funded ECEC sites on the northwestern side of the Region in towns such as Midlothian and Evergreen Park with 198 and 60 PFA slots, respectively.

There are more licensed ECEC providers on the southeast side of the Region. Thornton Township, which encompasses 15 towns on the Region’s eastern side, has the most licensed providers. There are 58 providers with a total capacity of 5,098 children. Data also tells us that the eastern towns of Region 1-B-C have more home-base child care providers than western towns. We see this in areas such as Dolton, Riverdale, and South Holland. Dolton has the highest number of child care homes with a total of 28; Riverdale and South Holland both have 17 child care homes. There are towns in Region 1-B-C with almost zero licensed child care providers. The town of Dixmoor has 338 children and zero licensed child care or Head Start care.

“Oak Lawn community has a lot of small businesses and good children engagements but not enough flexibility for Pre-K.”
-Family Member

“Where are the children in these western communities going?”
-Business Owner

“My village only has 20 Preschool for All slots. Families fight over slots to enroll their children in the program. The school even visits home to ensure you live in the community. It is tough for the children to be accepted.”
-Family Focus Group Participant

The Region also has approximately 440 license-exempt and family child care home provider locations. These locations provide care for 14,093 children. These locations offer care to children from birth to 13 years of age. However, many parents and caregivers seek this type of care for children under age three. License-exempt providers care for children with a mix of private pay and child care assistance programs. The Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides families with information and financial assistance to locate child care while working or in school. CCAP pays licensed or license-exempt providers for the children in

their care monthly. Families are responsible for a co-pay which can be as low as zero dollars. Region 1-B-C has 9,807 children who receive CCAP (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Children Receiving CCAP Assistance by Family, Provider Location

	Ages Birth to Two	Ages Three to Five	Total
Children receiving assistance by family location	4,397	5,215	9,807
Children receiving assistance by provider loc	4,495	4,495	9,927

Source: IDHS, ISBE, IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Region 1-B-C has many federal and state funded ECEC programs. The programs in the Region do not meet the needs of all our children. According to the child care deserts website, Region 1-B-C is home to several communities that offer little to no ECEC programs including Steger, Ford Heights, Justice, Hometown, Lemont, Worth, and Chicago Ridge.⁶ Other areas are saturated with programs but cannot meet the needs of the families in the communities. Most of these programs are in areas with families living at lower income levels. However, many of these programs do not have the capacity or staffing to meet the needs of all the qualifying families in the area. Overall, Region 1-B-C has a mix of ECEC programs and services, but due to locations and capacity limitations, equitable care is not being provided to all the children who are ages birth to five in the Region.

Figure 10: Number of Publicly Funded Sites, Capacity

Providers	Number of Sites	Capacity	Ages Served
Preschool for All	90	6,050	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	26	880	Three to Four
Prevention Initiative	38	1,662	Birth to Three
Head Start	22	875	Three to Five
Early Head Start	19	436	Birth to Three
Total	195	9,903	-

Source: IDHS, ISBE, IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Understanding the ECEC program landscape for the Region helps ensure that any program expansion is done with consideration of the needs of everyone in Region 1-B-C.

⁶ <https://childcaredeserts.org/>

Slot Gap

To evaluate ECEC in an area, it is important to understand the number of programs and services available to accommodate children 0 to 5 years old. Every Preschool for All (PFA), Head Start, child care center, licensed provider, and so on, is only allowed to service a certain number of children. This is called the program's capacity. If a program cannot accommodate eligible children in the area, it creates a slot gap. We cannot meet the needs of young children if we do not have enough programs or space to service them. Analyzing the number of early learning slots in comparison to children is imperative in learning how to better support these children.

According to the 2020 Census data, Region 1-B-C has 60,328 children from ages birth to five: 30,138 ages birth to age two and 30,190 ages three to five (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Overall Population, Number of Children

Population	Children 0-2 Years	Children 3-5 Years	Total Children
866,006	30,138	30,190	60,328

Source: U.S. Census
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Region has 167 licensed child care centers with a capacity for 14,901 children. There are seven license-exempt locations with a capacity for 526 children. Region 1-B-C also has 266 licensed family child care homes. These homes together have 2,641 slots. (Figure 12). That actively demonstrates that in Region 1-B-C only 18,068 children can be served in an ECEC program. That is approximately 30% of the Region's children. Leaving 42,260 children under five years old in the Region without an Early Learning seat.

With so many children under the age of five without a seat in our Region's ECEC programs, it is important to know where the children are going. High quality ECEC can put children and families successfully on the path toward lifelong good health and well-being, especially among the most negatively impacted by inequitable systems. Children that attend ECEC programs have increased school readiness and better social-emotional development, along with greater likelihood of meeting benchmarks. This is evident in children involved with the DCFS system. In fact, children in this priority population have a much better outcome for lifelong success versus those that do not attend an ECEC program.

Figure 12: Number of Slots by Provider Type and Age Group

Provider Type	Locations	Ages Birth to One	Age Two	Ages Three to Kindergarten	License Capacity
Licensed	167	3,458	2,218	6,656	14,901
License Exempt	7	2	22	291	526
FCCH	266	441	276	729	2,641
Total	440	3,901	2,516	7,676	18,068

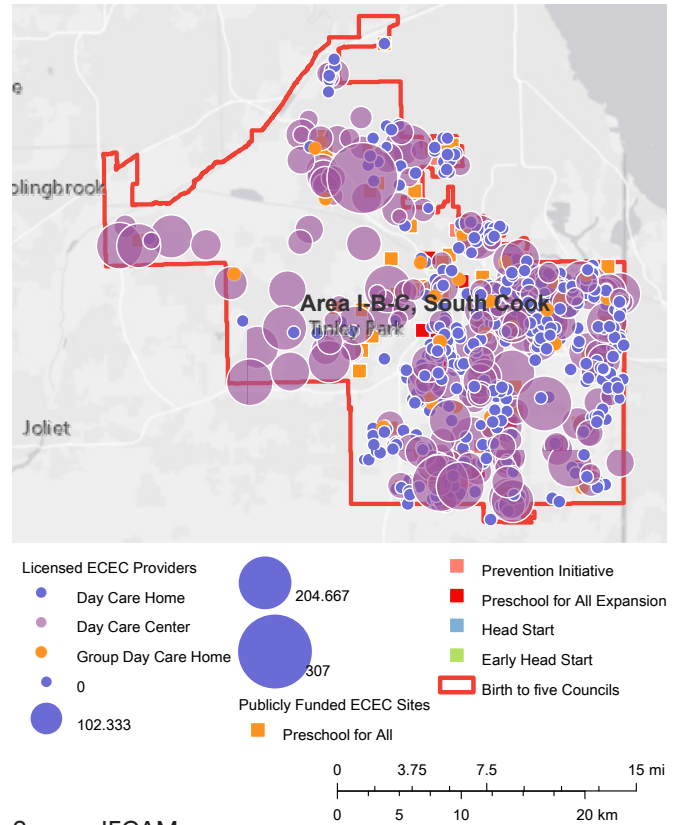
Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Currently, no data is available for private care slots, the number of children in Catholic schools, or the number of children under the care of a family member, friend, or neighbor. This lack of information does not allow us to address the full capacity needs of Region 1-B-C. The lack of this data could be one of the reasons we see ECEC deserts in areas of the Region (Figure 13).

Additionally, there is a slot gap for publicly funded programs, such as Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, and Prevention Initiative. According to the most recent data, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has funded 8,592 slots across all publicly funded programs. There are an additional 1,311 slots federally funded for Head Start and Early Head Start programs in the Region (Figure 14).

It is evident that Region 1-B-C needs additional capacity for children in early learning programs because there are more children than spaces available. But there is also a need for additional data to determine what services and funding would be beneficial for the children in the Region, especially data on layered funding. Programs can potentially layer Early Head Start and Head Start slots with Preschool for All or Prevention Initiative slots; however, without a way to see how many children are receiving funding from multiple funding sources, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of what the slot gap truly is for the Region. More data would be helpful in establishing the number of children and expectant families enrolled in home-based programs, which would allow for more tangible information on meeting the needs of priority populations in the Region.

Figure 13: Location of Licensed, Publicly Funded Sites



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 14: Number of Publicly Funded Slots by Program Type

PFA Slots	PFA-E Slots	PI Slots	HS Slots	EHS Slots	Total Slots
6,050	880	1,662	875	436	9,903

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Home-based programs and Early Intervention services are not caring for children; they are support services.”
-Community Member

“My cousin was watching my children and unfortunately could not care for them anymore. I wanted my kids to go somewhere but I could not find anywhere that could care for all three of my children.”
-Community Member

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

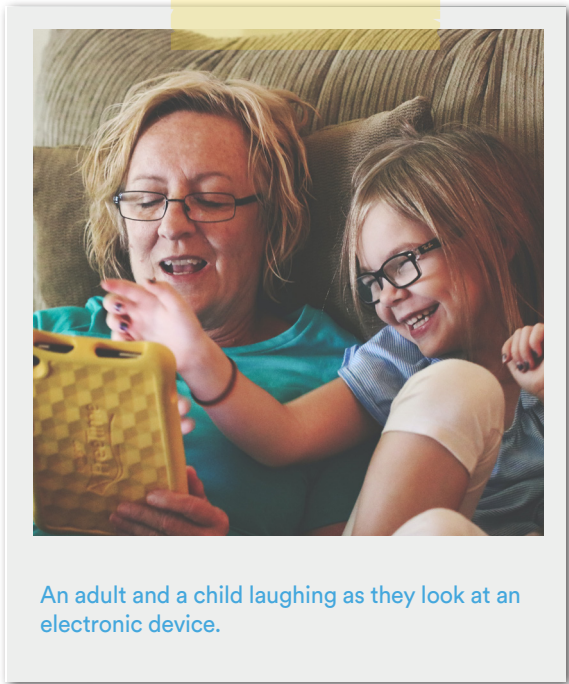
“We are not just babysitters. We are teachers and should be treated as such.”
-Community Member

ECEC professionals have been called the “workforce that supports the workforce.” It includes center directors, administrators, teachers, teacher assistants, managers, family child care home providers, social workers, Early Intervention specialists, and so many more positions.

Licensed professionals, which include center and home provider staff, must register in the Gateways Registry, a site that tracks professional development training and offers additional courses that count toward ExceleRate’s Circles of Quality and credentialing. Data provided by INCCRRA from the Gateways Registry lists 3,277 licensed child care professionals and 887 license-exempt family child care home providers (Figure 15).⁷

Below is a breakdown of the total number of licensed child care professionals by role, enrolled in the Registry:

- Administrators: 434
- Teachers: 1,396
- Assistant Teachers: 1,026
- Teacher Aides: 136
- Licensed Substitute/Floater Staff: 45
- School-Age Workers: 63
- School-Age Assistants: 23
- Youth Development Practitioners: 0
- Other Direct Service Providers: 91
- Other Indirect Service Providers: 55
- Family, Friend, or Neighbor Caregivers: 6
- School-Age Site Coordinators: 2



Additionally, INCCRRA data combines family child care home providers and their assistants with substitutes/floaters, other direct service providers, and other indirect service providers. Below is a breakdown of the number of professionals, by role:

- Family Child Care Home Providers: 553
- Family Child Care Home Assistants: 296
- License-Exempt Substitute/Floater Staff: 30
- Other Direct Service Providers: 7
- Other Indirect Service Providers: 1

The ECEC workforce in the Region is racially and ethnically diverse. The majority of the Region’s licensed Center Directors and teaching staff self-identify as Black or African American (Figure 15). There are a higher number of ECEC staff who self-identify as white on the western side of the Region in communities that are predominantly white. The majority of the ECEC workforce are monolingual, English-speaking women who are African American or white. This can present a barrier to non-English speaking families and

⁷ Data includes licensed professionals who were listed in the Gateways Registry as of March 2021.

the growing number of those who self-identify as Arabic who are moving into the Region and growing their families. Council members noted that towns such as Oak Lawn have more racial and ethnic diversity, with many ECEC teachers who self-identify as Hispanic or Latine and white.

The workforce teacher to student ratio is much higher for licensed family child care (FCC) staff. Those who self-identify as Black or African Americans make up most of the workforce. Based on conversations with community and Council members, there is a strong possibility that there are more Hispanic or Latine license-exempt providers; however, data is not available to support that.

Figure 15: Race and Ethnicity of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Staff⁸

Position Type	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	White
Center Direct	6	255	32	9	6	119
Teaching S	11	1,486	328	79	50	656
FCC Staff	*	471	27	14	6	29

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

ECEC providers reported not having the training they need to continue in the field, and turnover is high. The COVID-19 pandemic left the ECEC workforce strained and depleted; 56% of ECEC professionals across Illinois did not return to the field after the height of the pandemic.⁹ This left the field, which was already historically short-staffed, in a fragile state. Many ECEC programs closed, lowered capacity, or required staff to work longer hours due to the shortage.

There have been attempts to grow the ECEC workforce in Region 1-B-C. Arab American Family Services, located in the town of Worth, partnered with a Parent Mentor Program to increase workforce opportunities for Arabic Speaking ECEC staff. StarNet Region II is also providing professional learning and development to Preschool For All educators and staff, and both Eisenhower and Shepherd High Schools in Districts 218 are offering Early Childhood Education (ECE) classes to students interested in the field.

In addition to initiatives to grow the workforce, there are training programs and scholarships that can be accessed for ECEC staff to obtain degrees and other ECEC credentials. Gateways to Opportunity is the second largest ECEC professional development database in the nation. Professionals can take classes and training to gain higher levels of credentials in the ECEC field. Center Directors, for example, can use Gateways to Opportunity online courses to work toward the Director Credential, which requires the completion of an associate degree and working at least 1,200 hours as a Center Director or Assistant Director. A Level 1 ECE Credential only requires the completion of modules through the Gateways Registry; however, additional ECE Credentials require professionals to enroll in a college or university program. This may be a barrier for some who may want to continue in the field but cannot afford to pay for additional courses, or the who do not have time between other work, family, and personal obligations. For those who are considering higher level credentials, the additional pay they receive for completing coursework may not be enough to justify the financial and time investment they must make to attain the credentials.

⁸ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

⁹ <https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois-Child-Care-COVID-Impact-Report.pdf>

While many licensed teaching staff have completed at least some college coursework, they remain vastly underpaid, especially compared to others in the educational field. Kindergarten teachers in Illinois make around \$63,000 dollars annually, while pre-K teachers make almost 50% less at about \$33,000 dollars annually.¹⁰ The pay is so low for many in the ECEC field that many reported that they must rely on public assistance and subsidies to provide for themselves and their families.

Figure 16: Educational Attainment of ECEC Professionals, by Position Type⁸

Position Type	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	37	31	24	100	136	77
Teaching Staff	1,204	178	154	429	456	117
FCC Staff	254	18	53	88	68	38

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Additionally, ECEC professionals said that employers are not always supportive of staff attending classes because they are afraid that staff will leave once they complete their degree; many do not allow staff to attend classes during work time. Early Childhood Access Consortium navigators reported that some people find the application process (for continuing and advanced education and as well as scholarships) to be challenging, especially for those whose first language is not English. In addition, navigators shared that professionals who have degrees or coursework from outside of the U.S. reported having difficulty getting classes verified and transferred to count toward their degree.

There are some options for those who would like to work in the field but are unable to afford a degree or additional credentials. The Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois program is available for students interested in pursuing a degree in ECE. The program targets Illinois high school seniors, college freshmen, and college sophomores and offers up to \$23,000 in financial assistance, mentoring, job placement assistance, as well as classroom teaching experience. In addition, the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship Program (ECACE) was created to address the shortage of ECEC educators. It targets those already working in the field, as well as those who are interested in pursuing a degree in ECE. However, it is limited to certain colleges and universities, which may not be an option for all interested in utilizing the program. This is especially true if coursework is not accessible online and in-person attendance is required.

An ECEC workforce that diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, language, and gender, and well-supported professionals can create a positive outcome for children in the Region. Investing in professional development and higher compensation will increase the workforce, ensuring young children and their families will be better supported.

¹⁰ https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-6.pdf

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Parents, families, and caregivers are at the center of the ECEC landscape, but they have often been left out of conversations. Through focus groups, interviews, community conversations, and Council meetings, many expressed how difficult it has been in accessing quality care that meets the needs of their children and aligns with the needs of their family. Some parents/caregivers reported that not only have they been challenged with the high cost of enrolling their children in ECEC programs, but many said they were not even sure how to find or access services. Families are under pressure to find programs that are open long enough to accommodate their work hours but are limited in where they can send their children due to strict eligibility requirements and long waitlists.



Breakfast with Santa, captured by the Harvey Public Library.

“ I was on a waiting list for over three months for my daughter to go to child care. After finally getting a space, I was told I had to wait even longer for CCAP approval, which I was ultimately denied for being slightly over income. I missed so much work and felt like I had no real options.

-Parent

Access to publicly funded programs is limited due to the imbalance of slots available in comparison to the number of children in the Region. The eligibility for most of these programs is either based on income or various risk factors. Children that are identified with having risk factors such as experiencing homelessness, developmental delays, or experiencing a certain poverty level can be eligible for programs. There are also families that do not qualify for programs because they make a little too much money. In some cases, families miss the cap by as little as one dollar and are denied access. In addition, children have not been admitted to programs because they do not meet the disability threshold for some publicly funded programs, even if they score lower or identify under certain risk factors. Many families have shared that after the COVID-19 pandemic, they recognized the need for additional support for their children but reported that program eligibility requirements do not consider these needs.

Programs In Region 1-B-C are not equitable for all children in the area. Parents and caregivers in historically minoritized communities, such as those who are Black or African American and Hispanic or Latine, report having limited access to quality early learning programs because programs do not align with their work schedule, beginning and ending while they are traveling to work or in the middle of their workday. Many of the 40,800+ children living with one or more working parents/caregivers are unable to attend publicly funded programs due to the hours while their families struggle with getting them to and from half-day programs. This requires families to lean more toward child care centers that have longer hours of care or license-exempt care. However, license-exempt care does not always offer the same educational benefits as an ECEC program, which can leave children at a disadvantage in school readiness.

“ We are working 50-60 hours a week to cover child care costs!

- Focus Group Participant

“

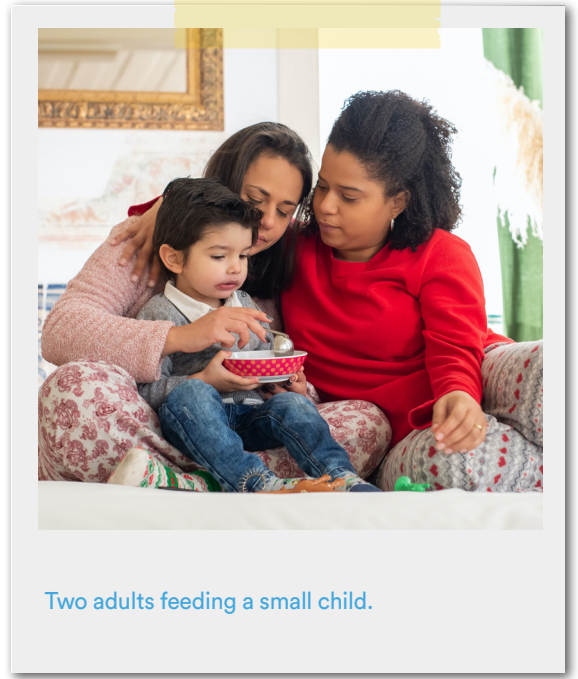
The good programs I am not able to get my kid to. The programs in my community are just watching the kids, they are not learning much of anything.

-Community Member

”

The high cost of child care is a looming crisis that affects millions of families. The same is true for Region 1-B-C. Families that are not eligible for CCAP find themselves paying upwards of \$700 a month, if not more, for child care. With the rising cost of living, food, and needs, many must make the decision to either pay rent or child care every month. In the last few years, the state of Illinois has moved in a positive direction to remove barriers to quality care based on income limitations. Recognizing the need for children to have consistent and quality care, income limits have been raised for the initial application and re-determination process for CCAP. While this is a step in the right direction, there are still strict income limits for federally funded programs.

Additionally, transportation was often cited as a barrier to accessing programs. Public transportation is not easily accessible in the Region, especially in towns like Riverdale. Parents/caregivers can easily spend two hours on public transportation going from an ECEC program to work. Having to make multiple transfers and long wait times makes it nearly impossible for families to rely on public transportation.



Two adults feeding a small child.

“

I have encouraged parents to miss a day of work unpaid just to keep their CCAP.

-Center Director

”

“

I decided to stay out of work because I was going to be working just to pay for child care.

-Community Member

”

Regional Strengths & Needs

When looking at the strengths and needs of Region 1-B-C, it is important to be mindful that each community is different. What is a strength in one community may not be in another. Similarly, what is a need in one area of the Region may be more or less severe in another area. After speaking with families and community stakeholders, we identified several strengths and needs. These changes will not come overnight, but this is a start.

Strengths

- Parents and caregivers take ownership of their child’s ECEC experience and want the best for their children.
- Higher concentration of ECEC programs in minoritized communities.
- Educational support for ECEC teachers and providers, such as Gateways to Opportunity, ECACE scholarships, and other support for staff to grow in their careers.
- Providers network within the Region and are supportive of each other.
- Awareness in the community that is centered on developing strong family support.
- Workforce members are committed to the work, with a very strong work ethic, despite low wages.
- Families have positive relationships with school staff.
- Communities are ready for potential new partnerships.
- Families love their neighborhoods and feel a part of their communities.

Needs

- Community Navigators that can connect families and providers to programs and resources and provide support when applying for ECEC services.
- Affordable quality care with extended hours for families that work non-traditional hours.
- Early Intervention services, Home Visiting, and easier access to special needs supports.
- Increased program capacity and more full-day classrooms.
- Stronger support for immigrant families and all families that speak languages other than English.
- Increased number of programs in ECEC deserts and on the west side of Region.
- Dismantlement of silos and segregation within ECEC programs across the Region.
- Transportation support for families, caregivers, and ECEC providers.
- Recruitment of a racially diverse ECEC workforce with better pay and benefits, and initiatives to support educational and career advancements.

Recommendations

Because the Region is so racially and socio-economically diverse and segregated, it was challenging to determine the actual needs of the full Region. Many families in the area have limited resources that do not address what their families need. Ensuring that resources match families' needs is just a first step. Region 1-B-C would benefit the most from having affordable, quality ECEC programs that are accessible and equitable for all children in the Region. There is a great benefit in having these programs run by a highly qualified ECEC workforce. Therefore, the recommendations are centered around four areas:

- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Accessibility and Affordability
- Quality
- Workforce Development

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

- Program funding to support families that speak languages other than English. Funding will allow programs to hire interpreters or give stipends to parent educators who are willing to interpret for other families.
- Establish community navigators who can help support intentional outreach efforts that target marginalized and under-resourced communities and families while helping to provide a seamless ECEC application experience.

Accessibility

- Increase publicly funded program capacity, locations, home visiting programs, and hours of care to provide a more equitable ECEC landscape.
- Enable publicly funded programs to partner with licensed and license-exempt providers to assist with/provide transportation.
- Provide incentives to ECEC programs that are strategically placed along public transportation routes.
- Implementation of child care cost caps/limits or relaxed income restrictions that will allow all children, regardless of family income, the ability to attend a high-quality program.

Quality

- Optimize community partnerships and Community Collaborations to develop unified mechanisms to connect families across the Region with resources and ECEC programs.
- Engage license-exempt providers in home-based coaching programs that will supplement the educational development of children in their care.

Workforce Development

- Encourage programs to hire specialized staff and provide professional and educational development at little or no cost to staff.
- Create statewide salary guidelines for ECEC staff to ensure equitable living wages and annual increases.
- Establish long-term benefits and compensation incentives for early learning professionals.

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-C, 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 B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: 2023 Federal Poverty Guidelines and Maximum Income Cap for Publicly Funded Programs

	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Head Start, Early Head Start	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Free Meals via Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Medicaid	Women, Infants, Children (WIC); Reduced Meals via Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), New	Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Rede	Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Prevention Initiative
Family Size	50% FPL	100% FPL	130% FPL	138% FPL	185% FPL	225% FPL	275% FPL	400% FPL
1	\$7,290	\$14,580	\$18,954	\$20,120	\$26,973	\$32,805	\$40,095	\$58,320
2	\$9,860	\$19,720	\$25,636	\$27,214	\$36,482	\$44,370	\$54,230	\$78,880
3	\$12,430	\$24,860	\$32,318	\$34,300	\$45,991	\$55,935	\$68,365	\$99,440
4	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$39,000	\$41,400	\$55,500	\$67,500	\$82,500	\$120,000
5	\$17,570	\$35,140	\$45,682	\$48,493	\$65,009	\$79,065	\$96,635	\$140,560
6	\$20,140	\$40,280	\$52,364	\$55,586	\$74,518	\$90,630	\$110,770	\$161,120
7	\$22,710	\$45,420	\$59,046	\$62,680	\$84,027	\$102,195	\$124,905	\$181,680
8	\$25,280	\$50,560	\$65,728	\$69,773	\$93,536	\$113,760	\$139,040	\$202,240
9	\$27,850	\$55,700	\$72,410	\$76,866	\$103,045	\$125,325	\$153,175	\$222,800
10	\$30,420	\$60,840	\$79,092	\$83,959	\$112,554	\$136,890	\$167,310	\$243,360

Source: INCCRRA
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.

Parents, Families, 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'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 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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