



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 24

(Grundy & Kendall Counties)





Region 24 Staff

Regional Council Manager: Sharkisha Jones (she/her)
Family & Community Engagement Specialist: Mandy Bailey (she/her)
Administrative Support: Melissa Kanning (she/her)

Office Address: 1304 Sunset Ave., Suite B, Yorkville, IL 60560

Phone Number (309) 270-5699

Email: sjones@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region24

Region 24 Action Council Members

Nancy Beal
Genny Haggard
Jessica Kubiak
Ann Marie Kuta
Glenda Love
Jami Mast
Cory Mehnert
Michelle Polivka
Melissa Vargas

Region 24 Family Council Members

Patti Blahetka
Shannon Meyer
Omar Meza
Rolando Paramo
Nikki Pehlke
Nicole Soloff
Kennedy Sparks
Michelle Strom

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Region 24 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.

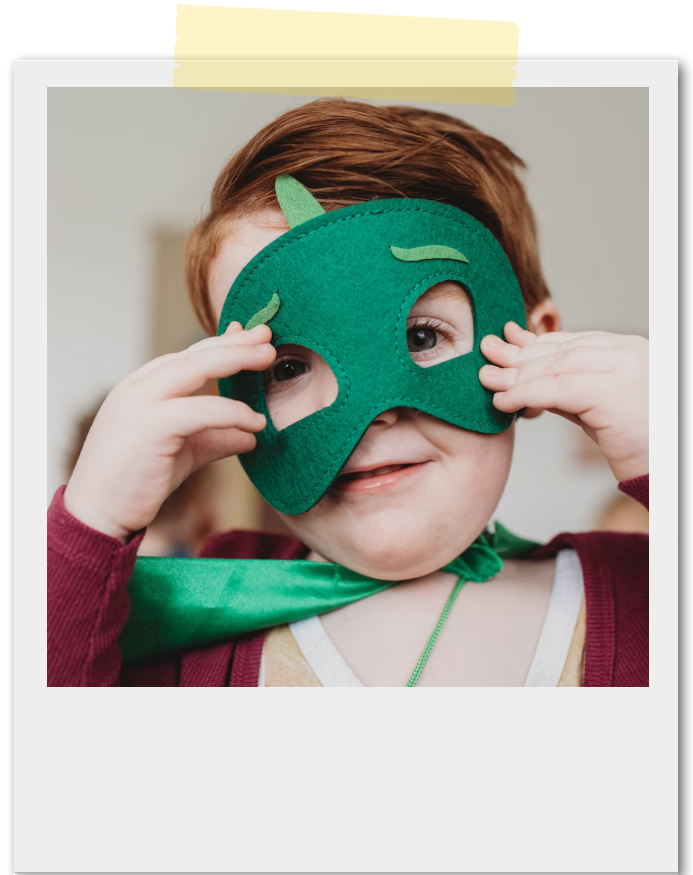
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 24 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

While compiling data and listening to the experiences of community members, several reoccurring themes emerged. The Regional Needs Assessment for Grundy and Kendall counties highlights these themes in more detail as Council members addressed these concerns and collaborated to find solutions.

Families and caregivers in Region 24 find it challenging to afford child care due to the lack of affordable options and the cost of living. Many families do not meet the income qualifications to receive Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) funding. ECEC facilities and preschools are facing an extensive teacher shortage. Most child care facilities and preschools currently have waitlists due to the lack of workforce, which is causing some programs to close their doors and making it more difficult for families in the Region to find child care options.



Families and caregivers are also unaware of many of the social services available in the region, which is leaving them either going without what they need or counting on community stakeholders, such as doctors, to assist them in getting the support needed for their children. Finally, Grundy and Kendall counties also need more hands-on support through obtaining special education services for their children. Families and caregivers begin the intake process not understanding the whole process and being exposed to terminology they are unfamiliar with. More individualized, hands-on support would alleviate confusion and build partnerships with the families and caregivers.

Through partnership with many community stakeholders, community members, parents and caregivers, Region 24 generated this list of needs and recommendations, reimagining the ECEC system that is needed in this community.

Region 24 Needs

- Affordable child care.
- Transportation to and from half-day programs.
- A timelier process for child care assistance programs to address long wait times.
- Extensive training for ECEC providers so they can work with children with disabilities and specific behavioral needs.
- More Early Childhood Community Collaborations that work in partnership to support each other and serve the families in the community better.
- A data-collecting system that is county specific and provides a basis for equitable funding.
- Clear, concise, and understandable language regarding how children qualify for Early Intervention services.
- Improvements in the evaluation process for special education services.
- Workforce recruitment and retention.

Region 24 Recommendations

- Increase the number of child care facilities (especially in Grundy County), including those providing full-day programs and care for children ages birth through three.
- Expand transportation services to and from half-day programs to accommodate all families in need and fund transportation for all students who qualify for services.
- Provide funding/incentives for ECEC programs to operate during non-traditional hours.
- Change student-teacher ratios in privately-operated child care programs when there is a child with a diagnosis that needs increased educator attention.
- Increase pay and provide on-site mentorship to educators.
- Educate owners of privately-operated child care centers on best practices.
- Provide no-cost child care for teachers currently employed in ECEC programs.

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

Sharkisha Jones (she/her)

Phone Number (309) 270-5699

Email: sjones@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region24



REGION 24 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.



15,347

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 24



3,000

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



13,946

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

24%

Percentage of children who
qualify for, but are not receiving,
Child Care Assistance

“It appears that we make a good living based on our income but, with all the expenses that it requires to live... we cannot afford to send our children to a high-quality child care program. The bottom line here is that the threshold for income qualifications should be increased to fit the needs of families.” - 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 24 NEEDS

1. Training for ECEC providers who serve children with disabilities and/or behavioral needs
2. Early Childhood Community Collaborations that work in partnership to support each other and serve the families in the community better
3. Clear, concise, and understandable language about how children qualify for Early Intervention services

REGION 24 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the number of child care facilities, including those providing full-day programs and care, for children ages birth through three
2. Update child-teacher ratios in privately-operated child care programs when there is a child with a diagnosis that warrants increased educator attention
3. Require continuing education in the form of college credits for professional development to ensure quality of content and care



“Illinois should provide easier access to affordable or free Early Childhood care to all families. Every child should have the same opportunity at success no matter their family's income, demographic or location.”

- Community Member

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

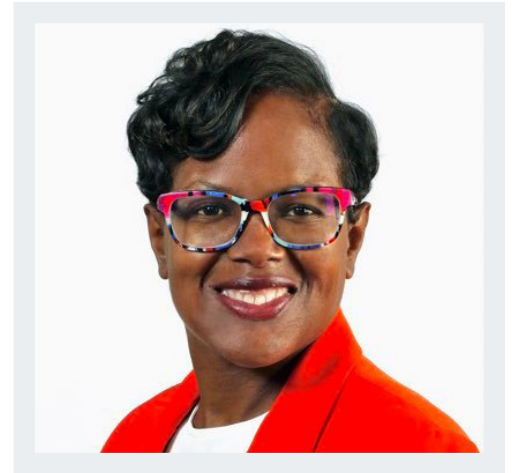
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

Region 24 would like to take the time to thank our Action Council and Family Council for their continued commitment and dedication to families and the community. Our Region's Action and Family Councils have consistently devoted their time to ensuring that community, along with parents' and caregivers' voices, have been uplifted to give us their concerns and perspectives of their experiences with the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. The Council's participation was vital to the Regional Needs Assessment; the quantitative data was a given, but we could not have completed the work without the qualitative analysis aspect that the Action and Family Councils addressed. The Councils provided us with lists of strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for current processes within the ECEC system. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the parents, caregivers, and community members of Region 24 as they have been phenomenal in providing their heartfelt concerns and experiences!

Parents, caregivers, and community voice is the heart of why we are reimagining the ECEC system. As we continue to strive for change, our goal is to continue to ensure that racial equity is embedded in each community, and to continue to elevate parent, caregiver, and community voice as it is crucial that all voices are heard in how a child's needs are effectively met to develop and thrive in their environment.

We thank the Birth to Five Illinois State Team, Illinois Action for Children, and Karen Nunally for all the support, dedication, and advising to Region 24, We thank the local school districts 308 and 115, the Regional Office of Education, Kendall County Health Department, Plano Area Alliance Supporting Student Success (PAASSS) Collaborative, United Methodist Church of Plano, The Local Interagency Council (LIC), Easter Seals of Joliet, Quad County Urban League, the local Child Care Resource and Referral SDA 5, local higher education institutions, Grundy County Chamber of Commerce, the faith based communities of Grundy and Kendall counties and many other business representatives in our Region that have helped us move forward with reimagining the ECEC system.

We would like to recognize and welcome Kendall County 2-1-1 for providing real-time data and resources to our community.

We thank every community member that participated in a focus group or interview to complete our Regional Needs Assessment, as your input has been beneficial in capturing heartfelt stories, memories, barriers, and strengths that our community currently possesses.

Thank you,

Sharkisha Jones (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 24
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.

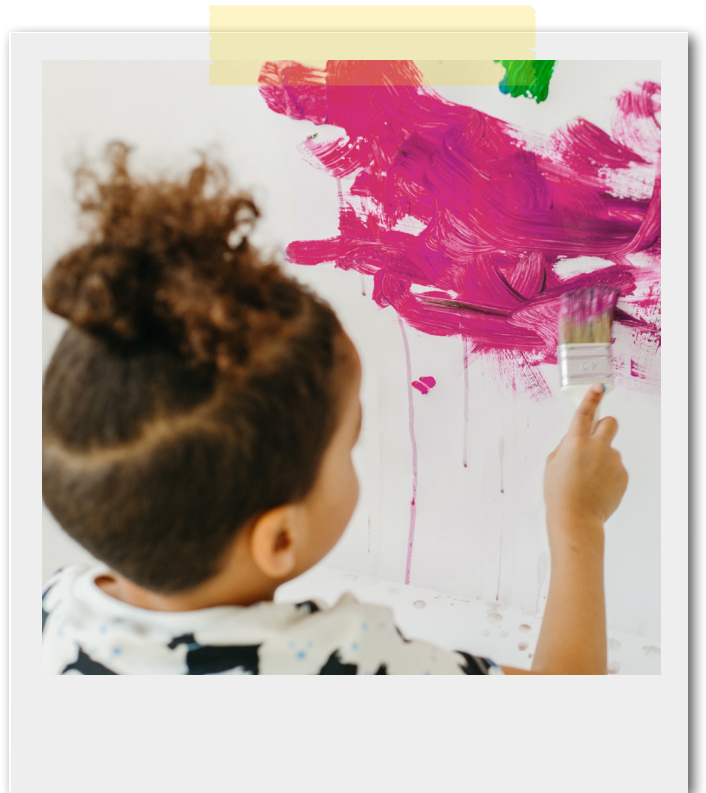
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

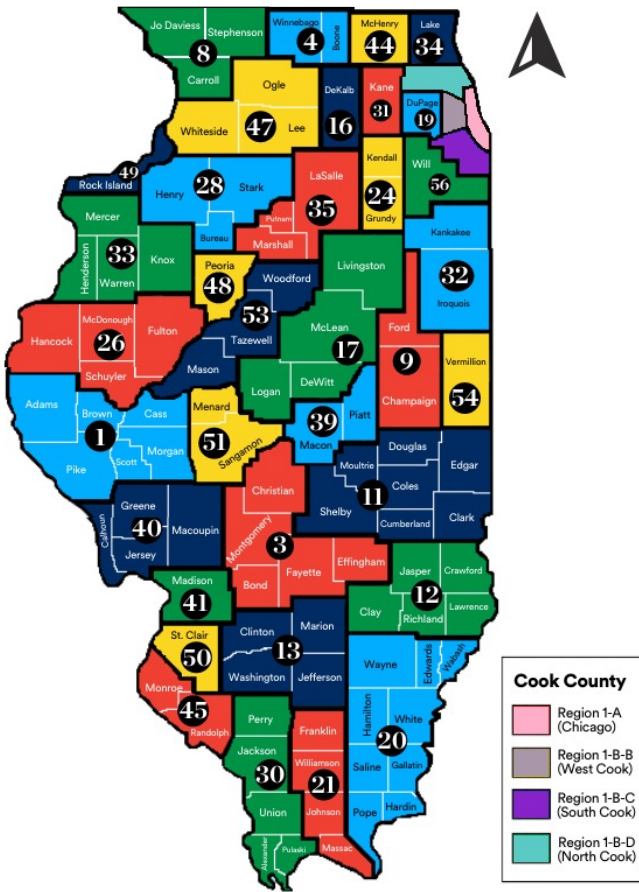


Timeline

- **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.

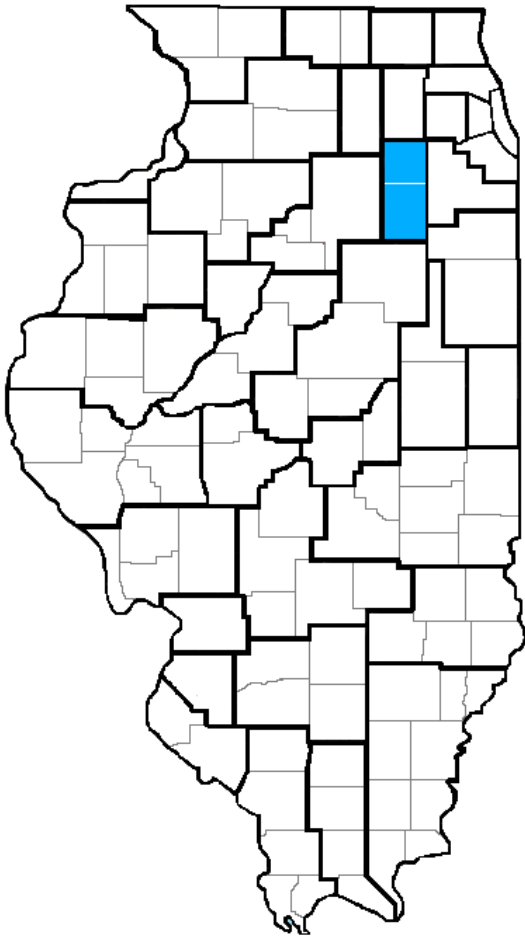
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 24

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

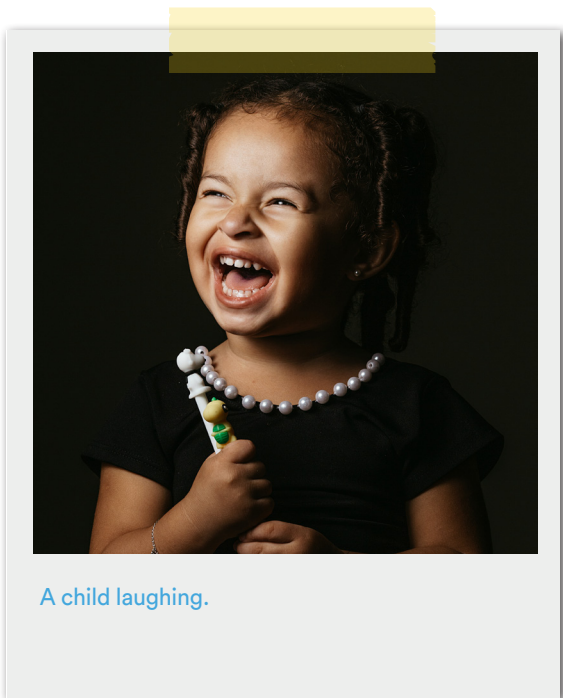
Region 24 is in north central Illinois and includes both Grundy and Kendall Counties. While considered part of the Chicago metropolitan area, both suburban counties are home to major commercial industrial companies and agricultural production.

Region 24 is in north central Illinois and includes both Grundy and Kendall Counties. While considered part of the Chicago metropolitan area, both suburban counties are home to major commercial industrial companies and agricultural production. Grundy County has 41 populated cities and towns. Grundy County’s incorporated cities and towns include Braceville, Carbon Hill, Channahon, Coal City, Diamond, Dwight, East Brooklyn, Gardner, Godley, Kinsman, Mazon, Minooka, Morris, South Wilmington, and Verona. Grundy County is considered a rural county.

Some major employers of Grundy County are the Morris Hospital; the Exelon Dresden Station; Lyondell; Wal-Mart; and R.R. Donnelley & Sons, a printing company that currently employs 831 employees, the highest number of employees in the county. In 1867 The Grundy County courthouse was built and is still in use today. Considered one of the most beautiful courthouses in Illinois, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the courthouse’s unique clock tower can be seen from miles away.

Grundy County is home to an estimated 45 miles of the Illinois River. The Illinois State Fossil Tullimonstrum (also known as the “Tully Monster”) was found in the Mazon River. Grundy County has three State Parks in Illinois: The Channahon State Park, Gebhard Woods State Park, and the William G. Stratton State Park. Grundy County is famous for its distinguished bluffs, lakes, hiking trails, prairies, and beautiful riverbanks. In September, Grundy County will hold its 74th Corn Festival. Grundy County welcomes all the tourists and nature lovers to come tour the 96-mile route of the Illinois and Michigan Canal that runs through Grundy County.

Kendall County has been one of the fastest growing counties in the United States, more than doubling in population over a 10-year span. The county has grown rapidly due to many new developments and many of the County’s residents have migrated from other cities to begin raising their families here. Kendall County is famous for well-known action movies that have been partially filmed here such as Man of Steel and Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice. The City of Plano has



A child laughing.

also been used in the film *Witless Protection*; the film was filmed in Plano’s historic downtown area at the Farnsworth House, a modern architectural landmark for documentaries and commercials.

The largest university in Kendall County is the hair of Professionals School of Cosmetology. Well known for their outstanding Early Childhood Program, Waubensee Community College also has a campus in Kendall County in Plano. Many people in Kendall County have a commute of 35-40 mins to their work-place. We do not have data on major employers in Kendall County currently because many community members work for private companies.

Land Acknowledgement¹

As we are committed to ensuring racial equity is at the center of reimagining the ECEC system, Region 24 would like to acknowledge the Peoria, Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kaskaskia, and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), as these are the traditional Native lands on which Grundy and Kendall community members live. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all the Native Peoples who came before us and continue to contribute to our community.

Regional Demographics

Region 24 has 66,470 people and a total of 15,347 children under the age of six; 7,365 are aged birth to two and 7,982 are aged three to five. Most of the people in Grundy and Kendall Counties self-identify as white. Specifically in Kendall County, 64% of the population self-identifies as white, 7% as Black or African American, 3% as Asian, 24% as Hispanic or Latine, 2% as two or more races and non-Hispanic, and less than 1% identify as another race.

In Grundy County, most of the population identifies as white, 1% as Black or African American, 15% as Hispanic or Latine, 4% identify as two or more races and non-Hispanic, and 0.19% identify as other and non-Hispanic. It should be noted, though, that those who self-identify as Hispanic or Latine may be of any race. Racial diversity is spread throughout the Region, with few to no identifiable communities concentrated based on race or ethnicity.

As of the 2020 Census, there are 567 households that speak Spanish and 395 that speak languages other than English. There are Spanish-speaking communities in both Plano and Oswego, located in Kendall County. According to data available on Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), there has been a slight decrease of limited English speaking and Spanish-speaking households in the Region; however, the reasons for the decrease have not been identified.

In Grundy and Kendall counties, there are 7,431 children aged five and under living with two working parents and caregivers. With a median household income of \$101,816 in Kendall County and a median household income of \$81,764 in Grundy County, many families do not qualify for subsidy programs.

Federally funded programs like Head Start and state funded programs like Prevention Initiative (funded by the Illinois State Board of Education) and the Child Care Assistance Program (funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services) all have income thresholds so families at the Region’s median income level do not qualify, automatically making this care unavailable to them. There are 3,321 children under the age of five living with one parent, so depending on the household size, this family may or may not qualify for subsidized programs

Figure 1: Overall Population by Race/Ethnicity by County

Race/Ethnicity	Grundy County	Kendall County
White, non-Hispanic	80%	64%
Black, non-Hispanic	1%	7%
Hispanic or Latine	15%	24%
Two or More Races, non-Hispanic	4%	2%
Other, non-Hispanic	0.19%	1%

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

as this parent’s income may also exceed the income threshold or the program may not fit the needs of the working parent.

Figure 2: Number of Children Under Age of Five Living in Working Families

Children five and under living with two working parents	Children five and under living with one parent	Children five and under living with one working parent	Children five and under living with one non-working parent
7,431	3,321	3,084	237

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Despite the average income, some of the families in Region 24 have stated that they are overwhelmed with living expenses and do not have the means to send their child to a high-quality licensed center. The cost of child care remains high even though they have a household income compared to the listed median household income for the county they reside in.

As stated by a community member in Region 24, “It appears that we make a good living based on our income but, with all the expenses that it requires to live, we cannot afford to send our children to a high-quality child care program. The bottom line here is that the threshold for income qualifications should be increased to fit the needs of families.” This results in many children in the Region not having the same opportunities as others for high-quality Early Childhood programs, which has created gaps in learning and allowed children and families to be segregated by income. For example, many families in the Region do not qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which provides stipends to families with limited to no access to economic resources, regardless of the household structure and family income. But many of them reported being unable to afford child care due to the high cost of living.

There are families, though, that are experiencing what is defined as poverty or deep poverty. 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. In many cases, it is also used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be experiencing “deep poverty”; someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be “living at the poverty line” (Figure 3).

Throughout the Region, there are 400 children aged birth to two that are living at the 100% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and 514 children aged three to five years of age living at 100% FPL. There are 1,250 children aged birth to five living at or below 185% FPL, and 1,400 children living at or below 200% FPL. The area of the Region with the highest number of children living at or below 100% FPL is in north central Kendall County, in and around Yorkville.

Children in Priority Populations

Priority populations are defined by the state of Illinois as underserved and underrepresented populations.² 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. There were six priority populations identified in Region 24:

Figure 3: Federal Poverty Levels at 100%, 185%, and 200% for a Family of Four

100%	185%	200%
\$27,750	\$51,338	\$55,500

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

children with disabilities, underage parents, families experiencing domestic violence, families experiencing homelessness, refugee children and families, and children and families that are facing barriers due to immigration status.

According to McKinney-Vento, there were 249 families experiencing homelessness within Region 24 as of the end of 2021. As of 2020, there were 508 underage births in Grundy County and 1,405 underage births in Kendall County. Focus groups also provided some data regarding families experiencing domestic violence. As of July 2021, one local agency has been servicing 218 children and adults experiencing domestic violence.

After thorough research through data and attempts to locate community partners, there may be additional priority populations present in the Region. However, data on priority populations is scarce and it was difficult to determine whether they should be included in Region 24’s discussion on priority populations: children of migrant and seasonal workers, children with parents/legal guardians with a disability, and children who are impacted by parental involvement in the criminal justice system. Region 24 Action Council and Family Council will continue to look for data on these additional populations to include in future discussions and reporting.

In Yorkville District 115 there has been a significant influx of children in need of Early Intervention (EI) services, which includes children who have been assessed and identified as needing services or supports with behavior, movement, learning, interacting with others, and/or self-help skills. Primarily, the district provides EI services through Preschool for All (PFA) classrooms, meaning that most children receiving EI services are located in PFA classrooms. Recently, they increased the number of students served by EI services by opening additional classrooms. After adding more classrooms, the district received another increase of children who qualify for EI services, however, those children have been placed on a waitlist due to inadequate classroom space.

Region 24 has also seen an influx in refugees from Nicaragua and Guatemala, specifically in Grundy County; however, the Region is experiencing difficulties tracking this priority population as they have found it difficult to trust many agencies and organizations. Service providers in Kendall County provide initial intake support for these families; however, they lose contact with many of them after initial contact, so it is unclear where these families end up living. It has been stated that their trust relies with the faith-based community in the Region. Additionally, according to organizations, agencies, and school districts, language barriers have made it difficult for many organizations to assist refugees through registration processes, leaving many without proper assistance or direction to other community resources.

To successfully reimagine the ECEC system, it is crucial that the demographic information is understood by all stakeholders, educators, and families as this information will give insight on what services, programs, and procedures need to be implemented in the Region, as well as restructured to ensure that the families’ and communities’ needs are met.

Figure 4: Number of Limited English-Speaking Households by Language

Number of Households	Number of Limited English-Speaking Households (Spanish)	Number of Limited English-Speaking Households (Other Languages)
66,470	567	395

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

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

Local Community Collaborations

Illinois Action for Children (IACF) defines Community Collaborations as organizations, agencies and individuals that care about young children who have come together to form Early Childhood Community Collaborations. Community Collaborations have the unique role and opportunity to reimagine the ECEC system, asking questions like, “How can we better align services in our community?” and “Where are the inequities in our community?”

There are two Community Collaborations in Region 24: Grundy County Partnership for Children (GPC) and Plano Area Alliance Supporting Student Success (PAASSS). Additionally, the Quad County Urban League and the Community Resource Team are two Collaborations located in nearby Region 31. While they are based in Kane County, they have extended their services to serve Kendall County community members.



Two children having fun driving toy cars.

GPC is a county-wide Collaboration that consists of a variety of organizations that are working together to prepare children for school. They strive to coordinate resources needed to help support children and families in Grundy County. Their mission is to “collaborate with organizations, stakeholders and community members to prepare young children in Grundy County for life-long learning, by identifying and addressing Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) issues.” GPC is goal-driven and makes every effort to increase parental awareness of healthy child development, ensure children have access to developmental screenings, and increase highly qualified and well-prepared professionals. Currently, at the time this report was published, they are working together with local public middle and high schools to begin brainstorming ways on how to bridge gaps in learning, ensure mental health is a priority, and create a strategic plan on how to smoothly transition children and families that are in prioritized populations to the proper resources available to them. The intent is that if educators come together sooner, representing all ages from birth to 18, then decisions can be made earlier that will have a lasting effect throughout their educational journey.

PAASSS was formed in 2018 to network, find, and share resources for children prenatal to third grade and their families. Their mission is to “strengthen the community by ensuring that all families in the Plano area are aware of and have equitable access to services and supports that empower them to raise children that are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed.” PAASSS has strived to build connections with many stakeholders in the Plano community. For example, they recently held the grand re-opening of the Plano Resource Center, where many local community partners were brought together to network and help PAASSS celebrate the family play groups and new office space for the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Agency. Additionally, they highlighted Family Focus, established to serve Kendall County community members, saving caregivers from driving, on average, 10-15 miles just to receive Early Childhood services.

Quad County Urban League (QCUL) believes in ensuring civil rights for all people by eradicating barriers to equal participation in the economic and social mainstream. The QCUL supports racial justice, civil rights and economic empowerment for African Americans and others within the Quad Counties (DuPage, Kane, Kendall, and Will) of Illinois. As they advocate for educational excellence and economic self-reliance, QCUL develops programs and services that are designed to empower children, youth, and adults. QCUL is a 110-year-

old community-based Urban League movement that has dedicated their purpose to creating sustainable economic and civil community models with global impact.

While not a Collaboration, the Community Resource Team is a resource sharing networking group of local non-profits, community service providers, small businesses, and advocates alike who serve Aurora, Kane County, and its surrounding counties. Their goal is to bring together community resources and provide opportunities for collaboration through monthly meetings to ensure that children and their families have access to services, programs, and events in the surrounding communities.

This example of collective impact connects to the broader Regional Community Systems (RCS) work of local agencies, public school districts, and physician offices, to name a few. They have begun partnering and formalizing a collaborative system within our community which would produce working solutions for children and families.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC programs and services are an integral part in providing supports for children and families in the Region. However, ECEC programs and services are not equitably distributed throughout the Region, leaving many families struggling to find child care that meets their needs.

In Region 24, there are limited Early Childhood program options in rural Grundy County. With limited opportunities available, there is a significant gap in support and services to children. Additionally, as stated by Family Council members, there is a lack of diversity in the types of child care programs in the area. Many of them are operated by the same corporation and offer the same type of programming, leaving families with few choices for their children.

Figure 5: Number of Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Sites

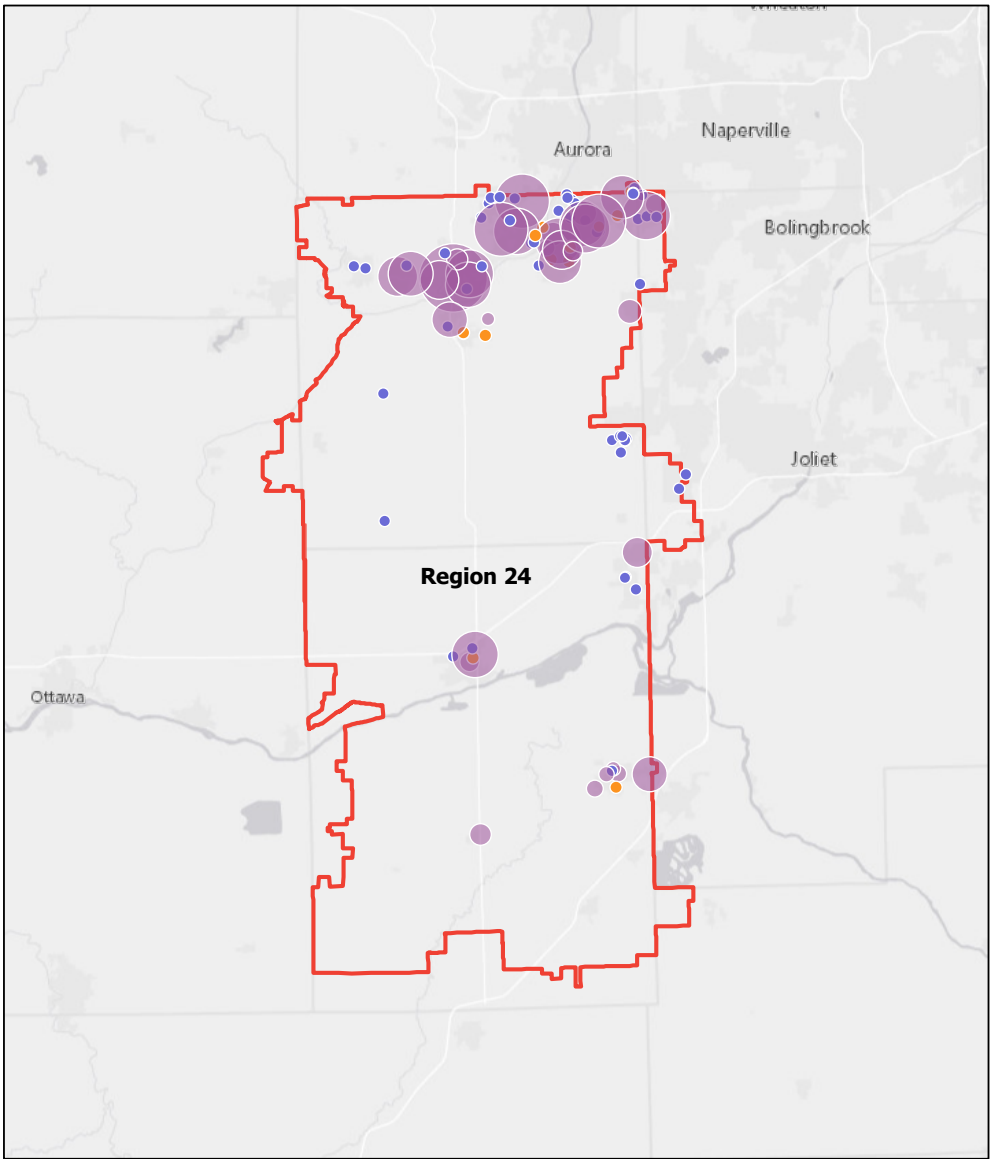
License Type	Number of Sites
Licensed Child Care Centers	29
Licensed Family Child Care	50
License-Exempt Child Care Programs	5

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Licensed child care centers and family child care programs are monitored by the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). Licensed providers are required to complete training, maintain licensing standards, and register on the Gateways to Opportunity site. License-exempt child care homes must still follow DCFS guidelines; however, the requirements for training and certification are fewer and they are limited to caring for up to three children at a time (including any children that are living in the home). Most of the licensed child care options are located in northern Kendall County, in and around Yorkville, Lynnwood, Oswego, and Boulder Hill, or in and around Coal City and Morris in Grundy County (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Location of Licensed ECEC Providers

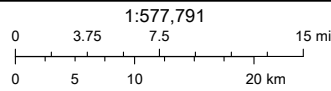


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Licensed ECEC Providers

- Day Care Home 160.667
- Day Care Center 238
- Group Day Care Home 6
- 83.3333

Birth to five Councils



Esri, HERE, NPS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, EPA, NPS

ArcGIS Web AppBuilder
Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, EPA, NPS | Esri, HERE, NPS |

Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Many families report that finding an affordable child care program is a challenge. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a program funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) that helps families access affordable, quality ECEC and after school programs. Caregivers must be enrolled in an academic or vocational training program or be employed, meeting income guidelines, to qualify for CCAP. Out of 15,347 children in the Region, there are only 178 families in Grundy County and 484 families in Kendall County who participate in the CCAP program. Both community and Council members reported that there needs to be an increase in awareness and funding to ensure all children, regardless of social class, race, or ethnicity, have the same opportunities to attend high-quality ECEC programs. There are also publicly funded programs available for families who meet enrollment requirements and wish to utilize programs and services (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Number of Publicly Funded Program Sites

Program Name	Number of Program Sites	Ages Served
Preschool for All	12	Children Ages Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	1	Children Ages Three to Four
Early Head Start	0	Children Ages Birth to Three
Head Start	0	Children Ages Three to Five
Prevention Initiative	1	Children Ages Birth to Three

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

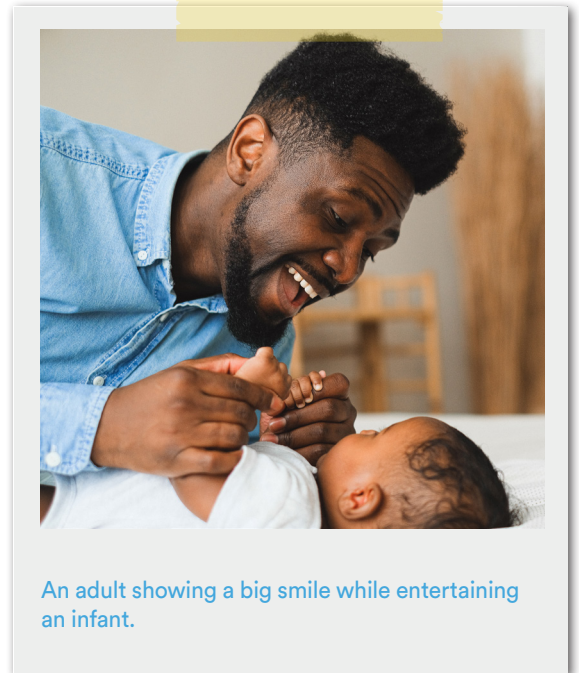
Additionally, Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) programs offer programming for families who meet certain enrollment requirements. Both programs are administered by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and serve children ages three to four to help them with Kindergarten readiness. The majority of PFA programs are in the north part of Kendall County, near Yorkville, Oswego, and Boulder Hill and near Morris and Coal City in Grundy County.

Early Head Start serves pregnant people and children birth to two age; Head Start serves children ages three to four. Both programs are federally funded and administrated by the Office of Head Start, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Illinois Department of Health and Human Services (IDHHS). The programs promote school readiness of young children from families that have little to no access to economic resources through local community agencies. Neither program currently exists in the Region; both programs closed in 2021 due to low enrollment. The Del Valle Migrant Head Start is located on the border of Oswego and Plainfield that serves seasonal and migrant children and their families. The number of children and families they serve has not been publicly disclosed.

Home Visiting services support pregnant persons and parents and caregivers of children birth to age five who live in communities that have been identified as facing greater risks and barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes. These voluntary, no-cost programs are administered by local community agencies and provide parenting support in the home or at a place of the caregiver's choosing. Region 24 Home Visiting programs include state-funded Home Visiting, Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) programs, and Parents Too Soon. Currently, Easter Seals of Joliet, Brightpoint (previously Children's Home and Aid), and Family focus provides Home Visiting services to five children in the Region.

Early Intervention (EI) programs are administered statewide by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) through local Child and Family Connections (CFC) offices and provide supports to qualifying children ages birth to three years old to meet developmental milestones. EI services include, but are not limited to, developmental evaluations and assessments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, developmental therapy, and speech/language therapy. It was shared with us that in Kendall County there are 237 children receiving EI services and 121 children in Grundy County.

Many community members expressed frustration because while resources in the Region are available, they are looked down on or given incorrect information if they need the service. Many parents and caregivers would like the option of sending their child to a licensed child care center or family child care program but cited the high cost of care as a barrier to accessing licensed care. License-exempt family child care providers have been the best option as rates are more affordable. Additionally, some two-parent households in the Region decided to open family child care programs within their home to allow one parent to continue working in the workforce, due to the high tuition rates, to prevent further financial strain in their household.



An adult showing a big smile while entertaining an infant.

“ Child care needs to be a social service, not a business transaction.
- Community Member ”

According to local community school district teachers, they are concerned that the children who are currently preschool-aged or homeschooled are not receiving services in their first language (typically Spanish), which in turn creates a deficit or gap in learning and communication when the child enters the public school system. One family member stated that after moving from a neighboring community that lacked dual

language programs, their child was able to attain the services they needed in Kendall County and now their child speaks fluent English well. More English as a Second Language (ESL) or dual-language programs would benefit children whose primary language is not English with Kindergarten readiness.

While there are some funding sources for ECEC programs, they are accessible to all providers. The Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grant (SGCC) is a child care program funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and administered by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA). It provides additional funding to pay ECEC staff and improve both the learning environment and programming. However, qualifying programs must be licensed and operate full-time, full year round. In 2021, another grant, the Child Care Restoration Grant (CCRG), was intended to support the economic health of licensed child care and license exempt centers who lost revenue due to COVID-19. The funding sources that are available are great sources; however, many providers feel that some of the qualifying guidelines have kept them from being able to attain some of the funding to expand services.

It is important to understand what options are available to families who want or need access to child care, and where there is a lack of options for families. Even in areas that have child care options, there is oftentimes a lack of available spots, creating what is referred to as a slot gap, leaving many on waitlists and desperate to find care that aligns with their work, educational, and family needs.

Slot Gap

A slot gap exists when there are more children eligible for enrollment in ECEC than actual enrollment slots available. It can be measured by looking at the overall number of eligible children versus overall capacity in publicly funded programs in licensed child care centers, licensed child care homes, or a license-exempt child care center.

Overall, there are not enough slots in licensed or license-exempt child care programs across the Region to meet the needs of families if they chose to send their children to child care (Figure 4). If all children in the Region were to enroll in child care, there would be 9,500 children who would be without care as there are not enough facilities in the Region to serve them all (Figure 5).

Figure 8: Overall Slot Gap for Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Programs

Number of Children Under 6	Total Child Care Slots	Children without a Slot
15,347	5,862	9,485

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 9: Child Care Facilities in Grundy and Kendall Counties

Child Care Type	Number of Sites	Total Licensed Capacity
Licensed Child Care	29	3,196
Family Child Care	50	528
Licensed Exempt Child Care	5	743

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Region 24 has a variety of options for child care programs that can provide services to children and families in the community, but due to the teacher shortage, some classrooms cannot be opened, and children are placed on waitlists. According to parents, caregivers, and stakeholders in the community, many of them have had to enroll their children in programs closer to their place of employment due to the teacher shortage.

“When all children are not a priority, it creates distrust and a lack of stability for the child and family.”
- School Official (Kendall County)

Figure 10: Publicly Funded Programs by Sites and Total Proposed/Funded Capacity

Child Care Type	Number of Sites	Total Proposed/Funded Capacity
Preschool for All	12	1,280
Preschool for All Expansion	0	0
Head Start	2	37
Early Head Start	0	0
Prevention Initiative	1	38

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There are 3,000 children birth to age five living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and 1,412 ages birth to two, 1,588 ages three to five. However, there are not enough spots in programs to serve or support all the children who qualify for publicly funded programs in the Region should their family wish to enroll them. Many children that would qualify or benefit from half-day Preschool for All programs have not been able to enroll in them as parents cannot leave their jobs to transport their child to another care provider midday. This barrier has kept children from participating in these programs and is potentially causing delays and gaps in their learning.

Providers from both privately and publicly funded programs noted that while available funding sources are great, some of the qualifying guidelines have kept them from being able to get additional funding to expand services. For example, one home care provider said they wanted to apply for the Strengthen and Grow Grant but found out they did not qualify because their enrollment did not meet the 10% CCAP threshold. However, meeting that requirement was not feasible due to the small number of

“ We feel that our children have to attend programs closer to our jobs due to lack of options in our area and in the event of an emergency since we work 30 minutes away.
 - Family Council Member ”

children they were allowed to have enrolled in the program. Expanding and refining guidelines for grants would allow more providers to expand programming and capacity for serving families.

Additionally, data is only available on proposed capacity (which does not necessarily mean those are the number of funded slots) and funded capacity (which means that funding was allocated for those number of slots). However, there is no easy way of knowing how many slots are actually being utilized. Furthermore, the data does not show how many children are receiving funding from multiple programs or services. Disaggregated, anonymous, student-level data would help decision-makers and funders have a better understanding of where to increase slots in publicly funded programs to ensure that all families who may want to enroll their child have access to the supports they need.

As the State strives to create equity for all with genuine insight gathered from community members and families, the identified driving factors of the slot gap is the workforce, the scarce number of programs, lack of awareness of programs, the transportation issue among half-day programs, and the qualifying threshold of subsidized programs. There are 9,500 children that would not have access to high-quality programs if all families had the option of enrolling their children in a program within the Region due to insufficient child care programs or workforce members to accommodate them.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

There are many pieces of the Early Childhood landscape puzzle, and ECEC professionals play an integral role in serving and supporting families and young children. However, ECEC programs throughout the Region are experiencing a teacher shortage, leaving some classrooms closed, and leading to children being placed on waitlists that are sometimes incredibly long. As a result, many community members said they had to find child care outside of the Region.

Demographic data collected through the Gateways to Opportunities Registry and provided by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) shows 514 licensed Center Directors, teaching staff, and family child care staff in the Region.³ Data also shows that 469 identify as female, 17 identify as male; only 28 educators identified as bilingual.

Data from the Registry also shows that many Early Childhood professionals have taken at least some college courses, with 84% of licensed Center Directors, 36% of licensed teaching staff, and 43% of family child care staff reporting that they had attained an associate degree or higher (Figure 11). It is important to note educational attainment because those who wish to earn Early Childhood Education Credentials Levels 2 through 6 or a Director Credential must take college courses or earn a degree. Some working in the field have enough higher education to earn credentials, but many choose not to pursue additional education.

“Despite being passionate about the Early Childhood field, many educators are choosing to pursue other career opportunities due to the lack of support within their facility, burn out, and the need for higher pay to accommodate the cost of living.”

- Community Member

Figure 11: Education Attainment of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Staff in the Region⁴

	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	6	6	*	27	33	5
Teaching Staff	247	27	25	93	66	10
FCC Staff ⁵	34	*	5	18	11	*

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

³ Data reflects those who were registered in the Gateways to Opportunities Registry as of March 2021

⁴ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

⁵ FCC includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floater, and other direct and indirect service providers.

Cost was cited as the biggest barrier to pursuing additional education, but there are scholarships that Early Childhood professionals can apply to help pay for or ease the financial burden associated with higher education. These include:

- The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program. ECACE was created to address the shortage of qualified educators and pays up to \$23,000 in tuition and related expenses to awardees who attend eligible colleges or universities.
- The Gateways Scholarship Program pays a portion of tuition to eligible participants in ECEC that want to earn college credit, credentials, or for Associate, Bachelor, or master's degrees.
- The Great START (Strategy to Attract and Retain Teachers) wage supplement program allows eligible child care educators who have completed college coursework and who continue at their current place of employment to receive a check every six months to supplement their income.

During focus groups, interviews, Council meetings and community conversations, Early Childhood professionals discussed other reasons for not pursuing additional education. There are many educators who want to take courses and/or earn credentials or degrees, but many found that a lack of experience in the Early Childhood field or even being employed in the field has caused them to be ineligible for scholarships that might help to ease the financial burden of higher education. Professionals who are employed at the Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs), higher education institutions, elementary schools, middle schools, and high school workforce members who would like to begin a career in Early Childhood Education have experienced barriers when applying for these scholarships because they do not meet the workforce requirements. Several also mentioned that they are not citizens of the U.S. and are therefore ineligible for scholarships or wage supplement programs that could help support them as they pursue additional education. Many child care teachers do not feel it is beneficial to continue their education because the increase in pay that may come with additional education would still not be enough to keep up with the cost of living. Furthermore, the additional pay may cause them to become ineligible for certain programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infant, Children (WIC), Medicaid, and CCAP.

Many providers in the Region also expressed their frustration that they did not meet the minimum requirements for receiving funds for the Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grant or the Child Care Restoration Grant. Through focus groups and interviews with Early Childhood Educators, they expressed the need for more public awareness of the availability of the programs and technical support and assistance for how to apply for these grants and scholarships.

The Region is also experiencing a shortage of Prevention Initiative (PI) workers who go into the home and support children aged birth to three to help build a solid foundation in learning to ensure their future success in school. Many educators stated that they retired or left the field because families and children did not seem receptive to the type of support they could offer. Additionally, the rate of pay for educators is not commiserate with their experience and does not allow them to make ends meet for themselves and their families; many have chosen other fields to enter due to salary increases.

COVID-19 impacted both the ECEC workforce in the Region and families who were unable to find child care during that time. Families shared that they had lost their jobs due to lack of open child care centers. Families receiving CCAP during that time could not utilize the program, even if caregivers were working remotely. Not only were families impacted by COVID-19, but child care teachers, especially if they were caregivers, felt the effects as well. The decrease in enrollment, along with having to quarantine if anyone in their family was exposed to COVID-19 resulted in lost wages due to decreased hours or having to miss work. Many professionals left the Early Childhood field during the pandemic and have not been replaced due to a lack of qualified or interested candidates to take their place.

It is important for funders, elected officials, and lawmakers to understand the challenges that Early Childhood Educators face and to consider their experiences and voices in legislation and decisions that impact the field. A holistic approach that considers the perspectives of all who are involved in the Early Childhood system is imperative to creating a fairer, more equitable system for all caregivers, children, and families.



Two adults holding a child while smiling for a photo.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

The primary goal of this report is to examine regional-level data to provide context and make meaning of the quantitative data, and to elevate parent and caregiver voices so their needs and experiences can be better understood by community and state stakeholders. Through our Action Council, Family Council, focus groups, interviews, and community events, families were able to give their sincere, and heartfelt concerns; this is crucial to reimagine the ECEC system.

Parents and caregivers discussed how thankful they are for the engagement they have with their children's schools and Early Childhood programs. They reported that they feel included in the decisions being made in their child's education, and that schools have tried to build sustainable relationships with them, as well as between students and community.



An adult kissing a smiling baby's face.

“

It appears that we make a good living based on our income but with all the expenses that it requires for the necessity of living we cannot afford to send our children to high-quality child care programs. The bottom line here is that the threshold for income qualifications should be increased to fit the needs of families.

- Community Member

”

However, not every family has been able to access the Early Childhood system in an equitable way. Parents and caregivers of children who have been identified as having a disability or special needs are not always able to access ECEC programs due to lack of experienced providers who are comfortable caring for children who may use mobility devices, feeding tubes, or need additional attention to meet their physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral health needs. There also is a lack of awareness about services that may be available for children who have disabilities or special needs, or about the referral process to get services. Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities or special needs said that the greatest issues they have experienced are paying out of pocket for services or being placed on an extensive waitlist for services.

Other parents and caregivers expressed the need for more Early Childhood educators and service providers who spoke languages other than English. In the 2020 Census, 567 households said that Spanish was their primary home language and 395 said they primarily spoke a language other than Spanish or English at home. Local teachers raised concerns that preschool-aged or homeschooled children are not receiving services in their language, which in turn creates a deficit or gap in learning and communication when the child enters the public school system. Very few licensed Early Childhood professionals speak a language other than English, making it difficult for some families to find a program that aligns with their linguistic needs.

Other families and caregivers spoke to the rising cost of child care and the need for more affordable options or for more families to be able to utilize CCAP. One parent shared that they want their children to attend a high-quality child care program, but they cannot afford to enroll them. They said CCAP income requirements need to be more realistic and consider the increased cost of living. Despite the high median household income in the Region, many families still struggle to afford child care and do not qualify for CCAP. The lack of publicly funded slots adds to the challenge of finding high-quality, affordable child care in the Region.

“ Illinois should provide easier access to affordable or free Early Childhood care to all families. Every child should have the same opportunity at success no matter their families’ income, demographic or location.

- Community Member ”

“ Transportation to and from half-day programs should be implemented, which would help the working class.

- Community Member ”

“ We have given too much power to people who have no experience in the field. We need to let teachers be leaders and parents be partners in the education system.

- Community Member ”

There is a stigma, though, with using publicly funded programs that was discussed during focus groups and interviews. Some parents and caregivers said that their children would benefit from the structured learning that Head Start and Early Head Starts providing, but they choose not to enroll their child in the program because. They believe there is a stigma related to utilizing the programs to which they do not want to subject their children and families.

A lack of transportation options was also cited as a barrier to accessing child care. For some families, they do not have reliable transportation and rely on public transportation, family members, or friends to help them get to work, school, appointments, social engagements, or to shop. It is even more difficult for families who must use various transportation options to get them to child care, then work, and then back home. This is especially true for children who attend half-day programs. There are rarely transportation options available to take them to an extended-day or child care program, meaning some caregivers must leave work or find someone else to transport their child to the next program.

Parents and caregivers said that they want to be involved in decision-making processes about their child’s education and the programs they attend. Centering their voices in the discussion about the Early Childhood landscape can help ensure that the needs of parents, caregivers, and families are being met, and that however they choose to care for and educate their child, they feel supported, empowered, and educated about the options available to them.

Regional Strengths & Needs

Throughout the Region, the community has echoed many of the same key themes related to the Early Childhood landscape. There are several strengths and needs that have been identified. Key themes illuminated in focus groups, interviews, and follow-up conversations with many community members:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Community members are not connected to many of the social services in the area due to unclear or complex processes.
- **Workforce Shortage:** There is a slot gap being caused by a teacher shortage that is forcing child care centers to place children on waitlists. Even worse, some centers must close their doors because they cannot find teachers.
- **Income Barriers:** Income qualifications for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) are unrealistic given the cost of living. Families find it nearly impossible to afford child care because they do not meet the income criteria for CCAP.
- **Special Education Services:** There is a need to provide families with more hands-on support through the intake process of attaining an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 504 Plan, speech or occupational services, or any services related to special education.

Strengths

- In Kendall County, there are a variety of privately-operated child care programs to choose from.
- There are private schools that provide full-day preschool for children ages three to five.
- There are many services for children and families, such as Early Intervention screenings and services; home visiting; Preschool for All programs; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program; CCAP; and many other valuable resources.
- Success with obtaining the proper services for their child after they have been diagnosed with a learning disability.
- The community, parents, and caregivers have displayed eagerness and dedication in creating a home-to-school connection through family involvement and family engagement.

Needs

- Extensive training for ECEC providers so they can work with children with special needs and behavioral needs.
- More Early Childhood Community Collaborations that work in partnership to support each other and serve the families in the community better.
- A data-collecting system that is county specific and provides a basis for equitable funding.
- Clear, concise, and understandable language regarding how children qualify for Early Intervention services.
- A timelier process for child care assistance programs to address long wait times to receive approval or denial letters that disrupts families' work schedules and extends financial strain.
- Workforce recruitment and retention.
- Transportation to and from half-day programs.
- Affordable child care.
- Improvements in the evaluation process for special education services.

As we strive to reimagine the ECEC system, the goal is to ensure needs are addressed to create an equitable system for all regardless of race, gender, ethnic background, and social class.

Recommendations

For ten months, Region 24's Action and Family Councils have met twice per month for four hours. The Action Council and Family Council will support local Collaborations through the Region's Implementation Plan. Recommendations for each subsection are as follows:

ECEC Programs and Services

- Survey families to uncover barriers to enrollment in ECEC program and services.
- Increase the number of child care facilities (especially in Grundy County), including those providing full-day programs and care for children ages birth through three.
- Expand transportation services to and from half-day programs to accommodate all families in need and fund transportation for all students who qualify for services.
- Create a multi-tiered approach to educate community members on the importance of ECEC.
- Host mandatory family engagement meetings that accommodate family's schedules.
- Provide funding/incentives for ECEC programs to operate during non-traditional hours.

Workforce Recruitment and Retention

- Educate secondary education students and school district administrators on the importance of ECEC through workshops and embed ECE into high school curriculum.
- Change student-teacher ratios in privately-operated child care programs when there is a child with a diagnosis that needs increased educator attention.
- Increase pay and provide on-site mentorship to educators.
- Increase the minimum degree required for lead teachers to an associate degree.
- Require continuing education in the form of college credits for professional development to ensure quality of content.
- Educate owners of privately-operated child care centers on best practices
- No-cost child care for teachers currently employed in ECEC programs.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Childcare Aware of America (2023). Retrieved from: [Illinois CCDC - Child Care Aware® of America](#)
2. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). *Commission report of findings and recommendations: Spring 2021*. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
3. Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (2023). *Report creation page*. Site name: <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>
4. Native Land Digital (2023). *Report creation page*. Site Name: <http://native-land.ca>
5. United States Census Data (2023). *Explore Census Data*. Site name: <https://data.census.gov>
6. United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). *Poverty Guidelines*. Site name: https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//194391/2020-percentage-poverty-tool.pdf
7. Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois' early childhood workforce 2020 report*. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA. Retrieved from: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

Appendix B: 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 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 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. How long have you been involved in Early Childhood Education and Care? What roles have you held during that time?
2. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
3. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
4. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
5. 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?
6. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
7. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
8. 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?

Appendix C: Additional Resources

Below are additional data resources that community members may find valuable.

1. Grundy County Community Needs Assessment:
[Grundy County Health Department \(grundycountyil.gov\)](http://grundycountyil.gov) (English)
2. Kendall County Community Needs Assessment, 2021:
[ad-2021-2026-IPLAN-04-2022-3.pdf \(kendallhealth.org\)](http://kendallhealth.org/ad-2021-2026-IPLAN-04-2022-3.pdf) (English)
3. Kendall County Community Needs Assessment, 2022:
[ad_2022AnnualReport_02.21.2023.pdf \(kendallhealth.org\)](http://kendallhealth.org/ad_2022AnnualReport_02.21.2023.pdf) (English)

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