



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

## Region 28

(Bureau, Henry & Stark Counties)





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## Region 28 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 28 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

The towns of Region 28 take pride in their small-town feel; they exude hospitality and friendliness. It is this ambiance that attracts families to Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties.

Rural communities, like those of Region 28, are generally regarded as resilient due to the willingness of residents to rally around in support of one another. However, it is this reputation, as well as the distance between towns, that often results in the limited presence of outreach services in rural communities.





Unlike neighboring urban communities, such as Peoria and the Quad Cities, the families of Region 28 lack affordable full day child care options, prenatal and postpartum care, and child welfare programs. Community Members also experience challenges with accessing public transportation, housing support services, and high-speed internet.

Region 28 is not asking for new services; they are simply asking to have their needs validated, and to be visible to the service agents whose territories already cover the Region. Families in Region 28 deserve equitable access to the resources they see in surrounding urban communities.

## **Region 28 Needs**

- Access to high-quality, full day early care and education services for children of working parents, including parents who work out of their homes.
- Access to family support services, like Early Intervention and prenatal and postpartum care, in the Region.
- Access to community services, such as public transportation, affordable housing, and broadband internet.

## **Region 28 Recommendations**

- When implementing state level systems to address child care programs and staffing shortages, recognize the differing needs of urban versus rural residents.
- Develop more community level collaborations to enhance service offerings for children and families.
- Improve agency level marketing strategies to ensure families within all communities are aware of available services and how to engage with them.

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

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# REGION 28 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.



**5,500**

Children Under  
the Age of 6  
in Region 28



**2,400**

Children 0-5  
at 200% Federal  
Poverty Level



**3,200**

Children 0-5  
Without Publicly  
Funded ECEC Slots

**50 miles**

Average distance families  
travel to access prenatal care  
and Early Intervention services

"I have to travel 90 miles, round trip, twice a week for my child to receive speech and physical therapy services. I'm a stay-at-home mom with reliable transportation. Not everyone has this luxury."

- Early Intervention 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 28 NEEDS ACCESS

- Access to affordable full-day ECEC options
- Access to family support services including Early Intervention, Child Welfare, and Maternal & Child Health
- Access to community services such as public transportation, high-speed internet, and housing and food assistance

## REGION 28 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement state level systems that actively and routinely seek parent/caregiver and care provider input about the barriers that exist and exclude participation in current programming
- Develop community-level collaborations to enhance service offerings for children and families
- Improve agency-level marketing strategies to ensure families within all communities are aware of available services



“I didn’t know where Kewanee was, but I heard they had a shorter waitlist for housing than Chicago... I hopped on the train, and here I am. I don’t get to see my friends as much, but it’s a better life for my kids.”

- Parent, Henry County

# 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.

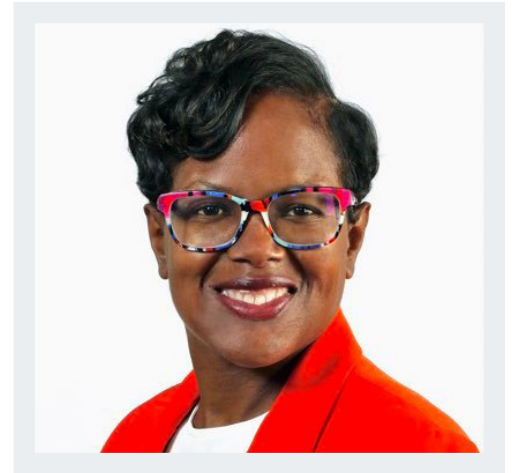
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

The Region 28 Regional Needs Assessment could not have been made possible without the help of our community.

First and foremost, we want to thank our Action Council and Family Council for the time and expertise they committed to the creation of this Needs Assessment. Thank you to Regional Office of Education #28, Abilities Plus, Black Hawk College, Braveheart, Early Bird's Daycare, Early Head Start, Tri County Opportunities Council, University of Illinois Extension, and 11 parent representatives of Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties for your participation in our twice monthly Council meetings. During Council meetings participants engaged in rich discussions surrounding the data, providing the qualitative response to quantitative trends. This priceless input allowed us to create a robust and realistic picture of the Bureau, Henry, and Stark County Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape.

Additional recognition goes out to those who took part in focus groups, interviews, and surveys to ensure we were capturing the stories that truly represent the strengths and needs of our Region. We were fortunate to hear from center directors, home child care providers, parents, students, ECEC staff, and early intervention providers.

We have so much gratitude for the countless libraries and community organizations that allowed us to set up tables, participate in events, and let us use their spaces as a platform for this important work. Since our office opened in the Fall of 2022, we have participated in over 80 engagement events, enabling us to reach over 2,500 community members.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the legislators and city leaders who took time away from their busy schedules to learn about the Birth to Five Illinois mission and how they could support us in our work.

Families as well as ECEC providers are our why, and without your stories, vulnerability, expertise, and grace we would not be in this position today.

Thank you, Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties for your support and trust. Together we are partners for early learning!

Thank you,

**Dianna Saelens (she/her)**

Regional Council Manager: Region 28

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.

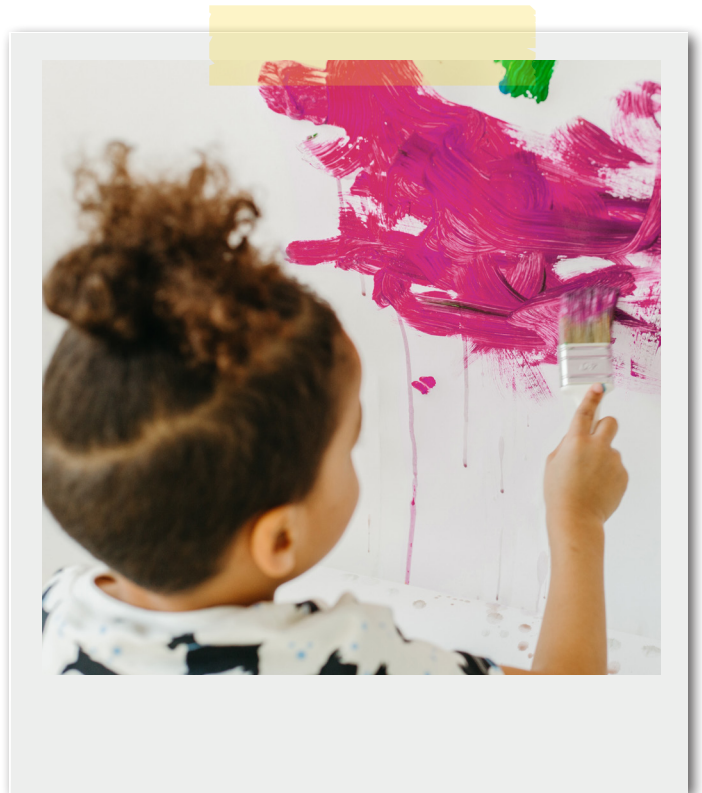
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

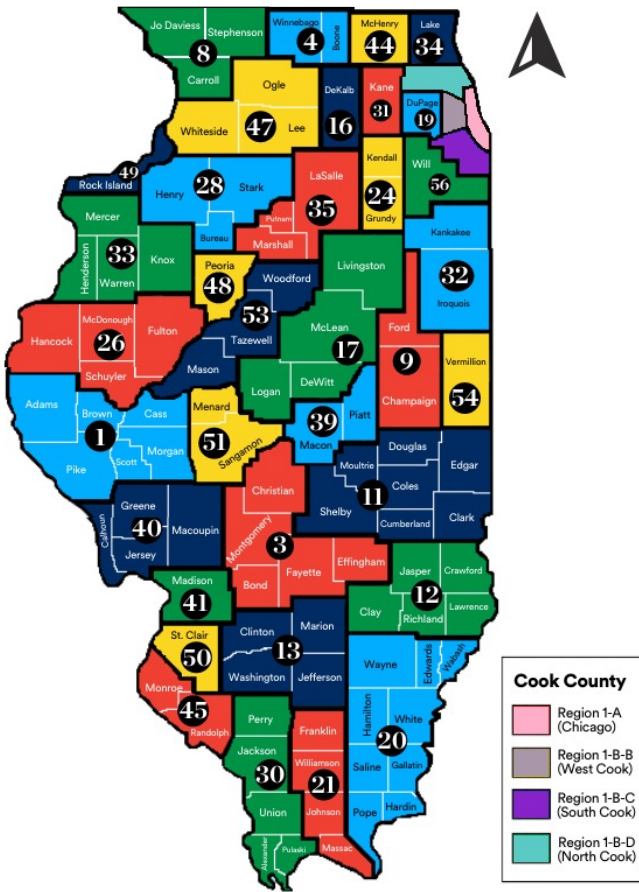


# Timeline

- **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

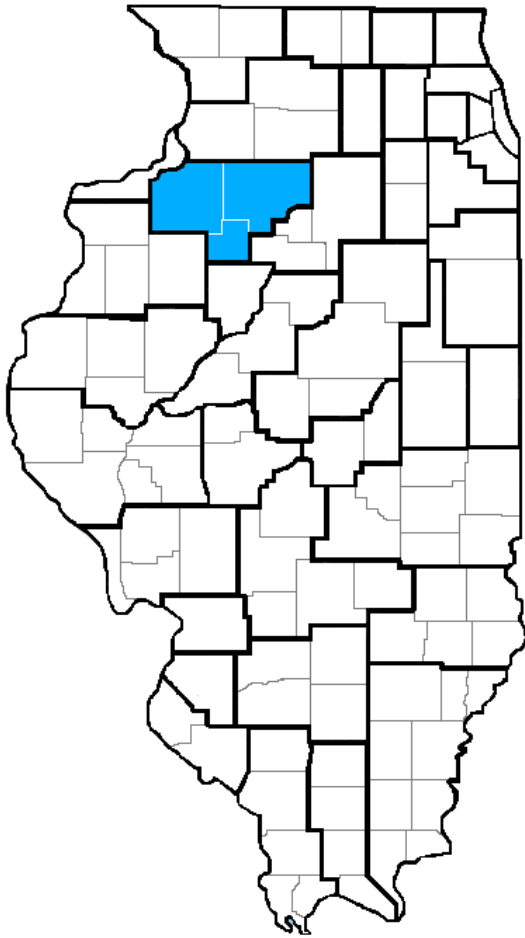
Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise 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 28

# Regional Community Landscape



## Regional Boundaries

Region 28, with a total square mileage of 1,988 miles, is in the northwest quadrant of Illinois. Comprised of Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties, Region 28 is divided among the Davenport-Moline-Rock Island (Iowa-Illinois), Peoria, and Ottawa Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

When Europeans first came to the Region, the land was still in a prairie state, without roads or dwellings. At this time, the land was made up of trails that the Foxe, Sac, Sauk, Pottawatomi, and Winnebago Indian tribes used as they moved through the counties with the passing seasons, from where they could grow small crops, to where they could hunt, and back again. Eventually, mining communities and rail stops began to form during the westward expansion.

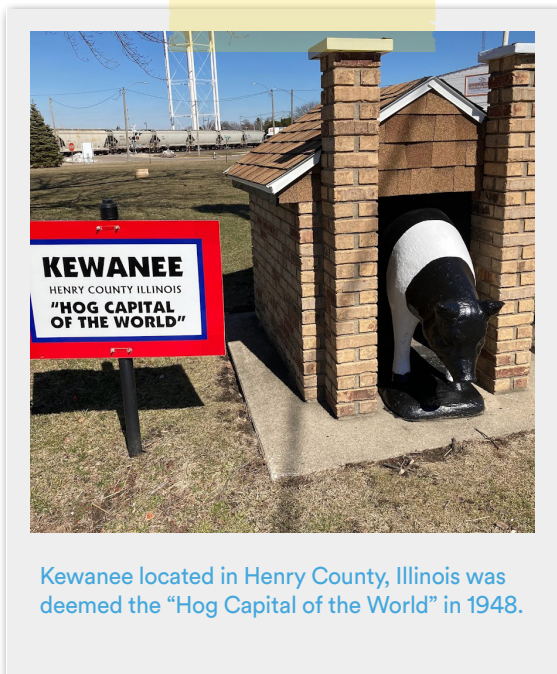
The towns in Region 28 take pride in their small-town feel, exuding hospitality and friendliness. With many of the downtowns still displaying historic architecture, they provide the feeling of stepping back to yesteryear. It is this ambiance which allows local businesses to thrive and landmarks to be admired. Region 28 is also the proud home to many parks which are used as a gathering place for community celebrations and sporting events throughout the year.

Region 28 is coined “The Hog Capital of the World” with 86.7% of the land in Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties used for agricultural purposes and a growing wind-energy industry. Major employers in the Region include Great Dane, Kewanee Life-Skills Re-Entry Center, Springfield Armory, and the Walmart Distribution Center.

The Region is known recreationally for containing Bishop Hill National Historic Site, Hennepin Canal State Parkway, and the Red Covered Bridge of Bureau County. A highlight of Region 28 is the Amtrak rail service with stops in both Henry and Bureau Counties, allowing for easy transportation to Chicago and across the United States.

## Land Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

Region 28 acknowledges that the Counties of Bureau, Henry, and Stark are the traditional homelands of many Native Nations. Region 28 is the homeland of the Meškwahki-aša-hina (Fox), Oθaakiwaki-hina·ki (Sauk), Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), and Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk, also known as Winnebago) Nations. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Region.



Kewanee located in Henry County, Illinois was deemed the “Hog Capital of the World” in 1948.

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

## Regional Demographics

Eighty-seven percent of the land in Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties is used for agricultural purposes. The area is also dotted with small, spread apart communities of 15,000 or less.

As of the 2020 Census, there were approximately 88,500 people residing in Region 28. The racial makeup of the Region is primarily white, but within some communities are neighbors who are Black or African American, Latine or Hispanic, and Asian.

Figure 1: Demographic 2020 Census Statistics for Region 28

# of Persons in Household		Bureau	Henry	Stark	Total
Population		33,244	49,284	5,994	88,522
Households		14,262	20,373	2,425	37,060
Households with Children Under the Age of 5		1,993	3,208	342	5,543
Median Resident Age		43	42	44	43
Overall Race and Ethnicity	White	94%	95%	98%	95%
	Latine or Hispanic	8%	5%	1%	4%
	Asian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
	Black	<1%	2%	<1%	<1%
	American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
	Other Race	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
	2+ Races	1%	1%	1%	1%
Median Household Income		\$55,217	\$61,467	\$62,681	\$59,788
Households With Children Under the Age of 5 Living on Income Below 200% Federal Poverty Level		973	1255	189	2,417
Underage Births (Under 20 years of age)		16	20	1	37

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

Of the 37,000 households in the Region, 15% have children under the age of 5 living with them. According to the Census, 69% of children in Region 28 are living in households with two adults and 31% in single adult households. The median income for a household in the Region was \$59,788 in 2020. Seven percent of households in the Region qualify for state assistance such as Medicaid, food stamps, and other supports due to their household income levels.

“ I got married and had a baby, I was living a dream. Then, out of the blue, the dream ended. I had to provide for my son alone. I needed a better job, which meant finding child care. Everywhere had a waitlist. Eventually I had to swallow my pride and sign up for food stamps. This wasn't Plan A or Plan B, but it's now my situation.

- Widowed Parent (Henry County)



## **Farm Families**

Nine percent of the households in Region 28 are farmers. The needs of farm families are an important demographic consideration in Region 28. Awareness of the needs of Illinois farm families is so important that the Illinois Farm Bureau purchased commercial space to launch a public awareness campaign during the 2023 Super Bowl.

Farm families experience unique demands on their time and energy. In addition to tending to animals and raising crops, they have stressors that often go overlooked by the general population, such as working seven days a week, schedules that do not include illness and vacation days, the impact of weather conditions, and balancing their budgets in response to commodity prices that fluctuate daily. Past advertisements of smiling male farmers posing with their wives who are tending to the young children have skewed the reality of the modern-day farm. In fact, the American Farm Bureau reports that women are now the fastest growing sector of farmers nationally.<sup>2</sup> Farm parents and caregivers must be considered when discussing the needs of working parents; they also navigate the complex world of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services.

## **Children & Families in Priority Populations**

Priority populations<sup>3</sup> are groups that often experience inequitable access to resources. Quantitative data on priority populations is often limited, so the data represented in this section reflects stories and examples from conversations with community members. Acknowledgement of these marginalized populations is done to support changemakers who are working to advance equitable access to services in communities.

## **Children & Families with Limited English Proficiency**

There are 270 households (0.7%) in Region 28 that have limited English proficiency. DePue, located in Bureau County, is where most limited English households in the Region reside. The biggest population of immigrants come from Guatemala, speak the dialect of K'iche', and work for Monterey Mushrooms and Walmart Distribution. Despite the high concentration of community members whose primary language is not English in DePue (46% of the population), translation resources have been diverted to other towns and counties due to the low percentage of service needs in Bureau County. For instance, DePue community members travel to Mendota (LaSalle County, 26 miles away), to access medical services in their native language. According to the 2020 Census, 3% of households in the Region are Spanish speakers who speak some English; 2% are primary speakers of other languages who speak some English.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fb.org/market-intel/women-in-agriculture-survey-2019>

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

**Figure 2: Children Ages Birth to Five Experiencing Homelessness, by County**

Bureau	Henry	Stark
88	165	25

Source: IECAM  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Children in Families Experiencing Homelessness

Homelessness, which is defined as any individual who lacks a fixed, regular nighttime residence, has become an increasing concern for children and families in the Region. Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties all have their own housing authorities that provide qualified individuals with affordable housing and resources to assist in their personal growth. Currently, there is a 15-month wait to obtain a Housing Choice Voucher (a federal program that helps families rent affordable homes, also known as Section 8 Housing) in Region 28. According to the Henry County Housing Authority, this wait time continues to increase, as more Chicago area families are relocating to towns like Kewanee, Princeton, and Toulon for the perception of safety that smaller, rural communities provide.

“ I didn’t know where Kewanee was, but I heard they had a shorter waitlist for housing than Chicago. I didn’t have to worry about getting shot. I hopped on the train, and here I am. I don’t get to see my friends as much, but it’s a better life for my kids.

- Parent and Housing Choice Voucher Participant (Henry County)

”

When the Illinois’ COVID-19 Eviction Moratorium lifted in October of 2021, 26% of households in Region 28 with Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) faced eviction for owing back rent from the moratorium period. The Regional Office of Education (ROE) had McKinney-Vento homeless support grant funding to support families with Kindergarten to twelfth grade students to avoid eviction. Unfortunately, households without grade school students have not been as fortunate. Over 100 HCV households are still anticipated to face eviction in 2023, in addition to the children and families in the Region currently experiencing homelessness.

## Children Born to Underage Parents

In 2020, there were 37 births to underage parents (birthing parents ages 19 and under at time of infant’s birth) in Region 28, a number that has been declining since 2000. Both health departments in the Region have strong Women, Infant and Children (WIC) programs, a special supplemental nutrition program for those deemed at nutritional risk. Multiple agencies in the Region also participate in the Loving Bottoms diaper bank program to help underage parents access food and diapers for their children. The Regional Office of Education (ROE) also has supportive resources such as tutors and home visiting programs that are available to help junior high and high school age parents and caregivers remain enrolled in school.

## Families Involved with the Child Welfare System

When a family is experiencing crisis and becomes involved in the child welfare system, various supports are put into place. The goal of these supports is to promote the wellbeing, permanency, and safety of children and families or, when that is not possible, help children find permanency with kin or adoptive families. In Region 28, there are over 120 children who are supported in various ways through the child welfare system per Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) statistical data.

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

## Local Community Collaborations

Community systems development recognizes the value of collaboration to increase collective benefits by focusing on shared goals. With the understanding that coordinated efforts around a shared purpose yield greater benefits and a wider-reaching impact, Collaborations develop coordinated and integrated local service delivery across health, early care and education, social service, and other service systems.

In Illinois, the vision for Community Systems Development (CSD) is that families can:

- Go anywhere to get access; there is no “wrong door”.
- Understand how services work and how to access them before they need them.

Illinois is home to over 50 formalized community networks focused on improving local ECEC systems. Unfortunately, there are currently no state funded early childhood collaboratives in Bureau, Henry, or Stark Counties. A significant barrier to collaboration in Region 28 has been the distance between service providers and funding dedicated to maintaining the Collaboration and sponsorship of community engagement activities.

A lack of formalized, state funded Collaborations greatly impacts the ability of families in the Region to become informed of and gain access to the support services available in their community. Discussions held among the Birth to Five Illinois Action Council and Family Council members have resulted in more service referrals and new approaches to getting the word out about the availability of services benefiting families. The formation of more Collaborations in the Region would result in heightened focus on services to best meet the needs and challenges experienced by families.



A child gently kissing the stomach of a pregnant adult.

## Early Childhood Education & Care Programs

High-quality ECEC is a crucial component of a child’s healthy development. The first 2,000 days of a child’s life are a period of rapid growth and change, when they learn to communicate, think abstractly, and understand the world. The Early Childhood years also impact children’s social and emotional health as they learn to cope with separation, group participation, problem solving, and sharing. Families, teachers, and communities have a crucial role in supporting children through this stage of life.

In Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties, there are a total of 61 licensed and license-exempt child care options for the 5,527 children under the age of five residing in the Region. Depending on the age of the child, the average time it takes a family to secure quality, full day child care programming in the Region is 12 to 15 months due to extensive program waitlists.

In Region 28 the following categories of early care and education programming exist: licensed child care, license-exempt child care, and publicly funded child care programs.

### License & License-Exempt Child Care

Licensed child care centers provide full-day early care and education services that families pay for out of pocket or receive payment assistance through child care assistance funding. Of the ten child care centers in the Region, three have achieved an ExceleRate Illinois designation for the quality- of-care services their programs provide.

**Figure 3: Sites and Capacity for Child Care Programs in Region 28**

Licensed Child Care Centers	Bureau		Henry		Stark	
	Sites	Capacity	Sites	Capacity	Sites	Capacity
Licensed Child Care Centers	2	187	8	579	0	0
License-Exempt Child Care Centers	1	46	1	15	0	0
Family Child Care Homes	8	79	39	362	2	18

Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Recognizing the need for programming, elementary schools in the Region have started offering district sponsored Pre-K programming in conjunction with their Early Childhood special education services for children ages three to five. Services can be full or part-day, and families typically pay tuition out of pocket. All the license-exempt, district-sponsored preschool programs in the Region are required to maintain an ExceleRate Illinois quality-of-care designation.

Family Child Care is full-day early care and education services that families pay for out of pocket or receive child care assistance support. Services are provided in the home of the child care provider. Of the 49 Family Child Care providers in the Region, two have achieved an ExceleRate Illinois designation for the quality-of-care services their programs provide.



**Figure 4: Publicly Funded Child Care Program Sites and Capacity**

Program Type	Bureau		Henry		Stark	
	Sites	Capacity	Sites	Capacity	Sites	Capacity
Preschool for All (PFA) (Part Day)	7	380	6	380	2	85
Preschool for All (PFA) (Extended Day)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Head Start	1	18	2	100	1	17
Early Head Start	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prevention Initiative (PI) (Center Based)	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

### Publicly Funded Child Care Programs

Preschool for All offers two and a half hours per day of preschool services to children ages three to five years through local school districts. There is no cost to families for service, as the program is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education. Participating students must meet eligibility guidelines, including but not limited to, income and developmental needs. Currently there are no programs in the Region offering Preschool for All Expansion services, a full-day service offered through the Illinois State Board of Education. Most districts have elected to remain with the part day model, to provide more students with the space and staffing resources they have available.

Head Start is a federally funded full or part-day preschool program for children ages three to five. There is no cost to parents and caregivers for services. In addition to preschool programming, families also receive home visitation support. Participating families must meet income and eligibility factors, including but not limited to, developmental need and/or participation in government funded public assistance programs.

Early Head Start provides full day early care services for children under age three at no cost to families. Participating must meet Head Start eligibility guidelines. While there are currently no Early Head Start sites in the Region, funding has been attained to start offering Early Head Start services in Henry County. Partnering centers and home child care providers are being sought to build out the program.

Prevention Initiative services are full-day services for children under age three and are provided by local school districts. There is no cost to families for service, as the program is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education. Participating students meet eligibility guidelines. Currently, there are no districts providing these services.

## Supplemental Early Care & Education Supports

ECEC programs do more than provide child care services, they also aim to improve the outcomes for young children and their families by offering support services such as child health and developmental screenings, remediation support, and home visiting to ensure the holistic needs of the child and family are met. Often these supports are provided through Early Intervention and Home Visiting services.

Early Intervention is a statewide program that provides supports and services for families to help their children under the age of three meet developmental milestones. Early Intervention services are paid for by the Department of Human Services and a family's public or private insurance. Services include speech therapy, physical therapy, and other types of services based on the needs of the child and family. "It took 432 days after my case worker made the referral for my child to start receiving speech therapy." Per federal guidelines it should only take 90 days for a child to receive services after a referral is made.



A child playing with blocks.

Early Intervention services are in high demand. Local offices report receiving 1,800+ referrals per year on top of their pre-existing caseloads. To meet the demand, offices have elected to only meet with families at their office or virtually, rather than reestablishing in-home visiting services that were traditionally provided prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. By not conducting home visits, service workers can apply the saved travel time to serving an increased case load. Unfortunately, not all families have work schedules that allow for appointments and extended travel times.

***A mother in Buda (Bureau County) reported traveling to Peoria, Illinois (47 miles each direction) twice a week so her child could receive necessary in-person services. This mother was fortunate to be a stay-at-home parent with reliable transportation; however, this is not the case for all families.***

In Region 28, the Regional Office of Education, Abilities Plus, Early Head Start, and Princeton Community School District all provide home visiting services to children under the age of three utilizing Prevention Initiative funding. All the programs have adopted the Parents As Teachers, a research-based, home visiting curriculum. Parents as Teachers partners with families to strengthen parenting practices, increasing children's school readiness and success.

With the need for additional ECEC programs in the Region, some parents have expressed a desire to expand the age range of children served by the Parents As Teachers curriculum. Unfortunately, Prevention Initiative funding utilized for current home visiting services only funds services for children under age three, and Preschool for All funding, which does require a minimum of two home visits per year to participating families, only supports students enrolled in center or school-based services.

## Affordability & Accessibility of Child Care

In addition to access, the cost of child care can be another barrier for families. Child care is often expensive; the average out-of-pocket cost for full-time child care in Region 28 is \$900 per month- nearly \$11,000 a year for one child. Many families feel priced out of child care, and it impacts not only their ability to work but also their decisions about what their family can look like.

According to the Census, in 69% of households in the Region, both adults work outside of the home. However, not all communities contain the child care services that families need, which often results in caregivers leaving the workforce or piecing together care services amongst friends and family as available.

### Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

CCAP is a program funded through IDHS that helps families access affordable, quality child care, ECEC programs, 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. In Region 28, 72 families are currently participating in CCAP.

***In 2022, a Henry County mother lost her CCAP due to breaking her leg and being off work due to short term disability. Since she was not working, she did not qualify for assistance. However, being a single, immobile mother with a toddler, she needed child care assistance more than ever! Sometimes blanket stipulations overlook the circumstantial needs of families.***

For many families, lack of awareness regarding CCAP is a barrier. Forty percent of parents surveyed by Birth to Five did not know what the CCAP was or how to apply for the program, and many parents and caregivers who were made aware of the program reported experiencing delays in getting their CCAP paperwork processed. Several parents reported learning about CCAP only after an Early Childhood program waitlist slot came available. In the time it took their CCAP paperwork to then be processed, they lost a hard to come by slot to another family on the child care center's waitlist. This, in turn, prevented caregivers from being able to also secure employment and better their household living situations. Parents wished they were better informed of how to navigate access to support services such as CCAP.

Early care and education services play a crucial role in the holistic development of children. Additionally, parents and caregivers need child care services in order to work, and for communities to thrive. Unfortunately, availability of services and cost can make accessing Early Childhood programs and services a daunting task for many families in Region 28. Access is further hindered by the lack of available spots across licensed, license-exempt, and publicly funded child care providers.

“ We would not have been able to do it without child care assistance... No, not work, we would not have been able to afford [our youngest child].  
- Parent (Stark County) ”

“ On Monday, Wednesdays, and Thursdays I work from home. On Tuesdays and Fridays, it is grandma in the morning, my sister in the afternoon, and then our neighbor if my husband has to stay late at work. It's a puzzle putting it all together and I always feel like I'm missing a piece.  
- Parent (Bureau County) ”

# Slot Gap

Slot gap is a term used to describe the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the capacity (or slots) across child care options. There were two slot gaps that were identified for this report: the overall child care capacity slot gap, which measures the capacity of all licensed child care, licensed family home care, and license-exempt child care centers against the total number of children ages five and under in the Region; and, the publicly funded program slot gap, which measures the number of slots in publicly funded programs against the number of children living at or below 200% FPL. As of the 2020 United States Census, there were 5,527 children under the age of five residing in Bureau, Henry, and Stark Counties.

In Region 28, there are only 1,117 spots in licensed or license-exempt ECEC slots available, leaving nearly 80% of young children without a spot in a licensed or license-exempt child care center or home (if their family would want to enroll them). It should be noted that the slots listed are maximum capacity for the ECEC programs. Due to workforce challenges and programmatic needs, some programs are currently operating below capacity, creating an increased service gap.

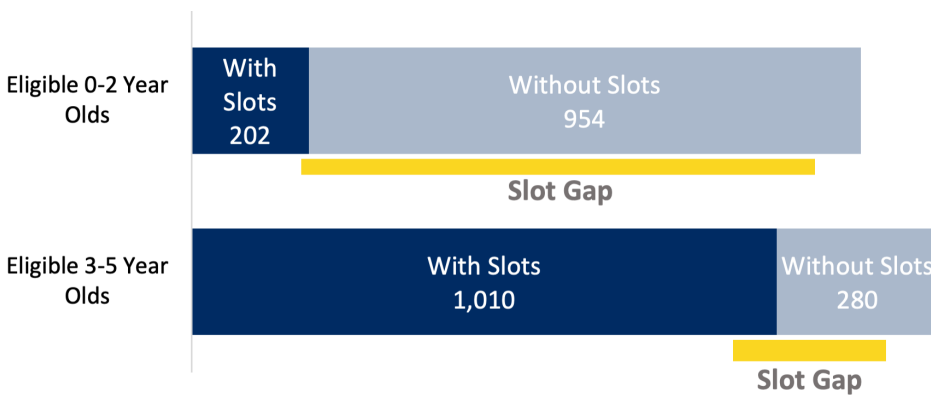
**Figure 5: Region 28 Child Care Slot Gap**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There are 1,212 publicly funded slots across publicly funded programs for the 2,446 children living at or below 200% FPL, leaving half of eligible children without a publicly funded slot.

**Figure 6: Region 28 Publicly Funded ECEC Programs Slot Gap**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3



## Slot Gap Impacts the Entire Community

One parent shared how there is a licensed exempt Pre-K program at her local elementary school, but no licensed child care centers or family child care homes available for wrap-around or full-day care needs. The closest program is 11 miles away, and that program has an extensive waitlist (6-18 months, dependent on the age for which care is needed). The parent is employed as the only dentist in her rural community and reported that due to the lack of full-day services in town, her son goes to Pre-K in the morning and spends the afternoon in the dental office. Luckily the office team is accommodating of the child care situation. On no school days (holidays, snow days, and breaks) the dental office is often forced to close due to having no full-day care option, which leaves the town without dental care.

In Region 28, 69% of households have adults who work outside of the home, resulting in a need for full-day ECEC services. Not all communities have the services that families need, which often results in parents leaving the workforce or staggering how care services are provided.

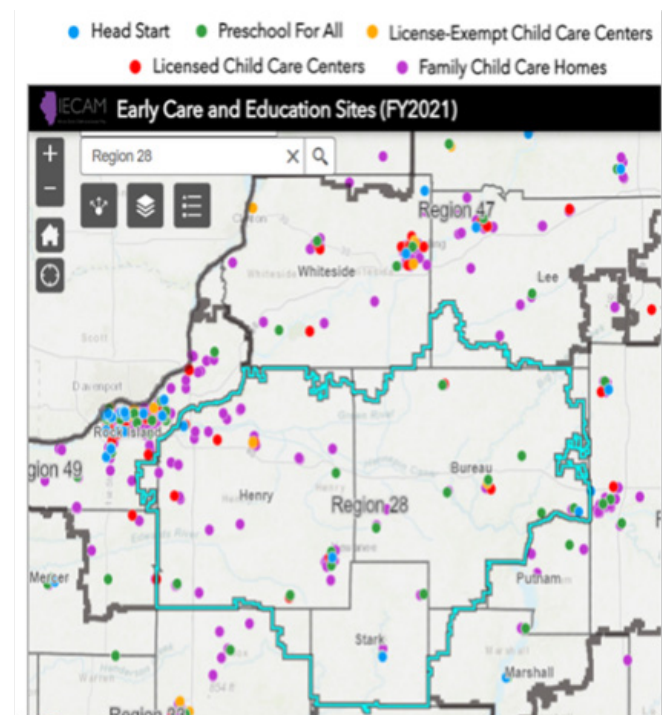
## Transportation To & From Programming

A shortage of ECEC programming slots is not the only access issue affecting rural communities. In small towns like Andover, Buda, Toulon, and Woodhull, it is not unheard of for a family to travel 20+ miles, in each direction, to access Early Childhood services.

Preschool for All (PFA) and school district non-licensed Pre-K services are the desired option for families with age-eligible children. Unfortunately, the hours of services and location often serve as a barrier to working families (69% of Region 28's population). Some school districts, like Stark County #100 and Kewanee #229, have collaborated with other entities such as Head Start (HS) to provide transportation to and from children's homes or before/after Pre-K programming, alleviating the transportation barrier for some families.

Not all districts currently have a Collaboration option or budgetary means to offer transportation to before or after school care. With a bus route averaging \$23,000-\$35,000 and the additional Department of Transportation (DOT) stipulations for Preschool students to ride school buses (like the need for a student monitor and child safety harnesses), many districts cannot afford to stretch their budget to include transportation costs.

**Figure 7: Location of Licensed and Publicly Funded Programs**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

## **Impact of Competitive Grants**

While many Regions hope to expand slots for Preschool for All (PFA) programming, Region 28 hopes PFA services will be restored in Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) to some school districts that lost services in the last round of competitive funding. For the 2018-2019 school year, some school districts in Region 28 lost PFA services, despite writing competitive grants, due to not enough state funds available for all programs. It was deemed that other districts displayed a greater need for services, so funding was reallocated. This forced some Region 28 school districts to discontinue PFA programming, resulting in a loss of over 40 preschool slots in the Region.

## **Attempts to Combat Slot Gap in the Region**

The need for additional service options in rural communities is recognized. In Fiscal Year 2020 (FY22), Skip-A-Long Community Services in Moline was awarded the first Early Head Start (EHS) grant to service Rock Island, Mercer, and Henry Counties. In Henry County, EHS is beginning to partner with family child care providers to offer enhanced prenatal to three years of age services in rural communities, as well as home visiting services. It is hoped that EHS can increase its funding and expand its partnerships to child care centers in the county in the years ahead, which in turn would create more high-quality, federally funded, child care slots for families to access Region 28.

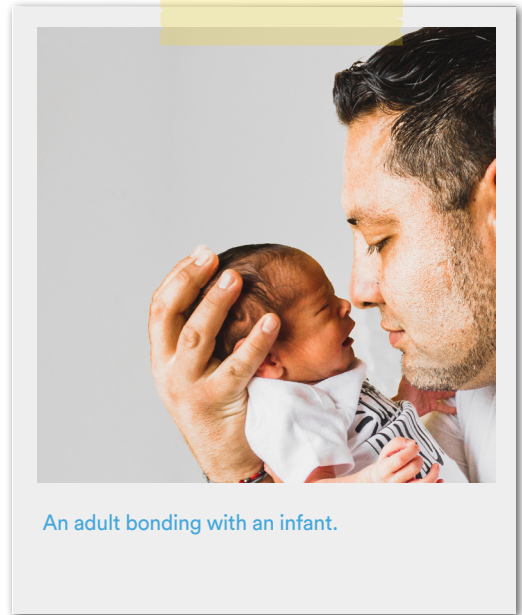
Without a clear understanding of the actual supply versus the need for care - the child care slot gap - and contributing factors, it is impossible to quantify the actual child care space needs or barriers associated with closing the access gap to affordable, reliable, and quality care for their children.

# Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Region 28, like so many other Regions across Illinois, is experiencing an Early Childhood workforce shortage. Multiple ECEC programs reported having classrooms they were unable to open due to staff shortages, further contributing to the slot gap in the Region.

**Ten percent of the Early Childhood center slots in Region 28 went unused during the 2022-2023 school year, and Early Intervention put students on waitlists due to ECEC programs not having enough qualified staff.**

One contributing factor to the shortage was the difficulty in completing the hiring process. Two school districts reported having to staff their Preschool for All classrooms with improperly licensed teachers to keep their classrooms operational, and now fear their inability to find appropriately licensed teachers to even interview will result in the funding for the classrooms being revoked by the Illinois State Board of Education. Four child care centers in the Region mentioned the delay in completing state mandated employment background checks is impacting their ability to hire staff. With background checks taking three to four weeks to process due to staff shortages at state offices, many prospective employees are taking jobs elsewhere, due to their inability to go weeks without employment/pay. But, even once Early Childhood professionals have been hired, they are not always staying in the field.



An adult bonding with an infant.

## Why Educators are Leaving the Field

Low pay is one reason some leave the field, contributing to the teaching shortage. According to the Salary and Staffing Survey,<sup>4</sup> the average yearly salary for all child care positions in Bureau and Henry Counties is between \$23,00 and \$24,000 (Figure 8). In comparison, the average yearly salary for all occupations in Bureau and Henry County is \$31,397 and \$35,942, respectively. For single mothers working in child care centers, this means their yearly income is less than 200% FPL. Additionally, few child care centers in the Region provide their staff with health insurance or retirement benefits.

Figure 8: Average Hourly Pay by Position, Yearly Pay for All Child Care Positions<sup>5</sup>

County	Administrative Director <sup>6</sup>	Director/Teacher	Teacher	Assistant Teachers	Yearly Salary for all Child Care Positions
Bureau	-	-	\$12.00	\$10.00	\$24,000
Henry	\$16.04	\$16.57	\$11.13	\$10.00	\$23,140
Stark	-	-	-	-	-

A second reason why staff are leaving the Early Childhood workforce in Region 28 is the ever-increasing expectations being placed on staff. With State quality initiatives for the improvement of learning opportunities comes increased educational expectations for educators. Most of the time educators are being asked to complete these new educational requirements during their personal time and are not compensated for their efforts. As one educator stated, “Although not as fulfilling, I can obtain a retail position for more pay, more benefits, more advancement opportunity, and not have to go back to school or take time away from my family.”

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=143721>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA\\_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-7.pdf](https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-7.pdf), [https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA\\_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-8.pdf](https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-8.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Cells with an asterisk \* did not have enough survey respondents to report.

Lack of support is a final reason why staff are leaving the Early Childhood workforce. In addition to a turnover in teachers, many early care and education programs have also experienced a turnover in administration. To become an administrator in an early learning program, Illinois child care licensing only requires the completion of one course in administration. Many administrators report there is more they wished they knew about encouraging their staff, business operations, available community resources, and human resource practices.

“ I loved and miss the kids, but I have my own child to put through school and rent to pay. It was either take on a second job, and miss out on my child’s evening sporting events, or leave the center I was working for.

- Former Early Childhood Teacher  
(Stark County)

“ I thought I wanted to be a director. Working with adults is not the same as children. I had no idea what all went on behind the scenes of a center. As a new teacher in the school district, I was assigned mentor. As a director I have no one I can turn to for help, instead everyone is turning to me for the answers.

- First Year Child Care Center Director

“ I just completed my principal licensure coursework. State Funded Pre-K, operating in district buildings, was never discussed by my professors. How well do up-and-coming district administrators with no Early Childhood background understand the unique needs of State Board of Education Preschool for All and Prevention Initiative programming?

- Early Childhood Administrator

## Perceptions of Student Teachers

Illinois has many scholarships to support individuals seeking a degree specifically in Early Education. Of the 9 current Early Childhood college majors from Region 28 that were surveyed, only 2 were made aware of these scholarship opportunities prior to enrolling in college.

When asked if they were planning on returning to their home communities to teach, half reported they were hesitant to return to their home communities for fear they would lose their position and seniority due to the potential for school district consolidation, something that is not uncommon when smaller school districts face budget restraints. Two also reported feeling nervous starting their careers in a small community, due to not having access to the same number of mentor teachers with an understanding of Early Childhood programming requirements that larger districts can provide.

## Pay & Education

Early Childhood professionals can earn more if they “move up the ladder” and accept teacher or Director-level positions. However, there are educational and training requirements that must be met in some programs, leaving some workers faced with the challenge of attending- and paying for- school to earn more pay. Black Hawk Community College (Henry and Rock Island Counties) and Western Illinois University Quad Cities Campus (Rock Island County) have partnered to help individuals attain Bachelor of Science degree in Early Childhood Education.

Aspiring teachers can attain an associate degree in Early Childhood Studies from Black Hawk College and then transfer to Western Illinois University to complete their Bachelor Degree and State Board of Education licensure requirements. The program is designed to “meet students where they are” by offering students advanced



placement credit for any prior experience working in Early Childhood programs, presenting courses in an online format, and allowing student teaching to occur in the workplace. Currently, there are 150 future Early Childhood Educators enrolled in the program.

There are scholarships that exist in Illinois to entice individuals to obtain their Early Childhood Education degrees:

- Illinois Gateways Scholarship- The Gateways Scholarship Program will pay a portion of tuition for eligible professionals working in licensed early care and education centers or PFA programs who want to earn college credit, credentials, or degrees.
- Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship-For individuals who work or have worked in early care and education centers and homes or district-sponsored preschool classrooms and are seeking additional credentials and/or a degree in Early Childhood Education. The ECACE scholarship can cover the total cost of attendance after other financial aid is received, covering costs such as tuition, fees, room/board, books, and supplies.

“ I was receiving the Gateways scholarship for my bachelor’s degree in Infant/Toddler studies. I took a job as a Prevention Initiative home visitor, the job I went back to school to qualify for. Since I was no longer in a Preschool for All classroom, I lost my scholarship.

- Prevention Initiative Funded Home Visitor (Henry County)

”

Unfortunately, these scholarships are only available to employees of licensed child care programs or Preschool for All staff. Some members of the early care and education workforce, like Prevention Initiative Home Visitors and Early Intervention staff, are excluded from these educational advancement opportunities. One year employment “payback” commitments following the completion of coursework paid for by some scholarships also place limitations on the positions Early Childhood majors can accept upon graduation.

In some areas of the Region, initiatives have been launched to try to recruit individuals to the Early Childhood field.

### **Child Development Associate (CDA) Virtual Cohort**

Child Care Resource and Referral of Midwest Illinois started virtual Child Development Associate (CDA) credentialing cohorts in the Fall of 2020 to help get more center employees, and even a few child care center parents, certified as classroom leads (the CDA credential is the minimum licensing requirement). Since the launch of the program 45 educators have completed the program. As a result of this initiative, Early Head Start was able to qualify enough staff to now consider expanding services Henry County, a county that previously has been without Early Head Start programming. Additionally, one child care center chain in the Region reported that they lost 60% of their staff due to COVID-19 center closures, the CDA cohort allowed them to keep all their classrooms operational.

“ My son’s Head Start teacher said I was good with kids and told me I should apply for a job. I said I would give it a try. Now I have my CDA, and work for Early Head Start. Head Start helped me turn my life around in so many ways!

- Parent & CDA Cohort Participant (Henry County)

”

### **ECEC Staff Shortage**

ECEC is not immune to workforce shortages, and these shortages have a significant impact on the child care slot gap. It is through the continuation of innovative recruitment strategies, employee pay and benefit initiatives, and staff development programs that encompass the entire ECEC field, that workforce challenges can be overcome in Region 28.

# Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

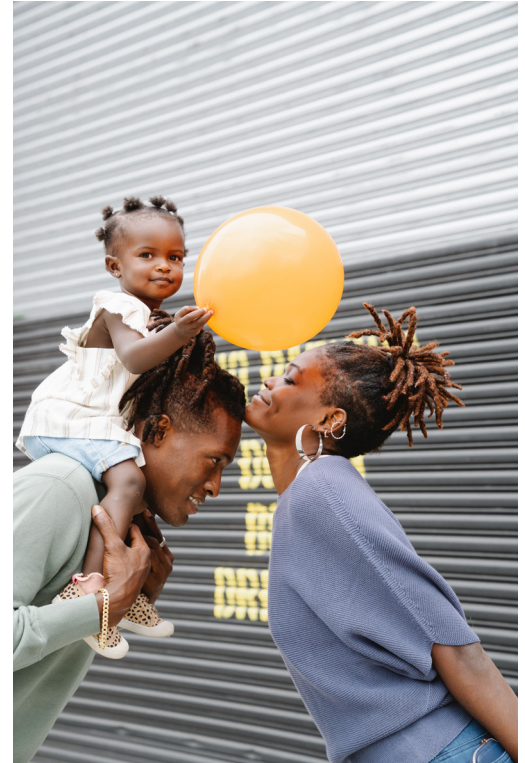
Region 28 is largely rural and families in the Region face challenges accessing Early Childhood programs and services.

## Non-Traditional Work Hours

Child care options are limited for families and caregivers in the Region, leaving many whose schedule falls outside of traditional, 9:00am to 5:00pm work hours piecing together child care or relying on friends and families to fill in the gaps. Parents and caregivers who farm said they are often overlooked as working parents in the discussion of child care. In addition to the shortage of child care services, farm families have the added challenge of often not qualifying for child care assistance funding due to the nature of their work.

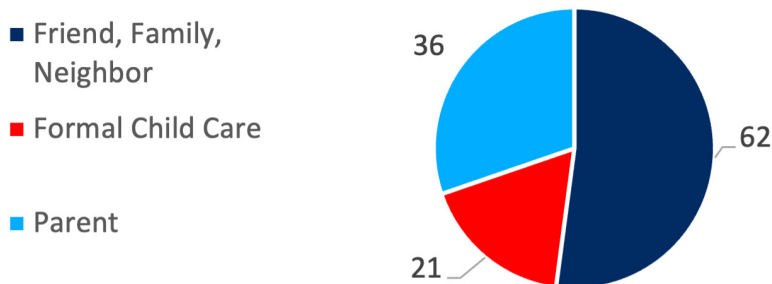
In Illinois, CCAP guidelines related to self-employment specifically states that if caregivers work from home, they do not have a need for outside child care and do not qualify for programs such as CCAP. This stipulation has often created an additional barrier for small, unincorporated farmers attempting to access high quality, affordable Early Childhood programming.

“ Why is farming the only occupation where you are expected to take your kids to work?  
- Parent & Farmer (Bureau County) ”



A baby playing with a balloon while cherishing the company of two adults.

Figure 9: Types of Child Care Services Utilized by Farm Families in the Region



Source: American Farm Bureau  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ The government spends millions of dollars each year on subsidies but fails to recognize that access to child care is also important for maintaining and growing a business.  
-Single Parent & Farmer, Henry County ”

Without accessible and affordable child care, farm families are often expected perform dual roles as both workers and child care providers. Child care affects the trajectory of the farm business and the ability of a farm family to stay on the land. With 86% of the land in Region 28 devoted to agricultural purposes, it is important that the personal needs, not just the land support needs, of farmers be considered.

## Access to Public Transportation

Limited transportation services exist in the Region. Bureau, Henry, and Stark counties have limited in-town, advanced scheduling required, shuttle services. A shortage of public transportation services limits the ability of families to access necessary social, educational, and medical services. In Henry and Stark Counties, it is recommended that public bus services be scheduled 24 hours in advance to guarantee service.

With medical services and early intervention services relocating to larger communities like Peoria and the Quad Cities, families with limited transportation are now facing additional challenges in accessing services.

## Medical Care Desert

With the closing of Illinois Valley Central Hospital and St. Margaret's Hospital, there are now no hospitals or subsidiaries in Region 28 that provide obstetric (OB) services. Unless an expectant parent is in the crowning stage of delivery, they are turned away from the remaining hospitals in Region 28. Expectant parents and caregivers must travel to the Quad Cities, Peoria, or Sterling, a drive that takes many expectant parents 70 minutes or more to deliver their babies and receive prenatal and postnatal support services.

*An expectant mother in Mineral (Bureau County) reported that she lives 70 minutes from the nearest delivery room. When she goes into labor, her plan is to travel to a friend's house in Peoria until contractions are close enough that she can proceed to the hospital.*

Families on Medicaid are more likely than those who are privately insured to have difficulty finding a medical provider. Parents in the Region report their frustrations with having only one or two medical providers to choose from that accept Medicaid, and those providers generally have several month waitlists for new clientele. Caregivers report having to travel to Peoria or Chicago to get their children established with a pediatrician or dentist to fulfil the examination requirements necessary for enrollment in education services.

## Translation Services

Schools face barriers with obtaining translation services for their limited number of students and families that do not speak English. Some districts report using alternative supports, like older siblings or family friends, to translate Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, due to not having any translators who are willing to travel the extended distance to the school.

“ My daughters don't schedule when they are going to wake up sick.  
- Parent (Stark County) ”

“ My daughter was receiving Early Intervention. Then I cancelled two visits because she was sick and I couldn't get her to both the doctor and her therapy appointment, we missed another visit because the bus was late. She has been put back on the waiting list for [physical and speech] therapy.  
- Parent (Henry County) ”

“ Head Start wants my son to see a dentist. The only dentist in town that takes Medicaid isn't taking new patients. I don't have a car to go anywhere else.  
- Parent (Henry County) ”

“ We can't get anyone to translate meetings for us. We're told it's too far, so we use older siblings to do the translating for us. I know it's not best practice, but it's all we got.  
-Educator (Stark County) ”

After hearing the request from parents for ESL classes in the area, Jefferson Elementary in Spring Valley partnered with Illinois Valley Community College (LaSalle County) to offer evening ESL classes on-site. Currently, there are over 30 families from Spring Valley, DePue, and Princeton participating in the classes. In support, Monterey Mushrooms and Walmart Distribution have made a conscious effort to schedule staff according to the ESL class schedules. Unfortunately, obtaining child care to attend class is still a barrier for many. In most households one parent at a time is taking classes, delaying the ability of the family unit to become fluent in English and less dependent upon translation services.

## Food Insecurity

According to research from the USDA, food insecurity rates are higher in rural than in urban areas.<sup>7</sup> In rural communities, residents lack resources to obtain the food they need due to factors including transportation barriers and limited access to affordable food.

***Due to not having a grocery store, fresh fruits and vegetables currently cannot be purchased out of season in Stark County.***

This fiscal year, Region 28 lost two small town grocery stores. Both Atkinson (Henry County) and Annawan's (Henry County) markets had to close due to being unable to compete with the big box stores in neighboring communities. With rising food costs and the alluring selection of big box grocers, it is a struggle for smaller markets to compete. The communities of Region 28 do contain food pantries, often organized by local churches and dependent on community contributions and volunteers to run. Being donor and volunteer dependent, church food pantries cannot provide the availability and variety of larger food banks. With few options and high costs of food, many families are left struggling to afford basic necessities, let alone child care.

## Child Welfare Supports

Child welfare service offerings are more limited in Bureau, Henry, and Stark counties than in more urban areas like the Quad Cities, Peoria, and Chicago. Families are often required to travel up to 50 miles to access substance withdrawal management, mental health, drug testing, and abuse prevention services.

“ Since the decrease in SNAP benefits went into effect in March, there has been an increase in food pantry usage. Some food pantries are now limiting participation to households with children because they are running out of food.

- Caseworker (Henry & Stark Counties)

Stark County is without a Safer Families program. Safer Families offers a home for children to stay and a supportive community for parents and caregivers while families are experiencing crisis. Bureau and Henry Counties are without a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program, which advocates for the best interest of children in the foster care system.

Along with fewer child welfare supports, Bureau, Henry, and Stark counties have higher rates of child abuse than the Illinois state average, and rates that are nearly double that of urban communities around the state, like Cook County. Rural community members do not have the same access to resources that are often taken for granted in urban communities. In turn, this lack of access places barriers on the ability of families and communities to thrive.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/rural-hunger-facts#:~:text=Food%20insecurity%20rates%20are%20higher,food%20insecurity%20rates%20are%20rural.>



**Figure 10: Reported Victims of Abuse and Neglect Ages Five and Under per 1,000 by County**

County	Victims of Abuse and Neglect per 1,000
Bureau	22.52
Henry	20.29
Stark	19.37
Cook	11.3
State of Illinois	19.37

Source: DCFS

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Centering family and caregiver voice is imperative to reimagining the Early Childhood system so that it is more accessible and equitable for all.

## Regional Strengths & Needs

Through Action and Council meetings, community listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, and surveys, qualitative data was collected about the Early Childhood landscape, and strengths and needs were identified.

Specific strengths Region 28 of ECEC services include:

- Discussions are occurring on how districts can expand Preschool For All services, and Early Head Start is actively seeking partners to expand programming to the Region.
- Innovative higher education and credentialing cohorts have been implemented to combat Early Care and Education workforce shortages.
- Many libraries in Region 28 have implemented weekly story hours that provide Kindergarten readiness activities for children not enrolled in preschool programming.
- Home visiting services in the Region provide educational support and connect families with community services.

The families of Region 28 lack access to:

- Affordable, full-day child care options for working parents and caregivers.
- Local Maternal and Child Health services.
- Early Intervention services where families live.
- Child Welfare programs to prevent child abuse.
- Public transportation.
- Housing Support services.
- Fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables.
- High-speed, reliable internet.

## Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in three main areas: systems building, collaboration, and marketing.

### Systems Building (State Level Recommendations)

- Actively and routinely seek parent and care provider's input from across the State on the barriers exist and exclude participation in current programming, such as the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Preschool For All, and Early Intervention. Needs and barriers differ across communities, blanket stipulations and procedures enacted for one population can create unintentional barriers for another.
- Consider the needs of all members of the early care and education workforce. Current Early Childhood scholarships and workforce recruitment initiatives are only for staff that work in licensed Early Childhood programs or district sponsored preschool classrooms. All members who comprise the early care and education workforce should be considered for workforce recruitment and retention initiatives.
- Offer incentives or priority consideration for child care programming, internet, transportation, food, and housing initiatives that intend on providing services in underrepresented communities across the State.

### Collaboration (Community Level Recommendations)

- Utilize libraries as community "hubs" for educational and resident support services. In addition to story hours that focus on Kindergarten readiness skills for children that are not enrolled in preschool programming, libraries could serve as a space to provide access to early intervention services, educational workshops, and a community-based location for social service agency office hours.
- Create Regional Medical Access Centers in Bureau, Henry, and Stark counties. Medical Access Centers can be staffed with Nurse Practitioners and Midwives in Illinois under the supervision of a neighboring hospital. Less expensive than traditional physician staffed medical services, Regional Medical Access Centers would create access to more medical services in underserved rural communities.
- Encourage collaboration to provide full day or wrap around child care services. Some school districts have collaborated with other entities like Head Start to provide full day services for families. The district provides Preschool For All services in the morning, and qualifying children are picked up by and transported to Head Start for afternoon programming. Additionally, some districts are hiring licensed preschool teachers that, rather than having in-district classrooms, provide the Preschool For All Programming in community child care centers and churches.
- Include high school Child Development Associate (CDA) courses as an option for students enrolling in Career and Technical Education coursework. Thereby, allowing high school students who are interested in becoming teachers to attain entry-level child care center positions upon high school graduation, and enabling the future teachers to qualify for scholarships designed to support the Early Care and Education workforce, like the Gateways and ECACE scholarships.

### Marketing (Agency Level Recommendations)

- Promote ECEC services in an equitable and accessible manner to residents in rural communities.
- Create mentoring opportunities within agencies to boost potential employees for positions.

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 28, 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: Regional Identity

Cities Within Region	School Districts	Legislative Districts
Annawan Atkinson Bishop Hill Bradford Cambridge Colona Galva Geneseo Kewanee La Fayette Orion Princeton Spring Valley Toulon Wyoming	Alwood CUSD #225 Annawan CUSD #226 Bradford CUSD #1 Bureau Valley CUSD 3340 Cambridge CUSD #227 Colona Grade School District #190 Dalzell Grade School District #98 DePue USD #103 Galva CUSD #224 Geneseo CUSD #228 Hall High School District #502 Kewanee CUSD #229 La Moille CUSD #303 Ladd CCSD #94 Malden CCSD #84 Ohio CCSD #17 Ohio High School District #505 Princeton Elementary School District #115 Spring Valley Community Consolidated School District #99 Stark County CUSD #100 Wethersfield CUSD #230	Illinois House Ryan Spain (73) Lance Yednock (76) Travis Weaver (93)  Illinois Senate Sue Rezin (38) Winn Stoller (37) Michael Halpin (36) Tom Bennett (53)  US House Darin LaHood (16) Eric Sorenson (17)  US Senate Tammy Duckworth Dick Durbin
<b>Major Highways</b> Interstate 80 U.S. Highway 6 U.S. Highway 34 Illinois Route 17 Illinois Route 78 Illinois Route 81 Illinois Route 82 Illinois Route 84 Illinois Route 92 Illinois Route 93		

## 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.

### Families, Parents, 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. 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 don't 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?

## Appendix D: Additional Resources

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

1. Erikson Institute Risk and Reach Report: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>
2. Illinois Action For Children Research & Data: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>
3. Illinois Action For Children Partner Plan Act: <https://www.partnerplanact.org/>

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Birth to Five Illinois is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and is a department of the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA).