



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

**Region 34**  
(Lake County)



In Partnership with

Early Start, Bright Future



[igrowlakecounty.org](http://igrowlakecounty.org)



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## Region 34 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.

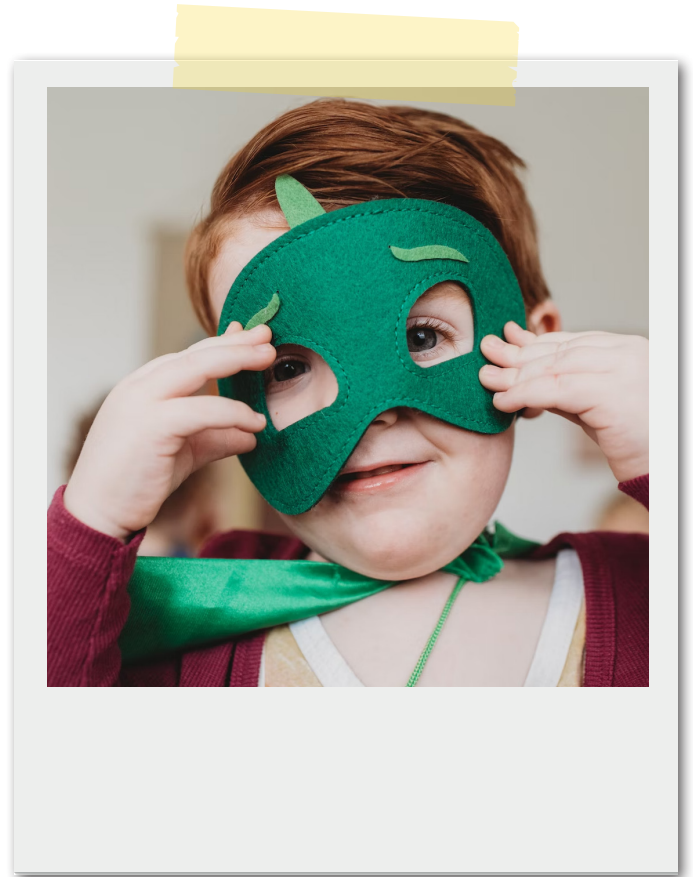
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 34 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 Regional Needs Assessment revealed two significant findings in Lake County. Firstly, there is a large slot gap, indicating the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the number of theoretically available slots across all childcare options. Specifically, the assessment indicated a 69% slot gap in publicly funded programs and a 66% slot gap in child care capacity, which is concerning. Increasing public funding and reducing the cost of child care are necessary steps to address this challenge faced by families.

Another finding that was identified by the Regional Needs Assessment was the workforce shortage in Lake County. It is crucial to raise awareness about the opportunities for initial education, ongoing education, and professional development in the field of ECEC to address this workforce shortage.



Through the collaborative work of the Action and Family Councils, the councils were able to gather valuable insights and data and to identify the strengths, needs, and recommendations for Lake County. Despite these challenges, Lake County has a wealth of resources and potential to transform the ECEC system for their Region.

## **Region 34 Needs**

1. Need to attract and retain ECEC workforce.
2. Increase awareness of continuing education opportunities.
3. Create more child care slots in all programs throughout the county.
4. Address the high cost of child care.
5. Increase services for children with disabilities and developmental delays.

## **Region 34 Recommendations**

1. Increase child care slots across all publicly funded program options.
2. Increase child care slots across all child care centers and home-based program options.
3. Create a centralized hub for ECEC-related resources and services.
4. Recruit and retain a quality ECEC workforce through offering competitive salaries, benefits, and opportunities for advancement.
5. Build partnerships with universities and colleges to help create a pipeline of qualified early education teachers.

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

**Dane Cruz (he/him)**

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## REGION 34 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.



**50,660**

Children Under  
the Age of 6  
in Region 34



**12,902**

Children 0-5  
at 200% Federal  
Poverty Level



**8,945**

Children 0-5  
Without Publicly  
Funded ECEC Slots

**69%**

The percentage of children ages 0-5  
who do not have access to ECEC  
services, also known as a slot gap

"This is a major issue! Raising kids costs  
money! Families cannot afford to raise  
children in our Region without assistance."  
- 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 34 NEEDS**

1. Need to attract and retain ECEC workforce.
2. Lack of awareness of continuing education opportunities
3. More child care slots in all program options.
4. Address the high cost of child care.
5. Increase services for children with disabilities.

## **REGION 34 RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Increase child care slots across all publicly funded programs.
2. Increase child care slots across all child care centers and home-based programs.
3. Create a centralized hub for resources and services.
4. Provide quality workforce, recruitment, and retention.
5. Build partnerships with universities and colleges to help create a pipeline of qualified early education teachers.



**"All the Child Care programs here in Lake County are full or have a waiting list."  
- Family Council Members**



# 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.

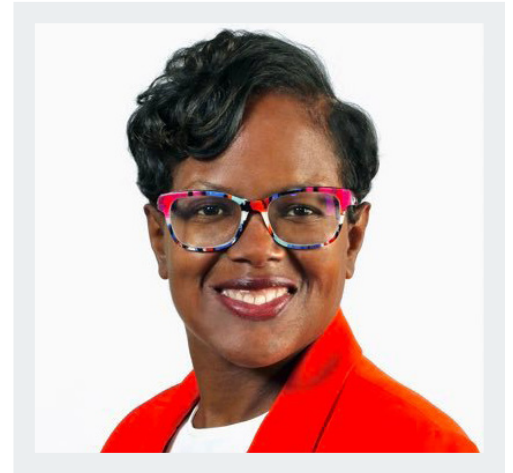
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

Completion of this Regional Needs Assessment was only possible due to the support, dedication, and commitment of our community. While we cannot thank everyone individually who shared their experiences by taking a survey or attending an interview or focus group, we would like to acknowledge and highlight a few of our community partnerships and collaborations.

Our Action Council and Family Council were the driving force behind this Regional Needs Assessment. We spent countless hours together reviewing data, sharing stories, connecting with other local leaders, analyzing the current Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in the Region, and advocating for the children and families. We are grateful for our Council members for their commitment, time, and for sharing their expertise and experiences, which equipped us with more thorough understanding of our Region.

A special recognition goes to iGrow Lake County of the Lake County Health Department. iGrow Lake County played a significant role in the planning, implementation, and delivery of Birth to Five Illinois's values and goals. Due to this partnership, Birth to Five Illinois: Region 33 and iGrow Lake County have mutually advocated for equitable access and increased the capacity and quality of ECEC in Lake County.

We truly appreciate those individuals that participated in our focus groups, interviews, and surveys, and the community members who contributed through discussions, meetings, conversations, and community events. We strived to meet people where they were, and our community exceeded every expectation we had.

We would like to express our gratitude to the many school districts, child care programs, Prevention Initiative programs, home visiting programs, Early Head Start/Head Start, businesses, and social services agencies that supported and promoted Birth to Five Illinois. Their support and participation were invaluable, and we could not have done it without their assistance.

Our Action Council and Family Council members, along with the residents of Lake County, leveraged existing community relationships, partnerships, and local collaborations' connections with deep roots in Lake County. We also want to give a special thanks to the parents and caregivers, local service providers, and members of the public who voiced their opinions and shared their experiences and stories, as well as all the organizations working to transform our vision into concrete programs and services for children and families in our county. It has been both a privilege and an honor to converse with the authentic voices of our families in Lake County.

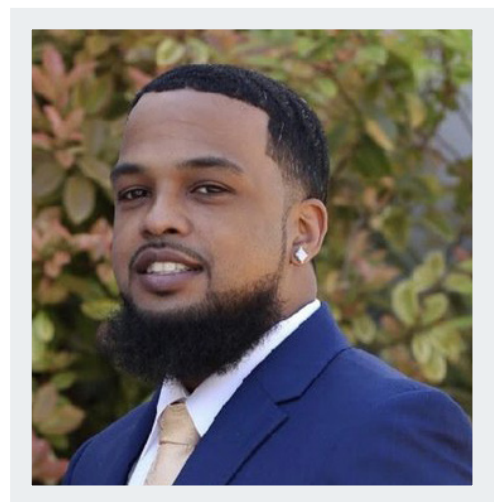
We would also like to thank the Birth to Illinois State Leadership Team who guided us, kept us informed, and inspired us to strive to transform the ECEC system in Region 34 to a simpler, fairer, better system.

Thank you,

**Dane Cruz (he/him)**

Regional Council Manager: Region 34

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.

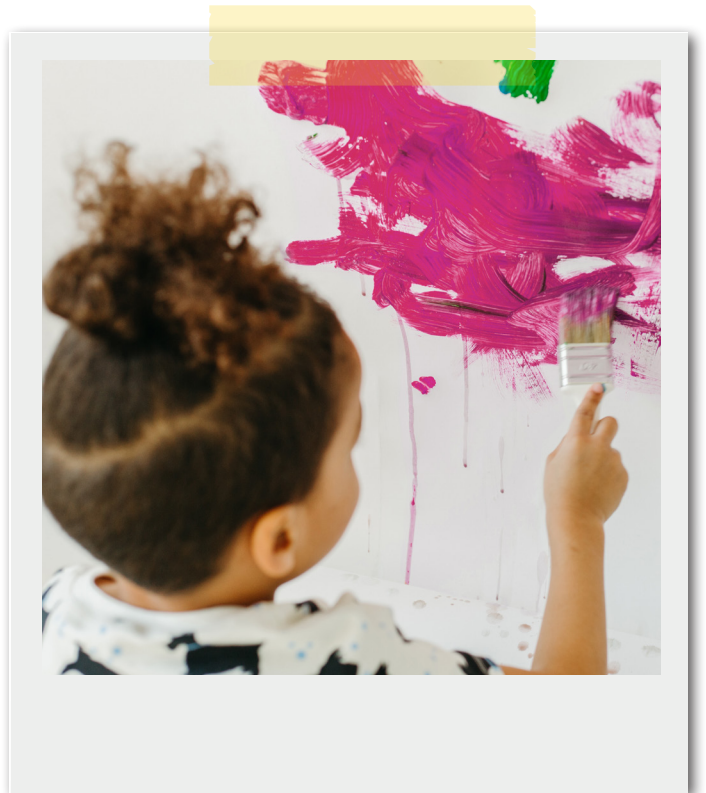
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

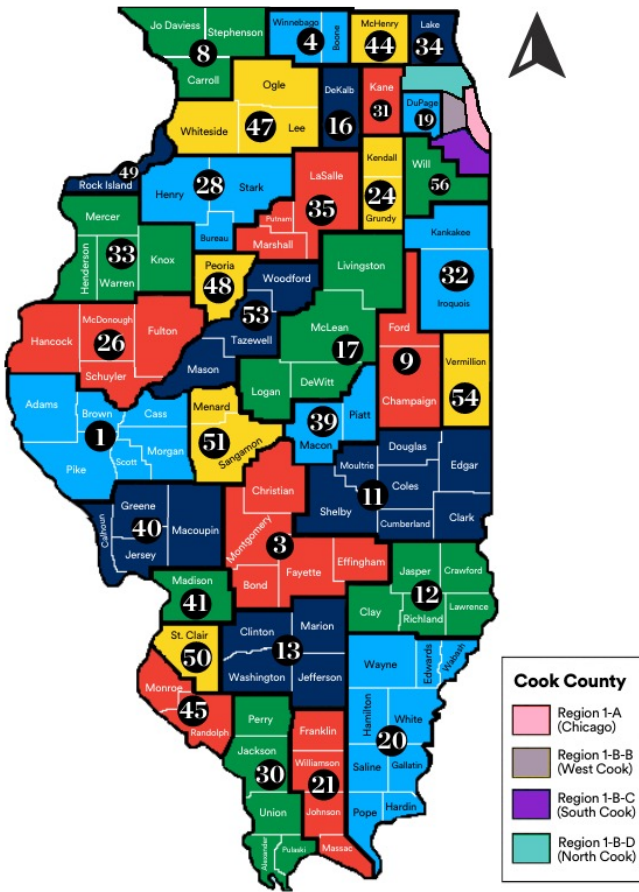


# Timeline

- **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

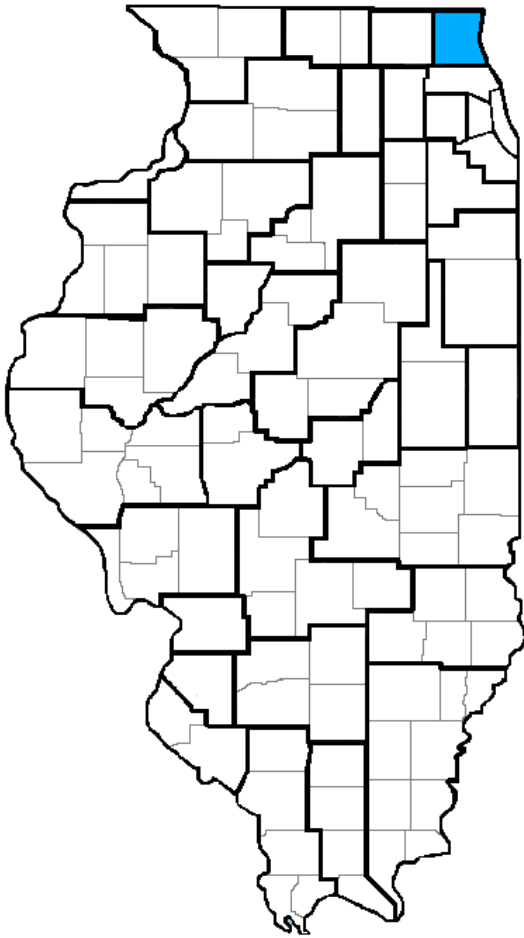
Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise 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 34

# Regional Community Landscape



## Regional Boundaries

Region 34 is located at the northeast corner of Illinois and shares boundaries with Wisconsin to the north, Lake Michigan to the east, McHenry County to the west, and Cook County to the south. The largest cities in Lake County are Waukegan, Mundelein, Gurnee, Highland Park, and North Chicago. Each city offers a unique blend of culture and history, making Lake County a vibrant and dynamic place to live.

Lake County is a beautiful area with a diverse landscape that encompasses both rural and urban landscapes. Although the development and growth of the urban areas are increasing, Lake County has still retained its rural charm with its vast open spaces, lush greenery, and picturesque landscapes. Lake County is home to several parks and natural areas, including stunning Illinois Beach State Park and the Chain O'Lakes State Park, which offers a range of outdoor recreational activities for residents and visitors. The Region is served by four Metra commuter rail lines, totaling 32 train stations and Pace buses that provide fixed-routes and paratransit services. The Region is 443 square miles wide and consists of 18 townships and 52 municipalities.

Lake County is home to 36 elementary schools, each with their own unique characteristics and educational programs. These districts serve a wide range of students, from those in more urban areas to those in more rural areas. Some of the larger school districts, such as Waukegan School District 60 and North Chicago School District 187, serve the populated areas and offer a variety of programs to meet the diverse student population's needs. Additionally, smaller school districts, such as Gavin School District 37 and Grass Lake School District 36, have fewer students which may lead to a more personalized educational program.

The Region is home to Ravinia, North America's oldest outdoor music venue, and one of the tallest carousels in the world, the Columbia Carousel at Six Flags Great America. Six Flags Great America is nicknamed "Thrill Capital of the Midwest," and first opened in Gurnee on May 29, 1976. Lake County is also home to Gurnee Mills, which is the largest outlet and full-price shopping destination in Illinois.



Birth to Five Region 34 Action Council members and Team at Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center, Waukegan.

Lake County is home to a variety of industries including Abbott Laboratories, CDW, Baxter International, Medline, and AbbVie. The region is also home to several reputable colleges and universities, such as the College of Lake County, Columbia College, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, and Lake Forest College. These institutions provide a wide range of educational opportunities for students pursuing various academic disciplines.

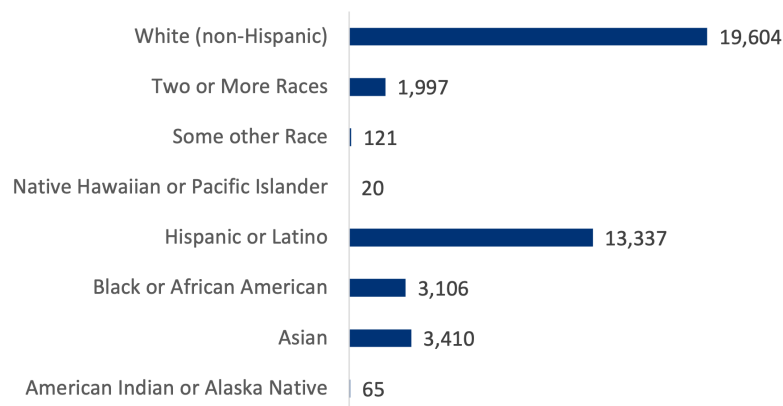
## Land Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

We respectfully acknowledge that Region 34 (Lake County) is the ancestral homelands of the Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Peoria, and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi) Nations. This land is also home to many other Nations, including Myaamia (Miami), Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux). We recognize the longstanding significance of these lands as part of Indigenous Peoples' past, present, and future. Historical awareness of Indigenous exclusion and removal is critically important to preventing future atrocities. We acknowledge all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our County. Birth to Five Illinois: Region 34 pledges to acknowledge the grave injustices of the past and to create awareness to advance education that invites truth.

## Regional Demographics

As of July 2020, the estimated total population in Region 34 was 711,239, making it the third most populated county in the State. The total number of children under the age of six was 50,660; 23,865 children who are ages birth to two and 26,795 who are ages three to five. According to 2020 Census data, 47% of children under six self-identify as white, non-Hispanic. However, there is a growing Hispanic or Latine population, reported at 32% of the population in the most recent Census. Eight percent self-identify as Asian population and 7% self-identify as Black or African American. Hispanic, Asian, and Black populations are more predominant in the more populated cities within Lake County, such as Waukegan, Round Lake, Mundelien, and North Chicago.

**Figure 1: Children Under the Age of Six by Race and Ethnicity**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

However, it should be noted that there were some concerns among Action Council and Family Council members about the collection of the Census data and how accurately it was collected. It is likely that Hispanic or Latine and Black or African American individuals were undercounted. While the Census attempts to count everyone, there were significant challenges collecting data in 2020, so there may be some communities that are not fully represented in the data.

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

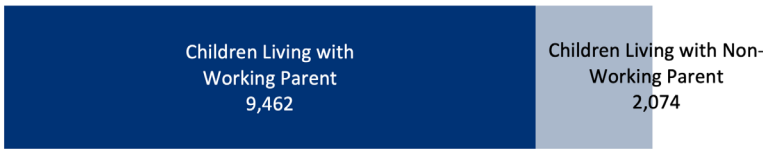
In 2020, 95% percent of the 258,769 families reported that English is their primary language, with small percentages of the households reporting that they are a limited English-speaking household that speaks either Spanish (3%) or another primary language (2%) such as Mandarin, Hindi, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Tagalog, French, Arabic, Russian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak Languages, Punjabi, and Cantonese.

As of 2020, 24,7225 children under the age of six were living with two parents and 11,536 children were living with one parent. Of the 11,536 families living with one parent, the majority lived with the working parent (Figure 3). This data underscores the need for child care in the Region.

“ Sometimes people in the community assume a lot of Hispanic people don’t speak or have limited English speaking but, they are fluent in English. It was also stated a lot of Hispanics decide to act as if they had limited understanding and speaking in English, but we are fluent.

- Community Member ”

Figure 2: Number of Children Under the Age of Six Living with One Caregiver



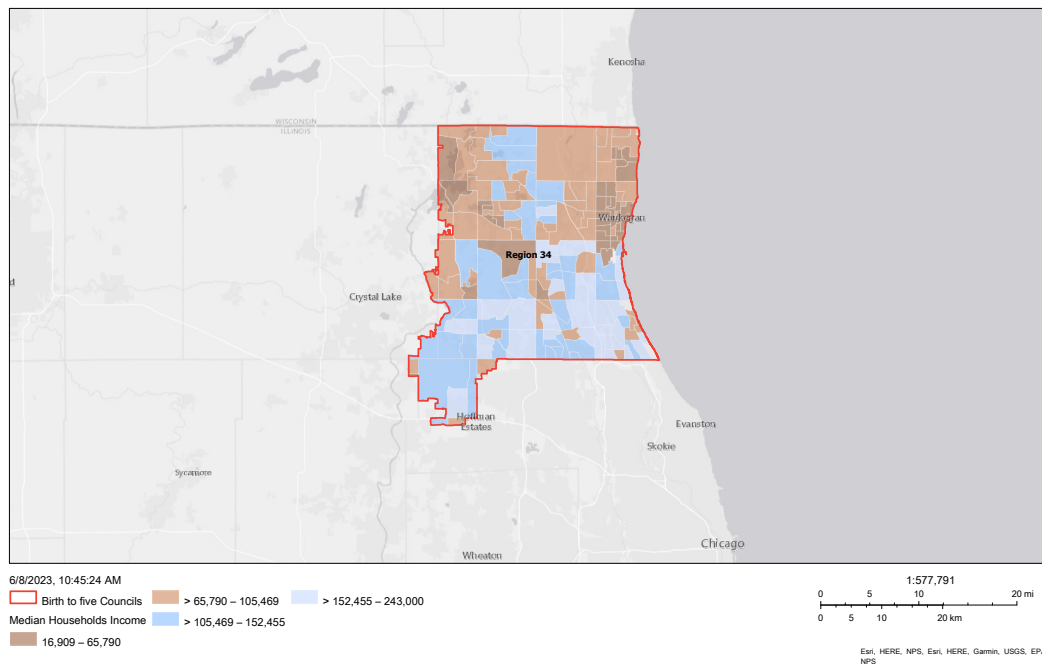
Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Lake County is a tale of two different counties. The Region contains some of the wealthiest cities in the State next to some of the most impoverished areas in the State. The estimated average median income in Lake County is \$92,000. In the southern part of the Region, the median household income is between \$152,000 and \$243,000 in cities such as Lake Forest, Highland Park, Buffalo Grove, and parts of Lake Zurich. In the northern part of the Region, there are places where the median household income is between \$16,909 and \$65,790 (Figure 3) in cities such as Waukegan, North Chicago, Zion, Winthrop Harbor, and parts of Fox Lake.

“ Raising kids costs money! Families cannot afford to raise children in our Region without assistance.

- Community Member ”

**Figure 3: Number of Children Under Age Six by Median Household Income**



Source: IECAM  
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The Early Learning Council (ELC) identified groups across the State as priority populations, defined as a population that faces economic disadvantages and a lack of a support system, who do not receive equitable resources compared to other students in the academic pipeline, and do not have adequate access to Early Childhood programs due to the programs’ location, cost, enrollment requirements, or capacity to serve the comprehensive needs of families.<sup>2</sup> Four priority populations in the Region were identified by the Region 34 Action Council and Family Council: Children living in families with poverty-level or deep poverty-level income, children in families experiencing homelessness, undocumented and/or immigrant families, and children with disabilities. There is limited quantitative data available on these populations, but qualitative data from priority populations was gathered through Region 34 Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, and community meetings, and are included throughout the report.

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 used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be living in “deep poverty, while someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line” (Figure 4). In Region 34, 25% of the children five and under live at or below 200% FPL (Figure 5).

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

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

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

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

**Figure 5: Number of Children Birth to Two and Three to Five at or Below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level**

Family Size	Under 50% FPL	51-100% FPL	101-200% FPL	201-400% FPL
Number of Children Ages Birth to Two	1,071	1,253	3,760	6,631
Number of Children Ages Three to Five	1,204	1,402	4,212	7,370

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

Based on Service Point data<sup>3</sup>, about 1,106 people were unhoused for an average of 38 shelter nights per person per year, and 661 people experienced homelessness for the first time. In 2020, there were 64 Kindergarteners identified as unhoused.

The population of Lake County has been steadily growing in recent years, and with the growth comes an increased need for additional resources and services to support the diverse community. One group that is underserved is immigrant and undocumented families. These individuals often face significant challenges such as language barriers, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare, education, and social services. This was the case for a parent who recently moved to Lake County from South America. She faced significant difficulties when attempting to register her child for school, including the lack of a permanent address and the absence of medical insurance or medical assistance. In many school districts, a permanent address is required as part of the enrollment process for verification purposes. Without a permanent address, the parent was unable to complete the necessary paperwork to register her child for school. Additionally, the child was unable to receive the required physical and immunizations necessary to enter school since the parent did not have medical insurance or medical assistance to cover the costs. Families who only speak Spanish notice a significant issue when registering for school, especially parents from another country or those who are not familiar with the procedures and requirements of the U.S. school system. Without access to language assistance and/or translation services, Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers may struggle to understand the registration progress, information provided by the school, communications with school staff, how to advocate for their children’s needs, and the resources available. To create an inclusive and thriving community, it is crucial that our Region invests in programs and services that support such populations experiencing systemic barriers. By providing legal assistance, language interpretation, and other resources, Lake County can ensure that all community members can lead healthy and fulfilling lives regardless of their immigration status.

Across the Region, there are 727 children receiving Early Intervention (EI) services and 714 children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in Preschool For All (PFA).<sup>4</sup> While these services are critical for helping children with disabilities reach their full potential, there is still a significant need for additional programs and services that can provide more comprehensive support for children and families. Many families in the area are forced to choose between accessing these services versus full-day child care, which can be a significant burden for families facing economic barriers.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lakecountyil.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> Data is reported from county and not Region level

Understanding demographic information is crucial to establish a comprehensive understanding of our county and how we can equitably serve all families. Reviewing the demographics allows us to evaluate the Region's state regarding race/ethnicity, household incomes, location of children under the age of six, and languages spoken in the home. With the population of Lake County increasing in recent years, it brings a range of new opportunities and challenges. With more and more families coming to the area seeking better opportunities and a higher standard of living, the demand for affordable housing, quality education and access to healthcare services also increases. Additionally, there is a growing need for language and cultural services to ensure that newcomers to the area feel welcome and supported. To address these challenges, it is essential that our Councils, local policymakers, and community leaders work together to provide the necessary resources and ensure that all Lake County community members have access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, programs, and additional supports they need to thrive.

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

## Local Community Collaborations

Local Early Childhood Community Collaborations are part of the larger Community Statewide Systems Supports (CS3) and funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). They bring together groups of people and organizations that work together to increase enrollment in quality, affordable Early Childhood programs so children enter Kindergarten ready to learn.

There are three Early Childhood Collaborations in Region 34: the Kindergarten Readiness Committee that is housed in the Round Lake Area School District (RLAS #116); the Early Childhood Community Coalition of Lake County; and the Lake County Local Interagency Council (LIC), located within Lake County's Early Intervention program in the Lake County Health Department (LCHD) and Community Health Center.

The Kindergarten Readiness Committee brings providers, non-profits, and governmental agencies together to support each other's events and to avoid duplications of efforts.

The Committee has Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with Head Start, the Round Lake Park District, Family Focus, and the LCHD to ensure referrals are made in a timely manner and acted upon as needed. For the past four years, the Kindergarten Readiness Committee has hosted the Lake County Early Childhood Education Summit to bring local Early Childhood stakeholders together in one place to share, learn from each other, and to collaborate.

The Early Childhood Community Coalition of Lake County is working to support the child care facilities in Lake County. Survey data collected by Birth to Five Illinois from local child care facilities revealed that attracting and retaining employees and DCFS Licensure are the two biggest hurdles. The Lake County Regional Office of Education (ROE) is working to connect child care agencies, and other entities that serve young children, to schools and other support services that may result in better readiness skills in school. The ECCC of Lake County is making headway in understanding the issues that child care agencies face and is in the process of developing a comprehensive plan to meet the needs of families in the Region.

The Local Interagency Council (LIC) is working to identify children under the age of three who may have some type of developmental delay and/or disability. As those children are identified through developmental screenings and/or eligible diagnoses, Early Intervention (EI) services can begin as soon as possible. In 2020, 727 children received Early Intervention services.



A toddler playing with a football on a grass field.

“  
The earlier they start,  
the farther they'll go.  
- LIC Motto  
”



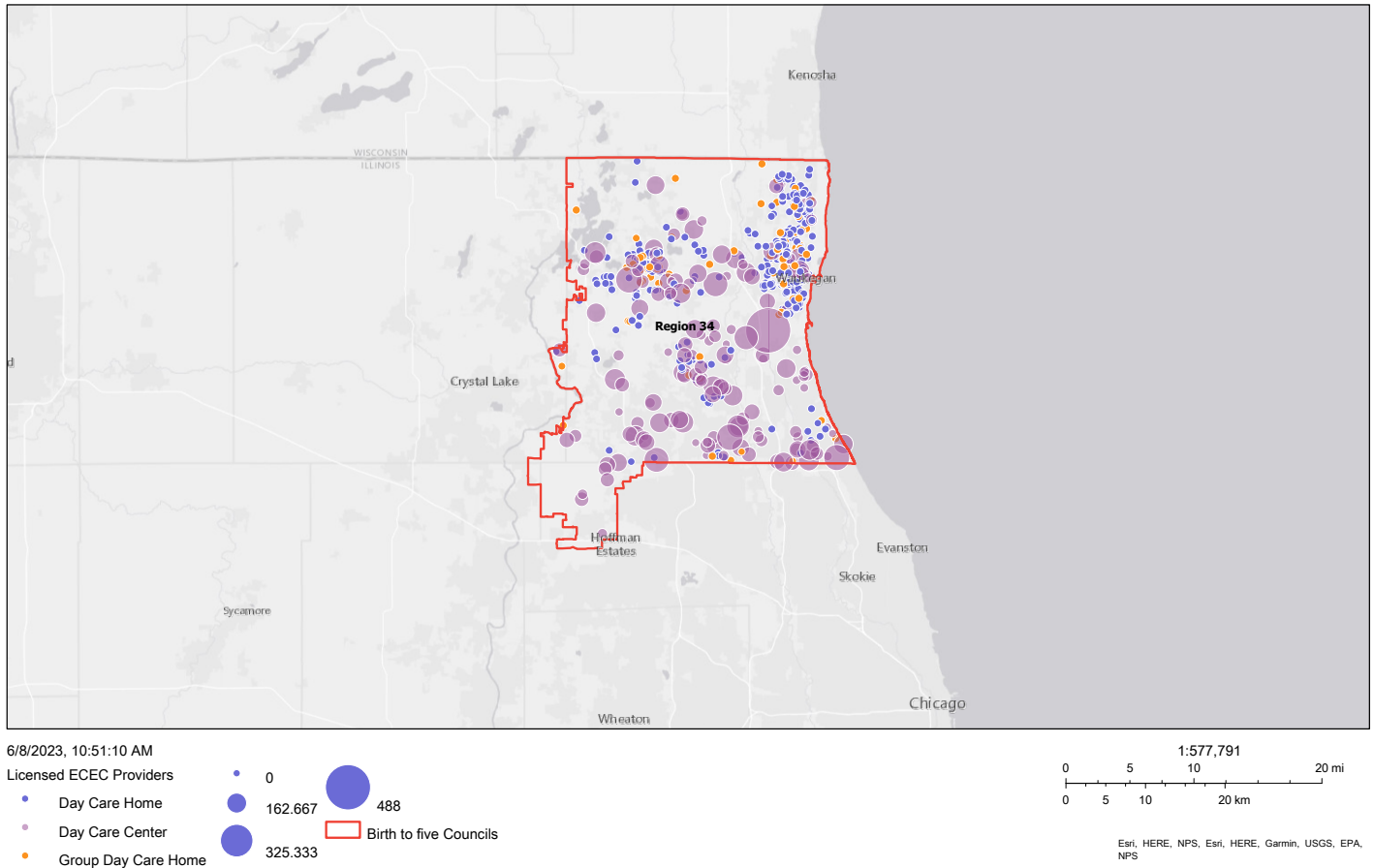
While not an official Collaboration, the ongoing partnership between Birth to Five Illinois' Region 34 Action Council and Family Council with iGrow Lake County and the Lake County Regional Office of Education (ROE) is a model for the rest of the Community Systems Development within Lake County. It is also very important to intersect these partnerships with wider multi-sector collective impact efforts within and across Lake County. For example, the integrated efforts with Live Well Lake County, which is a multi-sector strategic planning and implementation network charged with implementing Lake County's Community Health Assessment (CHA) and Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) processes.

In most cases, the lack of funding and staff has resulted in the inability to provide EI services for children that require them. There are some areas in the Region that are not currently being served by an Early Learning Collaboration. This is particularly true in rural areas where organizations may not have equitable opportunities to effectively network, connect, and share resources. This lack of an Early Learning Collaboration can have negative consequences, as organizations may duplicate efforts or miss out on opportunities to maximize resources. It is vital to develop strategies and initiatives that promote collaboration and resource-sharing among individuals, early learning organizations, and the community, not only in rural areas, but in all areas of the Region.

It is important to include this information in this report to ensure that local efforts remain connected and aligned with county efforts. Sharing information, data, and resources strengthens each other's efforts to improve access to Early Childhood programs and services.

# Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Figure 6: Location of Licensed Providers



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There are many types of Early Childhood and Care (ECEC) programs in Region 34. These programs include licensed and licensed exempt child care (including the Child Care Assistance Programs), family child care, Pre-School for All (PFA), Prevention Initiative/Home Visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSP).

## Licensed Child Care Centers

The Region is home to 120 licensed child care programs that provide high-quality early learning opportunities and give parents and caregivers an opportunity to go to work or go to school. Of the licensed child care centers in the Region, 28 child care centers have achieved an ExceleRate Illinois rating - ten gold, nine silver, and nine bronze. ExceleRate Illinois is a quality rating and improvement system that gives a process for pursuing quality efforts that will help providers learn more best practices and improve developmental skills of the children they serve. ExceleRate Illinois also provides standards guidelines, resources, and supports to help providers make sensible changes that lead to better quality outcomes.

Hearing authentic experiences from community members, providers, and families has shown that there are strengths and challenges in the Region. The strengths included but are not limited to having several different ECEC program options/models, racial diversity among staff, and the passion and commitment of the educators. The challenges include but are not limited to long waitlists, lack of night/weekend care, no substitutes for staff, and closure during scheduled breaks (holidays, winter break, spring break, and summer break).

## License-Exempt Child Care Centers

Licensed exempt centers must have specific conditions that must meet or qualify as exempt from licensure under Illinois Rule. Although these programs are exempt from licensure, families can find assurance that they are monitored and regulated by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) via a health and safety checklist conducted by Health and Safety Inspectors. There are 10 centers in the Region.

## Family Child Care Centers

Family child care providers care for children in a “home-like” setting and smaller group sizes. Licensed family child care providers may care for up to eight children (including their own), or for up to 12 children with an assistant. License-exempt family child care (such as family, friend, and neighbor) may care for three or fewer children (including their own) or children from one family. This care can be offered in the caregiver’s home or in the child’s home. There are 368 providers with a total capacity of 4,021 children.

Family child care homes are often closer to home and a more convenient option for parents/caregivers than traditional centers. They can also offer smaller child-provider ratios, more attentive infant care, and lower turnover for children and staff than licensed child care centers.

## Child Care Assistance Program

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a program that helps families pay for the increasing cost of child care. The YWCA Metropolitan Chicago administers CCAP in the Region. A family is considered income-eligible when the combined monthly income of all family members is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). For instance, a family size of three cannot make more than \$51,816 annual income and a family size of six cannot make more than \$83,676 annually to be considered under 200% FPL.

“

Even with CCAP... some child care centers, I still have to pay extra out of pocket plus that amount I was told by the YWCA because if the day care is doing an extra special activity for the kids, I have to pay extra if I want my child to participate. Sometimes I don't have enough to pay the extra, I wish it would only be a set amount per month including special activities.

- Community Member

”

In 2020, 3,946 families in the Region participated in the CCAP program (1,793 birth to two-year-olds and 2,153 three- to five-year-olds). Many families reported that the paperwork was often confusing and difficult. Some families are unaware that the CCAP program exists and are unsure of how to access it.

## Preschool for All

Preschool for All Program (PFA) is funded by ISBE. The program provides at least 12.5 hours weekly of high-quality preschool, including comprehensive developmental screenings, Bachelor’s-level early childhood licensed teachers, and standards-aligned, research-based curriculum so that children have a foundation of knowledge and skills that allows them to be successful through their school experience. There are 29 sites for PFA with a proposed total capacity of 2,880. The benefits include access to special needs services, transportation at no cost, and a smooth transition from Kindergarten to elementary school. The challenges include lack of capacity, high turnover of staff, and the program is only two and a half hours long each day.

## Early Head Start

Early Head Start is a program for birth to two-year-olds that provides family-centered services for families with very young children surviving on low incomes. These programs are designed to promote child development and enable parents/caregivers to move toward self-sufficiency. Early Head Start is tailored to the unique needs of infants and toddlers to promote physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development through safe and developmentally enriching caregiving. There is only one Early Head Start site in Region 34, with a proposed capacity of 70 children.

## Head Start

Head Start programs are designed for three to five-year olds to prepare children to succeed in school and in life beyond school. To achieve this, Head Start delivers services to children and families in core areas of early learning, health, and family well-being while engaging parents/caregivers as partners every step of the way. As of July 1, 2022, the Head Start program transitioned to a new grantee, the YWCA. The YWCA Metropolitan of Chicago adopted a different program model than the previous grantee (Community Development Institute), electing to use the “partner child care” option instead of the “center-based” program option. This transition offers a comprehensive, year-long program designed to provide parents/caregivers with increased flexibility to attend work or pursue educational opportunities, ensuring they can prioritize their responsibilities while their children receive dedicated care and support throughout the entire day. However, not all child care settings were open and available for families at the time of the report. The “partner child care” partners with providers to offer Head Start services and curriculum inside of the child care facility. There are no longer any Head Start centers in the Region.

“Applying for CCAP is hard and overwhelming. The amount of paper they ask for is insane. I have to make sure I have a checklist before I even start the application.”  
- Community Member

“I would rather keep my children at home. It is such a short time frame, especially because I have to transport my child. By the time I make it back home, I only have a short time to do something around the house. Then it is time to go back to go and pick up my child. Also, not to mention, when I have an appointment, I can’t be running back and forth between the short time frames.”  
- Community Member

## Prevention Initiative

Prevention Initiative (PI) is a Home Visiting Program (through the Illinois State Board of Education) that provides intensive, research-based, and comprehensive child development and family support services for expectant parents and families with children from birth to age three. This program helps families build a strong foundation for learning and to prepare children for later school success. In the Region, there are eight sites with a proposed total capacity of 553 children.

## Early Intervention

Early Intervention (EI) is a program funded by IDHS that provides services and support to babies and young children (ages birth to three) with developmental delays and disabilities. Families with an eligible infant or toddler can receive these services. EI services include, but are not limited to, developmental evaluations and assessments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, developmental therapy, and speech/language therapy. Per IECAM FY20 data, there are 727 children in Region 34 receiving Early Intervention services.

## Early Childhood Special Education

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) is funded by ISBE. ECSE provides free, specially designed instruction and therapeutic services to meet the unique needs of a child. A child is eligible for service through the development of an IEP, if after a team evaluation they are determined to have a disability that impacts their educational performance. In 2020, there were 714 children had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) through the Preschool For All programs.

## Summary

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs provide crucial support to young children and their families by helping to promote healthy development and by preparing children to be successful in school and beyond. There are many different types of programs available in Region 34, including center-based

options, home visiting programs, and child care partnerships that work with families to provide care and education for their children. Due to the importance of these programs, there is often a shortage of available slots to meet the needs of all children and families in the Region. The cost, location, and lack of transportation has become a barrier for many families. There is a growing need to increase the funding to support more ECEC programs (both publicly funded and paid programs) to ensure that we are positioning the children in our Region with what they need to thrive.

“ EI is such an amazing program to have. It helps families when it comes to receiving services at an early stage in life for our little ones. My premature baby has been in EI for almost 2 years. He had a G-tube because he was not able to eat. During the process to get him enrolled with Early Intervention, I received a lot of help from his coordinator. She was always willing to help during the process and answer all my questions. When my son was able to start feeding therapy with his speech pathologist, it was with her help my son was able to start eating and stop being g-tube dependent for all his feeds. To this day, my son is still seeing his speech pathologist on a weekly basis. The only thing is, I wish EI would offer services more than once a week, especially for speech.

- Community Member ”

“ My son has severe autism. I live in Wisconsin, but I work in Lake County. I would prefer to drive 90 minutes to work in each direction, just to take advantage of Wisconsin’s improved special need services.

- School District Employee ”

# 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.



Regional Council Manager Dane Cruz volunteering to be a reader for voices United.

There are a total of 50,660 children aged six and under in the Region, and a total of 17,304 slots in licensed and license-exempt child care centers and family child care homes. Across the Region, most children do not have a “slot” in a child care program. Council and community members said that the main drivers of the overall slot gap have been a lack of qualified staff, low pay, and few benefits that do not align with the requirements and education needed for teaching positions, and a lack of space and funding to open additional classrooms. Additionally, some programs never went back to operating at full capacity or re-opened after shutting down during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 7: Number of Sites and Capacity of Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Centers**

Type of Center	Number of Sites	Capacity
Licensed Child Care	120	12,599
Family Child Care	368	4021
Licensed Exempt Child Care	30	2735
<b>Total</b>	<b>518</b>	<b>19,355</b>

Source: IECAM  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There are 3,957 publicly funded slots across 45 ECEC programs for the 12,902 children living at or below 200% FPL, leaving most eligible children without a publicly funded slot.

**Figure 8: Publicly Funded Program Sites and Funded Capacity**

Program	Number of Sites	Funded Capacity
Prevention Initiative	8	553
Preschool For All	29	2,880
Preschool For All Expansion	2	155
Head Start	5	299
Early Head Start	1	70
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>3,957</b>

Source: IECAM  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Early Head Start only has a grant large enough for 70 children to be served at one location in Waukegan. They have applied to increase the number, but do not have the space, staff, nor funds to serve more families.

Council and community members said that school districts that are sites for Preschool for All and Preschool for All Expansion programs could not increase their capacities due to a lack of physical space, a lack of qualified staff, and a lack of funds. Grants do not support the administrative costs associated with the program, leaving the burden on school districts, which has been a driving factor for many of the programs closing.

While working to increase capacity for ECEC, it is important to know where the greatest needs are, including the relationship between the slot gaps and the population of young children in each of those areas. Without access to an ECEC program, many families are forced to make tough decisions. There is a large need for night and weekend care with very few, if any, programs that offer consistent night and weekend care.

One community member, a restaurant server, spoke about her challenges with finding affordable care that aligned with her work schedule. She said that it was extremely difficult to find care during nights and weekends. When she was able to find care, there was a convenience fee applied. The money that she made that weekend all went toward paying for child care, including the convenience fee. She later decided to quit her job because she could not afford it.

This decision to reduce hours or leave the workforce altogether can lead to poverty-level income and financial instability. It is imperative to consider the slot gap along with the needs of the families to provide accessible and affordable child care options. Private funders are also interested in learning more about where the slot gaps are as they think about the possibility of public-private partnerships, and how the partnerships can optimize capacity expansion for the Region's priority population communities.

“Prevention Initiative programs have not and currently do not have enough Home Visitors to meet the need in the Region. There is a large need for the program, but not enough staff or funding to increase the capacity at this time.”  
 - Action Council Member

“It is hard to find child care for weekends or not your normal 8 hours. I have struggled to find a good child care for my twins because it is not just one kid who needs child care after 6:00pm but two, so I must pay double convenience fee and some extra. I will make less money at work putting in extra hours if I take my children to child care.”  
 - Community Member

# Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The teaching workforce is a vital piece of the Early Childhood system. In Lake County, there is an urgent need to attract new teachers and providers to address the shortage and ensure that all students receive a quality education. However, there are several challenges when it comes to recruiting and maintaining Early Childhood staff.

Data collected through the Gateways Registry<sup>5</sup> and provided by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) shows that the majority of licensed Early Childhood Center Directors and teaching staff self-identified as white, while the majority of licensed family child care<sup>6</sup> (FCC) staff self-identified as Hispanic or Latine (Figure 9). Ninety-seven percent of all Center Directors, teaching staff, and FCC staff self-identified as female. Early Childhood professionals working in a licensed program are required to register in the

Gateways Registry; however, license-exempt providers are not required to register or maintain a record in the program, leaving no way to track how diverse they are in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. There is a need for an Early Childhood workforce that is more diverse in terms of race, culture, and gender, especially in licensed centers. Having a workforce that is representative of the community and the children in it promotes a sense of identity, provides diverse role models, and fosters an inclusive environment.

“ My son had the hardest time during his first three weeks of school. He would cry every morning because he did not want to go to school. I would ask him every day what was going on and he would just keep on crying telling me if we could please go back home to our country. He opened up to my oldest daughter about why he felt he did not belong here. ‘I have no one who looks like or even talks our language. I feel lost when I am at school, the special classes (art, gym, music, technology) are only in English. My teacher does not even speak Spanish like we do, he speaks a funny Spanish.

- Family Council Member ”

**Figure 9: Race/Ethnicity of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Staff**

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	white
Center Directors	3%	9%	8%	3%	1%	76%
Teaching Staff	5%	8%	22%	2%	2%	61%
FCC Staff	1%	17%	65%	1%	1%	16%

Source: INCCRRA  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Another challenge the community and Council members identified is the education and training requirements for licensed staff. There are some local options for those interested in training or earning a degree in the Region. The Illinois Gateways Registry offers online training for DCFS Licensing, ExceleRate Illinois, and other courses related to caring for children, and allows professionals to track their education, credentials, and training online.

<sup>5</sup> Data based on all individuals who had active Gateways Registry Memberships as of March 2021  
<sup>6</sup> Includes FCC providers, Assistants, licensed substitutes/floaters, as well as other direct and indirect service providers in the Gateways Registry



While there are some education and training options available, they may not always be accessible to potential or current Early Childhood professionals. Lake County Tech campus offers high school juniors and seniors Early Childhood Education courses for which they can earn college level credits that transfer to College of Lake County. The College of Lake County also offers a program and credentials that lead towards the necessary steps to becoming a qualified teacher. The Early Childhood Education program at the College is an associate degree, offering a transfer track that prepares students to move to a four-year degree program upon graduation or a career program that qualifies them for immediate employment upon graduation. They also offer Illinois Gateways to Opportunity certifications, as well as an Administration and Leadership Certificate. Some courses are available online, others are required to meet in-person.

Erikson Institute also offers a Master of Science in Early Childhood Education program that includes a triple endorsement in special education, Early Childhood Education, and multilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL) education. “Educator Impact Grants” offered to Lake County residents cover 100% of the tuition and other related costs for those enrolled in the program in an effort to recruit a more diverse roster of teachers, who then have an obligation to work in Lake County for four years.

Through a combination of focus groups, interviews, and surveys, challenges to pursuing Early Childhood Education or additional training were identified. One major obstacle is the amount of time it takes to obtain a degree. Many people find it difficult to dedicate “study time” while balancing work, family, and other responsibilities. Many of these programs require a significant time commitment, which can challenge the balance between multiple responsibilities such as work, family, and other personal obligations. Devoting additional time to pursue training or career development may seem unfeasible for some individuals, even if the programs are offered for free. It is important to emphasize flexibility in program offerings: part-time, online course, evening, or weekend classes.

“ The program has helped me refresh my previous knowledge and gain new knowledge, which helps all of us make changes to our programs [home child care facilities] to provide services of higher quality. ”

- College of Lake County Student

Beyond attracting qualified Early Childhood educators, there is a great need for Spanish-speaking Center Directors and teachers. College of Lake County offers an Early Childhood Education program that is taught Spanish for those who need classes in Spanish; 26 students completed the program in Fall 2022. Still, the need for both more programs that offer Early Childhood Education classes in Spanish and more Spanish-speaking child care staff and providers exists to support the ever-growing number of Hispanic and Latine families in the Region.



Music lessons between an adult and a small child.

<sup>6</sup> Includes FCC providers, Assistants, licensed substitutes/floaters, as well as other direct and indirect service providers in the Gateways Registry

Another challenge is the lack of financial compensation after completing a degree. In most cases, retail workers earn more than Early Childhood professionals, and often do not have the added requirements of earning or maintaining certification, education, or training. This wage disparity makes it difficult to attract new talent to address the child care staff shortage. According to Illinois Child Care Resource & Referral Statewide System Child Care Salary Profiles from 2021, on average child care workers make \$29,796 per year. The majority of child care center teachers (\$31,200) and assistant teachers (\$24,960) are earning well below the median wage for employed persons in their county (\$40,295) with family child care providers (\$22,880) and assistant teachers (\$24,960) earning the least.

People may also be unaware of the various programs, grants, or scholarships available to them. Without adequate information about resources, people are unable to make informed decisions or take advantage of the resources that can help them enhance their skills and advance their careers. Collaborating with local organizations, schools, community centers, and employment agencies to promote these opportunities can also help reach a wider audience, raise awareness, and establish a centralized hub/platform that provides comprehensive information about education and career pathways.

Families also said that having professionals who are trained and experienced in accommodating a child's disability or special needs is crucial. One parent shared that their son has autism and they have struggled to find child care, even among family members. When their son has been enrolled in child care, they often only attend a few days at the center before they are told that staff is not equipped to handle the severity of their child's needs. Instead, he needs a program where he can receive one-on-one attention, which is not often available in child care settings.

Also in Lake County, regional liaisons for the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act are in place to address the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness. It is imperative that staff members receive adequate training to recognize and meet these needs effectively. Children with unstable housing/shelter often face numerous challenges, such as a lack of a stable and permanent address, which can impede paperwork and registration; difficulty gathering or producing required documents such as birth certificates, immunization records, and academic transcripts; frequent moves that can impact social-emotional and academic progress; and a lack of awareness of their rights and resources. While there are some resources and support available to children and families experiencing homelessness, staff may not be aware of those or may not know that families are in need of them.

“ [It] is heartbreaking knowing that I’m not able to take my son into a ‘normal’ day care facility or even struggle to find someone within my own family to keep him. It is hard financially for my family but, I must stay home with him during the day and just work part-time when my husband gets home. I just wish we had more day care centers who had the training to work with autistic children.

- Caregiver ”

ECEC staff are passionate about investing in children and their communities, but they report that they are underpaid, which results in the lack of staff, cycle of burnout, feeling underappreciated, less willingness to get a higher education, and not having more qualified Center Directors. Creative solutions could include offering competitive salaries, providing professional development opportunities, paid/tuition reimbursement, and offering flexible work arrangements to accommodate the needs of potential candidates. There is also a need to establish outreach programs to raise awareness about the industry and the opportunities in it. These initiatives could help address the representation imbalance in the workforce and ensure that it better reflects the community.

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Families, parents, and caregivers are the most important part of the Early Childhood landscape in Region 34. Their experiences in and feedback on ECEC programs and services have been collected through Action and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. The main concerns they cited are access to affordable, quality child care that aligns with their work schedule; and child care options for children who have disabilities or other special needs.

Access to child care can be drastically different experience depending on where a family lives in the Region. Some families immediately found affordable child care, which has led to more stress-free experiences. Some families face a lack of availability of providers in their area, long waitlists, and inability to afford the high out of pocket child care costs. It was also reported by families that the paperwork involved in the process of child care and financial assistance could be difficult and confusing. This caused unnecessary stress and frustration in an already challenging situation.

Caregivers said “the good child care centers” are the ones who work with the children and provide learning experiences in addition to play time. They are also the centers that support the social and emotional development opportunities that many children missed out on due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also noted during focus groups and interviews that many parents prefer child care programs and/or providers who speak the same languages that children speak at home. Caregivers also prefer child care centers where monolingual students can learn another language.

Additionally, community members expressed the need to have access to before/after school care for those parents that work more than the regular eight hours per day, those who work night and/or weekends, or whose classes do not fall within the typical workday hours. Many community members stated that they had to leave their job or stop attending school because they did not have child care that aligned with their work schedule.

Community members also discussed the need to have reliable child care for children with disabilities or other special needs with staff who have been trained to care for their children. Many single parent households must make a choice either to provide a roof over their family or send their special needs child to a “regular child care center.” This poses an issue, because many of the existing child care facilities do not have the resources or training to care for children with disabilities or special needs. Consequently, families often are faced with a decision to pay higher costs for “specialized” care or stay at home and provide the care themselves.

“ All the good child care programs here in Lake County are full or have a waiting list.  
- Parent ”

“ We live in a County where Spanish is the language most of our children are exposed to. I want my child to learn Spanish, but with all we pay for child care we cannot afford to pay for classes. The closest thing is a Spanish speaker care provider.  
- Parent ”

“ It’s hard to find child care when I have to work on a Saturday or Sunday morning.  
- Community Member ”

“ After I had my son, he needed extra help because he had a g-tube (feeding tube) and was on oxygen. When it was almost time for me to go back to work, I started to look around in my community for child care. Every child care with an opening told me that because my son needed extra care, they would not be able to have him at the facility. Because it would take at least one staff member to be with him most of the time. I was also told that child care staff did not have the knowledge and training to take care of a child who was not only on oxygen but had a feeding tube. I had a talk with my husband, and we decided it would be best if I stayed home with our son until he no longer needed the extra help. I was fortunate enough to be able to stay home with my son because my husband’s income was good enough for us to afford me staying home. To this day I wonder how single parents with special needs children do it when they do not have the ‘luxury’ to be able to stay home with their children. My son no longer needs oxygen and does not have a feeding tube, but I can say it is hard and my son only had these special needs for a few months. I can only imagine how hard it is for parents whose children need the extra help for a longer period of time.

- Community Member

Due to the lack of child care options, many families have full-time responsibilities caring for their children. This is especially difficult for single caregivers with no outside support. In some instances, families are forced to choose between working, going to school, and staying home to care for their children. This could have major consequences, including reduced and/or loss of income, lack of career advancement, and inability to pursue educational opportunities.

Amplifying family, parent, and caregiver voices is crucial to understanding the challenges and barriers families face when it comes to the ECEC system. By listening to families and their experiences, funders, decision-makers, providers, agencies, and organizations can gain insights into the problems and find creative solutions.



A smiling child playing on a slide while two adults watch.

## Regional Strengths & Needs

Through Action and Family 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.

### Strengths

- Family voice is prioritized as evidenced by the Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils.
- There are additional opportunities for ongoing education (including YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, College of Lake County, Illinois Gateway Registry, and Erikson Institute).
- Organizations and the Regional Office of Education (ROE) collaborate and work together.
- There is a strong partnership between the ROE, iGrow Lake County/Lake County Health Department, and Birth to Five Illinois.
- Families are provided resources and services through hospitals and pediatricians starting at birth (via the ROE).
- The Round Lake Kindergarten Readiness Committee serves as a good model of innovation in ECEC.
- Coordinated Intake is provided by the health department.
- There is some diversity among child Care providers that represents the children/community served.
- The Lake County Foundation provides opportunities, investment, and support for ECEC expansion of programs in Lake County.
- Region 34 has a wide range of ECEC program options (center based, home based, half-day programs, full-day programs, licensed child care, and family child care centers).

### Needs

- Attract and retain ECEC workforce (by providing competitive salaries, increasing benefits, balancing staff-child ratios, and creating a pool of substitute teachers).
- Provide night and weekend care.
- Increase awareness of continuing education opportunities, including faith-based programs.
- Create more child care slots in all programs all over the county.
- Improve trust and culturally responsive care so that all families are comfortable leaving their children with providers of different backgrounds.
- Address the high cost of child care.
- Hire more multilingual and multicultural staff and provide forms, applications, resources, and services in families' native languages.
- Provide more access to technology and technological education.
- Increase services for children with disabilities and special needs.
- Simplify the CCAP process.

## Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in three main areas: programming, workforce, and support programs. Priority geographic areas within the Region were also identified.

### Programming

- Provide specialized programs and services that cater to the unique needs of children, such as therapy services, personalized learning plans, and inclusive classrooms. Offer more full-day options and summer programs that include additional supports and services.
- Increase child care slots across all publicly funded program options: Early Head Start, Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Early Intervention, Preschool For All, and Preschool for All Expansion.
- Increase child care slots across all child care centers and home-based program options: licensed child care centers, license-exempt child care centers, and family child care homes.
- Increase the CCAP eligibility to 250% or higher to support families surviving on low incomes.
- Offer programs during non-traditional hours, such as night, weekend, and “drop-in programs” where parents can drop off children with irregular schedules.
- Create a centralized hub for resources and services.
- Provide night and weekend care.

### Workforce

- Provide competitive salaries, benefits, and retirement packages for early education teachers and child care providers.
- Create/expand shared resources where providers can come together and receive “group rates” for health insurance, dental insurance, vision retirement, more paid time off and retirement.
- Provide opportunities for advancement; early education teachers should have opportunities for advancement and career growth.
- Address burnout and stress. Provide support and resources to help teachers manage stress, such as mental health services and wellness programs.
- Build partnerships between local organizations and universities and colleges to help create a pipeline of qualified early education teachers.
- Promote high school internships in the ECEC field.

## Support Programs

- Provide access to prenatal care, including home visiting programs (such as doulas and Early Intervention) and mental health services. Offer nutrition classes and parenting education to support healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.
- Increase the number of providers that speak Spanish to better serve Spanish-speaking families.
- Provide financial literacy classes and assistance with accessing public benefits such as SNAP and WIC.
- Offer mental health services and case management to help parents/caregivers navigate their child(ren)'s needs and access to resources.
- Offer parenting education and support groups for underage parents. Provide access to affordable child care and flexible scheduling options to accommodate their school schedules.
- Offer programs that allow for regular communication and visitation for children with parents who are incarcerated. Provide support services to help children cope with separation and maintain their relationship with their parents/caregivers who are incarcerated.

## Priority Areas

- Waukegan
- Round Lake Area
- Zion
- Mundelein
- Highwood
- Fox Lake

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 34, 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: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

### Caregivers

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

### Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. 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 do not 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?

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