



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 39

(Macon & Piatt Counties)





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Region 39 Executive Summary

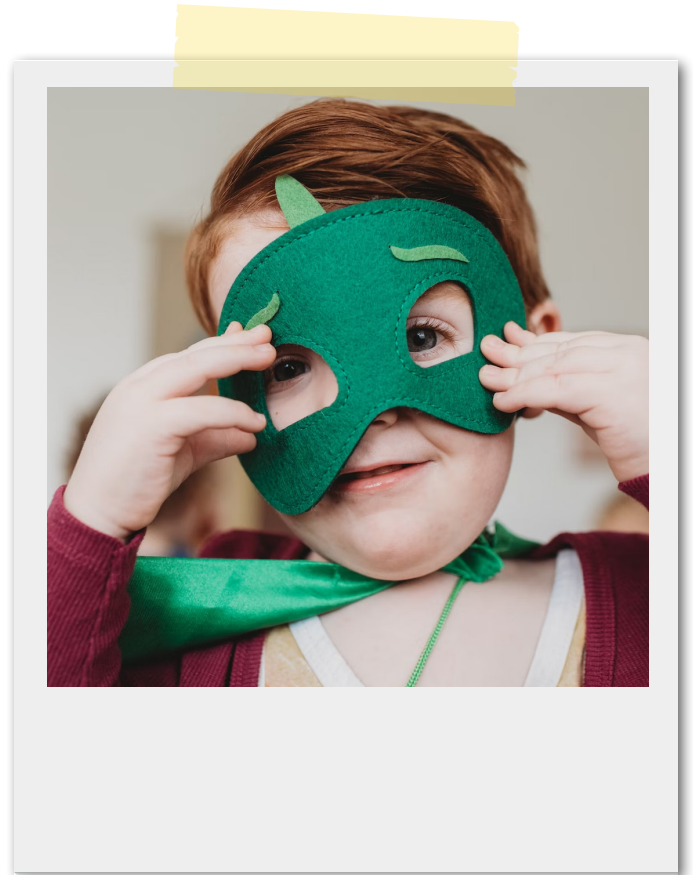
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 39 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

Region 39 is home to 9,034 children aged five and under. There are 3,894 Early Childhood Education and Care slots in publicly and privately funded programs, leaving 5,140 children without ECEC opportunity. The primary and overarching reason behind the lack of availability of slots is the dire shortage of qualified and highly skilled professionals within the workforce. ECEC teachers are paid just at or below the Federal Poverty Level and many do not receive benefits such as insurance or retirement options from their employers. Staff find it difficult to continue with higher education because of the lack of ECEC higher education degrees in the Region. Many seasoned ECEC teachers are leaving the field because they feel unprepared to navigate the increased behavioral issues and trauma seen in students.



Families that do find slot availability in ECEC programming for their children struggle to afford care. Fifty eight percent of Macon County and 24% of Piatt County household income goes to pay for infant-toddler care for single parent households in the Region. Lower income families can receive financial aid through Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), but some programs in the Region limit the number of CCAP slots. Not all programs accept Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) child care vouchers, so families with children in foster care struggle to find ECEC slots. In Region 39, a multitude of barriers pose significant challenges to the provision of quality ECEC programming, creating substantial obstacles for children, families, and the community.

Region 39 Needs

1. Urgent need of high quality, qualified ECEC workforce
2. Critical need of opportunity of high quality ECEC programs
3. Need of parent/caregiver knowledge on child development and connections to family resources
4. Need for Early Intervention services and screenings
5. Call for current and accurate data

Region 39 Recommendations

1. Raise Great Start Wage Supplement compensation to a professional wage. Make available higher education courses and local trainings to provide more hands-on techniques for working with children with behavior issues and trauma.
2. Leverage State funding to create ECEC programming specifically in Decatur (PFA & PFA-E, Early Intervention/PI) and Monticello (Special Education).
3. Develop effective methods to build awareness of community programs and ECEC services, as well as expand existing programs to meet families' needs, especially by increasing home visiting, establishing a crisis nursery, and providing family resource educators.
4. Increase State EI funding to retain and attract service coordinators, therapists, EI support professionals, social workers, and developmental pediatricians.
5. Create a better mechanism to improve the State's comprehensive data collection system.

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

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REGION 39 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.



9,034

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 39



3,636

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



1,994

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

\$733

Average monthly cost of child care

“My husband and I are foster care parents, but we will no longer accept children that are not school age because of the lack of slots in ECEC. Most centers will not take DCFS vouchers for child care or there is too long of a wait list.”
- Community Member, Macon County

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 39 NEEDS

1. A comprehensive and sustainable strategy to attract, support and retain a high-quality and racially diverse ECEC workforce.
2. Equitable access to high-quality ECEC programs and services.
3. Resources for parents and caregivers to help them advocate for their children's needs and/or inform them about ECEC programs.
4. Better access to Early Intervention (EI) services and screenings.

REGION 39 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Great Start Wage Supplement compensation raised to match professional wages for other fields.
2. Higher education courses and local training to provide more hands-on techniques for working with children with trauma.
3. Increase EI funding to retain and attract professionals.



**"Day care is so expensive!
It doesn't make sense for me
to work and pay day care."
- Parent, Piatt 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.

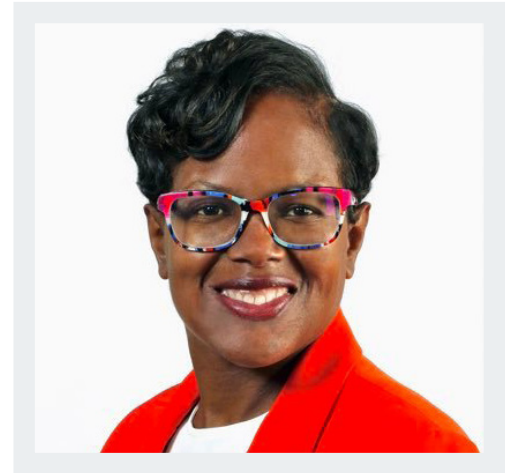
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

We are grateful to many individuals throughout Region 39, especially members of our Family Council and Action Council, who are individually and collectively the backbone of this work. They generously offered their time, perspectives, and insights to ensure this report accurately captures the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape in our Region, as well as our vision for change. Family Council members shared their experiences navigating the ECEC system, as well as the barriers that limit their children from having what they need to thrive. Action Council members examined data, listened to families' perspectives, and engaged in robust conversations about the strengths and shortcomings of our ECEC policies, programs, and services.

Many community leaders also stepped up – Anna Waters Head Start, Baby TALK, Center for Hispanic and Immigrant Community Opportunities (CHICO), Macon County Health Department, United Way, Decatur Public Library, Mt. Zion District Library, Child and Family Connections #19, the Barclay Public Library, and others – to support community outreach and engagement. Thank you all so much.

Finally, we are deeply indebted to families for trusting us with their stories and experiences. It is an honor and privilege to hear firsthand which aspects of our ECEC system are working well and what needs improvement. We hear you, and because of that, we are committed to amplifying your voices, and collaborating with you to design and implement solutions that support you and your children to flourish. Nothing about us, without us!

Thank you,

Heather Seitz (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 39

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.

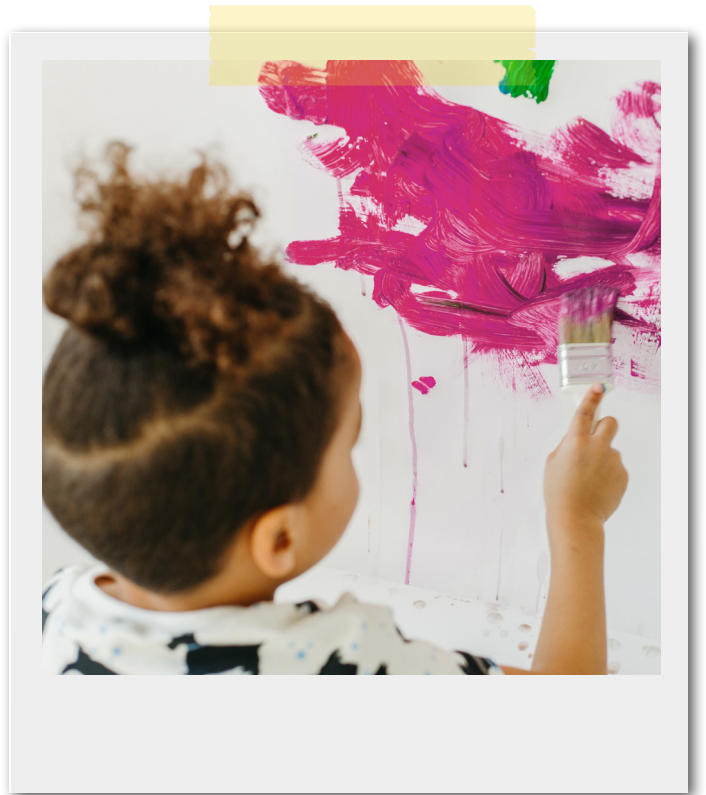
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

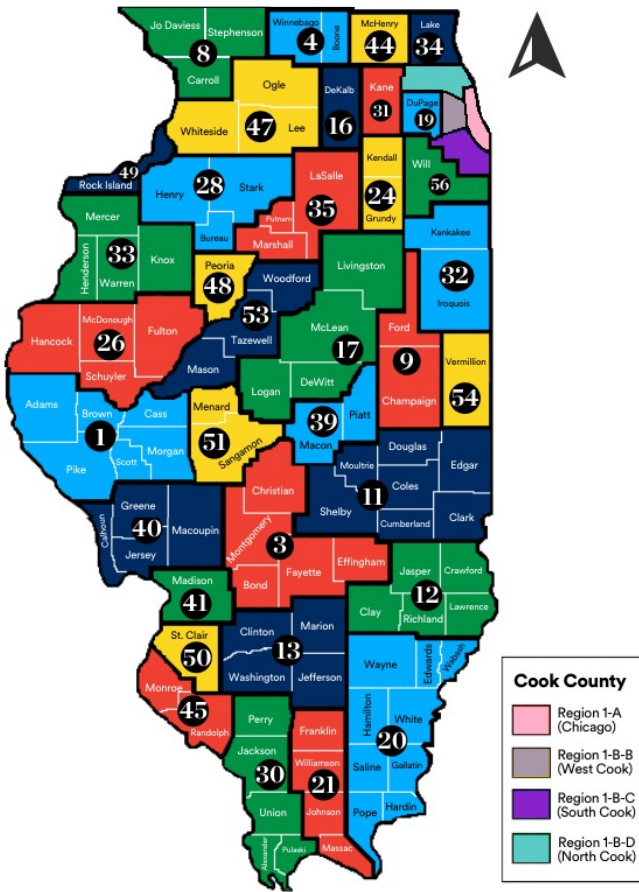


Timeline

- **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.

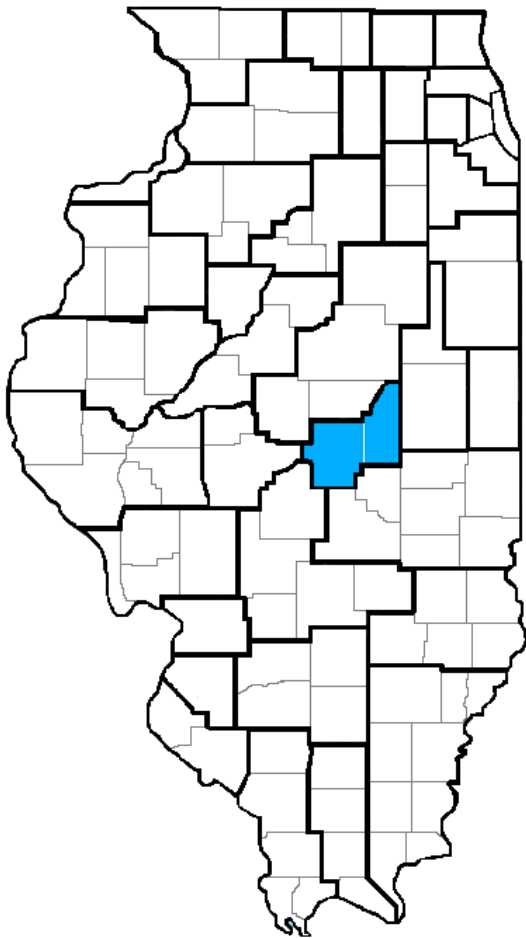
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 39

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 39 is in the middle of Illinois, contains Macon and Piatt Counties, and covers 1,019 square miles. The Sangamon River runs through both counties and leads to Lake Decatur in the middle of the City of Decatur. The largest industries in the Region are manufacturing (due to railroads, highways, and Interstate 72) and agriculture (resulting from the abundance of surrounding farmland). Major employers include Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Tate & Lyle, Caterpillar, and Norfolk Southern. Counties surrounding Region 39 include Sangamon, Logan, Dewitt, Champaign, Moultrie, Shelby, and Christian.

There are eleven school districts that make up Region 39: Decatur, Mt. Zion, Argenta-Oreana, Deland-Weldon, Sangamon Valley, Maroa-Forsyth, Meridian, Bement, Monticello, Cerro Gordo, and Warrensburg-Latham. Region 39 is home to two higher educational institutions, Richland Community College, and Millikin University. Visitors to Macon and Piatt Counties will find many choices of activities, including water activities on Lake Decatur; bike and hiking paths in conservation areas; music entertainment at the Devon Amphitheater; and children’s activities such as the Children’s Museum of Illinois, Splash Cove Waterpark, and Scovill Zoo. Region 39 has three major medical centers: Decatur Memorial Hospital, HSHS St. Mary’s Hospital in Decatur, and Kirby Medical Center in Monticello. Decatur Memorial Hospital houses the only Obstetrics/Maternity Unit for the area.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 39 acknowledges that it is the traditional homelands of the Peoria, Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kaskaskia, and Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Peoples. 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 two Counties (Macon and Piatt).

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

Regional Demographics

Overall, the total population in Region 39 is 118,844 (Figure 1). Although similar in land area, Piatt County has one-sixth the population of Macon County. While the Region is predominantly white, Census trends show increases in the number of children identifying as Black, non-Hispanic; Asian, non-Hispanic; and two or more races, non-Hispanic in Macon County.

Figure 1: Number of Children Under Age of Six by Race, Ethnicity

Population	Macon	Piatt	Total
Overall Population	102,432	16,412	118,844
Overall Number of Children Under the Age of Six	6,273	931	7,204
Race/Ethnicity of Children Under the Age of Six			
White	3,835	875	4710
Black or African American	1,469	2	1471
Hispanic or Latine	264	20	284
Other Races	26	16	42
Two or More Races	679	18	697

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Piatt County's racial makeup is 94% white, non-Hispanic, and it is slowly becoming less racially and ethnically diverse. Macon County's population is more diverse in racial makeup with most of the racially diverse population living in Decatur. Neither county has a large immigrant population. According to the 2020 Census, 99% of households in both counties primarily speak English. It should be noted, however, that many community members believe that people whose primary language is not English were under-reported to the Census.

Across the Region, there are 49,950 households, with most households in Macon County (Figure 2). Around 18% of all households in the Region include a child ages birth up to age six. The median household income varies widely across the Region, with Piatt County's median household income over \$20,000 greater than Macon County's median household income.

Figure 2: Total Number of Households, Number of Households with Children Under the Age of Six, Median Household Income

	Macon	Piatt	Total
Households	43,264	6,686	49,950
Households with Children Under the Age of Six	-	-	9,034
Median Household Income	\$55,954	\$77,759	\$66,756

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children in Priority Populations

The Early Learning Council (ELC) identified certain groups across the state as priority populations.² They defined them as a population that is well-defined and standalone that face economic disadvantage 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. 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.



A child standing while being held up by an adult laying on the floor.

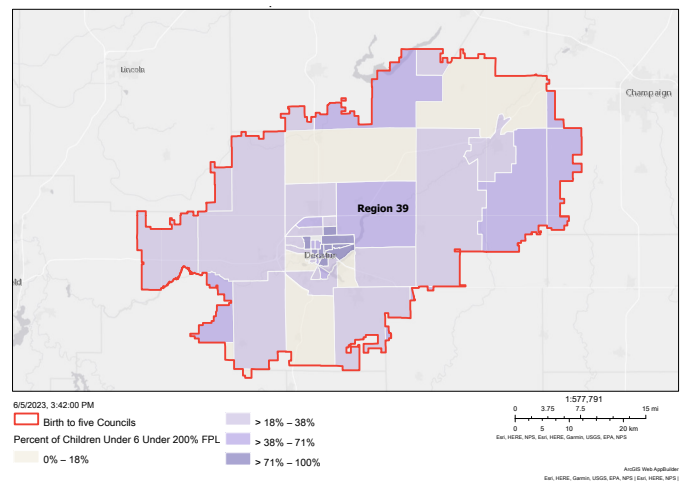
Figure 3: Federal Poverty Levels at 50% ,100%, and 200% for a Family of Two and Four

Federal Poverty Level	50%	100%	200%
Family of 2	\$9,155	\$18,310	\$41,198
Family of 4	\$13,875	\$27,750	\$55,500

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

The Action Council and Family Council identified the following priority populations in Region 39: families living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, those experiencing homelessness, child maltreatment and/or those involved with child welfare, and underage parents. 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” (see example in Figure 3). The Census reports that 17% of people living in Macon County live at or below 100% FPL. Only 6% of

Figure 4: Location of Children Under Six at or Below 200% FPL



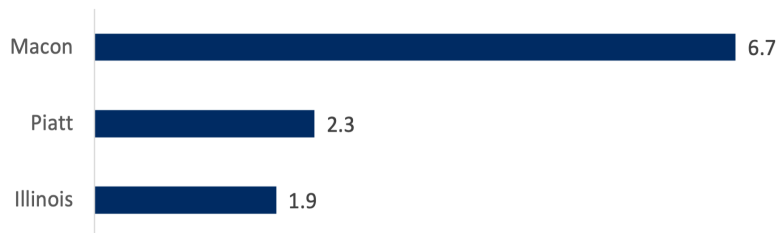
Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

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

people living in Piatt County live at or below 100% FPL. The largest number of children living at or below 100% FPL (“in poverty”) live in the city of Decatur in Macon County. The highest number of children living below 200% FPL (“low income”) are in the city of Decatur (Figure 4). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines homelessness as an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The 2019 Illinois Risk and Reach Report³ from the Erikson Institute calculated 15 risk factors that undermine optimal child development and compares them to the reach of 17 publicly funded programs and services that support early childhood well-being. One of the risk factors for children is if their families are experiencing homelessness or are unhoused.

The concentrated areas of families experiencing homelessness are similar to those of the families living on poverty-level incomes. The Erikson Report indicates that Macon County has a high-moderate rate of homelessness (3.5% of the Kindergarten children considered homeless) compared to other areas in Illinois. Piatt County is one of nine counties in the state reporting 0 homelessness ; however, due to stigma, these numbers are often underreported.

Figure 5: Number of Child Victims of Abuse by County Compared to Illinois per 1,000 Children Under Five



Source: Erikson Institute
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Forty-four percent of children ages five and under in Region 39 live in families with two working parents/guardians. Additionally, 3,304 live in households with one parent or guardian; of those families, 83% of those parents/guardians work, making child care an essential need for families in the Region.

Based on data from the Erikson Risk and Reach Report, Macon County has a high rate of child maltreatment (Figure 5). Piatt County has a low rate of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as well as neglect by a caregiver.

Of the children removed from their biological parents’ custody in Region 39 because of maltreatment, about 59% are placed with a relative and about 39% with a foster family. Because of the high number of children in Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) care and lack of foster care family homes in Macon County, many children are placed in foster care homes outside of Macon County.

“My husband and I are foster care parents, but we will no longer accept children that are not school age because of the lack of slots in ECEC. Most centers will not take DCFS vouchers for child care or there is too long of a wait list. Unfortunately, this usually means we will not take siblings because the younger sibling is not in school or child care, and we cannot afford to quit our jobs to be with them during the day.”

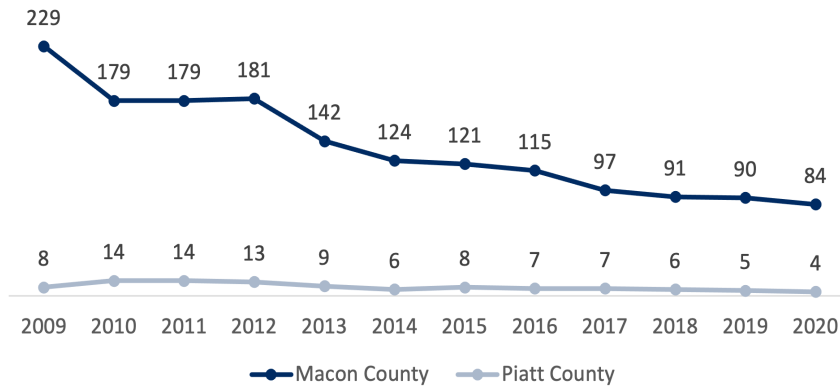
- Community Member, Macon County

³ <https://www.erikson.edu/applied-research/policy-leadership/early-childhood-data-reports/risk-reach-reports/>

Illinois' Department of Human Services reports that underage parent births from 2009-2020 decreased significantly in Macon and Piatt Counties (Figure 6). Community members state that the main cause of the decrease was community and nationwide campaigns to decrease underage pregnancies. In 2020, Macon County had 84 of the 1,251 (7%) births by underage mothers, while Piatt County had four of the 161 (2%) of the births are by underage mothers. Illinois' total percentage of births by underage mothers was at 4%.

Understanding the demographics of the Region, especially priority populations, can help decision makers ensure that they are providing equitable care for all children.

Figure 6: Underage Parent Births by County, 2009 to 2020



Source: IDHS
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Local Community Collaborations

An Early Childhood Collaboration brings together community partners to work together to properly support families so that every child aged five in their community is ready for Kindergarten. By collaborating, resources can be shared throughout the community and reach more families. By having shared goals and action plans, agencies can utilize their resources to affect families holistically and have the greatest impact. Piatt County does not have a formal Community Collaboration for ECEC work currently, but Macon County does.

The Macon County Early Childhood Collaboration (MCECC) was established in 2013 as the iGrow Collaboration for home visiting and was renamed in 2017. Their service boundaries include Macon, Moultrie, Christian, and Shelby Counties, based on the areas where the collaborative programs provide home visiting services. Their Leadership Group currently includes the iGrow Coordinated Intake Coordinator and representatives from each of the home visiting agencies in Macon County: Macon Resources, Inc., Bright Start, Healthy Families Illinois (HFI), District 61 Early Beginnings, and Baby TALK. The MCECC mission statement is to work collaboratively to maximize the impact of early childhood home visiting in their community. The goals and objectives are 1) to serve as many families in the community as we are able, 2) to provide exceptional supportive services to families and offer continued support, training, and updated resources to Parent Educators/Home Visitors, and 3) to build community awareness of home visiting services as a resource available for families, increase referrals from community agencies, and to receive feedback, participation, and support from community stakeholders.

While not a formal Collaboration, Macon County also has the Youth Health Coalition whose mission it is to create a sustainable community infrastructure that empowers and supports youth to make positive health decisions. This collaborative group shares resources and information between agencies and addresses youth health issues along the entire health continuum. The Youth Health Coalition has an Early Childhood Education Community Resource Synchronization work group focused on improving ECEC in Macon County.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Figure 7: Types of ECEC Programming

Program	Program Description
Early Head Start (EHS)	Center based and home-based services for infants and toddlers under the age of three, and pregnant people.
Head Start (HS)	Center based pre-school programming for children aged three to Kindergarten-entry.
Prevention Initiative (PI)	Center based and home-based services for pregnant individuals and children birth to three.
Preschool for All (PFA)	2.5 hours a day center based preschool services for children aged three to Kindergarten-entry age.
Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE)	Full-day center based preschool services for children aged three to Kindergarten-entry age.
Early Intervention (EI)	Supports and services for families to help their children younger than three years old meet developmental milestones.
Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)	Special education services for children provided through local school districts and special education cooperatives for children aged three to Kindergarten-entry age. *data not available on the number of ECSE slots in Region 39
Home Visiting IDHS	Home Visiting Program supports pregnant people and parents with young children birth to age five.
Home Visiting MIECHV	Home visiting program to improve the outcomes for pregnant women and children up to Kindergarten entry.
Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)	Financial assistance for income-eligible families with child care payments for families with children younger than age 13.

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

Region 39 is home to 9,034 children under the age of five. There are 1,829 Early Childhood Education and Care slots in licensed child care facilities, 80 license-exempt child care facilities slots, 345 family child care home slots, 1,640 slots in publicly funded programs (Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Head Start, Early Head Start, and Prevention Initiative). Only 3,894 children aged five and under have access to slots, which leaves 5,140 remaining families struggling to find ECEC for their children (if they choose to enroll their children into these educational programs).

“ We currently have two blended classrooms that serve 61 students in total, some with IEPs [Individualized Education Plans]. We recently screened more children than we will have room for. We will have a waiting list large enough to fill a whole other classroom for the next school year. Because we do not have enough room to take everyone, many of our families will need to resort to paying tuition to a private preschool or pay for child care during the day. This also means many of these children will miss out on receiving needed intervention services.

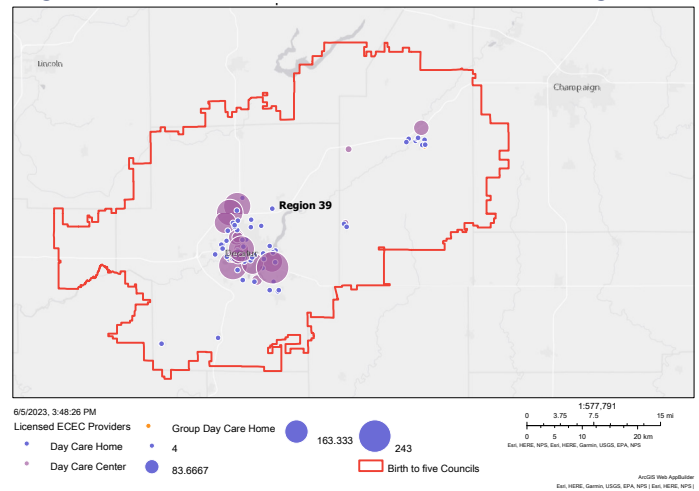
- Community Member (Piatt County)

Figure 8 shows the location of ECEC programs throughout Region 39 as indicated by the colored dots. The main concentration of services lies in the Decatur area and surrounding towns (Mt. Zion and Forsyth). Macon County has 12 DCFS licensed child care centers and 51 DCFS licensed family child care providers. There is one DCFS licensed child care center and 13 DCFS licensed family child care homes in Monticello. This leaves an ECEC desert for the rest of the Region.

Along with the lack of child care availability in rural areas, the child care facilities and family child care homes are not located on the Decatur City bus routes. While the bus is affordable according to families, they struggle to find reliable transportation that is also convenient to their work schedules and their child's child care center's hours. One community member reports needing to wake up at 5:00am to ride two buses to bring her children to day care, then rides another bus to her job at a local factory. She can only work part-time since her children's day care does not remain open late enough for her to work a full shift and ride the bus back to the day care. She is hoping to buy a car with her tax money to avoid having to rely on public transportation in the future. Families also note that the bus times do not correlate with the hours that centers are open, so the families work shifts conducive to child care availability. The earliest time a center opens in Region 39 is 6:00am and the latest any center stays open is 6:00pm. Families report that unless they work at an 8-5 job, using public transportation and child care programs is not possible. Many families state they must rely on family/friends for transportation to work full-time jobs. Many do not have this support, so they are unable to work full-time jobs. This makes them reliant on public assistance programs to live. In October 2022, Decatur Public Transit extended its days of operation to now include Sundays. However, buses still do not run on holidays.

A major challenge of the ECEC system in Region 39 is the lack of quality programs. ExceleRate Illinois is a quality rating and improvement system used to evaluate ECEC programs. ExceleRate uses a consistent set of standards organized into four domains and awards various levels of quality with Gold being the highest level. In Macon County, the only Gold quality programs are three Preschool For All (PFA) programs that are through the school districts (Mt. Zion, Argenta-Oreana, and Meridian schools), seven Silver quality child care centers and PFA programs, one Bronze center, and the remaining nine child care centers and all the family child care providers are still unrated. Five of Piatt County's PFA programs that are with their school districts are rated Gold level quality. Piatt County also has one Silver rated program and the remaining centers and family child care providers are unrated at this time. Community members working in ECEC programs state that the main barrier to achieving higher quality circles is the lack of staff with higher education.

Figure 8: Location of Licensed ECEC Programs



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children



A child sitting in a wheelchair smiling, wearing a tiara, and holding a wooden scepter.

Along with the lack of quality ECEC programs, Region 39 also faces a deficit in Early Intervention (EI) services (Figure 9). Early Intervention’s mission is to help children between the ages of birth to three with disabilities or delays learn and grow. When there are concerns about a child having a delay, the Early Intervention program, run by Child and Family Connections #19 (CFC #19) in Region 39, will provide a developmental evaluation. If the child qualifies for an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), then the child (family) will receive therapy to help them reach their IFSP goals. In Region 39, many children that qualify for services are put on waitlists for therapy due to the lack of therapists in the area. Currently, there are 219 children in Macon County with active service plans and 31 in Piatt County. The local hospitals are too full for speech feeding therapy, so the only option is virtual therapy for families.

Figure 9: Number of Children on Waitlist for Early Intervention Therapy

Type of Therapy	Number of Children on Waitlist
Developmental Therapy	19
Speech Therapy	53
Occupational Therapy	11
Physical Therapy	30

Source: CFC #19
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ Pediatricians used to be the source of referrals for services like speech, but there are no pediatricians available in Piatt County. Pre-K used to be reserved for those children who were displaying learning delays. However, the Pre-K now has so many unfilled slots that they enroll any child.
-Community Member (Piatt County) ”

“ There are no play therapists in Monticello and no one to go to my foster son’s school. I have to find time and the means to take him to Decatur for such services.
-Community Member (Piatt County) ”

The main cause of waitlists for therapy is the lack of therapists in the area or those willing to travel to Region 39. Therapists must pay for their own certification, professional development, liability insurance for being in homes, gas, items/tools for therapy, and technological needs. They are not paid if families cancel their therapy sessions. Community members report that many therapists decline to accept clients living in Decatur area for fear of crime and the high number of cancellations. One of the ways children are still receiving their therapy services is through the STEPS classroom at Baby TALK. Therapists provide therapy in a center-based program paid for by state and local funding. However, there are only 16 slots available.

One of the qualifiers for ExceleRate Gold level is that the program must provide developmental screenings for their children. Only publicly funded programs provide qualified developmental screenings for their community in Macon County. If a family does not bring their child to their well-child visits with their pediatrician, there is nowhere their child will have a developmental screening unless they are referred to Early Intervention.

Slot Gap

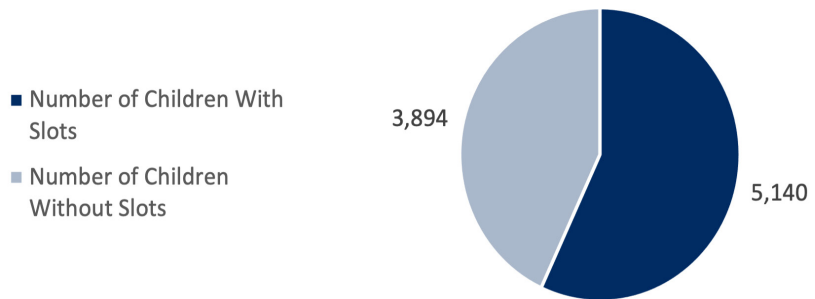
In Region 39, families do not have the luxury of choosing their child’s ECEC programming based on any other factor than an open slot availability in a program. A slot gap refers to the capacity (or slots) across programs compared to the number of children eligible for the slots. The slot gap occurs when there are not enough slots for the number of children that might be seeking enrollment in a program. It does not represent how many children in the Region would use a slot if it were available. By looking at the number of children that would qualify for each type of program, recommendations can be made to best suit the needs of the

“ Cost of good child care is barrier for families. The better ones (ECEC programs) cost more money and families in the area who want the best for their child often can’t afford it. -Community Member (Piatt County) ”

families in our community. Slot gap can be measured overall, which looks at the capacity of licensed center- and home-based child care, and license-exempt child care centers versus the number of all children ages birth to five in the Region. It can also be measured by looking at the number of slots in publicly funded programs versus the number of children living at or below 200% FPL. While each publicly funded program has their own set of enrollment criteria, income can be an important factor. Including all children at the highest FPL range in the measure ensures that all eligible children are identified.

Because of the lack of slots available, families are not able to choose programs based on accessibility of location, curriculum, education level of teachers, affordability, or even the quality of the program. A majority of children ages birth to five in the Region do not have a slot at DCFS licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, or license-exempt child care centers in the Region (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Number of Children with ECEC Slots vs Without Slots



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

By comparing the number of children that live at 200% FPL or lower to the number of slots in current publicly funded programs, some observations can be made about the number of publicly funded program slots that may be needed in the Region. Prevention Initiative (PI) and Early Head Start (EHS) programs are publicly funded programs for children aged 0-2 years. Preschool for All (PFA), Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE), and Head Start (HS) are programs available for children aged 3-5 years old.

There are 1,921 children aged two and under in Region 39 that live at 200% or below the Federal Poverty Level that would qualify them for publicly funded programs. Living at or below the Federal Poverty Level is not the only qualifier for publicly funded programs. For example, children ages birth to two years old could qualify for Prevention Initiative programs if they are experiencing homelessness, utilizing transitional housing, undocumented, youth-in-care in the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) system, intact families receiving services from DCFS, or children with disabilities. This increases the number of children that could be eligible for publicly funded programs. However, there are only 368 total slots for children ages birth to two. In Region 39, all eighty Early Head Start (EHS) funded center-based slots are also paid for with Prevention Initiative (PI) funds at Baby TALK, a local non-profit organization. This allows for all EHS children to be allowed

to stay the entire day for center-based care. Baby TALK holds the grant for the other birth to two care such as 66 EHS home visiting slots and 115 PI home visiting slots. Baby TALK also has eight center-based slots for Family Literacy families, a collaboration with Richland Community College to provide GED classes for parents and caregivers with children birth through three or who are pregnant; 16 slots for children enrolled in STEPS, a center-based program for children receiving Early Intervention (EI) services; and eight slots for center-based families in Foundations, a high-quality alternative education program for adolescents who are pregnant or parenting and working toward high school graduation. Other programs in Region 39 offer home visiting services for families, as well. Early Beginnings has 37 home visiting slots, Healthy Families Illinois has 48, and MRI Bright Start has 48 home visiting slots. MRI Bright Start is the only home visiting program in Region 39 that provides visits to families with children up to age five.



Two adults smiling at each other while embracing an infant baby.

Along with publicly funded programs for ages birth to two in Region 39, there are publicly funded preschool programs, including PFA, PFAE, and HS, for ages three to five. Decatur’s Empowerment Opportunity Center holds the grant for Anna Waters Head Start program with 187 preschool slots. Community Action Partnership of Central Illinois (CAPCIL) hosts the grant for 19 Head Start preschool slots in Cisco, a small town in Piatt County. Preschool for All and Preschool for All Expansion grant services are all provided through school districts throughout Region 39. Figure 11 details how many preschool slots are available for children in Region 39 by school district.

Figure 11: Publicly Funded Program Slots for Children ages Three to Five by School District

Unit School District	Number of Children Ages Three to Five	Children Ages Three to Five at or below 200% FPL	ISBE PFA (FY 2022)	ISBE PFA-E (FY 2022)	Head Start (FY 2022)
Argenta-Oreana CUSD 1	280	73	80	0	0
Bement CUSD 5	68	20	40	0	0
Cerro Gordo CUSD 100	76	22	38	0	0
Decatur SD 61	2,592	1,428	460	120	187
DeLand-Weldon CUSD 57	43	12	20	0	0
Maroa-Forsyth CUSD 2	387	96	70	0	0
Meridian CUSD 223	201	20	0	0	0
Monticello CUSD 25	464	121	60	0	19
Mount Zion CUSD 9	507	77	40	0	0
Sangamon Valley CUSD 9	165	51	0	0	0
Warrenburg-Latham CUD 11	154	41	56	0	0

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Publicly funded programs are not the only option for families in Region 39. There are privately paid slots for children, as well. Families have a choice of licensed child care centers, licensed family child care home programs, and license-exempt child care programs; there are 11 of these programs in the Region operated by a church or religious organization. However, the 3,894 slots in private care and publicly funded programs do not match the 9,034 children ages birth to five in Region 39.

For second and third shift care, the slots are even more limiting. Macon County has 241 night time slots at DCFS licensed family child care homes and Piatt County only has 13. These slots are licensed for all children ages birth to twelve, not just birth to five. With the top ten major employers in Macon County employing over 15,000 people, seven have second and third shift work.

“Families use friends or family (for second and third shift child care) and then pick up their children late when they are sleeping or parents stagger shifts so that they can have child care. They lose family time to save money on child care.”
 -Community Member (Macon County)

Figure 12: Number of Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Centers by County

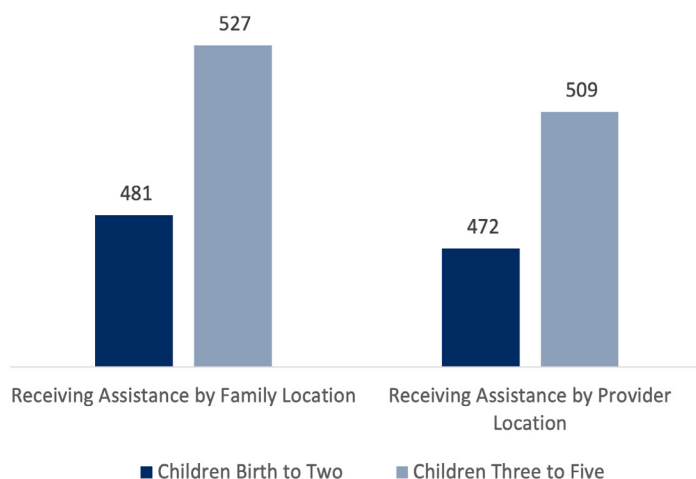
County	Licensed Child Care Centers	Licensed Family Child Care Homes	License-Exempt Child Care Programs ⁴
Macon	1,577	298	200*
Piatt	114	84	92*

Source: IECAM, Birth to Five Survey Data
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

One of the barriers creating a slot gap for children living in families with children experiencing economic barriers or children in DCFS care is the lack of providers willing to receive CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program) or DCFS child care vouchers. Programs cite that CCAP and DCFS application approval can take extra long (sometimes up to a month) and they cannot afford to wait that long for payments. One center owner stated that they have had children under DCFS care start at the center and then are moved to a new placement before the child care payment has even been received. Private paid programs state that they cannot afford the cost of having the child for long periods without payment. Other programs limit the amount of slots they provide for children receiving CCAP or DCFS child care vouchers. Families are forced to choose their ECEC programming for their children solely based on availability of a slot and if that provider will receive CCAP or DCFS child care vouchers.

“I have my foster child in a program that is low quality. It was the only program in our town that would take the DCFS voucher that had a space. We are on waitlists for other centers.”
 -Community Member (Macon County)

Figure 13: Child Care Assistance Program Usage by Family and Provider Location



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

⁴ Data collected via survey, with nine of eleven license-exempt child care programs responding

Many of the private day care centers, family child care homes, and the publicly funded programs have reported that they have facility space for expansion. Their main barrier for providing more slots for children ages birth to five is the lack of staffing it would require to maintain DCFS regulations for child-to-teacher ratios.

Understanding child care and publicly funded program slot gaps provides the opportunity for better, more targeted funding to areas and age groups that may need it most.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

The community reports that Region 39’s slot gap’s main driving cause is the lack of ECEC workforce, resulting in an insufficiency of available child care and preschool spaces. This shortage of qualified professionals in the ECEC sector has created a significant gap between the demand for child care services and the supply of qualified staff to meet that demand. As a consequence, parents and guardians face difficulties in finding suitable and affordable child care options, which impacts their life. The scarcity of ECEC workforce also hampers efforts to provide quality early childhood education, which plays a crucial role in children’s development and school readiness. Programs report that there is facility space available to expand. Two new centers are set to open in 2023 in Decatur, however, they are unable to find a workforce to enable them to open all their classrooms.

Gateways to Opportunity Registry 2021 Dataset from INCCRRA reports there are 691 people working in ECEC programs in Region 39. The majority of the ECEC workforce are 248 DCFS licensed teachers and 180 assistant teachers working in child care centers, along with 71 licensed Family Child Care Providers and 42 Family Child Care Assistants. Included in the workforce numbers are the support staff, such as 42 administrators/directors, 28 substitutes/floater, 10 school-age workers, two school-age assistants, and 35 other indirect service workers.

According to administrators in Region 39, the most significant challenge they encounter is the scarcity of qualified staff available for recruitment, which significantly hampers their ability to adequately staff and operate ECEC programs. Administrators have been struggling to find staff that have enough Early Childhood Education (ECE) classes from higher education institutions to be qualified as DCFS licensed teachers. Of the 481 teaching staff (teachers, assistant teachers, teacher aides, and substitutes/floater), more than half hold a high school diploma or GED. Thirty-seven percent of teaching staff have obtained an associate degree or higher.

In Region 39, there are two higher education institutions, Richland Community College, and Millikin University. Several years ago, Richland Community College discontinued their ECE associate degree program due to lack of interest. However, they still offered ECE classes. In 2022, Millikin University also discontinued their ECE bachelor’s degree due to lack of interest. With this program being discontinued, interested community members have no local option of receiving their ECE bachelor’s degree, Special Education endorsement, English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching endorsement, or their developmental therapist certification. Individuals who have an interest in furthering their Early Childhood Education (ECE) studies will discover that they need to explore educational opportunities outside of Region 39.

Figure 14: Educational Attainment of Licensed Center Directors, Teachers, FCC Homes⁵

	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	*	0	0	16	20	*
Teaching Staff	253	15	19	98	77	6
FCC Staff ⁶	51	*	*	7	5	*

Source: IECAM, Birth to Five Survey Data
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

⁵ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents

⁶ FCC includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floater, and other direct and indirect service providers

Faced with the lack of qualified staff, administrators have utilized the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential to meet the DCFS licensing regulations for lead teachers. The CDA is a credential based on a core set of competency standards where educators can earn their CDA by doing 120 ECE training hours, pass an exam and a verification visit where a CDA specialist observes them working in their classroom. The community in Macon County, through the Community Foundation and Workforce Investments Solutions, is supporting this opportunity for educators by providing funds to pay for the application fee and books for anyone pursuing the CDA credential. Richland Community College is promoting educators with a CDA to continue their education by crediting those with a CDA with six ECE college credit hours.

The most significant obstacle impeding a larger workforce from entering the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) field is the persistently low wages offered within the industry. According to the Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities Fiscal Year 2021, on average, teachers earn \$14.29 per hour. (Illinois has increased its minimum wage so that figure may have increased since 2021). If working 40 hours a week, a teacher would earn \$29,723 per year. The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) at 100% for a family of four in 2021 was \$26,500. Teachers, on average, are paid at 112% of the FPL. Just over half of the centers in Illinois report providing benefits such as medical insurance. Community teachers and directors report that many educators leave the ECEC workforce because they are unable to provide for their families without relying on public assistance. Those that do stay in ECEC often leave to work in the school districts to work as teachers or paraprofessionals where the pay is higher, and they are provided benefits.

“We have a hard time recruiting qualified people to work in ECEC. We have to grow them into teachers. As soon as we get staff educated to be DCFS qualified teachers, they leave for the school district. We can’t compete with what the school district can pay, but we can’t increase what we charge families. Families in Decatur cannot afford more than what they are already paying.”

-Community Member (Macon County)

Figure 15: Median Hourly Wages by Position in Illinois

Position	Director	ECE Teacher	ECE Teaching Assistant
Hourly Wage (2021)	\$19.00	\$14.29	\$12.00

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Family child care providers often encounter the disparity of comparatively lower compensation in contrast to their counterparts in center-based teaching positions. The Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities for Fiscal Year 2021 states that the average annual gross earning for a family child care provider was \$33,669.75 in 2019. “In FY 2021, the average hourly wage family child care providers earned was \$6.26 pre-COVID and \$6.63 at the time of response (compared to the state minimum wage of \$11.00 per hour); however, this hourly wage only reflects the average length of time that direct service is provided to children. When the average hours spent cleaning, preparing food, shopping, recordkeeping, and preparing educational activities for children (20.4 hours pre-COVID and 21.2 hours at the time of response) are factored into the equation, child care providers work on average 70.5 hours per week pre-COVID and 68.5 hours per week at the time of response and average \$4.45 per hour pre-COVID and \$4.59 per hour at the time of response.”

The State of Illinois offers a Great Start Wage Supplement (GSWS) that supports ECEC staff by supplementing their income based on educational attainment above DCFS licensing standards. This supplement ranges from \$150 to \$1,950, depending on an individual's current education level and child care position. Community ECEC staff report that while the GSWS is a nice bonus, it is not enough to keep them in the field. Action Council members broke down the wage supplement by hourly bonus and discovered an ECEC staff member with a CDA credential would receive an additional 23 cents an hour and an ECEC staff member with a bachelor's degree would receive an additional \$1.64 per hour. This is equivalent to a tank of gas a week.

In addition to the crucial aspect of receiving a fair and professional wage, ECEC staff highlight the existence of additional barriers that impede the growth of the workforce. Directors state that many seasoned staff leave because they are unprepared for the increase in children's challenging behavior. Staff have no mentors or coaches in private-pay centers and homes. Because of the lack of staffing, directors are spending more time in classrooms to adhere to children-to-staff DCFS required ratios and are unable to support staff.

Other DCFS regulations pose issues for staff, as well.

- Administrative restrictions regarding fingerprinting, form collection, and background checks processing time.
- Inability to engage new hires during sometimes long wait time which may lead to new staff taking a different job.
- Age restriction prohibiting dual credit ECE college and high school schools from becoming lead classroom teachers.

The challenges confronting ECEC programs not only exacerbate the complexities of recruiting but also significantly amplify the struggles associated with retaining a skilled and dedicated ECEC workforce. Addressing the shortage of ECEC professionals is crucial to narrowing the slot gap and ensuring that families have access to high-quality ECEC services.

“ I started my home child care because I couldn't find a spot at any center for my newborn. It made financial sense for me to stay home with my baby and my toddler and watch other children to supplement my lost income. What I didn't realize at the time was how much effort and paperwork it is to meet DCFS regulations. ”

-Family Member (Macon County)



A group of children laughing while eating ice cream.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Within Region 39, families encounter a multitude of formidable barriers that impede their access to and participation in ECEC programming. The main challenges that families find while looking for ECEC programming are: 1) no available slots, 2) high costs, 3) low quality programming, 4) lack of hours during families’ work schedules and inaccessible program location, and 5) cultural barriers and shortage of culturally responsive services. The main cause of unavailable slots appears to be the lack of qualified, high-quality teachers.

For families who utilize publicly funded programming, the cost of accessing quality ECEC programming ceases to be a barrier in their journey. For families that do not qualify for publicly funded programming, the cost of child care sometimes outweighs the benefit of joining the workforce. According to Illinois CCDC - Child Care Aware® of America, for single parent families the cost of child care can be 51% of families’ household income.

Figure 16: Median Monthly Cost of Child Care, Percentage of Median Household Income

	Median Monthly Price of Child Care	Price As Percentage of Median Household Income: Infant to Toddlers	Price As Percentage of Median Household Income: Preschoolers
Macon County Single Parent Families	\$740	58%	50%
Macon County Two Parent Families	\$740	12%	10%
Piatt County Single Parent Families	\$725	26%	24%
Piatt County Two Parent Families	\$725	12%	11%

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) helps families with limited access to financial resources pay for private child care based on their income and family size. Families whose monthly non-exempt income does not exceed 225% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for their family size at the time of initial program application are eligible for CCAP.⁷ Even for families who do not meet the eligibility criteria for CCAP, the burden of paying child care tuition remains a persistent struggle. Centers report that they have high costs (e.g., wages, building maintenance, and insurance), but they know they cannot charge more because families in Region 39 cannot afford to pay more. Family child care programs tend to be comparatively more affordable due to providers having fewer overhead costs compared to larger center-based facilities.

“Day care is so expensive! It doesn’t make sense for me to work and pay day care. And most parents I know make too much to qualify for CCAP.”
- Community Member (Piatt County)

⁷ <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=118832>

Figure 17: Percent of Income Spent on ECEC for Families Living at or Below 100% FPL

County	Child Care Center: Family of Two	Child Care Center: Family of Three	Family Child Care: Family of Two	Family Child Care: Family of Three
Macon	57%	49%	43%	37%
Piatt	61%	72%	38%	33%

Source: IDHS

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ You don’t have a sense of belonging when none of the people working there look like you. I don’t feel like leaving my child somewhere I don’t feel comfortable. Plus, some of the programs have reputations of being white day cares.
- Community Member (Macon County) ”

Many community members and family members have emphasized that individuals in marginalized communities, particularly people of color, encounter an additional barrier when it comes to accessing quality ECEC services. Families report not feeling welcomed in some programs because of the lack of diversity in the workforce and in the classrooms. Center directors and teaching staff in our Region are predominately white. Community members noted that while the racial makeup of teaching staff is equivalent to the racial makeup of the children they work with, they noted that lead teachers in centers are mostly white, and Black teachers make up mainly support staff such as teacher assistants, floaters, or indirect service such as housekeeping or food service. According to input from parents/caregivers of color in the community, a disparity exists in ECEC settings; white staff are more supported and favored to advance into leadership positions over people of color.

Figure 18: Number of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Providers by Race, Ethnicity⁸

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	White
Center Directors	0	6	*	0	0	35
Teaching Staff	*	102	5	*	12	328
FCC Staff	0	21	0	0	*	47

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ Black women have a hard time moving up to directors because they are not being supported in getting their degrees. Without certification, it’s hard for them to move up so they stay in positions with lower wages and less benefits.
- Community Member (Macon County) ”

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

“

I'm invited to the table, but I'm not asked to sit down.

- Community Member (Macon County)

”

Another barrier to accessing publicly funded programs is the complexity and burden associated with the eligibility forms that families are required to complete. For those programs, eligibility is based on higher needs. Family members of color in the community state that primarily, in the publicly funded programs, there are white woman asking the eligibility questions and family members of color can feel uncomfortable sharing very private information with someone that does not look like them or understand their family. Families then do not score the higher number of points required to be on the eligibility waitlist. Community members also noted that the board members of nonprofit programs are traditionally primarily white and may not be culturally response to issues that should be addressed for the eligibility forms.

By amplifying the voices of families, a comprehensive understanding of the genuine causes behind the barriers they encounter in accessing ECEC opportunities can be achieved, which would enable the formulation of informed recommendations to rectify our communities' issues. Solely relying on data without considering the perspectives of families and the wider community fails to portray an accurate representation of the realities and needed actions within our Region. Emphasizing family and community voices ensures an authentic depiction of the existing circumstances and facilitates the identification of appropriate steps for progress.



An adult embracing and kissing a smiling child.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 39 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers. .

Strengths

- All school districts, except for two, have a Preschool for All (PFA) program. There is a Head Start program in both counties. Macon County has three home visiting programs for children ages zero to two years old and one that visits children from zero- to five-year-old. There are 249 family child care slots available in Region 39 for children ages zero to five years old.
- Decatur boasts a cost-effective bus transportation system within the city, making it an affordable mode of transportation for families residing in the area.
- The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is available to provide financial assistance for families utilizing child care. It will pay for up to three months of child care while a caregiver looks for work.
- Area high schools currently have a bridge program with Richland Community College (RCC) in which students can work in ECEC centers while participating in dual credit courses at RCC and their home high school.
- The State has many supports for ECEC staff, such as free trainings, financial assistance programs for ECE higher education, and Great Start Wage Supplement for financial compensation.
- Workforce Investment Solutions in Decatur will pay for Child Development Associates (CDA) credentials and books. Richland Community College will transfer a CDA credential into six ECE credit hours.
- Heritage Behavioral Center has a grant to provide training and implementation of the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) system.
- Macon County has a resource guide that updated county services in the spring of 2023. Macon and Piatt Counties have a 211-resource phone line to provide information for community members on all the resources available to them.
- The Community of Care Campus serves as a centralized hub that houses a wide array of easily accessible resources, conveniently located within the Decatur bus routes, ensuring convenient access for individuals in the community.
- Community Health Center in the center of Decatur on Community of Care Campus and has the Healthy Steps program that provides child development, health, and safety information to families at well-child visits.

Needs

1. Equitable access to high-quality ECEC programs and services.

- The existing ECEC system fails to promote equitable access and outcomes for all children, including children of color, children in DCFS foster care system, and children living in households with poverty-level income.
- Families that require ECEC services outside the traditional workday have few options, specifically families that work second or third shift.

- There is a shortage of publicly funded and privately funded ECEC slots for children ages birth to five years old. There are 9,034 children ages five and under but only 3,894 ECEC slots in the Region.
 - The cost of child care is prohibitively expensive for some families (\$740/month median per child) and families report lengthy waitlists.
 - Public transportation routes do not correspond to ECEC program locations, provide efficient services, nor offer convenient schedules.
 - The CCAP application and review process is cumbersome and slow – applications must be submitted by email or fax, and the turnaround times reportedly vary from one week to two months.
 - ECEC programs and centers are reluctant to accept children with DCFS vouchers due to payment delays and/or never receiving payment for services rendered.
 - Some providers report DCFS Licensing Representatives inconsistently apply licensing regulations, which discourages family child care providers from pursuing licensure.
2. A comprehensive and sustainable strategy to attract, support, and retain a high-quality and racially diverse ECEC workforce.
- Recruitment:
 - As a field, ECEC fails to attract adequate numbers of aspiring staff to enroll in preparation and credentialing programs.
 - Preparation:
 - Region 39 lacks local and easily accessible ECEC preparation and credentialing programs, specifically programs that offer an associate or bachelor's degree.
 - Financial assistance offerings are inadequate compared to tuition costs and ECEC staff wages.
 - ECEC staff are not adequately supported to address children's social and emotional needs, as well as responses to trauma.
 - Hiring and Onboarding:
 - DCFS severely limits the days that new ECEC staff can be fingerprinted, offering services only on Fridays.
 - DCFS regulations restrict the pool of potential ECEC teachers by requiring teachers to be at least 19 years of age before leading a classroom. Yet, many aspiring ECEC teachers are not yet 19 years of age when they graduate high school.
 - Current state regulations do not allow newly hired ECEC staff to train inside ECEC buildings until background checks have cleared. Background checks can sometimes take more than one month to process.
 - Mentoring and Induction:
 - Newly credentialed ECEC staff working in private programs lack access to formal mentoring and induction programs.
 - Education and Professional Development:
 - Women of color report not feeling supported to pursue higher education coursework that will advance their professional growth and development.
 - ECEC staff are not sufficiently trained to support children's social and emotional development needs.
 - Family child care providers and private center ECEC staff are ill-equipped to provide families with the array of supports and services they need.

- Compensation:
 - ECEC staff are not paid a professional wage, which discourages new talent from entering the field and veteran staff from continuing to build their career in the profession.
 - Retention:
 - ECEC staff report feeling burned out and unsupported, causing them to leave the profession in search of more satisfying and financially rewarding careers.
3. Resources for parents and caregivers to help them advocate for their children's needs and/or inform them about ECEC programs, services, and resources.
- Parents and families report a lack of awareness of existing child development benchmarks, ECEC programs and community resources.
 - Region 39 needs additional home visitors/parent educators to support families with children ages three-five years old.
4. An increase in Early Intervention services and screenings; the current backlog prevents children from receiving essential support.
- There is a shortage of service coordinators and therapists to serve children who qualify for Early Intervention (EI).
 - There are a limited number of screening opportunities for children aged from birth to five years old.
 - Children referred to EI and who qualify for an IFSP are not guaranteed therapy and are sometimes placed on a lengthy waiting list.
5. New, reliable data that is not outdated and data systems that are integrated. Current data systems limit interagency collaboration and data-informed decision-making.
- Existing ECEC data are stale and do not reflect current program status, ECEC service offerings and children's needs.
 - Inadequate access to current and relevant data prevents ECEC agencies, programs, and services from making data-informed, aligned, and timely decisions.
 - A siloed intake system prevents ECEC agencies, programs, and services from efficiently identifying and accessing resources for children and families.

Recommendations

The Region 39 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

1. Design and implement an ECEC system that centers equity and facilitates access to high-quality ECEC programs and services for all children and families throughout Region 39.
 - Leverage State funding to create ECEC programming, specifically in Monticello (Special Education) and Decatur (Early Intervention, PI, PFA, and PFAE).
 - Decatur Public Transit (DPT) should add or readjust routes to better serve ECEC center locations and schedules. DPT is currently auditing their bus routes, times, and system.
 - The State should increase the amount of CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program) payments for second/third shift care more than payment for first shift care to provide an incentive for providers to increase second/third shift slots.
 - The State should improve its system for CCAP and DCFS payments and ease the application process. The State should provide an online portal that families and providers can use for paperwork. The State should improve the DCFS payments approval process to decrease wait time for payments. This will increase the number of programs willing to accept DCFS payment vouchers for children in DCFS care and thereby increase the number of families willing to foster children that are not old enough to be enrolled in public school.
 - Create a tax credit for families with children to assist in making child care affordable.
 - Local creation of a Child Care Directors' Meeting and a Family Child Care Provider support group to share information and create connections.
 - Expand training for DCFS licensing representatives.
2. Strengthen the ECEC workforce by fostering a culture of respect for ECEC staff; offering easily accessible, affordable, and high-quality training, credentialing and professional development opportunities; and paying professional wages.
 - Significantly increase the Great Start Wage Supplement amounts, ensuring that ECEC professionals receive compensation commensurate with their professionalism and expertise.
 - Provide pathways for parent/caregivers and high school students to enter the ECEC workforce.
 - Expand Richland Community College's ECE classes into an ECE associate degree.
 - Provide more hands-on techniques in higher education courses and local training for those working with children with challenging behavior and trauma.
 - Expand grants for ECE degrees, such as the Navigator Scholarship, and update eligibility for the Navigator Scholarship to lessen the cost burden for some teachers.
 - Expand the days/time ECE staff can go for fingerprinting beyond only Fridays, improve the background clearance process to lessen the wait time for clearance, and update the system to allow fax/email forms instead of paper copies only.
 - Lower the required age for lead teachers to 18 years old.
 - Expand coaching/ mentoring programs for private ECEC programs.

- Encourage shared trainings among local ECEC programs.
 - Recognize the crucial role of long-term staff in maintaining continuity and quality in ECEC programs by implementing retention bonuses as an initiative to incentivize and reward the commitment of experienced professionals within the field.
3. Develop effective methods to communicate with all families and build awareness of community programs and ECEC services, as well as expand existing programs to meet families' needs.
- Address the urgent need for a crisis nursery in Decatur, both locally and statewide. Allocate financing to support the establishment of this vital resource, ensuring that families facing crisis situations have access to immediate and specialized care for their children.
 - Expand Home Visiting programs for 3–5-year-olds in Macon County to provide support for children that were unable to obtain a center-based preschool slot.
 - Increase funding to provide State-funded home visitors with a professional wage to attract/retain staff.
 - Increase support for families in private programming; share information about community resources.
4. Expand the pool of Early Intervention service providers and professionals, as well as programming to effectively serve more children.
- Increase EI funding to retain and attract service coordinators, EI support professionals, social workers, and developmental pediatricians.
 - Acknowledge the statewide shortage of therapists in specific regions where their presence is greatly needed by taking proactive measures to assist with recruitment efforts, aiming to attract qualified therapists to the field and address the critical gap in services in those underserved areas.
 - Expand State funding for assistance in credentialing and billing process for therapists. Provide statewide trainings for therapists (specifically on how to do virtual visits).
 - Allocate State funding to provide Prevention Initiative funding to Baby TALK in Macon County to add a third Early Intervention classroom. This would create up to sixteen slots (eight in morning and eight in afternoon) for children to receive Early Intervention therapy in a center-based setting.
5. Create a data infrastructure and system to ensure ECEC decisions are informed by accurate data and provide equitable access to ECEC services for all children and families.
- Leverage Heritage Behavioral Center's grant funding to expand the use of Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) in the community.
 - Administer the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) in ECEC preschool programs to assess needs and share information with the school district that is receiving each child.
 - Create a better mechanism to improve the State's comprehensive data collection system to include dual funded slots, all license-exempt slots, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Special Education preschool slots.

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 39, 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 the Regional Needs Assessment, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others. In the interest of time and space, only select questions are included.

Parents, Families, and Caregivers

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

Early Childhood Professionals and Other Community Members

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 childcare readily available and close to employers in your community?
6. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have the accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. How do you think families could learn more about home visiting opportunities in the community?
8. What is or are there stigmas that go along with being a teen parent and utilizing resources such as healthcare, CCAP, food assistance?
9. Tell me what brought on your referral to Early Intervention?
10. What was that EI process like for your family?
11. What services would help parent/caregivers of children with developmental delays, specifically?
12. If your child is close to age 3, what are your plans for your child? Has EI helped with the transition to school after STEPS?
13. Do you feel the wages you are paid are aligned to the work you do? Do you receive benefits? Do you use the Great Start Wage Supplement program? If yes, is that enough of a supplement?
14. 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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