



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 40

(Calhoun, Greene, Jersey & Macoupin Counties)





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Table of Contents

Region 40 Executive Summary	3
Region 40 Snapshot Infographic.....	5
Overview & Acknowledgements	7
Introduction.....	8
Letter from State Leadership	9
Letter from Regional Leadership.....	10
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois	11
Timeline.....	13
Birth to Five Illinois Regions	14
Spotlight on Region 40	15
Regional Community Landscape.....	16
Local Community Collaborations.....	21
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs	22
Slot Gap.....	25
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce.....	27
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice	30
Regional Strengths & Needs.....	33
Recommendations.....	34
Appendices	35



Region 40 Executive Summary

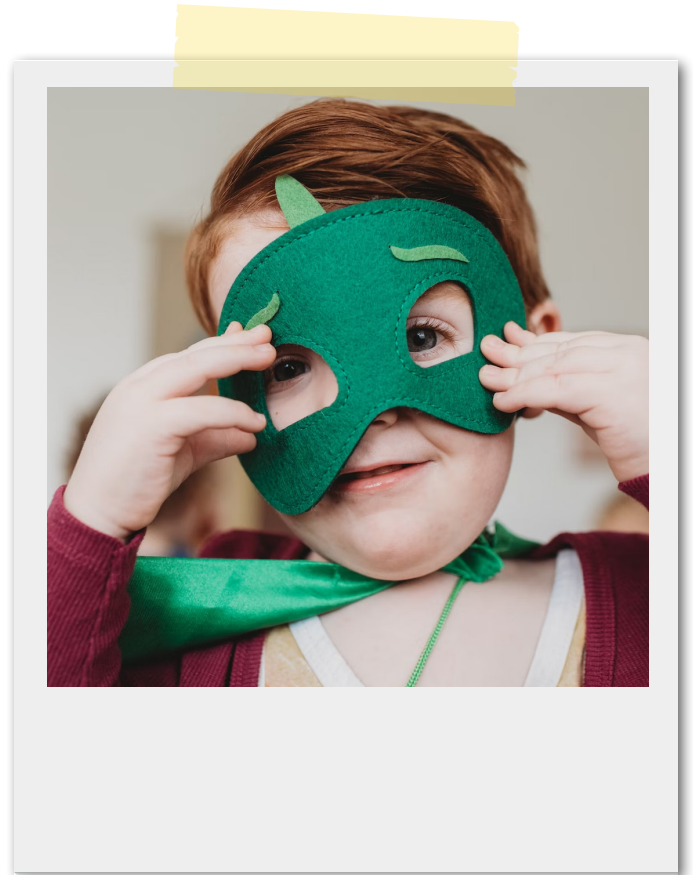
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 40 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 40 is composed of four counties with significant economic challenges. While there are areas with high numbers of ECEC programs and services the majority of the region has little to no access to high-quality, affordable ECEC. Findings suggest that Region 40's ECEC directors, educators, families, and communities are working hard to serve the area's youngest generation and value many assets in the region, including the school districts, Head Start, and child care. However, the need for increased awareness of ECEC programs and how it impacts Region 40 rural communities was strongly prevalent. Therefore, it not only identifies the region's strengths but also possible gaps. Five themes emerged during the aforementioned process; the need for: accessible child care, viable transportation, accessible specialized services, increased mental health resources, and awareness of regional ECEC services. These services exist across the region but are not consistently available for families.



In conclusion, the report captures strengths and weaknesses that reflect key opportunities for action to improve Region 40 ECEC opportunities and provide a wide range and mostly cohesive set of recommendations for acting on the ideas. It is understood these recommendations may require further refinement. It will be important for all levels of constituents to provide support, resources, and flexibility to build upon the strengths and address the gaps.

Region 40 Needs

1. Accessible and affordable child care for all families.
2. Affordable and viable transportation for ECEC programs. Transportation is needed at a community level for those with lesser opportunities to increase exposure and medical needs.
3. Local specialized services to meet the needs of children, families, and providers. Children in Region 40 need intervention services readily available near their primary residence or the school they attend.
4. Readily available ECEC Mental Health Services for children, families, and providers. Increase in mental health counselors in our region that are ready to assist children and families at all hours of the day in order to meet the needs of the mental health concern in Region 40.
5. ECEC system and programs that are easy to navigate. In conjunction with other programs and entities purchase a program that allows a networking collaboration for families in Region 40.

Region 40 Recommendations

1. Fortifying the ECEC workforce. It is recommended that we form a way to attract, prepare, support, and retain staff in the ECEC workforce
2. Transportation that is accessible for all. Region 40 is one of lesser opportunities, lack of exposure, and holds a need for accessible transportation to services missing within the community.
3. Access to local specialized services. Children that have been identified or need to be identified by professionals to identify a disability should have access to localized services within his/her community.
4. ECEC Mental Health support services for families with children 0-5. Region 40 should have mental health counselors as readily available as home visitors within Birth to 3 programs. These mental health counselors would be utilized for both children and families.
5. Increase ECEC knowledge and focus within the community. Region 40 collaborates in silos, the recommendation for our region is to allow those silos to branch out and form whole region community collaborations.

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

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REGION 40 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

Using a Collective Impact Model, between September 2022 and June 2023, we led our Action and Family Councils through data discussions to identify gaps and needs for children and families.

We coordinated focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather input from community members across the Region.



5,072

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 40



2,127

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



557

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

80%

Percentage of children ages birth to five without a slot at licensed and license-exempt child care centers and homes in Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, and Macoupin Counties.

“I recently completed my bachelor's degree; however I am unable to utilize it due to the reality of no child care.” - Parent

After identifying the most common and pressing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) needs of their communities, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.

REGION 40 NEEDS

1. More accessible and affordable child care for all families
2. Affordable and viable transportation for ECEC programs
3. Local specialized services, such as therapists and mental health providers, to meet the need of children, families, and providers
4. ECEC system and program that is easy to navigate

REGION 40 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Attract, prepare, support, and retain staff in the ECEC workforce
2. Accessible, affordable, and viable transportation for all children in public and private programs, including non-ECEC services
3. Improve access to local specialized services
4. Early Childhood Mental Health counselors and consultants readily available for both children and families
5. Local community collabs should form Region-wide collaboration



“If the ultimate goal is to place more children in programs appropriate for them and their families, we need to understand why there is such a large gap between available services and the children who need them.”
- Community Member

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

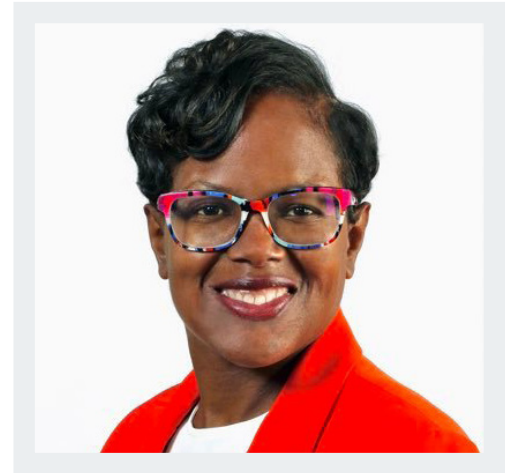
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

This Birth to Five Illinois: Region 40 Early Childhood Needs Assessment was made possible because of the work of the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding. While the Birth to Five Illinois system shares a common goal of improving ECEC statewide, this report is designed to provide a clearer picture of the breadth and depth of Region 40's ECEC programs operating in Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, and Macoupin Counties. An understanding of the ECEC landscape in these counties is a key ingredient for decision makers regarding the expansion/improvement of state and local ECEC public policy.

It is with gratitude that we acknowledge those who provided their expertise and voice for this Regional Needs Assessment. While we cannot individually thank every person who shared their story and experiences, we would like to spotlight a few partners whose input and support were instrumental in creating this report.

We are grateful to the Action Council and Family Council members who gave up their time to be present at meetings and answered the call to action by sharing their knowledge and their own experiences with ECEC. Members of both Councils spent countless hours reviewing and analyzing data, providing input, and seeking out others in our Region to share their stories to create a true and realistic picture of ECEC in Region 40. Your voices and perspectives were invaluable in making this Regional Needs Assessment a true living document.

Thank you to the Region 40 community members who attended events, participated in focus groups and interviews, and completed surveys. You embraced us without hesitation. Your voices, lived experience, and vulnerabilities made this report come alive. We value your commitment to our community's youngest generation and their future.

We offer thanks to the countless community partners who were willing to provide us with time and space to hold and participate in events: Region 40 Prevention Initiative and Preschool For All programs, libraries, health departments, local child care providers, local colleges, area businesses, and agencies. Establishing these partnerships has been invaluable in gathering data and information for this report.

A special thank you to Dr. Cindy Rice for always believing in me and being the guiding light in this work. You are the one who impressed upon me the importance of advocating for our youngest learners. I am honored to call you not only my mentor, but also one of my dearest friends. Additional thank you to the Birth to Five Illinois State Team for providing an avenue to build our local Councils, guidance in collaborating, and the knowledge needed to navigate our local ECEC landscape.

Thank you,

Keppen Clanton (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 40
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.

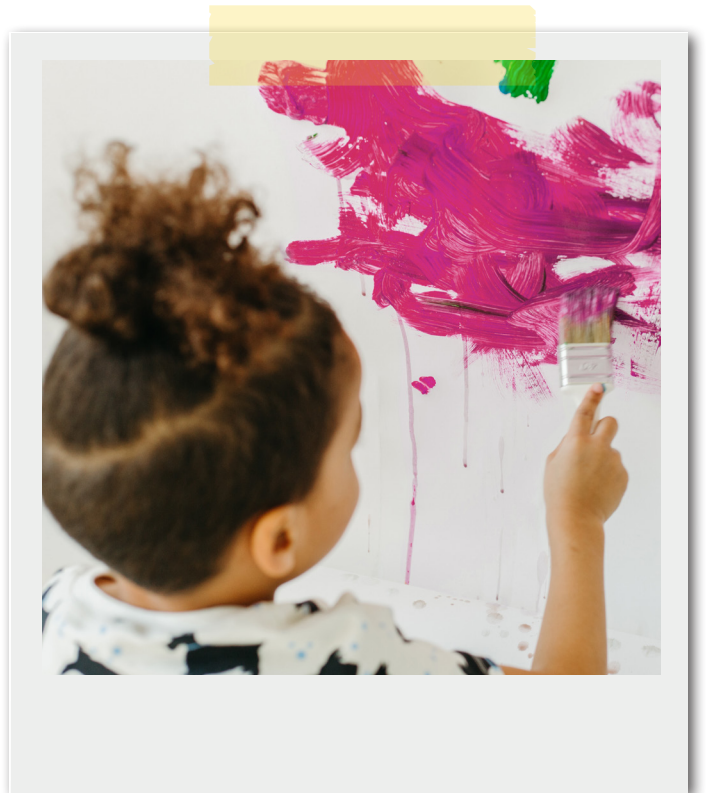
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

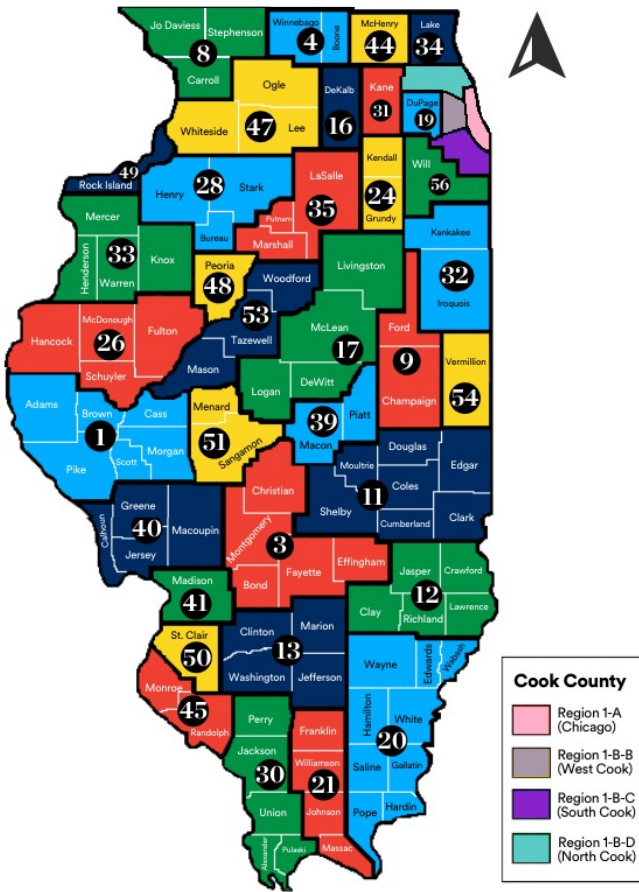


Timeline

- **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.

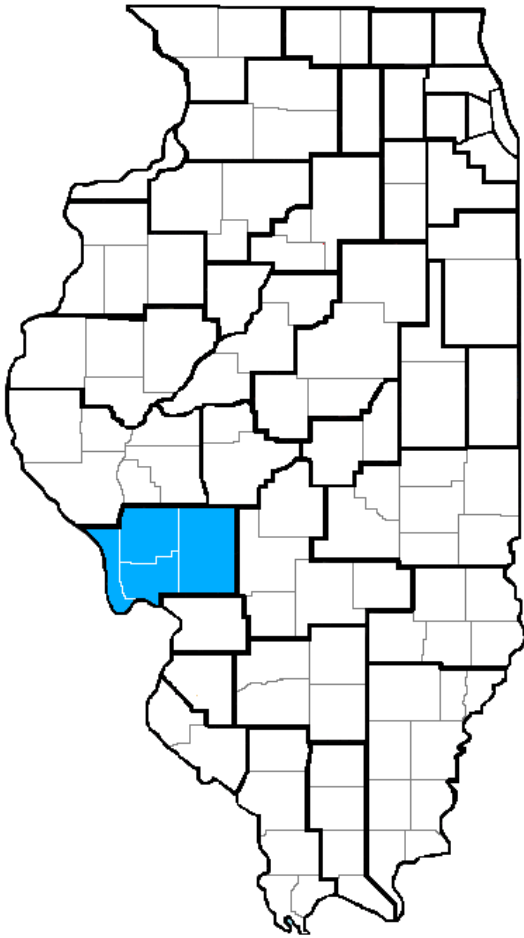
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 40

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 40 covers over 2,000 square miles and includes Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, and Macoupin Counties. Macoupin County comprises the eastern side of Region 40 and is the largest of the four counties. It is approximately 868 square miles with a combination of flat fields and rolling hills. In the northern part of Macoupin County, there are large acres of corn, bean, wheat fields, and most recently wind farms. In the central and southern areas, there are vast stretches of corn and bean fields, deserted coal mines, and expansive forests.

Calhoun County borders the west side and is the smallest county of Region 40, encompassing 284 square miles. The only way to access Calhoun County is to cross the Illinois River by draw bridge or ferry. Across the river, there is an extremely rural landscape composed of bluffs, rich hunting grounds, gravel roads, and small towns known as villages. There is no direct access to an interstate, and limited access to Wi-Fi, cellular service is limited. Community members must travel for over 35 minutes to access basic resources.

The southern part of Region 40 is comprised of Jersey County. Coming in as the third largest county at approximately 377 square miles, Jersey County is bordered by the Mississippi River to the south, the Illinois River to the west, and Macoupin Creek to the northwest. The bordering rivers play an important part in Jersey County’s economy by supporting agribusinesses and tourism. Jersey County is a combination of a city and rural towns. It has direct access to an interstate that connects several larger cities within thirty minutes to an hour, which provides the benefit of being “near the crowd, but not in it”.



Carrollton, Illinois square with the Greene County Courthouse in the background.

Land Acknowledgement¹

We acknowledge that Birth to Five Illinois: Region 40 is the traditional lands of the following Nations: Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskakia, Myaamia (Miami), and Peoria. We acknowledge the ancestors who cultivated the land in Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, and Macoupin Counties and were forced from their land and often stripped of their culture. These Indigenous communities are connected to their land, and despite years of forced removal this land is still Indigenous. This land acknowledgment is a small step in our ongoing responsibility to the land we occupy.

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

Regional Demographics

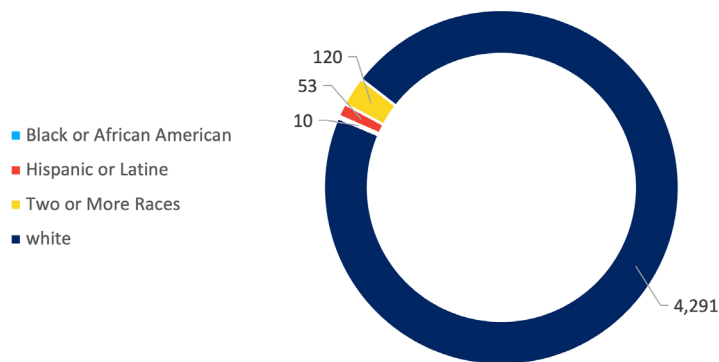
According to the 2020 Census, Region 40 is home to 5,074 children birth to age five; 2,625 children are under age two and 2,384 are aged three to five (Figure 1). Half of Region 40’s children under age five live in Macoupin County; moving west, the highest number of children per capita under age five reside in Greene and Calhoun Counties.

Figure 1: Number of Children by County

County	Number of Children Ages Birth to Two	Number of Children Ages Three to Five	Total Number of Children Ages Birth to Five
Calhoun	117	146	263
Greene	482	398	880
Jersey	535	601	1136
Macoupin	1,491	1,239	2,730
Total	2,625	2,384	5,009

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

Figure 2: Number of Children Ages Birth to Six by Race, Ethnicity



While the Region is predominantly white, the number of people who self-identify as Black or African American and Two or More Races in Macoupin and Jersey Counties has increased since 2017 (Figure 2). There has also been a reported increase in the number of households where English is not the first language, especially in Macoupin County (Figure 3). With an increase in racial and linguistic diversity, it is important to ensure Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs align with the changing needs of families and children in the Region.

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 3: Number of Households by Language, 2017-2020

Year	Number of Primary Spanish Language Households	Number of Primary Other Language Households
2017	77	4
2018	49	60
2019	43	70
2020	44	53
Total	2,625	2,384

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

Children and Families in Priority Populations

The Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) created a list of priority populations², defined as individuals who face economic disadvantages and a lack of a support system, do not receive equitable resources compared to other children in the academic pipeline, and do not have adequate access to ECEC programs due to the programs' location, cost, enrollment requirements, or capacity to serve the comprehensive needs of families. Of the 12 identified by the ELC, Region 40 Action and Family Councils identified four priority populations living in our Region: children living in households on incomes at poverty levels or deep poverty levels, children experiencing homelessness, children in families who face barriers due to immigration status, and children with disabilities. There is limited quantitative data available on these populations; however, qualitative data from those identified as being in priority populations was gathered through Action and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, and community meetings, and is included throughout this report.

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.

Children Living in Households on Incomes at Poverty Level

Region 40 has many families with limited access to economic and material resources. The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) measures the minimum amount of annual household income needed for individuals and families to pay for essentials, such as housing, clothes, and transportation. The FPL considers the number of people in a household, their income, and the state in which the family lives (see example in Figure 4). If a family's income is at or below 100% FPL, then that household is considered to be living on incomes at poverty levels; a family whose income is at or below 50% FPL is considered to be living on incomes at deep poverty levels.

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

	50%	100%	185%	200%
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

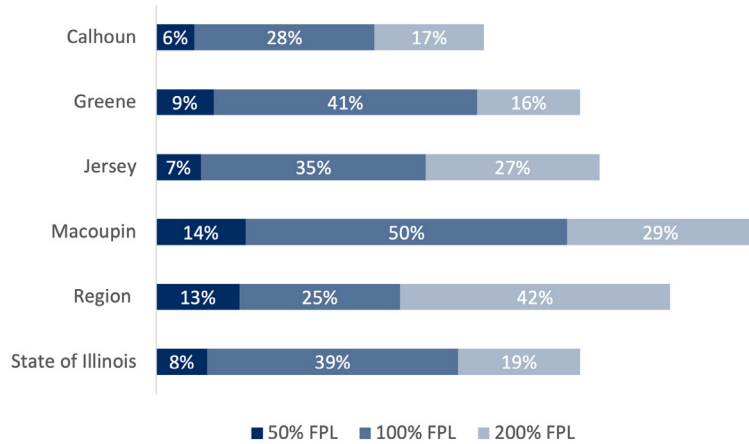
Action and Family Council members looked at the number of people across the Region living at or below 50%, 100%, and 200% FPL. All counties in Region 40 show pockets of deep poverty with a regional average of 13%, or 660 children (Figure 5), which is higher than the State's average of 8%. Macoupin and Greene Counties have the highest rates of people living at or 100% FPL.

“ Since this area doesn't have a grocery store, a pediatrician in town that will take him [18-month-old son with special needs], or transportation that we need, I am struggling to get him help and make sure we are eating healthy foods, etc. ”
- Single Mom (Greene County)

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

Rural towns in Region 40 can offer small-town living culture, a sense of belonging to a community, and small classroom sizes. However, there are fewer high-paying jobs, limited housing opportunities, limited available child care slots, and fewer resources for daily living, such as grocery stores and healthcare facilities. The lack of available resources can become a stressor that impacts both caregivers and their young children.

Figure 5: Percent of Population at 50%, 100%, 200% FPL by County, Region, and State

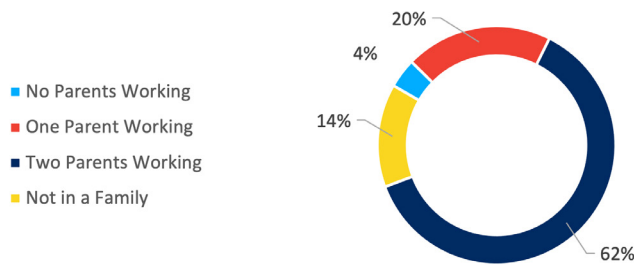


Source: U.S. Census
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ This area is a place with limited opportunities. We don’t have a grocery store, and just recently got a Dollar General. Up until just recently a Casey’s and a couple of bars were our only options. There isn’t any housing available here, and most parents live spread out throughout the backroads. If your child doesn’t attend preschool at the school district, the closest option is in neighboring towns that are more than 30 minutes away.

- Prevention Initiative Educator (Macoupin County)

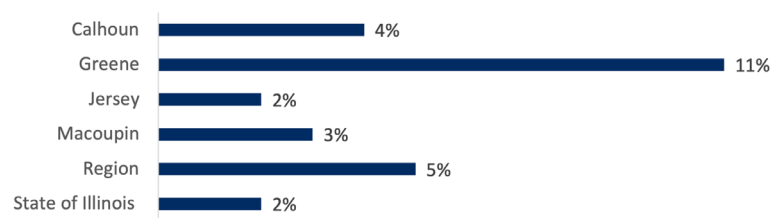
Figure 6: Percentage of Children and Working Parents



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

Over half the children under the age of five live in working families (Figure 6). The number of children in two-parent working families (2,352) is more than half the number of children living in one-parent working families (1,082). Even though 81% of families in Region 40 are working households, more than 75% of our families continue to live at or below 200% FPL.

Figure 7: Percentage of Children Ages Birth to Five Experiencing Homelessness by County, Region, State



Source: Erikson Institute, ISBE
Created by: Erikson Institute

Five percent of the Region’s children aged five and under are unhoused; comparatively, the rate for the State is 2% (Figure 7). According to the most recent information provided by the Area 5 Homeless Liaison, Region 40 has experienced an increase in unhoused families over the past three years due to the cessation of COVID stimulus checks, the no-eviction moratorium, and the loss of rental homes due to increased home sales. Families with children aged five and under experiencing housing instability confront numerous barriers to accessing ECEC programs.

Under IDEA, children birth to 18 qualify for publicly funded services once they have been evaluated as having a developmental, physical, or cognitive delay. Region 40 Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education trend data indicates that the number of children ages birth to two receiving Early Intervention services has remained at 4% while the percentage of children who qualify for Early Childhood Special Education and have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) ages three to five has increased from 9% to 11%. This increase is in line with what families are saying about Early Intervention and the lack of resources. Families with children from birth to two cannot access the necessary resources needed to begin therapies at an early age.

Region 40 is also home to a high number of children involved with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Data shows the Region's average maltreatment reports are 36 per 1,000 children, which is well above the State average of 19 children per 1,000. The most recent Erikson Risk and Reach Report indicated that the number of children in Region 40 with child welfare involvement has been steadily increasing. Some of these children are placed in substitute care, which sometimes includes family members like grandparents, but can also include non-relatives.

“

A family with a three-year-old son born with spina bifida has had to cut back work hours due to lack of therapies available locally. The trip for therapy takes over one and half hours one way, which takes away time the parent can spend with their two-year-old daughter.

- Parent (Calhoun County)

”



Data shows that too many of Region 40's youngest generation are raised in circumstances that make it challenging for them to enter Kindergarten ready to learn. Understanding the regional landscape and demographics of children and their families in Region 40 will assist communities, businesses, and policymakers determine what investments are needed to provide an equitable and accessible ECEC system that supports their diverse needs.

A smiling child posing for a picture on a bridge.

Local Community Collaborations

According to Illinois Action for Children, a Local Community Collaboration is formed when communities develop local partnerships and work across systems toward a shared goal of helping enhance the lives of young children and families and ensure healthy growth and development. There are stages of collaboration that include coordination of efforts, collaboration among partners, and the integration of services and programs.

The Region 40 Action and Family Councils considered all the known Early Childhood partnerships to discern if a Collaboration was present in the Region. Their feedback, coupled with additional community conversations, determined that no true ECEC Collaboration exists in the Region. The only connection between the groups and agencies is that the same people are in multiple groups. Organizations have similar objectives, missions, goals, and resources, but there is no formal integration of programs, planning, or funding. Currently, the organizations that provide assistance to young children and families in the Region are functioning independently.



Birth to Five Illinois: Region 40 Meet and Greet Ribbon Cutting.

Within the Region, there is a diverse range of community groups and entities that serve children and families. These include health departments, law enforcement agencies, school districts, housing providers, faith-based organizations, and food pantries, among others. Many of these groups hold monthly or quarterly meetings and often invite outside partners to share information; however, each organization continues to work separately towards their mission or goal. Council members discussed how establishing an ECEC Collaboration could result in better use of resources, such as time and funding, since multiple organizations often serve the same families.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Region 40 has an array of ECEC programs aimed at improving the outcomes for young children and their families. Programs are designed with either an emphasis on the “care” component of ECEC, the “education” component of ECEC, or sometimes both. Region 40 has a combined total of 79 public and private ECEC programs, including Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E), Prevention Initiative (PI), Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood (IDHS-DEC) home visiting programs (Figure 8) licensed child care centers, license-exempt child care centers, and family child care (Figure 9).

Head Start

Region 40’s six federally funded Head Start programs provide high-quality, research-based, comprehensive services to children ages three to five. Ninety percent of enrollments must be families with an income at or below 100% FPL. Foster children are automatically qualified regardless of foster family income. The other 10% of enrollments must be children with an identified delay or disability.

Macoupin County, which has the highest number of young children, houses four of the six Head Start programs. Calhoun County had a Head Start program but recently lost the program due to staffing issues; efforts are underway to set up a new home-based Head Start to replace the program that was lost. Greene County Head Start had to reduce the number of classes they can provide due to a lack of available qualified staff. The Greene County Head Start Site Director explained they are struggling to find teachers, bus drivers, and other staff due to low employee pay and benefits. If a teacher has earned their bachelor’s degree, they will often leave to go to the public school system because starting pay and benefits are well above that of a Head Start teacher.

“Transportation coupled with the income level requirements limits the families that can attend. It’s a losing battle when this Region already struggles with transportation. Then not being able to offer it to accommodate students in the program makes it a downhill slide.

- Head Start Director
(Greene County)

Figure 8: Publicly Funded Program Sites, Ages Served

Publicly Funded Program	Number of Program Sites	Ages Served
Early Head Start	0	Birth to Three
Head Start	6	Three to Five
Preschool for All	18	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	2	Three to Four
Prevention Initiative	8	Birth to Three

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool for All (PFA)

PFA programs, funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), offer high-quality center- or school-based services for children ages three to five to support their Kindergarten readiness. Eligibility is based on multiple factors, including children being “at risk of academic failure” and whose family income is less than four times the FPL. Programs must ensure children with identified disabilities receive services consistent with their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Region 40 has eighteen PFA programs, with one in a child care center in the south of the Region. Many PFA programs are in the eastern portion of the Region while programs in the western, rural portion remain scarce.

Jersey County is the third largest county in the State, so children must travel for access to PFA programs. The newest elementary school, located 22 miles from Jerseyville, is in Grafton and has the largest classroom capacity for PFA enrollment. Of the 180 pre-Kindergarten students that attend Jersey PFA, only 10 of them are from Grafton. To avoid extended times on the bus, the Jerseyville school district buses pre-Kindergarten children from Jerseyville to the Grafton PFA, while bussing the children in the northern part of the Region to the Jerseyville PFA program.

Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E)

PFA-E programs, funded by ISBE, expand full day access to a center- or school-based high-quality early education services. Eligibility is the same for PFA-E and PFA. Multiple factors, such as FPL, and environmental, economic, and demographic barriers are used as indicators to determine priority for enrollment. Region 40 has two PFA-E programs, one in Calhoun County and one in Greene County. Both counties’ PFA-E programs currently have waiting lists for eligible students. Due to its rural location and low availability of Early Intervention (EI) services, Calhoun created a blended classroom with itinerant support services once per week. If this type of arrangement was not in place, a three-and-a-half-year-old student would have to ride a bus for ninety minutes each way to receive services. The shortage of EI specialists and limited transportation options are creating barriers to access for families who seek the support.

Home Visiting

Home visiting programs offer information and referral services, weekly or monthly home visits, and caregiver classes aimed at supporting young families.

The PI program, funded by ISBE, provides services that include child development and education, parent/caregiver education, and family engagement. Eligibility is based on risk factors that limit a child’s academic success, including developmental delays and family income. Region 40’s eight PI programs offer home visiting services (in other Regions, PI offers both home visiting and center-based programming). Parent Educators are responsible for providing developmental educational activities for parents as the child’s first teacher. A Greene County parent educator and Council member reported she is responsible for visiting 17 families one to two times per month for a combined maximum total of 36 visits monthly. There are currently 5 Parent Educators in the Region, each with similar size caseloads with families on the waiting list.

To support pregnant people and young children, the IDHS Division of Early Childhood (DEC) offers three additional home visiting programs at no cost to families in Region 40: state-funded home visiting, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, and Maternal Child Home Visiting (MCHV).

Child Care

Center-based child care typically refers to full-day programs that offer care corresponding to traditional working hours. Although most centers in Region 40 provide care for infants and toddlers, some provide care to those only aged three to five. Some child care centers also care for school-aged children in their after-school programs. Almost all centers are regulated or licensed in some way by the State to ensure health and safety standards, child-staff ratios, and nutrition requirements.

Figure 9: Number of Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Centers and Homes

	Number of Sites
Licensed Child Care Center	7
Licensed Family Care Homes	35
License Exempt Care Center	2

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Child care centers are encouraged to become part of the ExceleRate Illinois program. According to the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), Calhoun and Greene County have child care centers working towards the ExceleRate achievements. Jersey and Macoupin Centers have several programs that have achieved Gold and Silver ExceleRate recognition. Region 40 Family and Action Council members both agreed when families are choosing who they want to care for their children, they put their children in programs with highly qualified personnel.

Licensed child care centers serve families with children from six weeks to 13 years of age and regularly provide care for less than 24 hours per day. All ECEC programs except school district- based programs are licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). There are seven licensed child care centers in Region 40. Three of the counties have only one licensed center, while the fourth county has four. One director shared that the capacity of their program is high but the requirements for staff, as well as the complicated process of receiving and maintaining accreditation, has taken a toll on her mental health; she is ready to shut down. Even though not all parents/caregivers enroll their child in a program (many stay home due to the high cost of care or choose to have a family member take care of their children) there are still long waiting lists for children from six weeks to three years of age, making hard for caregivers to work outside the home.

Licensed family child care homes are family child care providers that care for groups of children in a homelike setting. They may care for up to eight children (including their own), or for up to 12 children with an assistant. Family child care homes are licensed by DCFS and must follow the guidelines. The most recent data shows that Region 40 has 35 licensed family child care homes with the majority located in Macoupin County.

License-exempt child care centers are not required to be licensed by DCFS. These programs often operate in public and private schools, or in churches or religious institutions. According to the most recent data provided by West Central Child Care, the percentage of families receiving child care subsidies (financial support) by type of care is consistently higher for license-exempt child care than for those who use family child care and licensed child care centers.

Slot Gap



A newborn baby and young girl lying down.

Limited program capacity is one of the hurdles families in Region 40 encounter when attempting to enroll their children in ECEC programs and services. Program capacity has many determining factors and is governed by Illinois’ child- and family-serving state agencies; DCFS, IDHS, and ISBE use various measures to calculate the number of children each program can safely and responsibly care for per grant requirements, which subsequently determines the “capacity” of each program. Capacity is finite, and when there are more children interested and eligible for enrollment in ECEC programs than available slots the result is known as the “slot gap”. While a helpful qualitative measure, slot gap does not factor in families who chose not to enroll their children into ECEC programs, thus it does not give the full picture of care available vs. care needed.

Overall slot gap looks at the capacity of licensed child care, licensed family home care, and license-exempt child care centers vs. the number of all children ages birth to five in the Region. It can also be measured by looking at the number of funded slots in publicly funded programs vs. 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.

A defining characteristic of Region 40 is its geographic and demographic landscape. As noted earlier, Region 40 is rural with nearly 75% of children ages five and under living in homes where both caregivers are working but the family remains, by definition, on incomes at poverty levels. Even when caregivers are gainfully employed, families with small children are unable to access affordable ECEC programs. In Region 40, there are 44 child care sites with the capacity to care for 993 children (Figure 10). However, only about a third of that capacity is reserved for children ages birth to two, with the rest reserved for children ages five to 12. Additionally, not all slots are for full-day programs, leaving many families to patch together child care for the duration of the work day among multiple providers.

Figure 10: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

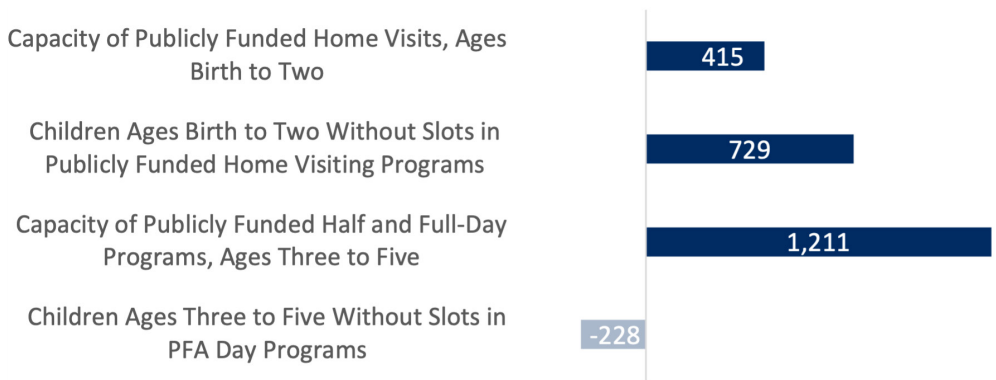
“ The child cares are full, the preschool has a waitlist, and our parents help us out, but it’s very inconvenient, as I work nights. When I get off, I will pick up the kids or leave them at my mom’s and just get a few hours of sleep before I have to pick them up. There aren’t any child cares available on weekends. If I want to see them I have to limit my sleep. If child care were more available, I could work a normal weekday schedule and our family would be able to spend more time together.

- Parent (Greene County)

”

Publicly funded programs for children ages three to five include Head Start (HS), Preschool for All (PFA), and Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E). Data shows that there are 228 more PFA slots available for children ages three to five in Region 40 compared to the number of children who qualify (Figure 11). Unfortunately, the data does not show that PFA programs are only half-day programs. When working families accept a half-day position in a publicly funded program, they then must find child care for the other half of the day. Unfortunately, there is a much larger slot gap for child care, and the availability of full-day care is scarce.

Figure 11: Publicly Funded Capacity and Number of Children Birth to Two and Three to Five³



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ The problem is hiring and retaining qualified staff. If there is not enough staff to meet the demand, then the number of slots ‘truly’ available is less.

- Child Care Center Director (Jersey County)

”

³ Note: -228 indicates that there are more slots than children who live at or below 200% FPL and may qualify for PFA based on income.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The ECEC workforce encompasses a range of professionals across healthcare, early childhood education, mental health, child welfare, and early intervention. Despite differences in specific responsibilities and training, each of these sectors contributes meaningfully to the well-being of children and families, often working with the same families in different contexts. Across these sectors, in Region 40 there are notably four similar challenges this workforce is facing: compensation, retention, burnout, and safety. For this report, the ECEC workforce includes staff in child care centers, Preschool for All classrooms, Head Start centers, and Early Intervention specialists, for a combined total of 319 ECEC professionals.

Interviews with Region 40 ECEC educators revealed the need for more public school certified ECEC educators; schools' positions are often posted for the entire school year without receiving any applicants. A parent from Macoupin County who took time off to care for her children due to lack of child care and became a child care center teacher shared that she is unsure what next steps need to be taken to help faith-based schools receive grants, but her program is in need. They have two fundraisers each year to help support their classroom needs, including an enrichment field trip or activity, and then the students are responsible for bringing snacks for the class once per month.

“ I think it's important for state legislators to know that our young kids are in need. Carlinville public and private pre-K is full, and all have waitlists.

- Teacher (Macoupin County) ”

In Region 40, 81% of children under the age of six live in households where all parents/caregivers are working. Yet, many of our rural towns and villages lack an ECEC workforce. This is more than a family matter; it impacts the communities and the State. The ECEC arena is the foundation of local and state economic health, enabling caregivers to work and financially provide for their families while employing a large workforce of teachers, administrators, and other professionals.

Gaps in the availability of qualified ECEC professionals appear to be widening each year. Currently, Region 40 ECEC directors report the number one barrier is finding and retaining qualified staff.

Low wages, often at or near poverty levels, and benefits (sick and vacation time, health insurance, and retirement) that vary with job type and employer make it difficult to attract and keep experienced staff with higher levels of education. A Region 40 Council member who is also a child care center director shared that she is finding it increasingly difficult to find employees who have the ECE credentials and retain them, as they often continue working towards the bachelor's degree and then go into the public school system for higher salary and benefits. ECEC educators frequently leave centers and family child care homes for positions in public schools with higher wages and benefits for doing the same or similar work.

According to the Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey and the Gateways to Opportunity Registry, Region 40 ECEC workforce professionals are generally underpaid compared to not only peers in other Regions of the State but also in similar fields (Figure 12). The pay gap issue along gender and racial/ethnic lines in Region 40 is difficult to identify due to greater than 90% of the workforce being white females. Nevertheless, the Region 40 ECEC workforce average salary falls below the State's average, with the largest disparity in the child care director position.

Figure 12: Average Salary of ECEC Positions by Region, State

Profession	Average Salary: Region	Average Salary: State
Child care Director	\$26,819	\$41,600
Lead Teacher	\$25,480	\$29,120
Assistant Teacher	\$22,880	\$23,400
Family Child Care	< \$26,000	< \$26,000
Preschool Teacher (Public School)	\$40,000	Starting salary

Source: CCR&R, IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

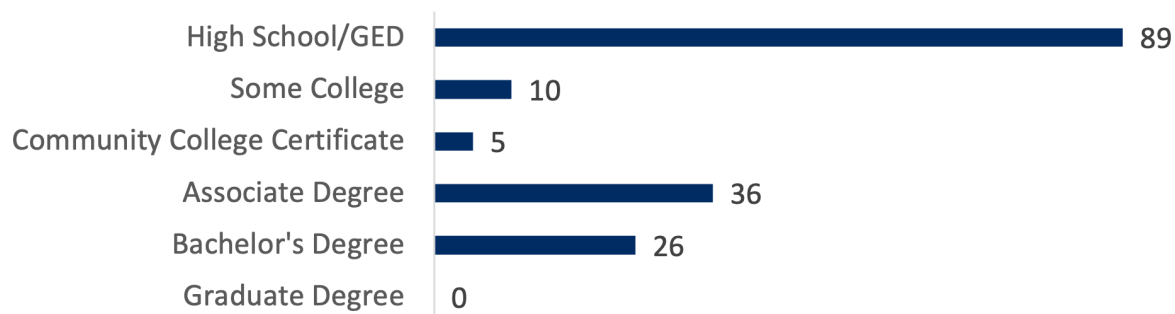
The current ECEC workforce has varied titles, roles, expectations, and requirements. Illinois has established various routes to obtain ECEC certification for those starting in the field, including Gateways to Opportunity. Each level requires child development knowledge and observation or work experience (Figures 13 and 14). Forty-five percent of the Region 40 licensed child care center workforce have attained at least first-level credentials. Of the 45% who have obtained ECE credentialing, 75% have not gone above Level 1. An additional ECE credential is the Infant/Toddler credential; less than 1% of the ECEC child care center workforce in Region 40 has it.

Figure 13: ECE Credential Levels, Education Requirements, ECEC Professionals by Level

ECE Credential Levels	Education Requirements	Number of ECEC Professionals at Level ⁴
Level 1	Completion of 48 hours training through statewide CCR&R	59
Level 2	High School Diploma or GED	5
Level 3	9+ Credit Hours (Math, English, Psychology or Sociology)	
Level 4	Associate Degree or 60+ Hours	8
Level 5	Bachelor's Degree	8
Level 6	Graduate Degree	

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 14: Education of Licensed Child Care Professionals by Educational Attainment



Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: INCCRRA

⁴Data from INCCRRA combined number of professionals at Levels 2 and 3, Levels 5 and 6.

An additional pathway is through the recently developed ECEC Accelerator Program, which provides those with an associate degree with the ability to obtain a bachelor's degree and sit for the Public Educator Licensing Exam. Upon successful completion of the program and exam, the person is eligible to apply for, and teach in, the public-school systems, grades pre-school through second. Region 40 has an ECEC Accelerator Program housed at Blackburn College in Macoupin County. The local community college is offering an ECEC associate degree at no cost, but not many students have applied.

“ We have been able to help with the public education teacher shortage, but we have in turn created a shortage in the ECEC child care center staff.

- Professor in ECEC Accelerator Program ”

“ Over 50% of the students in the program decide not to go into ECEC because of low compensation, amount of paperwork required to start a licensed center, and the excessive wait time for approval. Students are making more money waitressing and have less stress.

- Community College Program Director ”

During community outreach it was discovered that both ECEC professionals and families are experiencing primary and secondary trauma that can have negative physical, mental, and professional impacts. Because of the lack of health insurance benefits, ECEC educators are unable to access mental health services. As a result, ECEC directors and teachers are feeling burned out and requesting days off work, which impacts family access to programs, quality, and child well-being. Providers and families shared these challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and they are experiencing difficulties navigating the complexities of the last several years.

As Region 40 community groups and agencies continue work to attract new businesses and young families, state and local officials must prioritize strategies to attract, retain, and support a strong ECEC workforce for children birth to age five. A myriad of short- and long-term benefits result from high-quality early learning experiences, and an effective, consistent, diverse, and skilled workforce is the key driver of quality. It is essential ECEC educators have the skills needed to develop strong relationships with young children, to provide experiences that are supportive of their development and learning, and to equitably serve children from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, it is important to understand Region 40's ECEC workforce, as support for our early educators requires coordination at the program/institution and state/systems levels. Elevating ECEC workforce voices as well as the families impacted will help to honor the existing and future workforce to ensure they are well-prepared, diverse, effective, and well-compensated.

“ There is already a staff shortage which in turn means I have to cover in the kitchen, classrooms, and be a janitor all in one day. It is beginning to take its toll on me and how I interact with my students and families.

- Child Care Professional (Jersey County) ”

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice



Two adults and two children enjoying an afternoon on a bench.

Family members are their child's most important teachers, and through positive early interactions with ECEC programs and services, they can create an environment that promotes success in learning and life. In Region 40, public and private ECEC programs are bringing parents and caregivers into classroom activities, using culturally responsive communication, extending classroom-to-home activities, and offering child-development workshops for families.

Region 40 parents and caregivers shared that they attend school events, such as parent-teacher conferences, plays, and class presentations, and chaperone field trips to stay involved, yet barriers still exist for many families. The most common barriers Region 40 families face with program engagement include lack of transportation, lack of alternate child care, lack of localized specialized services, and lack of overall awareness of available opportunities.

Accessibility to Transportation

To get the most from ECEC programs, it is important that families are actively engaged. However, because Region 40 is rural and covers a large geographic area, families struggle to find and visit conveniently located providers and programs. Those with personal vehicles are adversely affected by rising gas prices, while those without personal vehicles must rely on school buses to transport their child to and from school. Caregivers shared their frustration with the need for public transportation to assist in getting to other child care services, such as doctor appointments, therapies, parent workshops, library story times, and other activities outside of the regular ECEC program. For those without a personal vehicle, traveling to these events can be burdensome.

Each family views their experiences in ECEC differently and each has their own needs and priorities. In the educational system, access is commonly defined as the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure, or at least strive to ensure, that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. There are many factors that can increase or decrease the level of accessibility that parents, families, and caregivers have. Additionally, access also includes involvement and engagement.

“

I feel like we are a family. My child's teacher is in constant communication, and we are working towards the same goal – what is best for my child and our family.

- Caregiver (Macoupin County)

”

“

Our 3-year-old grandson goes to Head Start. It runs from 8:00a.m.-2:00p.m. each day, but there isn't any transportation. Head Start used to have a bus route, but now they do not due to not having a driver. Lack of transportation can be tricky for our family situation and sometimes our son has to miss school.

- Grandparent Raising Grandchild

”

Accessing ECEC Programs

Region 40 families find that licensed child care is not available where they live, too expensive, or at capacity for the number of qualified staff. Due to the rural landscape, families must rely on jobs outside of the Region that may only offer swing shifts, require mandated overtime, or nontraditional hours. To add to the burden of lack of availability and affordability, caregivers reported that child care offered outside of the normal work day are nonexistent.

Family Council members discussed at length that when families find out they are pregnant they must immediately request to be put on a waiting list, but often do not secure a placement when the baby is born.

“As soon as we found out we were expecting our third child, I called the local child care center and asked to be put on the waiting list. Our son just turned 3 last month and we have yet to receive a call for availability. As we continue to wait, he stays with a grandparent 2 days a week, stays with one friend of the family 1 day a week, and then stays with another family friend 1 day a week. My husband has every Friday off and can stay home. These day-to-day arrangements become difficult if any one of the providers is not able to watch him.

- Parent of Three-Year-Old Boy

Even if a family gets a spot in a program, cost creates barriers to enrollment. A middle-class family does not always qualify for free ECEC programs, such as PFA, PFA-E, PI, and/or Head Start. If family income does not meet a program's eligibility criteria, the family may not be able to afford the service. Even if a family qualifies for free ECEC programs, the limited number of full-day programs creates additional transportation challenges.

Accessibility to Specialized Services

Many families are not aware of services for which their child may qualify until they gain access to a program. A Greene County parent of a two and half-year-old said that through the Prevention Initiative program she not only learned her child needed specialized services but was also provided with information on additional resources to assist in getting her child to the specialized services.

“Stuff is very expensive and even though we both work, the amount of assistance we receive is just not enough. To add to that, it's not like child cares are open for parents that work swing shifts at factories, or even a 10:00a.m.-7:00p.m. shift like my wife works at Walmart.

- Grandfather Raising Grandchild

“Our granddaughter didn't qualify for public school pre-K, so this put a damper on us for child care, as it would have taken care of our sitter situation for half of the day. Without being in pre-K our granddaughter was missing out on many opportunities to interact with other children because right now it's just us with her. She needs to be around younger kids.

- Grandparent Raising Children (Jersey County)

“I didn't realize I could get help from other places for my child's medical transportation. I have already exhausted the gas card support that Bright Futures has in place and was considering dropping an appointment for my son because I don't have the money to take him there.

- Parent (Greene County)

According to members of the Family and Action Councils, many caregivers are opting to take their children to private specialists due to the lengthy wait times for referrals, evaluations, and placements. Additionally, preschool teachers, directors, principals, school superintendents, and Early Interventionists all spoke of the need for more Early Childhood Special Education services. They discussed the lack of push-in and pull-out services, meaning that students were not getting their needs met either in a blended or a special education classroom.

Awareness of ECEC Programs and Services

The need for a better understanding of early childhood development is not limited to ECEC providers. Family Council members shared their lack of understanding of their own child's development and the need for more information about Region 40's ECEC programs and services. Families not participating in ECEC programs said they lean on family, friends, and the internet to learn about child development. During interviews with parents and caregivers, they repeatedly said navigating the system was complicated and they needed assistance through the process. They were thankful for the home visiting programs in helping them understand how the programs work.

“

We live in one of the most rural areas of the County. My child, who is three and half years old and needs special services, has to ride a bus up to 75 minutes one way to attend the type of classroom that fits her best.

- Parent of Child with Specialized Needs and Care

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When I moved here from Las Vegas I only knew about WIC and Link and that I needed to go to the Health Department for those programs. I did not know about PFA, PFA-E, PI, Head Start, or other programs because they were not advertised. I feel it is important that we work towards informing our community about ECEC programs and how families can become involved.

- Family Council Member

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Children learn anywhere, anytime, and not just in school. Families and communities of Region 40 have a shared responsibility to foster involvement and engagement opportunities that will benefit society, which includes advocating for their and other's children to gain the knowledge and skills needed for the workforce, civic duty, community life, and lifelong learning. This process begins with high-quality ECEC services, frequent home visits, and family engagement from birth to the first few years of school, as needed or desired by families. Programs in Region 40 state they have been working towards these goals and continue to grow each year through community resources, local businesses, and family partnerships.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed Region 40 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may provide better support to providers.

Strengths

- ECEC staff are enthusiastic about their work and able to share resources.
- Two new centers, one in Greenfield and one in Jerseyville, have applied for licensing with DCFS.
- Library offerings target early childhood educational programs, such as Move and Groove music time, weekly story times with engagement activities, and summer programs.
- Tracy Family Foundation provides grant funding for Greene and Calhoun Counties to support ECEC Collaborations and programs.
- Health departments are communicating across the Region.
- Blackburn College, a four-year college in our Region, is offering the accelerated Teacher Licensure Program in Macoupin County.
- Lewis and Clark Community College is offering an early childhood development program that includes a class to assist graduated students in navigating the business side of child care.
- The PI, PFA, and PFA-E programs within our public-school districts are providing continuity so we know the children receiving services and who will be coming into the program.
- Child care center and preschool programs are being fully utilized.
- The Region is starting to recognize and support the need for mental health services for all ages.

Needs

- More accessible and affordable child care for all families.
- Affordable and viable transportation for ECEC programs.
- Local specialized services, such as therapists and mental health providers, to meet the needs of children, families, and providers.
- Readily available ECEC mental health services for children, families, and providers.
- ECEC system and programs that are easy to navigate.

Recommendations

The Region 40 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.

- Form a way to attract, prepare, support, and retain staff in the ECEC workforce.
- Secure accessible, affordable, and viable transportation for all children in public and private programs. Transportation should include services outside of the ECEC sector, such as to doctor appointments, therapies, court hearings, etc.
- Access to local specialized services. Children that have been identified or need to be identified by professionals for specialized services should have access to affordable services within their community.
- Region 40 should have early childhood mental health counselors and consultants readily available for both children and families.
- Encourage the small Local Community Collaborations to branch out and form whole region Collaboration. The Collaborations would have an intentional focus on promoting increased awareness of the positive impact of ECEC programs, as well as available programs and services.

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

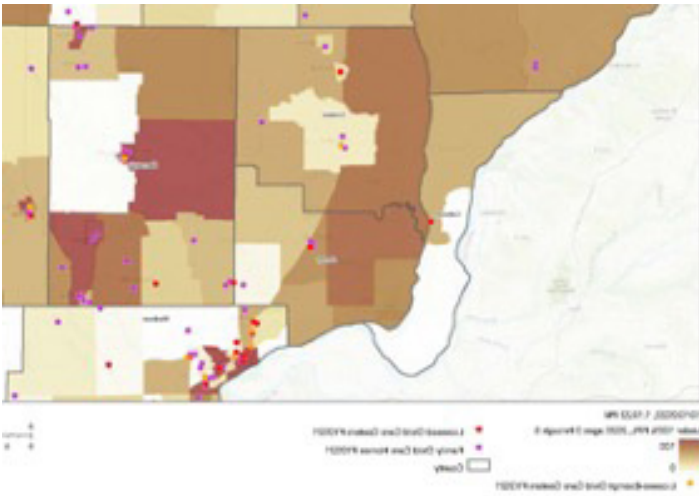
Appendices

Appendix A: References

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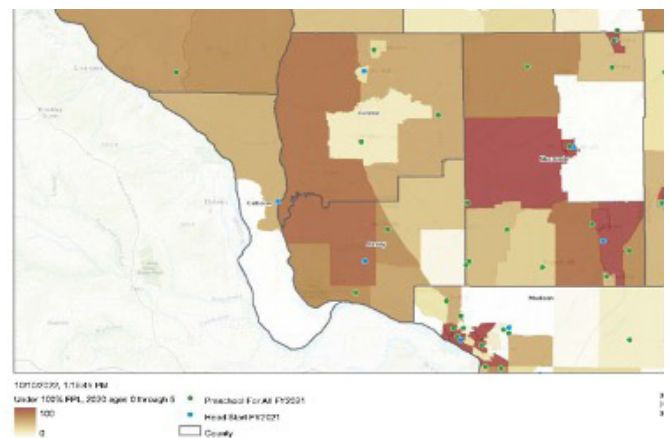
Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: Location of Children at or Below 100% FPL, Licensed Child Care



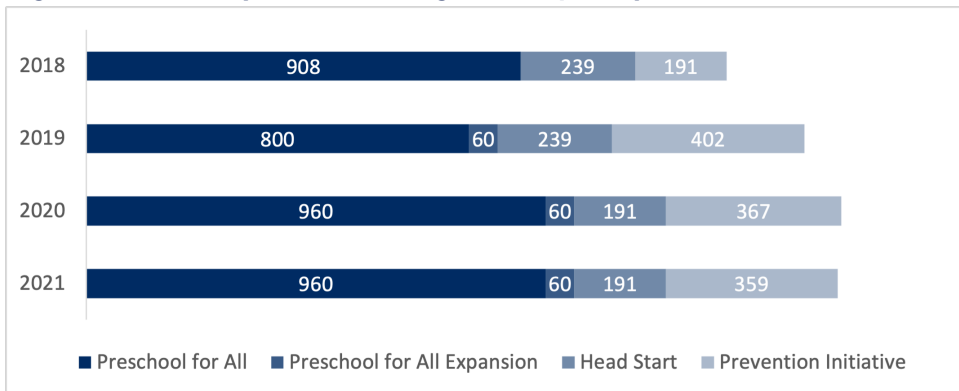
Source: IECAM
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Figure 2: Location of Children at or Below 100% FPL, Publicly Funded Programs



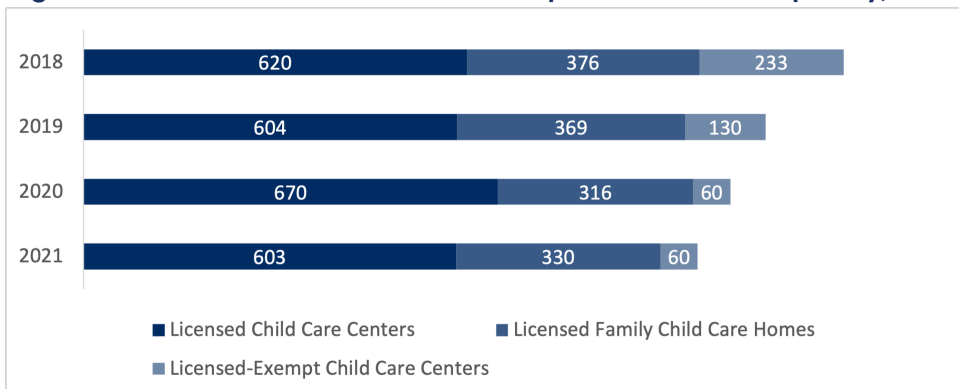
Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 3: Publicly Funded Program Capacity, 2017-2021



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 4: Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Capacity, 2017-2021



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

Parents, Families, 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 Others

1. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
2. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
3. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
4. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
5. Is 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 these accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

Appendix D: Additional Resources

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

1. Head Start Data: https://www.ilheadstart.org/illinois_head_start_data_dashb.php

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