



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 44
(McHenry County)





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Region 44 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.

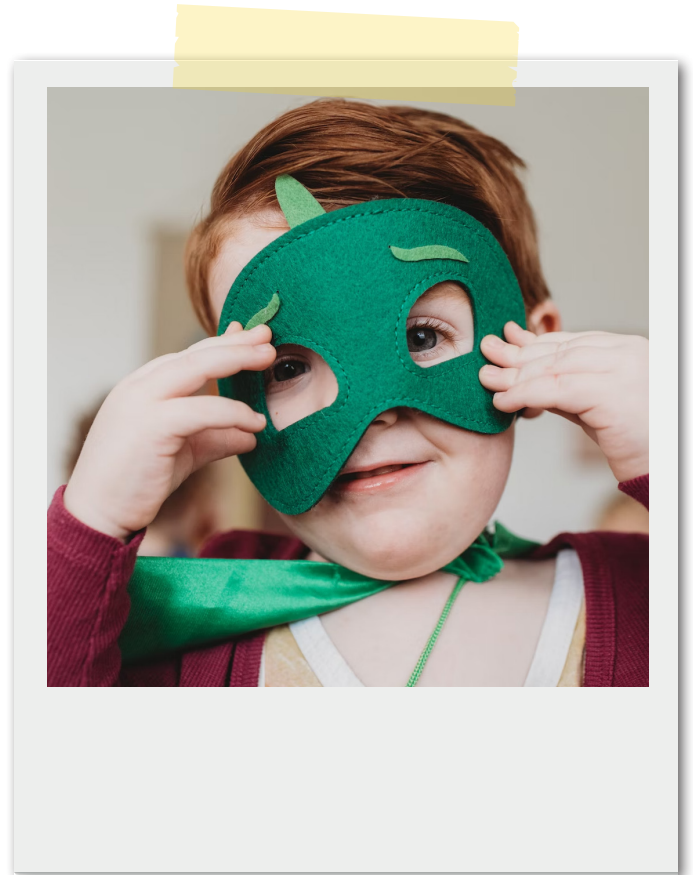
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 44 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

Key findings for Region 44 include the need for community education on the importance of ECEC, building and sustaining the ECEC workforce, and increasing funding for ECEC programs. Community education is a step in building up the ECEC workforce, as every ECEC professional who was spoken with said that they do not feel it is a respected profession and that is a reason why some people leave. Another reason why they leave is the lack of pay and benefits. Providers shared that if there was a pipeline and salary incentives to become teacher and director qualified, this would help tremendously. The ECEC workforce is vital to the economy; as one community member said, "We can't open the economy until we open day care centers."

Other key findings are that families need a central hub to connect them to services that could meet the needs of their child and they also need transportation to services. Too many times families are turning down ECEC services that their children are eligible for because they do not have transportation to get them to



and from the services, or the program is not full-day, or there is no transportation to take the children back and forth to a community-based program that is full day. This leads parents to sometimes choose between services their children need or working full time.

Region 44 Needs

1. Community awareness of the importance of ECEC programs and child development
2. Central hub for families to get information on ECEC services
3. Build the ECEC workforce
4. Transportation for ECEC programs
5. Dedicated funding for ECEC programs

Region 44 Recommendations

1. Ongoing community education on the importance and availability of ECEC programs
2. Coordinated intake for families to connect them to needed programs within the Region
3. Pipelines to become teacher and director qualified and incentives to continue education with more regulations on salaries and benefits
4. Transportation to and from publicly funded programs and child care programs
5. Funding for building costs and upkeep that won't affect the ECEC program's budgets

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

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REGION 44 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.



17,613

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 44



3,776

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



2,165

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

11,773

Number of children ages birth to five without a slot in licensed or license-exempt child care centers and homes

“We know so much more now about Early Childhood. We not only teach them academic skills, but social emotional skills, as well as self help skills. We have evolved as a profession. We just need the general public to evolve along with us.” - Child Care Employee

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 44 NEEDS

1. Community education about available ECEC programs and services
2. A central hub for families to find resources and support
3. Increase the number of ECEC professionals
4. Transportation to and from ECEC programs

REGION 44 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ongoing education on the importance of ECEC programs
2. Coordinated Intake to connect families to their needs locally
3. Streamlined process for qualifications and incentives to continue ECEC education with more regulations on salaries and benefits
4. Transportation for publicly funded programs to child care programs
5. Funding for building costs and upkeep that will not impact budget



"We need legislators to make it [ECEC] a priority. We can't open the economy until we open slots in day care centers. People can't go to work because they have to take care of their kids." - Parent

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.

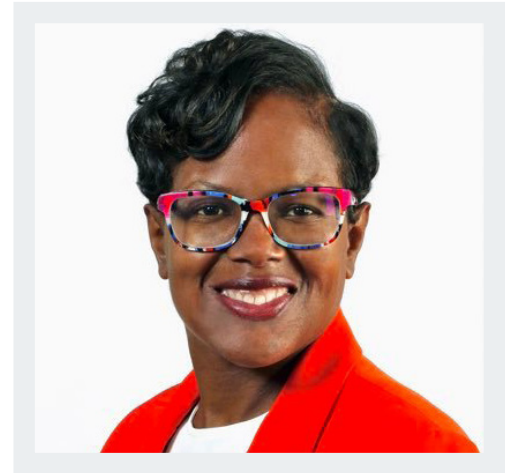
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

Many people have helped with the development of this Regional Needs Assessment. Although we cannot thank each person individually, this Needs Assessment would not have been able to be completed without the help of the community in Region 44. We would also like to thank the State Team of Birth to Five Illinois who helped support each Region with their knowledge and skills.

I want to thank our Action Council, comprised of experts in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The Action Council brought issues to the table as well as discussions on the strengths our Region holds. It was in the Action Council meetings that data was able to be thoroughly examined and the members were open about what their agencies see as needs for our Region.

I also want to thank our Family Council, which is comprised of parents and families in the Region who had children under the age of eight. Members of our Family Council come from different areas in our Region and brought unique perspectives to the table as parents and family members navigating the ECEC system in Region 44. The Family Council was able to give us feedback, raise concerns, and advocate for family needs.

There were many other important voices in this Regional Needs Assessment that we would like to thank. Thank you to everyone who participated in focus groups from the towns of Huntley, Woodstock, and McHenry. Thank you to those who participated in one-on-one interviews or took part in the online survey from the towns of Woodstock, McHenry, Harvard, Lake in the Hills, Huntley, Wonder Lake, and Crystal Lake. Lastly, we would like to thank those agencies who spoke with us and gave us feedback. The agencies we spoke with represented many different voices in the community including public health, libraries, those that work with children with disabilities, those that work with families experiencing homelessness, the faith community, and those that offer caregiver support.

Our goal was to gain insight from as many diverse voices as we could. Through these methods, we were able to gain a greater understanding of what the community needs and strengths are regarding ECEC. This would not have been possible without those who trusted us enough to speak about their own personal journeys.

Thank you,

Nicole Davis (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 44
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.

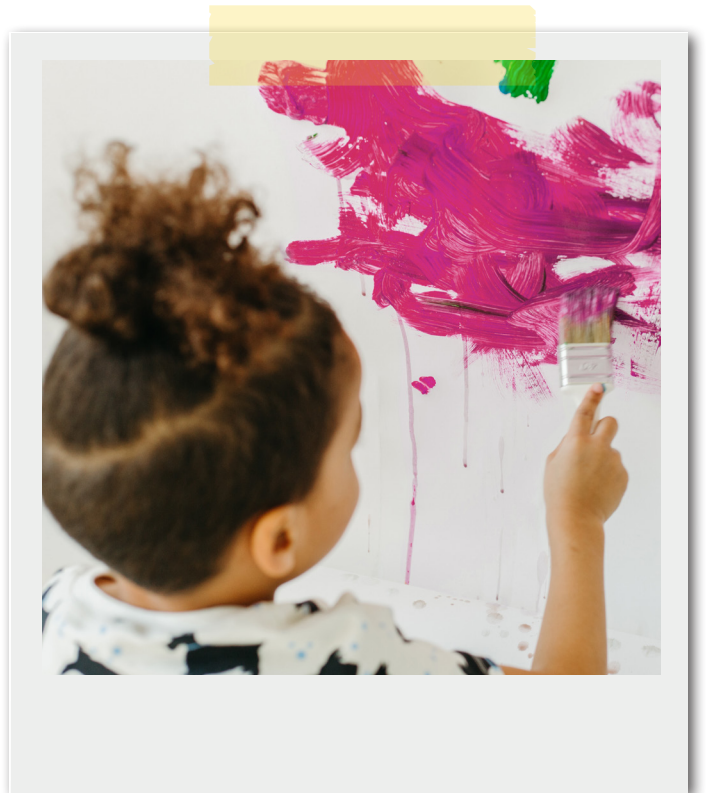
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

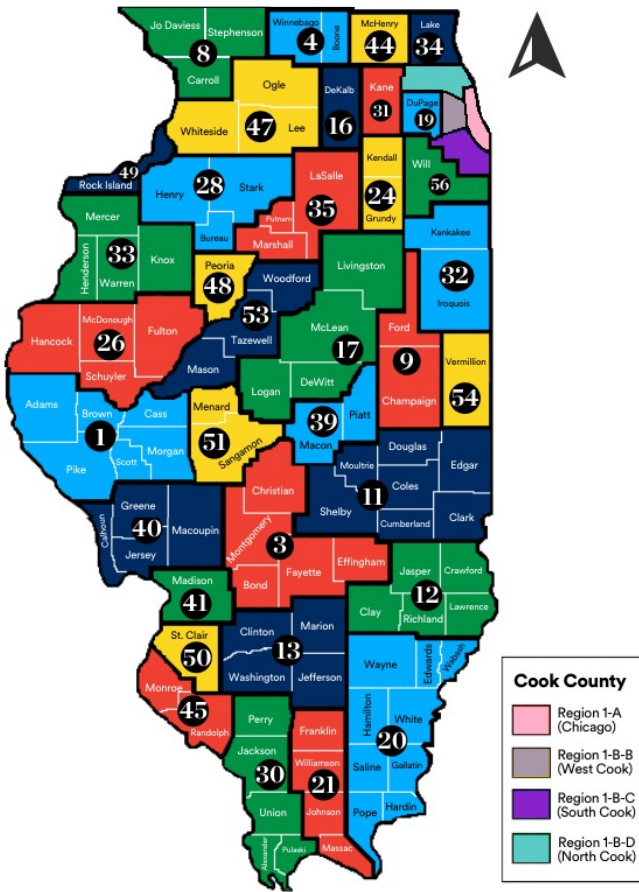


Timeline

- **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.

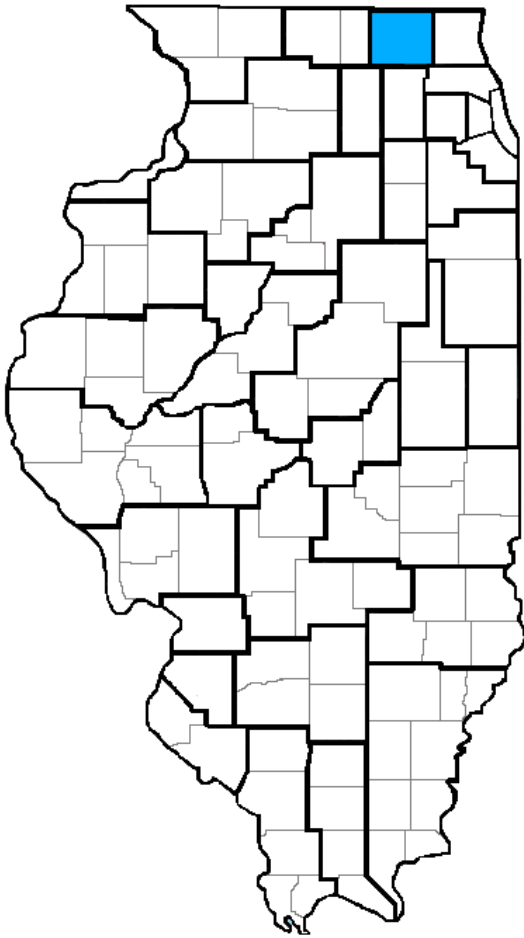
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 44

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

According to the 2020 Census, McHenry County had a population of 310,229 people, making it the sixth most populous county in Illinois. McHenry County is about 50 miles northwest of Chicago and borders Wisconsin. The largest cities in the Region are Crystal Lake, Lake in the Hills, and McHenry, with a combined population of over 95,000.

McHenry County is between Kane and Lake County, with its own unique landscape. The people who live in McHenry County enjoy busy suburban life, while also being able to enjoy the slower pace of rural life with ample opportunities to walk through conservation districts, along rivers, and take in local wildlife.

The largest employers in McHenry County include Northwestern Medicine, Follett Library Resources, Inc., Follett Software Co., and School Districts 47 and 158, which serve over 50,000 students a year. The Region has access to the Metra and the Pace bus by appointment. The governmental center for McHenry County is in Woodstock, which is best known for being the location of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray. The town of Crystal Lake houses McHenry County College along with Columbia College of Missouri.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 44 acknowledges that McHenry County is the traditional homelands of the Peoria Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Hoocak (Ho-Chunk), and Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Territories. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Region.

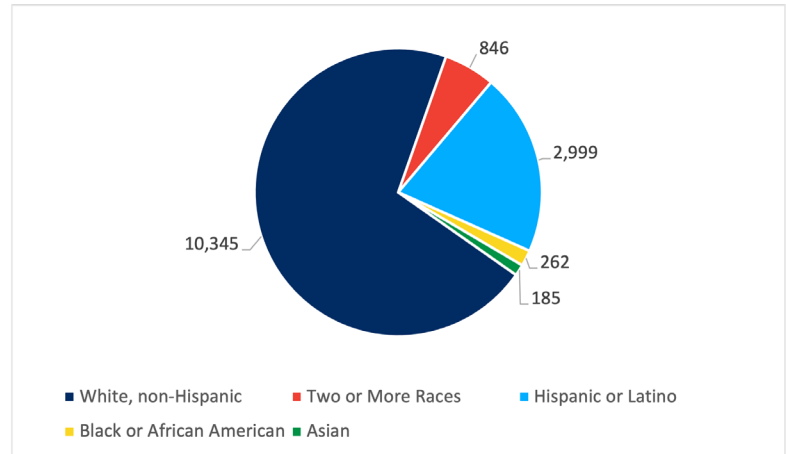
“ I think McHenry County has a small-town feel... Unique in that it feels small, but we can hop on a train and go to Chicago or jump up to Wisconsin in a matter of minutes. I think it is a good location all around.
- Community Member ”

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

Regional Demographics

There are 310,229 people living in Region 44, including 17,613 children under the age of six. While most of the children birth to age five are white, there is a growing racial and ethnic diversity in the Region (Figure 1). The diversity also extends to native language, which has been increasing in recent years. In 2020, there was an estimated 103,317 households in the Region and while most households listed English as their primary language, 1,294 primarily speak Spanish and 732 speak another language. Additionally, there were 542 Kindergarteners identified as speaking limited English in school districts within the Region. Compared to other Regions, this data may not seem especially high but, according to feedback received from local service agencies, it is suggested that the Hispanic/Latine population is higher than the 2020 Census data cites. There are also pockets in Region 44 where Spanish-speaking families primarily live, like Harvard and Woodstock.

Figure 1: Regional Racial and Ethnic Demographics



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Priority populations are twelve demographic groups identified by the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC)² based on criteria determining they are distinctive, timely, measurable, underserved, and who face significant systemic barriers. The priority populations within the Region are children of underage parents, children experiencing homelessness, children in families living on poverty-level or deep poverty-level income, children with disabilities, and families that face barriers based on culture and language. 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.

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. Families who live at or below 100% FPL are considered to be living “in poverty” by federal and state guidelines; families who live at or below 50% FPL are considered to be living in deep poverty, and children in households with income at or below 200% FPL are considered to be “low income.” Figure 2 shows an example of different FPL income bands for a family of four.

Figure 2: Federal Poverty Levels at 50%, 100%, 185%, 200% for a Family of Four

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

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

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

In 2020, there were 18 children in Kindergarten that were experiencing homelessness. It is important to understand the economic needs of the Region, especially children and families who live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), because these are the families who often need access to publicly funded ECEC programs. The number of children living at or below 100% and 200% FPL in Region 44 is shown in Figure 3. Community members have stated the importance of understanding FPL due to the high cost of child care and the scarcity of available subsidized care options for families.

Figure 3: Number of Children Ages Birth to Five at 100% and 200% FPL

	Number of children birth to five at or below 100% FPL	Number of children birth to five at or below 200% FPL
Region 44	1,585	3,776

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

In 2020, there were 2,990 births, with 73 babies born to teenagers ages 19 and under. There is a support group in the Region for underage parents called Teenage Mother’s Initiative (TAMI). They serve all expectant and parenting teens regardless of gender and provide group classes as well as one-on-one or two-on-one (depending on if both parents are involved) crisis case management and resource and referral services. TAMI is meant to be a short-term service to help underage parents tap into the numerous services for young parents in our county. Additionally, they make internal referrals for therapy services. One of our Region’s priority populations, underage parents, often need child care to continue schooling, and often qualify for other publicly funded programs within the ECEC system.

There were also 1,436 children that had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in 2020, with 1,039 of those children ages three to five and 397 of those children in Kindergarten. Children with IEPs often need other ECEC services in addition to child care, such as Early Intervention (EI), Preschool For All (PFA), Head Start (HS), and/or the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Unfortunately, as many community members have said, there are often not enough wrap-around services available to children who have been assessed as having a disability or who have been referred for services.

“We can’t open the economy until we open the child care centers. People can’t go to work because they have to take care of their kids and they can’t afford child care.”
-Community Member

We are finding that not all the ECEC services a family or child needs are able to be accessed in McHenry County for a variety of reasons, including lack of awareness that the program exists, transportation, staffing shortage, and affordability. The Region is growing in population, as well as racial and ethnic diversity. Unfortunately, ECEC programs and services are not able to keep up with the demand. Understanding who lives in the Region will help policymakers, funders, and community stakeholders focus on building supports for families that are accessible, affordable, and equitable for all.

“I still feel like low-income families are still at a disadvantage even with 4-C (CCAP) assistance, which is amazing. But you get a center, and they are charging the co-pay, charging the difference (in tuition), it’s not reasonable. I have a parent right now with zero income. Her CCAP co-pay is \$1/month, which is doable. But then she got the bill from the child care center and it was \$385 for two weeks with the registration fee and weekly fees for two kids. How can a parent with no income go back to work to earn an income and be expected to afford \$385?”
-Community Organization Staff

“Kids who test and qualify go into the schools for services, but it’s not ‘day’ care. It’s half-day and they still need care afterwards.”
-Parent

Local Community Collaborations

One integral part of the Early Childhood landscape is Local Community Collaborations. According to the Partner Plan Act (PPA) website, a local Early Childhood Community Collaboration is when communities develop local partnerships to help enhance the lives of young children and families, and to ensure the healthy growth and development of Illinois' youngest learners. In Region 44, there are currently not any official Community Collaborations, but conversations with Council members, community stakeholders, and caregivers have confirmed the need for an Early Childhood Collaboration to serve families and children in the Region.



Local community event, 2023.

An All Our Kids (AOK) network is described on the PPA website as communities that connect and coordinate services across sectors of the early childhood system, including health care, mental health services, early learning and care, family supports, and more. Region 44 previously had an AOK network, but this was not a federally funded program and not all the requirements were met due to lack of funding. Although the Region no longer has any official Collaborations, there is an Early Childhood Network that meets every three months. This network works to ensure that every child in the Region has access to regular developmental screenings while also working with parents and families to teach them developmental milestones and available support systems.

The Region 44 Action Council and local agencies stated that collaboration is needed for our Region. The Action Council has brainstormed the benefits and ideal stakeholders while community members stated the importance of including workers from child care centers, the park district, a hospital, a public school, as well as local businesses, resale shops, play places, early intervention, and pediatricians. The Action Council concluded that if our Region had a Collaboration, it would benefit the community by connecting families with services, create and provide an ECEC directory, as well as host events such as toy drives, kindness closets, food, and clothing drives, and play groups.

“ I have had a positive Early Intervention experience. My child wasn't terrified of going to Kindergarten. - Community Member ”

“ 4-C (the CCR&R) surveys annually about each center in McHenry County; very valuable but we need collaborations with other agencies in the same industry. -Child Care Director ”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC programs, which include licensed child care, licensed family child care, license-exempt child care centers, as well as publicly funded Early Childhood programs and services, offer critical support to families. Unfortunately, some of the Region has very limited ECEC options, if any at all, as shown in Figure 4. Most child cares centers are clustered in the southeast portion of the Region. There are some child cares in the middle and northeast of the Region and very few, if any, in the western and northern part of the Region.

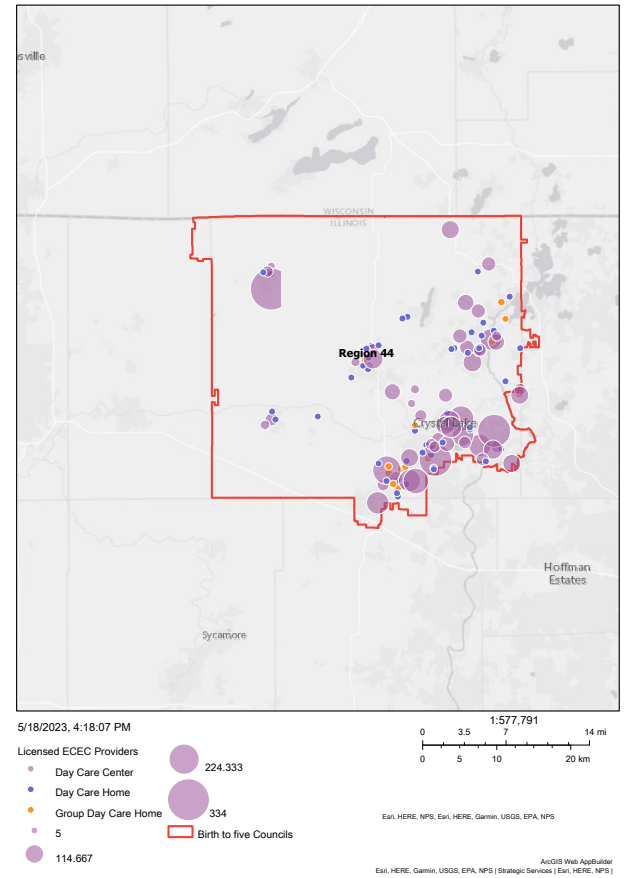
“ I woke up by 5 o'clock in the morning because that is when the summer camp window opened for my son here. And I was like 4:59pm logging in to make sure he got a spot. ”
 - Caregiver

The Region has 48 licensed child care centers and 62 licensed family child care sites (Figure 5). Licensed programs are monitored by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and are required to complete training and education to maintain their licensing status. There are also eight license-exempt child care centers that have further restrictions on the number of children they can have in their care, as well as registration and training requirements, and are monitored by DCFS.

Few child care programs offer evening and weekend care so families often cannot find care to meet their schedule. This is one of the reasons that families turn to license-exempt child care homes or Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care. There are 25 license-exempt child care homes in the Region. Care is limited to no more than three children under the age of 12 or care only for children from a single household. The three children to whom this exemption applies include the family’s natural or adopted children and any other persons under the age of 12 whether related or unrelated to the operator of the child care home.³ FFN care is not regulated by DCFS. If the home is caring for more than three children under the age of twelve (unless the children are all from the same household), including their own children, it is an “unlicensed” facility that would be asked to cease operation or become licensed. at a capacity that would not require a license, or the facility would be required to obtain a license.⁴

³ <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/>
⁴ www.sunshine.dcf.illinois.gov

Figure 4: Early Childhood Education & Care Locations



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

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

	Number of Sites
Licensed child care centers	48
Licensed family child care centers	62
License-exempt child care centers	8
License-exempt child care homes	25

Source: IECAM, DCFS
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ There are limited centers in parts of the county; Harvard has one, Marengo has none. Yet these towns have many children and I’m sure they are growing.
-Parent & ECEC Staff ”

Region 44 has high-quality ECEC programs for children and families, but they cannot meet the needs of the current and incoming families. As towns in the Region have grown in population and size, the number of child care options have largely remained the same, leaving families of young children on long waitlists, and families not knowing how to access information about ECEC services in their area.

Some parts of the Region have many programs to choose from, but the programs are full, or the centers are not able to fill the vacancies due to a lack of staff to open empty classrooms. Additionally, many families simply do not know where to even begin to look for services, especially if their child qualifies for publicly funded child care or needs enrolled in a Prevention Initiative program.



Play time with children.

Region 44 has access to funding sources that help support families that utilize some ECEC services. The Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency in the Region supports families with the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). CCAP gives financial assistance to help pay for child care services to those families that qualify based on income and family size. CCAP has two primary goals:

- To support income-eligible families by providing child care subsidies. This allows parents and caregivers to maintain employment or educational activities, thereby decreasing dependence on public assistance.
- To allow families access to multiple options for affordable, quality child care, early education, and after school programs that offer children the opportunity to grow, learn, and be cared for in safe, nurturing settings that are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

CCAP is available to families who have a child enrolled in licensed or license-exempt care. Across the Region, 35 licensed child care centers, 34 licensed family child care centers, and 8 license-exempt child care centers that accept CCAP. According to IECAM, 438 children who are ages birth to two and 583 children ages three to five used CCAP in 2021.

Other financial aid opportunities in the Region include grants that ECEC programs can apply for through agencies such as United Way, INCCRRA, or the government. Some centers offer scholarships, while the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) covers employment-related child care for foster parents, parenting youth-in-care that are attending school and/or working (up to the their 21st birthday), and Protective/Family Maintenance child care for unemployed, foster parents with a disability, and intact families engaged in services and Family Reunification (for a period of six months from the date that the child returns home to their parent).⁵ Additionally, the Region’s CCR&R recently received a grant to give families a temporary scholarship to help cover the cost of child care for families that either just miss the income cut off for receiving CCAP or to further support families in situations such as experiencing homelessness.

⁵<https://dcfs.illinois.gov/>

Within the Region there are six publicly funded Early Childhood Education programs: Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE), Prevention Initiative (PI), and Home Visiting programs. Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide comprehensive services to support the mental, social, and emotional development of children from birth to age five. In addition to education services, programs provide children and their families with health, nutrition, social, and other services. Head Start services are responsive to each child and family’s ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage.

Head Start encourages the role of parents as their child’s first and most important teachers. Programs build relationships with families that support positive parent-child relationships, family well-being, and connections to peers and community. Head Start programs are located in Crystal Lake, Harvard, and McHenry. Region 44 does not have any Early Head Starts,

Figure 6: Number of Publicly Funded Sites and Ages Served

Program Name	Number of Sites	Ages Served
Head Start	3	Three to Five
Early Head Start	0	Two to Three
Preschool for All	9	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	1	Three to Four
Prevention Intervention	6	Birth to Three
Home Visiting	-	Birth to Five

Source: IECAM, DCFS
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

so this service is only available to families in the Region with children ages three to five. Families who receive public assistance (TANF, SSI, or SNAP), and those with children in foster care or children who are experiencing homelessness also qualify regardless of income.⁶

For children ages three and four, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) provides funding for Preschool For All (PFA) and Preschool For All Expansion (PFAE). Region 44 has PFA programs in Marengo, Harvard, Hebron, Woodstock, Island Lake, Ringwood, Cary, and Lake in the Hills. Bigger towns like Crystal Lake, McHenry, Algonquin, and Huntley have none. The long-term goal of PFA and PFAE programs is to provide educational services to all three- and four-year-old children whose families choose to participate. The program focuses on providing high-quality educational programs for children who are considered to be “at risk of academic failure.” It also provides funding for programs serving families living at or below 50% or 100% FPL whose children may face challenges academically, and other families that choose to participate.

There are additional, non-care options available for children ages birth to three:

- Prevention Initiative programs, which are funded by ISBE and offer supports to expecting parents and families with infants and toddlers who may face challenges academically.
- Home Visiting programs, which are funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services-Division of Early Childhood (IDHS-DEC) and serves pregnant persons and children ages birth to five who live in communities that have been identified as potentially having greater barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes. Prevention Initiative programs may include home or personal visits, connecting families to community resources or group supports, development or behavioral screenings, and may take place in a child care center, family literacy setting, or home setting. There are six Prevention Initiative sites throughout the Region, with a total proposed capacity of 304 children. Region 44 has PI programs in Crystal Lake, Woodstock, Harvard, and Hebron, which leaves lots of areas without, including the entire southeast portion of the Region.

Home Visiting programs include Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), IDHS Healthy Families Illinois (HFI), and IDHS Parents Too Soon (PTS) supports. At the time of publishing this report, Region 44 did not have any of these publicly funded programs.

⁶ <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/how-apply>

While there are child care programs throughout the Region, some families who want or need to utilize care are unable to due to a lack of transportation to get children to and from publicly funded programs. Additionally, there are no full-day, publicly funded programs, meaning caregivers that qualify for publicly funded programs and need full-time care must find multiple programs and then figure out how to transport the child to, from, and in-between them. Families that need overnight or weekend care are often left with very few or no options for care. There are also very few multilingual ECEC programs and services, leaving some families without providers that can provide adequate support to those whose primary language is not English. Some caregivers raised concerns that while Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care has steadily grown and is utilized by many, it is not as closely monitored as licensed or license-exempt care.

It is important to understand the programs available to families in the Region and the challenges they have in accessing care and services. Additionally, it is important to understand how the licensed and funded capacity of Early Childhood programs impacts families and highlight how slot gaps can be a barrier to accessing high-quality, affordable care for families who want or need child care.

“ I’ve always used neighbors for care. My original provider moved away and the next one did not have a lot of interaction teaching the children, so I had to move on again and find someone new. ”

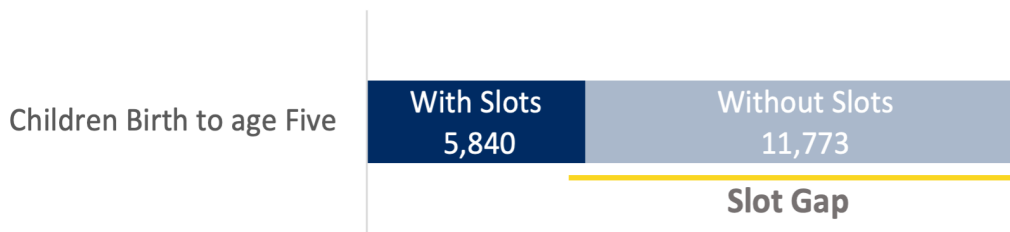
-Community Member

Slot Gap

A slot gap is the difference between the capacity (or slots) a child care program has and the number of children who qualify for enrollment in the program. This can be measured for overall child care capacity, which includes the number of children who can attend a licensed child care center, licensed family, and family child care home, or a license-exempt child care center.

Region 44 has different child care options for families, including licensed child care centers, licensed family child care, and license-exempt child care centers. However, with 17,613 children under the age of 6 and only a combined capacity of 5,840 slots available at child care sites, this creates our slot gap of 11,773 children. This means that 11,773 children do not have access to a spot in a licensed child care center, licensed child care home, or a license-exempt child care center (Figure 7)

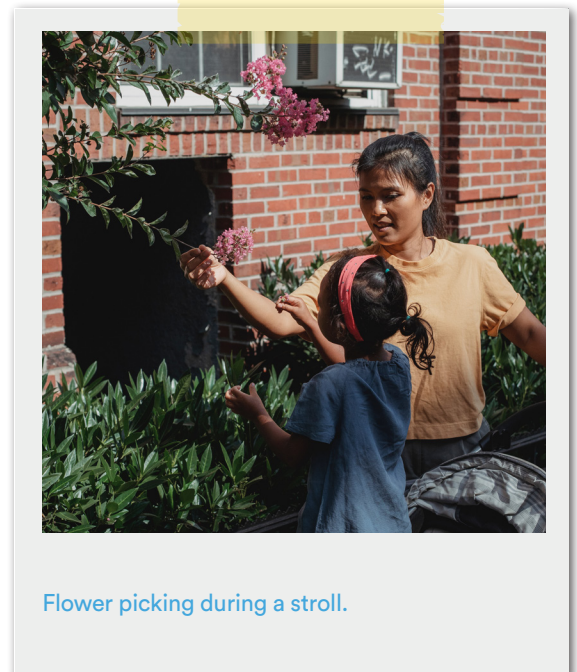
Figure 7: Overall Regional Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There are different reasons for the slot gap in the Region. First, there are not enough child care programs to support the number of children under age six. Second, there are not enough qualified teachers to open additional slots in programs. One Assistant Director stated that her center is licensed for 146 children. They have 92 children enrolled and 76 on a waitlist, largely because they cannot hire or retain enough staff to be fully operational.

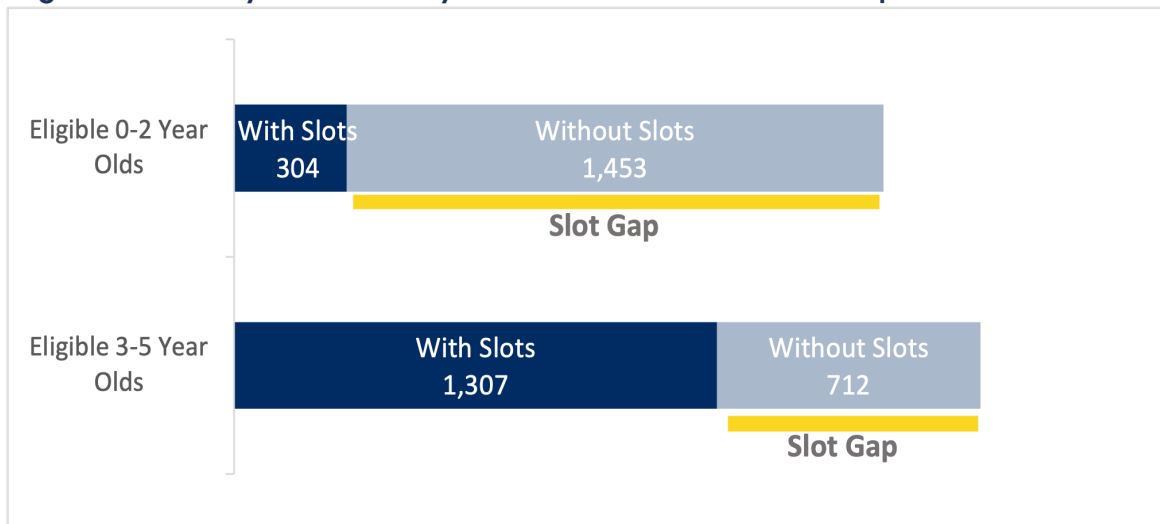
Region 44 offers publicly funded ECEC options for children three to five years old. These include Head Start (HS) and Preschool for All (PFA). HS and PFA offer some families another child care option; however, families must qualify for publicly funded programs through income, an assessed disability, being a part of a priority population or an active-duty military family. Currently, none of the publicly funded Early Childhood programs in the Region offer a full day option, which is needed for most working families. Parents and caregivers stated that the child care available is not within the boundaries of the PFA or HS program and some have turned down the publicly funded program their child was accepted to because they need full-time care and have no option to transport their child from one program to the other.



Flower picking during a stroll.

The publicly funded ECEC programs for children ages birth to three in Region 44 are Early Intervention (EI) and Birth to Three Programs. As seen in Figure 8, there is a slot gap of 1,453 for children who qualify for these programs. Children under three years old can qualify for EI when they have a developmental delay of 30% or more or have physical or mental conditions that result in a delay. Families can also qualify for the Child and Family Connection (CFC) prenatal to three home visiting program if they are experiencing any of the following life stressors: underage pregnancy/parenting, single parenting, families accessing Women Infants and Children (WIC) benefits, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), if the family has EI involvement, if their primary language is not English, if they are experiencing housing instability, or if there is a caregiver other than a parent raising the child. These programs are not child care options, but rather home visiting services and support within the ECEC system.

Figure 8: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There is also a slot gap of 712 for the eligible children ages three to five (Figure 8), which highlights the need for publicly funded ECEC services. However, even if there were more slots available for all the eligible children, there are other issues to consider. The services are spread out over the county, so if a family does not have access to a personal vehicle or public transportation (the Pace Bus requires an appointment), it is inaccessible and becomes a hurdle. The hours of operation and days they operate also pose a barrier for lots of families. Again, none of these programs offer a full-day option and they typically follow a public-school calendar, closing for holidays, breaks, and even summer. Region 44 also does not have an Early Head Start (EHS) Program, so families cannot use Head Start until the children are three years of age; PFA is only for children ages three and four years old.

“ I truly feel that every child deserves a quality education and quality child care. We should be building more centers. But we can have all the buildings in the world and if we don’t have the staff then we can’t serve the children.
 -Child Care Employee ”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The ECEC workforce in Region 44 has many dedicated and passionate workers. However, there are not enough Early Childhood teachers or caregivers compared to the capacity a center has for children, nor are there enough staff and therapists for prevention programs such as Early Intervention and Home Visiting. The reasons for this deficit include wages, high turnover from burnout, lack of specialized training, aging of workforce, and leaving the field to be a public school teacher.

Within the ECEC field, the wages are low, often they are not even a living wage, and there is also a lack of benefits for many employees. According to Illinois Child Care Resource & Referral Statewide System Child Care Salary Profiles, on average child care workers make \$24,326 per year and preschool teachers make \$33,171 per year, while Kindergarten teachers make \$61,082. Some ECEC professionals said that they relied on their partner to make enough income or carry benefits through their position so they could continue working in the Early Childhood field. Those that work in a Head Start program in the Region do not work summers and therefore they often try and find a summer job or must file for unemployment during those months.

“

If my significant other was not the bread winner, I would not be able to do the job I love.

-Family Child Care Owner

”

Professionals that work in the ECEC field state that there is high turnover from worker burnout. Many people within the ECEC field report that this is due to lack of respect and not being seen as professionals, as well as the requirements needed for the job. Some within the field have shared that there is a lack of respect because of how the community and parents perceive ECEC. It was stated by one worker that the problem is that “public school is mandatory, and everyone knows they have certified teachers. But people, parents included, often view child care as a service only needed for caregivers who need to work. There is no emphasis on learning.”

Most of the community also does not know the requirements to work in a licensed child care center. For instance, within a child care center, there must be always a director-qualified staff member on site. Per DCFS regulations, a director must have taken classes in Early Childhood Education and Business. To work alone in a classroom, the teacher must be qualified, which requires a certain amount of college credits or college credits plus experience, and you must follow the state law of adult-to-child ratios. If only one staff member is director-qualified, they are required to work open to close each day and cannot leave the center to even take a break if there is not another director-qualified person in the center. If the director is working in a classroom, which is often due to staff shortage, they cannot relieve teachers for breaks or even to use the facilities, as the children cannot be left alone in the classroom. If there is no one to relieve the teacher when their shift has ended, or if children are not picked up on time, the teacher must legally stay.



A warm embrace captured on film.

“ I think that may be a big reason why people leave too; they don’t feel valued if they cannot even go to the bathroom.

- Former Child Care Center Teacher ”

Prevention Initiative programs also have high turnover because of the increased needs of families and paperwork,⁷ while understaffed and underpaid. These situations cause burn-out and even those who love their job end up leaving.

ECEC professionals are also being asked to take on more than they are often comfortable and trained to do. There are no child care programs in the Region that specialize in caring for children with disabilities. Parents have said they are forced to make the decision to accept the services their child is eligible for but has a limited schedule, or to

put their child in a program that will care for them all day but has no special education background to meet the child’s needs. These include children that have medical needs such as a feeding tube or who have chronic or long-term illnesses, as well as children who are eligible to receive Early Intervention (EI) services. DCFS has strict guidelines on the ratios of children to adults based on age, but do not take into account that children with disabilities, who need EI services, or who have chronic or long-term illnesses. Teachers are left to care for a child that may need one-on-one support along with 10-15 other children. This puts the teacher in an impossible situation where they sometimes choose to leave the field because they feel they cannot manage their classroom and meet the needs of all the children within it.

The workforce is also aging out, according to directors in the Region. Center-based teachers and family child care providers who have worked in the field for over thirty years and are retiring, but younger staff do not feel the job is worth starting or staying in due to low wages and lack of benefits. Additionally, once teachers finish their college degrees, they leave to work in a public school. They state this is because of the better pay, benefits, and the recognition of being seen as a “real teacher.”

In the Region, there are incentives to work in the field that include trainings, career development, and higher educational opportunities that are both local and statewide. Locally, the community college currently offers college grants to pay for any Early Childhood Education (ECE) classes. Some districts in the Region also offer dual high school and college credits for certain courses, which helps those going into the field earn their qualifications quicker. Additionally, the CCR&R has Higher Education Navigators that help those that qualify get the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship. This scholarship is open to anyone who currently works in a center or family child care, or any person who would like to return to working in a center or family child care. The scholarship provides them with the free education needed to work in the field.

The State also provides other incentives such as the Great Start Wage Supplement Program, Gateway Credentials, and the Gateways Scholarship. The Great Start Wage Supplement Program is for a person working in a center or family child care. They can apply to receive a wage supplement check every six months while employed at their center or family child care. Any person working on their early childhood education can also earn a Gateway Credential. The credentials are offered based on training and college credits earned in the field of early childhood. Lastly, there is the Gateway Scholarship. This scholarship will help pay for early childhood education classes and are available once the person works in a center or family child care for 90 days and continues to work in the field.

“ The Early Childhood programs are not conducive for those children that need extra services since there is no training for these teachers and there is no requirement for a lower ratio as the public schools have.

- Early Intervention Employee ”

⁷ <https://www.childhood-usa.org/>

There are also local support systems in place that work as incentives for educators to stay in the field. The Region has its own Director's Association that meets monthly. The local CCR&R has recently started a family child care association that meets monthly while also hosting an online platform to connect providers when needed. The family child cares in the Region have also had their own family child care association for many years, called Little Hands, that holds meetings, learning sessions, and helps each other. In addition, the local CCR&R also has a mental health specialist and an infant/toddler specialist that offers support and training to those in the field of ECE.

“

As a director, I really enjoyed the director association group and getting together every month to share solutions and not just complain. People would help and collaborate, such a supportive group! A testament to these directors and providers who have been working in the field for so long and then passing on the system of learning to the new directors. Just bringing them in and encompassing them in and making them a part of the discussion; having them feel this is a community they really want to be a part of.

-Former Center Director/Current CCR&R Director

”

The racial and ethnic diversity within the ECEC field depends on where the families are located. While most licensed center's directors and staff self-identify as white; the population in the Region also does. The Hispanic and Latine community is the next highest population within the Region and that is also mirrored in the demographics of the directors and staff. Most of the licensed center's directors and staff speak English, with Spanish as the next most common language. Spanish speaking ECEC staff is also reflective of Spanish speakers across the Region. However, the Region has pockets of areas that have higher minoritized populations, and some of these families speak limited to no English. It has been reported by many community members that there is not enough Spanish speaking ECEC employees in the field.

“

In EI, I had a client, and they did not understand that since he was three, he had to go to public school. The public school was not much help with language barrier. They kept telling him to call us and we were telling her to call them. This went on for like five months and finally we were able to get our education advocate involved and finally able to make a connection between the two of them. Mom was misunderstanding what the school was telling her.

-Former Early Intervention Employee

”

This information regarding the ECEC workforce is vital to understand so that changes can be made. There would be no child cares, publicly funded programs, or Preventative Initiative programs for families and children without a workforce. According to the surveys received from families, parents, and caregivers have missed work, school, their own support groups, job interviews, and a few have even had to quit their job due to not having child care. Parents and caregivers in the Region are asking for more accessible and affordable ECEC options, but without a growing ECEC workforce, that cannot happen. Listening to those that work in the field will help us figure out how we can build and sustain these important careers in ECEC.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

The ECEC system is needed for parents and caregivers as well as children. Although many in the community and on our Action Council and Family Council spoke to the positive experiences they had with Early Childhood programs and services, many families talked about their personal challenges of finding accessible and affordable child care.

There is a lack of child care options in the Region, forcing families to choose other options that include: using grandparents, moving to an area that has more child care locations, parents/caregivers working different shifts, finding a different job with hours that the child care is open, or using child care that is not licensed by the State.

Families that can make these options work for them often feel lucky they have any child care at all, but it is not always the first choice they would make. Some caregivers say that the grandparents watching their children do not have the energy for it and are just there making sure the child does not get hurt; there is little to no learning happening. According to some child care centers and Prevention Initiative (PI) programs, families are choosing to move to areas that have more accessible child care and changing the child[ren]’s and families’ lives to be able to work.

Hours and days of child care centers are also a barrier. Families spoke about being forced to work opposite shifts, sacrificing precious family time, and often sleep, to make sure both parents and caregivers can work. Some families have said that they have had to leave their second or third shift job to work the first shift since that is when child care is available. When they leave that shift, they then sometimes lose pay and/or seniority. Others mentioned how difficult it is to work a rotating schedule where they do not need the same days each week because of the job they have. These jobs include retail workers, restaurant employees, nurses, firefighters, and police officers.

Child care costs are also a barrier for families who said they sometimes must turn to family members or non-licensed child care to be able to afford child care. Although the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a great financial aid for some families, others spoke about how difficult it is when you make too much money to qualify, but too little money to afford child care. Families that receive CCAP reported that it only covers a certain amount of tuition and sometimes the child care centers will charge more than the family’s monthly co-pay, or the child care will have extra fees that are simply not affordable. To stay on CCAP, some parents have said they have had to turn down raises and just cannot get ahead because the raise would make them ineligible for CCAP but would not be nearly enough to cover child care costs.



Trunk or Treat.

“ It is hard to find a child care spot, so when you do, you grab it and keep it even if you are not happy. ”
- Caregiver

“ Those on rotating schedules... That is hard if you don't have family and those preschools aren't working with those families, what are your other options? ”
- Caregiver

Agencies that work with grandparents who are choosing to raise their grandchildren to keep them out of foster care (for example when the parent(s) is/are incarcerated or pass away) are struggling because they are not supported as a foster home would be. DCFS will not pay for child care as they do with foster care. If the grandparent is not working, they cannot qualify for CCAP. Many

times, these grandparents do not have the health or energy to take care of their grandchildren seven days a week all day, but even in crisis situations where the grandparent is given virtually no notice and asked to take their grandchild(ren) in, they are not supported regarding child care.

“ I was just thinking about a friend of mine, her child is in child care, and they recently hiked up their prices. She is not eligible for CCAP and can no longer afford the child care and she told them, and they basically said, ‘oh well.’ They have to pay their employees, but we need to find the balance of both so it works out for both parties. Nobody wants to pay thousands a month for child care.

- Parent

“ We have a grandma who is fostering a two-year-old and this child needs to go to school. Grandma can’t keep up with her during the day. She needs to be learning and needs to be with her peers. But because she is at home, they can’t get the assistance.

- ECEC Staff

Families also spoke about the lack of awareness of ECEC services for children ages birth to five in the Region. Parents, caregivers, and agencies are all stating that children often are not getting the services they need because they do not know the services in our Region or what their child may be eligible for. When asked, families have stated that it would be helpful if pediatricians knew more about what the ECEC services are since they are typically the first one a family speaks to when they have questions about the child. Parents and caregivers shared that it is helpful that child care centers inform them about the CCAP, although this is typically only spoken about when the family speaks about the high tuition costs.

It is important to focus on the family voice in this report as they are the reason we are working for equitable, accessible, affordable ECEC services. Decision-makers need to know their experiences and what they say the issues are within ECEC because inequities within the system cannot be addressed until their voices are heard.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Regional Strengths and Needs were developed by the Action and Family Councils. They were also based on community input shared via surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Although there are some needs that are state level, we maintained a list that was focused solely on Region 44.

Strengths

- Providers are dedicated to their work and want what is best for the children.
- The workforce is collaborative and sits on different councils.
- Scholarships and grants are available for professional development training.
- Agencies in the Region actively try to seek out grant opportunities and collaborate to find funding sources.
- Agencies within the Region are constantly updating their services to fit the needs of the community and offer a variety of resources for families within the various ECEC programs.
- Agencies work together to create relationships in the community and with organizations to ensure accurate referrals.
- The Region has a county-wide Home Visiting program within the Child and Family Connections (CFC).
- In Early Intervention (EI), the service coordinators go above and beyond by sitting in on Individual Education Plan (IEP) and transition meetings.
- Participants in the Region's Directors Association learn and build off each other's knowledge and experience; seasoned directors assist the newer directors.
- The local community college offers the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship, and the CCR&R has Higher Education Navigators who will provide personalized assistance with the ECACE scholarship.

Needs

- Community education on the ECEC field, which would include qualifications needed, what providers do daily, and the importance of ECEC.
- Central Hub to connect families to the ECEC services within the Region.
- Respite care to relieve stress on parents/caregivers.
- Strengthened ECEC workforce.
 - o Stabilize the industry by recognizing it as a profession.
 - o Value ECEC professionals and their physical and mental health needs.
 - o Support for ECEC professionals handling different challenges with families and children.
 - o Provide a living wage with benefits and make it sustainable.
 - o Provide work/life balance.

“ I think we have some very good centers in McHenry County. We have good teachers, very good directors, and we have a stellar resource and referral agency. Those are definitely some positives.
-Assistant Director in the Community ”

- Child care availability across the Region.
 - Dedicated operational funding for ECEC programs.
 - Providers who will take infants sooner than six weeks of age for families that do not have the option to stay home.
 - Pre-K programs that are accessible to all children with a full-day option.
 - More in-home ECEC services.
 - Non-traditional hours for child care.
 - Transportation for ECEC programs.
- More services for children who need therapy because of emotional challenges.
- A lower ratio in classrooms to better support children’s challenging behavior.
- More therapists who will travel to the more rural parts of the Region.
- More doctor referrals for children whose parents or caregivers feel they need additional services.

“

“What we need is to set a bar of what ECEC should look like and the expectations. It’s been around for 50-60 years, and no one has taken the time to figure out what it should look like and how to make it so it’s not funded by the parents.

-CCR&R Staff

”

Recommendations

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment has brought attention to several recommendations that are needed in the Region for change to happen in ECEC. These recommendations will build and sustain a strong ECEC workforce and in turn, more families will then be able to utilize ECEC services. The recommendations are not written in order of importance, as they are all considered crucial to the Region's community, family, and current ECEC professionals.

Provide ongoing education on the importance of ECEC programs.

- Including information: for the community, families, and the current and potential ECEC workforce; on the different ECEC sectors and what each offers the child in terms of development; on when a child may need and/or qualify for other services and how to find support groups so families do not feel overwhelmed or alone. The goal of this recommendation is for people to know why the different ECEC programs are vital to our community and the economy and to draw more potential workers into this important field of work.

“

We need to take into consideration that a lot of parents don't want to test because they don't want it to come back that something is off. They don't necessarily want a diagnosis because if they don't have a diagnosis then everything is fine. I think we need to do a better job letting families know that it's okay, it's not something you did.

- Parent

”

Create a hub to connect families to their specific ECEC needs in the Region.

- The hub would include Coordinated Intake with a caseworker for families. A current organization that would be willing to (with funding) could take on this responsibility. The role of the caseworker would be to speak to a family that calls or makes an appointment, ask questions, help identify their ECEC needs, and match them with services. The case worker could help the family make the appointments with the agencies or fill out paperwork needed to receive services. For those families that would like to know about services but do not want caseworker support, it was suggested that a directory of all the ECEC services in the Region be created and handed out to all agencies, pediatricians, and obstetricians for distribution from their offices. Taking this one step further, a website could also be created for families to answer questions and get a list of potential ECEC resources.

“

Recently I saw something online and it was a questionnaire about your face, to figure out what make-up you need. Maybe create a website like this where we would have all the resources available. People would put in the needs they have, for example transportation. Not the same needs apply to everybody. Maybe somebody needs transportation, others need speech therapy. Maybe we have a website that would refer them to all the ECEC options.

- Parent

”

Encourage ECEC workforce development with direct pipelines to become a qualified teacher or director, along with incentives to continue education, and more regulations on salaries and benefits.

- Right now, there are scholarships that offer low- or no-cost education in ECEC, but there is little incentive for ECEC professionals to continue their higher education or stay in the field when they finish their education. It is recommended that there be a base salary based on position, experience, and education and have automatic salary increases when a higher level of education is obtained, which would create more individuals qualified as directors while also giving the ECEC workforce an incentive to continue their education and stay in the field. Additional incentives could be provided for those that are multilingual or willing to take the necessary classes to become proficient in another language. It is also recommended that anyone who receives the ECACE scholarship should be required to make a commitment to work in the ECEC field for a certain amount of time.

“ There needs to be a commitment to stay in the field if we give them the free education. Different pipelines, too. Different ways for you to become qualified for different positions through high school, community college, and internships. But internships are hard if you can't pay them or give them some kind of compensation. They aren't going to want to do that for free.

-ECEC Professional

”

Create transportation and full day options within the publicly funded programs.

- In the Region there is limited public transportation. You must call for a taxi, Uber, or Pace bus if you do not have your own transportation. The publicly funded programs do not offer busing services, and the ones that do offer limited busing within their district. If there was dedicated transportation funding for any child that attends a publicly funded ECEC program for which they qualify, families would not have to take transportation into consideration when deciding to accept the services. Currently, families may choose to deny the services because of an inability to transport their child back and forth, or because they need a full-day program and have no transportation to transition the child to/from one program to the next.

Incentives for child care programs to be open non-traditional days and hours.

- Parents and caregivers have spoken up that not everyone works a 'typical' Monday-Friday daytime schedule. There are many careers out there that need evenings, nights, weekends, or rotating schedules. Many businesses offer employees a different pay scale for working those non-traditional hours, and it is recommended that there be incentives and funding for child care programs to offer extended availability to accommodate these needs. Programs should receive a monetary incentive as well as a different pay scale for the ECEC professionals who work these hours.

“ We had a mom at the office that waited over an hour for a ride home from Pace.

-Agency Staff

”

“ I've talked to other parents or have seen on social media 'does anybody want to watch my kid?' I want to be the person that says, 'you can look here' but you then see they need wonky hours, and you know they have been down that road and there is nothing out there.

-Parent

”

Provide services for children within the ECEC classroom who require extra support due to developmental delays and/or behavior challenges.

- Both the children and their teachers need additional support. Additional funding for child care providers to have extra trained support staff would greatly benefit the family, children, and teachers.

Funding for building costs and upkeep that will not affect the ECEC program's budgets.

- Currently each ECEC program is in their own budget silo. According to some professionals in the field, if an unexpected cost arises (for example a roof repair), the program must cut costs in other ways. They may not be able to order art or classroom supplies for a period or choose another cost-cutting method to make sure they stay within their budget; this all affects the children and the professionals who serve them. This funding could also be used to upgrade the ECEC program with new software. It is also recommended that there be consistency in reporting for all ECEC programs to show where the funded money is going in order to hold all child care operators and agencies accountable.

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

“With our agency, you get a group of funds you get every year, and you divvy it up for what you could potentially get and then see how much for building costs to divvy toward. There is only so much you get and what if A/C unit goes out or roof needs to be replaced? That takes away from salary increases for your people.”

-Agency Supervisor

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

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. How long have you been involved in Early Childhood Education and Care? What roles have you held during that time?
2. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
3. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
4. What services do not currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
5. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
6. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
7. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
8. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

Appendix C: Additional Resources

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

1. Head Start Program Information Report (PIR): <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/data-ongoing-monitoring/article/program-information-report-pir>

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