



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 45

(Monroe & Randolph Counties)





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Region 45 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.

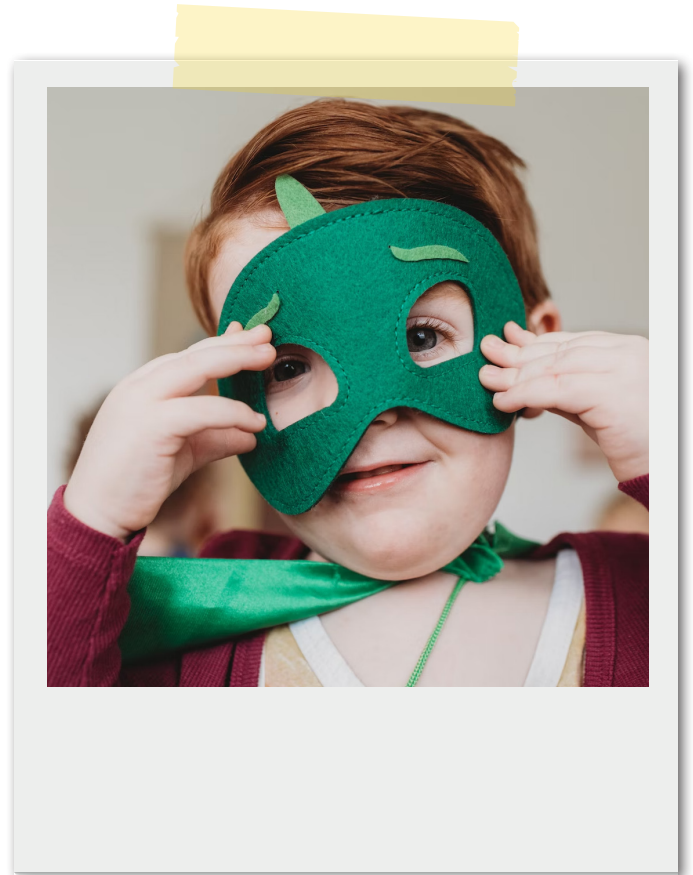
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 45 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 45, comprising Monroe and Randolph Counties, is home to 4,242 children aged birth to five. It is crucial to emphasize the socioeconomic disparity within Region 45. Monroe County is widely recognized as an affluent community, where merely 8% of children aged birth to five live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), significantly lower than the state average of 36%. In contrast, Randolph County exhibits a less prosperous environment, with 47% of young children living at or below 200% of the FPL. These statistics underscore the vastly different experiences that children and families face based on their county of residence. Consequently, access to Early Childhood Education Care (ECEC) programs and services becomes paramount, particularly for those growing up in economically disadvantaged households.

Currently, in Region 45, there are 25 different child care options available to serve the total population of 4,242 children under the age of five. However, the distribution of these child care options heavily favors



Monroe County, with 15 options available, while Randolph County has only two. There is one publicly funded program in Monroe County and eight in Randolph County, this lack of equitable distribution results in 600 children in the region being left without available slots. This imbalance in program availability poses a significant obstacle for families and deprives young children of the access they may need or desire.

Moreover, the shortage of qualified teachers within the Region's EECE programs, including those in public schools, is a pressing concern. Reports indicate critical shortages and high turnover rates among qualified educators. Consequently, parents in Region 45 face challenges in navigating a complex and fragmented system that fails to provide the necessary programs and resources for their children. This situation often forces parents to make difficult tradeoff decisions that impact both the health and development of their children and their own livelihoods.

Region 45 Needs

- Improve parental engagement and support caregiver involvement.
- Fostering productive stakeholder relationships and promoting seamless coordination across the entire Region.
- Enhance access to the Home Visiting, Early Intervention, and Prevention Initiative, extending it to children beyond the age of three who have been identified as at risk.
- Address the shortage of experts in the Region to ensure that the health needs of the community are adequately met.
- Prioritize equitable professional preparation, recruitment, and career pathways that ensure equal access to career opportunities for everyone.

Region 45 Recommendations

- Promote inclusion of families in ECEC activities and programs through meaningful involvement in planning, development, and evaluation processes.
- Promote and facilitate relationships among stakeholders in ECEC, fostering best practices, identifying challenges and solutions, sharing resources and knowledge, and continuous communication.
- Secure adequate funding to expand existing programs but also establish new ones that cater to children beyond the age of three.
- Enhance accessibility to pediatric providers for those facing financial constraints, relying on state insurance, and individuals with mental health and developmental needs.
- Establish a well-defined and achievable career pathway that encompasses professional development opportunities, mentoring programs, and development initiatives.

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

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REGION 45 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.



4,242

Children Under
the Age of 5
in Region 45



970

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



600

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

70%

The percentage of parents and caregivers surveyed who were forced to miss work due to a lack of child care options

"I am certified in elementary education. When we found out we were having a child we did the math, and it did not make sense for me to be working. I would actually be paying more than I made."

- 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 45 NEEDS

1. Improve parental engagement and support caregiver involvement.
2. Enhance access to the Home Visiting and Prevention Initiative, extending it to children beyond the age of three.
3. Address the shortage of experts in the Region to ensure that the health needs of the community are adequately met.
4. Prioritize equitable professional preparation, recruitment, and career pathways that ensure equal access to career opportunities.

REGION 45 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote inclusion of families in programs through meaningful involvement in planning, development, and evaluation processes.
2. Promote and facilitate relationships among stakeholders in ECEC, fostering best practices, identifying challenges and solutions, sharing resources and knowledge, and continuous communication.
3. Enhance accessibility to pediatric providers for those facing financial constraints, relying on state insurance, and individuals with mental health and developmental needs.
4. Establish a well-defined and achievable career pathway that encompasses professional development opportunities, mentoring programs, and development initiatives.



“I would love to have my child attend preschool; however finding an option that is close to my home, full day, and affordable is near impossible. This makes me feel like I am failing my child.” - Parent, Randolph County

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

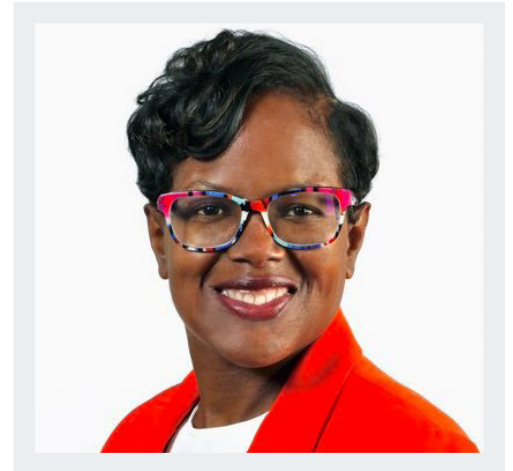
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

We would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to share their expertise and stories with us. The completion of the Regional Needs Assessment would not have been possible without the support of the Birth to Five Illinois State Team who led us, and the community members of Monroe and Randolph Counties who shared their valuable input. Our work examined the available data but was driven by the community feedback specific to Region 45 on the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape. We are grateful for the input from parents and caregivers, local organizations, local school districts, family child care, healthcare, community members, the Regional Office of Education, elected officials, Head Start providers, early childhood educators, and business owners in both Monroe and Randolph Counties.

We have a deep sense of gratitude for the Action Council and Family Council members. They have dedicated countless hours, engaged in meaningful conversations, and provided knowledgeable feedback about data, barriers, resources, and impacts making this Regional Needs Assessment as thorough as possible. The collective efforts allowed for a better understanding of the ECEC system in our Region. The Family Council gave us the opportunity to elevate stories and experiences and advocate to improve services. We are so grateful for the voice and insights so families who have navigated the systems because their perspective are vital to understanding the needs of the Region.

Thank you to all the ECEC professionals and stakeholders who not only have a passion for serving the children of our community but who also value the work to ensure we continue to provide high-quality care for all children. We appreciate all our community partners for allowing us to attend events that connected us with families and provided a space for them to share their experiences.

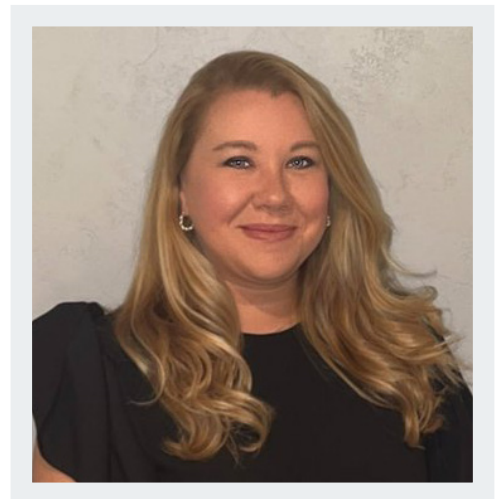
Lastly, we thank everyone who has participated in focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Your input was valuable in carrying out the collaboration to better understand the need, strengths, and recommendations for Monroe and Randolph Counties.

Thank you,

Candace Gardner (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 45

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.

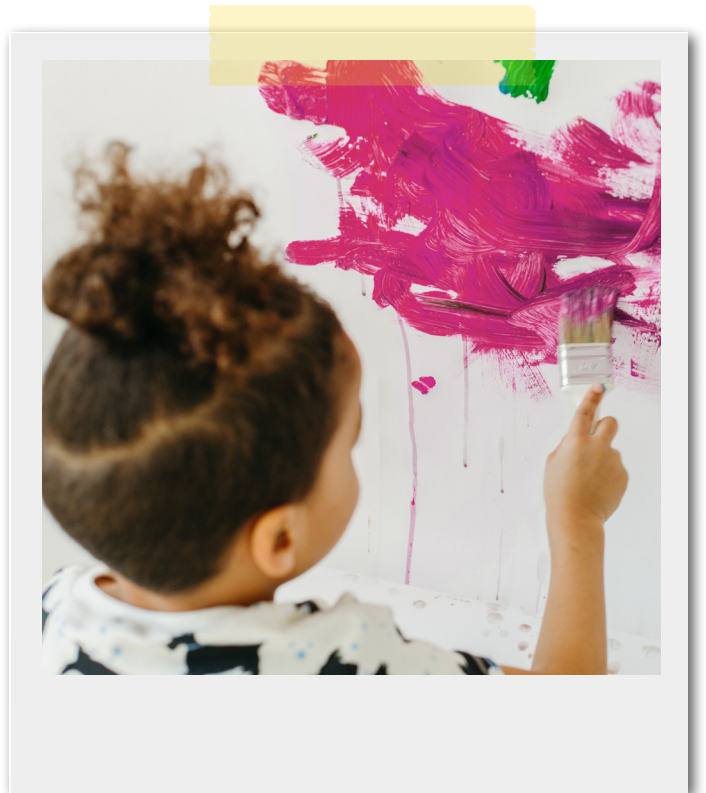
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

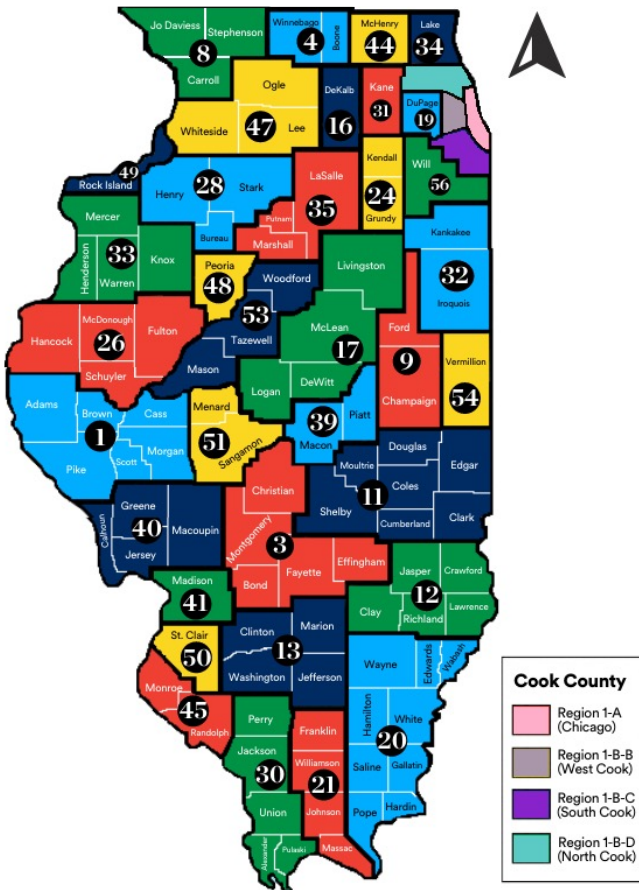


Timeline

- **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.

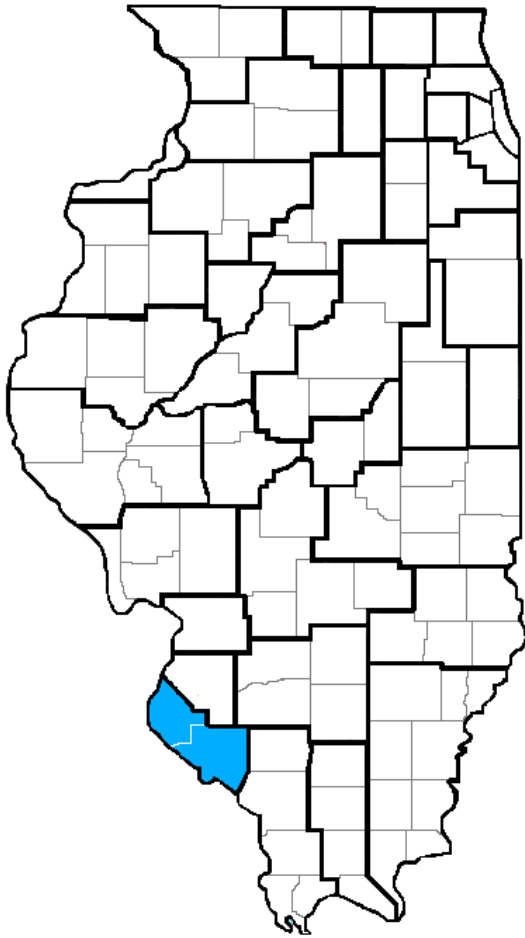
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 45

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 45 is in southwestern Illinois and encompasses Monroe and Randolph Counties. The Region lies southeast of the St. Louis metropolitan area and contains 1,000 square miles of varied topography, including high bluffs, gentle hills, and fertile prairies. The western border predominantly hugs the Mississippi River and extends east to the edges of neighboring counties, including St. Clair, Washington, Perry, and Jackson Counties. The Region is home to 65,074 residents who live among five cities, 15 fifteen villages, and numerous unincorporated communities. The largest populations reside in the county seats of Waterloo and Chester.

The local economy thrives from the roughly 1,500 businesses that operate throughout the Region, many of which are locally owned and operated. The largest industries include healthcare, manufacturing, retail, finance and insurance, and education, employing 80% of working adults. The Illinois Department of Corrections operates the Menard Correctional Center in Randolph County, which employs many local people.

Featuring nine public school districts and many public, private, at-home-based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs, Region 45 values education. This is evident in that 32% of community members hold at least a high school diploma, and roughly 57% of them pursue some form of post-secondary education or training.

Region 45 exudes small-town charm and offers world-class attractions. It is home to Popeye the Sailor Man and the World Shooting and Recreation Complex, attracting visitors from across the globe. Yet, what makes this Region unique is the multiple generations of families who reside here, creating a powerful sense of community and great local pride. It is well understood that neighbors rally and provide support when a community member needs help.

Land Acknowledgement

Region 45 acknowledges that Monroe and Randolph Counties are the traditional homelands of the ᏍᏌᏍᏌ ᏊᏊᏊᏊ ᏚᏚᏚᏚ ᏒᏒᏒᏒ ᏓᏓᏓᏓ (Osage), Ogaxpa, Myaamia (Miami), Kaskaskia, Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux) Nations. We acknowledge all the Native Peoples who came before us.



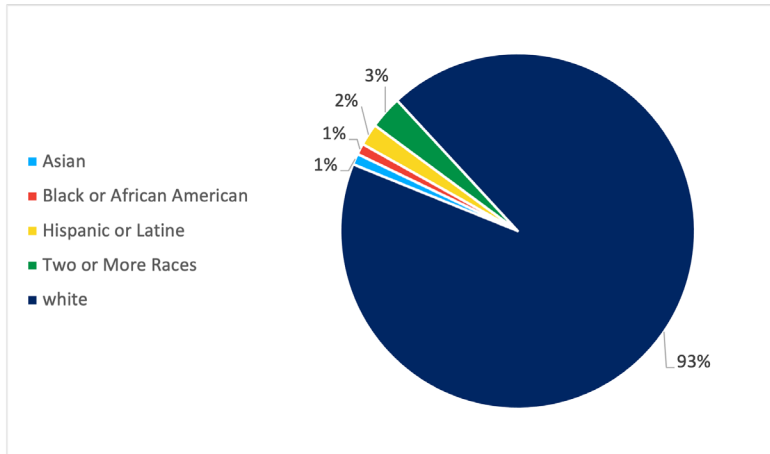
Downtown celebration with American flag being displayed.

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

Regional Demographics

Region 45 is home to 4,242 children from birth to age five. In the Census, 3,522 (93%) children's race was identified as white, as illustrated in Figure 1. While the number of young children has remained relatively constant over the past few years, the racial diversity of the children has increased in both Randolph County and Monroe County, more so in Randolph County. The number of children identifying as Hispanic or Latine, Asian, two or more races, or an unlisted race illustrates an increase throughout the Region and in pockets where non-white communities have formed. Understanding the demographic characteristics of our communities is essential to help us explain the strengths, needs, and recommendations for the Region's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system and how each phenomenon relates to one another.

Figure 1: Children Under Age Five by Race and Ethnicity²



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

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.

Although Illinois has identified 12 priority populations, data is limited and provides only high-level details. In Region 45, we focused on families facing economic disadvantage, those who do not receive equitable resources, children with disabilities, families that face barriers based on culture or language, and children in families on incomes at poverty or deep poverty levels. An overwhelming majority of the 25,071 households in Region 45 speak English, while 80 households speak a language other than English, including eleven households that speak Spanish and 69 that speak another language, such as various Indo-European, Asian, and Pacific Islander languages. It is not clear how many young children are growing up in limited English-speaking households. Yet, it is an important statistic to monitor to ensure that ECEC programs and services are accessible to all children and families, regardless of language.

Children in Priority Populations

Priority populations are defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council³ as children or families that face economic disadvantage, those who do not receive equitable resources, and underserved families who have needs relevant to the current landscape. 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

“The Latine population is most likely going to outside communities for resources because our Region lacks services that fit their needs.”
- Action Council Member

² Some Census categories not included due to number of respondents equaling less than 1%. This includes American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders; Other.

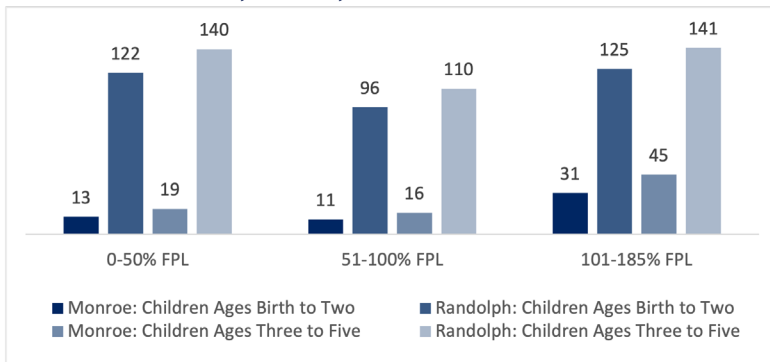
³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

It is essential to highlight that Region 45 is socioeconomically diverse, especially as measured between Monroe and Randolph Counties and demonstrated in Figure 2. The median household income for Monroe County is \$92,950 and is \$58,093 for Randolph County. Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is the amount of income determined by the federal Department of Health and Human Services needed to provide a bare minimum for food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other necessities⁴. Monroe County is commonly considered an affluent community, with only 8% of children from birth to age five living at or below 200% of the FPL, well below the State average of 36%. However, young children living in Randolph County are less well off, with 47% of children birth to age five living at or below 200% of the FPL. The data suggests two vastly different experiences for children and families, depending upon which county they call home. As such, access to ECEC programs and services is paramount for all children, especially those growing up in households with fewer economic resources.

“ Chester has now lost our ESL teacher; this leaves the district in a crisis in terms of our ESL families. We KNOW there are more children in the Chester Latine community that are under-reported in Census data. They do seek outside resources for health care, but educational care is a huge black hole of need, and they do not really know where to turn.

- Community Member (Randolph County)

Figure 2: Number of Children by Age Group, County at or Below 50%, 100%, and 185% FPL



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ My family falls right above the poverty line. Sometimes it is difficult for us to get assistance with things. My husband and I have considered getting a divorce so that the kids and I could qualify for assistance.

- Community Member

Figure 3: Federal Poverty Levels for a Family of Four⁵

	50% FPL	100% FPL	150% FPL	200% FPL
Monthly Household Income	\$1,092	\$2,183	\$3,275	\$4,367
Annual Household Income	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$39,300	\$52,400

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

“ Regardless of the income level, kids still need help. Income should not be such a barrier where these resources are concerned.

- Community Member (Randolph County)

⁴ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/glossary-terms>

⁵ Note: Most community programs use the 200% FPL level as a threshold for service qualification.

More children are growing up in households where parents/caregivers work outside the home, increasing the demand for accessible and affordable ECEC programs and services. In 2020, 2,617 children birth to age five lived in homes where both parents worked, and 830 lived in single-income households where the parent was employed outside the home. Regardless of socioeconomic status, all caregivers should be able to work outside the home if they choose to do so. While parents and family members work, all children deserve to spend their days in child care programs that are safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate.

The Region also has 403 grandparents responsible for most of the basic needs (such as food, shelter, and clothing) of one or more grandchildren who live with them. A grandmother expressed that she needed to increase her work hours to help provide for her two grandchildren she is raising. One community organization expressed the growing number of displaced families and individuals stating that challenging economic conditions and limited access to services have caregivers living in cohabitated environments and joining long waitlists for subsidized housing. A non-for-profit organization that focuses on helping families in the Region indicated that homelessness is the number one concern right now because there are limited publicly funded housing programs available.



Three babies playing together.

“Some of the barriers displaced families in the Region face are lack of housing assistance, being able to find a job without child care, transportation issues, and trying to keep a stable routine and environment for children. There is a clear need for more publicly funded programs and resources.”

- Community Member (Randolph County)

As such, access to child care programs and services that are affordable, high-quality, and offer flexible hours are essential to the continued economic well-being of the children and families who live in Region 45.

Knowing and understanding the demographic characteristics of Region 45 is essential to identify who lives in the Region, who is effectively served by existing ECEC programs and services, and who is not. It also provides a foundation to build on existing strengths, remediate shortcomings, and forge innovative solutions to entrenched problems.

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are one important piece of the Early Childhood landscape and can serve as a critical link between families and providers. Partner Plan Act defines a Collaboration as “a cross-sector approach to coordinating and improving the ECEC system within a defined geographic region.”⁶

Communities with successful Collaborations can reach families with the greatest barriers to access with services they seek. Community members in the Region feel that many service providers would benefit from formally or informally developing a Collaboration. When ECEC programs work together, they promote greater awareness of available services to parents/families, identify children with needs earlier, assist in program referrals, and provide high-quality services. It is essential to support ECEC Collaborations because they give a voice to their community with a shared common vision that allows them to identify and address root causes of challenges.



Three children walking down the road.

While there is no formal ECEC Community Collaboration in Region 45, many community resources are collaborating to improve children’s well-being. One of the collaborative efforts in Randolph County has built a network of stakeholders that includes local libraries, Pre-K, Early Childhood Special Education, Child and Family Connections, Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start, hospitals, grade schools, Regional Office of Education #45, the Sheriff’s Office, Health Department, and Housing Authority. They have a written community Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that started much smaller in 1995 and has grown with the expansion of grants and relationships built in the community over the past 28 years. The overarching goal of this network is to create the best environment possible for the children and families in Randolph County. They accomplish this goal by providing parental training programs, staff training, newsletters to families and child care centers, story time at local libraries, family fun activities, joint screenings, space for services, and service referrals. One network member stated: “Since this is a small community, we are all well-known to each other and generally get things accomplished with a phone call or personal visit.”

⁶ <https://www.partnerplanact.org/webdev/collaboration-supports/collaboration-institute>

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs are another important piece of the Early Childhood landscape. They include a wide range of half-day, full-school-day, and full-work-day programs, funded, and delivered in several ways through the public and private sectors. Although ECEC researchers and advocates propose combining different program types, there are many funding sources and different barriers families experience as they navigate programs. The result is an ECEC system of wide-ranging quality and skewed program access throughout the Region. Funding is complex and varied, and there is no cohesive structure, which creates confusion and frustration for both families and providers.

The current landscape of ECEC programs in Region 45 consists of nine publicly funded programs and 25 different child care options to serve a total of 4,242 children under the age of five (Figure 4). Most of the publicly funded programs are in Randolph County, with minimal programs in Monroe County. ECEC programs are community-level interventions that can benefit children, families, and communities.

When it comes to ECEC resources and needs, the two counties are at extremes of the social economic status/Federal Poverty Level (FPL) range. Also, some programs are not operating in the Region and are therefore unavailable to families who qualify. Finally, many children who could benefit from ECEC programs or services cannot access them, and may be less prepared in their social, emotional, and academic development when they enroll in Kindergarten. Erikson’s 2019 Risk and Reach report indicates that 89% of children in Monroe County and 76% in Randolph County do not demonstrate Kindergarten readiness.⁷

Of the children birth to age two in Region 45, 486 live at or below 200% FPL with minimal programs. Currently, the Region has zero Home Visiting or Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) options. Some families receive Home Visiting from counties outside of the Region. Because of this, community members and ECEC providers have stated that they are unaware of the program and services offered. Both support pregnant people and parents with children birth to age five that face greater risk and barriers by promoting child development, school readiness, and parenting support.

Home Visiting and MIECHV program’s targeted populations and goals can vary depending on the model. Most models use a weighted eligibility criteria based on a variety of factors including, but not limited to children who may be at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect, families with limited to no access to economic/material resources, caregivers or children with “low academic achievement”, and children with disabilities or developmental delays.

Figure 4: Number of Publicly Funded Programs by County

Program	Monroe County	Randolph County
Prevention Initiative	0	1
Early Head Start	0	0
Head Start	1	5
Preschool for All	0	3
Preschool for All Expansion	0	0
Total	1	9

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ I would love to have my child attend preschool, however, finding an option that is close to my home, full-day, and affordable is nearly impossible. This makes me feel like I am failing my child. ”

- Community Member
(Randolph County)

⁷Erikson Institute Illinois Risk and Reach Report - Interactive Map

Randolph County has a Prevention Initiative (PI) program called Birth to Three with a proposed capacity of 60 children. PI provides early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive child development with family support services. Eligibility prioritizes children impacted by environmental, economic, developmental, and demographic risk factors. Community members shared that two barriers are a lack of awareness of available programming, and the fact that care ends at age three. Children who age out are not always placed in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) because with PI they do not have to meet requirements for delays or disabilities.

“When programs are not housed in our community, parents and even educators are unaware of the services they provide.”
- Community Member
(Monroe County)

“Children must leave the Birth to Three program at three despite their continued need for support that PI provides.”
- Community Member
(Randolph County)

Early Intervention (EI) is a program that serves children ages birth to three with developmental delays and disabilities; children can receive multiple services. Fifty-nine children are currently receiving these services in Region 45. However, many families in the Region state that they are unaware of these services and find it challenging to build relationships with providers changing so often. EI providers are scarce in the Region, and some have reported high turnover rates. EI providers typically work through an agency or work independently without benefits, and there is a need for more providers in the Region.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) is offered after EI for children three to Kindergarten age, provided through various educational settings. Qualifying children meet one of the 14 categories in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Some families feel that the ECSE process of transition could be more seamless. According to Erikson’s Risk and Reach report, the Region overall has a lack of available EI resources and therefore does not reach the children needing services. It is likely that not all children who qualify for EI are being identified before entering ECSE. There is a need for assistance like a family advocate to help caregivers in navigating the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and for a more comprehensive system. Children in some rural areas of the Region are bussed to other school districts to receive services due to a lack of programming in their hometown.

“My child has two separate EI therapists; one saw my child 17 times in the same amount of time that the other therapist saw my child five times. I requested a different therapist and have been waiting a month to be assigned a new one. It feels that some EI therapists do not care if they see the child or not.”
- Community Member
(Monroe County)

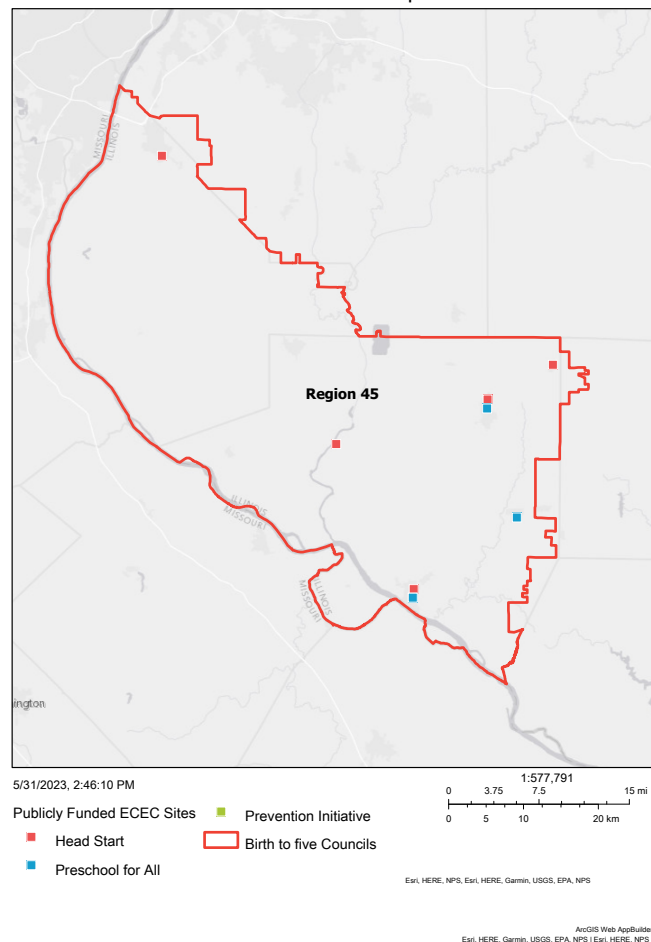
“I am happy with my child’s IEP; I know my son has needs, but I worry that the actions are not carried out and they slack on working on his IEP goals.”
- Community Member
(Monroe County)

Early Head Start (EHS) is a publicly funded program that provides child development and family support services to pregnant people, their families, and infants and toddlers under age three. Region 45 currently has zero EHS programs. Head Start (HS) serves children aged three to Kindergarten entry and provides family development and engagement, early education and child development, health, and mental health services. The Region has six HS programs: one is in Monroe County, while the remaining five are situated in Randolph County. Chester and Evansville locations of the HS programs in the Region are currently unable to operate due to workforce issues. EHS and HS eligibility requires that 90% of enrollment must be families with children living at or below 100% FPL.

Preschool For All (PFA) is a publicly funded program that serves children three to five years of age, providing high-quality educational programs for children determined to be “at risk of academic failure”. PFA programs are often based in schools or child care centers. Randolph County has three PFA programs located in Chester, Sparta, and Steelville with a proposed capacity of 149 children. Forty-eight of those children currently have an IEP in place. Monroe County last had a PFA program in 2017, and most programs do not offer wrap-around or extended care. Preschool For All Expansion (PFAE) programs expand access to full-day early education to children determined by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to be “at risk of academic failure”. There are zero PFAE programs in Region 45. Most caregivers of children enrolled in a PFA program are often still paying full tuition for child care services because the program is offered as a half-day and caregivers still need full-day care.

There are 25 child care options in Region 45, most of them located in Monroe County. Eighteen of them are child care centers licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), with 15 located in Monroe County, and three located in Randolph County, including one that is no longer operating. The Region has one licensed exempt child care center that serves children three to five years of age. Licensed exempt means that the center is not required to have a license through DCFS to operate but must still meet minimum requirements set by Illinois to operate as a child care provider.

Figure 5: Location of Publicly Funded Early Childhood Sites



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 6: Number of Child Care Sites by County

Program	Monroe County	Randolph County
Licensed Child Care Centers	15	3
Licensed Home Care Providers	3	3
License Exempt Child Care Centers	1	0
Total	19	6

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

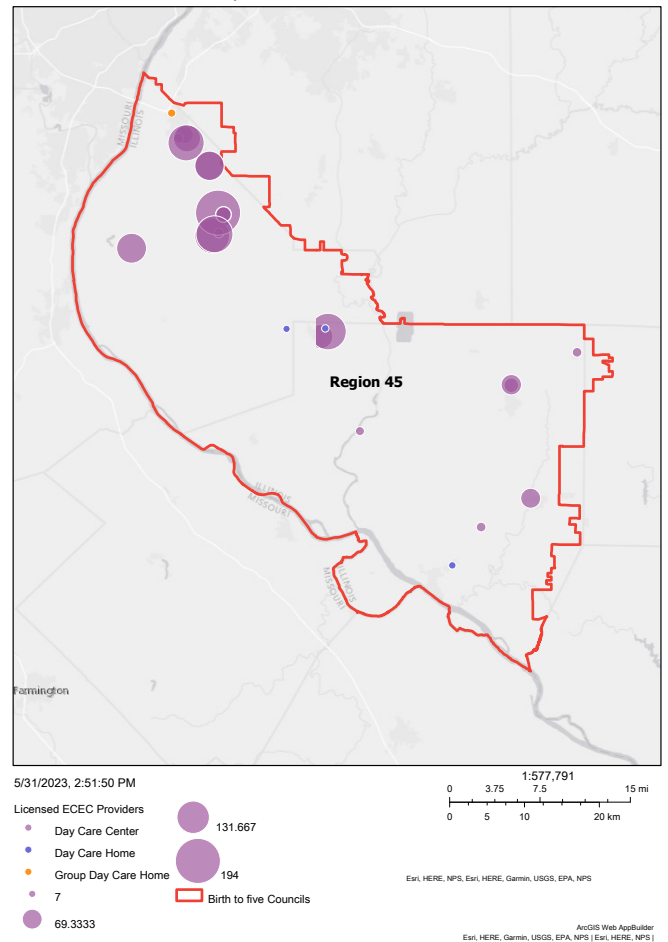
For decades, families have watched as fees for child care have steadily risen and become unaffordable for many. Current costs can act as a barrier to high-quality care for some, particularly families with limited to no access to economic/material resources. The excessive cost of child care can burden families to make difficult choices between having a career and supplying basic needs such as food, housing, or medical care. Per the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is unaffordable if it exceeds seven percent of a household's income.⁴ The average center-based child care price as a percentage of median household income for two-income families in Monroe County are 12% and 27% for single-income families. Randolph County, which only has two operating licensed center-based child care facilities, has an average cost of 14% for two-income families and 32% of household income for single-income families.⁵

Some families utilize the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to help with the cost of child care. However, community members shared that the application is lengthy, and eligibility requirements are not always easy to understand. The Region has four centers that currently have zero families utilizing CCAP. Families who qualify for assistance state that there is often a long waitlist for high-quality centers or are left to select a center based on acceptance rather than a choice. Child care is not affordable for working families and is a huge financial burden, especially for single caregivers. One community member stated she lost discounted child care when she left her ECEC profession for a new career. She then went back to the child care facility to work evenings on top of her full-time job so she could receive discounted child care for her family to be able to afford it.

“ I applied for CCAP and could not find a center with an available spot. Were no slots available, or did the facilities not want to deal with CCAP? My children are now being cared for by a family member. ”

- Community Member (Randolph County)

Figure 7: Location of Licensed Child Care Centers



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

“ The cost of Early Childhood Care has NOT helped my family. My children would have benefited from a more frequent Monday through Friday Early Childhood program had it been affordable. ”

- Community Member (Monroe County)

Slot Gap

Limited program capacity is often one of the most prominent barriers families encounter when enrolling their young children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs and services. Program capacity has many determinates and is governed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) or the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). DCFS and ISBE use various measures to calculate the number of children each program can safely and responsibly care for or who are eligible for services per grant requirements. These variables determine “capacity.” Capacity is finite and more children are often interested and eligible for enrollment in ECEC programs and services than available slots. This results in some children not having access to ECEC programs and services, commonly known as the “slot gap.”

According to the most recent and reliable data from IECAM, there are in total 1,839 slots available in licensed family child care homes, licensed child care centers, and license-exempt child care centers for 4,322 children ages birth to five who reside in Region 45. This “slot gap” leaves 58% of young children without access to the ECEC programs and services.

Parents and caregivers also described multiple communities across the Region as “child care center deserts,” meaning that there are either no licensed or license-exempt care centers near their homes or that centers operating near their homes have limited capacity. The capacity of the 18 child care centers in the Region is 1,678; however, that is different from the availability. Some centers have reported unintentionally contributing to the slot gap issues due to teacher shortages. In Monroe County, the majority (13 out of the 18 total in the Region) of the child care centers are in the more populated areas, such as Columbia and Waterloo, and one child care center in Valmeyer. Randolph County has many communities that do not house a single child care center, such as Chester, Coulterville, Sparta, and Evansville. Chester, one of the larger communities, is also home to large factories where a large part of the community works, in which those families must rely on home care.

Multiple parents and caregivers have voiced that their only choice is to travel to neighboring cities and counties to secure their children’s ECEC services. One child care center has a waitlist of 100+ children, with the next available opening for an infant in April of 2024. According to a survey of community members across the Region conducted by Birth to Five Illinois, 3% of caregivers reported they had had a child on a child care center waitlist for seven to 12 months, and 11% said their child(ren) has been on a waitlist for over 12 months. This data reflects similar feedback from half of the licensed child care centers in the Region, with 75% of them reporting a waitlist between six weeks to one year. Community members shared that the lack of slots and long waitlists have forced them to choose child care based on availability rather than quality. In Randolph County, 54% of infants and toddlers and 86% of 3–5-year-olds do not have access to licensed child.

“Chester has zero child care centers. With big factories, how are people able to work? The closest child care facility is Steeleville, or you must rely on friends and family.”

- Caregiver (Randolph County)



A caregiver holding an infant child.

“ I hear many people will go to the center they choose and get on the waitlist while taking their kids to a less desired one in the meantime.

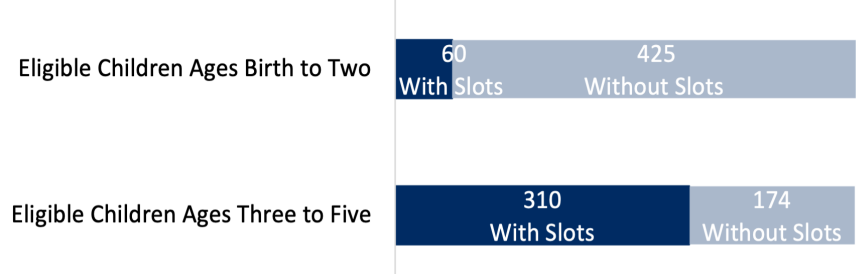
- Community Member (Monroe County)

“ A Monroe County resident said she applied for CCAP and could not find a center with an available spot. Were there no slots available or did the facilities not want to deal with CCAP? Her children are now being cared for by a family member.

- Caregiver (Monroe County)

Additionally, the lack of publicly funded ECEC program slots and services across the Region has eroded families’ financial stability and limited their choices. For children birth to age two, there are currently zero publicly funded programs in Monroe County and only one in Randolph County, which has a proposed capacity of 60 and currently serves 45 families. That leaves 426 children eligible per Federal Poverty guidelines ages birth to two without publicly funded ECEC slots (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Randolph County has few options for publicly funded preschools. These options are essential resources for children ages three to five to access early education and a foundation of skills that allow them to be successful in development. Randolph County has three publicly funded Preschool for All

(PFA) programs, serving 158 children, with 28 on a waitlist in Chester alone. Randolph County also has five Head Start (HS) programs with 173 funded enrollment capacity. Two of the five HS programs are facing issues due to a lack of workforce and are unable to offer the available slots they are funded.

Chester and Evansville HS programs did not open for the 2022-2023 school year, which means that 54 eligible children had no opportunity for services and were without a slot. Monroe County has one HS program with a capacity of 20 in Columbia. Every other preschool program in the Region is tuition-based and most only offer a part-time, half-day option. Parents in the community stated that they face excessive costs, a lack of open spots, transportation issues, and the inconvenience of half-day programs. Based on the eligibility of children ages three to five living at or below 200% FPL alone, the Region would need at least 174 more slots for children age three to five.

“ Parents always comment on the lack of availability for child care and preschools. We have several preschools, but we need more.

- Community Member

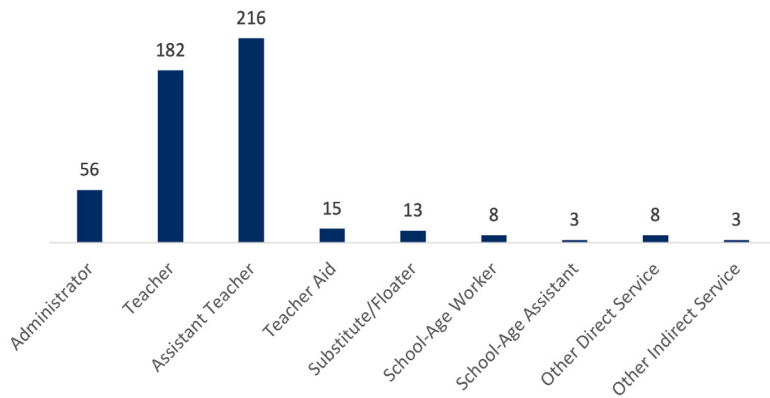
It’s important to consider the slot gap in the wider discussion of the Early Childhood landscape to help funders and decision-makers identify programs and areas that may need additional funding and support.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

A well-functioning Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system relies on having a prepared, stable, and qualified workforce. However, the existing ECEC system in Region 45 fails to ensure an adequate supply of new ECEC workers and struggles to develop, reward, and retain the current workforce. As a result, the Region faces challenges such as under-enrolled programs, high teacher turnover, and lack of continuity of care, which can limit learning opportunities for young children.

The ECEC workforce includes professionals who directly engage with children and those responsible for leading and managing ECEC settings. In Region 45, this workforce comprises individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and individuals working to support children from birth to five. Access to high-quality child care not only benefits families but also contributes to the overall economic stability of the community by enabling parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce.

Figure 9: Number of Licensed Center Positions



Source: INCCRRA
Created by: INCCRRA

In terms of workforce demographics, the Region has 437 licensed center teaching staff, with 406 identifying as female and 10 as male (registered in the Gateways Registry as of March 2021). Only 4% of licensed teaching staff are bilingual, while 80 households speak a language other than English. Non-English-speaking families face challenges in accessing ECEC resources due to long-standing inequities and systemic barriers. A local program that has eight Spanish-speaking only families on their waitlist is currently looking to hire a bilingual home visitor to support expectant parents and families with young children in the Region.

While the community is home to children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, the ECEC workforce lacks representation, with 95% self-identifying as white and only one percent as Asian, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latine, or other. Thus, there is a misalignment between the cultural and linguistic needs of the growing diverse communities and the current ECEC workforce.

“My child is black, and I often buy resources for her school out of my own pocket so she can see herself represented in materials, books, and projects. Our education system could do better by being more inclusive to everyone.”

- Community Member
(Monroe County)

“Language support is needed, mainly medical personnel and teachers. Many Spanish-speaking individuals are unaware of the types of help that are available due to the language barrier.”

- Community Member
(Randolph County)

Figure 10: Highest Level of Education of Center Directors, Licensed Teaching Staff, FCC Staff

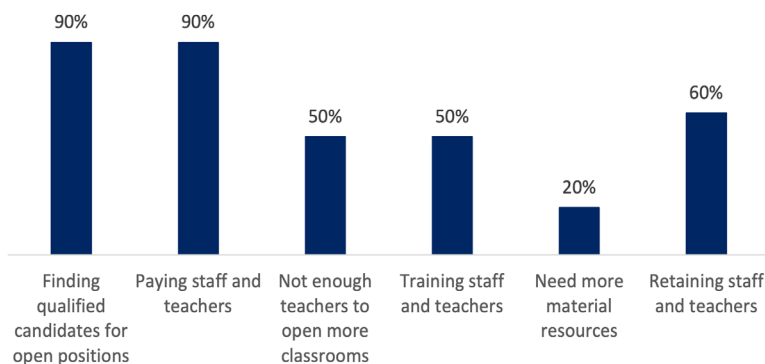
Not Reported	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
33	217	28	20	68	67	<5

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

A considerable segment of the workforce holds a high school diploma or GED as their highest educational attainment, and a smaller portion have completed an associate or bachelor’s degree. Very few have completed a graduate degree. It is worth emphasizing that educational attainment can significantly differ based on factors like geographic location, socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and individual circumstances.

When asked about their biggest challenges, child care professionals said that finding qualified candidates for open positions and adequately compensating staff and teachers remain significantly difficult (Figure 11). Many expressed that being able to offer benefits and expanded access to scholarships or local paid training would help with employee retention.

Figure 11: Child Care Center Current Challenges



Source: Birth to Five Illinois
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“If you do five minutes per assessment, it comes up to three and half weeks of work, and this does not even count the assessment pieces that are required to do for the curriculum chosen.”

- Program Director (Randolph County)

One program director in the Region stated that reducing the paperwork burden for current early childhood staff would help improve retention, productivity, and job satisfaction.

Federal, state, and local funding (even with parental fees) often do not fully cover the needs of the ECEC programs in the Region. Increased financial support is necessary to ensure proper training, reasonable compensation, and career advancement opportunities for ECEC professionals. Teacher shortages and turnover are prevalent in the early childhood programs across the Region, including public schools, which exacerbate the slot gap issue by limiting program capacities and hours of care. Addressing the emergent and shared challenges of ensuring high-quality ECEC services and a well-qualified workforce will depend on a roadmap for an inclusive, equitable future that values the essential profession for its skilled and important work.



An adult caregiver interacting with a child.

The low compensation in the ECEC field is causing a staffing and supply crisis that impacts families, educators, and programs. According

to the 2021 Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey, median earnings for child care occupations in Monroe County are \$22,880, and in Randolph County they are \$23,348. These salaries are significantly lower than the median household incomes (see: Demographic section) in both counties. Despite growing policy support, approaches to preparing, recruiting, and retaining a highly qualified ECEC workforce (including fair wages) vary widely across the state.

Ensuring comparable compensation for early childhood educators with similar qualifications and experience, regardless of the program type they work in, is essential. Utilizing grants like the Child Care Workforce bonus and offering benefits and access to scholarships or local paid training can incentivize employee retention. Centers have also stated that the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) co-pay for employees has given them the incentive to continue working in centers.

“ I love working with children, it has always been my career goal, however because of the low wages I am not able to provide for my family and need to change paths.

- Community Member (Monroe County)

“ My nephew was not Kindergarten ready. His parents did not want to keep him in child care because of the cost. Since it is up to the parents to proceed with Kindergarten instead of waiting another year, he started. Now he needs extra services through the school. Situations like this are causing elementary school staff to be overstretched and requiring more paraprofessionals. One local school district currently has eleven open positions, putting even more strain on the workforce.

- Community Member (Randolph County)

The Region currently has one location in Monroe County that offers career and technical training for child care: Career Center of Southern Illinois. In Region 45, about 70% of licensed center teaching staff hold a High School Diploma/GED as their highest level of education completed. There is a need for further education opportunities within the Region to support those seeking to advance their careers in ECEC.

ExceleRate Illinois is a comprehensive statewide system aimed at enhancing the quality of early learning and development services by fostering a culture of continuous improvement among providers. The system includes four distinct levels known as Circle of Quality designations. The Licensed Circle of Quality acknowledges providers who meet the licensing standards set by the State of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). As of fiscal year 2022, there were zero licensed child care centers or licensed family child care homes in the Region that qualified for the Bronze, Silver, or Gold levels, indicating the need for further improvement to meet the criteria for quality care. Randolph County does have two Preschool For All programs with Gold Quality and three Head Start programs with Silver Quality rating.

Early childhood professionals prioritize the care and welfare of young children throughout their workdays. Their critical role in community and child development underscores the importance of supporting and valuing the ECEC workforce.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

In Region 45, families find themselves struggling to navigate a complex and dysfunctional system that fails to provide the necessary programs and resources for them and their children. Parents are often forced to make tradeoff decisions that affect the health and development of their children, as well as their own livelihoods.

“ We need to start with the parents. We could do much more with the children if the parents were supported and had more access to services.

- Community Member (Monroe County)



Two adults and two children walking/riding a bike down a road.

The current ECEC system can be challenging for parents to navigate due to its intricate complexities of program and services, funding and resources, inequity, and inaccessibility. Parents and educators alike have voiced a need for expanded parent education on what is available in the Region and how to navigate those resources. Reflecting on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, an educator shared, “We are seeing a definite increase in the need for services and parental awareness of resources.” Numerous families have voiced their overwhelming stress when navigating the transitions between different early childhood services. Community members have reported waiting periods of three to six months before being able to access Early Intervention (EI) services. During the three-month wait for her child to begin therapy, one community member expressed a deep sense of helplessness, emphasizing that she would have greatly benefited from receiving information on how to support her child at home.

“ I have been doing the best I can with what resources I have, and it’s been extremely stressful.

- Community Member
(Monroe County)

Parents and caregivers have highlighted the necessity for support during the transition from ECEC programs, particularly when these programs do not extend beyond the age of three for eligible children. One caregiver recounted her experience with a family advocate prior to her son’s first Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting for Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE). Due to being the sole advocate for Southern Illinois and being inundated with families in need, the family advocate was unable to provide the necessary support. Consequently, the caregiver found herself attending her son’s IEP meeting alone, feeling incredibly overwhelmed and wishing she had received more guidance. In addition to the

challenges arising from a lack of resources and an awareness of existing resources, there is a pressing need for a more streamlined referral process for specialized services. Trusted educators and providers often serve as the primary source of information for parents and caregivers seeking guidance on their children’s needs. If these professionals are unaware of available services or how to refer a child to a program, it results in the child and their family missing out or experiencing delays in accessing crucial services.

Another recurring barrier is the pressing need for increased options across the Region, including child care centers, preschools, therapies, and medical and dental care. A significant challenge arises from the fact that most specialized providers, such as therapists and dentists, in the Region do not accept state-funded insurance plans. As a result, families must travel long distances, oftentimes an hour or more, or wait until they can switch to a different plan. For instance, one community member shared that her child’s medical care was delayed for an entire year due to her Medicaid plan that only covered offices and providers near Chicago.

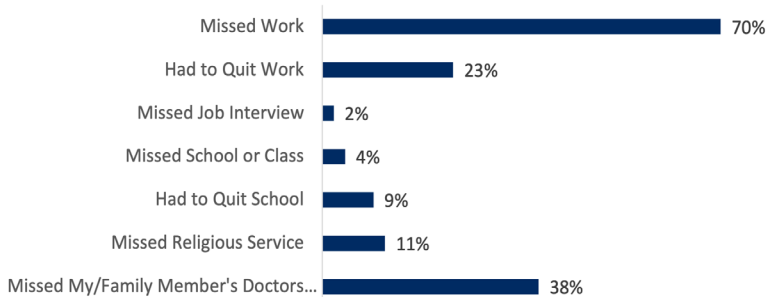
She had to wait until the next open enrollment to switch to a plan that covered providers closer to her family’s location. This situation is further complicated by the lack of accessible public transportation in the area, exacerbating the challenges faced by families. The situation becomes even more limited for children with disabilities when it comes to accessing child care options. Numerous instances have been reported where parents and caregivers of children with disabilities struggled to find a child care center that would accept their child, forcing them to make the difficult decision of quitting work or adjusting their schedules to work opposite shifts from their partners.

“ Having two children with disabilities has limited our access to child care. When searching for options, we found that zero facilities in the area were willing to care for my children due to the extra assistance they would need.

- Community Member (Monroe County)

The cost of child care is often perceived as overwhelming by many parents. A community member expressed this sentiment by stating, “Child care needs to be more affordable to families. Right now, we spend more monthly than our mortgage.” Families find themselves in the difficult position of having to make challenging decisions and significant sacrifices. As a result, some may opt for one parent to quit working altogether in order to avoid the financial burden of child care expenses. According to a community survey, a staggering 70% of parents and caregivers reported missing work due to a lack of available child care options. Additionally, 23% of respondents revealed that they quit their jobs altogether due to the absence of reliable and affordable child care solutions (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Challenges Families Face without Reliable Family or Child Care



Source: Birth to Five Illinois
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ We have been searching for care one to two times weekly for our children, and it is getting progressively more difficult as they age. There is no respite available where we live to my research, and hiring someone is beginning to cost more than our wage, making it difficult to maintain work levels throughout the year.

- Community Member (Randolph County)

With the Latine population in our Region experiencing significant growth, there is an increased need for language support. A community member shared a personal experience concerning their Spanish-speaking child who is currently attending speech therapy. They emphasized the crucial need for clarification during therapy sessions because the therapy is conducted exclusively in English. Furthermore, a local English Second Language (ESL) teacher stated that many Spanish-speaking individuals lack awareness of the available resources due to the language barrier. Sadly, our Region has limited translation services in place. For example, the interpreter utilized for the Region 45 Family Council meetings comes from a company in a neighboring Region, making it impractical for daily needs such as school and medical appointments. Many Spanish-speaking individuals require in-person translation services rather than relying on devices or technology.

Parents and caregivers have expressed a common sentiment of feeling uninformed and disconnected when it comes to their child's education and care. Many have voiced their desire not only to be involved but also to be more engaged in their child's educational journey.

The inclusion of families' statements in this report holds significant importance, as parents and caregivers are the ones directly experiencing the realities of ECEC in the Region. They are the ones at the center of complex decisions and making sacrifices to ensure the well-being of their children. It is crucial that parents and caregivers feel acknowledged, valued, and respected when expressing their concerns and perspectives. Furthermore, parents would benefit from hearing from other families, as it allows them to learn from shared experiences and realize that they are not alone in their journey. Creating an environment where family voices are heard and amplified fosters a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the challenges and needs within the ECEC system.

“ My husband is from Ecuador; he relies on me to do everything because there is very little support to help parents like him. So, I can only imagine that if both parents spoke Spanish, things would be complicated. Not to mention how many stereotypes and judgments add another layer to this issue.

- Community Member (Randolph County) ”

“ I often feel like my concerns are ignored; it is nice to be able to share my story.

- Community Member (Monroe County) ”

Regional Strengths & Needs

Region 45 Strengths

- The Birth to Three program in Randolph County provides comprehensive education and unwavering support to parents and caregivers, empowering them with the knowledge and resources necessary for nurturing their children's growth and development.
- The informal Collaboration in Randolph County is a cohesive and dynamic network that unites individuals, organizations, and local leaders who share a deep passion for advancing the Early Childhood Education and Care community.
- In our Region, numerous local organizations diligently strive to proactively tackle disparities, foster inclusivity, and bolster the overall well-being of priority populations.
- Randolph County proudly provides a robust and all-encompassing resource guide that serves as an invaluable tool for residents. This comprehensive guide encompasses an extensive array of resources and services available within our community, facilitating easy access for individuals to find and access the precise support they require.
- The community and local organizations form a steadfast support system, wholeheartedly rallying around individuals and families during times of need.
- Publicly funded programs in Randolph County go beyond providing a nurturing environment for children; they actively foster early literacy, socialization, and school readiness. These comprehensive programs are designed to cultivate a solid foundation in early learning, developing essential social skills, and equipping children with the tools and knowledge needed to excel academically as they transition into formal schooling.
- Our Region takes immense pride in its commitment to providing accessible, family-oriented events that warmly embrace all members of the community. These inclusive gatherings serve as powerful catalysts for fostering a sense of unity, deepening community bonds, and celebrating the diverse fabric of our Region.

Region 45 Local Needs

- Families residing in Monroe County requested a **comprehensive tool that can serve as a go-to resource** and provide them with quick access to a plethora of programs and services in the domains of health care, transportation, Early Childhood Education and Care, and community-based organizations.
- **Improve parental engagement and support caregiver involvement** in the development of young children by promoting awareness of the multitude of opportunities, resources, and programs available to them.
- To ensure optimal efficiency and effective communication between providers, it is imperative to implement a **more streamlined referral process**.
- Maximize the growth and development of young children by advocating for and advancing the provision of **high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care**, while fostering productive stakeholder relationships and promoting seamless coordination across the entire Region.

Region 45 State Needs

- Enhance access and communication within all Early Childhood Education and Care settings with efforts to minimize language barriers.
- Improve public transportation infrastructure to increase accessibility to promote equity, ensuring that all families, regardless of their socioeconomic status or location, have opportunities to access the resources necessary for the well-being and development of their children.
- Implement an advanced data collection mechanism that guarantees comprehensive, precise, and pertinent information is acquired, which will provide imperative insights to enhance Early Childhood Education and Care programs.
- Establish alliances and implementing a proactive framework between caregivers, early learning providers, and other key stakeholders that would significantly enhance the support available for children with disabilities and behavioral and mental health needs.
- Efforts must be made to eliminate the hindrances that impede the availability and accessibility of child care centers in Randolph County's underserved areas.
- Make applications readily available and equipped to cater to diverse languages and abilities.
- Enhance access to the Home Visiting and Prevention Initiative, extending it to children beyond the age of three who are eligible. This expansion aims to offer alternatives for families who do not meet the criteria for state services.
- Improve access to publicly funded half-day and full-day preschool programs to meet the growing demand for ECEC.
- Considering the critical role played by specialized professionals in providing quality care to children, it is essential to address the shortage of health experts in the Region to ensure that the health needs of the community are adequately met, and no child is deprived of necessary medical attention and treatment.
- Prioritize equitable professional preparation, recruitment, and career pathways that ensure equal access to career opportunities for everyone.

Recommendations

- Develop a Monroe County Resource Guide that becomes the cornerstone of the community's well-being and connectivity.
 - This comprehensive guide will meticulously compile and consistently update essential information, enabling individuals and families to access accurate and up-to-date resources.
 - By providing a centralized and reliable source of information, the guide empowers community members to make informed decisions and access the support they need with the appropriate resources and services available to them.
- Promote systematic inclusion of families in Early Childhood Education and Care activities and programs through meaningful involvement in planning, development, and evaluation processes.
 - This can be achieved by leveraging parent engagement, providing comprehensive training, offering continuous support, and conducting effective outreach initiatives.
 - By actively involving families at every stage, we empower them to contribute their unique perspectives, insights, and experiences, ultimately fostering a collaborative approach that enhances the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood initiatives.
- Create a centralized platform that fosters connectivity and seamless information sharing among providers, resulting in enhanced coordination and communication among professionals.
 - By adopting this integrated approach, unnecessary delays and duplications of efforts can be eliminated, while the potential for errors in the referral process can be significantly reduced.
 - This centralized platform serves as a reliable hub where vital information can be readily accessed and exchanged, enabling providers to collaborate effectively, streamline workflows, and ultimately deliver more efficient and effective services.
- Promote and facilitate the development of robust relationships among stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care, fostering shared understandings of best practices, identifying challenges and solutions, exchanging resources and knowledge, and nurturing continuous communication between families, professionals, and educators.
 - By encouraging these strong partnerships, we create a collaborative ecosystem where stakeholders can collectively work towards improving the quality of early childhood experiences.
- Enhance accessibility and inclusivity by offering comprehensive language support to Spanish-speaking families and children, including the provision of qualified translators/interpreters and culturally responsive providers.
 - This vital support aims to eliminate barriers that have previously hindered their full participation in existing programs and provides equitable access to opportunities.
- Significantly increase funding for public transportation and mobility options, specifically targeting communities lacking such resources, to facilitate seamless access to high-quality centers, medical facilities, and specialized service providers.
 - By allocating additional resources, we can bridge transportation gaps and remove the barriers that hinder individuals from underserved communities from reaching essential destinations.

- The state should implement a comprehensive framework to establish a unified Early Childhood Education and Care system that ensures seamless coordination and tracking of aggregated data across various funding sources, including dual funded slots, license-exempt slots, preschool slots, priority populations, screening methods, results, and waitlists.
 - By implementing this framework, we can effectively streamline data management, promote data transparency, and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the ECEC system.
 - This unified system will facilitate evidence-based decision-making, identify areas for improvement, and ensure equitable access to quality ECEC for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.
- Forge strong partnerships and foster a supportive network that brings together families, ECEC providers, and other stakeholders to champion the well-being of children with disabilities and behavioral support needs.
 - By prioritizing staff development and cultivating a culture of developmentally appropriate practices, we can ensure that every child receives personalized attention and interventions that are specifically tailored to their unique needs.
- Heighten awareness and enhance accessibility to address the demand for child care centers in Chester, Coulterville, Sparta, and Evansville.
 - This proactive approach ensures that families in these areas have convenient and readily available options for child care, expanded access to high-quality services, and economic productivity of families.
- Revise and enhance application processes for programs like publicly funded housing, Child Care Assistance Program, Individual Education Plans, and Social Security, by developing simplified applications that utilize clear, user-friendly language and offer alternative formats to accommodate diverse abilities and languages.
 - By implementing these improvements, we can ensure that the application process is accessible and inclusive, allowing individuals from various backgrounds and with different abilities to navigate the process with ease.
- Secure enough funding to expand existing programs such as Home Visiting and Prevention Initiative and establish new ones that cater to children beyond three.
 - This proactive approach ensures early identification of developmental challenges, providing comprehensive care, education, and support for children of all ages, enabling prompt and targeted intervention.
- Devote efforts to support parents and caregivers by establishing a mixed delivery system that encompasses both half-day and full-day publicly funded preschool programs.
 - This comprehensive approach aims to promote equity and provide opportunities for all young children, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances.
 - By offering a range of program options, we ensure that families have access to high-quality ECEC that aligns with their needs and preferences.
 - This commitment to equity and opportunity fosters an inclusive society where every child can thrive, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and success.

- Enhance accessibility to medical and specialized pediatric providers, prioritizing comprehensive care and support for all individuals, including those facing financial constraints and relying on state insurance, as well as individuals with mental health and developmental needs.
 - By improving access to these vital services, we ensure that no one is left behind, regardless of their financial circumstances or healthcare requirements.
- Establish a well-defined and achievable career pathway that encompasses professional development opportunities, robust mentoring programs, and impactful leadership development initiatives, all designed to actively support the growth and advancement of early childhood educators.
 - By creating this comprehensive framework, we empower educators to enhance their skills, deepen their expertise, and thrive in their professional journey.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: Citations

1. ChildCare Aware of America (2020). Affordability 2020. Site name: <https://www.childcareaware.org/our-issues/research/ccdc/state/il/>
2. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (2022). Measuring the burden of child care cost. Site name <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/online-and-on-air/blog/measuring-the-burden-of-child-care-costs>
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6. Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (2023). Report creation page. Site name: <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>
7. Native Land Digital (2023). Report creation page. Site Name: <http://native-land.ca>
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9. Partner Plan Act (2023). Collaboration Institute. Site name: <https://www.partnerplanact.org/webdev/collaboration-supports/collaboration-institute>
10. United States Census Data (2023). Explore Census Data. Site name: <https://data.census.gov>
11. United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). Poverty Guidelines. Site name: https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//194391/2020-percentage-poverty-tool.pdf
12. Whitehead, J. (2021). Illinois' early childhood workforce 2020 report. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA. Site name: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

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'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?
9. Tell us about your family.
10. Has lack of access to a reliable vehicle or public transportation kept your family from using resources?
11. Are any of the children currently in your care on a waitlist for child care or preschool? If so, how long have?
12. What have the consequences been of not having reliable, affordable child care?
13. What would be your ideal ECEC situation for your child?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

Appendix C: Additional Resources

1. Partner Plan Act, Illinois Program Inventory Quick Reference Guide:

https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ACTFORCHILDREN/35e7dc4d-525c-45bc-ba2c-48e6466050e3/UploadedImages/Documents/0-5_Illinois_Program_Inventory_Quick_Reference_Guide_9_7_22.pdf

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