



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 47

(Lee, Ogle & Whiteside Counties)



In Partnership with





Region 47 Staff

Regional Council Manager: Abby Hoskins (she/her)
Family & Community Engagement Specialist: Stephanie King (she/her)
Administrative Support: Isabel Cano (she/her)

Office Address: 137 N. Walnut Street, Byron, IL 61010

Phone Number: (309) 393-2541

Email: ahoskins@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region47

Region 47 Action Council Members

Andrea Cossey
Kimberly Crump
Rachael DeSpain
Maggie Fern
Anji Garza
Aaqil Khan
Lisa Lilja
Diana Merdian
Diane Lynn Ott
Lois Meisenheimer
Kris Noble, Member
Krista Peterson
Beth Smaka
Lauren Stafford
Monica Wolfley

Region 47 Family Council Members

Charis Allen
Candace Antczak
Angie Danielson
Sasha Gomes
Jessica Higgins
Brittany Howard
Shayla Johnston
Maggie LaFever
Carly Rodriguez

Table of Contents

Region 47 Executive Summary	3
Region 47 Snapshot Infographic	5
Overview & Acknowledgements	7
Introduction.....	8
Letter from State Leadership	9
Letter from Regional Leadership.....	10
Letter from Sauk Valley STARS Coalition.....	12
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois	13
Timeline.....	15
Birth to Five Illinois Regions	16
Spotlight on Region 47.....	17
Regional Community Landscape.....	18
Local Community Collaborations.....	22
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs	25
Slot Gap.....	28
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce.....	30
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice	33
Regional Strengths & Needs.....	33
Recommendations.....	35
Appendices	38



Region 47 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 47 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 47 is a community that prioritizes improving ECEC programming for children and families in the community. The Region is invested in collaborating with stakeholders from both the ECEC community as well as non-early childhood sectors and is aware of the needed program expansion. While existing programs are well received by families, the Region has a significant slot gap for both publicly funded ECEC programs and child care, which makes programming inaccessible to many families, especially for children under the age of three.



Parents in the Region expressed that child care options are so limited that many families feel they do not have a choice when selecting a program and some parents were even forced to quit their jobs. As stated by a parent in Lee County, “Quality isn’t an option, you just have to take what is available.” Additionally, parents in the Region are encountering obstacles, including transportation barriers or long distances traveled, providers who do not accept Child Care Assistance Program subsidies, high child care costs, language interpretation and translation needs, and lengthy waitlists for publicly funded programs.

Programs in the Region have the desire to expand, but due to an ECEC workforce shortage, programs are struggling to provide services to even their current capacities. ECEC programs are facing recruitment and retention difficulties for both teaching and support staff. While the Region and State are working to create a higher education pipeline for the future workforce, the Region feels that until low pay and limited benefits are remedied, college-level recruitment alone will not solve the issue.

The Action and Family Councils of Region 47 furnished a substantial amount of qualitative data to identify the most significant Early childhood Education and Care needs and proposed recommendations to improve them.

Region 47 Needs

- Increasing ECEC program slots with birth to three-year-old programming as a priority. This would allow for equitable access for all families in the Region who wish to enroll their children.
- Increasing affordable, quality child care or extended day options that allow for equitable access and parent choice for families who need full-day options.
- Increased awareness and education for parents and the community on the importance and availability of ECEC programs in our Region.
- A well-developed, supported ECEC workforce that can sustain the needs listed above.
- Prioritization of parent partnerships and support services that connect families with the ECEC system and strengthen their relationships.

Region 47 Recommendations

- Allocate non-competitive grant funding to support ECEC programs that are tailored to meet the community’s needs. Provide infrastructure support for programs to address space barriers.
- Revise policies related to CCAP so the program works for all families and providers.
- Create and market a modern, simplified Regional Resource guide for caregivers.
- Provide funding that allows for competitive wages and a higher education pipeline for future employees.
- Provide funding and or system support that is needed for Regions to support priority populations.

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

Abby Hoskins (she/her)

Phone Number: (309) 393-2541

Email: ahoskins@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region47



REGION 47 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.



8,878

Children Under the Age of 6 in Region 47



3,455

Children 0-5 at 200% Federal Poverty Level



2,168

Children 0-5 Without Publicly Funded ECEC Slots

32%

Percentage of children ages birth to five who have a slot at a licensed child care center or home

“It all comes back to the workforce. Without an Early Childhood workforce, we cannot expand the programming that families need. The Early Childhood workforce shortage is not only about the low pay, but respect, education, and support play a huge role.” - Action Council Member, Lee County

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

REGION 47 NEEDS

1. Increased ECEC program slots, prioritizing children ages 0-3.
2. Increased affordable, quality child care or extended-day programs.
3. Increased awareness and education on the importance and availability of ECEC programs.
4. A well-developed and supported ECEC workforce.
5. Prioritization of parent/caregiver partnerships and support services.

REGION 47 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Allocate non-competitive grant funding and infrastructure support tailored to meet the community's needs.
2. Revised CCAP policies that work for all families and providers.
3. Create a modern, simplified regional resource guide for caregivers.
4. Provide funding for competitive wages and a higher education pipeline for future employees.
5. Fund and support systems focused on priority populations.



“Our first day care was not a good experience. We didn’t know what to do. I actually quit my job because there were no other options.” - Parent, Ogle 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.

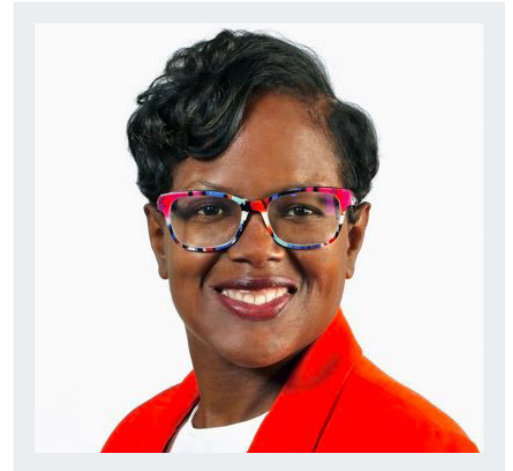
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand 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 must start by thanking the children and families in Region 47, the people and the stories that inspire our work. Completing this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment could not have been possible without our community's help and dedication. We thank the community stakeholders who served as the driving force, volunteering their time, knowledge, and resources as Action Council members. We are grateful for the parents and caregivers who helped us amplify family voice by sharing their time, thoughts, and needs as Family Council members. To both the Action Council and Family Council, thank you for your dedication to the completion of this report. Thank you to the community of Region 47 for engaging with us. With your support, we were able to hold many focus groups and interviews, collect surveys, and interact with numerous people through community conversations.

Thank you to the Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Coalition for partnering with Birth to Five Illinois and for your commitment to collaboration around Early Childhood in our Region. Similarly, thank you to the many organizations that supported our work, shared our resources, and connected us throughout the community. Thank you to the Regional Office of Education 47, Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce, Tri-County Opportunities Council Head Start, 4-C: Community Coordinated Child Care, Local Interagency Council #1, Flagg-Rochelle Community Park District, Sinnissippi Centers, Florissa, and the YWCA Sauk Valley for going above and beyond in sharing connections and spreading awareness of Birth to Five Illinois.

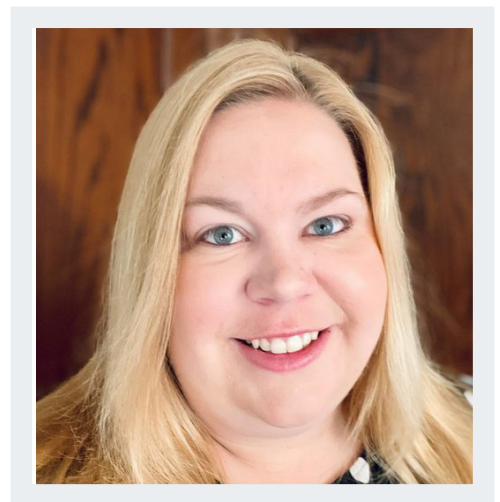
Last but not least, thank you to those who supported the development of Birth to Five Illinois, ensuring our goal of achieving a statewide regional and community system. Thank you to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) for bringing our State and Regional teams together and supporting the foundation of this infrastructure. Thank you to the Birth to Five Illinois State Team who built Birth to Five Illinois from the ground up. Thank you for mentoring our Regional Teams by providing support, guiding the completion of our needs assessment, and ensuring our mission and vision stayed true in our work. Thank you to Illinois Action for Children for providing us with support, coaching, and training that ensured our ability to work best with families and communities while amplifying the importance of equity in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Thank you,

Abby Hoskins (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 47

Birth to Five Illinois



Letter from Sauk Valley STARS Coalition

The Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Education Coalition would like to thank Birth to Five Illinois for including the Coalition as a partner in the development of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment. As you will read in this report, the rich and strong history of the STARS Coalition has uniquely prepared this Region for future innovations in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Throughout our history, which goes back to 1989, many projects have been implemented to address the Region's identified needs. In January 2021, the Coalition was fortunate to receive assistance from the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development to pilot the IRIS Coordinated Intake Platform in our Region. Also, during this time, the Coalition began working on a Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project (CBP) with Illinois Action for Children. These two projects provided the funding and support that boosted our regional collaboration work to the next level and uniquely positioned us for this collaboration with Birth to Five Illinois.

The Coalition is excited that this partnership with Birth to Five Illinois will support and expand our work in the future, including the sharing of resources. Already, guidance and input from the Region 47 Family Council has helped focus the work of the Coalition and amplify family voice when prioritizing new projects.



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.

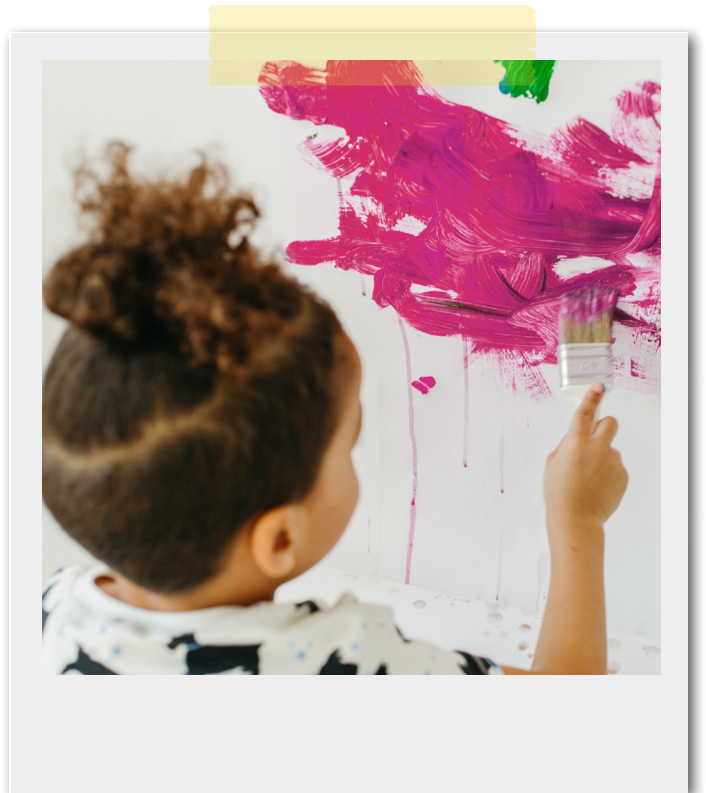
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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



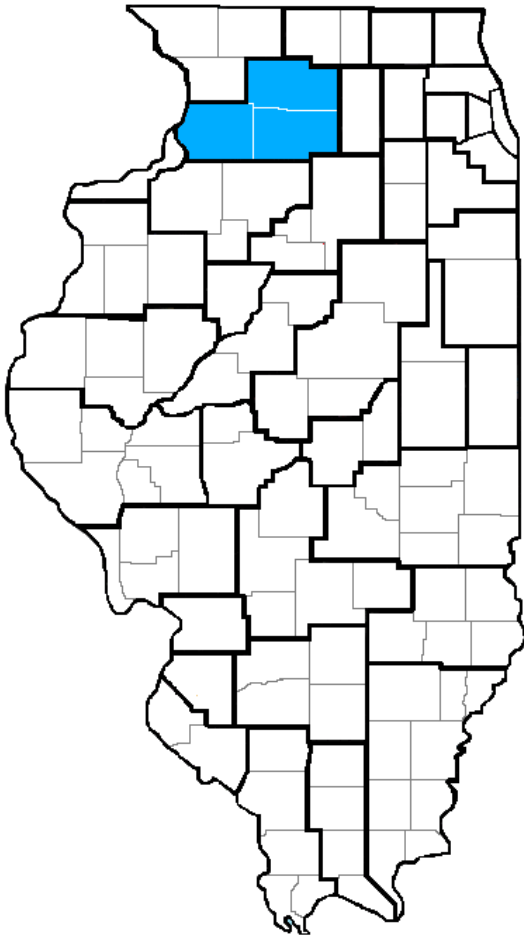
Timeline

- **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



Spotlight on Region 47

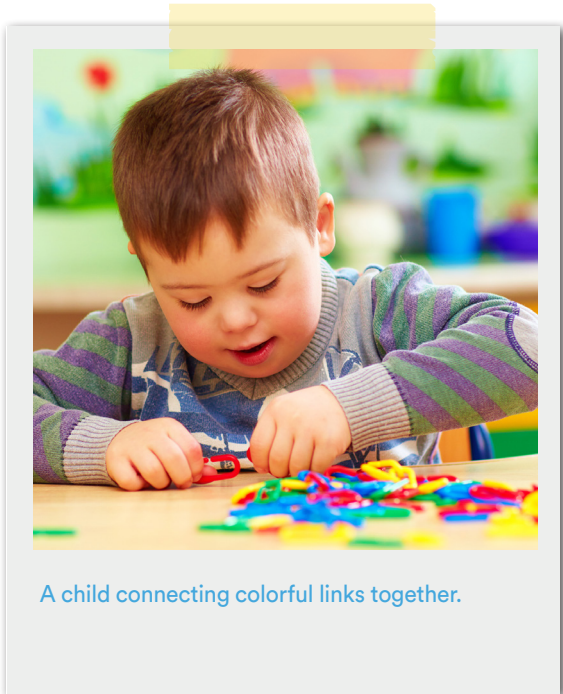
Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 47 is comprised of Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside Counties. Situated in northwest Illinois, with the Rock River connecting all three counties, residents and visitors can enjoy a scenic view while traveling down Route 2. Whether stopping to observe the Blackhawk Statue in Oregon, the bison in the Nachusa Grasslands, or visiting the Twin Cities Farmers Market, the Region is rich with history, nature, and local pride. Manufacturing, along with agriculture, is a major part of the Region’s economic landscape. Sterling, a city that has been known as “The Hardware Capital of the World” for its steel mills, is an example of the Region’s strong ties to manufacturing. While parts of the Region employ residents, it is also notable that many towns within Region 47 are “bedroom communities,” where many residents commute elsewhere to work, even out of their county.

While the Region’s population is small in scale, there is a large sense of community. With the three counties combined, Region 47’s territory spans 2,166 square miles, painting the picture of how rural and spread out the Region is (2020 Census). The Region is comprised of small cities, townships, villages, and several unincorporated communities. The larger hub cities of the three counties include Dixon (Lee), Rochelle (Ogle), and Sterling/Rock Falls (Whiteside). A Region that prides itself on events like Fiesta Days and Fiesta Hispana is not only working to welcome young families but also all cultures.



A child connecting colorful links together.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 47 is also known as the Oθaakiiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk) Valley. It is important we acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of Native Peoples past and present and honor with gratitude the land and Tribes. The Indigenous Peoples who call this land home include the Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Oθaakiiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk), Meškwahki·aša·hina (Fox), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Peoria, Myaamia (Miami), and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux).

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

Partnership with Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Education Coalition

Region 47 partners with the Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Education Coalition, the Region’s long-established Early Childhood Collaboration, to develop an Action Council that continues to support and expand upon the work already started in our Region. Along with the Regional Office of Education 47, the STARS Coalition works to plan, provide, and promote a comprehensive and collaborative system that identifies, coordinates, and facilitates equitable access to early education and community services designed to help all children, prenatal through age five, and their families reach their full potential.

The STARS Coalition has strong roots in addressing Early Childhood needs in our Region and participated in the Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project with Illinois Action for Children the year before Birth to Five Illinois started. Through Community-Based Planning, the STARS Coalition worked with various community stakeholders to address Early Childhood needs in our Region and plan for expansion.

Together, Birth to Five Illinois and Sauk Valley STARS were able to complete this report. Findings from Community-Based Planning, along with this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment developed in partnership with our Action and Family Councils, provides us with a thorough and unique needs assessment. Through our partnership, we were able to use the STARS Coalition’s knowledge and collaboration to examine recommendations in action and where our Region stands today.

Regional Demographics

Region 47’s total population is 141,000, 8,878 of whom are children from birth to age six (Figure 1). While most of the Region is white (Figure 2), there is a significant number of people who identify as Hispanic or Latine living in Rochelle (Ogle County) and Sterling/Rock Falls (Whiteside County).

Figure 1: Number of Children Under Age Six

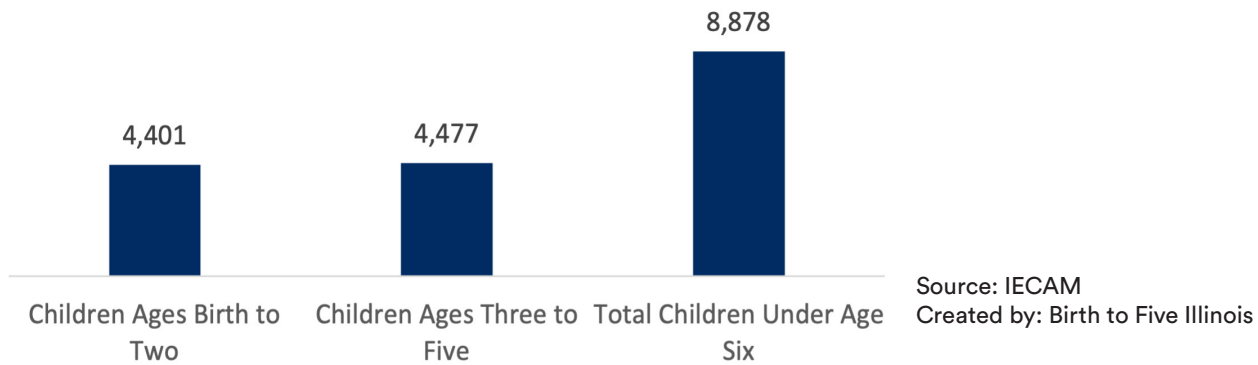
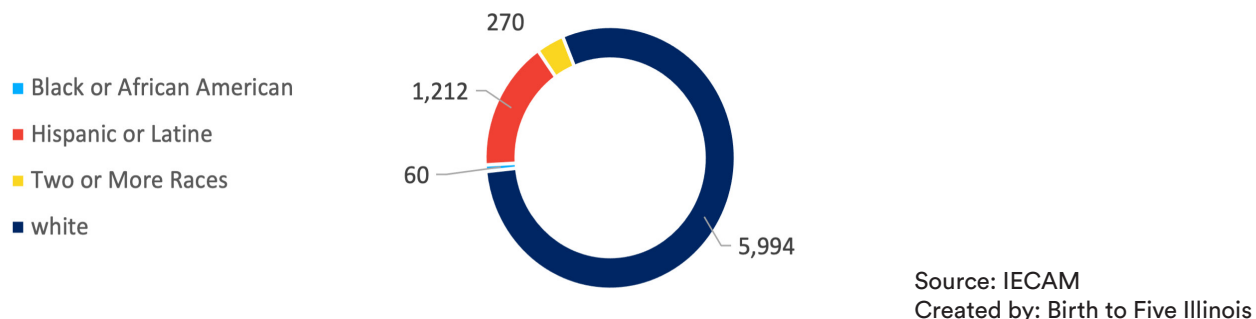


Figure 2: Children Under Six by Race, Ethnicity



Children & Families in Priority Populations

Families in greater need of support and services should be prioritized; these families are referred to as priority populations, as defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council.² Data on families who are in priority populations is not widely available, which makes parent and community collaboration and input extremely important to ensure the Region is equitably meeting the needs of all families. While this data is limited, qualitative data was gathered from the community and is included in the report. In a fair and equitable system, underserved populations should receive extra services to flourish. Community stakeholders identified families who experience barriers based on culture and language, families living on poverty-level or deep poverty-level income, families who are experiencing homelessness, children with disabilities, and families living in rural areas (as defined by our community) as priority populations in Region 47.

Families Who Face Barriers Based on Culture & Language

Data indicates a growing Hispanic/Latine population in Ogle and Whiteside Counties, as well as individuals of Two or More Races. Of the Region’s population of children under age six, 16% are Latine. Additionally, 1% of households are limited-English households speaking Spanish, highlighting a need for Hispanic/Latine representation and Spanish interpretation and translation (Figure 3). While finding data is difficult, based on community conversations we know there are families with limited English proficiency who speak other languages, including Arabic, Chuj, Czech, Polish, and Portuguese.

Figure 3: Number of Limited English-Speaking Households by Language, County

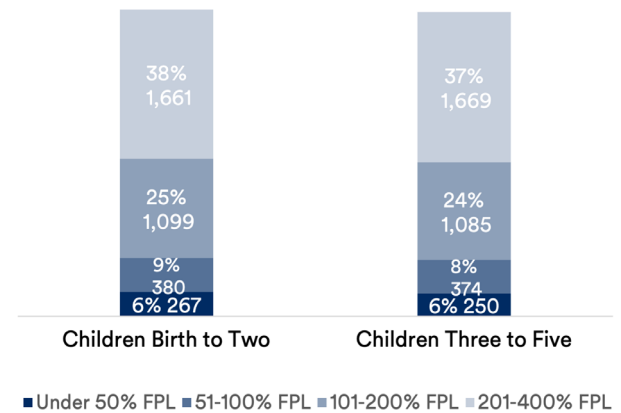
County	Number of Limited English-Speaking Households, Spanish	Number of Limited English-Speaking Households, Other Languages
Lee	44	26
Ogle	452	57
Whiteside	255	69
Region Total	751	152

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Families Living on Poverty-Level Income

Of the 8,878 children aged five and under living in the Region, 14% live in households with income below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and 25% live in households with income between 100 to 200% FPL (Figure 4). FPL is a measure of household income levels issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and is used by state and federal programs as a determining factor for families’ eligibility for services. While some areas of the Region have a slightly higher percentage of children under 200% FPL, most of the Region has at least 20 to 50% of children in this demographic, highlighting the need for programming that is accessible throughout the entire Region. Many programs recognize that families living at or below 200% FPL are in greater need of support and services and should be prioritized.

Figure 4: Children Under 6 by Age by Federal Poverty Level



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children

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

Figure 5: Federal Poverty Levels at 100%, 138%, 150%, 200%, 400% at Various Household Sizes

Household Size	100%	138%	150%	200%	400%
1	\$12,760	\$17,609	\$19,140	\$25,520	\$51,040
2	\$17,240	\$23,791	\$25,860	\$34,480	\$68,960
3	\$21,720	\$29,974	\$32,580	\$43,440	\$86,880
4	\$26,200	\$36,156	\$39,300	\$52,400	\$104,800

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

In the Region, 74% (6,595 children) of children aged five and under are living in households with all their caregivers working (Figure 6). Region 47 is a working community, and there is a need for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for children while caregivers are at work. Though most households are working, many families are still without access to economic resources and face significant barriers.

Figure 6: Children in Homes with All Parents Working



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Families Experiencing Homelessness

Data on children experiencing homelessness, especially age five and under, is limited, and the definition of homelessness varies from program to program. The 2020 Kindergarten data shows 12 students who were experiencing homelessness (Figure 7). Qualitative data gathered from community stakeholder conversations indicate that the number of children experiencing homelessness is much higher. Most recent data provided by Head Start and Parents as Teachers includes 20 children served without a home. School districts also report students experiencing homelessness, but the data is for the entire district and not specific to early childhood students. Additionally, many families do not report experiencing homelessness due to stigma and fear of the loss of school or services for their children.

“ There is also a fear among families in reaching out for help. Some fear they will be kicked out of school or have other repercussions.
 - Community Stakeholder (Ogle County) ”

Figure 7: Children Experiencing Homelessness, with IEPs, and Limited English Proficiency by County

County	Number of Children Experiencing Homelessness	Number of Children with IEPs	Number of Children with Limited English Proficiency
Lee	4	42	10
Ogle	4	79	42
Whiteside	4	99	25

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children with Disabilities

In Region 47, children with disabilities, which can be counted by those with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), are a prioritized population. In the Region, there were 217 Kindergarten students and 156 Preschool for All students who had an IEP to assist with learning in the classroom. According to data from the Erikson Risk and Reach Report, 176 children age three and under qualified for Early Intervention services in 2019, and 2020 IECAM data shows 132 children receiving the services.

Families Living in Rural Areas

Much of Region 47 meets the Census' definition of a rural area and has a population of 5,000 or fewer. Although rural communities are not listed by the State as a priority population, living in a rural community has an impact on a family's needs. Conversations with both the Family Council and Action Council highlighted that families living in a rural community face barriers related to resources and support, including education, care, and transportation.

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

“ He has had an IEP through school. He was in early preschool for two years and now he is in Kindergarten. I'm excited about the services we put in place and the progress he has made, but the struggle has been figuring out what those services were. How do we get them? How do we afford them? What is working and what is not? So that was the struggle, looking back.

- Parent (Lee County)

”

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are community agencies, organizations, and individuals that come together with a shared vision or goal and are an integral part of the overall Early Childhood Landscape. Early Childhood Collaborations understand the importance of improving education and care for children, parents, and providers. Region 47's Local Early Childhood Collaboration, the Sauk Valley STARS, covers all three counties and is recognized by Illinois Action for Children. The STARS Collaboration started in 1989 in Whiteside County when a relationship between the Regional Office of Education and the 10 school districts in the county was first established. In 2004, the partnership was formalized and expanded to include other community agencies that support ECEC programs; it expanded again in 2014 to include providers in Lee and Ogle County. The Collaboration has a strong history of working to improve equitable access for children and families in Region 47.



Birth to Five Illinois Action Council members and Birth to Five Illinois Team members, Abby and Stephanie.

Through slot gap and needs assessment work, goals were identified to address challenges and barriers faced by families trying to access ECEC services. Coalition partner agencies have used the work of the Collaboration and the Community-Based Planning for Expansion (CBP) project's plan to access additional funding to increase awareness of, and enrollment in, ECEC programs, to provide new and expanded early childhood services in the Region, and to continue to develop and strengthen relationships between traditional and non-traditional partners. Through the CBP project and Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS), the Region's collaborative relationships were considerably strengthened and have grown to include other non-traditional partners, such as local businesses. IRIS allows the Region to refer families to needed services; organizations can connect those they serve to the resources in their community. Having a strong referral system sets the framework to support all families and connect them with ECEC programs; the next step is addressing the need for more programming.

“ The Regional Office of Education 47, who chairs the STARS Collaboration, has successfully implemented a marketing and recruitment grant to educate families on Early Childhood opportunities in the area.

- Action Council Member ”

“

We have now had over 1,000 referrals from either our Coordinated Intake person on behalf of the family, the schools, or healthcare making referrals. In IRIS, they can go in and say what the parents qualify for and match them with what would be the best once the referral is made. It is getting easier for families and providers.

-Action Council Member

”

The STARS Collaboration has strong representation from publicly funded programs and the Regional Office of Education but is still working to increase participation from child care providers. Support and human service agencies, such as healthcare, the Health Department, Early Intervention, and the Child Care Resource and Referral also participate in the Collaboration. Understanding that Early Childhood also impacts the business community, the Chamber of Commerce also participates. The STARS Collaboration also works to obtain grants and both community and state-level support to achieve ECEC goals, which include equitable access to ECEC programs and an innovative program model that provides comprehensive services to families and identifying and supporting ECEC grantees.

“

The Regional Office of Education 47 (STARS Chair) has provided support for Early Childhood in the Region via a Coordinated Intake Specialist, Early Childhood Coach, Family, and Community Engagement Specialist, and as a Gateways Approved provider to support workforce development and credentialing.

-Action Council Member

”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC programs provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences, socialization, support services, and care for families. Region 47’s ECEC landscape includes a variety of child care and publicly funded education and care programs for children birth to age five, but programming is not accessible to all families nor meets everyone’s needs. Availability of services, cost, program hours, and transportation are all barriers for families seeking education and care for their young children.

Child care programs include for-profit and non-profit licensed child care centers, licensed family child care (home-based), and license-exempt home- and center-based programs. The Region has many home-based family child care providers spread across the counties. While child care centers have a large capacity, the number and their locations are more limited, concentrated in populated areas (Figure 9). There are many areas with no center-based programs, and there are not enough spots in licensed family child care programs, creating child care deserts.

Figure 8: Number of Licensed, License-Exempt Child Care Sites, Capacity

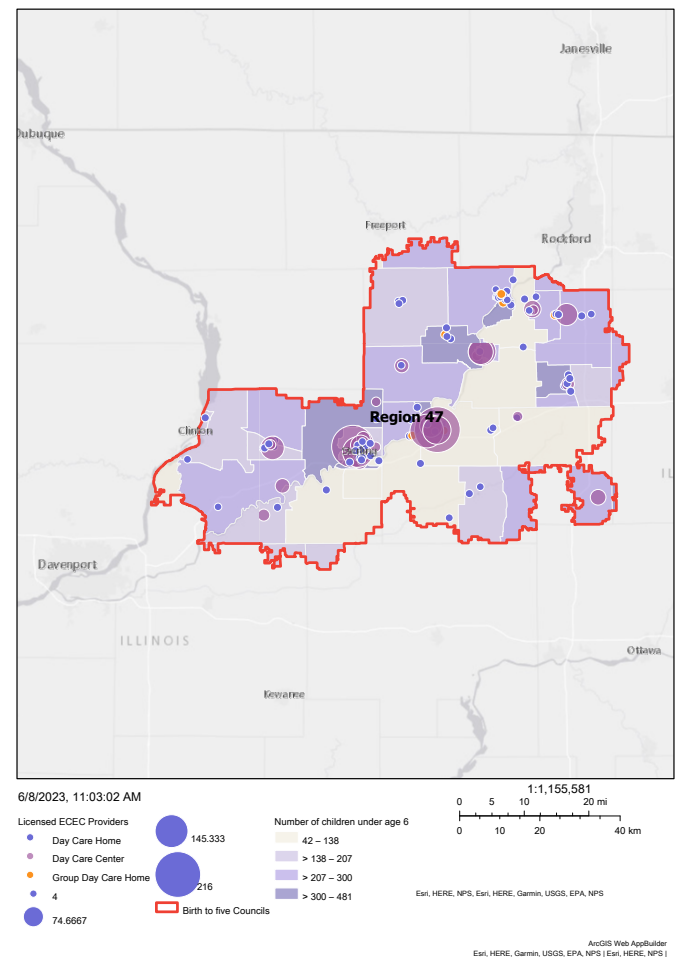
Program Type	Number of Sites	Capacity
Licensed Child Care Center	20	1,484
Licensed Family Care Home	100	982
License Exempt Care Center	6	342

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The median annual cost of child care in the Region is \$11,370 which is 16% of the median income for the Region. Families with limited access to resources who qualify can apply for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which subsidizes child care costs for families. However, not many providers in the Region do not accept the subsidy payment, forcing parents and caregivers who need the support to pay out of pocket or travel additional lengths to find a provider who does.

“ Finding a provider is impossible in our community, so we now have to travel to Rockford (another Region) to have child care. - Parent (Ogle County) ”

Figure 9: Location of Licensed Child Care Programs, Number of Children Under Age Six



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Region 47 has publicly funded ECEC programs available for children birth to age five. These programs are funded through state or federal sources and are free to qualifying families. Qualifications for these programs are unique to each but prioritize income and level of need. Programs also differ by age groups, breaking programming for children into groups from birth to age three and ages three to five. Healthy Families Illinois (funded by Prevention Initiative and Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Home Visiting) and Parents as Teachers First Years (funded by Prevention Initiative) are two options for children birth to three (Figure 11). These programs offer families a home visiting option, which provides both child and parent education. Home visiting is a versatile option in that it also serves families who may not wish to enroll their children in a center-based setting or who choose to stay home with their children.

Head Start also has a large presence in Region 47. The program offers ECEC options to children birth to age three through Early Head Start in addition to its programming for children aged three to five. Early Head Start and Head Start offer home visiting as well as center-based learning and care with half-day and extended-day options.

“Parents As Teachers has been a great program for our family. All three of my children were preemies, and one thing I have learned is usually by two they all catch up.”
- Parent (Whiteside County)

age three who qualify based on a developmental delay, Early Intervention provides therapy to support early growth and development. Early Intervention therapy takes place in the child’s natural environment, which is typically their home but can be their child care environment as well.

In addition to child care and publicly funded ECEC programs, the Region has many private tuition-based preschools. These preschools are both licensed and non-licensed, and while some are center based, the majority are part of a religious institution. These programs are part-day and emphasize education and socialization, not child care. They offer an additional option for families who do not qualify or choose not to utilize publicly funded or child care programs; they also offer an option for families who wish to engage with the faith community. Contrarily, due to cost, limited capacities, or family beliefs, while a great addition, these programs do not address the gap in ECEC programs for all families in the Region.

Figure 10: Number of Licensed and License-Exempt Providers Accepting CCAP

Program Type	Accepting CCAP
Licensed Child Care Center	15
Licensed Family Care Home	70
License Exempt Care Center	2
License Exempt Family Child Care Home	60

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 11: Number of Publicly Funded Programs, Capacity by Program Type

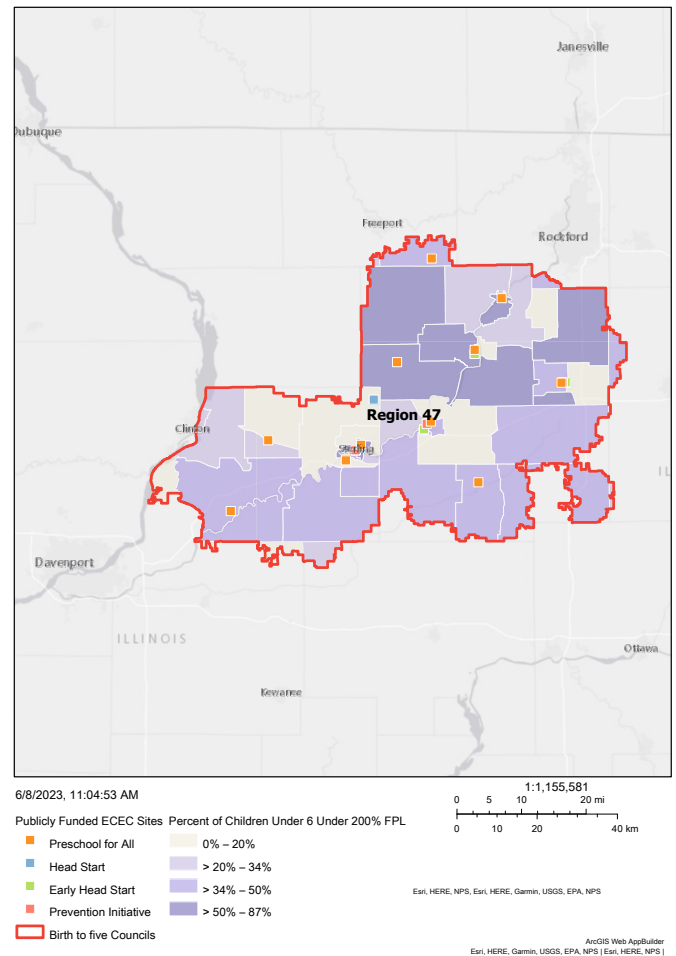
Publicly Funded Program	Number of Sites	Capacity
Early Head Start	4	53
Head Start	5	223
Prevention Initiative	2	155
Preschool for All	11	794
Preschool for All Expansion	0	0
IDHS Home Visiting	1	60

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool for All (PFA) is an Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)-funded program available to children ages three to five. The Region’s PFA programs are provided through public school districts and are part-day programs that typically last two and a half hours. PFA also provides children who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with special education services and therapy for children ages three to five. For children birth to

The Region has many great programs that provide education and support to children and families in their growth, development, and Kindergarten readiness, but there is not equitable access for all families. Programs have waitlists due to all spots being filled, staffing shortages, or limited facility space. Additionally, with Region 47’s rural landscape spanning over 2,000 square miles, these programs are not close to many families; they are often 20 miles or more away (Figure 12). Beyond the distance, many programs will not enroll children who live in other towns or outside school district lines. Living in a rural area can present barriers for families’ access to ECEC, including transportation and program hours. ECEC programs are in the most populated areas, requiring long-distance travel for some families. Transportation provided by programs is rare, and public transportation is even more limited.

Figure 12: Location of Publicly Funded Programs, Children at or Below 200% FPL



“ Every morning I am in multiple counties and multiple cities. Since we are in a small rural area, we are not like big cities. We don’t have public transportation that’s just waiting for us. - Parent (Whiteside County) ”

Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Many families desire to enroll their children in Preschool for All programs, but due to the programs being part-day, with zero full-day options, it is not feasible for working families who need full-day programs or wrap-around care options. As discovered by the Sauk Valley STARS, “There are only 25% of eligible children being served and ECEC programs don’t always meet the needs of families because they need full-day programming. Additionally, these programs in the Region generally operate with a waitlist; sometimes there are kids about 80 deep on a waitlist.” Head Start does offer extended hours with openings but has narrower income guidelines compared to other programs, so not all families qualify.

Child care also does not meet all families’ needs if they work non-traditional hours or if, because of distance, they cannot pick their children up before closing hours. Some families cannot access programming due to long waitlists and not enough open spots or “slots” for their children.

“ Quality isn’t an option; you just have to take what is available.” - Parent (Lee County) ”

Understanding the importance of the ECEC programs landscape is important so parents and caregivers understand their options and so providers can work to meet the needs of families. Families not having affordable access to high-quality ECEC is not adequate. Community stakeholders agree and have continuously been working to address shortfalls and improve programming options in the Region.

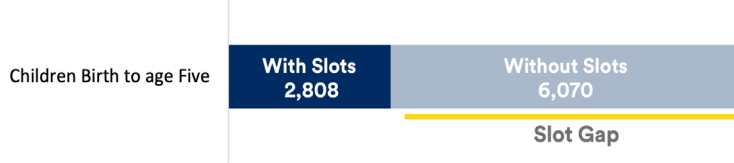
Slot Gap

Region 47 has a considerable slot gap for children ages birth to five. A slot is a term used in ECEC that signifies how many children can attend a program based on funding and capacity. A slot gap is when there are more children eligible for enrollment in an ECEC program than there are actual enrollment slots. The number of slots or the slot gap does not account for parent and caregiver choice; it is strictly the number of available spots versus the number of eligible children in the Region. Parent choice should always be prioritized, as families may choose not to engage with the formalized ECEC system. Data collected through community conversations with parents, caregivers, and stakeholders found that in Region 47 there is a significant number of families who want their children enrolled in ECEC programs but cannot because there are not enough slots available.

“ We have been on lists for child care centers since I was 16 weeks pregnant, and we have never gotten a call from them (child currently 17 months old).
- Parent (Lee County) ”

“ How many providers will accept assistance? When I went looking for a preschool for my son, it was a challenge. There wasn't any place around. My son qualifies but there isn't anything.
- Parent (Lee County) ”

Figure 13: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap

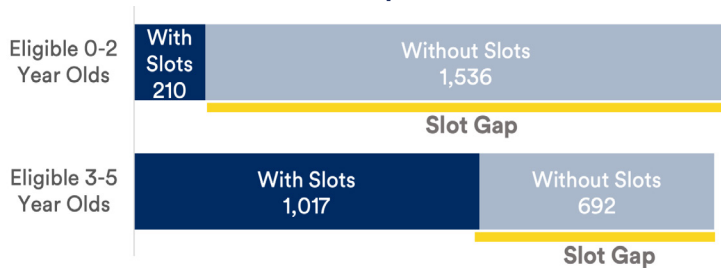


Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There are 6,070 children ages birth to five without a child care slot in a licensed child care center, licensed family child care (home provider), or a license-exempt child care program (Figure 13). While not every family will choose to enroll their child in child care, 68% of children not having a spot is substantial. Additionally, many providers will not accept the child care subsidy, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), creating even more of a barrier for families who need affordable care.

In the Region, there are 2,168 eligible children who are without available publicly funded programming (Figure 14). Publicly funded programs are ECEC programs such as Prevention Initiative (funded by ISBE), Early Head Start and Head Start (federally funded), and Preschool for All (funded by ISBE). The slot gap is nearly double for children birth to age three.

Figure 14: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

These gaps were acknowledged during the Region’s Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project in 2021/2022. The project, led by Illinois Action for Children and the Sauk Valley STARS Coalition, brought together community stakeholders to examine both the gaps that exist in the Region and conduct a thorough assessment of the areas of highest need. The group developed a plan to increase slots, identified possible schools and collaborating agencies that could support expansion, and set a strategic plan to execute and monitor the plan. Over the year, the slot gap for children under age three decreased by 3%, and for children 3-5 it decreased by 8%. The STARS Coalition continues to work on narrowing the gap and monitors the Region’s funded slots and current enrollment on a regular basis.

For families who wish to enroll their child in an educational program or child care center or home, not having access to programming presents challenges for the entire community and can impact their child's Kindergarten readiness. Families seeking enrollment may be doing so to support their needs as a working family or provide their child with an early childhood education to prepare them for Kindergarten. While ECEC can have positive impacts on a child's development, it is also important to note that parenting, education at home, and a child's social network can also prepare a child.

Kindergarten readiness refers to a child's acquisition of the developmental and social skills to adapt to a Kindergarten classroom. KIDS (Kindergarten Individual Development Survey) data reports that the average percentage of Kindergarteners in Region 47 demonstrating readiness in all three developmental domains is only 32%. Only 23% of Kindergarteners who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch demonstrate readiness, which is significant because these children live in families with incomes at 185% FPL, which is also a qualifying factor for many publicly funded ECEC programs.

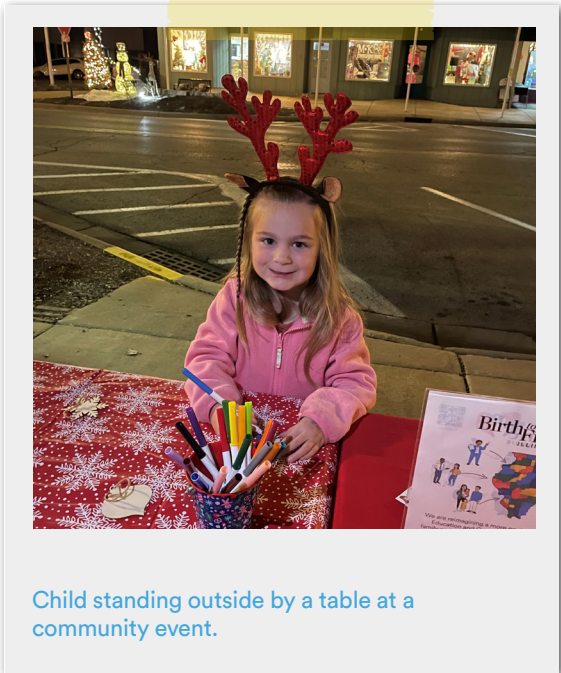
Preschool readiness also impacts children and families. While early childhood programs for three- to five-year-olds prepare children for Kindergarten, infant toddler programs prepare children for preschool. The slot gap for children under age two is correlated with risk factors for children and families that are not often realized or acknowledged until children are three or older and enrolled in programming. Enrollment for children ages birth to three is not only beneficial, but also often includes parental education. Access to programs and parent education offers caregivers resources and support for their child's growth, development, and an educational foundation that prepares them for preschool and beyond.

Finally, the lack of program slots significantly impacts families and the local economy. Without ECEC options, many parents and caregivers are leaving the workforce to stay home with their children.

“ I decided to be a stay-at-home mom because I was on a waitlist. I was debating but when I was calling around for a newborn and there weren't any spots available.
-Family Council Member (Ogle County) ”

Understanding the slot gap is a crucial part of creating an accessible and equitable ECEC system in Region 47. Providing parents and caregivers with education on the importance of ECEC encourages them to enroll, which provides a better count of how many families are truly seeking care and education and helps advocate for the need for additional slots. Knowing how many children need ECEC allows the Region's providers to create a plan for addressing these shortfalls.

“ There is a definite difference between children who come to Kindergarten and attended Pre-K. Some children need more than two years of preschool, but many families cannot enroll their children in preschool let alone birth to two programs.
-Focus Group Participant, School District Teacher (Whiteside County) ”



Child standing outside by a table at a community event.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Region 47 has a significant demand for a larger ECEC workforce. The workforce shortage is one of the main reasons programs cannot enroll to their capacity or expand. It impacts families' access to child care, which affects many aspects of their life, including employment options. Caregivers who need child care struggle to balance family needs and work responsibilities without consistent, convenient, and quality child care. Families who choose to stay home with their children or utilize non-center-based care but wish to enroll in home visiting or other ECEC services, may not receive the programming in which they want their children to participate.

The workforce shortage is most severe in child care and Head Start programs, but school districts are also feeling impacts. The workforce shortage includes support staff needed for programming, and programs also rely on those who provide transportation, meal service, and administrative support, as well as nurses, home visitors, and therapists to provide well-rounded programming.

Community members revealed many reasons why people are not entering the ECEC workforce and why current staff are leaving the field. The Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies' (INCCRRA) 2021 Child Care Salary Profiles reports the median annual salary for all child care occupations in Region 47, which includes teachers, assistants, and administrators, is \$25,133, significantly lower than the Region's median salary of \$33,300. The community also reports a lack of fringe benefits, value, and support. Providers indicated they feel undervalued due to a lack of recognition and appreciation for their work. The community also recognized the demanding nature of this profession; educators and providers need career resources and support to succeed. With constantly changing expectations but little change in pay, benefits, and resources, the Action Council agreed it is understandable why individuals are leaving the ECEC field. When providers do recruit, barriers tied to state-level policies, like waiting on background check clearances and license approvals, deter new staff from entering the field.

“ For two years, the Tri County Opportunities Council Head Start program has worked to open, serve, and support the community of Paw Paw. The only thing preventing us from doing that is a lack of staff.
- Action Council Member ”

“ There is a lot of funding for individuals who want to pursue higher education as it relates to early childhood education, however, I think the bigger issue is people lose interest the more they find out about just how much it takes to be a great early childhood educator and the pay... There's a lot that goes into the work that we do. We need to change how we value teachers.
-Action Council Member ”

Region 47's community has come together to work towards a solution to this issue. The Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce created a Child Care Taskforce initiative that brings multiple stakeholders together to address the shortage locally. The Taskforce is comprised of local child care, Head Start, the Regional Office of Education, the Child Care Resource and Referral, Sauk Valley Community College, and multiple local businesses and Human Resource representatives. They are working to define the existing problems at the local and state level, create and execute an action plan that can be put into place locally, and connecting with legislators and elected officials to work towards solutions at the state level.



A family sitting in a forest gazing ahead.

Region 47 has also been working to address career development and providing the community with training and higher education opportunities. The Regional Office of Education has engaged in work to implement Education Pathway Endorsement programs in its 24 public school districts to grow early interest, career exploration, work-based learning, and credentialing to increase the regional pipeline for education and early childhood. Sauk Valley Community College has seen an increase in enrollment, which can be attributed to the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship and the college’s recruitment efforts. The Child Care Resource and Referral also provides a Higher Education Navigator who works in conjunction with the college’s ECE Academic Advisor and Outreach Coordinator (both funded through the temporary ECACE grant). The college’s ECE program is on track to achieving the enrollment growth goals set by the State and supported by the ECACE legislation.

The Action Council recognized that while increasing the workforce is a priority, it is also important to prioritize quality, which includes educated and supported professionals. Publicly funded programs have more stringent guidelines on staff

Figure 15: Highest Level of Education of Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Providers³

Position	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor’s Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Director	*	0	*	14	19	*
Teaching Staff	116	11	22	63	29	*
FCC Provider ⁴	85	*	9	18	12	*

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

education levels; the data shows much lower required education levels for child care professionals. Most child care administrators have an associate or bachelor’s degree (Figure 15), but most teaching staff and family child care providers do not have a college degree.

The community acknowledged the need to diversify the ECEC workforce, as it does not represent all communities in Region 47. Most child care staff and administrators in the Region are white with a small percentage of Hispanic/Latine staff (Figure 16), and the same is true for publicly funded programs. There is a need for more bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) educator-qualified staff to serve Spanish-speaking children and their families. While the largest population of Spanish-speaking children reside in Rochelle (Ogle) and Sterling/Rock Falls (Whiteside), there are Spanish-speaking families throughout the entire Region. Finding qualified staff to support these students in Rochelle and Sterling/Rock Falls is difficult and even more difficult in the smaller, more rural school districts

³Cells with an asterisk * indicate the number of respondents was less than five but more than zero.

⁴Includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floaters, other direct service providers, and other indirect service providers.

Figure 16: Percentage of ECEC Workforce by Race and Ethnicity

Position	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Multi-Racial	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, Other	White
Licensed Center Directors	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	97%
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	0%	< 1%	7%	< 1%	< 1%	91%
Licensed Family Child Care Providers	0%	0%	< 1%	< 1%	0%	98%

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Parents who only speak Spanish have a hard time connecting when it comes to their children’s education because interpretation is not always available. They often rely on their own children for help, which isn’t fair to the parent or child.”

- Community Stakeholder
 (Whiteside County)

and programs. As stated by the Action Council multiple times “It all comes back to the workforce.” The ECEC system cannot reach its full potential without a workforce to support it, and larger systems solutions tied to funding and policymaking are also needed.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Each family has unique wants and needs when it comes to their involvement with ECEC. While some families may have little to no engagement, it is crucial to determine whether this is due to personal preference or accessibility challenges. Listening to each family's needs and priorities is essential to establishing a solid foundation for engaging with parents, caregivers, and families.

In Region 47, parents and caregivers agreed that publicly funded ECEC programs are of high quality and contribute to their child's growth and development. However, the feedback only came from families who were eligible and able to access these programs. Those who were still on waitlists, needed full-day care, or had trouble securing a slot had less positive feedback. While many parents who utilized licensed child care programs expressed that they were happy with their center or provider, some caregivers did share negative experiences. They felt that due to long waitlists and slot gaps, they had little choice when it came to quality and were compelled to choose a program based solely on availability. Much of their frustration stemmed from inconsistencies due to staffing shortages and the high cost of care.

“ The Family Council is important to me. There is a lot that needs to be said. There are a lot of gaps in the system, and I'm hoping that sharing my own experience will help in some way. ”
- Parent (Ogle County)

“ We did not have the best experience with our first child. We didn't know what to do. I actually quit my job because there were no other options. ”
- Parent (Ogle County)



Parent (left) and child (right) kneeling next to a baby goat (center) at a library event.

Families are facing difficult situations where they feel forced to choose a provider that may not have been the setting, location, or level of quality they ideally want. Due to high costs, providers not accepting subsidy payments, or limited slots, caregivers indicated that they sometimes feel forced to choose a provider that has an immediate opening and fits their budget and schedule. Families are also relying on family or friends, utilizing non-licensed care, working non-traditional shifts, or leaving the workforce. Moreover, families with children with disabilities face even more limited options.

“ Families with children with high-level needs have zero options in the Region. If their child has a disability, such as a feeding tube or limited mobility, no child care center can provide care. What are these families supposed to do? ”
- Community Member

Parents shared various reasons families struggle to engage with ECEC, including barriers to participation, the need for a simplified system, and the desire for greater parent impact. They also shared they are not always aware of engagement opportunities and want opportunities to interact with other families.

Families who opt for non-center-based programs or choose to stay home with their children often struggle to find additional socialization opportunities. Additionally, limited public transportation and the distance to resources poses challenges for transportation to and from programs or events. Families who speak a language other than English, such as Spanish, often do not have access to adequate interpretation and translation support. Parents and caregivers cited the lengthy wait times for children to be screened and provided resources as factors impacting their engagement with ECEC programs.

Families experiencing homelessness often encounter difficulties engaging with ECEC programs, as proof of address is often required. Not all families are comfortable disclosing that they are experiencing homelessness due to the negative stigma associated with it, and some fear that their older children enrolled in school may be considered out of district. The cost of child care or private preschool is another obstacle for families who do not qualify for publicly funded programs or need full-day options.

Parents also brought to light the challenges of navigating the complex ECEC system. Caregivers expressed their desire for a simplified, easy to access and understand system, since different programs have varying income thresholds, paperwork, and enrollment requirements. They rely mostly on word-of-mouth recommendations and want to be able to conduct their own research online. However, they face frustrations with ECEC engagement when programs lack websites or social media pages with adequate information, require personal information to receive details, or have offices located outside of their county. The community also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of input they have in ECEC improvement efforts, as their opinions are often disregarded or do not result in significant changes.

“ You can only fill out a survey so many times and not see results before you lose interest in participating.
- Parent
(Whiteside County) ”

It is crucial to establish an ECEC system in the Region that encourages parent partnership, so that all families who wish to engage feel welcome and supported. Families seek parental education and engagement with other families, and it is vital to ensure parents are aware of all available program options. A comprehensive marketing and outreach plan is essential to achieving this goal.

“ The question is how do parents know they are eligible for services? Our early childhood people have to do a better job marketing those eligibility requirements.
- Community Member ”

Regional Strengths & Needs

Strengths

Region 47 has a history of prioritizing ECEC, which naturally alludes to its many strengths. The Region also continuously strives for collective impact and works to collaborate with multiple stakeholder groups to ensure ECEC is prioritized. The community's summarized and prioritized list of strengths includes:

- Partnerships within the communities that have a shared commitment to improving ECEC. This strong sense of community includes multi-stakeholder collaboration, which also includes participants outside of the ECEC field.
- A well-developed ECEC expansion plan, stemming from the Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project, that includes additional supports needed for providers and parents/caregivers.
- The Regional Office of Education, which chairs the Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Collaboration, has a dedicated team that works to grow Early Childhood by building community partnerships, providing quality improvement supports, and educating and informing the community.
- Multiple stakeholders who are willing and able to acquire grant funds that have allowed for marketing ECEC programs, Coordinated Intake, and family and community engagement. The outcomes of these grants have demonstrated how a community can succeed when they have a well-developed plan along with the resources and funding needed to execute it.
- Quality ECEC programs for families who are eligible and able to access publicly funded slots.

Needs

Region 47 has demonstrated strength in recognizing the needs of the ECEC system. As established in this report, there are several areas where improvements can be made, including those that are currently underway through the Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project. The community's summarized and prioritized list of needs includes:

- Increasing ECEC program slots with birth to three-year-old programming as a priority. This would allow for equitable access for all families in the Region who wish to enroll their children.
- Increasing affordable, quality child care or extended day options in the Region that allow for equitable access and parent choice for families who need full-day options.
- Increased awareness and education for parents and the community on the importance and availability of ECEC programs in our Region.
- A well-developed and supported ECEC workforce that can sustain the needs listed above.
- Prioritization of parent/caregiver partnerships and support services that connect families with the ECEC system and strengthen their relationships. These services include:
 - Transportation.
 - Interpretation and translation support.
 - Timely access to developmental screenings and Early Intervention.
 - Awareness and expanded support services for children with disabilities and their families/caregivers.
 - Affordability or economic resources.
 - Housing.
 - A continuous outlet for families to share their voices.

Recommendations

Recommendations were developed based on the identified ECEC strengths and needs in Region 47. The recommendations are comprehensive, considering both local and State responsibilities and the previously established Community-Based Planning for Expansion efforts. With a mission to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the Region, the recommendations focus on equitable access, prioritizing family engagement, and increasing enrollment. To achieve this, our Family Council and Action Council proposes the following recommendations:

Expansion Recommendations

- **Local:** Continue implementing the Community-Based Planning for Expansion plan and support programs with the desire to expand. Work to ensure child care is part of the discussion by providing support and meeting times that consider everyone's schedules.
- **State:** Allocate non-competitive grant funding to support ECEC programs that tailored to meet the community's needs. Provide infrastructure support for programs to address space barriers.

Quality Program Recommendations

- **Local:** Explore blending and braiding of programs to enhance programs and support sustainability.
 - Supply the ECEC community with education on potential program collaboration partnerships.
 - Utilizing Coordinated Intake, create a family-first, not program-centered, approach by informing families who are on a waitlist of other programs for which they may qualify.
- **State:** Support and fund a statewide Coordinated Intake system.
 - Extend the use of IRIS (Integrated Referral and Intake System) by funding the program in each Region statewide.
 - Permanent funding for a Coordinated Intake Specialist so the Region can fully implement a Coordinated Intake and referral process.
 - Support additional grant funding for programs to participate in the Quality Rating and Improvement System confidently and competently for overall program quality enhancement.

Affordability Recommendations

- **Local:** Ensure the community is aware of and supplied with resources related to child care assistance.
 - Encourage ECEC providers to accept the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) as a form of payment for families; provide ECEC providers with education, resources, and a simplified system of seeking support related to CCAP.
 - Educate and supply local businesses with Child Care Resource and Referral contact information, forms/applications, and educational material on child care costs for employers who wish to provide child care assistance as a benefit for their employees.
- **State:** Revise policies related to CCAP so the program works for all families and providers. Some of these revisions could include:
 - A graduated subsidy scale for all families based on household size and income with no cap.
 - Modifying the rule that a provider cannot charge other families less than a CCAP family to allow providers to provide their own graduated scale for middle class families who do not qualify for CCAP.
 - Larger incentives for providers who accept CCAP and provide quality programming so providers can utilize funds for programming costs rather than raising their rates.

ECEC Awareness Recommendations

- **Local:** Continue efforts of providing ECEC marketing materials to the places parents and caregivers indicated, which include medical offices, grocery stores, older siblings' schools, and online or social media.
 - Provide families with desired in-person events where they can collect resources and connect with other caregivers.
 - Create and market a modern, simplified Regional Resource Guide for caregivers that is up-to date and can be accessed online.
- **State:** Provide grant funds that can be tailored to the Region and allow funding for continued marketing and outreach and a dedicated ECEC support team.

ECEC Workforce and Sustainability Recommendations

- **Local:** Provide regional support and recognition to the ECEC field
 - Create and execute a community campaign that recognizes the value of early childhood educators and providers.
 - Support the continuous coordination of ECEC to the Birth-to-Third Grade (B-3) initiative.
- **State:** Provide funding that allows for competitive wages and a higher education pipeline for future employees.
 - Provide adequate funding to compensate professionals employed in child care, publicly funded programming, and support services with a salary that is competitive to their K-12 counterparts, while simultaneously avoiding an increase in costs for families.
 - Support the continuation of the ECACE grant or other programs that incentive and properly prepare future educators and providers.

Parent Partnership Recommendations

- **Local:** Prioritize parent/caregiver partnerships by providing families with the means they need to connect with the ECEC system.
 - Continue expansion efforts in ECEC deserts to minimize travel and transportation needs.
 - Translate all ECEC materials to include resources in English and Spanish.
- **State:** Provide funding and or system support needed for Regions to support priority populations.
 - Statewide interpretation and translation services for families with limited English proficiency.
 - A universal data system of families who meet the definition of homelessness per the McKinney Vento Act that is accessible by ECEC programs to offer support and services.
 - Increased support for families with children with disabilities, providing a liaison or system navigation support to ensure families understand their child's rights and needs are met

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Erikson Institute. (2019). Illinois Risk and Reach Report. Site name: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/illinois-map/>
2. Illinois Action for Children and Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Coalition. (2022). Community-Based Planning for Expansion: Final Community Plan. Regional Office of Education 47. https://core-docs.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/1849/ROE_47/2948994/CBP_Final_Community_Plan_Spring_22.pdf
3. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). Commission Report of Findings and Recommendations: Spring 2021. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
4. Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (2023). Report Creation Page. Site name: <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>
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9. United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). 2020 Poverty Guidelines. Site name: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2020-poverty-guidelines>
10. United States Department of Labor. (2022). Childcare Prices by Age of Children And Care Setting. Site name: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/price-by-age-care-setting>
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Appendix B: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

Parents, Families, and Caregivers

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

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

Appendix C: Additional Resources

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

1. Illinois Cares for Kids: <https://www.illinoiscaresforkids.org/>
2. Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Sunshine Site: <https://sunshine.dcf.illinois.gov/Content/Licensing/Daycare/ProviderLookup.aspx>
3. Partner Plan Act, Illinois Action for Children, Early Childhood Systems Videos: <https://www.partnerplanact.org/webdev/ppa/resources/videos>
4. Partner Plan Act, Illinois Action for Children, 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
5. Partner Plan Act, Illinois Action for Children, Priority Population Data Scan and Guide: https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ACTFORCHILDREN/35e7dc4d-525c-45bc-ba2c-48e6466050e3/UploadedImages/Documents/Final_Priority_Population_Data_Scan_and_Guide-Oct19.pdf
6. Regional Office of Education 47, IRIS Program: <https://www.roe47.org/page/iris>
7. Regional Office of Education 47, Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Coalition: <https://www.roe47.org/documents/programs/sauk-valley-stars/177109>
8. Tri-County Opportunities Council Head Start Annual Report: <https://tcohelps.org/head-start/>

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