



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 50
(St. Clair County)





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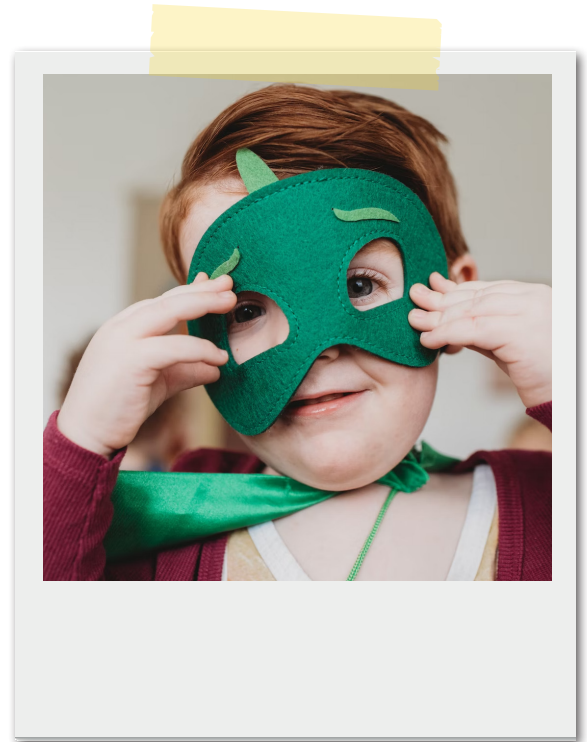
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Region 50 Executive Summary

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 50 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 50: St. Clair County is incredibly diverse in its geographic makeup, with several largely populated metro areas with swaths of rural agricultural land separating them. Due in part to this rural and urban divide, families in rural areas frequently have to travel to highly populated areas to find care for their children. While all Early Childhood Education and Care providers strive to provide the highest quality of care, several barriers prevent these professionals from doing so. Three of the most common obstacles shared by providers were operational costs, a need for staff, and the continued cost of training. “My staff is overworked and underpaid. We continue to ask them to do more and more each year. Providing care for children with high needs without the support they need adds stress and causes burnout,” stated an administrator. Providers shared that qualified staff have been leaving the field in droves in part due to staffing issues, the low rate of pay, and the high rates of burnout. Administrators shared that this is affecting teachers at all grade levels. These factors often shut down classrooms or entire programs, and providers are not able to operate at total capacity.

Children with a disability and those who have experienced trauma are two of the largest underserved priority populations in St. Clair County. The common refrain throughout our focus groups, town hall meetings,

interviews, and Council meetings was the challenge in finding any care, let alone high-quality care for children with special needs is incredibly difficult. Families shared that many programs have waiting lists and they are worried about losing their child's slot due to behavior. One Family Council member shared, "My child's disability is often seen as behavior, and we have been asked to leave multiple programs." Families communicated that they would have liked to know about available programs sooner. Additionally, families shared that their children did not receive Early Intervention because they had never been referred for services.

Transportation continues to be a major issue for both families and providers. For families, the lack of public transportation in rural areas limits their ability to access resources. Child care centers and school districts in St. Clair County do not provide transportation unless transportation needs are listed in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Families that have reliable transportation shared that it can still be a barrier in having to enroll and drop their children off at multiple providers. For providers, the lack of transportation means the classroom enrollment is different as they are unable to provide transportation to serve children who need it most. They are only able to enroll families who can transport their children to and from the program. Children whose families rely on public transportation are limited to accessing services that are within the St. Clair County Transit District's bus routes. Providing reliable transportation would expand the program's ability to enroll and give families access to programs that would typically be inaccessible to them.

Region 50 Needs

- Full-day or wrap-around services so families can return to work.
- Qualified ECEC professionals to fill vacancies.
- Transportation so families can access services and programs.
- Professional development for ECEC staff to support the growing needs of children (e.g., special needs, trauma-informed care).
- Intentional parent outreach for the agencies that provide services to families.
- More Special Education slots in Early Childhood programs.
- A statewide data collection system into which all programs can input data.

Region 50 Recommendations

- Develop a statewide data collection system that all programs use to collect real-time data.
- Explore transportation collaborations with the St. Clair County Transit District, school districts, and other community transportation.
- Explore opportunities for high schools to participate in the Level 1 ECE credentialing process to promote ECEC as a career option.
- Coordinate collaborative Child Find Efforts.
- Conduct outreach and promotion to the community around the available ECEC resources and services.
- Create training to support all staff in all programs for children with disabilities.

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

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REGION 50 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.



18,309

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 50



8,788

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



5,350

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

\$22,880

The median annual wage for St. Clair County Child Care occupations. In comparison, the median annual wage for all occupations is \$33,775 annually.

"Finding a program that had an opening was hard, but once they found out that my child had a special need, they would start explaining all the reasons why they wouldn't be the best fit. It was so hard as a parent to listen to the providers apologize." - 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 50 NEEDS

1. Full-day or wrap-around services so families can return to work.
2. Transportation so families can access services and programs.
3. Qualified Early Childhood professionals to fill vacancies.
4. Professional Development for staff to support children's needs.
5. Family outreach is needed for the service agencies that provide services to families.

REGION 50 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Explore transportation collaborations with St. Clair County Transit District, school districts, and other community transportation.
2. Explore opportunities for high schools to participate in the Level 1 ECE credentialing process to promote ECEC as a career option.
3. Coordinate collaborative Child Find Efforts.
4. Train all staff in all programs for children with disabilities.
5. Conduct outreach and promotion to the community for the available ECEC resources and services.



**"It is not that we don't have services for families, but reaching the families that need the service, assisting them through the application process, and continuing to keep files updated is sometimes a barrier in itself."
- Action Council Member**

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

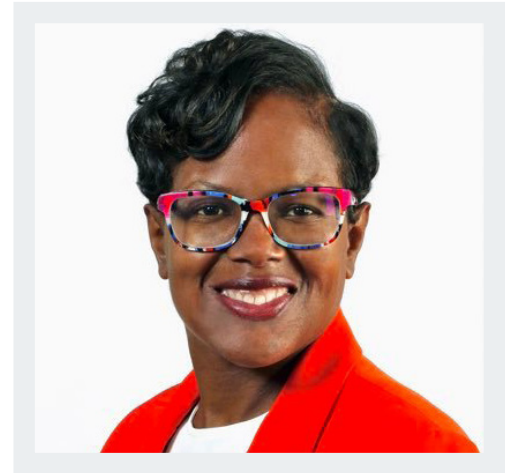
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

The work of this report directly reflects the countless hours, dedication, and connections that have been developed across Region 50. For this, I must take the time to thank those who showed up for us to support the discussions and helped our Team make connections, develop relationships, secure audiences for presentations, identify opportunities for community outreach, and make decisions based on key data and information. These are only some of the many ways family members, professionals, business owners and managers, elected officials, early childhood professionals, school district staff, child care or Head Start staff, collaboration members, and community members elevated our work to develop a working document that truly represents our Region's ECEC landscape and identifies what we need to commit to continue to explore. I am continually humbled by the dedication of the St. Clair community to drive forward what is best for children and families. I am honored to be a small part of a county that has worked to strategize ways to unpack the barriers and look inward at how we each play a part in the bigger picture.

This ongoing work, which I know will continue to be driven around new research and insights to increase our knowledge base, could not have been possible by just our Regional and State Birth to Five Illinois Teams. I must thank those who dedicated time to being a part of one of our two Councils. Council members shared two hours of their already busy lives with us twice per month. Admiration and thanks are due to the families who were courageous enough to share their personal stories with us. Gratitude and respect to the many direct care professionals who participated. We were able to gather a variety of voices from the workforce, including family child care providers, child care staff and owners, school districts staff, administrators, Early Intervention providers, family support staff, Special Education professionals, home visitors, and community direct support organizations.

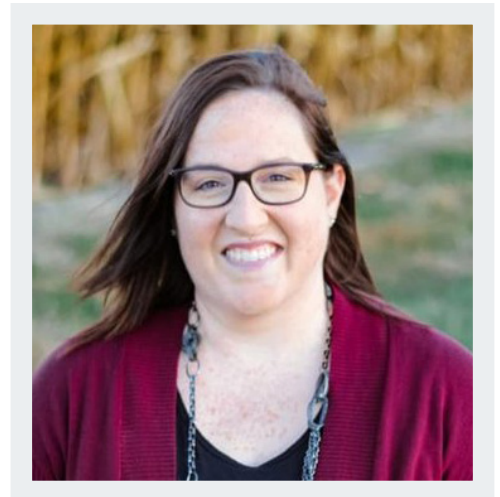
Relationships take time to develop, and as a new organization with ambitious goals, we needed help to move our work forward. The development of these relationships has been critical to building trust. Region 50 deeply appreciates the organizations and programs that welcomed us in, supported our mission, and helped us get connected. We could never truly capture all the organizations and individuals that touched this work but are grateful to each one of you!

I hope this report represents your message and look forward to continuing to drive change with St. Clair County professionals, children, and families.

Thank you,

Stephanie Herling (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 50
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.

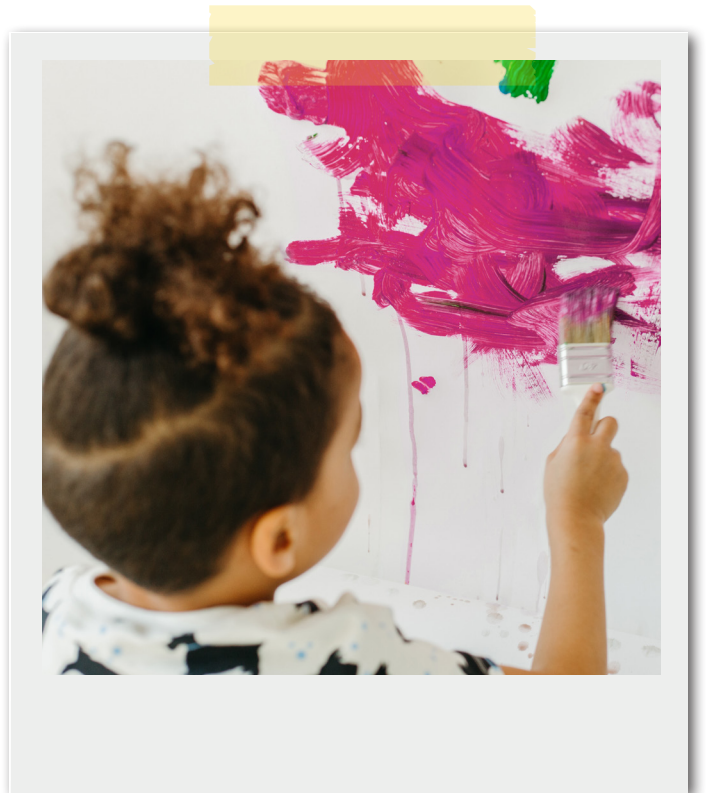
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

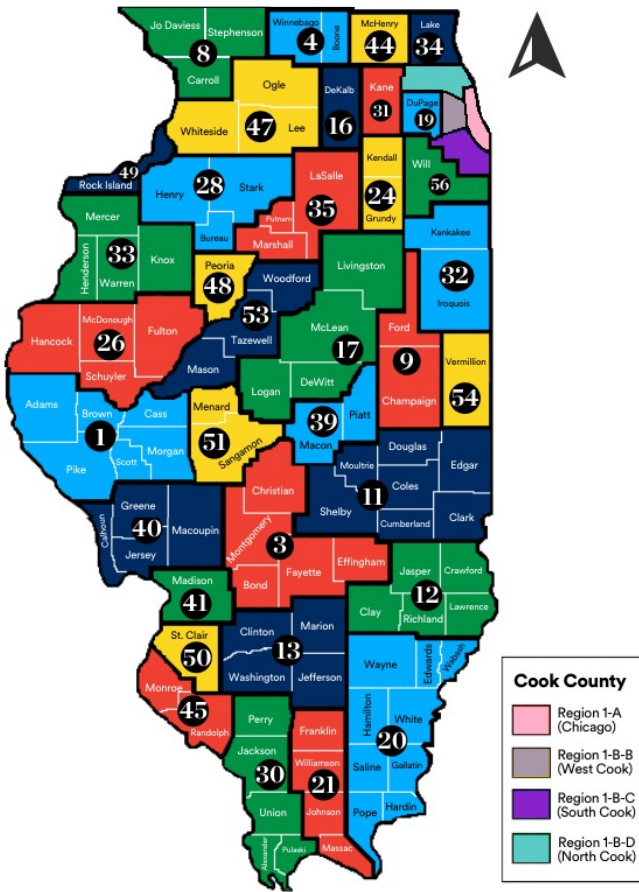


Timeline

- **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.

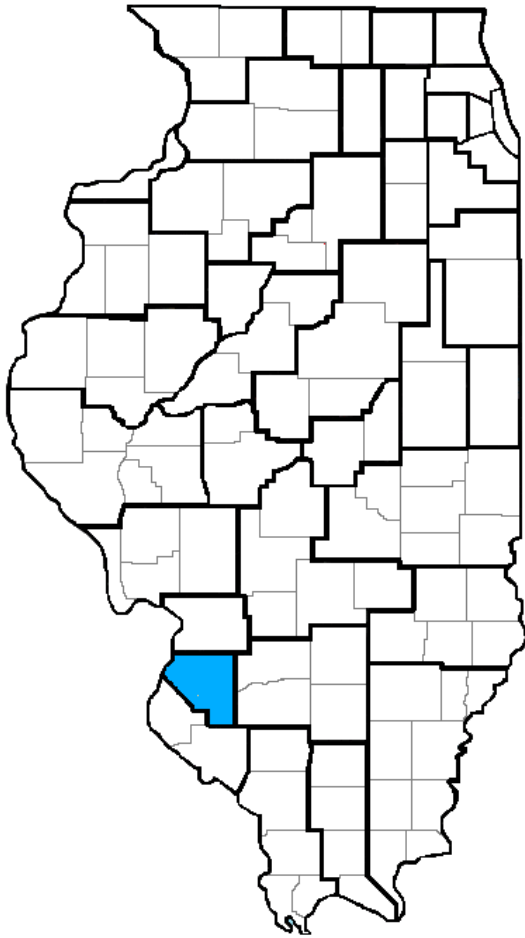
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 50

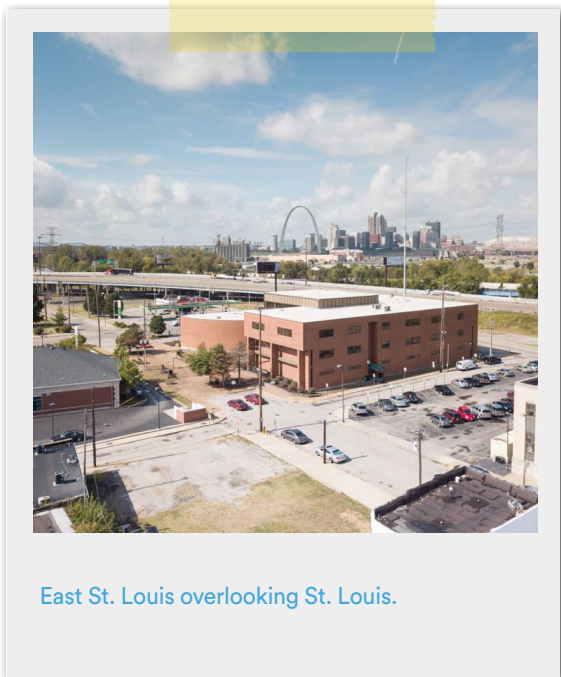
Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 50 includes St. Clair County, which is part of the Greater St. Louis Metro East Area. St. Clair County is 674 square miles located just east of the Mississippi River. As the oldest county in Illinois, St. Clair County is the ninth-most populous, with over 250,000 Illinoisans. While the County was initially developed for agriculture and still has a considerable amount of agricultural land, it is now primarily known for its industry and urban living areas. St. Clair County is the seat for the only United States Air Force Base in Illinois. Scott Air Force Base is the U.S. Transportation Command and Air Mobility Command headquarters, making a considerable contribution to the local economy by providing ample employment opportunities.

St. Clair County is comprised of a primarily populated metro area that houses a significant portion of the population and services. Twenty percent of the Region lives in a small area of St. Clair County, East St. Louis, the area with the highest (health, educational, employment) needs. Although St. Clair County has over 15 populated towns or cities, much of the area is substantially rural with smaller populations and limited resources. Those rural areas are often separated by agricultural or undeveloped land, making it harder for agencies to provide accessible services. Many parts of the County have limited resources such as the internet, access to public water and sewers, and services such as child care, healthcare, and social service agencies. In contrast, St. Clair County has parts that are abundant in access to resources such as high-speed internet, treated water services, public sewer, public transportation, social service agency offices, healthcare options, and a variety of child care options.



East St. Louis overlooking St. Louis.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 50 (St. Clair County) acknowledges that our Region is the traditional homeland of the ḡḡḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡḡḡ (Osage), O-ga-xpa Ma-zhoⁿ (Quapaw), Myaamia (Miami), Kaskaskia, Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux) Peoples. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and respect and honor the original caretakers of this land from the past, present, and future.

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

Regional Demographics

St. Clair County largely identifies as white and Black, with a growing number of children being reported as multiracial each year. Most of the Region is predominantly white, and the primarily populated northwestern areas predominantly represent the second highest race/ethnicity, Black or African American, as seen in Figure 1.

Region 50 houses 2% of the total population of children under six years old in the state. The most densely populated areas in the County with children under the age of six are Belleville, Cahokia, Centerville, Mascoutah, O'Fallon, Shiloh, and Swansea. East St. Louis has a densely populated area of children under six, however, our data and community conversations do not align. The community does not believe the data is inaccurate; they question if the information represents a complete picture of all families in St. Clair County due to the pandemic and the inability to conduct proper outreach during the collection of the most recent Census data.

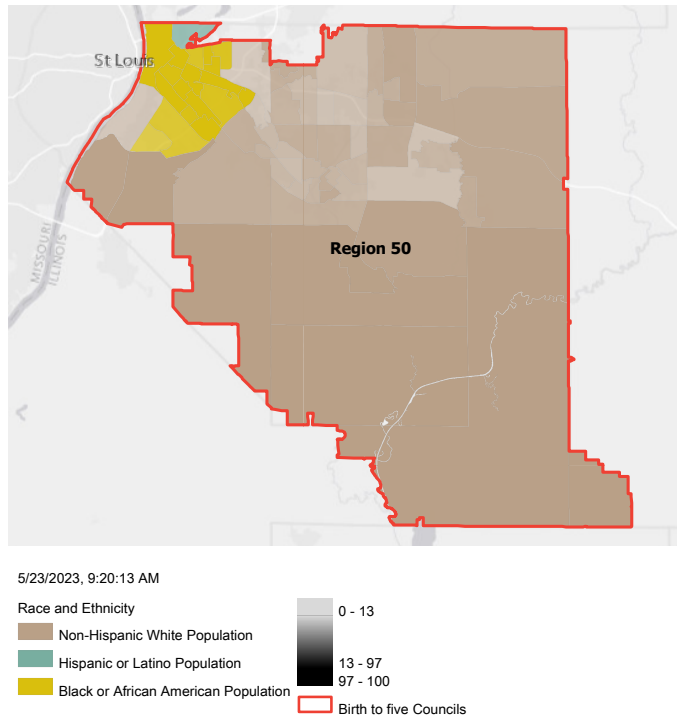
St. Clair County is home to a large military population that is stationed at Scott Air Force Base. Military Council members noted that Active-Duty military can claim residency in whichever state they choose, and do not have to update their residence even if they purchase a home in the state where they are currently stationed. The early childhood center, family child care center, and school on the base are not required to report their numbers to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), or any state agency, as they receive federal funding and report to the Department of Defense. Families in and around Scott Air Force Base may use services and programs in St. Clair County but may not be included in the totals for data reporting.

According to the 2020 Census, only a small number of households in the Region speak a language other than English. Educators report that each year the number of children enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs continue to grow, and there are a variety of languages in the homes of the children they serve; families come with varying levels of English receptive and expressive language abilities. Uniquely, the St. Clair County Regional Office of Education provides ESL service to school districts within the county as a co-op service.



Downtown Belleville, Illinois.

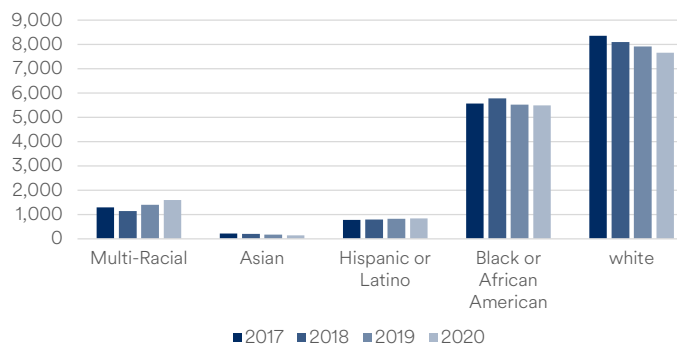
Figure 1: Race and Ethnicity by Location



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 2: Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2017-2020



Source: U.S. Census

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children & Families in Priority Populations

Erikson Institute’s Risk and Reach Report² calculated 15 risk factors that undermine optimal child development and compared them to the reach of 17 publicly funded programs and services that support children’s well-being. Children aged five and under in St. Clair County were assessed at a High-Moderate overall risk level, meaning they are at higher-than-average need of publicly funded programs and services that support well-being.

State-funded programs prioritize enrollment for families from priority populations, defined as families with limited or no access to resources and who face barriers for receiving support or service due to community-level and systems issues. In 2019, the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) identified 12 priority populations.³ Action and Family Councils considered these priority populations as most important in the Region: children in families living on incomes at poverty or deep poverty levels; children experiencing homelessness and unstable housing; children with disabilities; children of underage parents; and children in families with prevalent drug misuse (not one of the ELC defined priority populations). The purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed for a family to cover their basic household needs. Yearly income bands are created based on household size; Figure 3 shows an example. Forty-eight percent of children under the age of six live at or below the 200% FPL in Region 50, which is almost 10% over the state average.

Figure 3: Federal Poverty Level at 50%, 100%, 185%, and 200% for Family of Four

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

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

The region-wide median household income is \$63,017 compared to the State median income of \$72,563, but looking at the community level provides a better sense of which areas are highest in need of investment and services (see Figure 4; full table in Appendix B). There is a large range across the Region, with Alorton

²<https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>

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

“ We made the decision to work opposite shifts and pass our daughter back and forth just to make it by. My boyfriend and I would pick up night shifts with Uber Eats to make extra money. Even with all of this we still lost our housing and had to move back in with my grandmother.
- Family Member ”

“ I fill my classrooms each year with families that fit into these priority populations and often have a waitlist.
- Early Childhood Provider ”

more than \$40,000 under, and O’Fallon \$30,000 over the regional average. According to the Head Start/ Early Head Start Comprehensive Community Assessment , most (90%) of the public housing units in the County are in the East St. Louis area, inclusive of the communities of Centerville, Cahokia, East St. Louis, and Washington Park. Most people living in these areas self-identify as Black or African American with little to no access to economic resources. Areas with the highest economic needs are in the northeast, middle, and southwest areas of St. Clair County, where over 65% of the children are at or below 200% FPL.

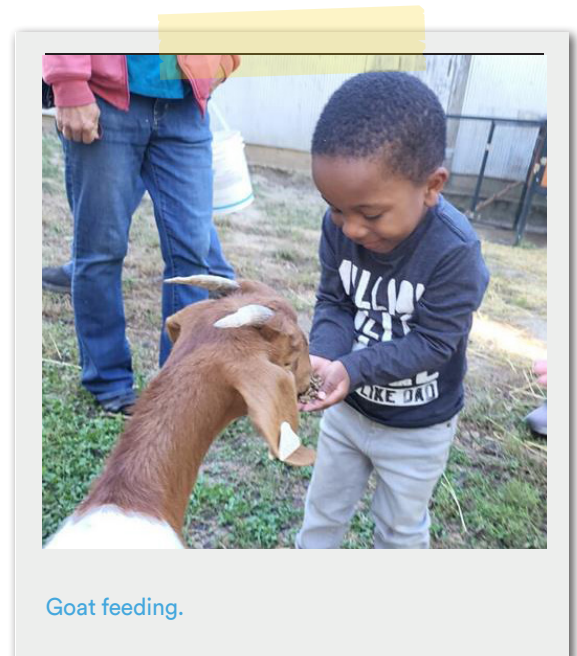
Figure 4: Median Household Income by City and Median Household Income

City Name	Median Household Income	St. Clair County Average: \$63,017
Alorton	\$19,605	-43,412
Centerville	\$24,088	-38,929
East St. Louis	\$26,011	-37,006
Smithton	\$99,279	36,262
O’Fallon	\$96,698	33,681

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

St. Clair County also has a growing number of families who are experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento program serves children who do not have a fixed, regular, or adequate place to sleep at night. While most think of families experiencing homelessness as sleeping outside or in a car, those experiencing homelessness could be in a temporary shelter or staying with another person, and struggle to connect with services to gain stable housing.

One of the largest underserved priority populations in Region 50 are children with a disability or developmental delay. Data on children with disabilities is limited, but in 2020 there were 185 children ages three to five with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and 359 children enrolled in Kindergarten with an IEP in St. Clair County.



“ Looking at numbers or race across the county we must remember that poverty looks different for everyone. Not just resources but the effect of the resources. Rural areas often have a lack of access to clean running water and heating or cooling. For example, often families in rural areas must have propane filled to have heat. If you are unable to pay for the propane, your family simply doesn’t have that resource, unlike families that have electricity often can’t pay their bills after they have used the resource.

- Caregiver

”

⁴ Comprehensive Community Assessment of St. Clair County, Illinois: Head Start/Early Start [Unpublished Publication]

St. Clair County has a higher rate of underage pregnancies (defined as children born to mothers aged 19 or younger) than the state average. According to 2020 IECAM data, Illinois has a 4% underage pregnancy average, while the Region has an average rate of 5%. Forty percent of new underage mothers reported as being single. Community members shared that grandparents often access the supporting services for families with underage parents.

Case managers report that the Region has a high number of overdoses each year, attributed mainly to opioid use/misuse. St. Clair and Madison County are major contributors to the statewide number of opioid overdose deaths. A caseworker said that “Many of these children are experiencing neglect and or abuse already in addition to the trauma that they experience with the overdose.” Services to support children in these families are largely unavailable.

While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region and improve access to high-quality, responsive services for all.

“ Finding a program that had an opening was hard but once they found out that my child had a special need, they would start explaining all the reasons why they wouldn’t be the best fit. It was so hard as a parent to listen to the providers apologize.”

- Family Member

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are groups of stakeholders that come together to develop coordinated and integrated Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service delivery systems to better support children and families. Stakeholders from different sectors jointly determine the issues, root causes, and solutions to achieve shared outcomes, taking collective responsibility for young children in the community.

The Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Partnership, a coalition of East Side Aligned, is a local community Collaboration that brings together partners to ensure every child in the area has the knowledge, skills, and disposition for Kindergarten success. Historically, East St. Louis has been burdened by systemic racism and economic disinvestment, which has increased barriers to accessing early learning programs and services for families. They bring together parents and caregivers, teachers, administrators, and early learning advocates to ensure children are on track developmentally and to support better outcomes for families and communities in East St. Louis City, Washington Park, and parts of Cahokia Heights and Fairmont City. This Collaboration also advocates for investments in ECEC to increase family access and ensure quality in programs by supporting a high-quality workforce to ensure local programs meet statewide quality standards.



Scott Air Force Base Air Show.

Several non-Collaboration groups work with families in St. Clair County. Child and Family Connections (CFC), which hosts the Local Interagency Council (LIC), is a network of families, community agencies, and providers supporting families with children from birth to five years old. The LIC coordinates free developmental screenings, child development information, and community resources. CFC #21 serves Madison, Monroe, Randolph, and St. Clair Counties and hosts LIC meetings to jointly make decisions about community services. ECEC administrators and community leaders also gather monthly for an Early Childhood Leadership Forum facilitated by two professors at the Southern Illinois University of Edwardsville.

Despite the great work on many agencies, most families in the Region are not served by a Collaboration to help them connect with and navigate the Regions ECEC programs. It is important to understand the impact of Local Collaborations in the broader context of the ECEC landscape and how it works in conjunction with other local programs and services.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

“High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an important component of thriving communities. It is central to the socio-emotional and intellectual growth of young children, the ability of parents and caregivers to go to work, and the ability of employers to find and retain workers.”⁵ There are several ECEC programs available to families throughout the Region who want or need ECEC services, including publicly funded, licensed, and license-exempt programs.

Head Start & Early Head Start

The St. Clair County Head Start and Early Head Start, both federally funded grants, are held by Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) who serves children from expectant families through aged five. Programs are in St. Clair County in Belleville, Caseyville, Cahokia, East St. Louis, and Lovejoy. They are part-day (6.5 hours), full-day (7 hours), and home-based. SIUE reported a cumulative enrollment (or slots) of 642 versus the funded allotted enrollment of 865, meaning the program is not operating at full capacity. There are classrooms closed at each site due to a teacher shortage, with 25 teacher and 25 teaching assistant vacancies needing to be filled, and the East St. Louis Helen Davis site is temporarily closed. The County is unable to serve 34% of the funded Head Start slots and 26% of the funded Early Head Start slots.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide comprehensive Early Childhood services: family and community engagement services and supports, early education, child development, and health (medical, dental, nutrition, mental health). Staff shared that the program has struggled to fill slots by children with disabilities due to staffing but also because parents/caregivers have chosen to enroll children with disabilities in the local public school instead. Many Head Start/Early Head Start locations are located on a public transportation line; however, transportation is a need, and providing it would allow more families to be served.

Preschool for All (PFA) & Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E)

PFA and PFA-E are administered by ISBE and provide care for children ages three to five. Programs administer a developmental screening and enrollment is prioritized for children who benefit from the most support within the community. Programs must also ensure that children with a disability receive services consistent with their IEP. Typically, PFA operates 2.5 hours per day or at least 12.5 hours per week. The Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) data reported that PFA served 14% of



Kids enjoying the inside of a firetruck.

“ I have had to miss work multiple times this month due to the lack of staffing. We hate to leave, but we are looking at other options at this point.
- Family Member ”

“ I would love to enroll my child in PFA, however, we both work and are not able to transport my daughter to and from the program. We need full-day care!
- Family Member ”

⁵ Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in a “Child Care Desert”

⁶ <https://www.siue.edu/eslc/programs/head-start/pdf/Annual-Report-2021-2022.pdf>

children in the Region aged three to five. PFA-E programs are meant to be fully inclusive, providing services to children with disabilities in the general education classroom. However, teachers shared that many providers are still pulling children out of the classroom for services. Programs in East St. Louis and Cahokia expanded all preschool programs to full day to better meet families' needs but could not sustain transportation costs with the funding provided. Programs reported having a waiting list and shared they were worried about being able to serve the children transitioning from Early Intervention (EI) services into classrooms because they may not have a spot available for them.

“ Enrolling in a PFA-E has given our family the ability to bring in a second income. I was able to return to work part-time, which has been a lifesaver with the growing cost of groceries and gas. ”
-Parent

“ Professionals have gotten a lot better since my first [program] transition experience. They asked me what goals I had for my child, and we discussed different options. Ultimately, they made the decision to place him in the location they felt was best. I would have liked to see him with full special education services, but they placed him in a PFA classroom where he can be with peers and the services will be integrated. Finding transportation to and from the program was a strain for our family. ”
-Family Member

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

Local school districts and special education cooperatives provide ECSE services for children who qualify. Funding is through the local (property taxes), state (appropriated by the state legislature), and federal (appropriated by Congress). Services can be provided in a variety of settings and are often blended into program settings that the school is currently funded to provide. ISBE reported in 2020 St. Clair County had 861 children ages three-to-five who had an (IEP). Providers shared that the number is likely higher because parents/caregivers of young children underreport if their child is not progressing at the targeted level and feel they will catch up. They also shared that they do not always know how to identify a true need for ECSE support and depend on the caregiver to help them understand the behaviors of their child.

Early Intervention (EI)

EI is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). Families receive services in their natural environment, or virtually, for their children ages birth to three to meet developmental milestones. Children must have a significant delay in at least one area of development, have a condition known to cause disability or delay, or be at high risk for a substantial developmental delay, and have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) that determines the focus of care. Child and Family Connection 21 provides EI; 284 children received services in 2020. The CFC reported they were not operating with a delay in services but need more service providers. However, caregivers shared there has been staff turnover and that they did not know about EI, or they would have got services earlier, and that they do not always receive necessary screenings with their pediatrician and/or ECEC provider. Families noted that EI services modeled helpful supports for working on their child's skill development.

Home Visiting

Home visiting is funded by IDHS; local agencies provide services to families to support maternal health, healthy pregnancies, and the care of children from newborn to five years of age. They also provide children with developmental screening and refer them for services if needed.

Prevention Initiative (PI)

The Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) PI program provides services for pregnant people and families with children ages birth to three. PI is home- or center-based, and uses “at-risk” eligibility criteria, as defined by ISBE. A developmental screening is administered, and a family’s environmental, economic, and demographic factors are assessed for determining eligibility and enrollment priority. Brightpoint (formerly Children’s Home & Aid) offers PI programming to the entire Region, and Lessie Bates provides services within the East St. Louis School District area. There were 3,347 publicly funded spots (or slots) available in 2020; however, community and Council members expressed a need for additional funding to serve additional families.

Family Child Care, Group Homes, and License Exempt Providers

In Illinois there are three types of child care: licensed child care homes, licensed-exempt homes, and group homes. Providers must maintain a license in good standing by maintaining compliance with Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) regulatory standards. IECAM data reports there are 152 licensed family child care providers with a capacity to care for 1,465 children. However, Brightpoint reported there were 388 providers who are serving 1,838 children in family child care. Family child care is often the only provider that provides extended hours (and sometimes overnight care) and the only option for many rural families.

Licensed child care providers may care for up to eight children, including their own, up to age 13. Licensed group child care has a maximum capacity of 16 children, including the provider’s own children under the age of 13, with the help of a full-time qualified assistant. Across the Region, there are 202 with the licensed capacity to care for 6,010 children. They are typically friends, neighbors, or families caring for children they know. License-exempt child care centers are programs that serve children ages three to 12 years who are not required to be licensed by DCFS to operate but still need to meet the state or local health and fire safety standards. They can operate full or part-day and be open for up to seven days per week. There are 261 license-exempt providers caring for over 2,384 children in the Region (see Appendix B for additional information from Brightpoint/Children’s Home & Aid). It is challenging to know how many are providing this type of care, and to how many children, because they are not required to report enrollment to any state agency unless they are receiving child care subsidy payments.

“ I had no idea where to start to look for care when I had my first child. Providers laughed at me when I called and said I was looking for infant care to go back to work...they explained that I should have started looking for care a year ago, as there are very few spots available.
- Family Council Member ”

“ Strengthening Families gave me what I didn’t know I needed. We built relationships with the staff and other families that improved my whole family’s mental health, we gained knowledge around my child’s development, and received valuable links to resources in the community.
- Family Member ”

“ Choosing family child care allowed me to have a small intimate setting that feels like home and allows my children to be all together while I work.
- Community Member ”

Not every child care provider in the Region is operating at full capacity due to a lack of qualified teachers and staff, leaving some families on long wait lists and others unsure of where to find care. Many community members shared that they chose license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor care because it was

affordable, and it met their work hours. Some families shared this type of care as a way for family members to earn an income while supporting their community.

Scott Air Force Base has providers and multiple Child Development Centers (CDC) on the base that military families can access on a sliding scale based on their rank. These are funded through the U.S. Department of Defense. Military families may not be accounted for in the Census Data, and it is difficult to understand the true extent of the need these families have for child care due to the lack of available data.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

CCAP subsidizes the cost of child care for families who lack access to economic resources and are employed or enrolled in education or vocational programs. Eligibility is determined by the gross household income, family size, and other factors. Families must fill out a 17-page application that can be confusing and requires both the family and provider to complete sections of the document. If there is an error, the approval timeline is reset. Many providers will not allow families to start care without approval and shared that they will have the family sign an agreement that they are responsible for the cost of care if approval is not awarded, which leaves some families continuing to wait for care. While Brightpoint developed a tip sheet for families to use to complete the paperwork to expedite the approval time, community members said that an updated online system would allow families, providers, and the subsidy agency to collaborate much more easily to complete paperwork.

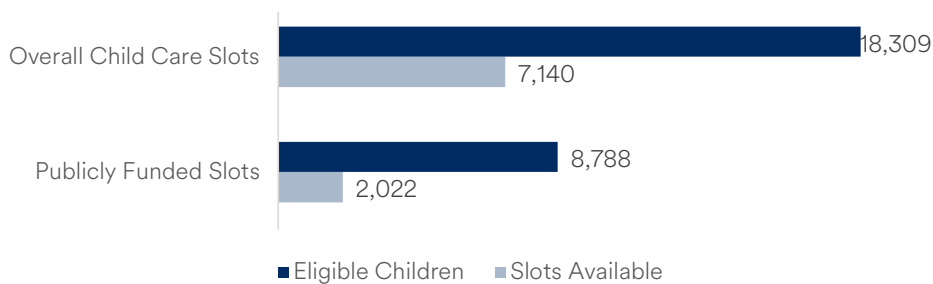
It is important to understand not only how many programs are available throughout the Region, but also the capacity of the different program types. While some programs have the capacity to meet the needs of families who want or need to enroll their child, many in the Region do not, causing a slot gap and forcing families to wait for quality, affordable care.

Slot Gap

In Region 50, there are 18,309 children ages six and under. However, not all children are enrolled in ECEC services as family choice is important, and some families may choose not to enroll their children in a program. Families have a variety of choices for care; however, deciding on a program goes beyond what a parent wants. Parents shared that they must first determine their budget, and what program covers their schedule and has an opening for enrollment.

The slot gap is the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the number of available enrollment spots across programs. It can be measured by looking at the overall slots (or capacity) versus the total number of children in the Region, and the number of publicly funded slots versus the number of children living at or below 200% FPL. There are not enough slots in licensed child care, licensed home care, and license-exempt child care centers to serve the number of children birth to age five in the Region. Families said they are unable to secure high-quality care for their infants and toddlers, and some families reported they must send their children to multiple sites because there are not spots to accommodate their family.

Figure 5: Overall and Publicly Funded Slot Gap



Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There are also not enough publicly funded slots to serve all income eligible children, especially birth to age two. Most slots infant and toddler slots are in the Prevention Initiative program, which is not exclusively child care as it also includes home visiting slots. There are more funded slots for children ages three to five, but not enough to meet the needs of all income-eligible children. Programs reported they are unable to enroll to full capacity because they have children, they expect to transition from Early Intervention into the Early Childhood program that they need to keep a space for. Some directors shared that they have children with high developmental needs and choose not to have full enrollment to ensure high-quality care for them in the least restrictive environment. Many providers also never returned to full capacity after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted; many staff left during the pandemic and never returned.

It is important to remember that not all slots are equal. Families shared that they cannot always choose a program held for two-and-a-half-hours daily; they need one that provides wrap-around care or transportation to a child care program that provides extended care. Each program also has different qualifications to receive services. There may be slots for child care open, but if the family does not meet the qualifications, they cannot access those services. Some state-funded programs are also located in school districts with additional guidelines. Though not a requirement of grant funding, programs can limit services to those within their boundary lines.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

ECEC programs cannot be expanded or improved without understanding the needs of Early Childhood professionals and the challenges of recruiting and maintaining a qualified workforce. In Illinois, staff at licensed centers are required to be a member of the Illinois Gateways Registry, which offers professionals a quick way to track their training and education online and meet Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) licensing requirements. Programs not licensed by DCFS can join Illinois Gateways; however, they are not required to join, leading to a lack of demographic and educational data on staff in those programs.

Figure 7: Number of Early Childhood Professionals by Job Title

Job Title	Number
Administrators	129
Teachers	413
Assistant Teachers	445
Teacher Aides	39
Substitute/floaters	24
School-Age Workers	12
School-Age Assistants	16
Other direct service workers	24

Note: Additional professionals that are not included might be those publicly funded in a school district, license-exempt providers, and other additional Early Childhood Education support staff

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

In spring 2021, data there were 1,121 ECEC professionals from Region 50 registered in Gateways.⁷ Data showed that 55% self-identified as white and 43% self-identified as Black. While the workforce data largely aligns with the demographics of children and families in the community, and families said they feel there is adequate racial diversity in the ECEC workforce, caregivers shared they would prefer to see more racial diversity in the materials programs use.

“When I think about my child’s program, they have diversity represented in the staff at the center, but they could use more children’s books, dolls, and the materials they send home.”
-Family Member

Licensed center staff are required to acquire and maintain training and education. Southwestern Illinois College (SWIC) provides an Early Childhood Education (ECE) associate degree and certificate program as well as an ECE associate transfer option. To transfer credits, the State must approve the school, or the coursework may not be accepted. Nearby and affordable programs may not be on the approved list, forcing them to choose a different and/or more expensive option or forego transferring altogether. Students reported lower-level college classes are available, but higher-level classes are often canceled due to low attendance/enrollment making it difficult to attain their degree. Those who want to receive a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education must go outside St. Clair County, unless they enroll in an online program.

Some ECEC program students and professionals also shared challenges finding eligible educational programs, especially since online options were unavailable. Working in a license-exempt program or before/afterschool program made them ineligible. Also, the work requirement sometimes means that completing a degree takes longer because they are unable to enroll full-time, and minimum educational requirements can be a barrier. Some had to stay in a position for another year of service to honor the payback when they could have taken a higher-paying position with benefits. Many people in the Region live and commute across state lines and may have limitations on receiving state funding to advance their education.

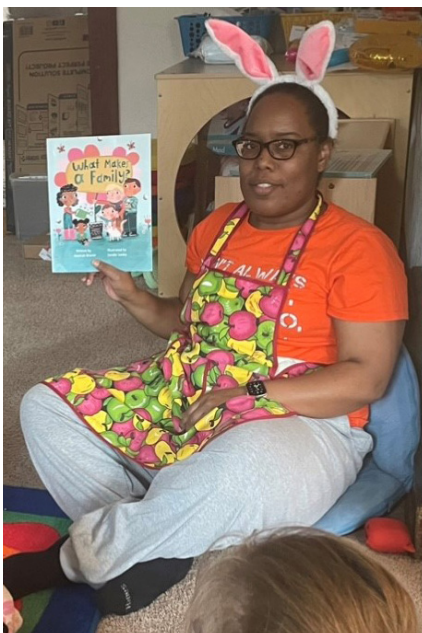
⁷ https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

Professionals also shared that enrolling in higher education classes puts a strain on them financially and does not provide a return of increased income and benefits much of the time. Illinois has implemented support to aid professionals in curbing the cost of higher education, such as the Gateways Scholarship Program, which pays a portion of tuition, and the Great START wage supplement program, which recognizes child care practitioners every six months that remain in their current place of employment after completing college. These programs are available for professionals who are licensed by DCFS or funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), have worked at that program for one year, work a minimum of 15 hours per week, meet wage requirements, live in Illinois, and commitment to future work in ECEC.

Missouri does not require the same education and training for ECEC teachers as does Illinois. One community member shared that she makes more as a lead teacher in her current Missouri classroom without a degree than she could in an Illinois program with a degree. Child care programs in the Region also shared that they often support staff while they obtain their bachelor's degree and Professional Education License (PEL) but see them leave to enter a public school career that offers higher pay, better hours, summers off, benefits, and a retirement plan. Administrators share that they do not have the ability to entice the staff to stay, match local school district salaries and benefits. Unlike community programs, public schools can layer tax, special education, and grant funding, and do not have additional costs such as rent.

“As a provider, we try to take all children, no matter the disability, but it is hard to buy materials that are so specific to the child's varying needs. Then the items may sit at the center for years before they are ever used again.”
- Early Childhood Provider

“I had no idea I could request an evaluation from my home school when I thought my child needed support.”
- Family Council Member



ECEC Provider showing a book to a group of children.

Programs also reported that providing high-quality care for children with disabilities is difficult when there are staffing issues. Families shared teachers tried different classroom supports before making a referral for evaluation, but the process between the referral and receiving supports is long. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the cracks in the system. Providers reported children returning to programs with higher social-emotional needs than before the lockdown. Council members noted the process to identify children with social-emotional needs and connect them to programs has been a challenge, as is providing holistic family support.

“My staff is overworked and underpaid. We continue to ask them to do more and more each year. Providing care for children with high needs without the support they need adds stress and causes burnout.”
- Early Childhood Administrator

Many Early Childhood service coordinators are carrying maximum caseloads. Early Intervention caseworkers shared that with the new Illinois Extended Summer Services, the program is continuing services for children after their third birthday until they transition into Early Childhood Special Education, creating an extended period during which new, qualifying families must wait for a service provider to have room on their caseload. For caseworkers, this extended timeline creates a hardship as they lose a large amount of income at once due to services stopping in August when children transition into school. Families shared case workers have started to issue the family with a thirty-day notice that they will not be extending the care as their provider.

Lack of mental health support for ECEC professionals was also identified as a challenge and a component of teacher and staff burnout. The 2022-2023 school year is the first year that administrators have had multiple professional vacancies midyear and professionals are more often leaving the field of teaching altogether. Focus group participants shared that they have thought of leaving the field as many entry jobs are at equal pay with much less stress. Administrators shared that they would love to promote their own staff, but the staff do not want to take on the workload due to the low pay. Funding for more slots does not get to the root issue of providing high-quality services. Early Childhood educators help to build the future; investing in the ECEC workforce invests in both today and tomorrow's workforce.

“ I have requirements around curriculum, assessment, screening, family engagement, ratios, special education services, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), and all the other requirements that my administrator has within the school. These requirements don't always align with each other, and it is hard to determine which is more important. It is exhausting to keep up with everything, especially when you have no planning time.

- Early Childhood Provider ”

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Parent, family, and caregiver engagement is the most important aspect of the ECEC landscape. While there are challenges that families face when accessing quality, affordable ECEC programs and services, they also highlighted positive experiences with programs throughout the Region. They shared the importance of involving them in decisions and said engagement looked very different based on the type of program in which their child was enrolled. Overall, the support and guidance that they receive with home visiting has been supportive, engaging, and uplifting, and many shared they wished they had learned of these programs sooner.

Families also shared that preschool programs made families feel included by inviting them into the classroom, including preschool families in school district programs and events offered for older children, preparing children for Kindergarten with the support of family input, matching support to children's developmental age/stage, parents build connections with other caregivers, and welcoming family voice and feedback. However, they also shared that these programs were planned for them and not with them and events were not always at convenient times.

Caregivers continuously voiced difficulty in accessing child care in their communities. Families in rural, less populated areas face child care deserts; there are such limited spots they are often left trying to piece together child care based on convenience and a base level of comfort so they can return to work. Some are never able to find care that aligns with their family's financial constraints or work needs and remain out of the workforce. Others turn to family, friend, or neighbor care because it most closely aligns with the flexibility they need.

Caregivers of children with disabilities shared concerns about the lack of openings to provide care for their children. Many did not learn about EI until their child was older, defeating the purpose of intervening early to support optimal child development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, families with the means to access the internet were able to continue services via virtual meetings, while EI Clearinghouse helped families experiencing access barriers meetings by providing a technology loan program. Overall, families expressed virtual therapies were hard to carry out without the support of the EI service provider to model in person. And although EI is helpful, it is not child care. Parents shared that searching for child care for their child under three with a disability was a difficult task, especially when their child had been dismissed from child care due to challenging behavior issues. As children get older, more options become available, such as Early Childhood Special Education programs, but many caregivers are unaware of the transition process into Special Education programs.

“ Stronger Beginnings has been a blessing for my family. They made connections, provided resources, gave me a platform to meet with other adults, provided meals that made it easier for our family to attend events, and always cared about our families' needs and wellbeing.

- Community Member

“ I don't need another training on biting, if they would ask families what we wanted they might be able to plan activities that we wanted to attend.

- Family Member

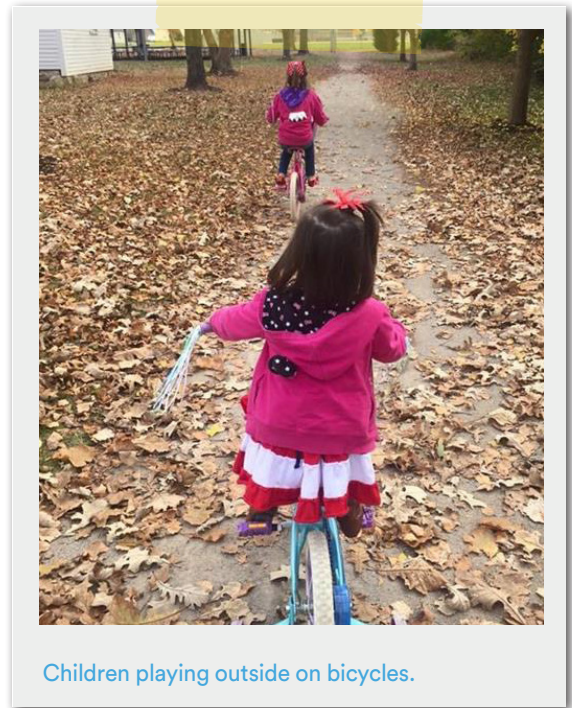
“ We are a rural area; it is hard for parents and caregivers to access programs as many live in the country. It is challenging to get the information to the parents.

- Librarian

While some schools provide services in self-contained ECEC classrooms, others provide services for children in an inclusive PFA/PFA-E classroom. These are not always full-day services, so some families lose out on Special Education services the school district can provide because they need a full-time child care program. Schools sometimes provide drop-in services, but families still must arrange transportation. Caregivers said that awareness of limited ECEC options is a challenge.

Transportation is another reason some families do not utilize child care services. While there are multiple public transportation options in the metropolitan area, there are limited or no ride-sharing services or taxis, and many families experience barriers due to scheduling and routes that do not get their children to school on time. Students arriving too early were not allowed inside; students arriving late miss the opportunity to have breakfast and also receive a tardy.

For most families, the increased cost of living has created more stress, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many shared that without the child care subsidy, the cost of care would not be feasible. Yet, families shared frustrations with the approval process. An online version of the application is available, but it does not automatically notify the agency upon completion. In fact, the agency shared that they typically learn about application completions from parents, which usually presents as confrontations from a lack of action and a delay in services. As families find employment, they need to be able to start work quickly and the current process does not allow for that. As families search for suitable child care, it is critical to engage in continued conversations to best understand their needs and how to meet them.



Children playing outside on bicycles.

“ Child care centers do not transport, and the school district doesn’t provide bus services, so it is impossible for me to enroll my child in the preschool program. Instead, he is enrolled in a full-day child care program so I can work. If someone could provide transportation, we would love to enroll him.

- Family Member

Regional Strengths and Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 50 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers.

Strengths

- Collaboration within the ECEC community across the Region; St. Clair County has a knowledgeable pool of Early Childhood Educators.
- Existing partnerships and collaborations that use family engagement and interact with multiple sectors to increase Kindergarten readiness.
- Strong Child Care Subsidy Office that is one of the largest in the State.
- Fairly flexible job market that families can access.
- Community resources that support a wide variety of needs and service requests.

Needs

- Full-day or wrap-around services so families can return to work.
- Qualified ECEC professionals to fill vacancies.
- Transportation so families can access services and programs.
- Professional development for ECEC staff to support the growing needs of children (e.g., special needs, trauma-informed care).
- Intentional parent outreach for the agencies that provide services to families.
- More Special Education slots in Early Childhood programs.
- A statewide data collection system into which all programs can that all programs can input data.

Recommendations

The Region 50 Councils discussed numerous recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Develop a statewide data collection system that all programs use to collect real-time data.
- Explore transportation collaborations with the St. Clair County Transit District, school districts, and other community transportation.
- Explore opportunities for high schools to participate in the Level 1 ECE credentialing process to promote ECEC as a career option.
- Coordinate collaborative Child Find Efforts.
- Conduct outreach and promotion to the community around the available ECEC resources and services.
- Create training to support all staff in all programs for children with disabilities.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

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Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: City location Median Household Income vs. County Median Household Income

City Name	Median Household Income	St. Clair County Average: \$63,017
Alorton	19,605	-43,412
Belleville	56,404	-6,613
Cahokia	30,556	-32,461
Centerville	24,088	-38,929
East St. Louis	26,011	-37,006
East Carondelet	48,750	-14,267
Fairview Heights	70,825	7,808
Freeburg	65,188	2,171
Lebanon	75,179	12,162
Marissa	47,262	-15,755
Mascoutah	79,189	16,172
Millstadt	85,845	22,828
New Athens	72,056	9,039
New Baden	79,662	16,645
Shiloh	86,292	23,275
Smithton	99,279	36,262
St. Libory	81,719	18,702
Swansea	80,331	17,314
O'Fallon	96,698	33,681
Washington Park	26,928	-36,089
Scott AFB	77,400	14,383

Figure 2: Brightpoint (formerly Children’s Home & Aid) ECEC Report

City	Total # Exempt Family Child Care	Total Capacity Exempt FCC	Total # Licensed Family Child Care	Total # Licensed Family Child Care Capacity	Total # Licensed Centers	Total Licensed Center Capacity	Total # Exempt Centers	Total Exempt Center Capacity	# Head Start	Head Start Capacity	# PFA/ PFAE	PFA/ PFA E Capacity
Alorton, Centerville East St. Louis Lovejoy	31	93	53	512	8	944	1	40	4	303	3	595
Belleville Swansea	21	63	62	607	12	1090	1	240	1	68	13	900
Cahokia	21	63	36	353	3	169	0	0	1	160	3	140
Caseyville	1	3	2	14	0	0	0	0	1	134		
Dupo	0	0	2	22	1	78	0	0	0	0	2	120
Fairview Heights	5	15	15	150	5	465	0	0	0	0	3	142
Freeburg	0	0	1	8	2	212	1	20	0	0	1	20
Lebanon	0	0	0	0	1	59	0	0	0	0	1	20
Marissa	0	0	1	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	60
Mascoutah Shiloh	1	3	11	93	4	583	0	0	0	0	1	80
Millstadt	0	0	1	8	1	55	1	20	0	0	0	0
New Athens	0	0	1	12	1	65	0	0	0	0	0	0
O’Fallon	2	6	10	70	4	328	0	0	0	0	3	200
Saint Libory	0	0	6	54	2	294	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shiloh	0	0	0	0	2	196	0	0	0	0	0	0
Smithton	0	0	0	0	2	196	0	0	0	0	0	0

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

Parents/Families/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?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

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