



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 56
Will County





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Region 56 Executive Summary

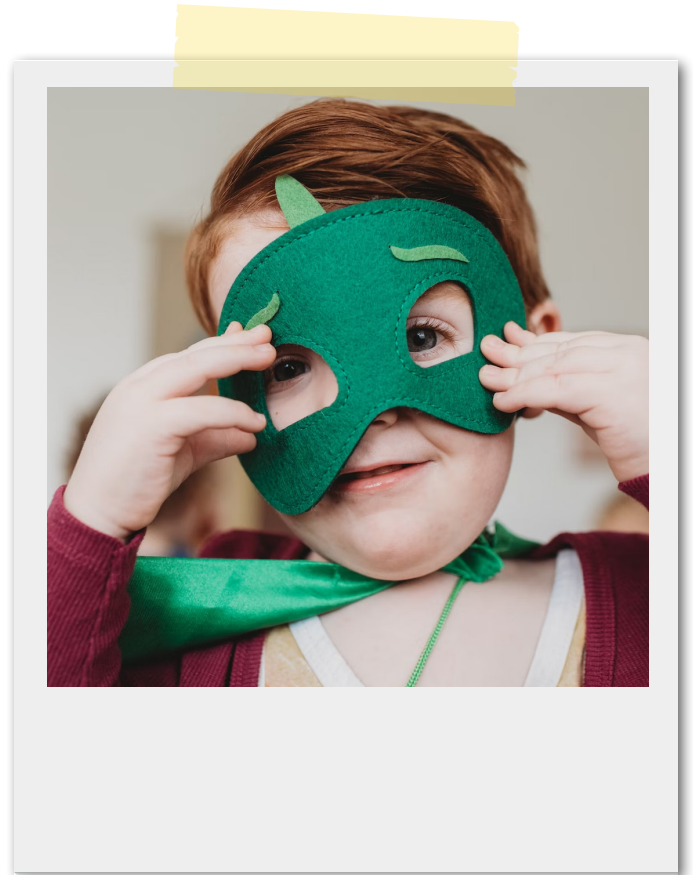
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 56 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

The Region saw a growth of approximately 20,000 residents in the last ten years, making it one of the fastest-growing counties in the State. The most noticeable population change was among the Hispanic/Latino population, which saw an increase of over 25,000 people. There are 43,771 children under the age of six living in the Region. While the majority of children in the Region are white, non-Hispanic, followed by Hispanic/Latino. Almost half of all children under six years old live at or below 200% Federal Poverty Line (FPL), most densely located in pockets of Bolingbrook, Joliet, Plainfield, Braidwood, Wilmington, and Monee. Out of 11,640 children under age six, living at or below 200% FPL, only about a quarter of those eligible for publicly funded programs have access to publicly funded slots due to slot gap issues. This slot gap is in part due to the Region's workforce shortage. Considering that each setting in ECEC requires different components to keep the workforce robust, overall each provider needs equitable access to funding, resources, and initiatives. Misaligned state systems impact regional and community ECEC



workforce, which in turn increases turnover, waitlists, child care deserts, classroom closings, and decreases workforce diversity. This results in families not being able to access services for their children. Families have shared their voices and mentioned that there are many barriers to accessing ECEC options that surround fiscal, cultural, transportation, programming hours, and communication. The Region strives to advocate for workforce equity and respectful compensation so that our families and children have the services that support intentional, accessible, and equitable programming that is affordable, diverse, and available for each family in the Region.

Regional Needs

- English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and services for children and families
- Full-day ECEC programming that supports working hours and non-traditional employment work schedule
- ECEC workforce compensation/benefits that align with a livable and respectable wage
- Streamlined and understandable ECEC system for families and providers
- Reduced and/or elimination of child care deserts
- Parental leave that aligns with family needs
- Increased investments in transportation around ECEC needs
- Quicker CCAP turnaround times and payments
- Additional investments in recruiting, hiring, retaining, and compensating diversity within the ECEC workforce (i.e. linguistics)
- Intentional training and support opportunities for ECEC professionals and providers who care for children with special needs
- Recognize child care family home and center providers equivalent to providers that work in a school-based setting
- Consider years of experience as a provider to override education requirements

Recommendations

- State-Regional-Community Model of Partnership
- Create One State ECEC Agency with Unified ECEC Data System
- Full-Day ECEC Programming
- ECEC Workforce Investments
- Elimination of Child Care Deserts

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REGION 56 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.



43,771

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 56



11,640

Children 0-5 at or
below 200%
Federal Poverty Level



8,573

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

\$14.15

The approximate hourly wage for an
Early Childhood Education teacher

“As a parent, and a former teacher, you have to make the difficult decision to either send your littles to day care while missing out on crucial mother/child bonding time and pay to be out of the house and work, or stay at home and not be able to contribute to the workforce. The salary doesn’t outweigh the cost of child care in our current economic landscape. It’s a catch-22.”
- Community Member

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 56 NEEDS

1. Full-day ECEC programming that supports working hours and non-traditional employment work schedules
2. Additional investments in recruiting, hiring, retaining, and compensating diversity within the ECEC workforce
3. English as a second language (ESL) programs and services for children and families

REGION 56 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a State-Regional-Community model of partnership
2. Create one state ECEC agency with a unified ECEC data system
3. Full-day ECEC programming
4. ECEC workforce investments
5. Elimination of child care deserts



“We don’t have an enrollment problem, there are tons of kids ready to enroll. We have a staffing problem. We cannot find teachers.”

- Provider

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.

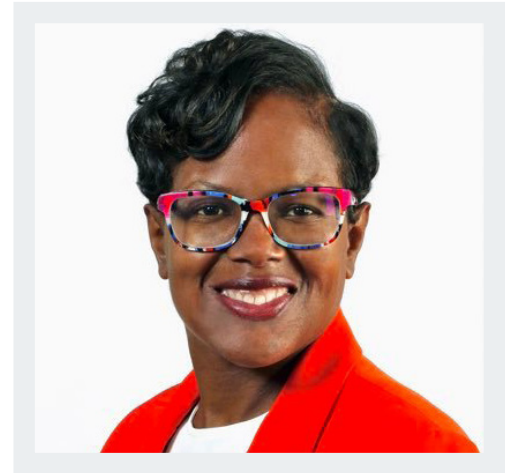
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

Thank you to everyone for supporting the development and completion of the Birth to Five Illinois: Region 56 Early Childhood Needs Assessment. We are grateful for the Action Council and Family Council members who dedicated their time and offered critical input on the early childhood needs in our communities. Our community partners whose contributions and commitment to addressing equity in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has made this work possible.

To our families and caregivers, thank you for giving us your voices, time, and valuable input to ensure Region 56 is the best environment for all children to grow, learn, and flourish. Words cannot express our gratitude to each and every one of you for sharing your lived experiences with us. All ECEC professionals, thank you for your commitment to caring, prioritizing, and nurturing children in an enriching and safe environment.

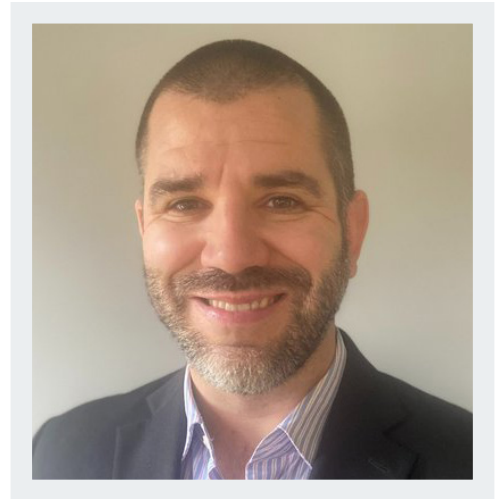
To our elected officials, thank you for being our advocates and champions and for helping us spread the importance of ECEC for our children and families in Region 56. Your direct involvement empowers the voices of families and children in our Region and across the State to make meaningful systematic changes to ECEC.

To our Region 56 Team, thank you for your innovative input and your tireless dedication in bringing the vision of Birth to Five Illinois to life. To our Birth to Five Illinois State Team, thank you for laying the foundation for us and for the continued support you provided during this process.

Thank you,

Keven Kerr (he/him)

Regional Council Manager: Region 56
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.

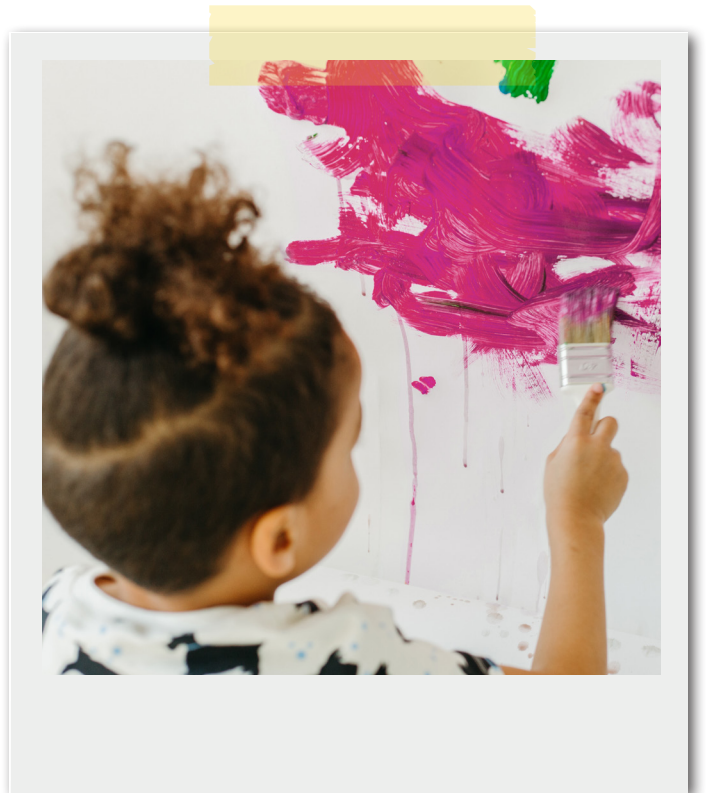
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

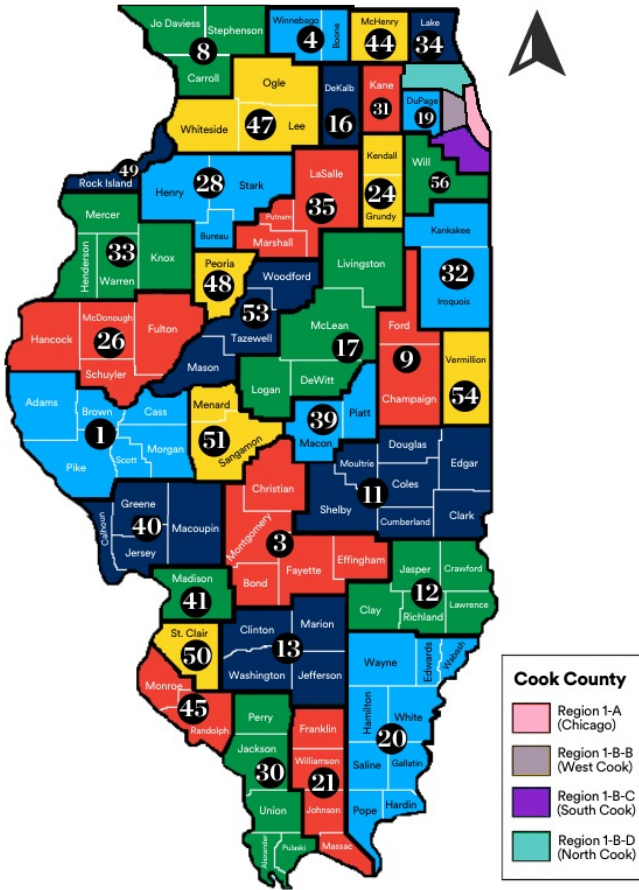


Timeline

- **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.

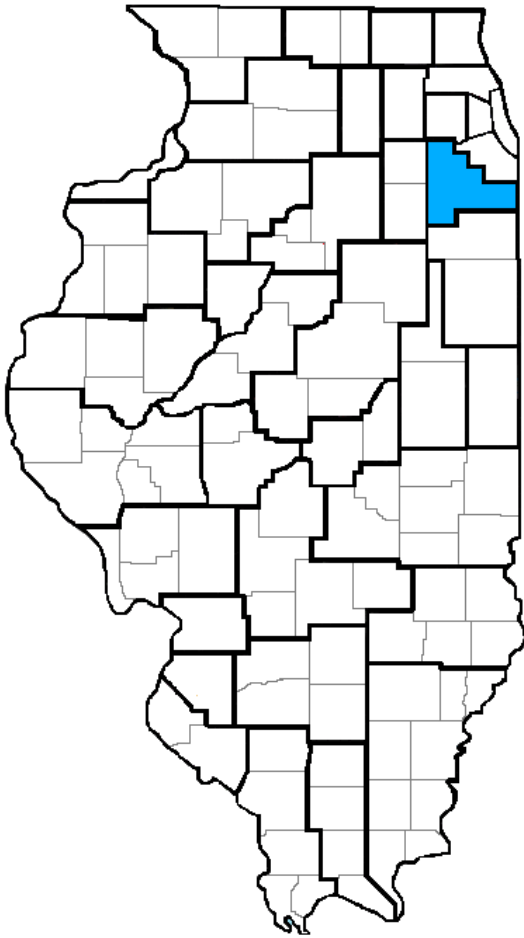
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 56

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

As one of the five collar counties, Region 56 is in the northeastern portion of Illinois, approximately 40 miles from the City of Chicago. It encompasses Will County, which is the fourth largest county in Illinois with approximately 835.9 square miles. The Region includes 89 municipalities, with Joliet as the county seat.

Region 56 is home to diverse landscapes, including over 20,000 acres of protected forest preserves, which includes U.S. Forest Service Park Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. It hosts the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which once connected the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Prior to the railroad era, the Michigan Canal helped establish Chicago as the transportation hub of the United States.

The Region is home to Lewis University, University of St. Francis, Governors State University, Joliet Junior College, and 26 school districts. Region 56 also houses four U.S. interstates, four U.S. highways, and 12 Illinois highways, in addition to rail and bus services that connect residents to the Chicago Loop. The strong energy infrastructure includes a natural gas pipeline grid where pipelines from Canada and the Gulf of Mexico meet and fan out across the Midwest.

Region 56 has 45 public parks that nurture family and children’s socialization in a safe environment while fostering community engagement for community members. The parks, natural places, strong infrastructure, and diversity make the Region a great place to raise a family.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Birth to Five Illinois acknowledges that Region 56 is traditional homelands of the Bodwéwadmí (Potawatomi), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskaskia, Myaamia (Miami), and Peoria. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Region.



An adult and a child going for a walk outdoors.

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

Regional Demographics

To support the Birth to Five Illinois mission to hold equity at the heart of our work, Region 56 works to understand the demographic layout of our community and how it relates to equitable access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across the Region.

Figure 1: Region 56 Population Change by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity Census Category	2010	2021
white, non-Hispanic	456,269	425,646
Hispanic or Latine	106,380	131,867
Black or African American, non-Hispanic	74,977	83,456
Asian, non-Hispanic	9,008	11,691
American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	833	954
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	115	126

Source: U.S. Census, 2010, 2021
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

According to the 2021 Census, Will County has a total population of 697,252. The Region saw a growth of approximately 20,000 community members in the last ten years, making it one of the fastest-growing counties in the State. The most noticeable population change was among the Hispanic or Latine population, which saw an increase of over 25,000 (Figure 1). Council conversations also highlighted that regional population growth was in part due to outstanding school districts, recreational activities, thriving job development, housing options, and resources and services for various priority populations, including asylum seekers from across the globe. The Region hosts culturally specific services and programming within a vast network of non-profit agencies.

“ We have seen a dramatic increase in immigrants seeking asylum who are coming from Venezuela and Colombia. Typically, they are bussed to Chicago and then end up coming to the Joliet area to access Spanish-specific services for children and families. Many continue to be impacted by homelessness, experience transportation hardships, and barriers to accessing child care and education.

- Community Member



An adult holding a child in the arms.

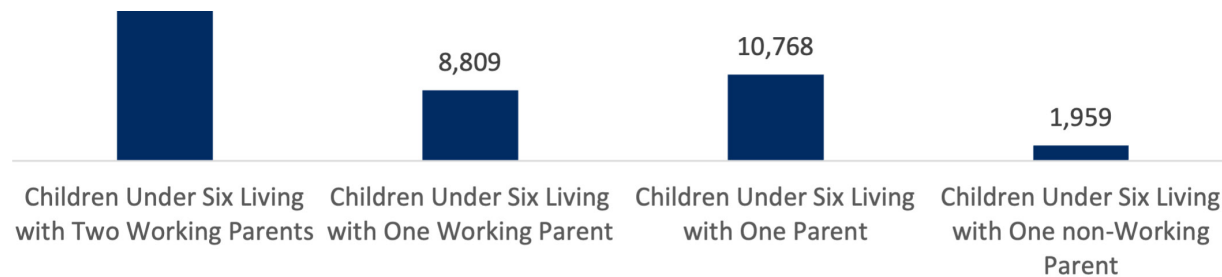
There are 43,771 children under the age of six living in the Region. While the majority of children in the Region identified as white, non-Hispanic, 28% identified as Hispanic/Latine, 11% identified as Black, and 3% identified as Asian (Figure 2). Less than half of these children live in a two-income household (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Race/Ethnicity Children Under Six Years

Race/Ethnicity Census Category	2020
White, non-Hispanic	19,202
Hispanic or Latine	10,076
Black or African American, non-Hispanic	4,036
Asian, non-Hispanic	927
Two or More Races, non-Hispanic	1,982
Some Other Race, non-Hispanic	47
American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	8
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	0

Source: IECAM, 2020
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 3: Working Family Conditions

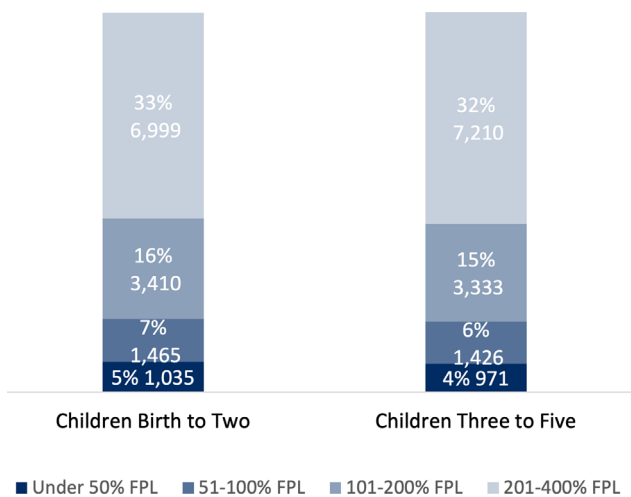


Source: IECAM, 2020
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“As a homeless parent of two young children, one with special needs, I have filled out countless surveys and intake packets. Looking back on my experiences, nothing has changed for the better with the information they have gathered. It continues to be extremely difficult to access services and they don’t align with family needs.”

- Community Member

Figure 4: Children Under Six by Age, Federal Poverty Level



Source: IECAM, 2020

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

More than 24% (10,768) of children under six years are living in a one-caregiver household, of which 18% (1,959) of those caregivers are not employed. Almost half of all households of children under six years old receive income at or below 200% Federal Poverty Line (FPL) (Figure 4). The highest areas of need, where children are most densely living in families designated at or below 200% FPL, are in pockets of Bolingbrook, Joliet, Plainfield, Braidwood, Wilmington, and Monee.

Children and Families in Priority Populations²

The Region has seen great growth over the past decade, which has created an increased need for regional support for programs and services across all populations. When presenting quantitative data on the Region, community members, and other stakeholders have reported that data is incomplete

and does not always depict their experiences. It is crucial to empower the voices of all stakeholders, especially those identified as priority populations (Figure 5). Priority populations are community members who typically have been underserved and underrepresented. By identifying and addressing priority populations, the Region can continue to improve equitable access to ECEC programs and services for children and families and work to align funding to address needed policy changes.

Priority Populations:

- Children and families in poverty and deep poverty.
- Children and families with child welfare system involvement.
- Children of a parent or a legal guardian with a disability.
- Children of teen parents.
- Children experiencing homelessness.
- Children with disabilities.
- Children of migrant or seasonal workers.
- Families with low caregiver educational attainment.
- Families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion.
- Children and families with refugee or asylum status.
- Children and families who face barriers due to immigration status.
- Children impacted by caregiver involvement in the criminal legal system.

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.

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

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are networks where individuals and local stakeholders come together to share their knowledge, resources, and lived experiences to promote ECEC growth and development. Regions across the state of Illinois may have informal community partnerships, however, a Collaboration refers to an officially established partnership between organizations with a shared mission or goal.

The All Our Kids (AOK) Early Childhood Network is an official Community Collaboration that was established in Region 56 in 2004. The AOK Network hosts monthly meetings with local stakeholders that include members from the ECEC network, including social service providers, public services, faith-based, and many other community stakeholders. The mission and vision of the AOK Network aims to create and support long-lasting partnerships that empower families with the knowledge and community resources necessary to promote healthy development and lifelong success. The AOK Network in Will County has had many successes, one of which includes piloting and launching the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) in February 2020. IRIS is a web-based information and referral system that engages early childhood providers and family support services to provide a clear referral path for families.

“I’ve been a part of AOK for a long time and in the last few months I’ve learned about so many programs and services that I didn’t even know existed. It’s great knowing this program exists and there are resources available in the community.”

- Community Member

The Region has many local partnerships, in addition to the AOK Network. These local relationships help foster changes and improvement in services and support for children and families to ensure equitable access across the board.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

According to the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding Report³, ECEC services support families and children from birth to five with two purposes; to support children in safe nurturing environments that foster interactions required to build school readiness, and to support families' abilities to participate in the workforce. According to the Illinois Cares for Kids⁴ website, all families have varying needs when it comes to ECEC. Different types of early care and education provide a wide range of options and services in varying settings to meet the individual goals of every family. Understanding the different types of program options, locations, and services, helps families make informed decisions based on the needs of their child(ren).

Figure 5: Region 56 Population Change by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity Census Category	Age (Years)	Program Location	Program Duration (Approximate)
Early Head Start (EHS)	0-3	Licensed Child Care Center Home-Visiting	Center: 6.5 hours per day Home: 1.5 hours per visit/week
Preventative Initiative (PI)	0-3	Licensed Child Care Center Home-Visiting (Virtual options available)	Center: Minimum 2.5 hours per day/ 5 days a week Home Visiting: Minimum 180 days per year
Early Intervention (EI)	0-3	Home-Visiting (Virtual options available)	Determined by the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)
Head Start (HS)	3-5	Licensed Child Care Center Home-Visiting	Center: 3.5 to 6.5 hours per day Home: 1.5 hours per week
Preschool For All (PFA)	3-5	Licensed Child Care Center School Based	2.5 hours per day, 12.5 hours per week
Preschool for All - Expansion (PFA-E)	3-5	Licensed Child Care Center School Based	5 hours per day
Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)	3-5	School Based	Determined by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
Licensed Child Care Center	6 weeks- school age	Licensed Child Care Center	Center operation hours
Licensed Family Child Care Home	6 weeks- school age	Licensed Family Child Care Home	Home care operation hours
Licensed Exempt Child Care Center	6 weeks - school age	License-Exempt Child Care Center	Center operation hours

Sources: Early Childhood, 2023, Illinois State Board of Education, 2023

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/primer-for-early-childhood-funding-commission-report-2021.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.illinoiscareforkids.org/>

Region 56 has a variety of ECEC program options for both children and families (Figure 5). Each option has a unique role in ensuring all families have access to high-quality care. Enrollment into these programs is based on income (Appendix B) and/or several categorical factors including, but not limited to, parent age, housing status, parent disability status, pregnancy, children’s involvement in foster care, developmental delays, and eligibility for public assistance. Within the ECEC programming landscape, there are differing service delivery settings. These include home-based services, licensed center/home programming, and school-based options.

Home Visiting: Allows families with children ages birth to three years to receive programming in their natural environment, which includes the child’s home or another setting in the community, such as a local library or park. Specific programs offer evidence-based curricula with the goal of increasing parent/caregiver knowledge of early childhood development, providing early detection for delays and health issues, increasing school readiness, and preventing child abuse and neglect.

Licensed (Exempt) Child Care Centers & Licensed Family Child Care Homes: Center-based programs for children birth to five years of age promote and nurture a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional growth for future school readiness while supporting the needs of families. Qualified licensed child care programs may accept support through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) that subsidizes the cost of child care for families at or below 200% of the FPL who are working, going to school, participating in a job training program, and/or actively looking for a job. Families who do not qualify for publicly funded child care options or assistance, will pay out of pocket tuition.

School-Based Programming: Provided through local school districts and special education cooperatives to provide a variety of programming for children ages three to five years. Children may qualify for school-based programming based on a variety of categorical factors, including developmental delay/diagnosis and FPL. In this setting, teachers and medical professionals can provide specialized educational and therapy services that work to lay a foundation of knowledge and skills that foster success throughout the school experience. Many of these school programs are half-day, which is around 2.5 hours in the morning or afternoon.

Programming options, settings, services, and duration of care can overlap based on funding streams, braided funding, performance standards, and licensing requirements. This complexity often causes confusion for programs when aligning services, meeting funder requirements, and tracking data outcomes.

“ Our early learning system is broken and disjointed causing confusion and barriers for families and providers. As a provider, navigating licensing standards and communicating with state agencies has become a barrier to maintaining and growing my program due to long delays, miscommunication, and unaligned practices.

- Community Member

”

Figure 6: Number of Sites and Capacity by Publicly Funded Program Type

Program Name	Number of Sites	Capacity
Early Head Start	4	265
Head Start	6	506
Prevention Initiative	2	190
Preschool for All	20	1,746
Preschool for All Expansion	7	320
IDHS and MIECHV Home Visiting	0	0

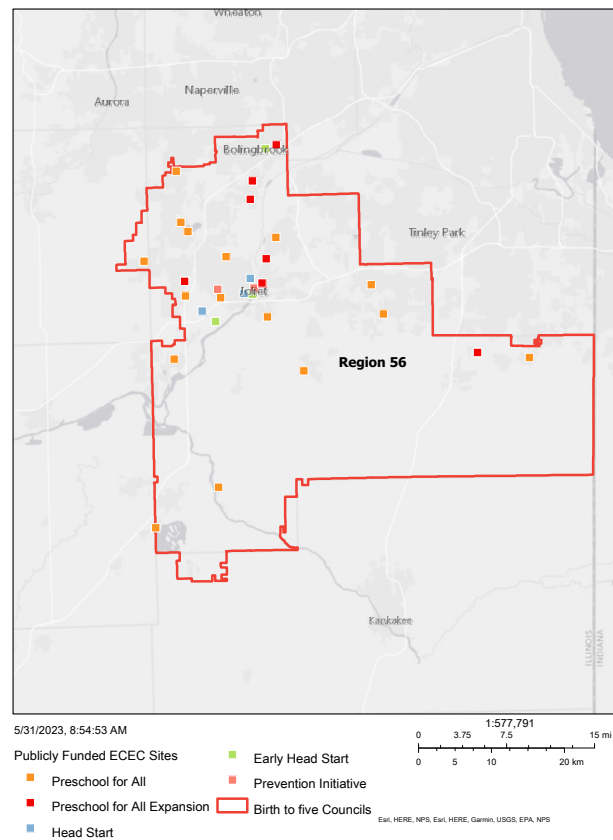
Source: IECAM, 2020
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 7: Number of Sites and Capacity by Child Care Type

Program Name	Number of Sites	Capacity
Licensed Child Care Center	82	7,994
Licensed Family Child Care Home	161	1,613
Licensed Exempt Child Care Center	19	1,909

Source: IECAM, 2020
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 8: Location of ECEC Programs



Source: IECAM, 2021
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Despite the diverse array of ECEC programming options and setting locations (Figures 6 and 7), most options are geographically isolated in the northern portion of the Region (Figure 8). This isolation of ECEC programs causes child care deserts or priority areas as defined by Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). These priority areas, as noted in the FY24 Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) Early Childhood Deserts Priority Areas (2023), include Joliet (Joliet Public SD86), Plainfield (Plainfield SD202), Crest Hill (Chaney-Monge SD 88), Crest Hill (Richland SD 88A), Braidwood (Reed Custer (CUSD 252U), Homer Glen (Homer Com Con SD33C), Lockport (Will County SD 92), Lockport (Taft SD 90), New Lenox (New Lenox SD 122), Elwood (Elwood Com Con SD 203), Wilmington (Wilmington CUSD 209U), Beecher (Beecher CUSD 200U), Crete (Crete-Monee CUSD 201-U), Rockdale (Rockdale SD 84), and Frankfort (Summit Hill SD 161).

Qualitative data collected from regional stakeholders indicated that ECEC program hours, waitlists, services, location, and high co-pays in combination with delays for payment in CCAP and transportation systems within these networks do not align with the unique needs of families who are seeking high-quality care for their children. Due to these barriers, families are often forced to choose between working and affording/accessing quality child care. These needs are further compounded in child care deserts in our Region.



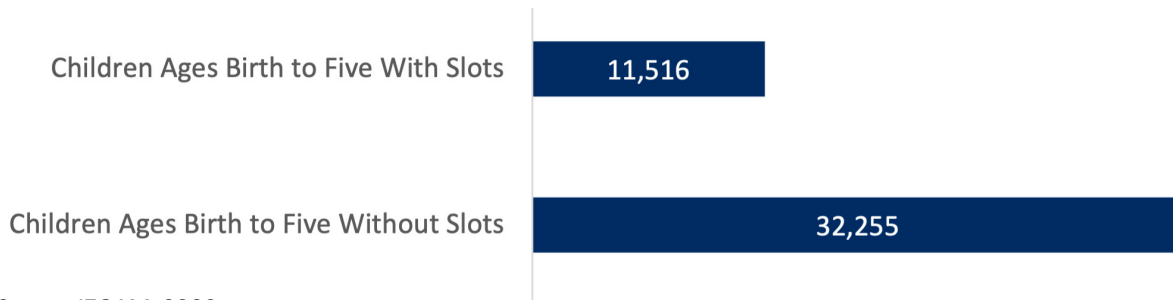
A child writing in a workbook.

“ Our town had one child care program that my child attended, but now it’s gone. Now I don’t have any other child care options left in our area.
- Community Member ”

Slot Gap

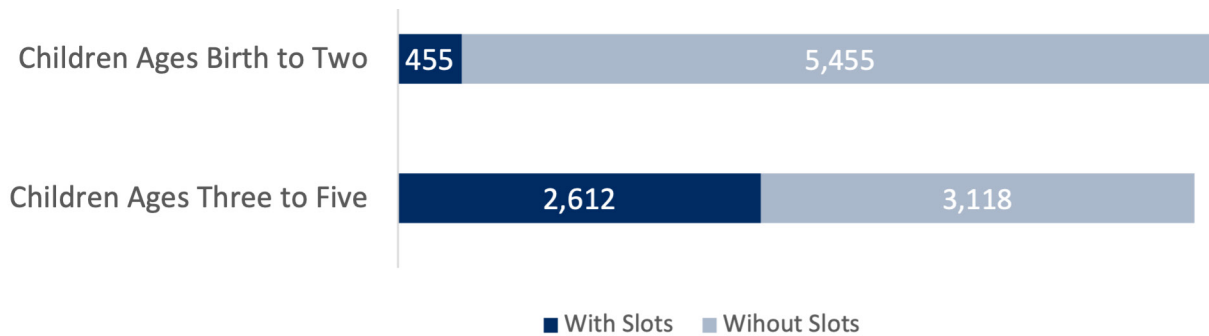
A slot gap exists when there are more children eligible for enrollment in ECEC programming than available enrollment slots. Slots can be defined by capacity, funded allocation, and enrollment. Funded slots are the number of available slots for each child per funding, where capacity is based on the maximum number of children per license. Enrollment is defined as children who attend programming across all funding streams. When exploring ECEC programming, it must be noted that families have many care choices that are not only limited to publicly funded ECEC programs and/or licensed child care center/home slots. Families explore what is best for their individual needs, including care by family members, relatives, or neighbor care which is not accounted for in the regional slot data.

Figure 9: Overall Child Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM, 2020
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 10: Publicly Funded ECEC Slot Gap



Source: IECAM, 2020
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The regional slot gap data shows publicly funded ECEC programs, licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, and license-exempt child care centers slots (Figure 9). There are 455 publicly funded slots for children ages birth to two years old, and these programs include Early Head Start and Prevention Initiative (Figure 10). There are 2,612 publicly funded slots available for children ages three to five and these programs include Head Start, Preschool For All, and Preschool For All Expansion. This totals 3,067 available publicly funded slots for children who qualify based on categorical factors, which include FPL. There are 11,640 children ages birth to five that live at or below 200% FPL, making them income-eligible for publicly funded ECEC programs. However, only about a quarter of those eligible for publicly funded programs have access to publicly funded slots. Despite the number of slots available, families may have to choose to utilize friends, family, relatives, or neighbors to provide care.

“

I researched child care options that meet our family’s schedule and child needs, but I prefer my children to stay with my mom during the day because I trust her, it’s convenient, and it’s flexible.

- Community Member

”

“

There is an available slot for my baby at the child care facility we want, but I don’t feel safe taking my baby on public transportation because I am a young new mother. Therefore, the baby stays at home with other family members.

- Community Member

”

Qualitative information collected through Action and Family Council meetings, interviews, and focus groups indicate that securing a slot in any program is not as simple as there being one available to the family. Other factors play a role in being able to access this slot, which include transportation, workforce, schedule alignment, geographical boundaries, and living in child care deserts. Additionally, even when slots are available, families may not enroll their children in a program due to a host of barriers including personal curriculum preference, transportation barriers, cost, time offerings, and ability to support children with disabilities. The specific information collected from our Region suggests a specific area south of Joliet once had a quality publicly funded ECEC program that many local children attended. It closed and moved further west. Now community members cannot realistically access the new program due to transportation access among many other reasons, which created a child care desert.

Proven long-term studies, over generations, of those who received quality ECEC services demonstrate that every dollar spent on quality ECEC programming for children birth to five yields a \$16 return, conservatively, in addition to a host of positive social, economic, educational, and developmental outcomes. ECEC is the nucleus of our Region and the state of Illinois. These programs and services that support our most underserved children and families can lay the groundwork for a successful trajectory that lasts a lifetime.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The Region’s ECEC workforce is a passionate group of professionals who strive to support our youngest children and their families. Our regional ECEC workforce spans across many settings and across all early learning funding streams that support families and their children under six years old.⁵

Figure 11: Illinois Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce

Roles may include:	Professionals work in:	Professionals are funded by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assistant Floater Teacher/Sub ● Early Interventionist ● Service Coordinator ● Home Visitor ● Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant ● Lead Floater Teacher/Sub ● Lead Teacher ● Paraprofessional ● Principal ● Program Director/Administrator ● Site Director ● Teacher Aid ● Teacher Assistant ● Special Education Support Staff ● Special Education Therapist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Child Care Home and/or Center ● Home Visiting ● Schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CCAP ● Early Childhood Block Grant (PI, PFA, PFA-E) ● HS/EHS ● Individuals with disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B/Section 619 ● IDEA Part C ● Local funding ● Private funding ● Private tuition ● Religious or private philanthropic funding

Source: Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, 2023.
 Created by: Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development

Child care providers and all who are associated continue to be the main pillar of ECEC success and functionality, no matter the early learning setting (Figure 11). Overall, workforce shortages continue to hinder family and child access to ECEC programming across all settings. Qualitative information suggests the ECEC workforce has always had challenges with diversity, inadequate wages/benefits, and a complicated, misaligned systems of licensing and credentialing. These concerns were further amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/governors-early-childhood-funding-commission.html>

ECEC Workforce Diversity

“Illinois is the nation’s fifth largest State and home to around one million children between the ages of birth to five. The State is becoming increasingly diverse, with cultural and linguistic minorities accounting for roughly half of the children in public Kindergarten.”⁶ Regionally, the diversity among children and families aligns with this trend.

Figure 12: Licensed Center Teaching Staff by Race and Ethnicity⁷

Position	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	white
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	2%	17%	17%	2%	2%	60%
Licensed Family Child Care Providers	*	46%	17%	*	*	36%

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Diversity refers to the range of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, identities, experiences, and interests within the workforce. Through daily interactions and observations, children form their own meaning of race, culture, and other forms of diversity. If children are cared for in a less diverse environment, they risk less connection with diverse groups which may result in fewer conversations about diversity and, in turn, provides more room for prejudice.⁸ Considering the Region has grown in the racial and ethnic diversity of children under six years, it is important to bring cultural awareness and inclusion through a more diverse workforce and culturally responsive classroom activities to provide families and children with the most comprehensive services.

In addition to the demographic information provided in Figure 12, out of 1,486 providers in Region 56, 22% are bilingual. Ninety-eight percent are women and only 2% are men.

To support the changing needs of children, a diverse workforce must align with these changes. The Region continues to face barriers with hiring and retaining qualified and diverse staff (Figure 12). Based on qualitative data from those in our current ECEC workforce, programs barriers include:

- Difficulty recruiting and hiring qualified staff of diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Minimal to no access to providing additional compensation for multilingual providers.

“ I’m employed by a smaller center-based program and speak Spanish and English. Our program enrolls more than 50% of children who primarily speak Spanish and I’m the only staff who can translate or engage with them and their families. I am not compensated for this skill set, which is not uncommon in this field.

- Community Member ”

⁶ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/transforming-the-early-childhood-workforce-il-report.pdf>

⁷ Cells with an asterisk * have fewer than five but more than zero respondents

⁸ <https://infantcrier.mi-aimh.org/the-importance-of-promoting-diversity-in-early-childhood-programs/>

ECEC Compensation/Benefits

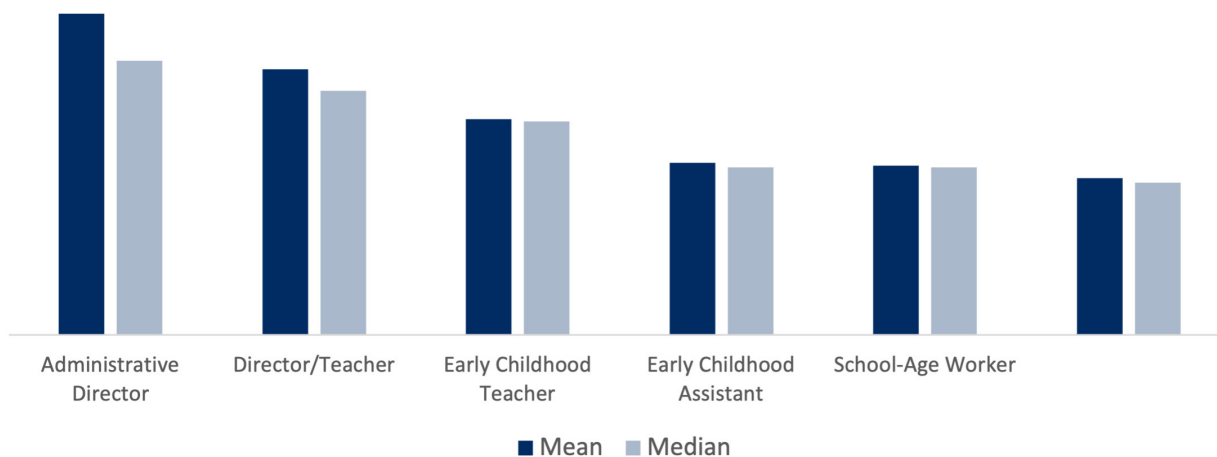
The ECEC workforce must be compensated with respectful and livable wages and benefits to remain in the field, which in turn supports their ability to consistently provide ongoing social, emotional, and developmental support skills in children.⁹

Figure 13: State-Wide Two-Year Individual Position Level Turnover Rate by Position

Position	Employees	Staff Who Left in Past 2 Years	Employee Turnover Rate
Administrative Director	547	57	10%
Director/Teacher	650	121	19%
Early Childhood Teacher	3,324	1,312	40%
Early Childhood Assistant	2,468	1,380	56%
School-Age Worker	325	143	44%
School-Age Assistant	119	54	45%

Source: INCCRRA, 2021
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 14: Child Care Center Hourly Wages by Position by Service Delivery Area 5



Source: IECAM, 2020
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Workforce salary/hourly compensation can vary due to several factors, including but not limited to accreditation, education, ECEC setting, experience, and access to workforce-related initiatives that assist with pay salary/hourly adjustments. Figure 14 displays the ECEC workforce hourly compensation in 2021 for service delivery area 5, which includes Grundy, Kankakee, Kendall, and Will counties. The State's minimum wage is currently at \$13.00/hour, and the ECEC workforce compensation lingers around this number for the direct care staff within classrooms.

⁹ At the Wage Floor: Covering Homecare and Early Care and Education Workers in the New Generation of Minimum Wage Laws

Members of the Region 56 ECEC workforce shared the following compensation-related issues:

- Minimal to no access to paid parental leave.
- Unaffordable or absent benefits packages.
- Not compensated for additional skill sets (i.e., linguistic skills).
- Inconsistent and/or uncertain access to compensation-related initiatives.
- Minimal to no access to retirement benefits.

“ I left my Early Childhood teaching job of over eight years to work for an agency that was offering me full benefits, retirement, and better pay.
- Community Member ”

Workforce compensation can vary based on funding streams, access to funds, and setting. Programs with robust funding opportunities may be able to provide higher compensation for their staff compared to those without the same opportunities. For example, providers shared through focus groups and interviews that qualified ECEC staff who are under-compensated regularly transition to a school-based setting due to higher pay and benefits, among other factors. Those working as licensed family child care or home providers continue to operate as independent business owners, setting their own child care rates. Compensation for these programs can vary, but on average providers earn \$4.59/hour, which covers direct care provided to our children, food preparation, cleaning, and record keeping.¹⁰ Additionally, home-based care providers reported that they are not given equal opportunity to support compensation initiatives to make a livable wage. Regardless of the program setting, ECEC providers cannot compete with the private sector compensation and benefits. Inequitable access to funding opportunities creates barriers to high-quality services for all children, especially in those from minoritized families.



A child playing on a slide.

“ I am competing with fast food restaurants, who are able to pay more than I can offer.
- Region 56 ECEC Provider ”

“ I can only give quarterly bonuses because if I used money for a raise and the grant stopped, I wouldn't be able to afford to sustain that pay rate.
- Region 56 ECEC Provider ”

¹⁰ <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27897/documents/Child%20Care/FY21SSV.7.IDHS.FINAL.pdf>

ECEC Licensing & Credentialing

Provider licensing and credentialing are regulated State standards that categorize education and professional development within the ECEC workforce. Licensing aims to ensure a standardized process that guarantees baseline health and safety measures, including provider qualifications. Credentialing processes identify standards regarding quality curriculum, enhanced health and safety measures, and expectations that ECEC providers meet high-quality educational and training requirements.

During focus groups and interviews, providers across program settings discussed the following barriers to licensing:

- Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) staff licensing requirements misalign with ECE credential levels for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS).
- Long wait times for DCFS fingerprinting and background checks.
- Compensation initiatives depend on provider credential status.
- Credential processes and renewals are confusing and tedious.
- Staffing patterns within state agencies slow down the licensing/credentialing process and make it hard to personally address questions or concerns.

“

One of the biggest barriers that we are facing goes back to DCFS and the representatives they are hiring. It's ridiculous that we must wait six weeks to have license renewals, background, and fingerprint checks done. If you're telling me I can be in the building without being paid, then I am moving on for a different job.

- Region 56 ECEC Provider

”

“

I used to be an occupational therapist for EI, but I let my credential lapse because I had to get a full-time position that had benefits for myself and my family. I would love to pick up a few kids in my downtime, but the EI credentialing process is too intense to obtain and maintain. I know so many other therapists who would love to pick up a few EI kids, but they don't have the time to reactivate and maintain the credentials.

- Community Member

”

To continue to effectively address these challenges, we must consistently consult with our current workforce—the people on the ground—to better understand their strengths and needs.¹¹ In addition to the overarching concerns in workforce diversity, compensation/benefits, and licensing/credentials across all ECEC program types, ECEC professionals shared additional challenges specific to each setting.

¹¹ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/transforming-the-early-childhood-workforce-il-report.pdf>

School-Based Challenges

- Wages do not align with the increasing cost of living.
- Benefit package offerings are inconsistent.
- Staffing to support children with disabilities and delays is inadequate.
- There is a lack of staff diversity, specifically linguistic diversity.
- Staffing patterns make it difficult to adhere to program expectations.
- Parents need more guidance navigating available services than staff can support.
- Licensing protocols are inconsistent.

Home Visiting Challenges

- Self-funded mileage is non-reimbursable.
- Wear and tear on a personal vehicle is costly.
- Health/retirement benefits, paid time off, sick leave, or paid maternity leave are not provided.
- Credentialing and renewal processes are cumbersome.
- Wages are not compatible with inflation trends.
- Unpredictable payouts depending on State or private insurance processing.
- Family no show = no pay for provider.
- Safety.

Child Care Home & Center Challenges

- Wages are not competitive/do not align with the cost of living.
- Lack of behavioral support/training.
- Provider shortage (i.e., lack of entering the field or unqualified).
- Unaligned credentialing/renewal processes.
- High turnover.
- Lack of equity/inclusivity training.
- Minimal access to health/retirement benefits.
- Inconsistent CCAP processing times.
- Language barriers.
- Decreased family engagement.
- Difficulty fully supporting children with disabilities and delays.

“

We don't have an enrollment problem, there are tons of kids ready to enroll. We have a staffing problem. We cannot find teachers.

- Region 56 Provider

”

Developing and maintaining a highly qualified and diverse early childhood workforce in Illinois is a complex undertaking that requires innovation, creativity, and careful attention to issues related to equity and access to higher education. Considering that each setting in ECEC requires different components to keep the workforce robust, each provider requires equitable access to funding, resources, and initiatives. Misaligned state systems impact regional and community ECEC workforce, which in turn increases turnover, waitlists, child care deserts, and classroom closings, and decreases workforce diversity.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

The Birth to Five Illinois: Region 56 Team worked with families from a multitude of backgrounds to address the inequities and barriers that currently exist in regional ECEC programming and services. The Region hosted Family Council meetings, focus groups, and interviews with families, especially focusing on regional priority populations who traditionally are underrepresented and underserved. Conversations aimed to ensure their lived experiences and voices are amplified to make meaningful changes to ECEC programming and services. Families have passionately shared their concerns with the ECEC system in hopes of having more equitable access to all the programs, services, and supports for children from birth to age five.

Families within the Region shared the following barriers to accessing ECEC programs and services:

- Costly tuition-based child care programs.
- Safety and financial challenges in accessing public transportation.
- Long waitlists for ECEC programming and services.
- Programming hours do not align with family work needs.
- CCAP policies and co-pays do not support family needs.
- Confusing information about how to access ECEC programming.
- Needs for comprehensive parental leave policies.
- ECEC programs are not meeting the demands for children with special needs.
- Child care deserts.
- Services do not align with family home language.

Access

Based on family feedback, access to high-quality and culturally diverse ECEC programming has been, and continues to be, challenging across the Region. Families in the Region have been honest in sharing their lived experiences and intimate stories when describing their challenges to accessing ECEC, which can be complex, multilayered, and unique to each family's needs. Access barriers revolve around a few main pillars: fiscal, cultural, transportation, programming hours, and communication.

Fiscal

ECEC programming (HS, EHS, PFA, PI, and PFA-E) across the Region is designed to offer free ECEC for those who meet the income guidelines. Families who are not income eligible for these programs are forced to pay out-of-pocket and/or apply for further assistance through CCAP to offset the cost. The income guidelines are a barrier for working families.

Additionally, families who do not apply or qualify for CCAP must pay out of pocket for their child's ECEC services. These out-of-pocket costs can oftentimes be more than a person's monthly mortgage or rent.

“ I have been receiving CCAP for many years, which is great, and now that we are understaffed, I am required to work overtime for my job. Now I'm making slightly too much money to receive my CCAP, but I cannot afford to pay the full tuition out-of-pocket.

- Community Member ”

“ My child attended a tuition-based program, and the cost was more than my monthly mortgage payment. It made more sense for me to quit my job and stay home than to hand over my entire paycheck to the child care center.

- Family Member ”

Transportation

Region 56 is home to various public and private transportation systems; however, they often do not align with the particular needs of families trying to access ECEC, such as those working non-traditional hours, those living in rural areas, and those travelling with multiple children.

Additionally, very few ECEC programs offer direct transportation or financial assistance to offset the cost of transportation. Regardless of the availability of ECEC programs, without affordable, realistic, and safe transportation, families cannot or will not utilize these transportation options.

Cultural

Region 56 is home to diverse families who strive to provide cultural enrichment for their children. The Region supports diversity in many ways and through various organizations by offering multicultural activities and resources. However, within ECEC programs, families often find that workforce, resources, and linguistic services do not meet their needs or align with cultural values. The region has seen an influx of asylum seekers with children, and our ECEC programs must ensure their programming aligns with and supports the diversity of families and their cultural values.

“ My family had a crisis at the end of 2021, and we immigrated to the U.S., along with a ton of other people. We came to Joliet because we had family here. People are running out of options and are in crisis. They are staying in the police stations and have minimal to no resources. When I try to call for services, it's rare that someone is available to speak in my language. There have been some who have helped us a lot, but we need additional help... When I discovered that it was 'normal' for people to send their baby to child care, I had no idea that was an option or a culture norm here.

- Community Member ”

“ I don't feel safe bringing my baby on the bus because there is no shelter while I wait, along with no sidewalks.

- Community Member ”

“ The buses are packed and almost impossible to bring strollers, backpacks, and other things on. Let alone worrying about my family's safety while I'm on the bus.

- Parent ”

“ The probability of having an accessible bus stop near me and having a drop-off point near the child care center is next to impossible.

- Family Member ”

Programming Hours, Special Needs Services & Location

ECEC programs must align with family schedules, be conveniently located, and provide the desired services that improve the quality of life for children and families. Programs often do not support a full day of care for those families working eight or more hours, making it difficult to utilize ECEC programs. Families are often forced to find care through friends, neighbors, and/or relatives or make the decision not to work.

ECEC programs strive to support children and families in several ways, including services for children with varying and/or special needs. However, families with children enrolled in ECEC programs who utilize supportive services are often forced to find creative ways to ensure their children are transported to and from programming.

Despite having many ECEC program options across the Region, our services are not conveniently located for families. The Region has 15 areas identified as child care deserts. It is crucial that families have access to programs that support their unique schedules, locations, and that provide high-quality services.

“ My family lives in a rural area where there are limited to no quality child care options. We are forced to drive many miles to enroll our child.

- Community Member.

“ If my child qualifies for special education, it needs to be full day with transportation provided in order for any full-time working parent to access this service.

- Parent



Adults and children being photographed while standing on a bridge.

“ My child gets special education services at the school district and the program is only 2.5 hours. I can't find a child care within the district limits, really none, that can support my child for the rest of the day until I can pick them up after work.

- Caregiver

Communication

ECEC is a multi-layered system; it can be confusing for families to understand the complexities of the programming, services, and resources offered. Families in the Region have stated that there is not one all-encompassing source of information for understanding the available programs or how to enroll. Streamlined state, regional, and community communications surrounding ECEC are essential to ensure families can learn about their options and make informed decisions about care and education for their children.

Family and caregiver involvement and engagement in ECEC programming is critical to its success and longevity. ECEC programs strive to engage caregivers through parent cafes, policy councils, family and school board meetings, and by hosting family events. For family engagement to be integrated throughout early childhood systems and programs, providers and schools must engage families as essential partners while providing services that encourage children’s learning and development, nurture positive relationships between families and staff, and support families.

Parents and families of our youngest learners are the heart of our Region and are integral to growing an intentional, accessible, and equitable community with affordable, diverse, and available child care options. The Birth to Five Illinois: Region 56 Action Council, Family Council, elected officials, and various regional stakeholders have begun the process of making meaningful changes to ECEC programming, services, funding, and policy decisions based on regional family voices and feedback.

“As a new mother in Joliet I started looking for child care I had no clue where to start. I eventually found a center, but the waitlist was very long, and I could not enroll my child for several months.

- Community Member

”

“As a parent, I’m grateful to have my voice heard and be involved. This allows decisions being made now to impact future growth for our children and families.

- Family Member

”

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 56 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

- Regional public transportation infrastructure.
- Passionate ECEC providers and provider network.
- An abundance of school districts.
- Access to culturally diverse family engagement opportunities.
- Dedicated informal community partnership and an official Collaboration (AOK).
- Pipeline for ECEC workforce and job placements through regional higher education options.
- Variety of ECEC services and programs.
- Regional commitment from families to strengthen services for children, especially those who are most often underserved.
- Robust family engagement opportunities (i.e., public libraries, park districts, parks).
- Wide range of family-centered resources and services.

Needs

- English as a second language (ESL) programs and services for children and families.
- Full-day ECEC programming that supports working hours and non-traditional employment work schedule.
- ECEC workforce compensation/benefits that align with a livable and respectable wage.
- Streamlined and understandable ECEC system for families and providers.
- Reduction in and/or elimination of child care deserts.
- Parental leave that aligns with family needs.
- Increased investments in transportation around ECEC needs.
- Quicker CCAP turnaround times and payments.
- Additional investments in recruiting, hiring, retaining, and compensating diversity within the ECEC workforce (i.e., linguistics).
- Intentional training and support opportunities for ECEC professionals and providers who care for children with special needs.
- Recognize child care family home and center providers as equivalent to providers that work in a school-based setting.
- Consider years of experience as a provider to override education requirements.

Recommendations

The Region 56 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- State-Regional-Community Model of Partnership
 - Continue to support and fund organizations that work as a conduit between the State, Region, and local community so the authentic family and provider voices are included in the decisions made around equitable, intentional, and practical funding, policy, and resource allocation decisions.
- Create One State ECEC Agency with a Unified ECEC Data System
 - Streamline and consolidate the ISBE, DCFS, IDHS, and Governor's Office of Early Childhood Department (GOECD) into one ECEC state agency to better align funding, communication, program performance standards, credentialing, and licensing.
 - Create one unified ECEC data system that aligns both state and federal ECEC performance standards, monitoring, reporting, outcomes, enrollment, licensing, and credentialing across all funding streams.
- Full-Day ECEC Programming
 - Expand ECEC programming hours across all funding streams that align with traditional full-time working hours to support working families, streamline transportation, and offer consistent care routines for children and families.
- ECEC Workforce Investments
 - Permanent and consistent initiatives for workforce compensation, diversity, and higher education.
 - Respectable wage/benefit minimums for all ECEC providers.
 - Accessible training and professional development opportunities for ECEC professionals through community and regional partnerships that target special needs, diversity, and equity.
 - Expand braided/blended funding opportunities.
 - Support the alignment of teaching standards with neighboring states to recruit ECEC professionals, considering relevant years of ECEC experience.
- Elimination of Child Care Deserts
 - Continue to strategically and equitably identify ECEC areas of need.
 - Continue to expand and fund Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and early childhood Request for Proposals (RFP) opportunities for all providers regardless of the setting.
 - Support and fund transportation needs for families and children to improve access to ECEC.
 - Support workforce investments.

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 56, 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: Federal Poverty Level for Families Living at or Below 100% FPL

Persons in family/household	At or Below 100% FPL
1	\$14,580
2	\$19,720
3	\$24,860
4	\$30,000
5	\$35,140
6	\$40,280
7	\$45,420
8	\$50,560
Note: For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$5,140 for each additional person.	

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

Families, Parents, 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?

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