



children's home & aid

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Testimony in Support of the Early Childhood Block Grant

Submitted by Eric Mayo on behalf of Children's Home & Aid

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Good afternoon. My name is Eric Mayo, and I'm the Public Policy Manager for Children's Home & Aid. Children's Home & Aid has been partnering with children, youth, and families whose potential is at risk to create hope, opportunity, and bright futures throughout Illinois since 1883. The agency offers the full breadth of high-quality state- and federally-funded early childhood programs – from Healthy Families Initiative and MICECHV home visiting, Early Head Start, and the Prevention Initiative program to the Child Care Assistance Program, Head Start, and Preschool for All. We currently operate five, full day and full year, child care centers with Preschool for All (PFA) throughout the state serving over 600 families, in addition to home visiting services to nearly 500 families, most of whom are through Prevention Initiative (PI) funded home visiting programs.

Access to high quality early childhood education programs is crucial to the well-being of our children and families and can help narrow gaps in outcomes that can plague children throughout their education. For example, during the 2019 school year, our child care centers saw significant improvements among African-American boys ages 3-5 who were meeting or exceeding expectations at our 5 centers. We appreciate the opportunity today to provide testimony to inform your decisions as you determine the priorities for the state's Fiscal Year 2022 education budget and how programs like ours can continue to provide for children and families in our communities.

Children's Home & Aid is asking that the state board increase funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant by at least \$50 million for the upcoming fiscal year. This additional funding will continue the important gains made by the board's increases over the past few years.

To start, I would like to tell you a story about one of our clients: She had been struggling with mental health issues and was referred to Stronger Beginnings for Families (SBFF), our Prevention Initiative program serving the Greater East St. Louis community, through a neighbor who was currently receiving services through our program. Prior to beginning services, she was admitted into a treatment facility and eventually became involved with DCFS' Intact Family Services. Our home visitor worked closely with her and the Intact Family Services program over the past year to not only provide home visiting services for her family with young children but to also connect her with additional resources. Our home visitor has encouraged her to engage in mental health services, referred her to receive the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and WIC, and to secure United Way assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic to child proof her home and purchase clothing for her four children. Our home visitor has built a strong relationship with this client and continues to go above and beyond to ensure her family receives as many supports as possible.

This story highlights the critical need for greater mental health supports within the early education and care system and the intersectionality of the struggles our clients are dealing with. Children's Home & Aid has seen a greater need for early childhood teachers, home visitors, and program staff to understand the complexity of those issues that children and families face. This is especially true for communities with high populations of Black, indigenous, people of color, families living in deep poverty or facing housing instability, and families involved in the child welfare system. These children and families have unique needs that require comprehensive services including early intervention, mental health services,

and active collaboration with Intact Family Services caseworkers so parents are able to fulfill their role as their children's first teachers and their children enter school ready to succeed.

Funding streams should consider the complexities of meeting the needs of priority populations that have been identified and prioritized by the Governor's Early Learning Council and disperse appropriate funds to support those enhanced efforts. The needs of families have increased and well-trained staff who know how to identify mental health issues and respond appropriately requires professional coaching, mentoring structures, and professional development topics that are trauma informed and are applicable to to equip staff and sustain the programs themselves.

These experiences have led us to make the following suggestions ISBE can implement to better serve children and families throughout Illinois.

1. Improve data collection to better understand how ISBE early childhood block grant programs are serving priority populations.

Due to our work in the child welfare system, we are uniquely positioned to understand the complex relationship between the child welfare system and the early childhood education system. We know children involved in the child welfare system and their families require additional supports in order to succeed. In order to offer those services, we need to be able to track whether or not a family is in the child welfare system.

Illinois has identified three populations that are the state's highest priority for early childhood education: children from homeless families, children with developmental delays and disabilities, and children involved in the child welfare system. However, in the IWAS-SIS system, only the first two are able to be tracked. It is therefore exceedingly difficult to estimate how many child welfare involved families are accessing early care and education. It is crucial that the data be disaggregated to appropriately display what priority populations are being served through ISBE early childhood block grant programs and what type of enhanced supports are needed through any additional funding.

Additionally, ISBE's data system is not built to accommodate community-based programs that provide services yearlong such as ours. A data tracking system that allows for data collection to accurately reflect the length of time that community providers are offering services could be helpful in evaluating the budget moving forward. This could also provide the opportunity to continue to work alongside community agencies to deliver stable and sustainable services to young children and their families in Illinois. Families' needs do not start and stop with the school year.

2. Provide greater mental health supports to children & families, especially those attending Preschool for All (PFA) and Prevention Initiative (PI) programs.

We know that early education providers often braid and blend their funding sources in order to provide services for the children and families in their community. This is difficult for providers to navigate, especially for providers in communities that are already lacking resources and impacts the types of encompassing services they can provide for young children and their families. Children's Home & Aid strives to care for the whole family in our early education programs and we believe that extra supports such as mental health services, collaborations with other services and connection to home visiting programs are crucial to early education programs. Our program staff has reported that once basic costs for our Early Childhood Block Grant (ECGB) funded programs are factored in, there is no room to provide the additional mental health supports the families we serve need, and which we can provide in some of our other programming. In our Head Start programs, for example, we can hire mental health therapists to

support children and our families, and we are encouraged by the results. While Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) has allowed for expanded services like mental health supports, it is still difficult to provide such services to our families across all of our ISBE programs. Those extra supports are necessary to meet the needs of children and their families, especially in communities that are disproportionately experiencing negative outcomes, but it is practically impossible to include such services through our current ISBE funded PFA and PI programs. Children's Home & Aid recommends an evaluation of the grant application process for the ECBG-funded programs to ensure that communities who need them most have access to the enhanced supports regardless of the ECBG funding stream that supports their program.

3. Provide greater flexibility for block grant funding to be used for administrative costs

ISBE contracts for the Early Childhood Block Grants do not cover the true costs of providing services. Each year, we add approximately \$738,000 of private donations to fund basic program operations, not to enhance the services our families receive. Simply put, ISBE contracts do not adequately cover the administrative costs of running a quality program. In 2017, we strongly advocated for ISBE to increase the indirect cost reimbursement rate in the Early Childhood Block Grant, and we were pleased that ISBE raised that rate to 12.14 percent starting for FY18. However, the practical impact of this change has been minimal. We strongly urge ISBE to make reforms to truly help programs recover administrative costs.

Thank you for your time and your efforts for the well-being of children and families in Illinois. Should you have further questions, you can contact me via email at emayo@childrenshomeandaid.org.