



Testimony in Support of the Early Childhood Block Grant

Submitted by Erin Plumb on behalf of Children's Home & Aid

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Good afternoon. My name is Erin Plumb, and I'm the Program Supervisor for Stronger Beginnings for Families, Children's Home & Aid's Prevention Initiative-funded program serving families in Madison, Monroe, St. Clair, and Randolph counties. Children's Home & Aid advances the well-being of children by investing in families to disrupt the systemic and multi-generational cycle of racial, social and economic inequality. Early childhood programs, like Prevention Initiative and Preschool for All funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant, are critical tools in disrupting generational inequity. Children's Home and Aid provides Prevention Initiative-funded programs for children zero to three through home visiting programs in the Central and Southern regions and in four of our five early care and education centers in Bloomington and the Chicago Metropolitan area. All five of our early care and education centers provide Preschool for All.

Access to high quality early childhood care and education programs is crucial to the well-being of our children and families. These programs can help narrow gaps in outcomes that follow children throughout their educational and life trajectory. We appreciate the opportunity today to provide testimony to inform your decisions and priorities for the state's Fiscal Year 2023 education budget. We hope to share how programs like ours can continue to provide for children and families in our communities.

Children's Home & Aid is asking the state board to increase funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant by at least \$54.4 million for the upcoming fiscal year. This is a 10 percent increase in the budget for the block grant and we, along with other advocates, are asking for a 10 percent budget increase across all components of our early education system.

I would like to share a story about one of our participants we served through our Stronger Beginnings for Families PI-funded program. Megan was referred to us through our own youth services program as a young, pregnant woman who was homeless and needed support. Our home visitor engaged with her throughout her pregnancy and after the birth of her child. Over the last two years the Stronger Beginnings home visitor has supported Megan in furthering attachment with her child, ensuring the child reached developmental goals, and connecting mom with resources in her community. Recently, Megan experienced challenges engaging in the program and the home visitor recognized that bi-weekly contact wasn't enough. The home visitor offered weekly visits throughout the summer and Megan fully re-engaged in the program with this more intensive support. We are excited to share that Megan is attending college and moved into her own apartment last week with her child and is receiving furniture from our youth services program.

This story highlights the need for flexibility in grants to support families in the ways most needed for their children and families to thrive. Funding streams must consider the complexities of meeting the needs of families prioritized by the Governor's Early Learning Council — such as children with disabilities, homeless, or are in the child welfare system, and disperse appropriate funds to support those enhanced efforts with high-quality supports. The needs of all families continue to increase, especially during the pandemic. Our state needs well-trained staff who know how to assess for risks and identify mental health issues and respond appropriately. This requires professional coaching, mentoring, and professional development that are trauma informed, equip staff with the

tools to be successful and are sustainable for programs. Additionally, the early childhood workforce has been underpaid for too long and funding should be set aside to increase compensation. These experiences inform the following suggestions to ISBE on how to better serve children and families throughout Illinois.

1. Flexibility in grants and increased funding to provide extra support for families.

We know families experienced significant stressors and trauma during the pandemic and have more complex needs than ever before. Families are being forced to access scarce resources and navigate multiple systems to meet their needs. Increased funding and flexibility in how programs utilize funds to support families is necessary. Current ISBE contracts for the Early Childhood Block Grant do not cover the true cost of providing services and, with increased needs for families, programs need additional funding to appropriately support families and staff. In our Head Start programs, for example, we can hire mental health therapists and family support specialists to support children and their families. While Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) allows for expanded services like mental health supports, it is still difficult to provide those services across all of our ISBE-funded programs. Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultations are shown to boost children's social-emotional well-being in their classrooms and reduce the likelihood of suspensions/expulsions. Increased funding could improve the quality of programs, not just for the children, but for families as well. These extra supports are necessary to meet the needs of children and their families, especially in communities with limited economic and employment opportunities and who have experienced systemic oppression.

For example, approximately 58% of the families served in Children's Home & Aid's PI-funded home visiting program, Stronger Beginnings for Families, are also receiving DCFS' Intact Family Services. Intact Family Services program works with at-risk families who have been referred for resources or who are at risk for abuse/neglect to address needs to keep families together. Many of these families experience a range of complex issues and trauma, our staff often experience vicarious or secondary trauma from being deeply invested in the relationships they have with their participants and families. Early childhood mental health consultations are necessary to meet the needs of children and their families and provides support, allowing our home visitors to do their best work. More flexible funding will allow programs to expand the use of Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services and improve the quality of our programs and outcomes.

In order to further the development of young children and support families across the entire state, we also recommend ISBE expand their proposed Family Child Care model to better fit the needs of those providers and the families using their services. Utilizing home visitors to work with a handful of family child care providers through evidence-based models could greatly increase the quality of care. This would be especially helpful for families living in early childhood care and education deserts, mostly rural areas without current access to home visiting or other early childhood services. The family child care providers can pass knowledge and skills learned from home visitors to families and help support caregivers in their developmental role in their child's life. Additionally, to support families across the entire state, utilizing a birth to 5 model for ISBE-funded programs similar to other home visiting programs would ensure families receive the services needed until their children are ready for school.

Additionally, ISBE could award higher funded grants for programs meeting model fidelity certification. This would reward programs of higher quality while also incentivizing programs to meet higher quality standards. Additionally, programs like ours offering the same level of services all year round, could receive appropriate funding for the quality services they provide. The needs of children and families do not stop over the summer months and an increase in grant funding could be used to ensure programs can continue to provide year-round services. This improves the quality of programs and holistic family support.

2. Increase compensation to support the workforce

Investing in our early childhood workforce is critical to supporting families in our communities. Increased investment in the ECBG can increase worker compensation across the state. The past year and a half of the pandemic highlighted the critical role early childhood educators play in the long-term development of young children as well as our society's infrastructure. Early childhood educators have long been underpaid and it is time to enhance their pay to reflect their important role. Increasing salaries for workers in positions across the early childhood education field will allow providers to recruit high-quality educators to our programs and retain staff as they grow in their own professional development. We know having stable, quality educators lead to better child outcomes for our young children, but providers need the support to recruit and retain those educators for children to experience the social emotional and educational benefits that come with consistency. ISBE can utilize cost of living adjustments, especially enhanced COLAs for community-based providers, to help support the workforce. Additional funding dedicated to our workforce will only make our service delivery stronger and benefit more children and families.

3. Improve data collection to better understand how ISBE Early Childhood Block Grant programs are serving priority populations

Due to our work in child welfare, we are uniquely positioned to understand the complex relationship between the child welfare and the early childhood education systems. We know children involved in the child welfare system and their families require additional supports to succeed. To identify who needs those services, we need to be able to track whether a family is in the child welfare system.

Currently, the IWAS-SIS system only tracks children from homeless families and children with developmental delays and disabilities. This does not account for the third population Illinois identified as the state's highest priority for early childhood education: children involved in the child welfare system. This makes it exceedingly difficult to estimate how many child welfare-involved families are accessing early care and education. It is crucial 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 for those families through any additional funding.

Additionally, ISBE's data system is not built to accommodate community-based programs providing year-long services such as ours. A data tracking system allowing for data collection to accurately reflect the length of time community providers are offering services could be helpful in evaluating the budget moving forward. This could also provide the continued opportunity 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.

Lastly, the Governor's Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding established that our state's current level of funding for early childhood services is only 14 percent of what is needed for a high-quality system meeting the needs of young children and their families in Illinois. An increase of 10 percent across the entirety of our early childhood education system is a necessary down payment. This increase is the first step in reaching the Commission's goals for children and families. We encourage additional investment in the future to continue to close the gap between what is funded and what is needed.

Thank you for your time and your efforts to promote the well-being of children and families in Illinois. Should you have further questions, you can contact us at aschoon@childrenshomeandaid.org.