

# Listening Sessions to Inform Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood



Key feedback from the early childhood community on priorities for the state's new unified agency.

As Illinois transitions to the new Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) to streamline the coordination and delivery of early childhood education and care services, groups across the state held listening sessions in the summer and fall of 2024 to gather feedback about how to best improve the state's early childhood systems.

Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) engaged families and providers as a part of this effort. Their feedback was shared directly with the state transition team.

## Participant Group: License-Exempt Providers

IAFC hosted two listening sessions in September 2024 with license-exempt providers—also known as family friend and neighbor (FFN) child care providers—in Cook County.

## GROUP FEEDBACK

License-exempt providers communicated the following priorities for the development of the new agency: increase communication, increase equity, and improve technological infrastructure.

### 1. Increase Communication

- FFN providers want increased communication from the agency on new developments, decisions, and changes.
- They request a fixed, bi-directional avenue for feedback, potentially through regular surveys, consistent listening sessions, or monthly questionnaires.
- They emphasize the need for improved interdepartmental communication in the new agency. FFN providers and parents should be able to easily access and communicate with departments, and all contact information should be clearly listed on public websites that are easy to navigate.
- Upon contacting IDEC, staff should be able to assist parents and providers competently or refer them to the department/person that can assist them. Moreover, staff should be informed about all departments in the agency and have a minimum working knowledge of the services they provide.
- FFN providers also need support from the new agency in parent-provider communications and request resources from the state on how to best work with parents.

## 2. Increase Equity in Compensation and Child Care Services

- FFN providers desire increased and more stable pay. They are paid less than licensed providers and want to be compensated fairly. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) rates need to increase, and FFN providers should be paid by the hour, not by the day. Additionally, they need consistent payments regardless of child absences, which are outside of the provider's control.
- Providers want access to benefits (health insurance, paid-time-off, retirement, family leave, etc.) offered through the state.
- FFN providers desire more training, as well as resources outlining a clear protocol if a provider notices a potential delay in a child. They also request additional compensation for unique care circumstances, including caring for a child with disabilities or behavioral challenges.
- Providers emphasize a need for increased professional development resources and availability. The state should offer trainings both online and in-person to optimize accessibility.
- They ask that trainings taken through the state or the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) build upon each other and result in educational credits.
- Providers request an on-call social worker or hotline to support them through difficult situations and to help them navigate systems.

## 3. Improve Technological Infrastructure

- FFN providers request that the state update antiquated IT systems and websites to improve the user experience. IT systems should be interwoven to reduce complications in reporting and decrease the number of times providers and families need to complete program enrollment paperwork.
- They suggest the creation of an online portal that holds all case information regarding CCAP, payments, and applications.
- They communicate a need for reduced and simplified paperwork, including the option to complete paperwork digitally. They also requested more accessible and approachable language for all and a less complex and bureaucratic CCAP system. Paperwork should be clear, understandable, accessible, and intuitive to all levels of education.

## CONCLUSION

This feedback will help to guide IDEC priorities as it begins to administer early childhood programs and services. As the transition continues, additional feedback will be essential to design processes and programs that meet provider and family needs and address the greatest inequities in the early childhood system.

To learn more about ways to take part in this important work, contact [advocacy@actforchildren.org](mailto:advocacy@actforchildren.org). To learn more about opportunities offered through IDEC, visit <https://idec.illinois.gov/>