

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: Providers in Action (PIA)

A group of center and home-based child care providers mobilized by IAFC, held two listening sessions—one in English and one in Spanish—in September and October 2024. Additionally, one PIA member held two additional listening sessions for her home day care association and for the Polish Provider Association.

GROUP FEEDBACK

Across four sessions, providers communicated the following priorities for the new agency: ensure consistent, reliable communication (with space for provider voice), improve technological infrastructure, and provide resources to promote equity.

1. Ensure Consistent, Reliable Communication (With Space for Provider Voice)

- Providers report a lack of reliable communication from within the current system, including irregular enforcement of licensing regulations by different licensing representatives and inconsistent answers about grant requirements and reporting. Providers noted the need for consistent, reliable communication. They also want more consistent communication between IDEC and parents.
- Providers hope to see improvement in the quality of communication between licensing representatives and themselves, noting that that they could work together as a team to meet the standards and ensure safe environments for children.
- Polish providers express the desire for multilingual communications from IDEC, noting that they were unaware of the new agency. They also wish to receive regular notices about items like proposed rule changes, new services, and new funding opportunities by email and in their native language.
- Providers suggest a Provider Council to give them voice in the new agency, and continuous feedback processes that include their input. They request site visits from IDEC leadership, especially to family child care homes, to ensure the home setting is considered in decision-making.

2. Improve Technological Infrastructure

- Providers report that the current timelines and processes for background checks; licensing and renewal; grants; and Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) approval, redetermination, and payments all have major impacts on their work.
- They call for a digital portal for providers, as well as one for families, where items can be submitted, tracked, and stored to speed up timelines and reduce the administrative burden on providers.
- In the short term, providers ask that documents like initial licensing applications and renewal forms be available online to download, print, and mail.
- Providers hope for ongoing website improvements to sites that will continue to exist beyond the transition, such as Gateways.

3. Provide Resources to Promote Equity

- Providers believe significant changes are needed to better serve children with disabilities. These include better pay for Early Intervention (EI) therapists to reduce waitlists, behavior specialists to provide support, and add-on payments for children with disabilities. These payments would increase pay for the teachers who obtain specialized skills to serve children with disabilities.
- Providers also want more support communicating with parents about the importance of screening and early intervention, and they note the need for bilingual EI therapists to support multilingual children.
- CCAP applications must be available in more languages to help support families in accessing those funds.
- As providers see influxes of families in their communities who speak a variety of languages, they desire workforce pipeline programs that can recruit and train individuals that speak these languages to work in early childhood.
- Across the new agency and overall, providers want to see more personnel who speak languages other than English, so that providers and families can receive support in their native language.
- Home providers want the new agency to promote family choice and support diverse learners. It can do so by expanding the definition of quality to reflect both homes and centers, which provide different learning environments to meet the needs of children and families.

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 bri.stormer@actforchildren.org. To learn more about opportunities offered through IDEC, visit <https://idec.illinois.gov/>