

# 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: Community Members in the South Suburbs

IAFC, in partnership with Cuddle Care and Under Carrey's Care, hosted a listening session in October 2024 with center-based providers, K-12 workforce members, and parents in the south suburbs of Chicago.

## GROUP FEEDBACK

Community members highlighted the following priorities for the development of the new agency: increase communication and support, improve technological infrastructure, and advance equity.

### 1. Ensure Consistent, Reliable Communication and Support

- Participants value building strong relationships between providers, families, and decision-makers to support those navigating the early childhood system. Listening sessions, focus groups, and tables specifically for providers and families can foster a collaborative and supportive environment while ensuring all voices are heard by the new agency in the decision-making process.
- Providers emphasize the need for increased training and communication with licensing representatives. They report that licensing representatives may share inconsistent information with providers or struggle to assist those looking for support. Additionally, a lack of communication between providers and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) can make it difficult for providers to receive informational updates or access assistance.
- Participants note a significant lack of advocacy resources and service centers for families and providers in resource-desert areas. Providers may work nontraditional and later hours, which means they need access to support from service centers and representatives. Having 24/7 service centers would expand access to support for providers at all times of the day.

## 2. Improve Technological Infrastructure

- DCFS licensing and renewal and Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) application processes should be available electronically/online. The outdated, manual process makes it difficult for providers to receive all necessary information, and the paper-based system can create additional delays and confusion.
- Providers emphasize the need for a one-stop-shop electronic portal for WIC, SNAP, TANF, CCAP, and Preschool for All. Developing a centralized resource for all online submissions and applications would create a more user-friendly, streamlined system for families and providers.
- Providers and families value digitized communication to ensure that all shared information is up to date and accessible. Reducing correspondence through mail and centralizing communication within a digital system would make it easy to advertise new meetings and decisions. It would also enable consistent communication and follow-up for providers and families.

## 3. Advance Equity

- Participants emphasize the need for expanding services for three- to five-year-old children with disabilities outside of the local school district. They desire an increase in resources and education for Early Intervention (EI) services to better assist children with disabilities and their families.
- Providers value and want the agency to prioritize racial equity in early child care. Outreach to marginalized racial communities would address gaps and improve child care accessibility. They also express the need to hire more Black male teachers.
- Providers encourage outreach to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community to address the need for more interpreters and expand language services.
- Teachers highlight pay discrepancies for multilingual or bilingual teachers, who are often underpaid and undervalued for their work with multilingual learners and students despite having additional language skills. They also desire additional training opportunities to provide bilingual support for children and families to close language gaps.
- Overall, participants express the need for more funding transparency and higher pay for providers and teachers. Teachers must be aware of how much money will be allocated to their classrooms. Providers also need more equitable pay and funding for salaries in care centers and home day cares. Often, their compensation is not aligned with the school system.

## 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/>*