

Lighting the Way Forward for Illinois Children and Families

A Strategic Plan

FISCAL YEARS 2026–2028





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More than five decades later, our commitment to progress endures.

Perhaps at no time in our history has the work of Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) been more important or more necessary. The world is filled with uncertainty. Obstacles to early care and education are increasing. The challenges facing children and their families are more complex than ever before.

Our Strategic Plan is a true vision for how we will remain a beacon of hope for the children of Illinois. It is the result of months of research and collaboration between our Board of Directors, internal, and external leadership, as well as early childhood educators and providers throughout Illinois.

We listened, and together we created a dynamic Strategic Plan that will inspire us to help more children in more ways—through bigger and bolder initiatives.

Throughout our history, we have built programs to meet the educational and developmental needs of children and families. We have partnered with policymakers, advocates, and the early learning field to ensure all early learning settings are high quality. We have tackled the hard questions facing families and communities through research and policies that have helped shape Illinois' early childhood system.

We are confident that our Strategic Plan will guide us to make an even deeper impact on the communities we serve. We're asking you—our staff, partners, advocates, and donors—to join us.

Let's light the way forward together.

April Ganney, CEO

Peter Kim, Board Chair

Illinois Action for Children

Our Impact



197,561

Children and families supported every year with access to high-quality early care and education opportunities.

8,868

Advocates educating and inspiring families, community leaders, and government.



1,300

Children (birth to five) receiving high-quality early care and education through our early learning programs

107,821

Total children benefiting from our programs and services



Our impact is measurable and meaningful.

Our Mission, Vision, and Core Values

They set us apart and bring us together.

At IAFC, we developed our mission, vision, and core values by reflecting on our rich history and by thinking about the brighter future we are creating for children in Illinois. These statements sharpen our focus. They're the common threads that connect us. More than anything else, they embody who we are and what we believe.

Mission

Illinois Action for Children uplifts children and all who care for them, advancing strong families and prosperous communities.

Vision

We envision a world in which every child and community has the care, education, and resources they need to thrive.



Core Values



Collaboration

We build strong partnerships and work together across communities, organizations, and teams to achieve shared goals.



Advocacy

We champion our mission and amplify the voices of families, providers, and communities to drive meaningful change.



Respect

We honor the dignity, perspectives, and contributions of every individual in everything we do.



Excellence

We strive for the highest standards, continuously learning and improving to deliver impactful results.



Support

We respond to the needs of those we serve and work alongside.



Four strategic goals, unlimited opportunity.

The following strategic goals will guide Illinois Action for Children's growth for the next three years (FY 2026-2028). They are aligned with our mission, vision, and values and will help us continue our commitment to the children and families of Illinois.

Through these strategic goals, we will invest in the early childhood field and expand access to high quality education.

Our Strategic Goals

- 1. Strengthen the child care field to better serve families**
- 2. Expand our influence and impact to improve childhood outcomes**
- 3. Diversify and expand funding streams in support of our mission**
- 4. Invest in IAFC staff, collaborative culture, and internal infrastructure**

Strategic Goal 1:

Strengthen the child care field to better serve families

Strengthening the child care field not only serves families, but it also creates the foundation for strong economic development in Illinois.

IAFC will draw on its legacy of advocacy and identify solutions to help providers thrive—allowing them to grow, invest, and provide more families with access to child care and early learning.

To help expand our sphere of influence, we will position ourselves as the leading resource for providers seeking support through direct services and referrals. Likewise, IAFC will optimize service delivery for families and communities to increase their access to child care resources.





Key strategies:

- ✦ **Create a well-aligned workforce development and retention strategy for educators and providers**
 - Advocate for and assist providers in accessing resources to attain higher degrees and credentials, earn competitive compensation, and improve working conditions
 - Help build a pipeline of talent in the field through alternative credential pathways with standards and quality best aligned with the type of care
 - Establish career ladders that support leadership and business development for early childhood educators
 - Research, explore, and innovate models that have been successful in the child care and other human service sectors
- ✦ **Position IAFC as the trusted resource for providers to strengthen their operational and business capacity**
 - Streamline provider interactions with IAFC to improve communication and access to services
 - Advocate for and increase services and resources in support of license-exempt and licensed providers
 - Provide comprehensive support throughout the licensing process
 - Deepen partnerships to connect providers with support on zoning and facility needs
 - Pilot a back-office support platform that may include purchasing, accounting, and other administrative support
 - Support providers with enrollment growth through improved systems and the building of marketing and outreach plans
 - Connect providers to capital and financial resources through partnerships with Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and other community organizations

✦ **Strengthen providers' professional growth through enhanced training and peer networks**

- Expand training offerings to include advanced topics
- Provide specialized training on behavioral challenges, trauma, language delays, and special needs
- Promote peer learning and collaboration through regional provider networks
- Strengthen supports for licensing preparation

✦ **Expand access and innovate program service delivery for families and communities**

- Improve access for families and communities with a streamlined hub for services and referrals
- Leverage data, research, and engagement to broaden family access to early education and care that best aligns to their needs and preferences
- Strengthen parent engagement across programs, including Child Care Assistance, Early Learning, Community Impact, etc.
- Provide education on Early Intervention (EI) and the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and facilitate improvements with the State of Illinois based on parent experience



Strategic Goal 2: **Expand our influence and impact to improve childhood outcomes**

IAFC will hold the state accountable by partnering with policymakers to help make Illinois the best place to raise a family.

Drawing on IAFC's expertise, capability, and coalitions, we will collaborate with state, city, and other partners to help set direction, pilot systems-wide initiatives, and invest in communities.

IAFC's position and reputation within the early childhood education and care sector, and our connection to the community, provides opportunities to influence what matters most to families and providers. IAFC's goal is to ensure that all children and families can access child care and early learning in their community.



Key strategies:

- ✦ **Utilize IAFC’s research work to shape policy and drive action, helping close the equity gap between child care access and capacity statewide**
 - Enhance research and evaluation on priority issues, including holistic family supports and cutting-edge research designs

- ✦ **Amplify the voices of families, providers, and communities challenged with systemic barriers to accessible, quality child care**
 - Galvanize the voices of families, providers, and communities to design child care systems that address their needs most effectively
 - Deepen the work to mobilize families and providers to advocate for key issues
 - Develop an advocacy toolkit for use by Board members, policy councils, and partner organizations

- ✦ **Ensure program standards are based in equity and uphold quality with input from families, communities, and providers**
 - Collaborate to align appropriate quality standards across all care settings, and help providers meet them while supporting families in identifying quality servicespartner organizations

- ✦ **Expand the visibility of IAFC and early childhood education and care issues in decision-making spaces statewide and nationally**
 - Build deeper capacity by partnering with other state and national advocacy organizations on key issues
 - Enhance IAFC’s identity as a coalition builder across the state and cross-sector movements

- ✦ **Develop a marketing and communication strategy that promotes IAFC’s distinct identity as an advocacy leader**
 - Understand IAFC’s current levels of influence to determine additional strategies to expand influence
 - Elevate storytelling that affirms and reinforces IAFC’s identity and impact

Strategic Goal 3: **Diversify and expand funding streams in support of our mission**

Diversified funding is the key to sustaining our future.

Diversifying and growing funding streams will position IAFC for longevity. By expanding our philanthropic relationships and deepening Board engagement, we will increase unrestricted funding and build a true culture of philanthropy.



Key strategies:

- ✦ **Increase funding from philanthropic sources to support mission-aligned growth**
 - Strengthen existing and cultivate new philanthropic relationships
 - Develop an updated case for support to funders that is clear and compelling
 - Leverage IAFC's increased visibility and influence to grow philanthropic funding
 - Increase Board engagement in fundraising and provide tools and education for raising money through fundraising events, sponsorships, and other activities

- ✦ **Build the infrastructures and develop earned income lines that strengthen financial sustainability**
 - Create a set of criteria and a decision matrix to assess various earned-income business ideas based on mission alignment, community impact, financial viability, and risk
 - Envision new ideas and explore the following small, contained pilots:
 - Subscription-based back-office support to child care providers, specifically smaller providers who may need business financial management and operations
 - Corporate partnerships to provide child care referrals and resources to their employees
 - Fee-based training and evaluation services to entities such as schools
 - Paid consulting services and customized research services for organizations that work in the early childhood sector or are looking to fund the sector in the most effective way

Strategic Goal 4: **Invest in IAFC staff, collaborative culture, and internal infrastructure**

Our team is at the center of everything we do.

Our team is passionate about IAFC's mission. Investing in staff and strengthening our culture will help to grow and retain talent and enhance collaboration. We must continually update internal infrastructure and systems to improve and streamline the agency's operations.



Key strategies:

- ✦ **Invest in strategies to attract and retain talented, mission-driven staff**
 - Increase, diversify, and target recruitment efforts to fill key roles in a timely fashion
 - Reevaluate and enhance employee benefits to improve retention
 - Identify essential roles and responsibilities needed to execute the strategies in this plan and invest in those roles
 - Clarify and communicate clear and focused priorities to minimize burnout and maintain high-quality outcomes

- ✦ **Create a collaborative work environment free from silos**
 - Ensure all staff develop a clear understanding of IAFC's identity, vision, mission, values, and key programs and services, and can communicate these externally
 - Improve communications between different departments
 - Leverage opportunities to better collaborate between departments
 - Create more opportunities for staff members from different teams to build relationships

- ✦ **Improve and streamline internal infrastructure, systems, and processes**
 - Invest in modernizing outdated technologies and add technology where needed to allow more efficient work and improved operations and service delivery
 - Improve and clarify internal policies and processes to support staff in their roles
 - Build capacity for data informed decision making and integrate Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practices organization-wide

- ✦ **Strengthen internal alignment and coherence to sustain and grow IAFC's organizational impact**
 - Develop a decision matrix to assess whether IAFC should lead, partner, or offload any of its work, and whether to pursue or say no to potential new opportunities
 - Determine prioritized programs and leverage data and research to identify ways to strengthen them
 - Develop strategies for shoring up programs with low impact or reach should IAFC decide to keep these programs
 - Ensure alignment between program priorities and IAFC's overall policy agenda



Putting our Strategic Plan into action requires working together

We have work to do—work that is vital to communities throughout Illinois.

Through our Strategic Plan, we will reenergize the child care field, build our networks through new partnerships, diversify and expand funding streams, and invest in the ongoing development of our staff.

As a result, we will do more for children and families than at any time in our history.

Your support is critical to our success. At Illinois Action for Children, we believe every child deserves to achieve their full potential—and with your help, they will do that and much more.

The Plan is in place. Let's begin.

Let's light the way forward together.

Thank you to everyone who participated in our strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning Committee

April Janney
Chief Executive Officer

Jamelia Bill
Executive Assistant to the CEO

LaChar Crayton
Board Member

Carisa Davis
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Shauna Ejeh
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Angela Farwig
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Linda Hodo
Board Member

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Chris Knapik
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Sandy Matthews
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Special thanks to the Bold Agenda team and Rena Henderson Mason, Founder & CEO.



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