



## Testimony in Support of the Early Childhood Block Grant

*Submitted by Aubry Stapleton on behalf of Children's Home & Aid*

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Good afternoon. My name is Aubry Stapleton, and I'm a Home Visitor with Children's Home & Aid in Bloomington. Early childhood programs, like Prevention Initiative (PI) and Preschool for All (PFA) funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), are critical tools in disrupting generational inequity. Children's Home & Aid provides PI-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 PFA.

Access to high quality early childhood care and education programs is crucial to the well-being of children and families in Illinois. These programs can help to narrow gaps in outcomes that follow children throughout their educational and life trajectory. We appreciate the opportunity today to provide testimony to inform the state's Fiscal Year 2024 education budget priorities. 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 ECBG by at least \$119.6 million for the upcoming fiscal year. This is a 20 percent increase in the budget for the block grant and we, along with other advocates, are asking for a 20 percent budget increase across all components of our early education system.**

Our budget request reflects our commitment, and the commitment of advocates that are part of the We the Village Coalition, to pursue implementation of the recommendations issued last year by the state's Early Childhood Funding Commission. These recommendations are intended to strengthen the equity, adequacy, and quality of Illinois' system of birth-to-five services — including those traditionally supported through the ECBG. The bipartisan commission found only about half of children from low-income families are receiving early childhood care and education services. The Commission further found the current level of funding for pre-K, child care, and key birth-to-three services is only 14% of what is necessary for a robust, high-quality system meeting on-the-ground needs. We must do better. Increasing the ECBG by 20% is an important investment and signals a commitment to realizing the commission's crucial goals.

I have seen all the families I work with my grow and thrive during my time in home visiting. One of the families I am proudest of is a family whose child was born with multiple disabilities, including one where she is currently the only child in the U.S. with her condition. The family has gone through the journey of being new parents while navigating medical appointments with specialists and early intervention services. At every turn, this family met their goals and found themselves empowered to advocate for themselves and their daughter. Now, they are starting a new journey as a family by joining advocacy groups and helping empower other families who have children with special needs.

I can't think of any better example of how these programs can disrupt intergenerational trauma and inequity. Not only has this family been strengthened, but now they are strengthening others in the community and state. Our experience as a provider, and stories such as the above, informs the following suggestions to ISBE on how to better serve children and families throughout Illinois.

## **1. Increase compensation to support the workforce**

Investing in our early childhood workforce is critical to supporting families in our communities. Compensation disparities between the early care and education sector and other sectors in our economy has resulted in significant staff turnover, which impacts child outcomes. And even within early care and education, the compensation disparities between community-based organizations and public schools contribute to staff turnover issues. One of the many truths to come out of the pandemic is the critical role early childhood educators play not only in the developmental growth of children, but in our society's infrastructure. This is a sector where educators have long been underpaid and it is time for their pay to reflect their importance.

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 leads to better educator-parent relationships and 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 (COLAs), especially those enhanced for community-based providers, to help support the workforce. Additional funding dedicated to our workforce will build on ISBE's FY23 effort and make our service delivery stronger; ultimately benefitting more children and families.

## **2. Align services and standards across models**

We offer programming under three different ISBE models: PFA, PFA-E, and PI. While each program ultimately has the same goal of providing a strong foundation to our youngest learners, we supplement our ISBE funding with our own dollars to deliver the same program for each child. For example, while PFA-E allows for expanded services like mental health supports, other ISBE programs do not account for them. There are also significant disparities between home- and center-based programs. Regardless of where a contract originates, it is imperative that we align services and supports across all models.

In the same vein, we also must better align available seats across communities so families can have a seamless 0 – 5 experience. For example, we work in communities where children placed into PI programs must seek alternative options once the child turns three. In these scenarios, ISBE should consider serving children beyond 36 months to prevent gaps in services to young children. The early childhood care and education system will work better when children and their families have access to consistent care from birth to five.

## **3. Support for providers to purchase diapers for their centers and programs.**

Diapers are a fundamental need for our youngest learners. A lack of clean diapers can lead to poorer sleep and an increased risk of medical issues like diaper rash and UTI's. Most importantly, many early childhood and education centers do not allow a child to attend their programs if caregivers do not provide clean diapers. This creates an access issue for children identified as a priority population. And the prices of diapers are only rising. A recent CNN report found that diaper prices increased 20 percent in the past year, on top of a 12 percent increase in the two years prior. That's the price of a basic need for families increasing by one third in the last three years.

A portion of the increase of the ECBG should go towards offering home- and center-based providers funding to purchase diapers. Not only will this simple act ensure children are able to attend; it also provides economic support for caregivers. Studies show for every \$1 in diaper aid a family receives, personal income increases by \$11. Additionally, ISBE can also include funding, especially for home-based programs, for other basic needs that families require like car seats, safety gates, beds, etc. that impact children's ability to develop and learn. By investing in diapers and other basic needs, we can expand the ability for programs to provide multi-generational support to families.

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](mailto:aschoon@childrenshomeandaid.org).