



## Testimony in Support of the Early Childhood Block Grant

Submitted by Trisha Hildreth on behalf of Brightpoint

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Good afternoon. My name is Trisha Hildreth, and I'm a Supervisor and former Home Visitor with Brightpoint's Stronger Beginnings for Families, Prevention Initiative program serving four counties in southern Illinois. You may be more familiar with our prior name, Children's Home & Aid. Our new name, Brightpoint, signals our unwavering commitment to disrupt the systemic and multi-generational cycle of racial, social, and economic inequality by investing in families. This new identity is a recommitment to our partnership with families as the single greatest asset for child and youth well-being. This is because at Brightpoint, we believe that strong families create thriving children. It is within families that children and youth find love, support, and guidance to overcome life's challenges—big and small.

In addition to Brightpoint's early childhood care and education centers in Chicago (Englewood), Palatine, Schaumburg, Carpentersville, and Bloomington, we have welcomed El Hogar Del Niño into our organization this past July. El Hogar Del Niño is a bilingual early childhood education organization serving over 300 children in Chicago's Pilsen, Little Village, and South Lawndale communities. All our centers utilize various ISBE programming to serve families. In addition, Brightpoint provides Prevention Initiative (PI) -funded programs for children zero to three through home visiting programs located throughout the state.

Early childhood programs, like PI and Preschool for All (PFA) funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), are critical tools in disrupting generational inequity. 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 2025 education budget priorities. We hope to share how programs like ours can continue to provide for children and families in our communities.

**Brightpoint is asking the State Board to increase funding for the ECBG by at least \$75 million for the upcoming fiscal year.**



While we appreciate the continued investment in the ECBG by ISBE, there is still more work to be done to ensure a fully-funded early care and education system. We applaud the Governor's recent announcement of a single agency serving the Early Childhood community, fulfilling one of the main recommendations of the Early Childhood Funding Commission. Alongside our fellow advocates in the We, the Village Coalition and Raising Illinois, we will continue to advocate to strengthen the equity, adequacy, and quality of Illinois' system of birth-to-five services — including those traditionally supported through the ECBG.

We see our community based ISBE programs to support not just children but the entire family. Our Stronger Beginnings PI home visiting program has worked alongside Moesha, a young mom, over the last three years. Moesha came to our offices for services because she was experiencing homelessness and wanted to find stability before her baby was born. Stronger Beginnings worked with our youth and family counseling program at Brightpoint to meet the multiple needs of Moesha and her family. Along with home visiting, she was provided access to transportation, housing resources, and maternal health support. With resources and community support, Moesha obtained her GED, is pursuing her associate degree, and her child is now enrolled in a Head Start program. We believe in partnering with families to achieve their goals and, ultimately, lead families to thrive.

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 profession 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 lead 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 should also consider including cost of living adjustments (COLAs) within their contract model to allow grantees to build in costs that occur over the lifetime of the contract. Additional funding dedicated to our workforce will make our service delivery stronger, ultimately benefitting more children and allowing for additional slots.

## **2. Increase support for providers in communities with mostly Spanish-speaking children and families.**

Many of our programs that serve Spanish speaking families report difficulties hiring bilingual staff and gaining access to resources that have been translated into Spanish. Additionally, with the increase in newly arriving migrant families in many communities in the Greater Chicago area and beyond, providers need additional support to appropriately incorporate families who are bilingual into early childhood education programs. Migrant families have unique needs and have experienced trauma that staff may need additional help addressing. Increasing access to infant and toddler mental health consultations for these programs can better support migrant families. Additionally, ISBE should allow for some flexibility between programs and ensure collaboration for migrant families who are in temporary housing and may move. We want to ensure these families have access to quality early childhood education programs in addition to all the other critical resources necessary for a newly arriving family.

## **3. 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 level of quality programming for each child. For example, while PFA-E and PI allow for expanded services like mental health, other ISBE programs do not account for them. There are also financial 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. Additionally, many of our programs are year-round but receive the same funding as programs that are only open during the traditional school year. Programs that are open year-long should have appropriate funding to serve children and families that need that type of programming.

In the same vein, we also must ensure children have access to early childhood programs from birth until they enter kindergarten. 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 that aligns with their needs.

ISBE can also strongly encourage providers to include measures for infant and toddler mental health consultations in their proposed budgets across all program models. Including a basic cost estimate for consultations per child across program model would help support providers in figuring out how to include this necessary tool. Mental health consultations are critical to supporting educators as they care for young children in an early education setting.

#### **4. Allow providers to purchase diapers for their centers and programs.**

ECBG dollars should be utilized to support basic needs access to protect Illinois's significant investment in early childhood. For example, many early care and education facilities require caregivers to provide disposable diapers for a child to attend their programs. This creates an access issue for children whose caregivers are unable to afford this basic need. And that number is rising. According to a survey released this summer by the National Diaper Bank Network, 1 in 2 families struggle to afford diapers, up from 1 in 3 before the pandemic. And 1 in 4 caregivers experiencing diaper insecurity reported avoiding child care, resulting in, on average, 5 days of



missed work per month. While Head Start programs are required to provide diapers for families, state subsidized programs have no such requirement. A portion of the increase of the ECBG should go towards offering home- and center-based ISBE 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 more flexible funding, especially to home-based programs, for other basic needs that families require like car seats, safety gates, child locks, 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@brightpoint.org](mailto:aschoon@brightpoint.org).