



Testimony to the Joint Session of the Senate Early Childhood Education Committee and the House Child Care Accessibility & Early Childhood Education Committee.

Submitted by Janice Moenster on behalf of Children's Home & Aid

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Good morning. Thank you to members of the Senate Early Childhood Committee and the House Child Care Access and Availability Committee for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Janice Moenster, and I am the Director of Early Childhood Services for the Southern Region at Children's Home & Aid. We are a statewide child and family service agency with a range of services from child welfare to behavioral health to early care and education programs. In my role, I oversee our Stronger Beginnings Home Visiting Program, the Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) and Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) located in southwestern IL. In addition, my unit provides backbone support to 3 community collaborations.

Stronger Beginnings for Families is a free, voluntary service funded by ISBE's Prevention Initiative (PI) program. We partner with expectant parents and families with children under 3 years to nurture attachment and foster healthy family-child relationships to positively impact child development and ensure every child can begin school ready to succeed. In Fiscal Year 2022, we served 200 families and 253 children. In this program, we work with families to provide parenting supports, develop protective factors to enhance the health and well-being of the child and family, and link families to services and economic supports.

The families we work with are often impacted by generational poverty and are the furthest from opportunities to thrive. They also tend to engage in multiple services with our agency or others, including Child Welfare, Early Intervention (EI), and Early Care and Education. They have experienced generational or vicarious trauma, or facing challenges with citizenship, lack of educational attainment, and single parenthood.

Our goal is to meet families where they are, help them identify what they need to thrive, and then partner with them to build a strong foundation for their children in their critical early years. We are focused every day on increasing the percentage of children who begin kindergarten safe, healthy, eager to learn, and ready to succeed while also decreasing disparities (racial, economic, geographic, etc.) in "readiness" at kindergarten entry and in achievement by third grade. A participant in our program shared, "The anticipation of having another meeting and learning more about my child-the things he needs, his development, my development, our creativity together and the total support of the home visitor - it is a mental & spiritual uplift she gives." This describes the impact of home visiting.

When working with families, they often identify additional needs. To support children with developmental concerns, we work closely with Early Intervention services in our area. Our staff partners with families during evaluation and again during the transition to Early Childhood Special Education. We also work with families to help them access technology for virtual therapies when that is their preferred delivery model or when services are not available in-person. We support our

multilingual families through strong partnerships with other local community-based organizations and collaborations, such as the Latino Roundtable of Southwestern Illinois.

I want to highlight two service gaps that deserve further exploration by the committee: First, we need to align the various home visiting models across ISBE and DHS to ensure a seamless 0-5 experience for families. For example, Stronger Beginnings work with families ends when their child turns 3 years of age. However, programs like Healthy Families Illinois or Head Start can work with children through their fifth birthday. What this means is families in our program, especially in the rural communities we serve, exit the child care system at three years of age. We find families are often reluctant to develop new relationships, change programs or they are unable to find preschool services where they live and with openings. The 24 months of lost support and learning are critical to child development and kindergarten readiness. As we expand home visiting programs, we must strive to ensure we are serving families from pregnancy and until children start kindergarten.

Another gap is the need to better connect our child welfare and early childhood systems. At Children's Home & Aid, we provide both services, and it takes intentional effort and collaboration to make connections and engage families in services. We believe this is critically important because home visiting provides an additional level of support to children and their families significantly impacted by trauma and exposure to environmental concerns. Our goal with pairing Intact and home visiting is to support children in remaining safely with their families and minimizing the risk factors of abuse or neglect.

When thinking about the opportunities that Smart Start can provide to our programs, we were excited to see the focus on compensation increases for the early childhood workforce, as they are critical to our success and are the true partners with families. For most jobs we post, I receive few applicants, and most, if not all, have limited skills or experience in early childhood or social services. Another challenge is hiring bilingual applicants; an increasing need and such an important component of meeting families where they are and building trust. An educated and compensated workforce will ensure my programs have the staff they need to help children and their families in our region thrive.

Smart Start represents a historic investment across all assets of the early childhood ecosystem, especially in home visiting. I encourage the State to explore planning grants to support providers in expanding services to meeting the needs of their community; specifically, opportunities to partner with family child care and centers where investments would strengthen program quality. We are excited to work with the members of these committees and fellow advocates to ensure these critical resources to reach the children and families we serve. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any of the committee's questions.