

Kansas Early Childhood Systems Building

# Needs Assessment

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➤ 2020 Update



All In For   
Kansas Kids

## Acknowledgments

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## Letter from Kansas Early Childhood State Directors Team

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May 2021

In 2019, as we wrapped up a whirlwind year of community conversations, analysis, and visioning for our state's most comprehensive early childhood needs assessment ever, we could not have anticipated that the world as we understood it was about to fundamentally change. We look back on that time—pre-pandemic—with fondness and gratitude for the many opportunities we had to connect with Kansans. From Goodland to Baxter Springs, Syracuse to Atchison, with more than 2,000 Kansans sharing personal stories from every county in between, we engaged in rich conversation. We learned so much from you. We truly enjoyed sitting amongst our fellow Kansans to hear of your cares and concerns.

The needs assessment process is designed to uncover truths, illuminate bright spots, and support good decision making by creating a more complete picture of what is happening. We used our PDG planning grant time in 2019 to assess the depth and breadth of the gap between the present state (what is) and our collective vision for early childhood (what should be). And while that “present state” looks very different today than just a few short months ago, our vision for tomorrow remains unchanged: we want to see every child thrive in Kansas.

This **2020 Needs Assessment Update** for the early childhood care and education system examines the ways in which gaps in accessibility and availability of services have grown wider and even more urgent than reflected in the **2019 Needs Assessment**. The results of this year's update are as concerning as they are evident. In many ways the data paint a grim and unequal picture. The pandemic slowed our strategic plan implementation efforts, but as state agencies worked to create emergency relief programs, the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** provided a framework for decision-making that served our state well in the development of our crisis response. Throughout 2020, we worked fervently to maintain a proactive approach while addressing critical and urgent needs.

Today, we remain incredibly heartened by what we know to be true of Kansans: we are resilient, and our communities are strong. While our transition back to what may or may not be normal continues to hold many unknowns, we look to the future with hope, and, as always, we lift our gaze to the stars through difficulty.

*Ad astra per aspera,*

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## SECTION 1

# Introduction

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The Kansas Early Childhood Systems Building Needs Assessment, conducted in 2019 (**2019 Needs Assessment**), is a comprehensive description of the Kansas early childhood care and education landscape, including the needs and experiences of our state's youngest children and their families. More than 6,100 Kansans representing all 105 counties contributed to the research process. The key findings of the **2019 Needs Assessment** informed the direction of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, a five-year plan encompassing seven goals for early childhood in Kansas.

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*[Read the full 2019 Needs Assessment and the All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan on the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund website kschildrenscabinet.org.](https://kschildrenscabinet.org)*

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Throughout the process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting on data, researchers used an equity lens. We understand that to achieve equity across our early childhood system we must first recognize and acknowledge existing disparities. Details on these disparities are presented in the findings to follow.

The first year implementing the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** began in April of 2020, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This public health crisis has significantly impacted Kansas children and families, the early childhood care and education workforce, and the broader early childhood system. This **2020 Needs Assessment Update** covers the time period of January to December 2020 and begins to explore the impact of the pandemic. We seek to understand experiences through four guiding questions:

- What did we learn about the experiences of Kansas children ages birth through 5, and their families, particularly as reinforced or revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What did we learn about the challenges facing the Kansas early childhood care and education workforce, especially considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?
- What did we learn about the Kansas early childhood care and education system, and its many cross-sector relationships, connections, and influences, during the first year of strategic plan implementation?
- What were the bright spots across Kansas communities, as shared by families, community members, and stakeholders?

We analyzed a variety of data sources to identify trends, gaps, opportunities, and common themes among participants in the Kansas early childhood care and education system. These sources include:

Updated data (e.g. national scans, census estimates, program and state agency reports, and surveys) regarding children, families, and the early childhood workforce, including data capturing the impact of COVID-19.

Updated or newly-released needs assessments or reports from across the broader early childhood care and education system, including two comprehensive, state-wide needs assessments conducted in 2020 by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) Bureau of Family Health.

- The Kansas *MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment* describes the maternal child health population in the state, including pregnant and parenting mothers, young children, and children with special health care needs.
- The 2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment assesses the quality and reach of evidence-based home visiting programs in the state for young children and families in high-needs communities.

Stories captured through the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* during the COVID-19 crisis. Patterns and emerging trends from these stories help inform our understanding of the strengths and needs of families across Kansas.



## Summary of 2019 Needs Assessment Key Findings

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### **Accessibility: Families with young children experience inequitable access to high-quality programs and services across the broader early childhood system.**

Geography, awareness, eligibility, fear, and costs contribute to the inequities. Proximity to the location of services as well as geographic distribution of services impacts ease of access. Families with young children often remain unaware of the services that are available to them until a family emergency or crisis necessitates initial access. Limiting and conflicting eligibility criteria add an extra layer of challenge to understanding and identifying appropriate services.

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### **Availability: Families with young children experience a gap between the services that are available and their actual needs, disproportionately affecting vulnerable and underserved populations.**

Gaps exist across the early childhood system but are concentrated in a few key areas: parenting skills, basic and economic supports, child care, crisis services, and health care. Parents and caregivers lack sufficient support to gain the skills and resources they need to nurture the healthy development of their children and meet their families' basic needs. Child care is a significant need, especially infant care, care during nontraditional hours, and care for children with special needs. More behavioral and mental health services are needed, including trauma-informed services. Families facing the disruptions caused by foster care, substance abuse, homelessness, and incarceration need additional support.

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### **Navigation: Families must adopt a “connect the dots” approach to navigate services across sectors; disruptors are frequent and common.**

Transition gaps occur at multiple levels across services and programs, requiring families to “connect the dots” within the early childhood care and education system, between sectors, and into kindergarten. Continuous engagement in early childhood care and education services requires significant problem-solving by families already in crisis, placing an additional burden on them. Common disruptors exist around transportation, cultural and linguistic barriers, health care, geography, cost, and crises.

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### **Workforce: Early childhood workforce needs at both the leadership and direct service levels include preparation, compensation/financial relief, ongoing training and support, and recruitment and retention.**

Specific challenges for those who care for Kansas children include diminishing numbers in the workforce, lack of credentials and opportunities to gain credentials, lack of respect and value, and professional development driven by regulations and availability. There is an urgent need for better compensation, benefits, and training for the early childhood workforce.

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**Facilities: Needs exist related to the physical conditions and environments of early childhood facilities across the state.**

There is limited funding and funding flexibility for providers to make capital improvements, despite the importance of physical infrastructure to the safety of children and staff. Additional learning materials and enhancements to environments are also needed to ensure children of all abilities and cultural and linguistic backgrounds have high-quality and developmentally appropriate experiences in their early years.

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**Collaboration: Early childhood providers and stakeholders share a desire for collaboration and cooperation, but these efforts are often disconnected and uncoordinated.**

Collaboration efforts exist across services, communities, and at the state level. Yet funding, awareness, and staffing limitations often hinder many efforts from taking a comprehensive approach. This can stifle good intentions and meaningful progress towards streamlining efforts and resources that support children and families.

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**Systems Alignment: Greater systems alignment is needed in order to fully realize an efficient and robust early childhood care and education infrastructure.**

The current system remains siloed, fragmented, and difficult to navigate, without a model that defines the structures, partners, and best practices for early childhood care and education for all children. Regulations often have unintended consequences that affect accessibility and availability of services. Utilizing multiple funding streams is necessary to sustain services, yet there are often conflicting policy regulations, expectations, or requirements. Primary areas for future systems alignment include regulation and policy, data sharing, funding and resources, and shared governance/system integration.

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**Bright Spots: Efficient, innovative, responsive efforts are occurring among early care and education system partners in communities throughout the state.**

Bright spots exist in all regions. Kansas is full of resilient families and communities that are striving to create the best possible circumstances for young children to thrive. Kansas has strong communities with passion, genuine care, and determination for improving the systems for children and families.

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## SECTION 2

# Children and Families

### Experiences in 2020

#### ***What did we learn in 2020 about the experiences of Kansas children ages birth through 5, and their families, particularly as reinforced or revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic?***

The year 2020 was extremely difficult and tumultuous for many of the young children and families at the heart of the Kansas early childhood care and education system.

- Inequities and disparities persisted and are being magnified by the disproportionate economic and health impacts of the pandemic.
- Families are facing acute and urgent accessibility and availability challenges across the broader early childhood system.
- The existing gaps in resources and supports for families experiencing substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health needs have grown even greater.
- Kansas children continue to experience significant disruptions to early learning opportunities.

## Background

### Demographics and Geography

Kansas is home to 191,113 children ages birth to 5 (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The demographics and geography of the birth to 5 population<sup>1</sup> in Kansas remained mostly unchanged since the **2019 Needs Assessment**. The geographic variability in the experiences of young children and families across Kansas, as well as the disproportionate impact of economic challenges on children of color, persisted. Details in the following sections document the latest data on these and other disparities.

Two emerging demographic trends should be monitored over the next few years for significance and impact on the birth to 5 population in Kansas:

1. A slight **decrease** in both the number of children ages birth to 5 (from 196,826 in 2017 to 191,113 in 2019)<sup>2</sup> and the annual number of births (from 36,464 in 2017 to 35,395 in 2019).<sup>3</sup>
2. A potential shift in the race/ethnicity of children ages birth to 5 due to an **increase** in the percent of Hispanic children (from 16% in 2017 to 18.4% in 2019).<sup>4</sup>

### Economic Indicators

Too many families in Kansas struggle with economic security and stability. Prior to the pandemic, the overall childhood poverty rate was trending down from 19.1% in 2017 to 17.1% in 2019 (United States Census Bureau, 2017, 2019). This trend, however, was not true for all population groups, and children of color continued to be more impacted by poverty, as did children from urban and densely-settled rural areas (Kansas Action for Children, 2020). Considering the urgent and immediate economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with young children, continued attention to key economic indicators for the birth to 5 population across demographics and geography will be important to follow.

#### 2020 Economic Indicators, Children Birth to 5, Prior to COVID-19

**47%**

of Kansas school-aged children **qualify for free and reduced lunch** (based on 130% of the federal poverty level for free lunch and 185% of the federal poverty level for reduced lunch)<sup>5</sup>

**17%**

of Kansas children under the age of 5 live in households with incomes **below the federal poverty guidelines**<sup>7</sup>

**67%**

of children ages birth through 5 live in a household where **all adults are working**<sup>6</sup>

**6%**

of children under age 18 **live in extreme poverty** (50% of federal poverty)<sup>8</sup>

In 2020, a family of four with an annual pre-tax income at or below \$26,200 fell under the federal poverty level<sup>31</sup>

Poverty of children ages birth to 5, by race/ethnicity<sup>32</sup>

Hispanic/Latino, any race	27.2%
White, non-Hispanic	11.6%
Black or African-American	40.1%
American-Indian or Alaskan Native	35.1%
Asian	13.2%
Other	33%

## Family Adversity Indicators

Young children in Kansas face disruptions due to situations of family adversity during their early years. The frequency with which children experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is one indicator of these disruptions. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were seeing a positive trend of fewer children ages birth to 5 in Kansas experiencing ACEs. Per most recent data, the number of Kansas children experiencing one ACE decreased to 15% from 26.6%, and the number experiencing two or more ACEs decreased from 14.4% to 11.9% (Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 2017, 2019). However, disparities exist. Children of color continue to experience a greater number of ACEs, as well as children from lower income households (Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 2019). Considering the additional stressors impacting children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic, trends regarding ACEs and other indicators of adversity among the birth to 5 population must be closely monitored in the coming years.

## Key Findings

### Accessibility, Availability, and Navigation

The **2019 Needs Assessment** included the following key findings regarding accessibility, availability, and navigation across the broader early childhood system in Kansas:

- Families with young children experience inequitable access to high-quality programs and services across the broader early childhood system.
- Families must adopt a “connect the dots” approach to navigate services across sectors; disruptors are frequent and common.
- Families with young children experience a gap between the services that are available and their actual needs, disproportionately affecting vulnerable and underserved populations.

New data in 2020, including both the *2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment* and the *Kansas MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment*, echo and reinforce these findings. Significant availability and accessibility challenges exist across the state, as detailed below, that impede support for addressing the critical needs of families with young children.

### Child Care

Child care availability and accessibility barriers in Kansas include cost, proximity, and lack of non-traditional hours. Hispanic/Latino and Black families and low-income families are more likely to experience these barriers.<sup>9</sup> Families with young children, especially parents of infants and parents with non-traditional work hours, face continued challenges accessing affordable child care in proximity to where they live and work.

- Costs for full-time infant and preschool care in both child care centers and family child care homes has increased. Notably, the average annual cost of full-time care for an infant in a center in 2020 was \$12,811, an increase over the 2018 average of \$10,955.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, this cost represents 47% of the median income for a single parent in Kansas.<sup>11</sup>
- Between 2017 and 2019, prior to the pandemic, the number of child care centers in the state increased modestly by 5.2%, but family child care homes decreased by 17%.<sup>12</sup> A surge in closures following the start of the pandemic, as detailed below, further impacts availability.
- Prior to the pandemic, a significant number of Kansas counties (45) had less than 50% capacity to meet the potential demand for child care. Seventy-seven percent of Kansas counties had more than 10 children, under 3 years of age, potentially in need of care for each reported child care opening, and notably, 19 Kansas counties do not have any infant and toddler care. Across the state, only 2.9% of child care centers and 7.3% of family child care homes offer evening hours. Overnight care is almost non-existent in any type of facility, as is weekend care.<sup>13</sup>



Additionally, applicants for the *All In For Kansas Kids* Quality Subgrants in 2020 shared narratives that provided more context around family experiences. These grant applications included examples of parents driving long distances for child care because it is not available in their community, parents whose employment options are limited due to lack of child care, parents who cannot find any child care for evening or weekend hours, and families needing support for navigating and connecting to critical services.

### Quotes From Applicants

*"The majority of my families commute to work adding an additional 2 hours to their day."*

*"We currently have no one in our county who offers evening or weekend childcare. Many of the childcare providers in the county are home based childcare. This makes it difficult for providers to offer anything other than standard operating days and hours since they provide care in their own homes."*

*"We have a childcare crisis in our community."*

*"This is not an unusual number for our area which has forced families to compete against one another for open slots. Families are encouraged to put in applications at homes and centers for infant care as soon as they become pregnant."*

### Home Visiting

The 2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment provides additional information about the availability, accessibility, and quality of home visiting programs for children and families across Kansas, furthering our understanding of participation and gaps of home visiting services.

- Currently, six of 20 high-need counties have Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIEHCV) programs.<sup>14</sup>
- Five Kansas counties do not have any home visiting programs (Edwards, Kiowa, Commanche, Barber, and Kingman). Several other counties only have home visiting programs with limited eligibility that may not meet the needs of families living in those communities (Harper, Rawlins, Greenwood, Pratt, Rush, Wabaunsee, Ness, and Clark).<sup>15</sup>
- Children in home visiting programs do not always receive timely developmental screenings for a variety of reasons, which can delay access to other necessary services and supports.<sup>16</sup>
- Both language and cultural barriers create challenges for enrollment and engagement in home visiting programs.<sup>17</sup>

### Early Intervention Services

We know that navigating systems of services for children with disabilities or special health care needs can be complicated for families with young children. Kansas has a strong network of 31 Part C service providers, 36 Local Interagency Coordinating Councils, and a State Interagency Coordinating Council that works to give Kansas families local representation and voice. This system supports delivery of Infant-Toddler/Part C services in communities to children under the age of 3 who need early intervention services. Despite this strong system of support, the **2019 Needs Assessment** indicated that nearly one in four Kansas children (23% in 2019) exited Part C without having their Part B eligibility determined, an increase over 2017 (12%) and 2018 (20%). And, for those who do get screened for Part B eligibility, one out of three will not qualify and may need help finding other support and services.<sup>18</sup> Because smooth transitions from infant/toddler services to preschool services is a vital part of ensuring quality care for children with disabilities, Kansas is monitoring these data and, in 2020, began piloting a care coordination program known as Bridges to help address this need.<sup>19</sup>

## Mental Health Services

The limited availability and accessibility of mental health services and resources is another area of concern for Kansas families with young children. Among participants in Kansas MCH (maternal child health) programs, 24% screen at high risk for post-partum depression and anxiety (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, *MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment, 2020*), but home visitors who work with this population face numerous challenges in making referrals to professionals, especially in rural communities (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment, 2020). The same challenges exist for making referrals for children who need services to address social-emotional or behavioral concerns. Nearly half (48%) of all children ages 3 to 17 years with a mental or behavioral health condition do not receive counseling or treatment for their condition (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, *MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment, 2020*).

## Substance Use Treatment

The 2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment describes a range of gaps in substance use disorder treatment for pregnant and parenting women, especially around residential options that include child care services. The geographic distance between treatment facilities is problematic, and limited transportation resources magnify gaps in care (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020). Considering the increase in recent years of infants born with neonatal abstinence syndrome (120 annually per most recent data), the limited availability of treatment options is a critical concern (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, *MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment, 2020*).

## Impact of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted all Kansas families with children by mid-March 2020 with the closure of school buildings for the duration of the 2019-2020 school year. Findings from national surveys and short-term studies conducted throughout the pandemic describe staggering and inequitable economic, health, and mental health impacts coupled with reduced availability and accessibility of key services and supports, not just for school-aged children, but for all young children and families.

## National Impact

In the U.S., as many as two in every three families with young children ages birth to 8 faced financial challenges in the spring and summer of 2020 (NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2020). Children from lower-income households of all races and ethnic groups were more likely to have experienced three or more co-occurring, pandemic-related economic and health hardships (Padilla, 2021). Low-income families have faced more challenges in receiving economic stimulus benefits and payments intended to support them (Padilla, 2021). Children from Latino and Black households have experienced co-occurring hardships at a greater rate than children from White households (29-31% compared to 16%) (Padilla, 2021). Children in Latino and Black households were more likely to experience food insecurity during the summer of 2020, regardless of employment status of the adults in the household (Chen, 2020).

## A Kansan's Story



I work in a mental health hospital. We have been at or over capacity since the second week of the stay-at-home order. I have witnessed multiple people reporting how this is affecting their mental health, to a crisis level. This is from losing jobs, not being able to do their normal routines, see people, selfcare, or relapsing on drugs/alcohol due to just being at home all the time.



Child care closures and concerns about health and safety in child care settings, combined with a lack of paid leave, created a significant challenge for families of young children across the country. The percentage of full-time employed mothers in the U.S. using child care dropped from 74% to 49% after the start of the pandemic (American Enterprise Institute, 2020). Among parents of young children who used child care prior to the pandemic, 75% reported they had begun caring for their children at home; nearly 50% made changes to their hours or schedules to accommodate this shift in child care scenarios (American Enterprise Institute, 2020).

Households with children also experienced increased health and mental health concerns: One in three reported someone in their household struggling to cope with isolation, and one in five reported difficulties finding space for their children to play safely outside (NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2020). Nearly three in four parents of children attending remote preschool reported feeling very overwhelmed; one in four reported they are mostly overwhelmed (Barnett & Jung, 2021).

### **Kansas Impact**

Emerging data in Kansas, as well as the stories and experiences shared by families and providers, reflect these national findings. Most Kansas families with young children have been impacted in significant ways, and national data indicate children and families from marginalized or underserved populations have been impacted more significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic compounds stressors for families already facing adversity and illuminates precarious economic situations. The gaps in accessibility and availability of services across the broader early childhood system are wider and even more urgent now than reflected in the **2019 Needs Assessment**.

For Kansas families already struggling to meet basic needs, the economic impact of the pandemic has been devastating and has largely disrupted any positive economic trends experienced during the early months of 2020.

- The 2020 Kansas Speaks Survey, conducted in fall 2020 by the Docking Institute, captured some of the many financial impacts on Kansas households: nearly one-quarter of households reported serious problems affording basic items, and nearly one-fifth reported challenges with paying mortgage or rent. Just over one-third reported they had experienced reduced hours or wages. Women under the age of 45 and individuals from households with incomes under \$50,000 reported the greatest impacts.<sup>20</sup>
- The unemployment rate in Kansas was 3.2% in March 2020. The rate rose to 12.6% in April 2020, declining to 4.7% in December 2020.<sup>21</sup>

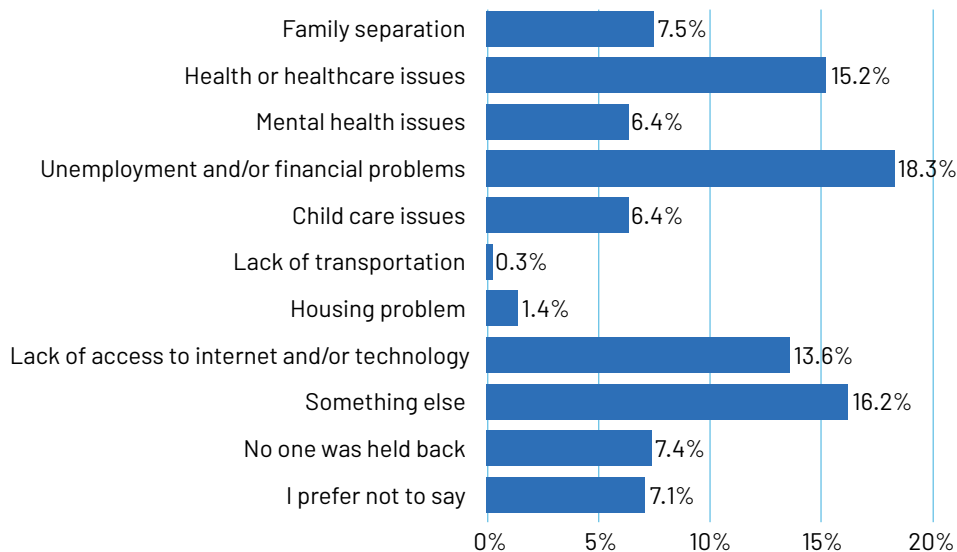
## A Kansan's Story



I have a couple friends who are experiencing unemployment during this time of COVID-19 and both have applied for unemployment and food stamps. I was happy to hear from one friend who has 4 children, and her spouse who works in the entertainment industry and tours with bands (unemployed now), their family was able to get on food stamps within a few hours of applying. They received a phone call 2 hrs after applying and are now receiving \$900/month and they were really surprised by how much money they are receiving and are very thankful.

In addition to economic impacts, parents and caregivers face isolation, health concerns, anxieties, and trouble navigating the complexities of remote learning, all while experiencing disruptions of key services and support. These patterns of exacerbated family challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic are reflected in the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* analysis. For this analysis, respondents first shared personal narratives and then identified the most prevalent “disruptor” that held them back from thriving. The most common response in 2020 was “unemployment and/or financial problems” (18.3%), though participant responses spanned a range of economic, structural, and social restraints as presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. 2020 *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* responses to the disruptor indicator**



Additionally, lock-downs and quarantines resulted in fewer overall touchpoints with early childhood care and education service providers. Without these touchpoints, the needs of families are harder to detect, understand, and support.



## Early Learning Disruptions

### *Building Closures*

During the pandemic, families with young children in early learning settings (child care, preschools, and Early Head Start/Head Start locations) have faced temporary closures, reduced capacity, and changes to schedules and protocols. Early into the pandemic, the Kansas Department for Health and Environment's Child Care Licensing Department posted a survey for child care providers to self-report on temporary closures. One thousand and sixty-five (1,065) facilities from 85 Kansas counties reported a closure, including 756 child care centers, licensed family child care homes, and group day care homes. Most closures were in March and April, followed by a second wave of closures in November and December, impacting family child care situations more than once during the year (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Bureau of Family Health, 2020). Of the 486 programs completing a follow-up survey, many re-opened in April and May, but some did not re-open until August or September, indicating they were unavailable to families for nearly six months (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Bureau of Family Health, 2020).

A report of Head Start COVID-related closures in Kansas indicates that less than half of all Early Head Start and Head Start programs in the state were open for full in-person services as of January 2021. Forty-six percent were open for a combination of virtual and in-person services, and 14% reported only a virtual/remote option (Office of Head Start, 2021).

Likewise, the majority (75%) of child care and Pre-K programs funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant reported temporary closures; many of those (65%) had extended closures of over 10 weeks in the first few months of the pandemic (Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, 2021).



## A Kansan's Story



A home visitor shared a story from a family new to services who was struggling to complete virtual visits due to lack of access to technology. The only connectivity available is a borrowed cell phone that is not always available nor reliable. When learning that they could receive technology via the Technology for Families program, the parent was overcome with emotion and so grateful for the possibility this would have for improving their ability to connect with the home visitor to receive coaching and support more reliably. The limited connection this family has to the outside world would open up with this technology.

### Remote Learning Disparities

During closures, programs and agencies shifted to virtual services by offering remote early learning activities, home visits, and check-ins with families. For some early learning programs, especially school-based preschool programs, home visiting programs, and early intervention services, remote learning continued into the fall of 2020 or even longer for some families, depending on where they lived. While the incredible creativity and resourcefulness of teachers, providers, and families made remote learning possible, unfortunately, families have had varying levels of access to such options. Nationally, an estimated one in three households are limited by poor functioning internet connections or lack of internet connectivity (NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2020). In Kansas, we know that prior to the pandemic, 81.8% of households had a broadband internet subscription and 90% had a computer (United States Census Bureau). We also know through the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* that these resources have been stretched even thinner during the pandemic for many families. Data shows that Kansas families were particularly challenged by internet connectivity and access to technology:

- Service providers report concerns with many clients who only have pre-paid phones, limited calling or texting capacity, or who have devices that cannot accommodate video calls.

- Nearly fourteen percent of respondents experienced a lack of access to internet and/or technology as a major disruptor. Demographic information revealed that these families were more likely to have marginalized racial identities and have annual household incomes under \$30,000.

### Declining Preschool Participation

In December 2020, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducted a national survey of parents with children ages 3 to 5 who were not yet in kindergarten. The results of the survey indicate young children have experienced the loss of many learning opportunities during the pandemic, including a decrease in preschool participation. The decline in preschool participation was greatest among children in poverty; only 13% of children in surveyed families earning less than \$25,000 per year received in-person preschool in December 2020. Preliminary enrollment data from the Kansas 2020-2021 school year indicate fewer children enrolled in preschool settings than during the 2019-2020 school year:

- In public school settings, 20,371 three and four-year old children were participating in preschool options in September 2020, including state and locally funded options, a decline of 13% from the 2019-2020 school year.<sup>22</sup>

- Private school Pre-K enrollment experienced an even greater decline of 19.3% over the same time period.<sup>23</sup>

### Disruptions to Kindergarten Transitions

In the **2019 Needs Assessment**, strengthening kindergarten transitions was noted as a need even before the pandemic. Many children age-eligible to transition out of early learning programs into kindergarten in the fall of 2020 experienced disruptions to this important process. Normal transition events and procedures were impacted during the pandemic, with reduced opportunities for in-person interactions and activities. Families with children entering kindergarten were faced with choosing remote, hybrid, or in-person options across the state. Preliminary enrollment numbers from the 2020-2021 school year reflect an 8.5% decrease in kindergarten enrollment in Kansas (Kansas State Department of Education, 2021).

Providers from services across the early childhood system echoed these challenges for Kansas children and families:

- A survey of Early Head Start and Head Start directors, conducted by the Kansas Head Start Association, revealed challenges stemming from parental concerns and fears about in-person learning and in-person home visiting, layered with the challenges of engaging children and families through remote services.
- Providers shared challenges around supporting the comprehensive needs of families (e.g. mental health support, intensified needs for substance misuse treatment, and domestic violence services and resources) through virtual learning services. In particular, providers indicated a widening gap for addressing a range of substance abuse disorders, including alcohol abuse and opioid and methamphetamine abuse.<sup>24</sup>



- As with kindergarten transitions, the pandemic also disrupted Part C transitions while reducing opportunities for in-person Part C service interactions and touchpoints among local providers.<sup>25</sup> One of the effects of these conditions has been a considerable drop in referrals.<sup>26</sup>

## Our Tomorrows StoryBank

Across the state, families and providers are sharing their experiences, describing how various disruptions caused by the long-term nature of this public health crisis are resulting in challenging and extraordinary circumstances. One source of data about these experiences, the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank*, has captured stories since mid-March 2020. Kansans shared accounts of economic struggles, significant disruptions to their lives and the lives of their children, concerns about health care access and social isolation, the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic, and the supports that helped them through difficult times. Throughout this report we have included quotes from the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* to demonstrate the struggles, concerns, and hope of Kansans in their own words.

When asked who was responsible for meeting their basic needs in the stories shared, patterns suggest that most families relied heavily on their own family and friends or community. Government supports were much less frequently mentioned. The responses underscore the importance of messaging and outreach related to service provision. Government agencies at the state and local levels may want to give special consideration to message framing and communication efforts to ensure they are connecting with families most in need.

### A Kansan's Story



Most days I feel like my family is just surviving. I am a stay-at-home mom and my husband does not make very much money at all. I stay home because we have two toddlers that are very close in age. I am a teacher by trade and if I were to have continue to work after I had the second child that would have been my entire paycheck. So we decided that I would stay home with the two babies. My husband barely makes enough to cover rent and utility bills. But then we have everything else that we have to figure out how to pay for. Each month it's a question of what can we shuffle around so that we can buy food or pay for something that our kids need. Because the local schools in our neighborhood or not that great we've chosen to put our kids in private school. But that has extra costs. And even with a huge scholarship it's still too much for us to really pay for. Every month it feels like we have to ask the question what bills are we going to pay and which bills are we going to leave unpaid. Sometimes it's too much.





## SECTION 3

# Early Childhood Workforce

### Experiences in 2020

#### *What did we learn about the challenges facing the Kansas early childhood care and education workforce, especially considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?*

A strong early childhood care and education system in Kansas relies on a well-prepared and equitably supported workforce. **The year 2020 created uncertainty and instability for an already over-burdened workforce.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing challenges for the early childhood care and education workforce.
- Child care providers, especially family child care home providers, need additional small business supports and resources to access and use emergency relief and new financial resources when available.
- The impact of the pandemic on the child care workforce, especially, has drawn attention to both existing burdens and new obstacles, including pay inequities; insufficient benefits; and emerging health, mental health, and safety concerns.

## Background

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Kansas is challenged by its lack of workforce data and comprehensive information regarding the needs of the early childhood workforce. Initial steps are underway to address this challenge as part of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, but knowledge of who makes up the early childhood workforce remains limited at this time.

We know that a significant number of professionals interact with Kansas children and families through various early childhood care and education services. An estimated 8,410 individuals make up the early childhood teaching workforce alone, including child care providers and directors, preschool teachers and administrators, and early education special education providers. This number is likely low, as it does not capture many self-employed family child care home providers (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). Nor does it capture the count of home visiting staff across multiple home visiting models, early intervention staff, maternal child health staff, and numerous support staff and administrative staff across Kansas programs, services, and organizations.

## Key Findings

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### Significant Workforce Challenges

The **2019 Needs Assessment** included a key finding regarding the needs of the early childhood care and education workforce in Kansas:

- Early childhood workforce needs at leadership and direct service levels include preparation, compensation/financial relief, ongoing training and support, and recruitment and retention.

Both the *2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment* and the *Kansas MCH 2025 Title V Needs Assessment* echo these same workforce needs in 2020. Specifically, the pathways for entering the home visiting profession vary by program model and organization with no alignment of qualifications or competencies (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020). Across the broader system, health professional shortages, especially mental health professionals, continue to impact availability and accessibility of critical services for children and families (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020).

Applicants for the *All In For Kansas Kids Quality Subgrants* shared details on the critical need for better benefit packages for child care staff, especially health care benefits. Narratives also highlighted recruitment challenges, noting that some positions go unfilled for long periods of time (up to two years). Some child care programs report that they continually operate under capacity because they simply cannot hire enough staff. Applicants also drew attention to the need for resources intended to educate program staff and improve performance around the small business aspect of child care programs.

### Quotes From Applicants

*"Currently, there are zero childcare facilities in Allen County that offer health insurance as part of their hiring package."*

*"We are not able to increase our target area of underserved population infant toddler because we cannot strengthen and retain our workforce."*

*"Family child care providers work long hours, at low wages, to meet the needs of children and families, maintain compliance with regulatory agencies, and manage the business side of their program. Family child care providers rarely have breaks or opportunities to collaborate, brainstorm, or problem solve with colleagues during their regularly scheduled work day."*

## Compensation Gaps and Disparities

Updated and new data available in 2020 offer additional context for understanding how compensation gaps impact the early childhood workforce. On the Early Childhood Workforce Index, Kansas continues to receive a ranking of “stalled” in the areas of compensation and financial relief.

- Although the median wages increased for both child care workers (from \$9.25/hour to \$10.20/hour) and preschool teachers (from \$13.54/hour to \$14.08/hour), wages for these professions still lag far behind wages of elementary school teachers at \$28.24/hour (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020).
- Kansas early educators with a bachelor’s degree are paid 4.3 percent less than their colleagues in the K-8 system (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020).
- The poverty rate for early educators in Kansas is 19.7%, higher than the 10.2% poverty rate for other workers in the state (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020).

## Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire early education workforce, but the impacts for child care providers have been particularly significant and devastating. When the pandemic began, the most immediate impact was the sudden loss of income due to both mandatory and voluntary closures and subsequent declines in enrollment. Income loss affected the ability of programs to pay salaries and other fixed costs; national estimates indicated that 50% of programs were at risk of permanent closure without significant public investment (NAEYC, 2020).

Providers in Kansas reported closing for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons were concerns about health (including their own health, their family’s health, and/or the health of their staff), followed by low enrollment, and increased expenses. For those that had not re-opened as of November 2020, the most common reason was concerns for their health or their staff’s health and the expense required to do so safely (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Bureau of Family Health, 2020). The most common needs to remain open at the beginning of the pandemic were cleaning supplies followed by hand sanitizer. Programs also reported needing assistance with food and toiletries (Child Care Aware of Kansas, 2020). For many programs, these needs have persisted, though several do report they received funding through various COVID relief resources to assist with these needs, such as the Hero Relief Program (Child Care Aware of Kansas, 2021).

For programs that did reopen, increased costs to meet health and safety protocols, often while operating at reduced capacity, were a burden. Estimated added costs for Kansas child care providers during the pandemic, due to additional sanitation and cleaning expenses, were \$2,880 a month for a child care center and \$730 a month for a family child care home, increasing the cost of center-based child care 11% a month and 66% a month for family child care homes (Workman, Simon & Brady, Matthew, 2020).

The complexities of new and emerging challenges were echoed by providers of home visiting services, including Parents as Teachers and Early Head Start. For example, PAT programs across the state, on their mid-year reports for the 2020-2021 program year, reported three pandemic related challenges as their top three most common challenges: recruitment and retention, providing remote services, and the overall impact of the pandemic on program operations.

### A Kansan’s Story



So if I have to do home schooling again at all this school year there needs to be more funding and internet access for daycare providers so that it’s easier for us to help the school age children without compromising care/time of toddlers and without us having to raise rates on parents who are already/still struggling due to this pandemic!

## A Kansan's Story



My husband and I have been home daycare provider for 13 years. In all of that time, we have never worried about our financial future, because we have a reputation in the community that people trust and people are always having children. We have never had a spot open for more than a few weeks and most were usually filled within a few days. But, that's all different now. My families are overwhelmed with the stress and financial instability at their jobs and that is a ripple effect to us. I have already lost a few families and it's probably just a matter of time until I lose more. Some of my families are continuing to pay me even though they are keeping their kids home, but I am waiting everyday for more and more to drop out. And it's not because these families have been laid off or lost their jobs, they all are still working from home. But, since they have chosen to not bring their child to me, they are also choosing to not pay me. If only everyone would just hold the line and keep paying as they are being paid. I know that's an unpopular opinion - but if we all keep paying for the services that we had budgeted then it would be easier for all of us to survive this. As a self-employed daycare provider, I don't qualify for unemployment. My insurance doesn't cover loss in wages. I have nothing to fall back on other than to get a job at a grocery store. That won't cover my house, car, credit cards or utility bills. We just need help Holding the Line!

## Our Tomorrows StoryBank

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Providers and other early childhood system stakeholders shared many concrete examples throughout the year that demonstrate these ongoing burdens and new disruptions. Anecdotes and patterns from the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* illuminate challenges of the early childhood workforce during the pandemic, even drawing attention to concerns not captured in any other data sources, such as the struggle to care for school-aged children in child care settings due to remote learning.

Early childhood professionals shared stories of resource-intensive and complicated COVID-19 health and safety practices. They also illuminated the importance of sick leave and benefits for child care providers, and highlighted the quality-cost gap. From provider stories we know that staff mental health and anxiety is a significant, universal concern.

Providers are also frustrated with gaps in relief and recovery efforts, including eligibility requirements and determination of "essential workers." While providers shared an appreciation of the wage coverage benefits offered by the Hero Relief Program, they are frustrated with the lack of support to cover costs for quarantined teachers, since wage coverage only extended to those infected with COVID-19.

Across the entire mixed-delivery system, providers have shared struggles with ever-changing circumstances and unclear/changing guidance. They struggle to maintain adequate staffing levels and adjust to new and evolving protocols. They feel an overwhelming sense of anxiety from the burden to try and keep services as normal as possible for children and families.





## SECTION 4

# Early Childhood System

### Kansas System in 2020

***What did we learn about the Kansas early childhood care and education system, and its many cross-sector relationships, connections, and influences, during the first year of strategic plan implementation?***

Sustaining the Kansas early childhood care and education system relies on a strong infrastructure of resources, information systems, partnerships, and governance structures. **The year 2020 created challenging circumstances for sustaining the energy and enthusiasm sparked by the intensive work and relationship building across the Kansas early childhood care and education system in 2019.**

- Early childhood system partners and collaborators pushed forth numerous efforts and initiatives throughout the year to further the goals of the ***All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan***.
- Community members and early childhood providers across the state remain unaware of key opportunities and initiatives; broader engagement in ongoing conversations and involvement in opportunities for input is crucial.

- Systems barriers, including administrative policies and regulations and funding parameters, create obstacles to collaboration and alignment that must be continuously evaluated and considered, with lessons learned during the pandemic incorporated into long-term strategies and approaches.
- The Kansas early childhood care and education system overall responded rapidly, and in targeted and flexible ways, to the needs of young children and families, the early childhood workforce, and the organizations and agencies across the broader early childhood system.

## Background

### **All In For Kansas Kids**

The **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, finalized and released in April 2020, is the guiding document for collaboration and action across our state’s mixed-delivery system for early childhood. Federal grant funding from the three-year \$8.9 million renewal of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG), received in April 2020, offers significant support for *All In For Kansas Kids* efforts.

Key accomplishments of *All In For Kansas Kids* in 2020 include:

- Executive Order 20-02 named the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care and established the Early Childhood Recommendations Panel, a volunteer panel of individuals with early childhood expertise. The Early Childhood Panel first convened in July 2020 and meets monthly.
- Fifty-nine early childhood care and education programs and organizations across Kansas received competitive *All In For Kansas Kids* Quality Subgrants totaling \$2.1 million. Applicants piloted the newly designed Kansas CommonApp created with resources from PDG.
- Kansas continued its pilot of Links to Quality for child care providers and maintenance of the Kansas Quality Network website. Both activities are supported through the Kansas Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) in alignment with the Kansas Child Care Development Fund State Plan.
- Bi-monthly webinars continued throughout the year, covering a range of topics related to **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** implementation and COVID-19 resources/relief efforts.
- The Workforce Development Advisory Group advanced its work to reduce early childhood workforce challenges in Kansas, concentrating on the initial steps for developing and implementing a workforce registry in Kansas. The group is comprised of early childhood professionals and representatives of early childhood preparation programs from Kansas higher education institutions.
- The virtual Kansas Kindergarten Readiness Summit brought together community teams on November 13, 2020, to plan for kindergarten transitions. The Kindergarten Transitions Toolkit was developed to support collaboration around successful transitions, including formalizing expectations, responsibilities, and protocols in local communities.

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***For a complete overview of accomplishments in 2020, view the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund 2020 Annual Report.***

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## Key Findings

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The **2019 Needs Assessment** included key findings for the early childhood system and infrastructure in Kansas:

- Needs exist related to the physical conditions and environments of early childhood facilities across the state.
- Early childhood providers and stakeholders share a desire for collaboration and cooperation, but efforts are often disconnected and uncoordinated.
- Greater systems alignment is needed to fully realize an efficient and robust early childhood care and education infrastructure.

All three findings continue to capture the dominant challenges and opportunities in 2020 for the early childhood care and education system in Kansas.

### Infrastructure

The requests by applicants for the *All In For Kansas Kids* Quality Subgrants reflected a great need for funds specifically for infrastructure. Applicants requested support for facility improvements and materials to enhance indoor and outdoor spaces, both for the purpose of raising the quality of care and education and to increase capacity to serve more children.

### Collaboration

Early childhood providers and stakeholders continue to demonstrate a desire and willingness to collaborate, but barriers persist. For example, the 2020 Kansas Home Visiting Statewide Needs Assessment echoed the **2019 Needs Assessment** findings around collaboration, specifically noting that many providers and organizations work toward similar goals for supporting pregnant and parenting women with treatment for substance use disorders, but collaboration and coordination remains challenging. At the local level, applicants for the *All In For Kansas Kids* Quality Subgrants requested funds to support community collaboration and strengthen comprehensive support for children and families. These applicants shared accounts of wanting to provide much-needed services by connecting families to area resources, but not having the capacity to do so with existing funding.

### Alignment

In 2020 attention was suddenly shifted toward aligning resources to help minimize the immediate impacts of the pandemic on early childhood care and education providers across Kansas, all while continuing to plan for longer-term alignment and system building. Some long-range plans were necessarily delayed in 2020 due to the pandemic, such as formation of a public-private partnership endowment (Children's Cabinet 2020 Annual Report). This and other delays offer an opportunity to incorporate lessons learned during the pandemic into the ongoing work of the ***All In For Kansas Kids* Strategic Plan**.

### Funding

Finally, sufficient funding for sustaining services across the mixed-delivery system is desperately needed. There simply are not enough resources to meet the many needs of children and families, as well as the needs of the workforce, especially considering the impact of the pandemic. Difficult and challenging decisions must be made to determine where and how to invest limited resources. For example, the number of applicants for two new 2020 grant programs, and the funds requested, far exceeded the awards:

- In April 2020, nearly 1,800 providers applied for Child Care Action Lab grants, but only 137 applicants received the \$500 awards.
- In October 2020, 148 organizations submitted applications seeking \$6.6 million in funds from the *All In For Kansas Kids* Quality Subgrants. Only 59 applicants received awards totaling \$2.1 million.

While these kinds of one-time funds were available in 2020 (and heading into 2021) to support families, providers, and organizations, grant funding is not a long-term solution.



## COVID-19 Response

State agencies were able to quickly respond to needs arising from the pandemic through *All In For Kansas Kids* mechanisms (e.g. bi-weekly webinars, weekly emails). Leaders shared important information, updates, guidelines, and opportunities in an ever-changing environment for the early childhood workforce. State agencies and local organizations leveraged existing partnerships to ensure that available resources, many of them time-limited opportunities, reached those most in need.

Kansas received one-time funding of from the federal CARES Act for early childhood program relief and dispersed these funds through a variety of initiatives supporting providers, including technical assistance, cash relief, and technology tools for remote learning. These initiatives included the Hero Relief Program, the Technology for Families Fund, Remote Learning Grants, the Child Care Health Consultant Network, and stipends for child care providers to help keep the doors open.



- The Hero Relief Program provided revenue replacement for lost subsidy payments, supported health and safety supply costs, and offered one-time bonuses to workers caring for children of essential employees. In the early months of the pandemic, child care, preschool, and early education closures were particularly challenging for families of essential workers. Aiming to ease these challenges, Kansas expanded child care subsidy eligibility in mid-April 2020 to essential workers and first responders with income at 250% of federal poverty level and below, removing the family share option. Kansas also adjusted child care subsidy eligibility rules for families experiencing disrupted work and/or child care situations by approving additional hours for families who needed them, granting automatic 12-month renewals between April and July for families whose benefits were up for review, and delaying action on child care case closures during those same months.<sup>27</sup>
- Funds for child care providers, administered by Child Care Aware of Kansas, included temporary stipends for pandemic-related expenses and sustainability: family child care homes received \$750, small child care centers received \$1,500, large child care centers received \$3,000, and relative providers received \$750.
- Payroll Protection Program Loans accessed by small businesses in Kansas, as of June 30, 2020, supported the retention of 4,567 child care jobs.<sup>28</sup>

### A Kansan's Story



I see all of these ads, commercials, posts on social media, and signs supporting Frontline workers. They are all about nurses, grocery store workers, first responders. There is not one that is about childcare providers. All of these nurses are just as exposed as child care providers are. Not just in a pandemic situation, but on a daily basis.



## SECTION 5

# Bright Spots

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### Experiences in 2020

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#### *What were the bright spots across Kansas communities, as shared by families, community members, and stakeholders?*

The year 2020 was a turbulent year in which existing struggles and challenges for many families with young children became more precarious, and new struggles and challenges arose. Despite this, we can share a number of **bright spots in the early childhood system across Kansas communities.**

- Families and providers across the state shared stories of resilience and offered opportunities for young children to thrive.
- Teachers, child care providers, home visitors, and early intervention staff, as well as staff across the broader early education system, have responded with creativity, innovation, and agility to constantly and rapidly-changing conditions.



## Key Findings

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The **2019 Needs Assessment** included a key finding highlighting the many bright spots of the early childhood system and infrastructure in Kansas.

- Efficient, innovative, responsive efforts are occurring among early childhood care and education system partners in communities throughout the state.

In 2020, bright spots continued to shine across the state. Providers often responded quickly and creatively to the rapidly-changing needs of children and families, reinforcing our mantra of *All In For Kansas Kids*.

One example of responsive effort is the rapid switch to tele-intervention services in Part C programs. Tele-intervention services, like face-to-face visits, must be provided within the guidelines of evidence-based practices, and decisions need to be flexible and fluid, especially with the ever-changing conditions of the pandemic. Some of the ways this has manifested over 2020 are: Part C program staff have altered work places and schedules; providers and families re-visit needs of both from visit to visit; and local lead agencies have been encouraged to make decisions that reflect the needs of their individual communities, agencies, staff, and families.<sup>29</sup> Many Part C providers have expressed that serving clients remotely has worked well and appears to be a natural fit with the Primary Service Provider (PSP) model. It has offered an opportunity to improve coaching practices, a central focus of PSP. In tele-intervention, the only way intervention can be carried out with the child is by coaching the adult who happens to be in the same location. Providers can no longer “default” to working directly with the child, a tendency that often stood in the way of forming good coaching skills.<sup>30</sup>

Two specific bright spots capture the momentum sustained during 2020 to work toward the long-range vision and goals of the ***All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan***:

- 1-800-CHILDREN re-organization, re-brand, and re-launch: The 1-800-CHILDREN helpline and online resource directory serves as a 24/7 statewide approach for connecting providers and families with early childhood care and education support, information, and resources. During 2020, coordination between state agencies, local communities, and Kansas Children’s Service League made expanding the reach of this valuable resource across the state possible.
- Structure for Kansas Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS): ECIDS will make it possible to monitor and analyze the reach of early childhood care and education services in Kansas to inform future decision-making. During 2020, leadership across state agencies developed a Data Trust Agreement, creating a structure and process for governing and sharing data across the early childhood system. This agreement reflects a formal and pivotal step forward in the alignment of state resources and efforts.



## Our Tomorrows StoryBank

Kansas families shared many stories of resilience in 2020. *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* respondents, when asked to point out the main bright spot in their stories, indicated most frequently the strength of their family (37.8%), followed by help from community members (19.4%).

One specific example of *Our Tomorrows* stories in action is the Technology for Families (TFF) grant program, offered through CARES Act funding and managed by the Children's Cabinet. Grantees awarded TFF funds were asked to contribute stories from families receiving technology support through the grant program, continuing the effort to leverage *Our Tomorrows* data to inform and evaluate the success of family-focused programs and services in Kansas. The story patterns collected by TFF grantees, when compared to the overall *Our Tomorrows StoryBank*, reveal that families served by this program:

- Are significantly more likely to indicate that local organizations are meeting basic needs, and that services are working well.
- Feel positive about the experiences they chose to share.
- Are less likely to report that they have no help in meeting their needs from any entity, local or statewide.

The stories collected through TFF programs demonstrate how critical it is to develop services and supports in response to real-time, specific needs as heard through the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank*.

### A Kansan's Story

We have been blessed with the opportunity to get an iPad with wifi and a data plan. We are so grateful for this. It has changed our lives and allowed us to continue home visits to support our child with a disability by using Zoom, and we don't have to worry about exposure to COVID-19. And we can still get support! Totally awesome!

### A Kansan's Story

Our family did not own a tablet, iPad, or PC. We missed months of sessions with our therapist when restricted to only virtual home visits, and we didn't have the equipment to participate...with our new tablet and wi-fi we are now able to participate in classroom instruction, meet virtually with our son's therapists and teachers, and see our doctor virtually when necessary. It really has changed our lives for the better, and we'd like to thank you for helping us.







## A Kansan's Story



I am working with a family who wanted me to share her story. The woman is a single mom of six children living in government housing. The home is affordable but also small for her family. The mom has struggled to find a job due to a language barrier as well as struggling to find a childcare facility for her youngest child. The woman has family in another country so she relies on her church for support. COVID has impacted her home now that five of the six children are home doing online schooling. The school was able to provide devices for the children but with everyone being online her internet does run slow. The woman was able to finally find a job during COVID and childcare during COVID. The woman shares she also works with others who speak the same language providing her with relationships outside of the home. Our agency was approved for the tech grant which provides the family with a tablet with unlimited data for 3 months. The mother shared how she was going to have to pay for faster internet but now she does not have to.





## SECTION 6

# Limitations and Opportunities

The year 2020 highlighted both successes and challenges of the Kansas early childhood care and education system. This Needs Assessment Update was conducted to understand changes since the **2019 Needs Assessment** and to uncover emerging information on the impact of COVID-19. As such, there are potential limitations to note:

- This update was focused specifically on a narrow set of research questions and does not address the needs of families as comprehensively as the **2019 Needs Assessment**.
- Access to services in 2020 was dramatically impacted by lock-downs and quarantines, potentially limiting applicability of findings post-pandemic.
- Relief and recovery from pandemic conditions is ongoing, and Kansas-focused studies of short-term impact were limited at the time of this update.
- Until Kansas-specific data on some indicators is available, we must look to national reports for indications of potential areas of concern. For example, nationally, a racial wage gap exists for early childhood workers: Black early educators providing infant care make on average \$.78/hour less than White early educators caring for infants-toddlers and \$1.71/hour less than White early educators caring for preschoolers (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). These disparities will be important to follow and address as new data from Kansas becomes available.

Despite these limitations, this Needs Assessment identified a number of trends and opportunities for ongoing systems work:

- The pandemic response in 2020 required a strong collaborative approach for which the newly-established governance structure of the Kansas early childhood care and education system proved supportive. Overall system alignment work in 2020, based on the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, continued despite the need to re-assess, pause, and/or pivot on various tactics in response to pandemic conditions. Newly-established tools, such as the Kansas CommonApp, allowed for rapid response to emerging and worsening conditions. **This groundwork for improved alignment and enhanced collaboration sets the stage for continued system enhancements and efficiency gains in the future.**
- Increased availability of, and supports for, **remote service provision offers new avenues for connection with children and families**, particularly those in rural areas.
- Conditions of the pandemic highlighted the critical importance of child care as an industry. The intersection of child care, economic development, and family supports suggests the need to **address child care as a public good**, rather than simply a social service.
- Kansas continues the **ongoing assessment of needs** through data monitoring and the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank*. **Regular dialogue, safe-to-fail interventions, and innovative approaches** by Kansas early childhood leadership and stakeholders will be key to strengthening and supporting families and providers across the state.

## A Kansan's Story

What a blessing to receive the produce boxes through our health department & CCC distribution. When I think of the amount of money our family saved by not having to buy fresh produce at the store, I am filled with gratitude for those who help with this effort every 2 weeks.

Future updates to needs assessments for the Kansas early childhood care and education system should consider the following questions:

- What new regional data in Kansas is available to analyze the impact of the pandemic on various target populations of providers, children, and families? In what ways are disparities and gaps continuing to widen, and/or what intentional actions and activities are working to narrow gaps and reduce disparities?
- Has the pandemic further reduced child care capacity since this 2020 update? How has the infusion of COVID-19 response resources into the child care system advanced quality, opportunity, and access for families?
- In what ways have government and communities continued rapid response to pandemic-induced crisis around mental health, substance abuse, and child maltreatment?
- In what ways are gaps and disparities in technology access and connectivity being addressed to further reduce disparities? How can we ensure access and availability for remote service provision as opportunities evolve based on lessons learned from lockdowns and quarantines during the pandemic?
- In what ways has the pandemic continued and/or lessened disruptions to continuity of care and early learning transitions?
- What new data is available to analyze provider and workforce stability? Have there been improvements, post-pandemic, to overall worker well-being in terms of health, mental health, and safety concerns? How are existing inequities in worker pay, benefits, and training being addressed across the early childhood care and education system?
- As the federal government, state agencies, and the private sector consider and implement stronger investments in families and early care and education, how is equity ensured and what is the near-term impact? How can lessons learned from past needs assessments and strategic plan implementation influence long-term consideration for prudent and sustainable use of new resources and investments?





## SECTION 7

# Conclusion

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The key findings of the **2019 Needs Assessment** hold true in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has clarified our understanding of those findings and our understanding of the challenging circumstances that young children and families in Kansas face. The tumultuous year illuminated shortcomings of the system in realizing our vision for Kansas as a place where every child thrives.

Young children and families across Kansas communities have **urgent and immediate needs** as the pandemic has further exacerbated the struggle to earn a living wage, find quality care and education opportunities, and meet the developmental needs of Kansas children. Despite the pandemic, though, 2020 was a year of **momentum** for the Kansas early childhood care and education system. The uncertainty and crisis required swift action and collaboration. Early childhood leaders and stakeholders pivoted and responded to emerging needs and widening gaps across the state. Local providers and organizations rallied with creativity and innovation to the evolving needs of communities and families. We must continue to recognize and understand those needs to assure an equitable and targeted response with our available resources, lift-up and celebrate the resilience and strength of families, and strengthen the system to meet the long term needs of Kansans. Providers, stakeholders, and leaders across the Kansas mixed-delivery system must engage and value the voices of families to help us do so.

Our early childhood care and education system faces challenges. We knew this prior to the pandemic. We articulated those challenges in the **2019 Needs Assessment**. We committed to building and sustaining an early childhood system in Kansas rooted in the science of early childhood and focused on creating the strongest start possible for our youngest residents in the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**. The need for a strong social infrastructure and for public and private investment in early childhood, especially child care as a public good, is more critical than ever.

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## Endnotes

- 1 As in the 2019 Needs Assessment, we acknowledge that Kansas early childhood care and education programs and services serve children birth [through](#) 5. However, available population and indicator data, such as U.S. Census Bureau data, reflect children ages birth [to](#) 5. Unless otherwise indicated, data and estimates reflect children ages birth [to](#) 5, with birth [through](#) 5 noted when applicable.
- 2 (United States Census Bureau, 2017, 2019)
- 3 (Kansas Department for Health and Environment, 2020)
- 4 (United States Census Bureau, 2017, 2019)
- 5 (Kansas Action for Children, 2020)
- 6 (Center for American Progress, 2019)
- 7 (United States Census Bureau, 2019)
- 8 (United States Census Bureau, 2019)
- 9 Forty-four percent of Kansans live in a child care dessert, which means they live in a census tract with more than 50 children and no or limited child care options (at least three times more children than licensed slots). For Hispanic/Latino and Black residents, the percentages are higher (60% and 54% respectively). Percentages are also higher for lowest income residents of the state (63%) (Center for American Progress, 2017).
- 10 (Child Care Aware of Kansas, 2018)
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- 18 (Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, 2021)
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- 20 (Carpenter, 2020)
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- 24 (Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office, 2020)
- 25 (IDEA Infant Toddler Coordinators Association, 2020)
- 26 (Kansas Inservice Training System, 2020)
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- 31 (Federal Register, 2020)
- 32 (Kansas Health Matters, 2019)

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