

Kansas Early Childhood Care and Education System

# Needs Assessment

▶ 2021 Update

All In For   
Kansas Kids

## Acknowledgments

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Summary of 2019 and 2020 Needs Assessment Key Findings .....	6
Summary of 2019 Needs Assessment Findings .....	8
Summary of 2020 Needs Assessment Update Findings.....	8
<b>Children and Families</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Experiences in 2021 .....	9
<b>Background.</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Demographics and Geography .....	10
Economic Indicators .....	11
2021 Economic Indicators, Children Birth to Five .....	12
Family Adversity Indicators .....	13
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Accessibility, Availability, and Navigation.....	13
Home Visiting .....	15
Public Preschool.....	15
Child Care .....	16
<i>Our Tomorrows StoryBank</i> .....	18
<b>Early Childhood Workforce</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Experiences in 2021 .....	19
<b>Background.</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Number of Child Care Professionals .....	20
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Workforce .....	21
Child Care Workforce.....	21
<i>Our Tomorrows StoryBank.</i> .....	24
<b>Early Childhood System</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Experiences in 2021 .....	25
<b>Background.</b> .....	<b>26</b>
All In For Kansas Kids.....	26
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Early Childhood Facilities .....	27
Systems Alignment .....	28
<b>Bright Spots</b> .....	<b>29</b>
Experiences in 2021 .....	29
Key Findings .....	30
<b>Limitations and Opportunities</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Key Insights – Limitations.....	31
Key Insights – Future Questions .....	32
Key Insights – Opportunities.....	33
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>36</b>
Endnotes .....	38

## Letter from Kansas Early Childhood State Directors Team

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May 2022

We present this **2021 Needs Assessment Update** in the midst of a busy period of continued recovery from the global pandemic. As we reflect on the status of our early childhood care and education system, we understand that the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic are still unfolding. This update provides fresh data on needs and opportunities against the backdrop of both pandemic recovery and longstanding gaps in availability, affordability, and access.

As first documented in our 2019 comprehensive statewide needs assessment, far too many Kansas families continue to have trouble accessing early childhood services. Families face uncertainty around caring for our youngest Kansans, and early childhood workers, particularly child care providers, are grappling with extreme disruptions, stress, and burnout.

Permanent fixes must be implemented to address ongoing and deepening infrastructure concerns while providing the resources and support young Kansans and their families need. Given that two in every three Kansas children under six (69%) live in households where all parents are working and that 44% of Kansans live in a child care desert, significant investment is necessary to help families solve their unique child care concerns. When we speak about supporting Kansans - our economy, our communities, our families - we must recognize the catalytic role of early childhood investments.

The 2021 data indicates several encouraging signs of recovery in Kansas—overall poverty rates continue to decline, unemployment rates and public preschool enrollment have largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, and families greatly benefited from the expanded federal Child Tax Credit. Yet, with insufficient wages, child care deserts, and inequitable access to services we know we still have more work ahead to meet the needs of every child and family in Kansas. Addressing such challenges and their root causes to ensure every child thrives is the aim of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, and there is a role for each of us.

Throughout the process of gathering information for each of the needs assessments over the last three years, we have been inspired by the resilience of families and communities across the state. However, we recognize that resilience alone doesn't solve our most pressing challenges.

We present this **2021 Needs Assessment Update** to document the experiences of Kansas families with young children, from barriers to bright spots. This report underscores the need for deepening investment and continued collaboration across our four state agencies and all partners in our early childhood care and education system, and a call for bold yet achievable solutions to systemic problems. Together, we remain dedicated to identifying opportunities for investment and committed to meaningful and lasting change.

**Dr. Carla Whiteside-Hicks**

*Kansas Department for  
Children and Families*

**Amanda Petersen**

*Kansas State Department  
of Education*

**Melissa Rooker**

*Kansas Children's Cabinet  
and Trust Fund*

**Kelli Mark**

*Kansas Department of  
Health and Environment*



## SECTION 1

# Introduction

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The Kansas early childhood care and education system is entering year three of our **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** implementation. Understanding the current needs of both our system and our youngest Kansans and their families is a driving force in that work. This **2021 Needs Assessment Update**, covering January to December 2021, reflects our understanding of the current reality for Kansas children and families, the early childhood care and education workforce, and the broader early childhood system.

This report elevates the most pressing experiences from 2021 and reinforces the need for continued implementation of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**.

- Economic inequities and disparities continue to perpetuate instability for Kansas families with young children, and accessing services and supports to meet health and well-being needs remains a challenge.
- Affordable, accessible child care remains out of reach for many Kansas families with young children, with lack of infant/toddler slots and the high cost of child care related to income levels being particular barriers.
- The early childhood care and education workforce is experiencing significant challenges recruiting and retaining professionals in both home visiting and child care, representing system issues rising to the surface.
- Workforce shortages in child care are indicative of a broken business model, where a small two-payer system and an understated true cost of care means that families cannot afford to pay more and providers cannot afford to keep doors and classrooms open.

- Ongoing COVID-19 response efforts created opportunities for expanding the reach and effectiveness of the Kansas early childhood care and education system, but gaps persist between current scale of needs and resources available.
- Kansas communities, providers, and families continue to showcase tenacity and creativity, with notable bright spots shining across the state particularly with community-led efforts to find child care solutions.

The **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** is acting as the dynamic and anticipatory strategic plan that we envisioned. To be sure, we have adapted strategies to respond to evolving needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, but our strategic plan has been the north star throughout. We will continue to address the immediate pandemic-related strains on children, families, and the early childhood workforce, while also solving for the deeper root causes of these long-standing issues.

Throughout the process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting on data from previous needs assessments, researchers reviewed the results from a variety of perspectives to deepen our understanding of the varying needs, values, and availability of services.

For this **2021 Needs Assessment Update** we analyzed various data sources to monitor key indicators and identify emerging trends, challenges, opportunities, and bright spots among participants in the Kansas early childhood care and education system. 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.
- National and state reports highlighting the experiences of children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Stories captured through the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* during 2021. Patterns and emerging trends from these stories help inform our understanding of the strengths and needs of families across Kansas.

## Summary of 2019 and 2020 Needs Assessment Key Findings

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The **2019 Kansas Early Childhood Care and Education Needs Assessment** is a comprehensive description of the Kansas early childhood care and education landscape. It describes the needs and experiences of our state's youngest children and their families in the year prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 6,100 Kansans representing all 105 counties contributed to the research process, informing the key findings and shaping the direction of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, a five-year plan encompassing seven goals for early childhood in Kansas.

Implementation of the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** began in April of 2020 as Kansas children and families experienced the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The **2020 Needs Assessment Update**, covering January to December 2020, captured our initial understanding of the significant toll of this public health crisis on Kansas children and families, the early childhood care and education workforce, and the broader early childhood system. What we learned in 2020, underscored by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, deepened our understanding and further informed our work on the **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**.

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[Read the full \*\*2019 Needs Assessment\*\*, the \*\*2020 Needs Assessment Update\*\*, 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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Key findings from both 2019 and 2020 are summarized on page 8.



## Summary of 2019 Needs Assessment Findings



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



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



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



**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.



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



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



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



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

## Summary of 2020 Needs Assessment Update Findings

- The year 2020 was difficult and tumultuous for many of the children and families at the heart of the Kansas early childhood care and education system.
- An already over-burdened workforce experienced uncertainty and instability in 2020.
- Responding to the ever-changing circumstances of the pandemic taxed the energy and enthusiasm sparked by the intensive work and relationship building across the Kansas early childhood care and education system in 2019. These strong relationships, however, also enabled us to respond quickly and work across agencies and organizations.
- Bright spots were plentiful as community leaders, state agencies, and Kansans innovatively responded to the needs of children and families, and also continued the work of the *All In for Kansas Kids Strategic Plan*.







## SECTION 2

# Children and Families

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### Experiences in 2021

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***In 2021, Kansas families with young children experienced a range of availability, accessibility, and navigation barriers across the Kansas early childhood system.***

This was due in large part to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, layered with existing and challenging needs. Unfortunately, these compounded barriers echo previous findings from 2019 and 2020 and point to a persistent need for greater stability for young families across Kansas.

- Economic inequities and disparities perpetuate economic instability for far too many Kansas families with young children.
- Further reduced child care availability and accessibility creates an additional hardship for Kansas families with young children.

## Background

### Demographics and Geography

Kansas is home to 188,853 children ages birth to 5 (United States Census Bureau, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 provides the current demographics for this population. We are monitoring two emerging demographic trends for significance and impact on the birth to five population, and both data points continued their respective trajectory in 2021.

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. Estimated population data continues a **downward trend** in the number of children ages birth to 5 (from 196,826 in 2017 to 188,853 in 2020)<sup>2</sup> and the annual number of births (from 36,464 in 2017 to 34,368 in 2020)<sup>3</sup>.
2. The shift in the race/ethnicity of children ages birth to five continues due to an **increase** in the percent of Hispanic children (from 16.0% in 2017 to 18.9% in 2020)<sup>4</sup>, with corresponding shifts in other races/ethnicities.

As reported in previous needs assessments, geographic variability continues in the experiences of young children and families across Kansas. One additional trend to monitor in the future is the number of young children living outside a metropolitan area in Kansas, which went from 33.7% in 2019 down to 30.8% in 2021 (Child Trends & Zero to Three, 2019, 2021).

**Table 1. Race and Ethnicity of Children Birth to 5**

Demographics	Births <sup>5</sup>	Children Birth to 5 <sup>6</sup>
Total	34,368	188,853
Hispanic, any race	17.4%	18.9%
White, non-Hispanic	68.4%	65.2%
Black or African American	6.9%	6.2%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.5%	0.5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.5%	2.9%
Other	3.3%	2.9%

## A Kansan's Story



"Being a single parent and self-employed has made this pandemic a huge struggle. Having to change plans at a moment's notice due to COVID exposure or quarantine means possibly not paying my mortgage that month. Any and all help we have received has kept the hope alive that we will all get thru this together."

### Economic Indicators

For Kansas families with children ages birth to 5, updated economic indicators point to a positive trend. The poverty rate for children ages birth to 5 dropped from 17.1% in 2019 down to 15.7% in 2020, which mimics an overall decline in poverty in the state. (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Similar cause for optimism can be found in the unemployment rates in Kansas, which have returned to pre-pandemic levels (3.3% in December 2021 comparable to 3.2% March 2020) after extraordinarily high rates in the early months of the pandemic (Kansas Department of Labor).

While trending in the right direction, we share these indicators with caution. The latest data for several key economic indicators – including poverty and median income – are from 2020 and likely do not fully capture the economic impact of the pandemic. Additionally, the indicators highlight that young children of color and those in low-income or single parent households continue to disproportionately struggle economically.

- The poverty rate for Kansas children under 18 living below 100% of the federal poverty guidelines is 13.9%. This translates to a family of four living on \$26,500/year or less. However, many more Kansas children live at the edges of poverty. Nearly one in five children or **19.6%** live in a Kansas household making below 125% of the federal poverty threshold. This amounts to only \$33,125/year for a family of four. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021; United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- In a national poll conducted in late summer 2021, 59% of households with incomes below \$50,000 reported serious financial problems in the few months preceding the polling time period compared to 18% of households with incomes over \$50,000, even though 69% of poll participants reported financial assistance from the government in the same time period (NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2021).
- Eligible families benefited from the expanded federal Child Tax Credit in 2021. In Kansas, 60% of eligible families received the credit; of these, 42% used it to pay down debt, 34% mostly saved the funds, and 25% mostly spent them. For lower income households, 69% used the funds to pay down debt. When families did spend the funds, the most common use was for food<sup>7</sup> (Roll, Chun, Brugger, & Hamilton, 2021).
- The median household income in Kansas is \$61,091, but this varies significantly by the race/ethnicity of the head of household: \$39,274 for Black or African American households, \$49,196 for Hispanic households, and \$63,379 for White households. Median household income for female headed households with children under the age of 18 is \$30,206 (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

## 2021 Economic Indicators, Children Birth to Five

**42%**

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>8</sup>

**6%**

of children under age 18 **live in extreme poverty** (50% of federal poverty)<sup>9</sup>

**16%**

of Kansas children under the age of 5 live in households with incomes **below the federal poverty guidelines**<sup>10</sup>

In 2021, a family of four with an annual pre-tax income at or below \$26,200 fell under the federal poverty level<sup>11</sup>

Poverty of children ages birth to 5, by race/ethnicity<sup>12</sup>

Hispanic/Latino, any race	24.2%
White, non-Hispanic	10.3%
Black or African-American	37.4%
American-Indian or Alaskan Native	23.7%
Asian	19.5%
Other	23.9%



In 2021, Kansas families and households experienced a variety of challenging economic circumstances ranging from wage and job loss to difficulties paying for basic household expenses.

- On the 2021 Kansas Speaks Survey, Kansas households reported financial challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic: 36.3% reported an impact on the ability to afford food, 30.6% to make the mortgage payment or pay rent, and 34.6% to pay utilities. Over one-third reported they had experienced wage or hour reductions because of the pandemic (Institute at Fort Hays University, 2021).
- For the time period of December 1 – 13, 2021, 13% of Kansas households with children under age 18 who participated in the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey<sup>13</sup> reported little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment, 29% reported children in their household were not eating enough because of the cost of food, and 29% reported difficulties paying for typical household expenses in the week prior (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

## Family Adversity Indicators

Situations of family adversity can create disruptions that have long-term impacts for young children. It is something to monitor, particularly as more data showing the impacts of the pandemic become available. The frequency of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is one such indicator with data available through calendar year 2020. Despite timeline limitations, there is movement in the right direction, as the number of Kansas children birth through age 5 experiencing ACEs was trending down between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020<sup>14</sup>, from 21.4% to 14.2% for children experiencing one ACE and from 14.2% to 10.6% for children experiencing two or more ACEs (Maternal and Child Health Bureau).

The U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey represents a more recent survey and gathered information throughout 2021 about the mental health of parents and caregivers in Kansas, another indicator of adversity (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).

- For the time periods of January 6 – February 1, July 21 – August 16, and December 1 – December 13, 2021, between one-quarter and one-third of Kansas adults living in households with children reported they felt nervous, anxious, or on edge for more than half of the days or nearly every day in the two weeks prior to the survey. These percentages are consistent with those in the weeks immediately following the onset of the pandemic and throughout 2020.
- During those same time periods, of those surveyed in Kansas, approximately one in every five adults living in households with children reported they felt down, depressed, or hopeless for more than half of the days or nearly every day for the past two weeks. This is also consistent with the numbers in the weeks immediately following the onset of the pandemic and throughout 2020.

## Key Findings

### Accessibility, Availability, and Navigation

The Kansas early childhood care and education system includes a range of services and supports for children ages birth through five and their families, known as the mixed-delivery system. Kansas communities, early childhood leaders, and service providers worked hard to help families access this vital array of services during the pandemic. Efforts to expand access to child care subsidy and child care provider grants, ensure broader awareness of statewide resources in 1-800-CHILDREN, and offer resource navigation supports were highlights in 2021. Yet data and stories from Kansans highlight that significant gaps remain, and more pointed solutions – particularly to resource accessibility and availability – are needed.

In 2021, to inform the work of the Kansas Strong and Family First grants, the KU School of Social Welfare in partnership with the Kansas Family Advisory Network invited Kansas parents and caregivers to participate in a survey and share information about service needs and barriers. While the grants associated with Family First target families involved in the child welfare system, all parents and caregivers could participate in the survey regardless of involvement with that system. Approximately 650 individuals participated across the state.

- Only about half (56%) of survey respondents noted they could easily access needed individual or family services.
- Thirty-eight percent indicated they needed child care services in the last two years. Of these, 44% experienced accessibility barriers, such as not being able to afford the cost of care, being on a waitlist for open child care spots, and not finding child care to align with their work schedules.
- The Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (KS-HSCO), as part of its annual needs assessment process, conducted focus groups and a survey in the fall of 2021 with Kansas Head Start and Early Head Start (HS/EHS) directors. Participating directors echoed these sentiments about the range of emerging and crisis needs experienced by families with young children across the state, including mental health and social isolation impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021).

- Twenty-eight percent indicated a need for early childhood services in the past two years. Of these, 27% experienced challenges accessing these services.
- About one in five (23%) reported they needed housing assistance in the past two years. Over half of these (53%) indicated they faced barriers accessing housing assistance, primarily due to waitlists or not knowing how to access the service.

- Participants indicated a need for mental health services in the past two years for either themselves (29%) or their child (30%). For both, 34% indicated barriers accessing these services, including scheduling (for parental mental health service) and lack of knowledge of how to access (for child mental health services).

**Early Childhood Care and Education  
Mixed-Delivery System**



## Home Visiting

Model and program specific data for 2021 indicates a significant gap between the need for and availability of home visiting services.

- Under Title V Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment manages the Kansas MCH Universal Home Visiting program for pregnant women and families with young children. The need for services exceeds the availability in 96% of Kansas counties, and 57% of counties do not have any MCH Universal Home Visiting services (University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research, 2021).
- The Kansas Parents as Teachers programs served 8,125 children birth through 5 years old during the 2020-2021 program year with a 91% retention rate (not including families who left the service area) (Kansas State Department of Education, 2021). In Kansas, Early Head Start (EHS) programs in 2020-2021 received federal and state funding to serve 1,551 infants and toddlers in home visiting slots (Office of Head Start, 2021). Service numbers for both programs are comparable to the numbers reported in the **2019 Needs Assessment**, which indicated that Kansas home visiting programs serve far fewer children and families than meet eligibility requirements for the services.
- In Kansas, EHS Directors, in the **2021 KS-HSCO Needs Assessment**, shared ongoing challenges faced by home visiting programs, including inconsistent and interrupted visit schedules due to COVID-19 restrictions and concerns for home visitor and family safety, which created barriers for building and sustaining family engagement. One director remarked: "The one thing that we struggled with in the home visiting world was just consistency. It felt like we'd have a visit and then people would be fearful...We might go two weeks without, and then we have another one, and it felt like it made it harder to develop relationships" (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021).

## Public Preschool

In the **2020 Needs Assessment Update**, we included an overview of the many disruptions to early learning services because of the pandemic, including periodic school closures, remote learning during the 2020-2021 school year, and a 13% decline in public preschool enrollment between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year. Preliminary enrollment data from the Kansas 2021-2022 school year indicate that public preschool enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds is comparable to the pre-pandemic enrollment for the 2019-2020 school year, though Early Childhood Special Education enrollment may be lower, a data point to be monitored in the coming years.

## A Kansan's Story



"There are days when me and my husband come home from work utterly exhausted both emotionally and physically. Leading and helping our community during a pandemic has taken a toll on each of us in different ways. There are evenings when we have to dig deep just to get through the nighttime routine. Most of the time we navigate the routine in complete silence with little talking because we've given 110% of our energy to others during the day. And although we want our community and the people that live here to have the best quality of life possible, it sometimes feels like we are doing the complete opposite so that others can survive and be happy."

## A Kansan's Story



"Where have all the smiles gone? As someone who works with small children, I have noticed some have stopped putting mouths and noses on the people they draw. Just eyes."

## Child Care



**69%** of Kansas children under six live in households where **all parents are working** (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

The data point in the blue box (69%) tells us in broad terms how many affordable, high quality child care slots are needed. While seemingly a simple demand/supply equation, the data from 2021 underscores what has been a broken business model for decades. The current cost of care stretches beyond reach for many parents, despite most child care providers not being able to offer livable wages for those who care for and educate young Kansans. This creates an unsustainable situation where families

can't afford child care and providers can't afford to keep doors and classrooms open. While a daunting challenge, solutions for this start by understanding the true and complete cost of care (based on livable wages), as well as finding ways to meet those costs without adding burden to family costs. We address the worker side in the next section, but begin below with needs related to the child care affordability and accessibility challenge.

In Kansas, child care is paid for primarily from two sources: family payments and if the family is eligible, child care subsidy which is funded through the federal Child Care Development Fund. The number of children whose families are accessing child care subsidies in Kansas has gradually increased, from a monthly average 8,823 in State FY 2019 to 10,104 in State FY 2020, and then to 11,095 in State FY 2021 (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2020, 2021). The latest jump correlates with the Kansas Hero Relief Child Care Assistance Program, which expanded child care subsidy eligibility to any Kansas worker with an income at 250% or less of the federal poverty level, decreased the family share deduction amounts, and extended eligibility period from 6 to 12 months for those who qualified under the essential worker program instead of the regular child care subsidy program ([ksherorelief.com](http://ksherorelief.com)). This program was supported by the federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and the Child Care Development Fund. While more families are accessing this benefit, many eligible families are still not receiving child care subsidy. The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the lead agency on issuing child care subsidy in Kansas, has taken the information that was gained during the 2020 Kansas Child Care Market Analysis to improve the program by increasing the allowable maximum rates that are used to determine the benefits, adjusting the age categories to better match the categories providers use and decreasing the family share deduction amounts. DCF is actively working to better understand why families might not access subsidy when they are eligible and what barriers exist for child care providers to enroll to take subsidy.

Many Kansas families faced additional challenges with accessing child care to meet their needs. In December 2021, 38% of Kansas parents with children ages birth to 5 who participated in the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey reported that at least one child in the household was unable to attend child care or another arrangement at some time in the past four weeks because of the Coronavirus pandemic; 21% reported they took unpaid leave during that time period due to child care disruptions (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Factors impacting a family's ability to access child care accessibility can be nuanced, and in 2021 included reduced supply, fluctuating provider capacity, and increased family-share costs.

## A Kansan's Story



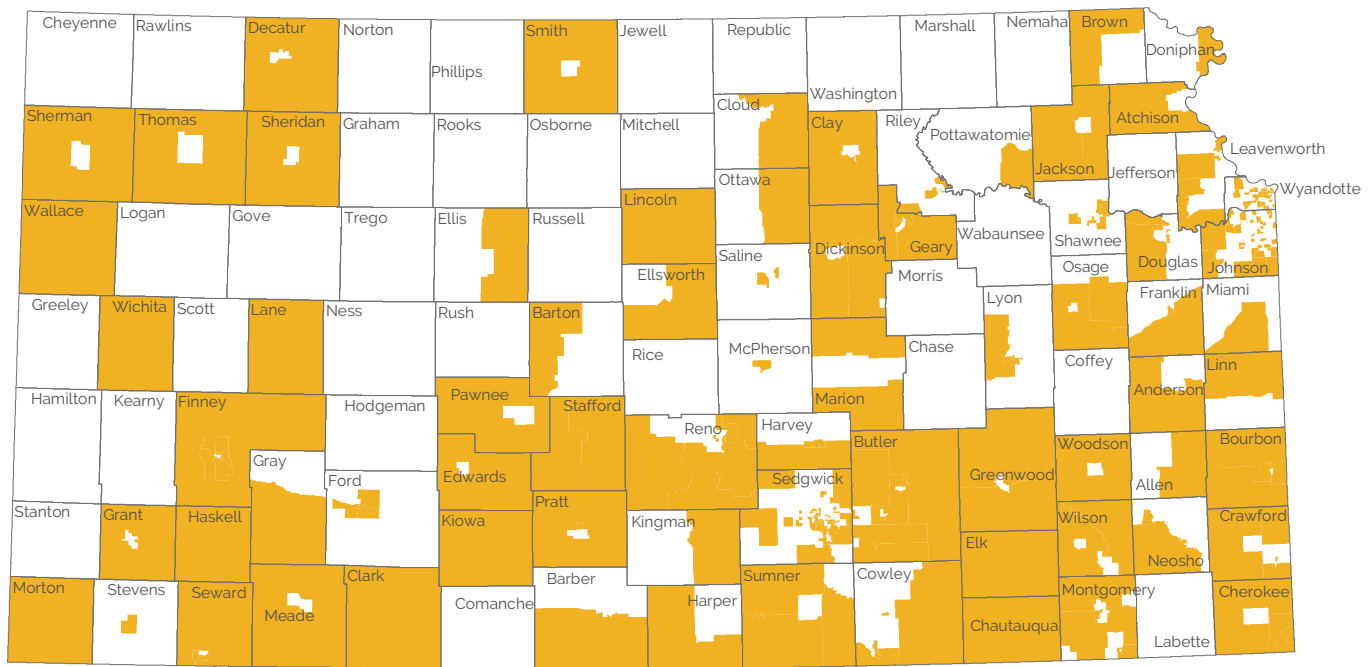
"I am a child care provider. Covid-19 scared my families and we have struggled with behaviors from our children as they struggled through the new normal that this virus presented. We had to learn how to deal with our emotions so that we could help the families and children understand and handle theirs. We discovered that our role of educator went from ABCs and 123s to teaching and helping children understand what was happening in their changing world."



## Child Care Deserts

In July 2021, a sampling of Kansas providers from both child care centers and family child care homes reported they were operating at an average enrollment rate of 77% of licensed capacity (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021). The reality of providers operating at less than capacity is not unique to 2021, and reasons could range from health and safety concerns (both children and workers), staffing shortages, and/or revenue shortfalls. Even prior to 2021, the child care supply in Kansas did not meet the potential demand. The availability of child care in Kansas was trending downward annually, especially for family child care home options (Child Care Aware of Kansas and Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021).

### Child Care Deserts in Kansas (December 2021)

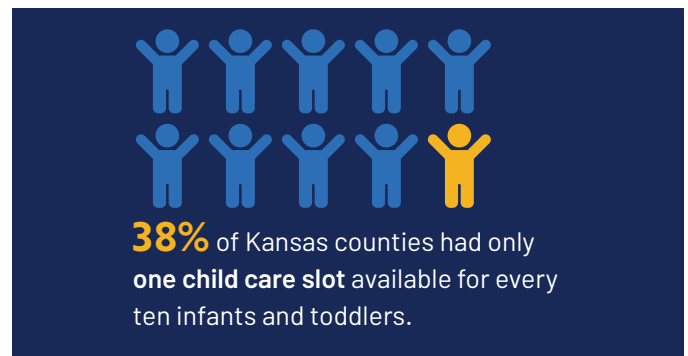


**Orange** Tract with more than 50 children under age 5 and either no child care providers or more than 3x as many children as licensed care slots.

Source: [University of Kansas Institute for Policy & Social Research](#); data from Kansas Department of Health & Environment, Child Care Licensing and U.S. Census Bureau, 2015–2019 American Community Survey.

## Supply and Demand

Child care supply and demand data for 2020 indicated that 38% of Kansas counties had only one child care slot available for every ten infants and toddlers that potentially needed care, and 15% of counties did not have infant or toddler slots available; at that time, the state had a total of 631 child care centers and 3,548 family child care homes across Kansas (Child Care Aware of Kansas and Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021). As of February 2022, these numbers were 631 child care centers and 3,219 family child care homes (Child Care Aware of Kansas, 2022), a net loss of 329 family child care homes or 9.3%. To explore county-specific child care provider supply information, visit the [Point-in-Time tool created by Child Care Aware of Kansas](#).



## Household Income

Prior to the pandemic, families spent 10.1% of household income on child care (Center for American Progress, 2021). For households with a female head of household, the percentage of income was even higher at an estimated 29% of median earnings needed to cover one infant slot (University of Kansas Institute for Policy and Social Research, 2022). The existing accessibility challenges created by the prohibitive cost of care for low-income households are now layered with challenges created by reduced capacity and supply.

## Our Tomorrows StoryBank

To add texture to the statistics and paint the picture of the experience of Kansans, we have continued to collect stories from citizens across the state. This story-collection project, known as *Our Tomorrows*, uses a complexity-based tool called SenseMaker to capture narratives directly from Kansans to learn about how their needs are changing, how service providers are responding, and the general well-being of children and families. Throughout this report we have included quotes from the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* to demonstrate the struggles, concerns, and hopes of Kansans in their own words. A unique feature of this approach is that the storyteller gets to interpret their own experience.

The lived experiences shared through the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* support the findings that Kansas families faced increases in **mental health issues**, **child care issues**, and **problems accessing housing** in 2021. However, the most significant change in 2021 as represented in *Our Tomorrows* stories was a reduction in the challenge of accessing internet or technology. Given the targeted pool of *Our Tomorrows* participants (early childhood organizations and the families they serve), this suggests that efforts by the early childhood system in late 2020 to early 2021 to provide families with better access to internet and with needed technology for early learning, family appointments, and home visiting proved to be helpful for Kansas families.

The most significant change in 2021 as represented in *Our Tomorrows* stories was a **reduction in the challenge of accessing internet or technology**.



Patterns of self-reported disruptors (chosen from the following chart) in the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* 2021 Data showed that **participants of color reported issues of family separation twice as often as white participants** (including custody issues, foster care experiences, behavioral health institutionalization, and situations of domestic violence), and experienced higher rates of unemployment or financial problems, as well as a lack of access to transportation. Similarly, participants who identified as **single parents reported unemployment or financial problems nearly twice as often as the rest of StoryBank**, and experienced family separation, a lack of access to transportation, and problems accessing safe and affordable housing more frequently than the rest of the state's population.

## What was the biggest thing that held you, your family, or someone you know back?

Percentages of most significant disruptors identified by *Our Tomorrows* participants,

2020 to 2021.

Family separation



Health or healthcare



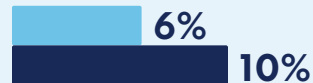
Mental health issues



Jobs & money struggles



Child care issues



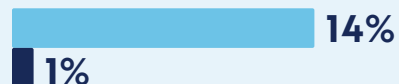
Lack of transportation



Housing problems



Internet & tech access



Something else



No one was held back



Prefer not to say





## SECTION 3

# Early Childhood Workforce

### Experiences in 2021

***In 2021, the early childhood workforce experienced high uncertainties and stressful working environments caused by staffing shortfalls, ongoing wage and compensation challenges, and resource navigation barriers.***

While the COVID-19 pandemic added stress and uncertainty, larger systemic challenges caused the most significant strain on those who support our youngest Kansans and their families. New data and insights from 2021 echo known challenges from previous needs assessments, while offering a firm warning that deeper solutions are needed.

- Child care providers across the state continue to grapple with workforce shortages that intensified in 2021 and further reduced child care availability for Kansas children and families.
- Low wages, a long-standing child care workforce issue, impedes hiring and retaining staff, compounding the workforce shortage crisis.
- The instability of the child care workforce and the energy devoted to filling the revolving door of vacancies compromises the ability of child care providers to engage in meaningful work to address larger systemic challenges.

## Background

The Kansas early childhood workforce includes a range of professionals who interact with Kansas children and families through various early childhood care and education services: child care providers and directors, preschool teachers and administrators, and early special education providers are all considered an integral part of the early childhood workforce, as well as home visiting staff across evidence-based models, early intervention staff, maternal child health staff, and the support staff and administrators of early childhood programs, agencies, and organizations.

### Number of Child Care Professionals

In 2021, work progressed to increase the availability of data on the Kansas early childhood workforce, with particular emphasis on child care. The **2020 Needs Assessment Update** relied on estimates from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, which estimated the Kansas child care workforce at 8,410 individuals in 2019. Because this number does not capture the many self-employed home-based child care providers, efforts were made to utilize the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) child care licensing data to convey the nuances of our child care workforce. Based on data from the KDHE CLARIS system, as of April 2022, there are 14,928 workers directly educating and caring for children in licensed child care settings in Kansas.<sup>15</sup>

Kansas laws that govern licensed child care (K.S.A. 65-501 et seq.) and administrative regulations define each type of facility<sup>16</sup> (home, preschool, child care center, etc.). Regulations and child care policy set by KDHE legally exempts certain programs and facilities/settings from licensure, based on the statutory definition of a child care facility in accordance with K.S.A. 65-503 (d). Legally exempt facilities include but are not limited to home and center-based programs operating on military installations and serving only military families, preschool programs operating on the premises of private schools providing Kindergarten through grade six pursuant to K.A.R. 28-4-422, preschool programs operating on public school attendance sites, unlicensed Head Start Centers (optional licensing in Kansas), and child care programs operated on federally-recognized Tribal land.

To get a complete picture of the child care workforce, we should also consider those providing care in unlicensed settings. Data is not readily available for all legally exempt programs, but Table 2 below illustrates the comprehensive view for child care facilities serving children birth to five years. These counts do not include the approximately 7,000 additional individuals working in substitute, unspecified, non-teaching, and direct care roles. Additional data is needed, and ongoing efforts will focus on increased access to state-level data to get an accurate picture of both the workforce and children served in child care settings.

**Table 2. Child Care Workforce**

Facility	Type	Titles/Roles	Count <sup>17</sup>
Licensed	Child Care Centers including licensed Head Starts	Owner/operator, Program Director, Assistant Program Director, Teaching Staff	11,118
Licensed	Licensed Day Care Homes	Owner/operator, Program Director Primary Caregiver	1,947
Licensed	Group Day Care Homes	Owner/operator, Program Director, Primary Caregiver	1,497
Licensed	Preschools	Owner/operator, Program Director, Assistant Program Director, Teaching Staff	366
<b>Total Licensed Facility Workers</b>			<b>14,928</b>
Unlicensed (exempt)	Unlicensed Head Starts	Lead Teacher, Assistant Teacher	299
Unlicensed (exempt)	Public Preschool <sup>18</sup>	Pre-Kindergarten teacher (excludes teacher aides)	1,003
Unlicensed (exempt)	Private Preschool	Pre-Kindergarten licensed teacher (excludes teacher aides)	30
Unlicensed (exempt)	Military Program (home or center)		Unknown
<b>Total Unlicensed Facility Workers (excluding military)</b>			<b>1,332</b>

## Key Findings

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### Workforce

The shared struggle of communities, families, and employers during the COVID-19 pandemic attracted fresh attention to existing workforce burdens while presenting new obstacles, especially for child care providers. Emergency relief efforts and resources have provided short-term relief for providers as they struggled to keep their doors open. National and state data for 2021 echo the workforce issues of our previous needs assessments and, highlight the growing workforce shortage in the child care sector.

- According to the Kansas 2020-2021 Annual Program Information Report, Head Start and Early Head Start grantees in Kansas employed 2,272 individuals during the program year, including 966 teachers and assistant teachers and 170 home visitors. Of those, 461 staff left their positions during the year (including 292 teachers, home child care providers, and home visitors) and 271 of those positions were replaced during the year (including 193 teachers, home child care providers, and home visitors)(Office of Head Start, 2021). The net loss of staff during this time period is 42%
- Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities (KCCTO) conducted its annual early care and education workforce survey in 2021. Of the 1,518 early care and education professionals who participated in the survey, 66% of participants indicated they plan to stay in the early childhood field.
- A 2021 review of the Kansas Department for Health and Environment's MCH Universal Home Visiting program highlights workforce challenges, including recruiting enough qualified applicants, in terms of credentials and experience, lengthy training and onboarding processes to adequately prepare staff for the home visitor role, and challenges sustaining and meeting ongoing professional development requirements (University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research, 2021).

### Child Care Workforce

As we noted in Section 2, the current cost of care – while still inaccessible for many families – does not generate enough revenue for child care workers to consistently earn a living wage. We are seeing the impacts of this across the nation, as child care workforce recovery during 2021 lagged other industries. In December 2021, the number of child care workers was still 12.4% lower than it was pre-pandemic. (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022). It is clear the ramifications of this systemic problem are permanently hindering economic recovery. In this section, we will address the worker side of the child care challenge.

Child care is an industry that cannot be automated. Workforce costs are naturally the greatest expense for child care businesses, and the revenue to support that labor cost is dependent on having children enrolled. This represents a serious and circuitous problem for providers. Providers cannot enroll children without a sufficient number of staff, and they cannot increase wages and benefits to recruit and retain the workers they need without the revenue generated from enrollment (Fillon, Child Care Employment 12.4% Below Pre-Pandemic Levels, 2022).

Similar trends emerged for Kansas in 2021. In a July 2021 national survey, 41% of participating Kansas child care providers indicated more challenges recruiting workers than before the pandemic and 73% reported staffing shortages; 43% of providers with staffing shortages indicated they were serving fewer children, 9% indicated they were unable to open classrooms, and 19% reported reduced operating hours. Over half were considering leaving the field or closing their family child care home within the next year (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021).

In an October 2021 statewide survey of providers focusing on the impact of the pandemic, Kansas child care providers noted themes of staffing and enrollment challenges, health and safety concerns, general financial strain, and emotional stress and burnout (Child Care Aware of Kansas in Partnership with the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, 2021).

Sample comments from providers participating in the survey highlight these challenges.

*"Our waitlist has increased and our staffing has decreased. We are struggling to find qualified staff. With reduced enrollment, offering more attractive salaries is not an option."*

*"I am about ready to call it quits. Between all the separation of families from the classrooms and the children, the extra laundry, the relaying, the shortage of children, the local covid positivity rates and my staff having to take off to care for their own children who have been excluded from school...I am losing the joy that this job once gave me..."*

*"... I haven't had to close my daycare in years due to me being sick. I hate having to close my doors without giving my families at least a one month notice of any planned time off. This situation made it impossible to do that. I have many teachers and school staff in my daycare and a single mom. It hurts my families when I have to close."*

Head Start/Early Head Start Directors in Kansas, as part of the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office needs assessment process, echoed these sentiments, identifying unprecedented staffing shortages and strains.

*"...mental health is just an all-time high for us-not only just our parents, but our staff. Just the fact that we're having trouble staffing, and we have so many of our own staff that are having issues with their own families, it's hard for them to focus with families. I feel like our families are kind of being cheated that our staff have other greater issues going on, too, so I think that is the long-term effect of COVID. We barely can staff classrooms and some of my strongest staff are not so strong right now, so it's trying to figure out different ways to support them so that they can support the families."*

*"Our site, I'm sure just like many others, is extremely understaffed and, for the first time ever, we have classrooms that we can't open because of being understaffed. I'm sure it's not just Head Start. Many places that other people were taking their children to have either classrooms closed down or they've closed down an entire center because they just couldn't stay afloat..."*

## A Kansan's Story



*"A few months ago, I decided that I would like to open up my own family child care business. I currently work outside of our home, but my husband and I are hoping to start a family soon and being able to provide child care seemed like a good fit for our family. I had started the process to become licensed but due to financial strains it had been slower moving than I had hoped, trying to come up with all the up-front costs involved. I was so excited when someone in my community told me that we had a new program that would help people like me get started in the business. So far, I have had an initial consultation and signed up for a technology lending library so that I can have a computer to complete a lot of the process online. I will also be eligible for a mini-grant that will help me purchase items I need like a crib and changing table and highchair. I am so happy to have this extra support!"*

Federal COVID-19 relief funding sources provided additional funds for child care providers in Kansas in 2021. The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) of 2021 allocation to Kansas (\$89 million) provided financial support to child care providers through sustainability grants and other one-time funds, in addition to expanding child care assistance for eligible families, and increased opportunities for child care providers to access technical assistance and quality supports (The Hunt Institute, 2021). Additional funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 provided \$133 million in Discretionary funding and \$214 million in Stabilization funding. At the time of this printing, over \$90 million has been sent directly to approximately 3,500 licensed child care providers in Kansas as part of 2021 sustainability grant funding (rounds one and two).<sup>19</sup>

The influx of these additional relief funds in 2021, while significant, has provided only temporary respite. Workforce shortages continue and the short-term assistance pales in comparison to the true cost of care needed to bolster the sector for long-term recovery. The impacts of COVID-19 magnified existing workforce challenges while adding novel variables such as wage increases in competing fast food or retail industries also trying to recover. The two payer child care business model – families and subsidy – limits child care providers from taking the same steps these other industries have taken to raise wages or add benefits to try and recruit and retain staff. As it stands now, child care providers have been and continue to bear the true cost of care, and the results are child care shortages in nearly every Kansas community.

- Twenty-seven percent of participants in KCCTO's 2021 workforce survey indicated they do not have enough money to buy the things they need.
- The estimated true costs that providers face to provide child care across settings far exceeds both the cost that parents can afford to pay and current subsidy rates. For example, the estimated true cost of providing infant care in Kansas is over double the current child care subsidy reimbursement rate, an estimated increase of \$23,210 per year (Center for American Progress, 2021). Kansas is undertaking specific efforts to determine this exact figure, which would include variables such as living wages and/or pay parity, paid training time, health insurance and paid time off, updated facilities and curriculum, and increased classroom resources for children.
- In the July 2021 NAEYC survey, 68% of Kansas providers identified low wages as the primary barrier to recruiting staff to fill their shortages. The median child care worker hourly wage in Kansas is \$10.90 per hour compared to \$18.24 for preschool teachers and \$27.16 for kindergarten teachers (Center for American Progress, 2021).
- Child care workers are woefully underpaid historically and, as a result, many face similar economic challenges as many of the young children and families they serve. Even prior to the pandemic, national data indicated that one in every three child care workers experiences food insecurity (Fillon, 1 in 3 Child Care Workers is Experiencing Food Insecurity, 2022).



## Our Tomorrows StoryBank

In addition to data collection efforts documenting what gaps exist in the system, we also want to note what is working and under what circumstances providers feel supported. We can learn from these narratives and amplify efforts to get more stories like this.

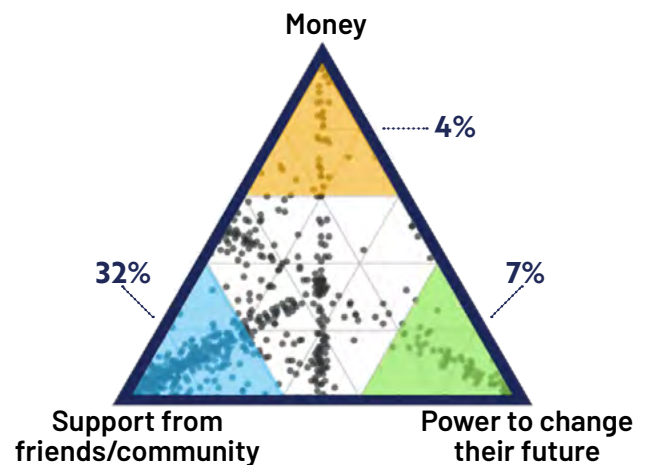
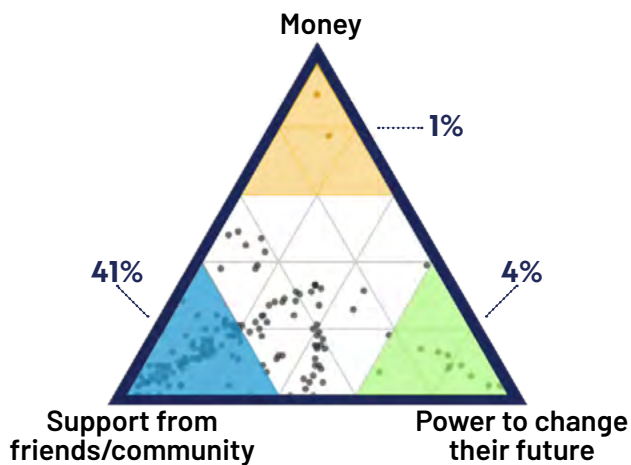
### What helps our service providers feel secure?

Our Tomorrows participants were asked to reflect on the stories they shared with the *Our Tomorrows StoryBank* and to then tell us what helped them feel the most secure in those shared experiences. In 2021, when responses from participants who self-identified as service providers are compared to the rest of the StoryBank, the emerging patterns suggest that service providers are especially reliant on strong community networks and relationships to help them feel secure in their daily lives and work. The two triangles below represent responses from service providers (on the left) and the rest of *Our Tomorrows* participants (on the right), with percentages of responses placed near each of three triangle points represented for comparison.

These patterns reflect the critical realities of the state's early childhood workforce as seen and heard in previously discussed **All in for Kansas Kids** efforts to capture provider challenges and circumstances. While strong peer and community support networks are a bright spot for many providers, ongoing struggles related to financial instability and feelings of powerlessness may be contributing to less secure realities for our early childhood workforce.

#### Service Providers in 2021 (246 stories)

#### Rest of StoryBank in 2021 (1,017 stories)



## A Kansan's Story



"I have been providing child care for 25+ years and have never seen this big of a need for child care in my area as I've seen since Covid hit. We have providers that are retiring, just like any other year, but on top of that other providers are calling it quits. Some of these are long term providers, others are not but we have had a large decrease in numbers causing a shortage in available quality care for children...especially infants. I've received seven calls this week alone from desperate parents looking for somewhere to place their children so they can get back to work."





## SECTION 4

# Early Childhood System

### Experiences in 2021

***In 2021, Kansas early childhood system partners and collaborators continued implementation of strategies and tactics outlined in the All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan while acting to alleviate pandemic impacts on young Kansans, their families, and the early childhood workforce.***

The intensive work and relationship building of the prior years provided the foundation from which to continue targeting and addressing system-level needs, including those exacerbated by the pandemic. The realities of 2021 highlight both the ongoing commitment to strengthening the Kansas early childhood care and education infrastructure and the challenges of a strained and stretched system.

- Across the broader early childhood system in Kansas, COVID-19 pandemic responses included substantial financial relief and supports, coordination and alignment, expanded partnerships and cross-sector relationships, and new initiatives to provide timely and critical supports to families of children birth to 5 and the early childhood workforce.
- COVID-19 response efforts created opportunities for expanding the reach and effectiveness of the Kansas early childhood care and education system, but gaps persist between the current scale of needs and the resources available.

## Background

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The Kansas early childhood care and education system infrastructure includes the resources, information systems, partnerships, and governance structures for organizing, monitoring, and supporting the Kansas early childhood mixed-delivery system to respond to the needs of young Kansans, their families, and the early childhood workforce.

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

The **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**, continues to serve as the roadmap for addressing needs and opportunities. In 2021, partners and stakeholders across the Kansas early childhood care and education system entered the second year of implementation of our three-year federal Preschool Development B-5 Grant (PDG). Key accomplishments follow, and reflect a commitment to strengthening collaboration efforts, deepening understanding of data needs and opportunities, and investing in connection points that help meet the needs of young children, families, and the early childhood workforce.

- **Coordinated resources and efforts** to strengthen the quality of early childhood care and education services for young children and families, such as the dissemination of the Kansas Kindergarten Readiness Toolkit.
- Continued communications efforts to **support shared connections and engagement** such as the **All In For Kansas Kids** bi-weekly webinars, the weekly e-newsletter to over 3,000 early childhood partners, and close coordination and support with over 60 community organizations and child care providers who received a second year of PDG Quality Subgrant funding.
- Increased investment in **1-800-CHILDREN** as the statewide centralized access point and resource directory. A social media campaign launched in late summer of 2021 saw a 103% increase in connections, and since November 2020, 1-800-CHILDREN has supported approximately 700 calls and over 23,000 online resource directory searches from Kansans.<sup>20</sup>
- Ongoing collaboration through the Kansas early childhood care and education **shared governance** structure, led by the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund (Kansas Children's Cabinet), which was codified in a 2020 Executive Order as the state's federally mandated Early Childhood Advisory Council. Key work groups and entities delivering on collaborative initiatives include the Child Care Systems Improvement Team, the Workforce Development Advisory Group, and the Early Childhood Recommendations Panel which serves as the working group of the Early Childhood Advisory Council.
- Established the Early Childhood Data Trust Agreement (Data Trust) which helps **facilitate data sharing** to better understand impact and support future decision-making as it relates to the Kansas early childhood care and education system. Kansas entities currently in the Data Trust include the Kansas Children's Cabinet, Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the Kansas State Department of Education. The first authorized project from this new Data Trust linked data from the Kansas Children's Cabinet and DCF. Analyses reveal that families who participate in Early Childhood Block Grant programs or Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention programs are significantly less likely to experience a removal into foster care. This reduced likelihood of removal into foster care alone represents an 8% return on investment for early childhood services. Future analyses under this authorized project will identify the services most effective at preventing child maltreatment reports and removals into foster care and identifying how removal reasons are associated with various early childhood services.
- The launch of **new initiatives to meet emerging needs**, including the Child Care Health Consultant Network (CCHC) which offers expanded technical assistance to child care providers for increasing health, safety, and wellness in their child care settings. The CCHCs supported nearly 500 child care providers with 2,383 different engagements and touch points throughout the year.

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*For a complete overview of accomplishments in 2021, view the **Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund 2021 Annual Report.***  
[kschildrenscabinet.org/project/annual-report-2021](https://kschildrenscabinet.org/project/annual-report-2021)

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## Key Findings

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### Early Childhood Facilities

Investments in the physical conditions and environments of early childhood facilities has been an identified need each year of our needs assessment efforts, and 2021 is no different in that regard. What *is* different, and notable for its potential to engage diverse partnerships, is the connection between shortfalls in available child care and community-level responses to solve those issues with new or expanded facilities. Anecdotally, communities across Kansas are recognizing their dire need for child care, noting the maxed capacity and long waitlists of existing providers, and mobilizing to identify solutions. Leaders across Kansas, including but not limited to, Dodge City, Emporia, Salina, Lawrence, Manhattan, and Garden City, have all begun exploring efforts to expand access to child care to meet their growing needs. These are just a few examples of community-led efforts to identify and leverage local assets to support early learning facilities. In addition, early childhood partners and agencies continue to share a range of existing facility-related needs including interior and exterior equipment, general facility upgrades, and expanded or new classroom space. Across the Year 2 applications for the **All In For Kansas Kids** Quality Subgrants, applicants described a variety of these needs, commenting on the impact of facility and equipment needs on capacity and reach.

One of the biggest challenges for the many early childhood leaders across Kansas with aging and outdated facilities, is the lack of available funding – including federal grants – that lists construction or capital improvements as an allowable expense. It is encouraging to see local communities organize to engage non-traditional private-sector funding partners. More of this type of innovation will be needed to continue shoring up the physical supply of child care facilities and other early learning environments in Kansas.



## A Kansan's Story



"I work with home and center providers. Usually when a program starts up we have a gathering of all providers to network and talk about programming, share experiences and expectations. With Covid-19 this was not possible. If there ever was a year that gatherings were needed it would have been this one, except that is the one thing we could not do.

Gathering was not an option. Zoom was one way of gathering but it lacks warmth and some seem disinterested, providers needed the warmth and touch of in person meetings. I have watched providers struggle with hiring qualified staff, staffing as people get sick or quarantined, collecting payment from families and just keeping it all together in general."

### Systems Alignment

While the COVID-19 relief and response efforts showcased alignment strengths within the Kansas early childhood care and education system, opportunities for improvement remain. For instance, Head Start/Early Head Start Directors in Kansas identify challenges and opportunities to review staffing and licensing requirements, background checks, to allow some flexibility in meeting extreme staffing shortages, as well as need for greater alignment with other systems across the broader early childhood system including mental health providers and the child welfare system (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021).

Results from a Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory conducted at various timeframes in 2021 with both the Early Childhood Recommendations Panel and other shared governance groups indicate that, in general, the perceived strength of collaboration has increased over time amongst those engaged in shared governance activities. However, data also indicates that engaging with existing system-wide initiatives remains a challenge, and more should be done to connect early childhood partners and professionals to these initiatives. For instance, in the Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities Annual Workforce Survey, 13.4% of early childhood professional indicated that they are familiar with Links to Quality and 5.9% reported they had received technical assistance via that initiative; 31% indicate they are familiar with the Child Care Health Consultant Network and 14.9% had received support.

The same findings are echoed in the Kansas Child Care Provider Experience mapping effort, which was a 2021 initiative to gather information from child care professionals about the ways in which they interacted with system supports throughout their child care licensing journey. The results offer insights about how and when interactions happen with the child care licensing system, the types of barriers and supports they encounter throughout the process, and where the opportunities exist to increase supports after becoming a new licensed provider (University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships & Research, 2021).

### Kansas Child Care Provider Experience Mapping Effort

**389** providers from across the state participated in the surveying process.

Respondents were primarily owners/directors with 11 or more years of experience in child care. About one-fourth were from child care centers or preschools; the remainder were family or group child care home providers.

### Reported Challenges or Barriers

Using or navigating child care licensing online state systems	40.9%
Burnout and/or compassion fatigue	40.4%
Attending child care related appointments or training	34.4%
Securing necessary funds to sustain their child care operations	29.2%

*To learn more about navigation barriers and opportunities from child care providers in their own words, please visit the [Child Care Experience Mapping findings report](#).*



## SECTION 5

# Bright Spots

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### Experiences in 2021

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***In 2021, Kansas early childhood systems partners and communities showcased resilience and innovation, despite the lingering pandemic-related challenges and the ongoing systemic strains.***

Bright spots have been a resounding theme throughout each year of our needs assessment efforts. While experiences and circumstances identified throughout this document are cause for both concern and action, Kansas communities, families, and providers continue to lead the way on generating creative and agile solutions.

- Local community responses to meeting the needs of families with children ages birth to 5 reflect innovation, commitment, and persistence, creating opportunities for young children to thrive.
- Cross-sector partnerships bring additional ideas, strategies, and resources to the early childhood system, creating opportunities for broader impact.

## Key Findings

Bright spots again serve as evidence of a deep-rooted commitment to assuring that children and families have opportunities to thrive. At the community level, and across the early childhood system, new or expanded partnerships, sustained or redirected resources, and innovative initiatives capture the spirit of *All In For Kansas Kids*.

- Head Start/Early Head Start Directors in Kansas across the state reported the importance of partnerships at the local level with both existing partners (such as local health departments, public schools, and local Research and Extension units) and new partners (such as churches and farmers markets) for meeting the needs of children and families during 2021<sup>21</sup>. Examples of the valuable role of community-level partnerships to respond to local needs exist across the state.
- The Dolly Parton Imagination Library, previously reaching 21% of children across the state, launched a statewide partnership through the Kansas Children's Cabinet in 2021 with the goal of reaching all eligible Kansas children in future years.<sup>22</sup>
- Kansas Power to the Positive (KPOP), a partnership of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Kansas Children's Service League, and the Community Engagement Institute at Wichita State University, distributed Family Friendly Workplace Surveys to employers across the state, creating the opportunity for cross-sector engagement in addressing critical issues for Kansas children and families.
- Partners at the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, Kansas State Department of Education, and the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research collaborated to create and launch Sunflower Summer, a cross-sector learning enrichment initiative for Kansas school children of all ages. This initiative supported nearly 11,000 visits by Pre-K students to 71 attractions and sites across the state at no cost to their families.<sup>23</sup>
- A new initiative, Kansas Future Fellows, brings individuals from different sectors across the state together to address early childhood care and education systems change.<sup>24</sup>
- As referenced in Section 4 related to facilities, communities and employers are engaging in new and creative ways to solve child care for their neighbors, constituents, and employees. Local public-private approaches have great potential to leverage unique community assets and resources to address local challenges.

### A Kansan's Story

"I know a single mom has two children who express challenging behaviors at times. Mom has her own history of trauma and drug use. She has been sober and very proud of her sobriety for the last few years. Mom is working full time, parenting, and remaining sober. Mom struggles at times, but always tries to focus on how far she has come. Mom is open to services and engaged in learning new tools to be the best mother she can be."



## SECTION 6

# Limitations and Opportunities

This **2021 Needs Assessment Update** captures ongoing challenges first identified in prior needs assessment efforts and elevates experiences unique to the last year. While these efforts highlight and confirm persistent and known issues, they also offer key insights into where our understanding of the Kansas early childhood care and education system is limited, what questions we should continue to ask, and where clear opportunities exist to fill gaps and test viable solutions to meeting needs.

## Key Insights – Limitations

- The **2019 Needs Assessment** was a comprehensive process to capture the needs of Kansas families with young children, the early childhood workforce, and the early childhood care and education system. That process included 53 one-time community engagement sessions, story collection efforts, and other unique surveys that are difficult to conduct on an annual basis. The **2020 Needs Assessment Update** and **2021 Needs Assessment Update** utilized existing data sets and annual surveys that often have a narrower, more targeted focus.
- COVID-19 pandemic impact data on Kansas children and families and the Kansas early childhood workforce remain limited for 2021, especially demographic and workforce data. Indicator data primarily reflect 2020 information and estimates.
- Data on effects of the pandemic primarily include survey and polling results and anecdotal data collected by early childhood systems partners. These data do not fully capture the disparate impacts or the long-term effects of disruptions to early care and education services.

## A Kansan's Story



"Having Y-Care and the Cares Act funding has been a lifesaver for me. As a single mom to three kids, the additional financing through the Cares Act quite literally saved me financially and provided stability for me and my children during a time of immense uncertainty. Unfortunately, my finances did not change with the circumstances, and having the Cares Act grant was a Godsend. I truly am so thankful. Otherwise, the year would have looked much different for my family. I work both before and beyond school hours, and it's a relief to know my children are active, safe, and do not have to leave the school when the bell rings. They enjoy Y-Care so much that sometimes they ask me to run errands after work to pick them up even later. The staff are always friendly and let me know of successes or trials any of my kids have during their time there."



## Key Insights – Future Questions

- **COVID-19 Relief Funds.** What is the impact of COVID-19 relief funds, including one-time funds, on the Kansas early childhood care and education system? How did the COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts affect the economic circumstances of Kansas children and families? What is the impact of the expiring recovery efforts on trends?
- **Systemic Investments.** How have the efforts to address deeply-rooted systemic strains to the early care and education system impacted the reach of services across the mixed-delivery system?
- **PDG Funds.** How has the influx of Preschool Development Grant B-5 funds impacted our ability to strengthen and improve the overall early childhood care and education system for children, families, the workforce, and communities in Kansas?
- **Supply, Capacity, and Wages.** How have our efforts to strengthen the early childhood workforce and physical infrastructure impacted the supply and capacity of Kansas child care providers? What wage disparities exist across the state and what opportunities exist to address them? How do wage increases, both short-term and long-term, impact child care stability?



## Key Insights – Opportunities

Despite the hardships wrought by the pandemic and its impact on an already fragile early childhood system, opportunities are on the horizon. The **All In for Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** acts as a stable foundation from which to move forward with planned systemic strategies, while also mobilizing relief funding to jump-start key workforce initiatives. Strategies and tactics within the plan continue to offer implementation guidance for how to move beyond relief and recovery, shifting ahead to foundational investments that have the potential to transform the Kansas early childhood care and education system. The items below will focus on opportunities within the child care sector in particular, but for a broader view of strategies and tactics, read the [All In for Kansas Kids Strategic Plan](#) on the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund website.

- The gap between child care supply and demand must be addressed, so that children have a safe, secure, and nurturing place to be while parents are working. Several interdependent strategies are underway to address the levers of a quality child care system, including recruitment, career development, and retention.
- **Kansas Workforce Registry**— Kansas is in the process of building out a professional workforce registry system. This system will provide professionals with an online repository for their professional accomplishments, support them in accessing professional development and training, as well as offer connections to resources that align with their career goals. This will also help address the challenges we heard from providers about the difficulty in navigating online state systems, the registry will offer a robust and efficient look at Kansas workforce data, which has been a documented challenge. The rich data reporting elements related to recruitment, retention, and overall workforce trends will help inform future investment decisions at both state and local levels.
- **Workforce Compensation Reform** – A long-term solution must address the low wages of child care workers that lead to high turnover and child care shortages. A vibrant Kansas child care system cannot solely rely on existing resources. Our sustainable solution must:
  - Leverage existing investments
  - Align with the **All In for Kansas Kids Strategic Plan**
  - Be based on the true cost of providing quality care
  - Reflect the cost of living
  - Anticipate long-term trends
  - Incentivize retention, quality improvement, and career development
  - Draw on long-term, sustainable support from multiple payers, including families, federal funds, state contributions, local funding, and the private sector
- **Child Care Career Pathway** – A Career Pathway is a foundational tool to help professionalize the early childhood care and education workforce, support coordinated recruitment and retention efforts, and guide professionals in advancing in their career. Co-creation work is nearing completion on a career pathway for the child care workforce that will provide options for the advancement of child care professionals, as well as providing clear, comprehensive guidelines for the alignment and coordination of resources, such as professional development, recognition, and wages. This ensures all child care professionals will have a coordinated set of tools to access key resources and connections and to advance their careers. Importantly, the pathway will roll-out in conjunction with the workforce registry.

### A Kansan’s Story

“A local child care facility is providing educational totes for all local in-home child care providers. The totes are full of educational items for all ages. The totes are providing materials we can’t afford ourselves. They are helping our children’s development and helping providers give quality child care with learning materials. They have also allowed the kids to have new items during cold weather.”



- **Defining Quality** – Inherent in the efforts to understand the true cost to provide quality care, is the need to continue expanding and clarifying the definition of quality. Efforts are underway with expansion of the state’s Links to Quality program, an update of core competencies, and the adoption of a career pathway which recognizes professional learning, mentorship, and peer supports as key to improving quality care.
- **Facilities** – Old and outdated facilities are a financial challenge for child care providers to afford, many of whom are small business owners. There is also a need in some communities to establish new facilities to address the lack of slots in over half of Kansas counties, which have twice the number of infants than available slots. Work is underway to identify funding sources to address these needs.
- **Relief Funding** – Kansas early childhood system partners received an unprecedented level of additional emergency federal financial resources in 2021, specifically to address the continued critical and urgent needs from COVID-19. These include \$89,000,000 from the Federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, \$133,736,063 from the Child Care Development Fund Supplemental Discretionary Fund, and \$213,897,405 from the Child Care Stabilization Funds allocation (The Hunt Institute, 2021). While much of these funds have already been obligated and spent to keep doors open for child care providers and supporting families with COVID-related emergencies, opportunities exist to leverage these funds through collaboration and innovation.

## A Kansan’s Story



“Our health department administrator along with a local physician did several short, fun, and informative talks regarding the COVID-19 virus that were then put on their Facebook pages. This even caught the attention of the state health director who then participated in a Facebook Live talk. Way to work together to share important information!”



## SECTION 7

# Conclusion

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In 2021, Kansas families with young children continued to experience availability, accessibility, and navigation barriers across the Kansas early childhood care and education system. Families coped with the evolving day-to-day impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic while facing the reality that a critical service—child care—continued to reel from dwindling capacity. Our early childhood workforce struggled, trying to provide care for Kansas families in need while contending with an unprecedented workforce shortage that cannot be easily addressed with short-term relief efforts.

As we have in previous needs assessments, we recognize and applaud the resiliency of Kansas families and the early childhood workforce. However, resiliency alone is not enough. Our current challenges point to longstanding system inequities and gaps in infrastructure which represent real barriers to full recovery from COVID-19 and the promise of a thriving Kansas for our youngest citizens.

Much has changed since the **2019 Kansas Early Childhood Care and Education System Needs Assessment** was produced. But this fact has not: longer-term fixes and significant investments are needed to ensure thriving children and families.

The **All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan** provides both the vision and concrete strategies for change. We know it will take even greater collaboration and targeted action on multiple fronts to meet our goals and to secure much-needed investments. We call upon all early childhood partners—state agencies, politicians, businesses, school systems, philanthropies, service providers, and individuals—to use this document as reference and evidence of the critical importance of this work for all Kansans.

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## Endnotes

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- 1 As in the 2019 Needs Assessment and the 2020 Needs Assessment Update, 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), (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 3 (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2018), (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020)
- 4 (United States Census Bureau, 2017), (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 5 Reflects race/ethnicity of mother (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2020)
- 6 (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 7 Based on responses to the United States Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey.
- 8 (Kansas State Department of Education, 2022)
- 9 (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 10 (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 11 (Federal Register, 2021)
- 12 (United States Census Bureau, 2020)
- 13 The United States Census Bureau has conducted the Household Pulse Survey since April 2020 to monitor the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on American households.
- 14 In the 2019 Needs Assessment we reported on 2017 ACES data for Kansas children ages birth to 5. Because the most recent data available is for a two-year data set (2019-2020), we are utilizing the two-year data set for 2017-2018 for comparison.
- 15 This figure reflects workers in licensed centers, homes, and preschools with role of program director (PD), asst PD, teaching staff, owner/operator, primary caregiver. It does **not** include staff in programs serving only school age children or facilities exempt from licensing (unlicensed public preschools and Head Start facilities, child care facilities located on military installations and tribal land).
- 16 Laws and regulations governing child care facilities in Kansas can be found online at <https://www.kdhe.ks.gov/342/Child-Care-Licensing-Regulations-Policy->
- 17 Unduplicated counts from KDHE CLARIS, April 2022
- 18 Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) 2020-2021 school year data [https://datacentral.ksde.org/report\\_gen.aspx](https://datacentral.ksde.org/report_gen.aspx); although the majority of public school Pre-K programs are not licensed, some of the staff could be working in licensed facilities and already counted in the 14,928 total
- 19 DCF Relief Funding Spending Review as of 4/15/2022
- 20 Figures for calls and searches from KCSL 1-800-CHILDREN Data Dashboards from periods Nov 2020 -April 2021; June-Sept 2021; and Oct-Dec 2021.
- 21 (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021)
- 22 (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2021)
- 23 Sunflower Summer was funded through federal pandemic relief funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)(The Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, 2021).
- 24 Sunflower Summer was funded through federal pandemic relief funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)(The Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, 2021).

## University of Kansas Institute for Policy & Social Research

County	Census Tract	County	Census Tract
Allen	9526	Lane	9566
Anderson	9537	Leavenworth	702, 707, 710, 714, 716, 9819
Atchison	816	Lincoln	861
Barber	9682	Linn	9551
Barton	9712	Lyon	3, 4, 5, 7
Bourbon	9556, 9557, 9558, 9559	McPherson	7884, 7885
Brown	4806	Marion	4895, 4898
Butler	201, 202.01, 202.02, 203, 206, 208, 209.01, 209.03	Meade	9666
Chautauqua	9646	Miami	1005
Cherokee	9581, 9582, 9584, 9585, 9586	Montgomery	9501, 9505, 9507, 9509, 9511, 9512
Clark	9671	Morton	9646
Clay	4581	Neosho	9519, 9520
Cloud	9771	Osage	103, 105
Cowley	4931, 4936, 4937, 4939, 4941	Ottawa	856
Crawford	9566, 9567, 9571, 9573, 9574, 9576	Pawnee	9703
Decatur	9511	Pottawatomie	3
Dickinson	841, 842, 845	Pratt	9686, 9687
Doniphan	203	Reno	4, 6, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18
Douglas	5.02, 6.03, 9.01, 9.02, 14, 15	Riley	2, 3.03, 6, 8.01, 10.02
Edwards	9696	Saline	6, 10
Elk	9651	Sedgwick	1, 3, 11, 14, 15, 20, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 51, 52, 53, 56, 59, 60, 61, 63, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71.02, 72.01, 80, 84, 86, 89, 91, 94.02, 95.04, 95.09, 95.11, 97, 100.01, 100.02, 100.04, 100.05, 101.06, 101.07, 101.1, 101.11, 101.16, 104, 106
Ellis	726	Seward	9656, 9658, 9659, 9660
Ellsworth	866	Shawnee	4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16.01, 16.03, 30.01, 30.02, 31, 33.01, 36.06, 36.07
Finney	9601, 9602, 9604.01, 9604.03, 9604.04, 9605.01, 9605.03, 9605.05, 9605.08, 9606	Sheridan	9526
Ford	9618, 9620, 9621.01, 9621.02	Sherman	4536
Franklin	9544, 9545	Smith	4759
Geary	2, 3, 6, 7, 8	Stafford	4706, 4707
Grant	9636	Stevens	9652
Gray	9627	Sumner	9622, 9623, 9626
Greenwood	9656, 9658	Thomas	9534
Harper	9617	Wallace	9541
Harvey	303, 304, 306	Wichita	9576
Haskell	4631	Wilson	971, 972
Jackson	826, 828	Woodson	966
Johnson	501, 502, 507, 512, 516, 519.02, 519.04, 519.06, 519.08, 520.03, 520.04, 523.05, 524.11, 524.18, 525.02, 526.01, 526.07, 527, 528.03, 529.06, 530.05, 530.07, 531.05, 531.08, 533.02, 534.06, 534.1, 534.13, 534.14, 534.15, 534.22, 534.24, 535.57, 536.01, 537.01, 537.03, 537.09, 538.01, 538.03, 538.04	Wyandotte	403, 404, 405, 406, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 415, 416, 420.01, 420.02, 421, 422, 423, 426, 427, 434, 435, 437, 438.03, 439.03, 439.05, 440.03, 440.04, 441.03, 442.02, 443.01, 443.02, 443.03, 447.03, 448.04, 451
Kingman	9611		
Kiowa	9691		

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