

Cook County & Grand Portage Early Childhood Needs Assessment

*Prepared for: Sawtooth Mountain
Clinic Community HUB Grant*

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Together Through Life

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Key findings

Child care is the greatest unmet need in Cook County.

Recommendation:

Support child care providers to expand and increase child care spots.

- ✓ Cook County has 90 licensed child spots for children under age 5, yet 220 children age 5 and under live in households with all parents working.
 - ✓ Community partners overwhelmingly said child care was an unmet family need in Cook County.
 - ✓ In the parent survey, child care was most commonly identified as an unmet family need, especially child care for infants and toddlers.
-

Lack of awareness and isolation prevents families from accessing services.

Recommendation:

A Community Navigator position would help link families to existing services.

- ✓ In a web survey, less than half of programs were aware of universal programs like Follow Along, Early Childhood Family Education, and home visiting; and a majority reported finding out about programs via word-of-mouth rather than official channels.
 - ✓ The second most common barrier parents identified to participating in early childhood programming was lack of awareness of existing programs.
 - ✓ Community partners indicated families often reached by existing early childhood programming are those that are already connected to a service system or a resource hub.
 - ✓ Community partners believed a Community Navigator would be an asset to the community by helping to build connections and relieving the pressure of currently overburdened staff.
-

Parents are seeking recreational activities and parental support.

Recommendation:

Build collaborations among existing organizations to provide free or low cost parent and child programming.

- ✓ In a web survey, parents indicated they are seeking activities for themselves and their children, primarily for their children to develop socialization skills and for them to get peer support.
 - ✓ Parent support was the third highest rated need in the community by parents themselves.
 - ✓ Over a third of Cook County families are living in poverty compared to a fifth of families statewide, emphasizing the need for free or low-cost programming.
 - ✓ Community partners indicated there are opportunities for increased collaboration.
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Introduction

In February 2021, Sawtooth Mountain Clinic (SMC), with collaborative support from primary community partners of Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Cook County School District ISD166 and Cook County Public Health and Human Services, as well as support of many other local organizations, was awarded the 2-year Community-based Navigation Model, Local Community Resource Hub grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) (2021-2022, Track 2). As a Track 2 grantee, Year 1 (2021) is dedicated to capacity building, needs assessments and research, as well as ongoing collaborative relationship building with community partners and families. Year 2 (2022), informed by Year 1, transitions into full model implementation. The development and implementation of a Local Community Resource Navigational Hub Model ultimately seeks to increase relationship-based, universal and equitable access to programs and services for families with young children, prenatal to 5 years of age. The model must include virtual, mobile, and physical supports that are locally-driven, alongside the community and family voices, to promote sustainable collaboration among the systems who serve families, and reflect their evolving needs throughout our communities. The grant goals are to: 1) make it easier for families to get what they need, 2) increase access to services, and 3) grow community engagement and support community developed solutions.

Wilder Research supported the SMC Hub Team in planning the future HUB Model with data collection and interpretation. Specifically, Wilder Research assisted the team in determining:

- Needs and assets related to communication and learning of families experiencing homelessness, isolation, and marginalization,
- A family communication and engagement strategy that is created with the help and input of families themselves, and
- Practices, programs and strategies of Cook County organizations; existing resources to serve families and their strengths.

Wilder conducted key informant phone interviews with 20 community partners representing 19 agencies; a web-based survey of 32 parents with children age 5 and under advertised via flyers and social media; and analyzed demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Minnesota's Center for Health Statistics. One focus group with three parents was also held virtually, however additional groups were cancelled due to lack of participation.

Characteristics of Cook County children and families

Cook County is a geographically large county with a small population. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, of the 5,400 residents of Cook County, about 300 are under age 6. About 45 new babies are born annually in Cook County, primarily to white mothers, though 12% of babies are American Indian, likely due to the Grand Portage reservation located within the county. Of note, the number of deaths in the county is greater than the number of births, so population growth is a result of people relocating to the county, not due to births.

Over a third of Cook County families are living in poverty compared to a fifth of families statewide (Figure 1). Families in Cook County are more likely to rent their housing than other Minnesota families; interest in vacation homes drives up real estate prices giving families fewer options to own their own homes.

Mothers giving birth in Cook County tend to be more highly educated than those in Minnesota in general, with over half of mothers having a bachelor's degree or higher. While this generally positions families for greater economic security, the hospitality industry jobs that are common in Cook County do not necessarily need degrees. Thus, new moms may be faced with educational debt, yet lower wage jobs. A majority of births are paid for by Medicaid, an indicator that a large portion of mothers do not have private health insurance through an employer. They may be unmarried, unemployed, or working too little to qualify for benefits. Cook County mothers are more likely than other Minnesota mothers to be unmarried and not to list a father on the birth certificate.

While Cook County mothers are less likely to access prenatal care in the first trimester, most do get adequate or better prenatal care over the course of their pregnancy. Birth outcomes are worse in Cook County than in Minnesota in general: a larger proportion of babies are born preterm, low birth weight, or both. Statewide, Indigenous mothers and mothers of color are least likely to access prenatal care and most likely to deliver preterm due to a history of institutionalized racism. While data specific to Cook County could not be broken down by race or ethnicity, this likely holds true in this geography as well, especially given the distance Grand Portage families have to travel to deliver in a hospital in Duluth.

1. Characteristics of Cook County children, families, and mothers

	Cook County	Minnesota
Age of children	296	
Under age 3	158	
Ages 3 and 4	79	
Age 5	59	
Families with children under 5	111	
Percentage living below 185% of poverty	35%	20%
Rent or own their housing		
Rent	37%	29%
Own	63%	71%
Mother's race/ethnicity		
White (non-Hispanic)	79%	70%
American Indian	12%	2%
Asian	6%	8%
Hispanic	3%	7%
Black/African American	0%	13%
Mother's educational attainment		
High school, GED, or less	17%	21%
Some college or associate degree	31%	30%
Bachelor's or graduate degree	52%	49%
Births paid by Medicaid ^a	58%	44%
Family status		
Mother unmarried at time of birth ^a	38%	32%
No father documented on birth certificate ^a	17%	11%
Prenatal care		
Started in first trimester ^a	69%	78%
Received adequate or better	50%	15%
Birth outcome		
Cesarean birth ^a	26%	27%
Preterm ^a	13%	7%
Low birth weight (<5.5 pounds) ^a	10%	4%

^a While some data may be missing, the number missing is not reported, so the percentage is calculated on all births. Sources: American Community Survey 5 year estimates (2015-2019), U.S. Census Bureau. Includes Grand Portage reservation and off-reservation trust land; due to high margin of error, data for the reservation could not be reported separately. 2017 and 2018 County Health Tables, Minnesota Department of Health.

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/data/mchs/genstats/countytables/index.html>

Programs available for young children and their families

Community partners participating in interviews identified the following existing programs and agencies as available in Cook County or Grand Portage for families (in alphabetical order; Figure 2). Services are heavily concentrated in the largest city – Grand Marais – or located in other parts of Minnesota, but serve Cook County.

2. Programs serving Cook County and Grand Portage families

Name of program	Location/Service area	Description
Nonprofits		
Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency, Inc. (AEOA)	Virginia, MN; serves Cook County	Community Action Program for Cook County. Offers a variety of programs, including Adult Basic Education, Minnesota Dislocated Worker Program, MFIP, SNAP, Head Start, energy assistance, transportation, etc.
Arrowhead Transit	Virginia, MN; serves Cook County	Arrowhead Transit is a part of AEOA. Provides transportation services throughout the county, including regularly scheduled bus line from Grand Marais to Duluth and between Grand Marais and Grand Portage.
Ascend Services	Duluth, MN; serves Cook County	Provides home and community based health care, mental health services, and behavioral health services.
Birch Grove - Saplings Program	Tofte, MN	Preschool for children age 3-5; licensed for 14 children. Free transportation and scholarships may be available.
Consumer Directions	St. Cloud, MN; serves all of Minnesota	Consumer Directions is a qualified Home and Community Based Services provider that offers a variety of financial services and supports for families that qualify.
Cook County YMCA	Grand Marais, MN	Provides opportunities for health and well-being, youth development, and child care, as well as other community resources. Licensed for up to 42 children in child care.
Cooperation Station	Grand Marais, MN	Day care, licensed for up to 14 children, including school-age children.
Family child care providers	Grand Marais, MN	Three family child care providers operate at home businesses in Grand Marais, collectively licensed for up to 36 children, including school-age children.
Grand Marais Public Library	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides library services, including access to books, DVDs, magazines and newspapers, and offers events for all ages.

2. Programs serving Cook County and Grand Portage families (continued)

Name of program	Location/Service area	Description
Nonprofits		
Ruby's Pantry	Grand Marais, MN	Provides boxed surplus groceries for a \$20 donation with no eligibility requirements.
Learning Opportunities Through Stories (LOTS)	Finland, Grand Marais, Grand Portage, Silver Bay, Tofte, Two Harbors	Provides early literacy opportunities for children birth through 5 years old.
Minnesota Children's Press	Grand Marais, MN	Mentors children in writing, illustrating, publishing, and selling books.
Northeast Service Cooperative	Mountain Iron, MN; serves Cook County	Provides a variety of services to the Arrowhead region, including academic programs, educational services, training and development, and wellness programs.
Violence Prevention Center	Grand Marais, MN	Supports those that have been affected by domestic violence, assault, human trafficking, stalking or harassment, and similar forms of violence with access to a 24-hour phone line, information and referrals, emergency short-term housing, support groups, and more.
School district departments and programs		
Cook County ISD 166	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides PK-12 education to Cook County, as well as a preschool, Early Childhood Special Education, and Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE). Of note, ECFE employs only one parent educator.
Cook County ISD 166 Early Childhood Special Education	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides speech and therapy services, including occupational and physical therapy, through early intervention funding (IDEA Part B and C).
Cook County Community Education	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides services and educational opportunities for all ages.
County departments and programs		
Cook County Public Health and Human Services	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides supports and services for all Cook County residents, including child care licensing, financial support, access to public health insurance, and social services.
Cook County Higher Education	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Provides opportunities for higher education across Cook County, including distance learning, lifelong learning, local medical training and development, and college prep.
Help Me Grow	Online; serves all of Minnesota	Website that provides resources on child development.

2. Programs serving Cook County and Grand Portage families (continued)

Name of program	Location/Service area	Description
Grant Portage programs		
Family Spirit Program	Grand Portage, MN	Home-visiting program that supports young American Indian parents from pregnancy through 3 years post-partum.
Head Start	Grand Portage, MN	Though not mentioned in interviews, Grand Portage has a Head Start program for ages 3 to 5.
Grand Portage Health Services	Grand Portage, MN	Though not mentioned in interviews, Grand Portage Health Services is a community clinic that operates on a sliding fee scale.
Grand Portage Human Services Dept.	Grand Portage, MN	Though not mentioned in interviews, Grand Portage also has a Human Services Department.
Clinic programs		
North Shore Health	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Though not mentioned in interviews, North Shore Health is a 16 bed hospital and 37 bed nursing facility with ambulatory services. The care center offers Outpatient Pediatric Occupational Therapy.
Sawtooth Mountain Clinic	Grand Marais, MN (main office), as well as Tofte, MN and Grand Portage	Comprehensive community health center.
Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program	Grand Marais, MN; serves Cook County	Federal program that provides food assistance to families with young children. Sawtooth Mountain Clinic is the local WIC agency for Cook County.

Community isolation makes it challenging to reach families for services and programming.

In the key informant interviews, community partners were asked their thoughts on how effectively families with young children are reached with services and programs. Particularly, researchers were interested if differences existed based on children’s age (infants and toddlers vs. age 3-5), whether or not mothers are pregnant, and whether or not families are experiencing homelessness, violence, substance use, or other crises. However, there was little consensus from respondents on which of these populations were or weren’t being effectively reached. Some said they felt like nearly everyone was being reached about services, while one or two respondents each believed parents with infants and toddlers, parents with children age 3-5, and pregnant mothers were being reached less than other groups. This lack of agreement may be due to the diverse roles they have in the community.

Rather than specific child age groups or demographic populations, a theme did emerge around community connection and isolation. Respondents indicated that families already connected to a service system or a resource hub are often connected with other resources (N=6). For the families being missed or not reached, respondents most often cited those that are overwhelmed or in survival mode and thus do not have the time or energy to connect with resources (N=5). Similarly, respondents also said families that are geographically isolated throughout the widespread county are not effectively reached (N=4). In a focus group, parents mentioned they often learn about programs through word of mouth from other parents or programs, including Facebook.

Though not specifically mentioned, previous needs assessments conducted by Cook County School District indicated that families participating in early childhood family education are predominating white, indicating the 21% of mothers who identify as American Indian, Asian, or Hispanic may be less likely to access these services.¹

In general, this information suggests that connection to the community is most important for families to access resources, which can be difficult given the size of the county that geographically isolates some families. Families may also feel disconnected from their community if they feel marginalized for other reasons.

If you've been really identified within the system then you're probably getting more support across the board, just because people are telling you more about it. I think probably those that are sustaining themselves kind of okay are the ones that probably miss more of the information, potentially, just because they aren't being encouraged to know more about [resources].
– Community partner

I think for the folks who are busiest and perhaps need to understand the most about services, it can be really hard for them to have time to figure out what's available, what's needed, how they can manage to take advantage of the services.
– Community partner

I'm not sure it is particular groups of people or particular populations. I think it's just speckled throughout the population of the county. Physically, people are really spread out and maybe people who are further out versus people who live in town.
–Community partner

Parents' awareness of programs and services varies.

In a web-based survey, parents were asked what programs they had participated in or heard about. Among universal programs, or programs available to all families, only about a third had heard about or used the Parent Aware child care database to find child care, and just about half had heard about or used Early Childhood Screening or the Follow Along Program (Figure 3). Given the shortage of child care in the county, discussed in further detail in this report, parents may have little need to access the Parent Aware website.

¹ ECFE Community Needs Assessment, Cook County School District #166, 2019-2020

Among need-based programs in which families are eligible based on a child’s developmental need, lack of income, or other government-defined risk factors, few parents were aware of services for babies and toddlers, such as Early Head Start, early childhood mental health, and early intervention (Figure 3). Over half were also unaware of early learning scholarships, school readiness programs, and child care assistance, for which low-income families would be eligible. Of those that were aware, just one parent had accessed these benefits. Again, knowing about these resources to help pay for child care likely would not increase access to it without an increase in child care slots.

In contrast, a large portion of parents taking the survey had heard of statewide economic benefits – SNAP, WIC, and MinnesotaCare – that would not be restricted by lack of services in Cook County.

3. Parents’ awareness and use of early childhood programs

Program (n=27)	Participated	Heard about	Not heard about
Universal programs			
Parent Aware child care database	4%	31%	65%
Early Childhood Screening	35%	15%	50%
Follow Along Program	27%	27%	46%
Early Childhood Family Education	59%	22%	19%
Home Visiting	48%	37%	15%
Need-based programs			
Early Head Start (Birth-2)	4%	15%	81%
Early Childhood Mental Health Child Care Consultation	4%	15%	81%
Part C Early Intervention (Birth-3)	12%	8%	81%
Early Learning Scholarships	0%	27%	73%
School Readiness	0%	28%	72%
Part B Early Childhood Special Education (age 4-5)	4%	27%	69%
Child Care Assistance Program	4%	44%	52%
Head Start (ages 3-5)	4%	46%	50%
Voluntary pre-kindergarten	15%	50%	35%
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	12%	73%	15%
Women, Infant and Children program	56%	37%	7%
Medical Assistance (MA) or MinnesotaCare	50%	46%	4%

Isolation, transportation, and lack of awareness are the main barriers to participation.

In the key informant interviews, community partners discussed barriers for families to participate in available programs and services or what may need to change to improve participation. The web-based survey also asked parents what makes it difficult for them to participate in early childhood programming.

Some families are isolated or lack community connection.

As mentioned in the section above, community connection or isolation may play a significant role in whether people are aware of resources. Similarly, when asked specifically about barriers to participation, again the widespread nature of the county and geographic isolation were mentioned (N=8).

Lack of transportation prevents families from accessing services.

A few community partners mentioned transportation as a barrier for some families (N=5), though this was not a frequent barrier indicated by parents on the web-based survey (Figure 4). A few community partners mentioned some transportation support exists, such as Arrowhead Transit or organizations that may provide their own transportation, but it is insufficient. Telehealth became more frequently used during the pandemic out of necessity, and may be one way to work around the need for transportation. However, high-speed internet service – necessary for effective telehealth – is spotty, particularly in rural parts of Cook County.

I think of a lot of the rural counties in Minnesota, really particularly far-flung, and the transportation issue... it might be a 60 mile drive from somewhere in the county, just to get to the clinic or to the county or to the school to talk to someone.

– Community partner

Transportation is a burden beyond that people are like, 'I can't get to the thing. So it doesn't even matter that you're offering stuff for free. I can't get it.'

–Community partner

Parents cannot participate in programs they don't know about.

Another theme was insufficient outreach or available information (N=8). Particularly, respondents mentioned that families can be disconnected from resources and support systems that may connect them with programs or services (N=6) and that it's often difficult to find accurate, up-to-date information (N=3). The second most frequent response of parents about their barriers to participation was not being aware of any early childhood programming (Figure 4).

"There's also a real challenge for parents to find accurate information about events that are going on and are sort of community happenings. So there's Boreal [local media] and there are Facebook groups, but it's pretty fragmented. So there's not really a maintained list of events or even of resources or other information."

– Community partner

“A lot of programs have come and gone. It’s hard to find out about them. I think it’s really hard to find out about these things. It’s kind of word of mouth, accidentally bumping into the right person in the right place. Once you hear about it, it can be hard to track down the people and sign up.”

–Cook County Parent

Other potential barriers

Other, less frequently mentioned, barriers include:

- Parents indicated they do not participate due to the **scheduling or timing** of programming, with some parents specifically noting the lack of programming outside of working hours on evenings and weekends (Figure 4).
- Community partners believe program **eligibility requirements** or criteria may be a barrier to parents participation (N=5). For example, families whose income is too high to qualify for assistance, but nonetheless would benefit greatly from services. Similarly, it can take too many steps or “hoops to jump through” to obtain or determine eligibility for services (N=4).
- Community partners were concerned that any **cost** associated with a program or event may prevent families from participating (N=4); however, no parents noted cost preventing them from participating in any available programming.
- Community partners indicated that families are **too overwhelmed** to seek programs out or participate (N=4).
- Community partners are concerned that **stigma** within the community prevents families from asking for help, particularly given that Cook County is a smaller community (N=4).

4. Parents’ self-reported barriers

What makes it difficult for you to participate in early childhood programming? (n=31)	Percent
The schedule/times are not convenient	39%
I am not aware of programming	29%
Involved in other activities/No time	16%
Program staff keeps changing	13%
Transportation or locations are not convenient	13%
Nothing, I am able to participate in the programs I want or need	10%
Did not know anyone else participating	10%
Cost or affordability	0%
Registration too difficult	0%
Not interested in early childhood programming	0%
Other	0%

Close-ended question; multiple responses possible, so totals do not equal 100%.

Family needs and supports

Family needs

Community partners were asked what they believe are the unmet needs of families with young children in Cook County. The parent survey also asked about parents' greatest unmet need, and which programs and services the community most needs to better serve families with children age 5 and under. Results are listed below, in order of the most frequently mentioned themes across both community partners and parents.

Child care is the greatest unmet need in Cook County.

When community partners were asked about unmet family needs in Cook County, the most common answer by far was child care (N=17). Parents who participated in either the focus group or survey echoed this need; a third of respondents to the parent survey indicated child care was the greatest need, especially for infants and toddlers (Figure 5).

According to U.S. Census data, 220 children age 5 and under live in households with all parents working in Cook County. However, according to Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) licensing, only 90 licensed child care spots exist for children age 5 and under,² emphasizing the need for child care. Moreover, licensed providers are not required to operate at full capacity and many choose not to. Thus, many parents are either relying on informal care from family and friends or not able to access child care at all.

Community partners noted there isn't enough child care available, generally (N=6), and specifically for infants and toddlers (N=4); the hours of child care centers do not work with many families' schedules (N=5); and child care isn't affordable for many families (N=5). Of note, the YMCA child care closed their toddler room as interviewing was taking place. Quite a few respondents spoke on the issue of hours and scheduling, noting the hours of child care are not amenable to some people who work a typical business hours job, let alone those who work in the hospitality or tourism industry and have less regular work schedules. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 40% of the jobs in Cook County are in the leisure and hospitality industry. In order to work those jobs, parents would need child care evenings and weekends. As noted above" a few respondents noted that not having child care can also prevent parents from participating in other programming or events. Similarly, mothers who had recently given birth shared in focus groups in 2019 that the cost and availability of child care heavily influenced how

² There's a total of 106 licensed capacity including school-age. DHS Licensing Information Look Up on August 27, 2021. licensinglookup.dhs.state.mn.us.

many adult family members participated in the workforce.³ Finally, parents said they needed child care and support after hours in order to get a mental break or time alone.

I mean child care, it's a major gap that impacts the families we serve and impacts our staff as well. We have a lot of families with young kids. It's a major workforce issue when we don't have enough qualified child care providers in the community. Families have to get really creative with care. – Community partner

There's not enough space in daycare for all the kids there are. We piecemealed it. As soon as someone finds they are pregnant, they have to get on a waitlist if they are to stand a chance. It might be a whole year wait. Stable child care and enough child care are important. -Cook County Parent

Our greatest need is quality babysitters so that my husband and I can have time alone (both together and separately). We are lucky enough to have child care 3 days a week, but with full work schedules, it would be really nice to have time to center ourselves and be the best parents we can be. A drop in care program, or even a way to know about quality local babysitters, would be fantastic. I think back to the year I had ECFE and that 30-45 minutes without my children, being able to just drink a hot cup of coffee and know the kids were safe ... without exaggerating, it supported me through the whole week. -Cook County Parent

5. Most needed services for young families

Which of the following (currently unavailable) programming and services does the community most need to better serve families with children age 5 and under? (n=27)	Percent
Child care for infants/toddlers	44%
Birthing, labor, and delivery services	37%
Parenting education and support	33%
Child care for school-age children	22%
Preschool or school readiness programming	22%
Summer/year-round programming	22%
Mental health care	22%
Perinatal support or child birth programs	11%
Culturally specific American Indian programming	11%
Pediatric medical care or other medical infant and early childhood specialists	7%

Close-ended question; multiple responses possible, so totals do not equal 100%.

³ Listening to Families presentation. October 30, 2019.

5. Most needed services for young families (continued)

Which of the following (currently unavailable) programming and services does the community most need to better serve families with children age 5 and under? (n=27)	Percent
Breastfeeding and lactation support programs	7%
Screening for developmental concerns	7%
Nutrition support (e.g., WIC)	4%
Family law legal services	4%
Special education or support for children with disabilities	4%
Home visiting	4%
None of the above	4%
Other: <i>Flexible child care, pre-K, diverse children's programming (art, sports, music, science)</i>	11%
Dental care	0%

Close-ended question; multiple responses possible, so totals do not equal 100%.

Living wage jobs and affordable housing are lacking.

Respondents also mentioned residents not having access to living wage jobs or making too little money (N=7). This was often said in relation to other needs, such as not being able to afford child care, housing, or health care. A few respondents noted that people are underemployed or subject to seasonality of work in Cook County, and don't have the same hours or make the same amount of money all-year round. The idea of seasonality was mentioned in relation to both the tourism and the construction industries.

Related to income, community partners (N=6) discussed the lack of affordable housing in Cook County, noting that it can be expensive to live in Cook County or that the "starter home" market for young families is inadequate and/or too expensive. A few said this may be due to the large number of second homes or Airbnbs in the county because of tourism along the North Shore. (One community member said over half of homes in the county are second homes.)

[My family's greatest need is] better pay to eliminate pressure to work more than full time.

-Cook County Parent

We currently rent a home that will most likely be going on the market soon, but the present housing market in Cook County (and the rest of the nation) makes it difficult for us to purchase a home. Rental homes are very few and far between here.

-Cook County Parent

Mental and behavioral health services are limited.

Community partners noted there generally aren't enough mental or behavioral health services within the county for both children and adults (N=7). Similarly, a fifth of parents indicated mental health services are in high need, with some indicating they need mental health support for themselves and their child.

*[My family's greatest need is] emotional/therapy support for struggling parents.
-Cook County Parent*

The 2017-22 Community Health Improvement Plan noted there is less than one mental health provider for every 1,000 residents in Cook County, less than half the statewide ratio. For many specialty services or evaluations, residents need to travel to Duluth, which can be a significant burden and disrupt care. Some respondents from school districts or early childhood centers emphasized the importance of identifying mental or behavioral health needs in children as soon as possible and connecting them with services quickly, but noted this doesn't always happen. Even once a child is identified, there may not be relevant services available for them. A few respondents also said chemical dependency support for adults in the county is insufficient, which may obviously impact the children in those families (N=4). According to DHS licensing, Cook County Wilderness Outpatient Treatment Program is the only licensed substance use treatment program in the county.

Some mothers travel over 100 miles for prenatal and natal care.

Respondents in both the community partner interviews and parent focus group mentioned that no clinics in Cook County offer prenatal and natal services, and there is only one known midwife. Thus, most families travel to Duluth for these services (N=6 of community partners). This was also identified as a top community need among respondents to the parent survey (Figure 5). Similarly, mothers who had recently given birth shared in focus groups in 2019 that they were traveling over 100 miles to give birth and had high anxiety and stress about the costs and associated risks of travel.⁴ This can be a burden to families, cause a disruption of care if they typically see a provider within Cook County, and can prevent or delay new moms from being connected with other services within the county. Some families may instead choose to stay and deliver at home, which can be dangerous without some assistance. A few respondents mentioned a need for more midwives or doulas in the county to help address this gap, whether families are going to Duluth or staying at home.

[People talk about] support throughout pregnancy and people feeling really isolated and alone and lacking a continuity of care. So maybe [they're] getting some prenatal care locally, but also driving to Duluth. Maybe getting discharged from Duluth, but not having a lot of postpartum follow-up. And just feeling that distance and feeling that isolation and [lacking] that support piece. – Community partner

⁴ Listening to Families presentation. October 30, 2019.

Parents are seeking more support and parenting education.

In the parent focus group, parents also mentioned a lack of formal parenting groups or parent education. A few community partners discussed a similar need (N=3), noting an important connection between parental support and good mental health for both parents and their children. A third of respondents to the parent survey also indicated parenting education and support was most needed.

[My family's greatest need is] connection with others who are living in the same stage of parenting.

-Cook County Parent

In the 2019-20 ECFE Community Needs Assessment, parents and the parent educator identified interest in the following parenting topics:

- Establishing consequences for behavior and discipline strategies
- Teaching children responsibility
- Balancing the family's time
- Talking to children about the pandemic (or other current events)
- Encouraging independent play
- Managing social and emotional responses and emotional development
- Discovering mental health resources
- Navigating government assistance programs

Family supports

Parents primarily rely on each other for support.

Nearly all respondents of the parent survey indicated they go to friends, family, and coworkers for information about parenting and early childhood development. Nearly two-thirds go to their child's doctor, and half turn to the internet. Parents turn to mental health and ECFE professionals less commonly, likely due to the fact that few people fill these roles in Cook County (Figure 6).

Similar to who they go to for parenting information, a majority of parents said they rely on word-of-mouth for information about early childhood programs and services (Figure 6). Some parents also rely on social media, their child care provider, the YMCA and/or the schools. Parents did not typically get information from traditional media (radio or newspaper), a community health clinic, a community center, or a library.

6. Parents' sources of parenting information

Who do you go to for information about parenting? (n=28)	Percent
Family, friends, and coworkers	96%
My child's doctor or health professional	64%
Internet sites and blogs: <i>Facebook and Instagram, simplefamilies.com, Kids Health, parents.com, biglittlefeelings, The Bump, My Bored Toddler, Mayo Clinic</i>	50%
My child's child care provider or preschool teacher	32%
Cook County Public Health and Human Services staff	21%
Parenting books: <i>Positive Psychology parenting books; Bringing Up Bebe</i>	21%
Parent and Family Educator, or ECFE program professional	11%
Informal parent support groups: <i>My Favorite Mamarinos on Facebook</i>	11%
Therapist or mental health professional	7%
Other <i>(Suppressed to maintain privacy)</i>	4%
None, I do not seek out this type of information	0%
Where do you go for information about early childhood programs and services for your family? (n=28)	Percent
Friends and family (word of mouth)	61%
Social Media ⁵	39%
Child care provider	36%
Cook County YMCA	21%
Cook County Schools	18%
Sawtooth Mountain Clinic/Community Health Clinic	14%
Grand Portage Community Center	14%
Cook County Library	11%
Cook County Public Health and Human Services	11%
Boreal.org	11%
None	7%
Local radio station	4%
Cook County Herald newspaper	4%
Charter schools	4%

Close-ended question; multiple responses possible, so totals do not equal 100%.

⁵ Facebook groups: Moms on the Move, Growing Families Cook County, and Grand Marais Area Kids and Baby Sell and Swap.

Opportunities

Organizations within Cook County are well-positioned to serve families, yet are also working over their capacity.

During the interviews, stakeholders were asked what organizations or roles were best positioned to address the previously mentioned needs and barriers for families in Cook County. Respondents most commonly mentioned clinics or health care facilities (N=9), such as Sawtooth Mountain clinic, and the local school district or child care centers (N=9). These groups were often mentioned because they are in a unique position to have regular contact with families and act as a resource hub. A few respondents noted that schools and early childhood centers already act as natural resource hubs for parents.

Several respondents also mentioned an opportunity to strengthen the partnership between Cook County service providers and Grand Portage (N=5). A reservation-based Head Start program was frequently mentioned as a way to address child care needs, in part because Tribal Head Start programs can have more lenient guidelines than non-tribal Head Start programs and Grand Portage lacks child care services.

Respondents also mentioned staff in organizations in Cook County “wear many hats,” and may be overwhelmed, stretched thin in their roles, or taking on responsibilities that aren’t in their official job descriptions. With this in mind, respondents noted that many staff are already doing all they can and organizations would need additional resources or positions to effectively address these family needs.

“People do have to - because of our community size, our population size and the demographics - there are always going to be people who have to wear multiple hats. But how can we make the job descriptions reflect what's really happening, and how can we make sure that we are appropriately allowing the time to do those jobs, and then have the money that would need to be in place to make sure that they are paid for the time that it really takes to do the job and in a way that works.”

– Community partner

In the parent focus group, parents mentioned the YMCA or public library may also be good options for additional early childhood programming because of the family-friendly activities currently held there, their space options for events or meetings, and general accessibility.

Improved collaboration among organizations could help address family needs.

Overwhelmingly, respondents mentioned a need for improved collaboration or relationships among various entities or organizations in Cook County in order to better serve families there (N=16). Some respondents noted they think organizations in Cook County collaborate well already and just have room for improvement, while others said this is something organizations do not currently do well and need to address. Regardless, respondents reported that entities in the county can be fractured or siloed from each other (N=6); this can translate to ineffective outreach or service delivery for families.

Respondents offered a few ideas to improve collaboration throughout the county. Again, there was a desire for more collaboration and understanding with Grand Portage (N=4). A few people noted that the existing coalitions or committees, such as the Early Childhood Coalition, were helpful in bringing people together so they would like to see more of these types of platforms that intentionally bring people together (N=3). Respondents also mentioned organizations sharing resources and materials, or braiding funding together for common goals (N=3).

Returning to the idea that staff are overwhelmed or “wear many hats,” a few respondents pointed out this makes working together towards common goals important to spread the responsibility, while others mentioned that collaboration and relationship-building takes time and resources staff may not currently have in their roles or job descriptions.

I think that so often individuals in our community feel like they're starting from scratch. Like I want to work on affordable housing, or I want to work on hunger or wherever, and people start from the bottom up because they don't know that there's other people that worked on it, what that even looks like, or what the history of that is. And maybe it doesn't always matter. Maybe it's great to sometimes start with a fresh slate, but I think it also means that you don't get the foundation work that maybe is already done by people.

– Community partner

A Community Navigator position will be a positive asset to the community.

In the community partner interviews, respondents were asked their thoughts on creating a Community Navigator position who would be tasked with linking families with service providers.

Respondents had mostly positive thoughts and believed there would be benefits to this type of position (N=12). The most common perceived benefits were having a designated go-to person in the community to share resources and to build connections (N=6) and having someone to take the burden of that responsibility off other staff (N=6).

It's a full-time job for people just to figure out what [residents] might be able to connect with to support them and their family. I think the idea of a navigator is great as it relates to kids and young families and seniors, and to many others too. We don't have the bandwidth to really find out what all is available.

– Community partner

Parents are seeking activities for themselves and their children.

The web survey asked parents what types of programming they would prefer, their main reasons for attending early childhood activities, and their preferred locations.

Parents responding to the survey mostly preferred programming for both parents and children, whether it be one-time or weekly (Figure 7). Given the lack of child care, and interest in both child socialization and parental support, programs that serve both parents and children would be necessary in order for parents to attend. There was less interest in programming for parents only, and very little interest in online programming. Online programming is likely less effective with young children, and the previous ECFE needs assessment verified that some families lack reliable internet access, especially those in greater Cook County.

The main reasons parents seek early childhood activities is to provide social opportunities for their child and connect with other parents, followed by wanting educational opportunities (Figure 7).

[My family's greatest need is] activities for the under 5 group, i.e., swim lessons, sports, open gyms, ECFE, etc.

-Cook County Parent

[My family's greatest need is] an opportunity for the kids to get to know other kids through physical sporting activities or play dates.

-Cook County Parent

The top locations respondents said were the best place to attend activities were outdoor parks and the YMCA, followed by the library, community center, and clinic (Figure 7).

7. Interest in future programming

In which of the following types of programs would you be most likely to participate? (n=30)	Percent
One-time activities for parents and children	73%
Weekly programs for parents and children	63%
One-time activities for parents only	23%
Monthly programs for parents only	20%
Hybrid programming that is both online and in-person	13%
On demand services	13%
Online programs, support groups, or resources	10%
Home visiting	7%
Weekly programs for parents only	3%
Other	13%
None	0%
What are the main reasons you would seek services related to parenting and early childhood? (n=30)	
Social opportunities for my child	80%
Connection or support with other parents or peers for myself	67%
Evidence-based information or educational opportunities on range of topics	50%
Support from a licensed professional	33%
Specific time with my child	13%
None, I am not interested in early childhood programming	3%
Where is the best place for your family to attend activities or classes? (n=30)	
Outdoor parks	67%
YMCA	50%
Public library	37%
Community center	30%
Sawtooth Mountain Clinic/Community Health Clinic	27%
Schools	17%
Other	17%
Child care	13%
Online or virtual	10%
At home	3%
Place of worship	0%

Close-ended question; multiple responses possible, so totals do not equal 100%.

Additional professional development or support for staff

In the community partner interviews, some respondents were asked what services or supports were available for providers and if there were unmet needs. Few had responses to this question, but they included:

- More support and guidance around grant writing
- Child care providers need more support, particularly higher pay and more training
- Different organizations and providers need help with referrals (i.e., where to refer for what). This included medical referrals.

Recommendations

- **Consider ways to support child care providers to expand and increase child care spots.** Cook County has a severe lack of child care. Based on the number of young children who live in households in which all of the adults work, Cook County needs to more than double the number of child care spots available. To address this, consider partnerships with foundations or organizations like First Children’s Finance to provide financial supports for providers to expand and hire qualified early childhood providers. County leaders may also consider ways to support family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers or informal, legally unlicensed caregivers that are providing child care to support Cook County families.
- **A Community Navigator position would help link families to existing services.** Lack of awareness was the second most common reason given by parents for why it is difficult to participate in early childhood programming, and many parents were unaware of existing programs. Community partners indicated that those families reached by efforts to build awareness about programming are often those that are already connected to a service system or a resource hub. A Community Navigator would help ensure families gain access to existing services and programming. Community partners believe such a position would benefit the community by helping to build connections between existing service providers and relieving the pressure on currently overburdened staff.
- **Build collaborations among existing organizations to provide free or low cost parent and child programming.** Parents are seeking activities for themselves, in order to get peer support, and for their children, in order to develop their socialization skills. Community partners identified an opportunity for increased collaboration, which could help fill this gap in programming for families. Future activities could include: outdoor and physical activities, music and art, and parenting education, as well as informal support groups and play dates. While families did not indicate cost was a barrier to participating in existing programs, over a third of Cook County families are living in poverty compared to a fifth of families statewide, emphasizing the need for free or low-cost programming.

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