

2026

# Early Childhood Advocacy Day (ECAD) Toolkit



# Introduction

This toolkit is designed to empower you with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively advocate for early childhood education and programs and navigate Early Childhood Advocacy Day 2026.

## What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is speaking up, supporting, or taking action on behalf of a person, group, or cause. Advocacy turns your experiences into real change.

Advocacy can look different depending on the situation:

- **Self Advocacy:** Speaking up for yourself or your child, asking questions, and requesting support.
- **Community Advocacy:** Supporting others by sharing resources and raising awareness.
- **Systemic Advocacy:** Identifying systemic gaps, organizing with others, and pushing for improvements.
- **Legislative Advocacy:** Influencing policies by contacting legislators, testifying, and supporting funding initiatives.

## What is Public Policy?

Public policy turns advocacy to action. This includes laws, rules, programs, and decisions that impact our daily lives.

Public policy determines early childhood:

- Funding
- Access to Services
- Program Quality



# Why Early Childhood Advocacy Matters

- **Over 858,000 children under 5** live in Illinois.
- Early childhood programs:
  - support healthy development
  - strengthen families
  - boost the economy
- Every \$1 invested yields **long-term benefits** for children and communities
- Advocacy ensures these programs are **funded, accessible, and equitable**

## What's Happening with the State Budget?

Each year, Illinois must pass a balanced budget—this means tough decisions about funding priorities.

### **Governor's FY27 Proposal:**

- Child Care: **+\$55M**
- Early Intervention: **+\$15M**
- Smart Start Workforce Grants: **Level funded** at \$200 million
- Home Visiting: **Level funded** at \$27.9 million
- Early Childhood Block Grant: **Level funded** at \$748 million
- ECACE Scholarship: **Level funded at** \$5 million

# What's Happening with the State Budget?

## **ECAD FY27 Advocacy Priorities**

Advocates are calling for:

- **\$130M increase for Child Care**
  - \$80M CCAP
  - \$50M Workforce (SSWG)
- **\$40M increase for Early Intervention**
- **\$5M increase for Home Visiting**
- **\$5M increase for ECACE Scholarship**
- Increased investment in the **Early Childhood Block Grant**

## Who Are We Advocating To?

### **Key decision-makers:**

- The Governor
- State Senators & House Representatives

### **Influencers:**

- Providers, Families & Advocates
- Organizations & Coalitions
- Media, Researchers, & Community Leaders

### **Effective Advocacy Strategies:**

- Meet with legislators.
- Write letters or emails.
- Share your story.
- Raise awareness (social media, community).
- Participate in events like ECAD.



# SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN FY27

Illinois can be leading the way for early childhood and be the best state in the country for families with young children. Unfortunately, all levels of the early care and learning system remain significantly underfunded. Illinois families are relying on policymakers to make early learning a reality for children and need for them to increase resources for preschool, child care, home visiting, Early Intervention services (EI), and the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. Only with a sustained state investment will Illinois be a national leader.

We must grow and strengthen the state's early childhood system through an FY27 budget that includes the following increases in funding, which reflect the multiyear vision of the state's bipartisan Early Childhood Funding Commission for improving birth-to-5 services' access, quality, and equity.

## Child Care

**Advocates request a \$130 Million increase:** 

**\$80M for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)**

*(The Governor proposed a \$55 million increase)*

**\$50M for Smart Start Workforce Grant (SSWG)**

*(The Governor proposed level funding)*

Additional funding will:

- **Maintain current caseloads, and provide rate increases for both home-based and center-based programs**
- **Support the workforce among other program improvements to meet program demands**

Without new investments, Illinois families with young children will continue to struggle to find quality, affordable child care, and child care workers will remain significantly underpaid.

## Home Visiting

**Advocates request a \$5 Million increase** 

*(The Governor proposed level funding)*

Additional funding for Illinois' home visiting program could:

- **Increase provider compensation to state-recommended levels**
- **Expand services for families**
- **Strengthen the state's infrastructure** and boost positive outcomes for children

With over two decades of flat funding, continued funding is vital to improve maternal and child outcomes.

## Early Intervention

**Advocates request a \$40 Million increase** 

*(The Governor proposed a \$15 Million increase)*

This investment would allow the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) to:

- **Increase pay for EI providers** to retain existing and attract new therapists into the program.
- **Improve referral, intake, and evaluation processes**, and ensure services are available in a timely manner.

Without action, more providers will leave, long waitlists will keep growing, and more babies with developmental disabilities or delays will lose their only chance to benefit from Early Intervention.

## Early Childhood Block Grant

**Advocates request increased investment** 

*(The Governor proposed level funding)*

With increased investment, the state could:

- Strengthen **program quality** by supporting programs to shift to more full-day preschool slots
- Improve the **cost-per-child rate** for current programs to work toward reflecting the true cost of care

These investments are especially important in light of federal funding uncertainties and the state's work on funding adequacy, making this a critical step in enhancing early childhood education outcomes.



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## Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship (IBHE/ISAC)

**Advocates request a \$5 Million increase**   
*(The Governor proposed level funding)*

Investment is essential to:

- **Increase the number of qualified ECE educators** by promoting advanced credentials and degrees
- **Expand providers' classroom capacity**

Current funding levels fall short of current demand, leaving 534 of candidates without the financial support to complete their programs.

Additional funding will help the state's overall goal of expanding preschool slots and child care access.

### **SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS:**

SEIU Healthcare Illinois  
Peoria County Bright Futures  
Prevent Child Abuse Illinois  
Family Focus  
Brightpoint  
YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago  
SAL Community Services  
Erikson Institute  
New Moms

# How to Build Your Elevator Pitch

A strong advocacy message includes:

1. Who you are.
2. What you care about/the problem.
3. How you have been personally impacted.
4. The solution/a clear ask.
5. **Practice!!!**

## Simple Template

- “Hi, my name is \_\_\_ and I am a [parent/provider]. I’m here because [issue]. This impacts me/my family because \_\_\_\_\_. I’m asking you to support \_\_\_\_\_.”

## Know Your Legislators

- Find your elected officials at:  
<https://ilga.gov/members/FindMyLegislator>

# What to Expect at ECAD

## Attendees Will:

- Meet with legislators, share their stories.
- Participate in the rally.
- Connect with other advocates.



## Share Your ECAD Photos and Videos!

- Use these hashtags when you post:  
**#AdvocateECE #ECAD26**
- Tag our cohosts: @COFIOline, @EarlyEdIL @IAFC\_Cares, @latinopolicy, @RaisingIllinois, @SEIUhciimk, @wethevillageil
- Upload your photos **here** to be featured in our posts after the event!

# What to Expect at ECAD

## Agenda:

- 6:30 AM - Buses Depart/Arrival Times Vary
- 10:30 AM - Registration/AM Legislator Meetings
- 12:00 PM - Rally Begins in Capitol Building Rotunda
- 12:30 PM - Advocacy Meetings with Legislators
- 1:45 PM - Bus Boarding for Departure
- 2:00 PM - Event Ends, Buses Depart

## Before You Go:

- Prepare your story, practice your elevator pitch.
- Know who your legislators are.
- You can also share your story through our “Letter to Your Legislator” action.
- Need support, contact the ECAD Team.

## Conclusion

**When parents, providers, and communities speak up – systems start to listen. That’s how change happens.**

If you are interested in additional early childhood advocacy 101 trainings for your group, please fill out this [form](#).

Please contact Neoma Nagahawatte at [neoma.nagahawatte@actforchildren.org](mailto:neoma.nagahawatte@actforchildren.org) with any questions.