WORKING TOGETHER we must create a brighter future for children, for families, and for the communities we call home.
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Before we move forward, we need to look back.

We need to look at what we’re doing well and what we can do better. We need to celebrate all that we’ve accomplished over the years and acknowledge that our best is still to come.

The work begins right here, right now.

Our Five Year Strategic Plan builds on the plan that was adopted in 2009. It has been developed with input and guidance from our board, our donors, our partners, our staff, and the families and communities we support. We’ve identified opportunities to improve our services, our structure, and our processes. Most important of all, we’ve realized that, as an organization, we must be continuously moving forward to do even more.

We have mission and vision statements that resonate; our action agenda continues to evolve; our approaches are flexible and need to be more so as our environment becomes more demanding. We have a different understanding of the complexity of our own work. We know that the lives of families are more complex and complicated; we respect their choices and challenges and we know that by working together we can make a meaningful and measurable difference in the lives of children, families, and communities throughout Illinois.

Our central commitment is to empower families and communities to foster healthy, well-nurtured, and well-prepared children. We will fulfill this commitment by focusing on five key areas:

1) **Responsive Programs and Public Policies** – We will continue to address the needs of children and families in the context of their community.

2) **Collaborative Relationships** – We will build on the local and national relationships that extend our policy and service capacity, and expand opportunities for families and communities.

3) **Compelling Messages** – We will communicate to the audiences we serve with clarity and conviction while building our brand and enhancing our reputation.

4) **Dynamic Leadership** – We will continue to engage our board, our staff, and our field in building diverse leadership for an expanding, connected, and changing world.

5) **Organizational Excellence** – We will continue organizational transformation to deliver real-time excellence in the programs, policies, and services that impact the families and communities we serve.

Working together, we can serve more families in more ways than ever before. It’s time to take action.
It’s knowing where we want to go. And understanding how we will get there.

During the past five years we’ve accomplished a great deal...

**Our advocacy work** has helped create a robust early childhood system in Illinois. It’s helped thousands of families become eligible for Child Care Assistance. It’s helped develop a statewide rating system that rewards high-quality early care and education programs. And it’s helped organize thousands of advocates to inform and influence policymakers to make the needs of children and families a priority in Illinois.

**Our early learning programs** have created a national model for providing preschool to children in family child care homes who would otherwise not have access to classroom-based programs. We’ve trained child care providers to be more empowered in their work and professional development. We’ve brought certified teachers, child development experts, nutrition and literacy training, and thousands of books and resources into family child care homes. We’ve worked with parents, community groups, and local governments to identify the best ways to connect children with early learning opportunities. And we’ve engaged and trained parents to help them build and strengthen leadership in their families and communities.

**Our Child Care Resource and Referral Program** provides professional development opportunities for thousands of early care and education providers each year. It provides child care referrals for almost 10,000 families each year and represents the specialized needs of teen and foster parents. It connects thousands of families with literacy, mental health, and nutrition resources. And it administers the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) in Cook County, helping more than 76,000 families access child care each year.
We are focused on the future — a future where we’re being asked to do more with less.

At the federal level, government reform has come to mean reducing available staff and funds even as needs increase. On the state and local level, through our advocacy and some fortunate priorities in state spending, early childhood has not suffered as much as some other programs. Yet the overall spending for human services has decreased and the issue of pension liability and the need for reform has made Illinois one of the worst states in the nation for addressing the issues of poverty.

The non-profit sector faces new challenges. State contracted payments for services are inconsistent. Historic non-profit infrastructure is becoming obsolete. Traditional approaches to protecting funding sources and doing business are no longer adequate to meet the needs of contractors or those they serve.

A new generation of entrepreneurs has crossed into the non-profit space and they’ve brought language and tools that resonate with the business leaders who are driving funding. Untested and unproven methods for interacting with communities masquerade as “performance-based approaches” and “value-added solutions” to issues and circumstances that have long suffered from inadequate resources.

Small agencies often lack the tools, staff or capacity to meet changing needs; large organizations often have been slow to learn new skills in a rapidly shifting and more demanding governmental, political, and fiscal landscape. Worsening financial capacity and no apparent answers to state debt has challenged the human services sector and led to the disappearance of many historic players. We continue to seek new funding and advocacy partners as we grow our grassroots organizing and parent engagement to combat the many challenges that await us. In this environment, we must lead the conversation and focus the discussion on the real issues children, families, and communities face in ever increasing numbers.

Our Strategic Plan is where the future begins for our organization, our supporters, and for the families we serve.

### Key components of our strategy:

**Our winning aspiration**

The Illinois field leader in: early care and education; advocacy and administration; community engagement and systems development. A top producer of early care and education program research, developed through in-context innovation.

**Where we will play**

Locally, in communities serving the hardest to reach; regionally, as a quasi-governmental entity; in Illinois, in advocacy and systems development and alignment; nationally, as local policy leaders and partners.

**How we will win**

Excellence in: “from the ground up” public policy and advocacy; continuous administrative process improvement; innovation in community programming; and direct service.

**Our capabilities**

Organization and system leadership; early care and education technical/professional skills and competencies; front line staff development.

**Our systems and supports**

Evolving technical and human resource infrastructure; fiscal and financial competence; strong performance management metrics; and strong oversight and governance systems.
Mission – Our Purpose
Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for organizing, developing and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

Vision – Our Desired Future State
Illinois Action for Children envisions a future in which all children and families, especially those most vulnerable, have the opportunities and resources they need.
Children

- Early care and education systems should promote the safety, health, happiness, and education of all children.
- All children, regardless of socioeconomic status or race, should have access to quality early care and education programs and services.
- Early care and education programs should support the social, emotional, and physical well-being of all children.

Parents and Families

- Parents and families know and want what is best for their children — their choices should be recognized and supported.
- Parents and families should demand affordable and high-quality early care and education in the setting they choose.
- Families must have greater access to financial assistance that supports child care during the non-traditional work hours that define today’s employment.

Early Care and Education Providers

- Child care professionals need opportunities and supports for continuous quality improvement to create better outcomes for themselves and the children in their care.
- Every family makes child care decisions based on their reality and we should support quality in the type of care they choose, including Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care.
- Child care professionals should have access to high-quality professional development opportunities, technical and financial supports needed to advance quality in their programs.
- Child care professionals should be paid at a level that is reflective of their skills, supports quality, and fosters a well-educated workforce.

Early Childhood Systems

- Early childhood systems should align to provide consistent and progressive supports to families, providers, and their communities.
- Human Service and family support systems should align to provide learning opportunities to all children and professional development opportunities to all providers in all settings.
- Innovative programs that reach the most at-risk families isolated by poverty should be prioritized and funded.
Our Theory of Change is informed by ecological systems theory, highlighting the interplay of a child’s environments at the family, community and broad social levels, and by social capital theory, describing how making connections and building community can improve a child’s life. Every resource that we bring into a community can stimulate growth in social capital, and if we shape our work with that goal in mind, families will use our services to make connections and take action.

All of our work is powered by our Theory of Change.

Our Approach

Based on our Theory of Change, all of our programs have three basic elements:

1. Offer resources to deliver a needed service to an under-resourced community.

2. Build community by encouraging our customers to participate in local collaborations and other activities in which they support each other and take leadership on behalf of children and their communities.

3. Support advocacy by creating leadership opportunities and encouraging and engaging customers in community-level and statewide advocacy on behalf of children.
We have ambitious plans for the next five years. Plans that will impact the next fifty years.

Our Mission and Vision have framed our work and direction for five years. We have engaged new partners, sharpened our policy foci, and approached communities in new and different ways — from family supports to engaging community systems development. We have garnered new professional and funding partners, redesigned many of our structures and expanded volunteer engagement. We must do more.

We know that our internal culture must be stronger to continue the development of leaders, our messages must be more targeted to preserve the focus on our poorest citizens, and our staff must be more skilled to support changing communities and demographics. Our research and policy work must be even more data driven and more focused on impactful outcomes to influence and direct resources to the highest need communities.

The following Action Agenda will advance each of these important themes.
Our Agenda

Build Responsive Programs and Public Policies

Goal:
Continue to address the needs of children and families in the context of their community

Rationale:
Providing access to needed supports is essential to ensuring school and life success

Action 1.1 - Focus on outcomes and impact in our work with families and in communities
• Define and pursue “quality” relationships, programs, and services in divergent communities
• Track and support child care provider growth through broad/structured input and feedback loops
• Help neediest families navigate complex service systems

Action 1.2 - Broaden our public policy focus
• Identify and enlist priority partners in policy discussions
• Advance scholarship in the policy/practice spectrum
• Build technical and policy expertise in community systems development

Action 1.3 - Engage a multi-year program and policy platform
• Define approaches, policies and programs to support strong families and powerful communities
• Work with partners around economic security for all families
• Structure integrated engagement of local/state/federal policymakers and related administrative entities

Success Measures
• Policymakers adopt our organizing/community engagement lens in policy development
• Technical assistance infrastructure exists and supports community systems development
• New models of composite family support services emerge
Develop Collaborative Relationships

Goal:
Build on local and national relationships that extend our policy and service capacity; and expand opportunities for families and communities

Rationale:
We become stronger and more effective when we leverage the diversity of our network

Action 2.1 - Merge network of relationships for better program results
- Engage the k-20 education spectrum around education transitions
- Define and set boundaries for key local/national partnerships
- Attract strategic philanthropy around policy and community needs

Action 2.2 - Enhance community collaborations
- Broaden collaborations in targeted communities statewide
- Mobilize diverse communities around shared early care and education (ECE) themes
- Design and model regional early care and education best practices

Action 2.3 - Shape technical assistance services
- Design flexible consultation models for diverse providers and communities
- Innovate early care services integration in high-need communities
- Mentor and coach place-bound collaboratives/partners in the full spectrum of Illinois communities

Success Measures
- A technical assistance and consulting structure is a part of a growing customer service model
- Diverse communities are engaged in common needs management
- Collaboration and coordination are deemed a core competence

Create Compelling Messages

Goal:
Communicate to the audiences we serve with clarity and conviction while building our brand and enhancing our reputation

Rationale:
By effectively communicating we will better serve our communities

Action 3.1 - Segment messaging to target communities of interest for impact
- Use data and research to map targeted communities by shared interests/needs
- Develop targeted messages to align with regional diversity
- Communicate regional best practices in early care and development to partners through various mediums

Action 3.2 - Clarify key messages
- Enhance the “strong families, powerful communities” brand
- Ensure messages frame early care and education discussion around the realities and impact of poverty
- Connect needed services and information to families, communities, policymakers, and funders

Action 3.3 - Align our brand with issues that demonstrate our leadership in the early care and education community
- Elevate traditional messages that demonstrate need and impact to attract new advocates
- Simplify messages around early care and education system for neediest families
- Engage media partners in adopting our messages to influence political will to support neediest families

Success Measures
- New partners align with and support IAFC brand
- Attach our brand/identity to key issues
- Our messages and impact are traceable through a variety of mediums in local and national public discourse
Promote Dynamic Leadership

**Goal:**
Continue to engage our board, our staff, and our field in building diverse leadership for an expanding, connected, and changing world

**Rationale:**
Strong leadership is the clearest path to organization, system, and field success

**Action 4.1 - Advance field-based staff development**
- Diversify staff to reflect changing communities
- Create new roles and opportunities to attract new talent to field
- Enhance tools that support asynchronous staff development

**Action 4.2 - Enhance skill-based investments**
- Develop new supports for a professional pipeline
- Share technical expertise through peer learning protocols
- Build field competence through coaching and mentoring

**Action 4.3 - Extend the performance culture**
- Continue investment in performance management systems
- Build on continuous quality improvement cycles
- Refine leadership expectations for promotion and growth

**Success Measures**
- Promotions reflect staff investments
- Best practice recognition from leadership in the field
- Succession plans have multiple internal candidates prepared to lead

Sustain Organizational Excellence

**Goal:**
Continue organizational transformation to deliver real-time excellence in the programs, policies, and services that impact the families and communities we serve

**Rationale:**
Assure that the organization survives, grows, and thrives

**Action 5.1 - Create self-sustaining programs**
- Build out human/technical infrastructure
- Develop advanced practice communities
- Enhance research and development engine

**Action 5.2 - Identify broader quality measurements**
- Grow interdisciplinary practices that highlight program integration
- Implement and refine program evaluation tools and protocols
- Grow internal capacity for priority setting and problem resolution

**Action 5.3 - Extend the entrepreneurial sphere**
- Define national roles we will play for impact on early care and education field
- Manage financial and technical challenges of scale
- Prepare more organizational leaders for system leadership

**Action 5.4 - Fund diversification**
- Grow revenue through board financial leadership, civic engagement, and innovations in philanthropy
- Advance strategic and value-added partnerships
- Increase corporate, foundation, and individual giving

**Success Measures**
- Enhanced technical infrastructure is in place
- National reputation is acknowledged externally
- Endowment is significantly increased
Working together we must create a brighter future for children, for families, and for the communities we call home.

It’s time to act.

It’s time to build upon the achievements of the last five years and raise the bar even higher. It’s time to increase our impact on the children and families who now need us more than ever before. It’s time to recognize that our broad approach to supporting children by supporting families and communities is a proven and effective means to address overarching issues of endemic poverty, which we believe is the root cause of the educational failure of America’s poorest children.

At Illinois Action for Children, we are excited and committed to this strategic plan as we continue to be a catalyst for organizing, developing, and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

To learn more about Illinois Action for Children, our programs, our advocacy efforts or how you can get involved, visit our website at www.actforchildren.org.
Special thanks to those who participated in the strategic planning process:

Board of Directors

Executive and Senior Management

Peer Learning Group

Providers in Action

Management Staff

Organization Staff

Stakeholders and partners from the early care and education field, government, academia, philanthropy, and business.