

Essays

The essays in this section provide a set of broader policy perspectives on the complex issues raised in *Illinois Kids Count 2015*. The authors come from diverse backgrounds, including government, advocacy groups, community-based organizations, and universities. Many of the essays address issues related to young children, including early childhood development, preschool, home visiting programs, and innovative two-generation educational programs. Other essays focus on afterschool programs, juvenile justice, Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit, child care, low-wage work, and suburban poverty. All of the essays discuss strategies for confronting poverty and creating opportunity. We thank the authors for sharing their experience and expertise.



POVERTY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Children in poverty begin school well behind their more affluent peers and the gaps persist over the school years. In 2011, researchers Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook found that at age four, children from families in the poorest income quintile score on average at the 32nd percentile of the national distribution on math and the 34th percentile in a test of literacy while children in the richest quintile score at the 69th percentile on math and literacy. Gaps in conduct problems and attention/hyperactivity are also apparent albeit less pronounced. In a 2010 study, my colleagues and I found that children from poor families also go on to complete less schooling, work less, and earn less. Understanding the origins and persistence of these differences in fortunes is a vital step for ensuring the prosperity of future generations.

Low-income families experience higher levels of stress than more affluent families and these disparities may affect children's development. Furthermore, a 2011 study by Dean Spears found that conditions of poverty and scarcity not only create psychological distress, but also deplete important cognitive resources for parents and their children.

According to economic theory, children from poor families lag behind their economically advantaged counterparts in part because their parents have less time and money to invest in them. Studies show that investments in high-quality child care and education, housing in good neighborhoods, and rich learning experiences enhance children's development, as do investments of parents' time.

Emerging evidence from neuroscience and social epidemiology further suggests that the *timing* of child poverty matters, and that for some outcomes later in life, particularly those related to educational attainment and health, poverty *early* in a child's life may be particularly harmful. Both human and animal studies highlight the critical importance of early childhood for brain development and for establishing the neural functions and

structures that will shape future cognitive, social, emotional, and health outcomes.

The goals of childhood anti-poverty policies are often characterized in terms of their impacts on children's life chances. The existing research suggests that greater policy attention should be given to remediating situations involving deep and persistent poverty *in utero* and occurring early in childhood. In terms of indicators, it is crucial to track rates of poverty among children—especially deep poverty occurring early in childhood—to inform policy discussions regarding children's well-being.

This evidence base points to several important policy implications. Sanctions and other regulations that deny benefits that would improve the economic security of families with very young children appear particularly harmful. It would be more effective to advance policies that provide more income to families with young children. For example, in the case of work support programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit, this might mean extending more generous credits to families with young children. This policy change could significantly boost school readiness and academic achievement for children in poverty.

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GREAT TEACHING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Through every debate about education policy runs a widely shared goal: children deserve great teachers. There may be fierce arguments about the best strategies for achieving that goal, but the goal itself is rarely if ever questioned. To some, however, that goal only applies to children ages five and up. But we know the first five years of life are critical developmentally, and that's why great teaching in those years is also of paramount importance.

An increasing body of science shows that child development is heavily influenced by how children interact with adults. Children in their first five years benefit from trusting and supportive relationships with grown-ups, and that includes teachers. This means that the best teachers in the birth-to-five-years can have a significant long-term impact on a child's developmental trajectory.

Great teaching is particularly important for children in low-income families. Research shows that the language gap for children opens in the first year of life, and only widens from there. Quality early learning has a greater effect on low-income children, but they are the least likely to receive it. Even though Illinois is a national leader in serving children under age four, that doesn't mean we're anywhere close to serving enough of them; while about 40 percent of Illinois children are in low-income families, under 5 percent of all children ages birth to three are receiving publicly funded education and home visiting programs, and only 18 percent of 3-year-olds participate in state-funded preschool.

In many ways, the best teaching of young children looks a lot like the best teaching of older children. It's a lot of looking children in the eye, asking them open-ended questions, and engaging in a conversation about the answer. It's taking a child's natural curiosity about language, math, and science, and helping them understand the world around them through active learning and exploration. It's

about recognizing a child's emotional needs and helping the child to feel safe, secure, and connected to the other people in the classroom. It's about understanding the child's cultural context, and for teachers of Illinois' many dual-language learners, it literally means speaking the child's native language. The principles of great teaching are the same throughout a child's education, even if in the early years the content is *Green Eggs and Ham* rather than *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Sustaining great teaching in early learning requires the same things it requires throughout the K-12 years: rigorous and developmentally appropriate learning standards, an engaging curriculum, and teachers who are given what they need to excel—including strong preparation, instructional leadership at the school level, and support from teaching colleagues. Great teachers are made, not born, through organizations that support their continuous improvement. Keeping great teachers in early childhood classrooms also requires paying them as the skilled professionals they are.

Illinois has taken important steps toward providing low-income children with great teachers in the first five years, including a system that measures teaching quality and provides supports for improvement. Great teaching alone won't lift children out of poverty, but if Illinois continues to improve the quality of teaching for young children, these efforts will have a long-term positive impact on our state.

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THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN

Nationwide, 33 percent of Latino children live in poverty, compared with 22 percent of all children, even though three quarters of Latino children live in households with at least one working parent. The adverse impact of poverty on the physical, psychological, and cognitive development of these children jeopardizes their futures.

Structural economic and social factors create conditions that trap families in poverty despite their hard work and aspiration for a better future. For the past 30 years, our economy's transformation has narrowed the path to upward mobility. Higher-wage manufacturing jobs moved overseas and low wage jobs in the service sector became the dominant source of employment for individuals with low education levels. Moreover, many working families lost their jobs and houses during the Great Recession, throwing them into poverty.

Access to quality early education provides opportunities to lift children out of poverty and is a proven investment resulting in increased educational attainment, economic productivity, and social stability. Gads Hill Center on the southwest side of Chicago provides early education programs to low-income Latino families. Most parents work in low-wage jobs and face challenging working conditions. Because these jobs do not offer paid time off, parents lose income to take care of a sick child or a family emergency. Breaking the cycle of poverty requires policies that supplement the child-rearing resources available to disadvantaged families. Continual cuts in government funding weaken such efforts to reduce poverty and inequality.

Although Illinois' Preschool for All program has been a model nationally for access to early childhood education, enrollment of Latino children lags behind other groups. Only about 40 percent of Latino 3- and 4-year olds in Illinois attend some type of preschool program, compared with 58 percent of White and 55 percent of

African-American children. Early childhood is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for every child, considering the rapid brain development that occurs before age five. These persistent disparities in early education access undermine efforts to reduce the achievement gaps in school.

Society must make a greater commitment to invest in all children's futures and overcome the barriers to Latino enrollment in early childhood programs, including lack of information, language barriers, and lack of infrastructure in Latino neighborhoods. Areas with the highest concentration of Latino children in the state, such as Brighton Park in southwest Chicago, need capital investments to provide early education facilities for more than 3,000 children under age five. Currently, working families heavily rely on relatives or home child care. Last October, Gads Hill Center received a \$2.5 million capital grant from the State to build a center for 150 children. This covers only half the cost, so additional public and private funds are required to make this dream a reality.

Developing policies and implementing strategies to lift Latino families out of poverty is an investment in our nation's future. Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group, with one in five school-age children in the U.S. expected to be Latino by 2020. This population must become better educated to ensure high productivity, global competitiveness, and civic engagement. Increasing access to high-quality early education programs is essential to ensure all children in America can build a promising future.

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EXPANDING EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGH-NEED COMMUNITIES

In 2012, Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI) launched an early learning initiative dedicated to improving the life prospects of young children in four low-income housing developments, including Altgeld Gardens on the south side of Chicago.

This multifaceted community-driven effort is organized around the Altgeld-Riverdale Early Learning Coalition, a broad-based coalition of some 30 organizations, schools, city agencies, and residents working toward the common goal of assuring that all children in this high-poverty community will be on track to succeed by third grade, a critical benchmark for future education and life success.

The Coalition's most significant accomplishment to date is the Altgeld-Riverdale Parenting Program (ARPP), launched in January 2014 and free to expectant mothers 21-years-old and younger living in Altgeld Gardens and three adjacent communities. This program provides doula services, which involve supports for expectant mothers through an infant's first two months, followed by home visiting services for an additional two years. The participating young moms are recruited in a variety of ways, largely, however, via referrals from schools, community members, the local WIC office, churches, and community-based organizations.

The ARPP was created in response to a needs assessment performed by the Erikson Institute, which identified the absence of doula and home visiting services as the community's highest priority need. In addition to the enthusiastic support of the Coalition, ARPP's formation depended on securing external funding and identifying a skilled provider familiar with community needs. After a thorough search, BPI contracted with Catholic Charities of Chicago to provide both birth coaching and home visiting services.

ARPP is modeled after the Ounce of Prevention Fund's evidence-based early childhood home visiting

framework, "Parents as Teachers." Accordingly, the program focuses on increasing parental knowledge of early childhood developmental needs and good parenting practices; identifying developmental delays and health issues early; and increasing school readiness and school success.

ARPP assists parents in a number of ways. Family support workers (home visitors) share information on infant developmental phases and the importance of talking and reading to babies. They also screen children for developmental delays, help register children for preschool programs, and help participants identify and achieve personal educational and employment goals. The program also provides weekly support groups for pregnant and parenting moms. Group discussions cover a variety of issues, such as post-partum depression, difficulty with fussy babies, and relationship and family challenges, as well as problems at work or school.

To ensure quality and track impact, the program is overseen through a combination of monthly progress reports from the provider, Catholic Charities, and in-person discussions of quarterly tracking reports prepared by the Ounce of Prevention.

Research is increasingly documenting the positive contributions that doula and home visiting programs make to the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development of children and to strengthening the bonds of attachment between parent and child. In this context, the Altgeld-Riverdale Parenting Program is fulfilling a singularly vital role in the lives of young children and parents in these communities—a role which has been made possible through the enthusiastic embrace of the community.

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TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER

Children who live in poverty are at a significant disadvantage in terms of their educational and economic trajectories. At school entry, low-income children are almost a year behind their higher-income peers, and this gap remains as children progress in school.

Low-income students are then less likely to complete high school and attain a postsecondary certificate or degree. For low-income parents, education and income are particularly related. Over two-thirds of low-income parents with children under age three have a high school degree or less.

Two-generation approaches—targeting parents and children together—represent a promising and innovative antipoverty strategy and are gaining momentum across the United States. These programs link intensive, high-quality education and career-building programs for low-income parents *simultaneously* with early childhood education for their children.

Early childhood education programs—often viewed by parents as safe, trusting environments—may offer an ideal context for recruiting parents into postsecondary education or training programs and promoting their educational success over time. Moreover, parents may be more motivated to improve their education when they experience their own children’s educational advancement through the support of early education.

Two-generation programs that promote parents’ education and income may in turn influence children’s learning and development. Parents with more education and training could provide more cognitively stimulating home environments and have a stronger focus on literacy and numeracy at home, which then may help promote children’s readiness for school. In addition, more educated parents may have greater access to higher paying jobs with more standard work hours, which could promote parents’ work-family balance. All of these improvements could theoretically influence children’s own future economic

stability, particularly for children who are also receiving the positive benefits of early childhood education.

Although the theory behind two-generation programming is compelling, studies of these programs are still in their nascent stages. Researchers at Northwestern University are currently leading an evaluation of *CareerAdvance*®, one of the only operational two-generation programs in the country. *CareerAdvance*®, launched in 2008 by the Community Action Project of Tulsa County, Oklahoma, combines Head Start services for children with education and training in the healthcare sector for parents. The program also provides a number of supportive elements, including career coaches, a peer cohort model, and incentives for performance and attendance.

The main evaluation of *CareerAdvance*® is ongoing; however, preliminary results suggest that parents in the program have had relatively high rates of success. After 16 months in the program, 76 percent of parents achieved at least one workforce-applicable certificate. This is remarkable compared to the rates of average community college degree completion across the country, where only 27 percent of full-time students and 15 percent of part-time students complete a degree after six years.

These findings suggest that—beyond just preparing children for school—early childhood education programs could provide parents tools for increasing their education and eventually lifting their families out of poverty. Future work may implement various two-generation models to explore whether and in what contexts two-generation programs can increase educational and economic wellbeing from one generation to the next.

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WHERE POSSIBILITY LIVES

Children from low-income households face many challenges. Some of these difficulties are obvious: lack of resources, food scarcity, and violent neighborhoods. Other struggles are less visible, including summer learning loss and low self-esteem. Something even less obvious—but a formidable barrier to success—is the aspirational gap. For too many children, generational cycles of poverty and violence threaten their ability to persist, envision a productive life, and proceed on a path to success. Out-of-school time programs provide a systemic solution to overcome this aspirational gap, empowering children to recognize their potential and break generational cycles of poverty and violence.

If our common goal is to bring children up and out of poverty, out-of-school time programs matter on a number of levels. At Chicago Youth Centers, we recognize that the most significant barrier facing low-income children is this aspirational gap. Too many of these children cannot aspire to be or do more because they cannot see the possibilities that exist within themselves or beyond their communities. Well-designed out-of-school time programs give children the tools and resources they need to succeed in school and in life.

Programming with this kind of power does not occur in a vacuum. By implementing a curriculum that emphasizes the Four C's—creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking—staff at Chicago Youth Centers have witnessed incredible transformations within our kids. Of the nearly 900 children aged 6 to 12 participating in our programs, 91 percent maintained or improved essential life-skills; 95 percent reported a deeper engagement in academics; and 98 percent progressed to the next grade. Out-of-school time programs introduce children to educational and professional opportunities they would not otherwise encounter, and most importantly, nurture children's ability to dream and aspire.

Effective out-of-school time programs surround children with the social capital they need—safe spaces, family engagement, community resources,

and caring adults—to manage every stage in their academic and emotional development. Children become more confident and realize their unique strengths. They develop lasting relationships and learn to collaborate. They make better life choices and let their talents shine. They have fun, but it is fun with a purpose. Out-of-school time programs not only provide safe havens where children can learn and thrive, but they also have positive effects on families. Parents can go to work knowing that their children are advancing in productive ways and can receive support from program staff.

Last year, many news outlets featured a story about a child who received cochlear implants. When the child heard his father's voice for the first time, joy, wonder, and knowledge immediately spread across his face. When kids experience something profound—beautiful music, art, or a success story from someone with a similar background—their lives can be changed forever. Out-of-school time programs provide this opportunity for change. They give children the ability to dream as they make their way between childhood and adulthood, between today and tomorrow. Chicago Youth Centers has dedicated its work to deeply enriching our kids' lives and putting them on that path to success. We know that out-of-school time programs are a place where possibility lives.

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EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

Illinois has experienced an impressive 12-year drop in the number of children sent to secure detention centers. Many factors, including the general drop in crime over the same period, contributed to the decline, which began its most dramatic fall in 2007.

Economics may have played a part. The Great Recession reduced the resources of local governments responsible for funding pre-trial and post-trial detention of juveniles. Another factor was the development of better practices for determining which children need to be detained because they pose a greater risk to public safety or failed to appear in court. We cannot predict and should not rely on fluctuations in the crime rate to determine the number of juveniles in detention. There are better and more informed practices that hold great promise for maintaining or reducing the number of incarcerated children.

Advances in science and law support a wiser use of detention. Growth in the knowledge of adolescent brain development has created wider understanding of problematic youth behavior and the ability to analyze the risk of future criminality. The U.S. Supreme Court and courts in many states have recognized that, in comparison to adults, juveniles have diminished capabilities in regard to judgment and recognition of the consequences of their decisions and actions. It's no secret that youth are impulsive and extraordinarily influenced by their peers. Because these conditions are not intentional, the law treats them as factors that reduce culpability.

Fortunately for children, best practices in juvenile justice have been informed by high-quality research conducted with the assistance of foundations, universities, and the federal government. For instance, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative has created

major change through the use of risk assessment instruments to determine whether a child should be detained. If public safety or the likelihood of failure to appear in court does not require a locked facility, then the system can use less expensive and less restrictive community alternatives, including day and evening reporting centers and electronic home monitoring. In addition, we have scientific guidance on the impact of jailing children from the National Academy of Science's 2014 report on juvenile justice reform, which should be relied on to avoid toxic effects.

If we make decisions based on objective and scientifically sound principles, we can increase public safety and improve positive outcomes for children. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and stakeholders at every system decision point must be aware of the science which should drive appropriate practices including alternatives to detention.

Poverty alone is not a predictor of criminal conduct by an individual child. Combined with deficits in education, health care, mental health and behavioral health care, and trauma informed services, those children who live in poverty stricken environments are more likely to be detained than children of higher income families. Reliance on science in developing tools and making decisions about incarceration can improve public safety, decrease the cost for taxpayers and, most important, make it more likely that kids coming into contact with the system will not go deeper into the system and later into adult prisons but will live safer and more successful lives.

**HON. GEORGE W.
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THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDICAID FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN

There's no such thing as an undeserving four-year-old. Whatever else we may disagree on, most can agree that children are entitled to adequate health care, and over one-third of Illinois kids receive this health care through Medicaid and related medical assistance programs.

Far from a burden, this is one of our state's most essential programs, keeping kids healthy and providing care when they're not. Medicaid is one of the largest providers of vaccinations in the state. It also brings billions of federal dollars into Illinois every year, far more than any other program.

As a pediatrician, I see the benefits of the program every day. Parents, many of whom struggle with precarious economic situations, can still count on their kids getting health care thanks to Medicaid. These parents typically work, raise families, and go about their day much like everyone else. And their children, like all children, require a usual source of care, a "medical home," in order to stay healthy. Children with asthma, for example, are far less likely to miss school (and their parents less likely to miss work) if they have a health care provider who regularly sees them. Absent Medicaid, these kids would have no place to go other than the emergency room, where treatment is more expensive and illness more severe.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, most primary care providers and hospitals participate in Medicaid. Prior studies of provider capacity for children are reassuring, and the program enjoys high satisfaction ratings from both patients and providers. Measurements of quality have also improved in

recent years. The program even provides bonus reimbursement for providers who see their patients regularly and give them quality care.

Illinois Medicaid is now transitioning to a "multi-payer" managed care model, and from my position on the statewide Medicaid Advisory Committee I have had a front-row seat from which to watch this process play out. Providers, who understand firsthand how important health care is to young, growing children, are doing our best to navigate this new system. In the past, we only had to deal with the state or its Primary Care Case Management vendor—now we will have to negotiate individual arrangements with multiple insurers in order to keep taking care of our patients. How well we maintain this "continuity of care" will likely determine the overall success of the transition. So far, this has proven challenging as children may be assigned to insurance plans in which their providers do not necessarily participate. Some providers have not signed with any plan, effectively ending their participation in the program. It will take vigilance on the part of every corner of the health care spectrum—from patients to providers to hospitals to insurers to the state—to ensure this process goes as smoothly as possible.

The children who depend on Medicaid for their health care deserve nothing less.

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THE EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT WORKS

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has given working families a step up since the federal government enacted it in 1975. The EITC helps families who work but struggle to get by on low wages: it allows these families to keep more of their income. It helps families pay for the things that allow them to keep working, like car repairs and child care.

The EITC is the single most effective policy tool for lifting low-income families out of poverty. Each year between 2010–2012, the EITC kept about 300,000 Illinoisans out of poverty, nearly half of them children. The EITC also improves children’s chances of success as adults, because young children who grow up in families who can cover the basic necessities do better in school and in the working world.

In addition to reducing poverty, the EITC promotes work because for those at the lowest income levels, the amount of the credit increases as earnings increase. After reaching a maximum amount, the credit is gradually phased out at higher income levels. The additional money low-income working families have to spend on goods and services increases local economic activity across the state.

The EITC has the support of liberals and conservatives. When he signed a major national expansion, President Reagan called the EITC the most “family friendly” measure that had come across his desk—praise that could easily have come from someone on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

Noting the success of the federal EITC, 25 states, including Illinois, have implemented state-level EITCs, usually set as a percentage of the

federal credit. Illinois’ EITC is currently 10 percent of the federal credit. A family of four making \$13,000 in 2013 saw their income increase by about \$300. The state EITC has a tremendous impact not only on a family’s ability to pay for things that keep them working, but also on our state’s economy. In 2012, the Illinois EITC generated over \$300 million dollars in economic activity.

While we are proud of our efforts to lift working families out of poverty, more can and should be done to expand the EITC in Illinois. In 2012, about 630,000 Illinois children (1 in 5) lived in poverty. Since 1999, the number of children in poverty has increased by more than 175,000—enough to fill Soldier Field nearly three times.

We are working to expand our credit to 20 percent of the federal EITC over the next few years. We plan to reintroduce our companion bills in the new session of the Illinois General Assembly. Former Governor Pat Quinn was an enthusiastic champion of the EITC. We are hopeful we can convince new Governor Bruce Rauner to join the chorus.

Visit EITCWorks.org to see how the EITC is helping families and communities across Illinois.

**STATE SENATOR
JACQUELINE
COLLINS**
16th District

**STATE
REPRESENTATIVE
BARBARA
FLYNN CURRIE**
25th District

CHILD CARE SUPPORTS FOR LOW-INCOME PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Child care is a vital component of contemporary families' lives. Not only does it help parents balance work and family, it also helps launch children's developmental trajectories toward a productive and healthy adulthood.

Paying for this vital support is difficult for any family, but especially for those with the fewest resources. A recent national report reiterated the high cost of care, especially relative to other common household expenses. In the Midwest, the report showed that the annual cost of sending two children to full-time center care approached \$17,000, exceeding housing (\$15,000), college tuition (\$9,000), transportation (\$8,000), food (\$6,000), and utilities (\$3,000) in a household's budget. Illinois was in the top ten "least affordable" states for center care of infants and preschoolers, with annual costs being about 40 to 50 percent of the state median income for families headed by single mothers and 10 to 15 percent for married couples.

Yet, it is just this center-based care that research consistently shows is positively associated with academic school readiness, especially for preschoolers. For instance, a recent study using a nationally-representative data set found that 4-year-olds cared for in centers averaged higher reading and math scores than children cared for exclusively in homes, even when the center care was only part time and regardless of whether the home-based care was with a parent or in a family child care setting. The average differences in reading between children attending centers and homes approached the size of the difference in reading scores between children whose mothers had a bachelor's degree versus a high school diploma (adjusting for other characteristics, such as the child's earlier pre-reading skills).

Illinois has important policy systems in place that support parents' and children's access to these care settings. However, the state's fiscal crisis and

Great Recession have punched and revealed holes in these systems that are a cause of great concern. State funding for preschool has dropped 25 percent since 2009, and child care assistance was severely underfunded for the current fiscal year. Parental job losses have had consequential ripple effects as well. When children's enrollment is dependent on parents' employment, disruptions in parents' jobs can result in children losing early learning opportunities and further financial strain on care centers. A final vulnerability, I would argue, is that the state failed to pair its investments in early childhood throughout the 2000s with as much and as rigorous "R&D" spending as it could. As such, Illinois missed the opportunity to fully document the payoff from investments in quality early learning and care.

Despite these challenges, the state has some positive opportunities ahead. New federal dollars could help the state begin to build back its preschool programs. These federal dollars, which are contingent on additional state funding, include monitoring requirements, the data from which could also be used to assure more sustained commitments to early care and learning in the future by providing rigorous documentation of the returns on such investments in Illinois. In addition, the recent reauthorization of federal child care funding includes a provision requiring 12-month continuous eligibility for child care assistance. Taking full advantage of these opportunities can help mend the holes in state child care systems, so all families—including those with the fewest personal finances—have the support they need for productive employment and life success.

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JOB QUALITY FOR WOMEN: WAGES AND BEYOND

Although the economy is improving, low-wage jobs are growing faster than other jobs, and the quality of these jobs continues to deteriorate. Low-quality jobs pay poverty-level wages, have irregular work schedules, lack family-supporting benefits, and offer few if any opportunities for advancement. Women, specifically women of color, remain concentrated in low-paid occupations and make up the majority of low-paid workers.

Low-paid women often lack more than decent pay; they lack benefits such as paid sick days and medical leave that allow them to care for themselves and their families. When their children are sick, they often must choose between staying home to care for their children at the risk of losing their jobs or sending their sick children to school. Their hours are irregular; they might work 25 hours in one week and 10 in another. They work two, sometimes three, part-time jobs, just to make ends meet. Their unpredictable schedules make financial stability impossible and returning to school unthinkable.

Low-wage work also negatively impacts children. Women are increasingly the sole or co-breadwinner of their families—they need all the work hours they can get just to afford the basics. As a result, it is extremely difficult for these hard-working parents to also give their children the time and attention they need. For example, a mother who works several jobs to provide financially will be hard-pressed to get time off to attend a parent-teacher conference or other school event. By reducing parental involvement in school, low-income jobs also have the effect of limiting children's future chances for success.

Efforts to improve job quality are critical for reducing poverty. Many low-paid workers are just one paycheck, sick child, or broken-down car away from economic disaster. Although it is often

assumed that safety net programs primarily support people who are not working, a significant portion of safety-net resources go to workers with meager wages who cannot meet their families' basic needs. The growing number of low-wage, low-quality jobs will increase demand for these and other basic social programs.

It doesn't have to be this way. High-quality jobs are good for children and parents, are in the best interest of employers, and in the long run, benefit communities and society. Better pay and meaningful benefits enable parents to have both the resources and time needed to help their children succeed in school. Businesses profit from reduced turnover and greater customer satisfaction. Communities benefit when low-wage workers have more dollars to spend in local economies, and society in general would also benefit through reduced need for public subsidies for working people.

We must develop national, state, and local policies—such as increasing the minimum wage and providing stable work schedules—that enable people to care for their families, plan their finances, and enroll in school or training. These public policies would “raise the floor,” but voluntary actions by employers to improve work and wages are also essential. By improving the quality of jobs, we can help ensure that all our families and communities can thrive.

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SUBURBAN POVERTY AND THE CHALLENGES OF BOTH PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND PUBLIC POLICY

I write this from my son's hockey game in a northern Cook County suburb, an affluent community with top-notch schools, expensive extra-curricular activities (like hockey!), vital retail, and a robust civic and cultural milieu. I am distracted by the local poverty that seems invisible, but is definitely not absent.

In contrast to common perceptions and stereotypes, the fastest growing poverty populations nationwide are in suburban areas, a fact spotlighted by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube at the Brookings Institution.

In the suburbs of metropolitan Chicago, more than 550,000 people lived below poverty level in 2012, about twice the number in 1999. Unfortunately, the critical resources that help alleviate poverty haven't kept pace: Suburban communities often lack adequate affordable housing, food pantries, and other critical social services that help families regain stability and self-sufficiency.

While many suburbs are ill-equipped to tackle the challenges associated with growing poverty, innovative housing and community development strategies are emerging in the Chicago region. Core to these local efforts is collaboration—across municipalities, government agencies, and public and private sectors.

One example is the response to the 2008 housing crisis by more than 20 municipalities in Chicago's southern suburbs. These areas experienced sharp increases in poverty and were the hardest hit by the foreclosure crisis. In response, these jurisdictions chose not to compete for needed resources, but instead collaborated first on a federal redevelopment grant and ultimately leveraged a range of public and private investments and tools. Thanks to new resources, these communities redeveloped previously uninhabitable properties and made other strategic investments to increase jobs and stabilize the region.

A second example is the Regional Housing Initiative (RHI), which is designed to increase

affordable rental housing options in “opportunity areas” throughout the Chicago region. RHI is a collaboration of diverse stakeholders including public housing authorities, state and federal agencies, and local non-profit organizations. In response to fragmented federal funding for housing assistance in the suburbs, RHI pooled the resources of nine public housing authorities to allow families who were on waiting lists for rental assistance to move to communities with good schools, jobs, public transit, and other amenities. With the opportunity to live in a mixed-income or supportive housing community instead of a high-poverty area, children in these families are experiencing better health and school performance.

These two examples—the collaborations of the suburban municipalities and the RHI public housing authorities—involve arduous work and require local leadership, capacity building, flexibility, coordination, and state and federal policy changes. However, they are also replicable and scalable, and thus promising for public policy.

There is evidence of continued progress. Cook County is scaling up place-based collaboration efforts through its new “Planning for Progress” strategic plan, and several federal programs to support systemic changes to tackle poverty are now available to suburban communities.

With this momentum, hockey moms and policymakers alike can resolve that our stereotypes of poverty, and thus our perceptions of the possible, don't interfere with permanent solutions.

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