

Early Learning Coalition of Florida's Heartland, Inc.

www.elcfh.org

Early Learning Coalition of Florida's Heartland- Community Needs Assessment

Investing in children- investing in our future.



School Readiness Plan Amendment Requirement:
ELCFH Board Approval:
Updated:

February 28, 2019
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December 30, 2022

Background

The Early Learning Coalition of Florida's Heartland, Inc (ELCFH) is located in the heart of Florida and is comprised of four counties: Charlotte, DeSoto, Hardee and Highlands Counties. These counties extend over 1900 square miles. Hardee, Highlands and DeSoto Counties are located inland and are contiguous with Polk County to the north, with Manatee County to the west and Okeechobee County to the east. Charlotte County is considered a coastal county with the Gulf of Mexico and Charlotte Harbor bordering on the west. Glades and Lee Counties surround Charlotte's south and eastern boundaries and Sarasota County is to the north.

The ELCFH was established in 2000 as a 501(c) (3) and became a multi county coalition as of July 1, 2005. The ELCFH acts as its own fiscal agent and services offered include Child Care Resource and Referral, eligibility determination and case management, provider trainings, parent support, child development and inclusion support services, and child care provider contracting and reimbursements. As the ELCFH continues to provide these services "in-house", the focus to enhance the quality of our early childhood education programs is foremost. Being readily accessible, and providing frequent on-site training has helped our providers view the ELCFH as a partner in early care and education.

The ELCFH is actively engaged in all four communities. The ELCFH staff and board members work collaboratively with local agencies, are represented on various boards, and are members of numerous organizations. The ELCFH understands the importance of networking with community agencies to assist in caring for the needs of all children. Strong working relationships have been established between the ELCFH, school boards, state college personnel and other early education providers. The ELCFH Board of Directors consists of members that represent the health department, school districts, Work Force Development Boards, Head Start and key community agencies. These entities work collaboratively to address the needs and development of the whole child.

The ELCFH deeply values the quality of child care services for children enrolled in the School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) programs. Developmentally appropriate strategies to promote early literacy through high quality children's literature are regularly presented through provider training and on-site technical assistance. Books are distributed to low income and at-risk families in tandem with child assessment. The ELCFH has placed heavy emphasis on positive relationship building by the provider site with children and families as a core element to quality programming.

The mission of the ELCFH is to support families and children in accessing high quality early care and education services via School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-kindergarten programs. The ELCFH also serves as a point of access to resources and referrals for health care and family support services. The vision of the ELCFH is that each child will have a strong early foundation to promote a lifetime of success.



Sensory play is a wonderfully open-ended activity that promotes important school readiness skills such as sharing and turn-taking.

Description of the ELCFH Service Area

Charlotte County

Charlotte County is the most populous segment of the ELCFH service area. The population averages around 194,843 and nearly 10% of the residents live in poverty. Approximately 5,455 children age birth to five years reside in Charlotte County (2.8% of the population); 73% of Charlotte County K-12 students are eligible for free/ reduced lunch. Known for its beautiful waterways and coastal boundaries, Charlotte County has experienced strong infrastructure growth since the significant destructive impact of a Category 4 hurricane in 2004 and impact of Hurricane Ian which was near to a Category 5 is to be determined. Punta Gorda is the only incorporated city in Charlotte County.

DeSoto County

DeSoto County is one of two rural counties within the ELCFH service area. With a population of approximately 34,408 this community is comprised of two small towns, Arcadia and Nocatee. Approximately 1,686 children age birth to five years reside in DeSoto County (nearly 5% of the population); nearly 100% of DeSoto County K-12 students are eligible for free/ reduced lunch. DeSoto County has a large, seasonal migrant community as agriculture is the largest employment industry. It is estimated that 20.8% of its residents live in poverty.

Hardee County

Hardee County, population 25,425, is also a rural county in the ELCFH service area. Its population fluctuates during the seasonal months as agriculture is also this county's largest employment industry. Approximately 22.3% of Hardee County residents are economically disadvantaged. Approximately 1,652 children age birth to five years reside in Hardee County (7% of the population); 94% of Hardee County K-12 students are eligible for free/ reduced lunch.

Highlands County

Highlands County is the second largest county within the ELCFH service area. Its population of 103,296 experiences fluctuation during winter and spring months, due to the migration of retirees and agricultural workers. Approximately 16.1% of its residents are living at the poverty level; 4,235 children age birth to five years reside in Highlands County (4.1% of the population); 96% of Highlands County K-12 students are eligible for free/ reduced lunch. Avon Park, Sebring and Lake Placid are the incorporated cities that make up Highlands County. Other unincorporated areas are found on its eastern borders. Highlands County is classified as contiguous rural due to its population size and proximity to neighboring rural counties.

Data sources:

- Florida Department of Education: www.Fldoe.org – 21-22- Lunch Status by District report
- United States Census Data: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>

County	Population	Median Household Income	% Households in Poverty	% above poverty level but income constrained	Cost of child care for two children per month)
Charlotte	184,998	\$52,927	10%	30%	\$1,318
DeSoto	36,399	\$35,057	22%	46%	\$1,218
Hardee	27,228	\$37,594	22%	42%	\$1,240
Highlands	105,424	\$39,796	15%	42%	\$1,240
Florida Average	21.5 mill	\$55,462	13%	33%	\$1,557

Data sources:

- United Way ALICE 2018 Report: <https://www.unitedforalice.org/county>
- Child Care Aware: <http://usa.childcareaware.org/advocacy-public-policy/resources/research/costofcare/>

Key Issues

The goal of the community needs assessment was to review relevant data for the ELCFH service area and identify key issues that impact availability of early care and education services. While not an exhaustive list, below is a listing of the core facts, findings, and ELCFH action:

- The effects of the **COVID-19 Pandemic in FY 19-20 and 20-21** are serious, as child care programs have realized significant difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified early learning professionals. Providers have reported closed classrooms due to this trend, which has created an issue of children who are eligible for services, with subsidized funding available, but unable to access programs due to limited capacity. This is most prevalent in Charlotte, DeSoto and Highlands Counties and continued as a difficult issue in FY 21-22.
- More recently, **Hurricane Ian** blew through the ELCFH service area (September 28, 2022), further threatening the already vulnerable child care capacity. The ELCFH continues to work with local, state and national partners to provide needed resources to providers to support program rebuilding and teacher retention.
- The ELCFH continues to work to strengthen **parent involvement** in their child's education and empowering parents as the child's first and most important teacher. During child care resource and referral interviews, parents are educated on choosing a quality center and encouraged to participate in their child's educational activities at the provider site. ELCFH staff work to assist providers in obtaining materials and resources to engage parents in actively participating in their child's education. Materials to support parents can be accessed from ELCFH website at www.elcfh.org.
- **Lack of transportation** continues to be a key issue for access to the VPK program in the four county service area. Some families may utilize home visitation services through a partner agency to support the child's school readiness needs.
- **Limited transportation for school-age children** is also an issue as few child care providers are able to offer drop-off and pick-up services to and from school. As a result, parents have chosen to enroll their school-age children in non-contracted, school based programs and discontinued School Readiness services.
- **Services for infants** within the ELCFH service area continues to be challenge, even more so in light of the impacts of the pandemic and Hurricane Ian. Families in need are typically on multiple waitlists for a child care slot opening.

- The ELCFH provides **developmental screening, assessment and support services** to help children impacted by developmental concerns or trauma. Collaborative work with community partners ensures that children's needs are identified early and interventions applied. During FY 21-22, 106 children were referred to partner agencies (Early Steps, Florida Diagnostic Learning and Research Services- FDLRS, Center for Autism Related Disabilities- CARD) for further screening and evaluation.
- During FY 21-22, 434 children received individualized intervention services to primarily address behavioral concerns. It has been widely observed that **children who have dealt with trauma are more likely to present behavioral challenges that can result in suspension or expulsion from child care programs**. Addressing needs early can help to lessen developmental gaps prior kindergarten entry, lessening risk of later school failure. These vulnerable children need access to programs that are truly responsive and compassionate to their needs.
- **The ELCFH is actively addressing the issue of challenging behaviors** in the classroom by assuring early care and education teachers have the tools they need through trainings such as *Making the Most of Classroom Interactions*. This training intentionally teaches teachers how to help assure children feel safe, secure and loved within early learning programs. The ELCFH has also promoted expulsion prevention through a Board adopted best practices statement (*Position Statement: Expulsion of child/ family from program*) and continuous provider/ family support and technical assistance. Additionally, the ELCFH created Cozy Corners, which serve as opportunities to support preschool age children in learning self-regulation skills when presented with big emotions. The materials and training for the corners have been distributed to all contracted providers and funded through county and state specific funding. Larger child care facilities have been provided with materials for a second classroom as funding has been available.

*"Reading to children at night, responding to their smiles with a smile,
 returning their vocalizations with one of your own,
 touching them, holding them-
 all of these further a child's brain development and future potential,
 even in the earliest months."*
Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

Availability of Child Care Services: Working families need access to quality child care services. Children need access to quality programs that support learning and development. Access to services especially for infants can be a challenge for families due to availability, affordability, or both.

County	## of children age 0-4 yrs	## of children age 5-9 yrs	## of licensed child care programs	## of programs exempt from licensing	## of Registered FCCH	## programs offering infant care	## of accredited provider sites	Licensed capacity of child care per CARES	Capacity reported by provider (2017 data; current data not available)
Charlotte	5,455	6,561	42	18	2	30	5	5,027	3,433
DeSoto	1,686	2,037	15	3	3	9	0	1,643	1,202
Hardee	1,652	2,011	18	1	5	13	3	1,803	1,485
Highlands	4,235	4,968	35	14	2	21	9	3,387	2,715
ELCFH	13,028	15,577	110	36	12	73	17	11,860	8,835

Data sources:

- Kids Count Data Center: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org>
- DCF CARES: <https://cares.myflfamilies.com>



Children need access to developmentally appropriate learning experiences that support growth in all areas of development.

Community Assets- *the following highlights key community partnerships and resources already in place to address the afore mentioned key issues for children and families in the ELCFH service area.*

Early Learning Resources

- School Readiness Program: child care subsidies funding through state, federal and local funds for low income and at-risk children.
- Voluntary Prekindergarten Program: free preschool programming for Florida children (with set age requirement).
- Intentional Support Services Program: ELCFH designed program to provide intentional, developmentally appropriate support to individual children with developmentally or behavioral concerns in the child care setting. Activities are also facilitated in the home to further enhance the home to school experience for the child and family.
- Head Start and Early Head Start Programs: whole child and family programing offered through local school districts, community based programs and Redland Migrant Christian Association (RCMA) throughout the ELCFH service area.
- Campaign for Grade Level Reading: community collaborative focused on grade level reading formally in Charlotte and DeSoto Counties.
- Highlands County Champion for Children: provides support for services/ child and family needs in Highlands County children that are not otherwise funded.
- United Way Partnerships: The ELCFH is partnered with United Way in each county in the service area. Awarded funds support match needs for direct child care services, child screening, and quality initiatives.
- Child Care Business Network (CCBN): was created in FY 21-22 and launch in FY 22-23. The CCBN serves as network to support new and developing providers in successful navigation and maintenance of their School Readiness and VPK contracts.

Resources for children with special needs

- Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System (FDLRS): screens and evaluates children age 3 years and older who may have special needs. Development individualized education plans (IEP) once needs are identified to best support the child's learning and development in the preschool/ school setting. Therapeutic needs are also addressed.

- Early Steps: screens and evaluates children age birth to just prior to the third birthday who may have special needs. Development individualized family service plans (IFSP) once needs are identified to best support the child's learning and development in the home/ child care setting. Therapeutic needs are also addressed.
- Center of Autism Related Disorders (CARD): provides identification and therapeutic services for children who are on the spectrum for autism.
- The Florida Center: center-based therapeutic program to support children with special needs.

Family Programs

- Kids Thrive: United Way or Charlotte County funded collaborative focused on support for children and families dealing with substance exposure and childhood trauma.
- Healthy Families: home visitation program in four county service area focused on child abuse/ neglect prevention and positive parenting skills.
- Healthy Start Coalition: program focused on pregnant women and infants and toddlers to help identify and reduced possible risks to maternal and child health outcomes.

Other Family Resources

- KidsHealth.org: Nemours Foundation: provides general health, social-emotional, developmental information for families- parents, teens and children.
- VROOM.org: Free app that encourages playful parent child interactions through every day items and activities. Promotes executive function and school readiness skills through developmentally appropriate activities and interactions.



*Assuring young children have access
to good books
(and adults to read to them!)
is one of the best ways to prepare
for kindergarten entry.*