

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

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. 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 Childcare Resource and Referral, eligibility determination and case management, provider training and onsite coaching, parent education, child development and inclusion support services, and childcare provider contracting and reimbursement for the School Readiness (SR) and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Programs. As the ELCFH continues to provide these services in-house, the focus to enhance the quality of early childhood education programs in the four county service area has been an important priority. The ELCFH serves as a colleague and partner in early care and education to the childcare community.

The ELCFH is actively engaged in all four communities with heavy emphasis on early literacy. 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 Board of Directors has had over the years focused discussions on topics of concern that directly impact optimal child development- and ultimately a child's readiness for school and life success. To that end, the following position statements have been developed and are regularly shared with the broader early learning community and community partners. Each statement is listed in the ELCFH Provider Handbook: *CP5: Provider responsibility to the Personal Rights of Children; CP6: Prevention of Child/ Family Suspension/ Expulsion; CP11: Assuring Child Safety; CP12: Child Screen Time and the Impact on Executive Function; and CP13: Local Definition of School Readiness.*

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.

Description of the ELCFH Service Area

In 1999, Early Learning Coalitions were established by the Florida Legislature initially to administer School Readiness services in all 67 Florida counties. In 2005, the VPK program emerged and ELCs went through a merger process to create needed administrative efficiencies. At that time, Hardee and Highlands Counties merged with the ELC of Charlotte/ DeSoto to become the ELC of Florida's Heartland. Today, the ELCFH continues its original mission of assuring children have access to quality based childcare and early learning services. This is accomplished through Board approved ELCFH focus areas that support early learning teacher training, empowering parents as the child's first teacher, and advocating for early identification of child developmental concerns prior to school entry.

Charlotte County

Charlotte County is the most populous segment of the ELCFH service area. The population averages around 217,212 and nearly 9.3% of the residents live in poverty. Approximately 6,503 children age birth to five years reside in Charlotte County (approximately 3% of the population); 62.8% 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 Hurricane Charley in 2004, Hurricane Ian in 2022 and Hurricane Helene and Milton in 2024. 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 37,078 this community is comprised of two small towns,

Arcadia and Nocatee. Approximately 1,897 children age birth to five years reside in DeSoto County (approximately 5% of the population); 82.1% 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 21.8% of its residents live in poverty.

Hardee County

Hardee County, population 25,932, 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 18.9% of Hardee County residents are economically disadvantaged. Approximately 1,737 children age birth to five years reside in Hardee County (6.7% of the population); 88.6% 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 111,122 experiences fluctuation during winter and spring months, due to the migration of retirees and agricultural workers. Avon Park, Sebring and Lake Placid are the incorporated cities that make up Highlands County. Other unincorporated areas are found on its eastern borders. Approximately 15.5% of its residents are living at the poverty level; 4,695 children age birth to five years reside in Highlands County (4% of the population); 92% of Highlands County K-12 students are eligible for free/ reduced lunch

Data sources:

- Florida Department of Education: www.fldoe.org – 25-26- Lunch Status by District report
- United States Census Data: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>
- <https://datacenter.aecf.org/> (2023 data)

Review of Available Data Sources

The below provides data/ information for each county in the ELCFH service area:

Race and Ethnicity (2025)

Indicator	Charlotte	DeSoto	Hardee	Highlands	Florida average
White alone	89.6%	83.2%	86.1%	84.0%	76.4%
Black alone	6.4%	13.2%	8.5%	11.2%	16.9%
American Indian/ Alaska Native alone	0.4%	1.1%	1.5%	0.9%	0.6%
Asian alone	1.7%	0.7%	1.5%	1.7%	3.4%
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Two or more races	1.8%	1.6%	2.3%	2.0%	2.5%
Hispanic or Latino	9.1%	30.9%	42.9%	23.7%	28.7%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	81.6%	54.7%	46.2%	62.7%	50.6%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States](#) (by county and state)

Non-English Language (Language Isolation- 2020 - 2024)

Level	Charlotte	DeSoto	Hardee	Highlands	Florida
% of population in county	1.9%	3.5%	6%	4%	7%
## of households	1,738	452	492	1,881	615,946

Source: <https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov/data-portals> (by county and state)

Education and Other Indicators (2025)

Level	Charlotte	DeSoto	Hardee	Highlands	Florida average
High school graduate or higher (age 25+)	89.9%	73.5%	76.9%	86.6%	92.5%
Bachelor's degree or higher (age 25+)	34.1%	10.8%	12.1%	20.5%	27.0%
Under 65 with a disability	8.9%	15.6%	12.0%	15.1%	12.9%
Under 65 without health insurance	13.6%	22.9%	17.2%	16.7%	12.4%

Source: [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States](#) (by county and state)

Income Status

County	Population	Median Household Income	% Households in Poverty	% above poverty level but income constrained	Average cost of childcare for two children per month
Charlotte	217,212	\$69,952	9.3%	31%	\$1,979
DeSoto	37,078	\$54,417	21.8%	34%	\$1,521
Hardee	25,932	\$60,489	18.9%	24%	\$1,271
Highlands	111,122	\$54,897	15.5%	29%	\$1,412
Florida average	23.3 mill	\$74,568	12%	47%	\$1,580

Data sources:

- United Way ALICE 2024 Report: <https://www.unitedforalice.org/county>
- [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Charlotte County, Florida](#)
- First Five Years Fund: [Childcare and Early Learning in Florida](#)
- [2025-Florida-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf](#)

Available Childcare Services in ELCFH Service Area:

County	## of children age 0-4 yrs	## of children age 5-9 yrs	## of licensed childcare programs	## of programs exempt from licensing	## of Registered FCCH	## programs offering infant care per CARES	## of accredited provider sites	Licensed capacity of childcare per CARES
Charlotte	6,503	6,839	64	18	6	41	8	5,077
DeSoto	1,897	1,800	13	8	0	8	0	1,201
Hardee	1,737	1,712	14	5	2	11	4	1,154
Highlands	4,695	4,722	29	12	0	24	9	3,060

Data sources:

- Kids Count Data Center: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org> (2023)
- DCF CARES: <https://cares.myflfamilies.com>

VPK- % of Eligible Child Participation Rates

Fiscal Year	Charlotte	DeSoto	Hardee	Highlands	Florida
2024-25	77.3%	57.6%	51.0%	58.9%	77.8%
2023-24	81.5%	53.7%	56.0%	59.6%	77.9%

Source: [The Florida Index of Preschool Access | The Sunshine Portal](#)

ELCFH School Readiness Program access- children age birth to five:

Enrollment by Age/ Care Type	Infants (INF)	Toddlers (TOD)	Twos (2YR)	Threes (PR3)	Fours (PR4)	Fives (PR5)
# of children in FY 24-25	59 (5.6%)	163 (15.4%)	214 (20.2%)	229 (21.6%)	238 (22.5%)	157 (14.8%)
# of children in FY 23-24	85 (7.6%)	139 (12.4%)	219 (19.5%)	271 (24.2%)	255 (22.7%)	152 (13.6%)
# of children in FY 22-23	52 (5.0%)	146 (13.9%)	202 (19.3%)	248 (27.3%)	253 (24.1%)	147 (14.0%)

Source: [The Florida Index of Preschool Access | The Sunshine Portal](#)

Additional information- Research Brief: Childcare Affordability for Florida - SR Families is a study conducted in 2024 by the EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY RESEARCH GROUP (ECPRG- Jing Huang, Ph.D., Phillip R. Sherlock, Ph.D., Herman T. Knopf, Ph.D). This report discusses the impact of the cost of childcare services for families living in poverty even if childcare subsidies are available. Families are responsible for parent co-payments and may also have a differential charged by the provider to make up for the total cost of the childcare services not reimbursed by the allowable provider rate. While the application of the School Readiness payment does detract from the total cost of the childcare services, the co-payment plus the applied differential results in substantial family expenditure for childcare.

Source: [Research Brief: Childcare Affordability for Florida SR Families](#)

The average cost nationally for childcare services in 2025 was \$13,184. This was reported in a study from **Childcare Aware of America** entitled *Affordability of Childcare for Families*. Source: [Childcare in America: 2025 Price & Supply](#)



“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 child’s brain development and future potential, even in the earliest months.”

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

Key Issues Impacting Early Learning

The ELCFH understands the value in high quality early learning programming, especially for children living in poverty and/ or in at-risk home environments. The Perry Preschool Study is an important longitudinal study that followed children from low-income homes who did or did not have access to quality based early learning programs.

It has long been estimated that the savings in later remedial education needs as well as the impact on society is at least \$7 for every dollar expended on early learning. Early identification further lessens this- plus helps promote the child's positive success in school. This translates into later success- with impact to less likely be incarcerated or a teen parent, and more likely to graduate from high school and college. Source:

<https://highscope.org/perry-preschool-project/>

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:

- **Childcare accessibility issues continue** and are due in part to the impact of COVID-19 (with the great resignation and difficulties facing providers in staff hiring and retention) and more recent hurricanes in 2022 (Ian) and 2024 (Helene and Milton). While programs are slowly coming back, or new programs are opening, the need remains greater than the availability impacting the ability of families to access needed services. “Underground” (illegally operating) childcare has become more readily available as families seek out services they can afford.

The ELCFH tracks children and families who are “Eligible but not Enrolled”, meaning they have been invited in for childcare services, but have not been able to select a site due to the age of the child and space not being available. Providers are invited on a monthly basis to complete a survey from the ELCFH to indicate the slots they have available and by which ages.

The results are then forwarded to families who can choose to contact the provider sites. This information is regularly compiled into a report and shared with the ELCFH Finance Committee and Board.

- **Overall cost of the childcare services**, even with childcare subsidies, has become a significant burden for economically disadvantaged families. Even with the childcare subsidy applied, families are responsible for paying the legislatively required *parent co-payment (fee)* and in many cases, a differential payment is assessed by the provider. These payments are required by the provider to make up for the additional monies required monthly for the child’s service that is not allowable by the ELCFH due to the *not to exceed* provider payments rates as set by the Division of Early Learning (DEL- lead agency to all Early Learning Coalitions).
- 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 childcare 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. Parents are also encouraged to look up their providers on the DCF website (www.myfloridafamilies.com) to review recent provider inspections conducted by DCF.

- **Lack of transportation** continues to be 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 childcare providers are able to offer drop-off and pick-up services to and from school. As a result, some parents have chosen to enroll their school-age children in non-contracted, school based programs and discontinued School Readiness services.
- **Language needs** and communicating in an effective way with families in their home language is an important goal of the ELCFH. The ELCFH works to assure informational materials, children's books are available, especially in Spanish. Some ELCFH staff are fully bilingual, helping families to feel comfortable when communicating with the ELCFH offices.
- **Services for infants** within the ELCFH service area continues to be challenge. The ELCFH offers provider trainings and in-field coaching to support high quality infant/ toddler classrooms and care practices. Families in need are typically on multiple waitlists for a childcare slot opening.
- The ELCFH provides **developmental screening 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. To date in FY 25-26, 1136 children were screened (using the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and 473 (42%) children had possible concerns noted. While some children simply needed support activities to do in the home and childcare, a total of 84 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.

The ELCFH prioritizes child developmental screening as a way to identify special needs and hopefully have the opportunity to engage children in services to offset or reduce developmental concerns that can derail efforts to build up a child's readiness for school success. One pervasive challenge that remains is helping parents understand the rationale behind developmental screening and respond to further evaluation and intervention opportunities if a possible need is noted.

- During FY 25-26, 165 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 childcare programs**. Addressing needs early can help to lessen developmental gaps prior to kindergarten entry, reducing 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 and social/emotional development** 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 CP6: 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 were distributed to all contracted providers and funded through county and state specific funding, and continues to be offered to new providers.

- **Availability of Childcare Services:** Working families need access to quality childcare 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. The ELCFH is aware of areas in the service area that greatly lack needed childcare services.



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 aforementioned key issues for children and families in the ELCFH service area.

Early Learning Resources

- School Readiness Program: childcare 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 developmental or behavioral concerns in the childcare 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 Charlotte, United Way Suncoast (DeSoto County), United Way Central Florida- Hardee County, and United Way Central Florida- Highlands Division. Awarded funds support match needs for direct childcare services and support Division of Early Learning match funding for the School Readiness program.
- Childcare Business Network (CCBN): was created in FY 21-22 and launched in FY 22-23. The CCBN serves as a network to support new and developing providers in successful navigation and maintenance of their School Readiness and VPK contracts. The ELCFH works with new and struggling providers to align them with a mentor and promote peer-to-peer networking.

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 of 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 of individualized family service plans (IFSP) once needs are identified to best support the child's learning and development in the home/ childcare 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 of Charlotte funded collaborative focused on support for children and families dealing with substance exposure and childhood trauma.
- Healthy Families: home visitation program in the 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 reduce possible risks to maternal and child health outcomes.
- HIPPY Home Visitation Program- Hardee County and Parents as Teachers (PAT)- DeSoto and Hardee (Step-up Suncoast): Home visitation programs designed for parents of young children; program provides parents with the tools needed to support their child's development and prepare them for kindergarten entry.

Other Family Resources

- Charlotte County Family Services Center: under the authority of the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners, the center links families with needed resources such as food pantries , housing and rental assistance.

- KidsHealth.org: Nemours Foundation: provides general health, social-emotional, developmental information for families- parents, teens and children.
- All-Faiths Food Bank: offers help to families with food insecurity; coordinates with partner agencies and offers a “place to land” onsite if an agency needs to meet directly with a family.



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