



ILLINOIS

January 29, 2021

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Leaders and Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

If the COVID-19 pandemic's economic fallout has taught us anything, it's this: Child care, early learning, and birth-to-3 services form an essential business sector that truly supports all others, a workforce behind the workforce.

As employers, managers, business owners and executives throughout Illinois, we have seen what happens when working families lack access to reliable, affordable services for their children. Even before the pandemic, a ReadyNation report showed the infant/toddler child care crisis annually cost our state's workers and employers nearly \$2.5 billion in lost wages, productivity, and tax revenues— a hefty price tag that has surely grown during the past year's erosion of such services.

Yet the effects are also costly to our hopes of preparing the workforce of tomorrow. Recent Illinois data show that only three out of 10 children entering kindergarten last fall were fully prepared for school success in early math, language and literacy, and social-emotional development — the foundation for skills-building on which both academic and professional achievement will depend. Furthermore, these disparities remain particularly and troublingly pronounced among Black and Brown children, low-income households, many rural areas, and other communities of particular need.

To address these challenges, our nonprofit, nonpartisan, ReadyNation network of 3,000+ business leaders throughout the country — over 275 of them in Illinois — supports greater, research-proven investments in the well-being of children and families. Thus, we're encouraged by a number of developments: An expert commission, appointed by the Governor, is finalizing recommendations for long-term improvements in the funding adequacy, equity, and governance of our state's system of early childhood services. A parallel effort we support, through the Illinois PN3 Coalition, has set an ambitious goal of expanding high-quality services to thousands more low-income infants, toddlers and their families by 2025. And with the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus leading the way, this new year already has seen several important measures advance to strengthen early learning opportunities for young children.

Many of the policy priorities below represent significant, further steps toward these aims for helping children and their families — and, in a very real sense, our overall economy and long-term well-being as a state. We urge your support for these FY2022 requests in the budgets of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). We share these requests with the sobering understanding that state resources are extremely limited — underscoring the need to prioritize spending as wisely as possible, in areas such as these:

- **Preschool and birth-to-3 programs** – An increase of at least \$50 million in the Early Childhood Block Grant, as ISBE has recommended, could help bolster preschool and critical, birth-to-3 services statewide. It's vital that we boost the chronically low compensation of teachers and other staff, as well as their professional development and support, and extend Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services to

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more kids, families, and educators. This increase would take the grant total to \$593.7 million.

- **Child care assistance** – Workforce stability, productivity and recovery demand that we reverse the erosion of affordable, reliable care for children while their parents are on the job. DHS Child Care Assistance Program caseloads were still recovering from 2015 eligibility cuts when the pandemic hit and greatly increased pressures on providers statewide. Restoration grants have tapped federal aid in helping thousands of providers to weather FY21 as best they can, but many programs have closed and others are struggling to avoid following suit. Maintaining a General Revenue Funds level of at least \$431 million in FY22 would help to maintain these crucial services for working families.
- **“Parent coaching” services** – The DHS-administered Healthy Families Illinois (HFI) and Parents Too Soon (PTS) programs support voluntary, home-visiting efforts for the parents of at-risk children, from birth to age 3. But while home-visiting programs have served as an essential lifeline for young parents — including during this pandemic — their state funding has remained stagnant for years. We request a \$2.37 million increase in HFI and a \$1.62 million boost in PTS to meet more of the demand for these important services, bringing their combined total to \$20.9 million.
- **Early Intervention** – These are vital therapies for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Increasing their help by \$25 million would help meet growing needs, particularly among youngsters exposed to lead. It could bolster low provider compensation and support data-system improvements, while bringing EI resources to a total of \$140.9 million.

In addition to these early childhood priorities, we encourage your support of the following elementary-through-postsecondary education requests:

- **After-school programs** – Teen REACH efforts have helped raise participants’ grades and graduation rates while providing youth with safe, positive environments during out-of-school hours. A \$5.1 million increase to extend these DHS services further would raise the program to \$19.6 million and bring resources closer to the level of support they enjoyed before years of cuts and neglect. Similarly, our state should continue to strengthen after-school offerings serving primarily students from low-income households, through a \$20 million commitment in ISBE.
- **Postsecondary financial aid** – Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants help low-income students to access college. But too few students who qualify for this help actually receive it, and MAP assistance covers far less ground than it once did. We must stabilize this program’s resources to ensure students can rely on the full funding promised them, and increase assistance to ensure full coverage of tuition and fees at Illinois’ public institutions of higher education for all MAP-eligible applicants by 2027. A \$50 million increase in MAP support would help progress toward these aims.

Every one of these priorities has enjoyed bipartisan support over the years, a testimony to their widely acknowledged value. Each remains a vital investment in the well-being of children and families, our workforce and economy during these trying times. We hope to work with you in these regards, and we thank you for your service and dedication to our state.

Sincerely, the undersigned Illinois business leaders and members of ReadyNation –

Charles Carey
Chairman,
CME Group Foundation
Chicago

Christa Markgraff
VP of Operations,
Nicor Gas
Naperville

Tom Fitch
Senior Director of Facilities,
Springfield Clinic
Springfield

Dr. Christopher Burke
President,
Christopher B. Burke
Engineering, Ltd.
Rosemont

Virginia Glasner
President,
Highland Park Chamber
of Commerce
Highland Park

LoRayne Logan
President & Founder,
Workplace Staff & Search
Rockford

John Quigley
President & CEO,
Elmhurst Chamber of
Commerce & Industry
Elmhurst

Chris Setti
CEO, Greater Peoria
Economic Development
Council, *Peoria*

Maureen Kahn
President & CEO,
Blessing Health System
Quincy

Joshua Gunn
President & CEO, Peoria
Chamber of Commerce
Peoria

Kayla Edwards
Managing Partner,
Express Employment
Professionals, *Springfield*

Lisa Savegnago
President,
Nameplate & Panel
Technology
Carol Stream

Desiree Bennyhoff
President & CEO,
Edwardsville/Glen Carbon
Chamber of Commerce
Edwardsville

Phillip “Mike” Beard
Executive Director,
Greater Jefferson County
Chamber of Commerce
Mt. Vernon

Brian McGuire
President & CEO,
Associated Equipment
Distributors
Schaumburg

David Sabathne
President & CEO, Western
DuPage Chamber of
Commerce, *West Chicago*

Lisa Weitzel
President, Illinois
Association of Chamber of
Commerce Executives, *Springfield*

Keith Krutz
President,
IMS Buhrke-Olson, LLC
Arlington Heights

Jen Howard
President,
Joliet Region Chamber of
Commerce & Industry, *Joliet*

Teresa Beach-Shelov
President,
Superior Joining
Technologies, Inc.
Machesney Park

Charles Moore
President & CEO,
McLean County
Chamber of Commerce
Bloomington

Rudy Valdez
VP, South West Ideas for
Today & Tomorrow
Rockford

Steve Gaus
Executive Director,
Palatine Area Chamber
of Commerce
Palatine

Barbi Brewer-Watson
Executive Director,
Kankakee Economic &
Development Agency, *Kankakee*

Norma Lansing
President & CEO,
Effingham County Chamber
of Commerce, *Effingham*

Adam Hendrian
Credit Analyst,
Knapheide Manufacturing Co.
Quincy

Pam Gaither
Executive Director, Galesburg
Area Chamber of Commerce
Galesburg

Erin Kopec
Director of Marketing,
HireLevel, Inc.,
Marion

Matt Duffy
Executive Director,
DeKalb Chamber of
Commerce, *DeKalb*

Anisha Grimmett
Executive Director,
Alignment Rockford
Rockford

Eva Field
President,
Hinsdale Chamber of
Commerce, *Hinsdale*

Jason Powell
Director of Business
Development, WLC
Management Firm, LLC
Marion

Cindy Allston
President/CEO,
Bloomington Chamber
of Commerce, *Bloomington*

Amy Whiting-McCoy
Executive Director, Pekin
Area Chamber of Commerce
Pekin

Manuel Sanchez
Founder & Managing
Principal, Sanchez, Daniels
& Hoffman, LLP, *Chicago*

Mirinda Rothrock
President, Greater
Decatur Chamber of
Commerce, *Decatur*

Kevin Weinacht
President,
Weinacht & Associates
Collinsville

John Keller
President, Riverbend
Growth Association
Godfrey

Tony Beiermann
Community Senior VP,
First Mid Bank & Trust
Peoria

Paula Schmidt
President,
Geneva Chamber of
Commerce
Geneva

Wendy Pfeil
Executive Director,
Greater Belleville Chamber
of Commerce, *Belleville*

Tricia O'Brien
President, Hoffman
Estates Chamber of
Commerce & Industry
Hoffman Estates

Miriam Iwrey
CEO, Carol Stream
Chamber of Commerce
Carol Stream

Nate Ruben
Principal,
Ruben Digital,
Wheeling

Tasha Marsaglia
Executive Director,
Plainfield Area Chamber of
Commerce, *Plainfield*

Jennifer Bishop
Executive Director,
Marshall Area Chamber of
Commerce, *Marshall*

Kevin O'Keeffe
Executive Director,
Bolingbrook Area Chamber
of Commerce, *Bolingbrook*

Carla Bobell
Executive Director,
Canton Area Chamber
of Commerce
Canton

Ken Kaczynski
President,
K&L Watch Service, Inc.
Mt. Prospect

Jeff Hettrick
Executive Director,
Ottawa Area Chamber of
Commerce & Industry, *Ottawa*

Jennifer Olson
Owner, The Lookout
at the Lake
Creal Springs

Mindy Cain
Director of Workforce
Development, Champaign
County Chamber of
Commerce, *Champaign*

Carol Iaccino
Owner,
Hoard Heaven
Carterville

Kim Schilf
President & CEO,
Lincoln Park Chamber
of Commerce, *Chicago*

Mike Paone
VP, Joliet Region
Chamber of Commerce
& Industry, *Joliet*

Jason Murphy
Inside Sales Manager,
WS Communications
Collinsville

Bonnie Wheeler
Vice President, News (Retired),
Mel Wheeler, Inc., *Carterville*

Margaret Perreault
President & CEO,
Batavia Chamber of
Commerce, *Batavia*

Maureen Glasoe
Owner,
Virgo Words
Evanston

Emily Johnson
CEO, New Lenox
Chamber of Commerce,
New Lenox

Jeff Bloemker
Commercial Loan Officer,
Bank of Hillsboro
Effingham

Linda Harper
Administrator, Mt. Zion
Chamber of Commerce
Mt. Zion

Mike Broski
President, Entre
Computer Solutions
Machesney Park

Ted Glasoe
Owner,
Ted Glasoe Photography
Evanston

Peter Coules
Partner,
Donatelli & Coules, Ltd.
Hinsdale

Heather Pierce
Owner, Steadfast
Center LLC, *Champaign*

Patti Thayer
President,
Thayer Lighting, Inc.
Loves Park

Jeromé Holston
Director, LGBT Chamber
of Commerce of Illinois
Chicago

Emily Melvin
Account Manager,
Priority Staffing Group
Marion

Leigh Ann Brown
CEO/Executive Director,
Morton Chamber of
Commerce, *Morton*

Janet Mathis
Principal, The
Development Consortium
Geneseo

Joellen Randall
VP, Human Resources,
Blessings Health System
Quincy

Carlos Fernandez
VP/General Manager,
WGEM
Quincy

Steward Sandstrom
Senior Project Manager,
Levi, Ray, & Shoup, Inc.
Springfield

Michael Traylor
Owner, Integrity of Personal
Training, *Machesney Park*

Christina Van Yperen
Executive Director,
Grundy County Chamber of
Commerce, *Morris*

Kris Noble
Executive Director,
Sauk Valley Area Chamber of
Commerce, *Sterling*

Elizabeth Krenzer
Consultant & Sr. VP of
Manufacturing (Retired),
Cardinal Health, *Deerfield*

Karen Wilson
Owner & Agent,
Karen Wilson State Farm
Godfrey

Zack Sullivan
Executive Director,
Geneseo Chamber of
Commerce, *Geneseo*

Nancie Zobrist
Executive Director,
Highland Chamber of
Commerce, *Highland*

Alicia Bermes
Executive Director, Niles
Chamber of Commerce &
Industry, *Niles*

Diana Nielander
Owner,
High-Impact Consulting
Gurnee

Derek Sherman
Senior Consultant,
Blane Canada, Ltd.
Belvidere

Felicitas Cortez
Executive Director,
Orland Park Area Chamber
of Commerce, *Orland Park*

Bill Fleming
Executive Director,
Pekin Area Chamber of
Commerce (retired), *Pekin*

Tamryn Hennessy
Program Director,
Greater Oak Brook Chamber
of Commerce, *Oak Brook*

Erik Christian
Owner, Principal Consultant
HR Fit
Edelstein

Cat Coppinger
Executive Director,
Pontiac Area Chamber of
Commerce, *Pontiac*

Joni Duncan
Former Senior VP,
Ann & Robert H. Lurie
Children's Hospital, *Chicago*

David Marquardt
Managing Director,
Riveron
Chicago

Sarah Marion
Executive Director,
Manteno Chamber of
Commerce, *Manteno*

Rudy Melchiorre
President,
RME, Inc.
Woodridge

Mark Rouse
Owner,
Runner's High 'n Tri
Arlington Heights

Jay Schwartz
Owner,
Strange Cargo
Chicago