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

*Investing in children- investing in our future.*

School Readiness Plan Amendment Requirement: February 28, 2019
ELCFH Board Approval: March 27, 2019
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.
The ELCFH Service Area

**Charlotte County**
Charlotte County is the most populous segment of the ELCFH service area. The population averages around 178,465 and 11% of the residents live in poverty. Approximately 5,600 children age birth to five years reside in Charlotte County (3.1% of the population); 68% 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. 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 35,134 this community is comprised of two small towns, Arcadia and Nocatee. Approximately 1,843 children age birth to five years reside in DeSoto County (5% of the population); 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 26.1% of its residents live in poverty.
**Hardee County**
Hardee County, population 27,302, 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 23.3% of Hardee County residents are economically disadvantaged. Approximately 1,900 children age birth to five years reside in Hardee County (7% of the population); nearly 100% 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 100,917 experiences fluctuation during winter and spring months, due to the migration of retirees and agricultural workers. Approximately 19.8% of its residents are living at the poverty level; 4,642 children age birth to five years reside in Highlands County (4.6% of the population); 83% 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](http://www.fldoe.org) - 1718FC3- Lunch Status by District report
- United States Census Data: [https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>% Households in Poverty</th>
<th>% above poverty level but income constrained</th>
<th>Cost of child care (one infant/one preschooler/per month)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>178,465</td>
<td>$44,200</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>$1,180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeSoto</td>
<td>35,134</td>
<td>$35,513</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>$1,016</td>
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<td>Hardee</td>
<td>27,302</td>
<td>$36,222</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>$1,035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlands</td>
<td>100,917</td>
<td>$36,490</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>$1,035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida average</td>
<td>20.98 mill</td>
<td>$50,860</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>$1,344</td>
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**Data sources:**
- United Way ALICE Report: [https://www.unitedforalice.org/home](https://www.unitedforalice.org/home)
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:

- **In FY 17-18**, the ELCFH served 2,746 unduplicated low income and at-risk children through the School Readiness Program and 1,789 pre-school age children through the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK).

- The ELCFH strives 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.

- **Children with referrals through protective services** under the Department of Children and Families (DCF) receive childcare services for up to six months. ELCFH staff review these cases regularly to ensure the need and eligibility for continued care.

Abuse and neglect is considered to be one of Florida’s greatest threats to children and has been positively linked to serious interruptions in the child’s development. During FY 17-18, the ELCFH served 713 children through protective services; children who have dealt with trauma are more likely to present behavioral challenges that can result in suspension or expulsion from child care programs. If not identified and addressed early, developmental gaps can widen as the child nears kindergarten entry, creating a higher 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 this issue 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 an approved statement (*CP13- Expulsion of child/family from program- position statement*) and continuous provider/family support and technical assistance.

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 17-18, 112 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. Additionally, 114 children with developmental and behavioral concerns were enrolled in the ELCFH *Ready-Set-Goals* Program for intentional support services.

- Children having access to **quality early literacy opportunities** as a key element of school readiness is paramount. During the second half of FY 17-18, 193 three to five year old children received the *Get Ready to Read* preliteracy screening. Of those, 125 (65%) scored below average in preliteracy skill development.

The ELCFH continues to address this issue by assuring low income and at-risk children have **access to books in the home** and in their child care provider sites. Providers contracted with the ELCFH have had access to the *Building Blocks for Literacy* training and regular on-site technical assistance specific to early literacy.

- **Services for infants** within the ELCFH service area has historically been insufficient. Providers generally offer child care beginning at age two and older. This is attributed to the required smaller staff to child ratio, as well as the actual cost of care for the very youngest children. Many families find it challenging finding child care for their infant resulting in subsidized child care services being placed in suspension while clients wait on multiple waitlists for a child care slot opening.

- **Early childhood staff turnover** creates a need for ongoing training and support for new teachers. Coordinated efforts are maintained with Charlotte Technical College, Florida SouthWestern State College, South Florida State College and Suncoast Technical College to promote training and credentialing for early childhood staff. Information is also provided to access financial support through TEACH scholarships and Complete Florida.

> “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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>## of children age 0-4 yrs</th>
<th>## of children age 5-9 yrs</th>
<th>## of licensed child care programs</th>
<th>## of programs exempt from licensing</th>
<th>## of Registered FCCH</th>
<th>## of programs offering infant care</th>
<th>## of accredited provider sites</th>
<th>Capacity reported by provider</th>
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<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>5,844</td>
<td>6,263</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5,171</td>
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<td>DeSoto</td>
<td>2,068</td>
<td>2,099</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,239</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardee</td>
<td>2,006</td>
<td>2,066</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlands</td>
<td>4,800</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>ELCFH</td>
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<td>15,463</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11,501</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Data sources:
- Kids Count Data Center: [https://datacenter.kidscount.org](https://datacenter.kidscount.org)
- DCF CARES: [https://cares.myflfamilies.com](https://cares.myflfamilies.com)
- Office of Early Learning Provider Portal

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).

- **Ready-Set-Goals (RSG) 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.

- **Charlotte County Reads**: United Way of Charlotte County funded collaborative addressing children reading at grade level by third grade.

- **Campaign for Grade Level Reading**: community collaborative focused on grade level reading formally in Charlotte and DeSoto Counties.

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 expose 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 them for kindergarten entry.