



A Fresh Look at Local
Needs and Opportunities



COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT UPDATE

Community Assessment Update

2024 – 2025



This **Community Assessment Update** builds on last year's study with a fresh look at the changing needs of families in **Berrien, Cassopolis, and Van Buren Counties**. We gather input through parent surveys and ongoing feedback, which helps us understand current challenges and priorities. Family voices guide our program design, decisions, and services to ensure responsive, effective support.

We recognize multiple challenges that impact families' ability to access services:

- **Transportation:** Limited public transit remains a key barrier, especially in rural areas. We have mapped available transportation options and are always exploring solutions for families, such as seeking grants like the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services' one-time emergency transportation grant, which can help families.
- **Parent Schedules:** Work and training schedules vary widely among families. However, **85%** of families who responded to our family survey indicated that our **current hours meet their needs**. Additionally, **90%** prefer Monday through Friday care over a Monday through Thursday schedule. Only **15%** of families expressed a preference for year-round care.
- **Child Care Demand:** While no tuition-based enrollment has occurred yet, demand across our three counties remains high. As part of strategic planning, we are exploring enrollment options for families from a range of economic backgrounds, while continuing to prioritize Head Start-eligible children. We anticipate offering up to 20 tuition-based slots by the end of summer 2025.

Community Strengths and Resources

- **Health and Behavioral Services:** Corewell Health, InterCare, Cassopolis Family Clinic, local community mental health agencies, and county health departments provide accessible medical and behavioral health care for families.
- **Education and Workforce Support:** Great Start Collaboratives, local ISDs, Michigan Works!, 24/7 Dads, and area colleges offer early education initiatives, workforce training, and community-based parenting programs.
- **Basic Needs and Family Support:** Organizations like Feeding America, Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency, libraries, and community centers help meet food, housing, literacy, and digital access needs.
- **Collaborative Impact:** These partnerships form the foundation of our coordinated service model, promoting children's holistic development and helping families overcome structural barriers.

Demographics

County	Population	Children Under 5	Median Income	Poverty Rate
Berrien	152,261	5.3%	\$63,152	13.6%
Cass	51,589	5.4%	\$60,000	12.5%
Van Buren	75,798	5.5%	\$66,902	14.7%

Eligibility Overview: 2024–2025 Program Year

20%

Income
≤100%

14%

McKinney
Vento

54%

Public
Assistance

3%

Foster
Care

4%

Over Income
101–130%

5%

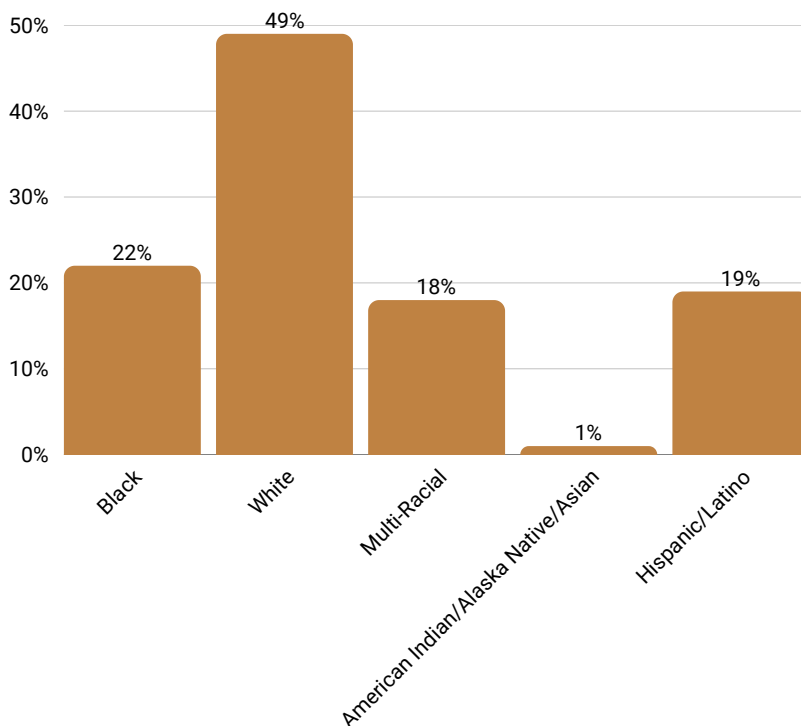
Over Income
131%+

18%

Receive Disability
Services

In accordance with Head Start Program Performance Standards, Flowers Early Learning is required to ensure that at least 10% of total enrollment consists of children with disabilities.

Race and Ethnicity of Enrolled Children (2024–2025)



Race and Ethnicity by County

Berrien County

- White alone: 80.1%
- Black or African American alone: 13.9%
- American Indian and Alaska Native alone: 0.7%
- Asian alone: 2.1%
- Two or More Races: 3.0%
- Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 6.4%

Cass County

- White alone: 89.5%
- Black or African American alone: 5.0%
- American Indian and Alaska Native alone: 1.2%
- Asian alone: 0.9%
- Two or More Races: 3.3%
- Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 4.6%

Van Buren County

- White alone: 91.3%
- Black or African American alone: 3.7%
- American Indian and Alaska Native alone: 1.2%
- Asian alone: 0.8%
- Two or More Races: 2.9%
- Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 12.8%

Our updated research and community feedback highlight three key areas where families still need support.

Area of Need: Infant Mortality Prevention

Infant mortality rates in our region remain alarmingly high—more than double the state average in **Berrien (13.7 per 1,000 live births)** and **Cass (12.3 per 1,000 live births)**, compared to the statewide rate of **6.1**. These disparities are influenced by limited access to prenatal care, housing instability, and income discrepancies.

Supporting Infant Wellness: 2025-2026 Program Year Recommendations

Safe Sleep Education

- *Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director*
 - Continue sharing safe sleep resources to support safe environments and reduce infant sleep-related risks.
- *Responsible Party: Communications and Engagement Coordinator*
 - Distribution through digital platforms. Develop and share short, accessible educational videos on prenatal care, infant development, and wellness best practices to support families at home.

Lactation Support

Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director

Maintain and enhance access to breastfeeding support and education to promote infant and maternal health.

Doula Partnerships

Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director

Continue seeking partnerships with community-based doulas to offer culturally responsive perinatal support.



Area of Need: Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Southwest Michigan is experiencing a concerning rise in suicide rates, especially among young and middle-aged males. In 2023, **Berrien County** saw a **38% increase** in suicides, with most cases involving **men aged 26–44**. Van Buren County reported a suicide rate of **23.7 per 100,000**—significantly higher than both the state and national averages of **14.7 deaths per 100,000 people**—while Cass County remains designated a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area, with limited access to psychiatric care. These figures underscore the urgent need for early intervention strategies, community-based mental health supports, and increased awareness around emotional well-being, particularly for youth and caregivers in rural communities.

Social-Emotional Wellness: 2025-2026 Program Year Recommendations

Use of Conscious Discipline

Responsible Parties: Early Head Start and Head Start Education Directors

Continue training staff and caregivers to foster emotionally safe and supportive environments.

Community Outreach

Responsible Party: Communications and Engagement Coordinator

Expand efforts to share mental health resources through events, print materials, and digital platforms.



Area of Need: Access to Infant and Toddler Care

There is a significant shortage of licensed childcare slots for **children under age 3** across the region. Families face long waitlists, high costs, and limited options, while providers struggle with **low wages, staffing shortages, and high turnover rates**.

Child Care Access & Capacity: 2025-2026 Program Year Recommendations

Expand Infant/Toddler Care

Responsible Party: CEO/Executive Director and Development Director

Continue working to secure funding to support new classrooms, wraparound services, and start-up needs.

Grow the Early Childhood Workforce

Responsible Party: Human Resources Team

Continue offering training and professional development opportunities to help recruit and retain quality caregivers.



This update reflects our unwavering commitment to nurturing well-rounded early childhood development. The data reinforces what we've heard from families: real challenges require collaborative, innovative solutions. Flowers Early Learning will continue to work to secure resources, partnerships, and shape policies that uplift the youngest members of our communities and the families who care for them.



Flowers Early Learning is a 501(c)3 organization funded through grants and community support.

This report is also available at www.flowersearlylearning.org

Approved by Board and Policy Council: June 18, 2025

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