



COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

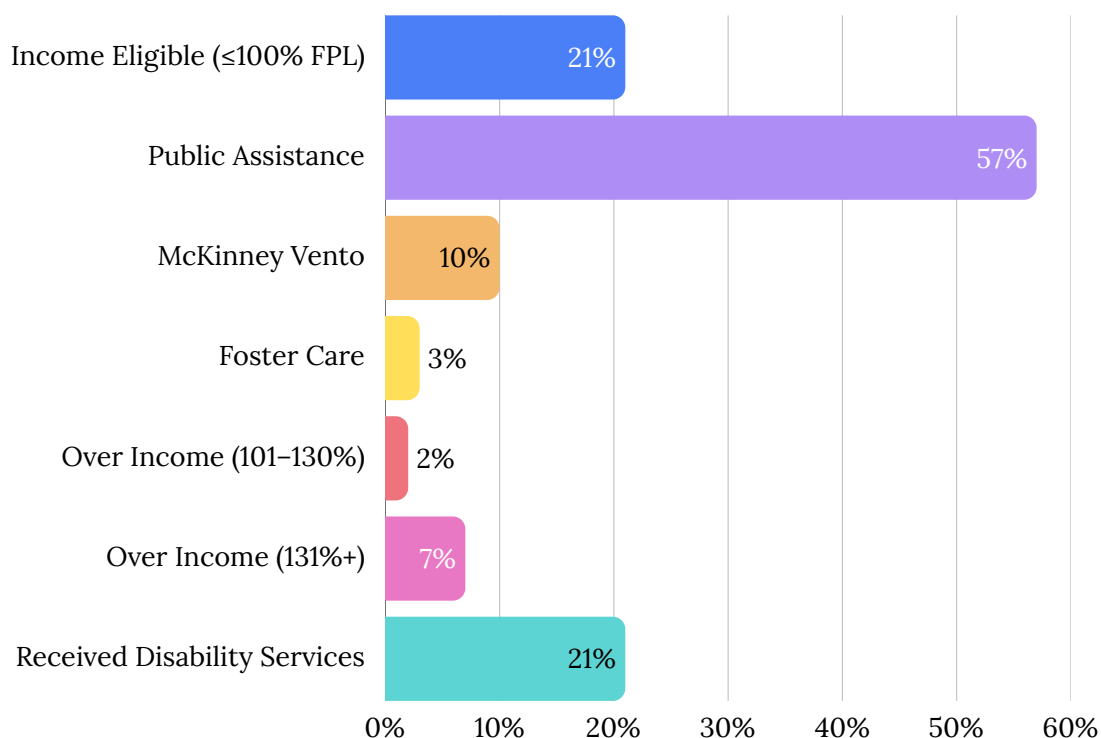
2025 - 2026
UPDATE

Reflecting the Communities We Serve

Flowers Early Learning serves children and families across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, reflecting the diverse communities within our region. During the 2025–2026 program year, enrolled children represented a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, demonstrating the importance of culturally responsive practices, inclusive learning environments, and family-centered engagement strategies across all service areas.

Program Demographics					
County	Black	White	Multi-Racial	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Hispanic/Latino
Berrien	33%	34%	28%	1%	4%
Cass	20%	45%	28%	3%	4%
Van Buren	5%	48%	28%	2%	17%

Eligibility Overview 2025 - 2026 Program Year



Actions and Impact from the 2024–2025 Community Assessment

Our Community Assessment last year identified three key areas of need: infant mortality prevention, access to infant and toddler care, and social-emotional wellness.

Supporting Infant Wellness

We expanded infant mortality prevention outreach by sharing safe sleep education and family resources throughout our centers, lactation areas, and social media platforms. Families were connected to local supports, including lactation services and licensed doulas through county-specific referrals.

Child Care Access and Capacity

Through partnerships and grant opportunities, Flowers Early Learning added 20 tuition-based infant and toddler care slots in the Benton Harbor community, helping increase access to high-quality early childhood education for local families.

Social-Emotional Wellness

Teaching teams participated in monthly professional development workshops focused on integrating Conscious Discipline practices into our HighScope curriculum. To further support families, a parent workshop on Conscious Discipline was also hosted during the program year.



2025 - 2026 Community Assessment Update

The 2025–2026 Community Assessment reflects Flowers Early Learning’s ongoing commitment to understanding and responding to the evolving needs of children and families in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. The Community Assessment Team gathered and analyzed data from a variety of sources, including parent surveys, population and workforce trends, housing and transportation information, infant mortality rates, and other key community indicators.

Family and community voices remain central to this work. Feedback from families and community partners helps identify current strengths, challenges, and priorities, guiding our efforts to provide responsive, high-quality services and support.

Together, Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties are strengthened by collaborative partnerships, local resources, and organizations dedicated to supporting children, families and overall community well-being.



2025–2026 Community Assessment Identified Needs



For the 2025–2026 Community Assessment, we identified three key areas of continued need:

- infant mortality prevention
- access to infant and toddler care
- supporting families in preparing for natural disasters and severe weather events

These priorities reflect ongoing challenges faced by families across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties and highlight areas where targeted support can strengthen safety, stability, and well-being.

Infant mortality prevention remains a critical focus, with continued emphasis on safe sleep practices, maternal health, and connecting families to prenatal and postnatal supports. Access to high-quality infant and toddler care is also a persistent need, as families continue to seek affordable, reliable care options that support both child development and workforce participation.

In addition, the assessment highlighted the importance of helping families prepare for emergencies such as floods, storms, and other severe weather events. Strengthening family readiness and increasing access to preparedness resources will help ensure children and families are safer and better supported during times of crisis.

Area of Need: Infant Mortality & Maternal Health

While infant mortality remains a concern across the region, recent data and community feedback point to broader maternal and infant health challenges, including gaps in prenatal care access, mental health support, and postpartum resources. Families continue to report barriers related to transportation, healthcare access, and navigating available services, especially during pregnancy and the first year of life.

Maternal & Infant Health: 2026–2027 Program Year Recommendations

Expand Prenatal & Postpartum Education

Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director

Enhance education for expectant families, including prenatal health, postpartum recovery, and infant development, with a focus on accessibility and cultural responsiveness.

Safe Sleep & Infant Wellness

Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director & Communications and Engagement Coordinator

Continue safe sleep education while expanding digital outreach through short-form videos and family-centered resources that reinforce safe practices and early development.

Strengthen Community-Based Supports

Responsible Party: Early Head Start Education Director

Deepen partnerships with doulas, healthcare providers, and mental health professionals to provide holistic, wraparound support for families before and after birth.



Area of Need: Access to Infant & Toddler Care

The shortage of high-quality infant and toddler care continues to impact families across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Waitlists remain long, and affordability continues to be a barrier for working families. At the same time, providers face ongoing workforce challenges, including recruitment, retention, and burnout, directly affecting the availability of care.

Access to childcare remains a critical challenge across Southwest Michigan. Current estimates show a shortage of 3,331 childcare slots in Berrien County, 1,486 in Cass County, and 1,566 in Van Buren County, underscoring the urgent need for expanded capacity to support families and support the local workforce.

Child Care Access & Capacity: 2026–2027 Program Year Recommendations

Increase Infant/Toddler Capacity

Responsible Party: CEO/Executive Director and Director of Philanthropic Innovation

Pursue funding and partnership opportunities to expand classroom capacity, particularly for children under age three, while maintaining high-quality learning environments.



Strengthen the Early Childhood Workforce

Responsible Party: Human Resources Team

Expand workforce development efforts, including career pathways, apprenticeships, and ongoing professional development to attract and retain qualified educators.

Support Family Access & Navigation

Responsible Party: Family Services Team

Assist families in navigating child care options, subsidies, and enrollment processes to reduce barriers and improve access to available care.

Area of Need: Emergency Preparedness

Emerging community feedback and environmental trends highlight a growing need for family-centered emergency preparedness. Severe weather events, economic instability, and housing disruptions have underscored gaps in families' ability to plan for and respond to emergencies, particularly for those with young children.

This need is especially important as Michigan has experienced a noticeable increase in the frequency and severity of severe weather, including tornadoes, in recent years. In 2025 alone, the state experienced 33 tornadoes, more than double the average of 13 in prior years, reinforcing the importance of proactive storm preparedness and family emergency planning.

Emergency Preparedness: 2026–2027 Program Year Recommendations

Promote Family Emergency Planning

Responsible Party: Health and Family Services Team

Support families in developing individualized emergency plans that account for children's needs, including supplies, communication strategies, and evacuation planning.

Increase Access to Preparedness Resources

Responsible Party: Communications and Engagement Coordinator

Create and distribute simple, accessible materials focused on emergency readiness, including weather safety and first response basics.

Build Community Response Partnerships

Responsible Party: Health and Family Services Team

Collaborate with local emergency management agencies and community partners to connect families with training, resources, emergency kits, and coordinated support systems.



Our Commitment to Children and Families

This update provides understanding of the strengths, needs, and priorities of families across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Through data analysis, family input, and community collaboration, this process helps ensure that Flowers Early Learning remains responsive to the changing needs of the communities we serve.

The findings of this assessment will guide planning, decision-making, and service delivery throughout the coming year. By focusing on identified priority areas, we continue to strengthen supports that promote safety, stability, and healthy development for young children.

Flowers Early Learning remains committed to working alongside families, staff, and community partners to build systems of support that are responsive, equitable, and impactful. Together, we will continue to address barriers, expand opportunities, and ensure that every child has the foundation they need to thrive.





Where children, families,
and communities thrive.

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