

Illinois Preschool Expansion Program
Guide to Determining Eligibility and Selecting Participants

4/13/15

Establishing minimum eligibility

At minimum, a **child must be four-years-old AND from a family with income at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level**. The child must turn four-years-old by September 1 in order to enroll in the program. Children who are age-eligible for kindergarten are not eligible for the program.

Age eligibility

Programs must prove the child is age eligible using any one of the following forms of evidence:

- Child's birth certificate (copy is acceptable)
- Passport
- Court documents
- Medical records
- Visa
- Other governmental documentation

A child's certified birth certificate is the preferred form of evidence to prove age eligibility. Programs should first ask families to produce the child's birth certificate, and if it is not available, the program can assist families with identifying other options for proving the child's age. If the family is unable to produce any evidence, a written statement attesting to the child's date of birth, signed by the parent or guardian, as well as a plan to obtain the documentation is required. In this case, programs should assist families in obtaining a certified birth certificate.

Income eligibility

Programs must prove income eligibility for all participants enrolling in the program by documenting how family income was calculated using any one of the following forms of evidence:

- Pay stubs (Two most recent, consecutive)
- Proof of WIC benefit
- Proof of SNAP benefit
- Proof of TANF enrollment
- Proof of SSI benefit
- Proof the family receives CCAP
- Tax return (most recent)
- Wages and tax statement (most recent W-2)
- Verification/letter from employer

- Proof that **parent** is enrolled in Medicaid (a medical card with the child's name does not prove income eligibility)
- Signed written statement from the family (for families with no income, provide form)

Families derive income from many different sources and may need several options to prove income eligibility. The preferred way to verify income eligibility, however, is through proof of enrollment in a public benefits program, or paystubs. Programs should first offer parents the opportunity to use proof of enrollment in a public benefits program or paystubs to verify their income before offering other options. For parents that are not employed, programs should first work to obtain documentation of receipt of one of the public benefits listed above before utilizing a signed written statement from the parent, as this is the least preferred documentation.

As mentioned above, programs should encourage families to provide verification that they are enrolled in public benefits programs during the eligibility screening process. Evidence of enrollment in a public benefit program includes possession of a public benefits card with the family's name printed on it (such as a LINK card), a signed and dated letter from the administering agency, a referral from the administering agency that indicates the family is receiving a specific benefit, or contacting the administering agency directly after a release of information is signed by the family. Programs should document the evidence used for verification and use their best judgement in determining whether or not to accept evidence that appears questionable in some way.

If families present without proof of income or verification of public benefits at the time of the eligibility screening, programs should still assess the family for other eligibility, including priority selection factors, and accept provisional proof of income (such as a signed written statement from the family or only a single paystub, etc.) until the family is determined to have enough cumulative points from the selection factor assessment to enroll in the program. Programs must collect the appropriate documentation before or soon after the child begins attending the program, but may wait until that point in order to save time and work for both the program staff and family, particularly for families that don't have enough points to enroll in the program.

Note: Verification of income must be completed no earlier than six months prior to the child's first day of attendance in the Preschool Expansion program. Therefore, for example, programs that served a child at age three would need to do a new determination of income eligibility for the Preschool Expansion program rather than relying on evidence of the family's income at the time the child enrolled in the three-year-old program.

Household size and income

For the purposes of determining income eligibility of a family for the Preschool Expansion program, "family" includes all persons living in the same household who are:

- Supported by the parent(s)' or guardian(s)' income; and
- Related to the child's parent(s) or guardian(s) by blood, marriage, or adoption; or
- The child's authorized caregiver or legally responsible party

Programs should count income only from parents or guardians of the child, **including unmarried parents residing in the same household**; income of adult siblings of the child that are residing with the family or unmarried partners of the parent who are not related to the child should **not** be counted. Income of a parent who does not reside in the household with the child should also not be counted; however, programs should request information on child support, if applicable, and count that income toward the total household income. Non-resident parents should not be included in the total household size.

Categorical eligibility

Children who are homeless and children who are in foster care are considered categorically eligible for Preschool Expansion program. Income verification is not required (as it can be assumed homeless families have low income, and children in foster care have no family income). If a program determines a child is homeless or in foster care, it must allow the child to begin attending the program without immunization and other medical records, birth certificates, or other documents, giving the family reasonable time to present these documents.

Technical Assistance Resource

Although intended for use with the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) [Parent Income Calculation Worksheet](#) may be a useful tool that can be used to calculate a family's annual income from information on paystubs. The IDHS [Wage Verification form](#) is an example of a form that can be used to obtain verification of a family's income from an employer.

Note for programs blending and braiding funding

If a program blends and braids funding with another funding stream, such as Head Start, the program must meet the most restrictive requirements of all funding sources. For example, if a Preschool Expansion program blends funding with Head Start, all families must meet the Head Start income eligibility criteria and all children must meet the Preschool Expansion age criteria.

Documenting priority factors for selecting participants

The Preschool Expansion program is intended to serve the children with the highest needs in each community; therefore, programs are required to prioritize children by need as part of their recruitment, selection and enrollment process for the program. Per Illinois' application, Preschool Expansion Subgrantees will be expected to fill their slots with eligible children with very high needs, defined as eligible children who receive 25 or more points on the Eligibility and Weighted Priority Enrollment Form.

- The highest priority for selection for the program must be given for: homelessness, child welfare involvement, disability (child has IEP for more than itinerant speech services or has been referred for special education evaluation), and family income at or below 50% the Federal Poverty Level
- Other priority selection factors include: income at or below 100% FPL, caregiver with no high school diploma or GED, teen parent at the birth of first child, immigrant or refugee family, active duty military family, English not spoken in the home, and child displaying developmental delays for which a referral to special education is not indicated at the time of the screening.

On a case-by-case basis, programs may enroll children experiencing other risk factors of significant concern that are not included above. Programs must document the reason for enrolling a child that doesn't meet any of the priority selection factors; this reason can include clinical judgment or community circumstance. Children who do not meet any of the priority selection factors should account for no more than 20% of a program's total enrollment.

Documentation/evidence of priority selection factors

Because producing evidence of many of the priority selection factors may prove onerous for both families and program staff, all selection factors will be documented through a **parent interview and questionnaire**. The responses from the parent interview and questionnaire will be used by program staff to complete the **standardized Eligibility and Weighted Priority Enrollment Form**. The parent questionnaire gathers all information needed to determine whether a parent/guardian is on active military duty, the age of the parents at the birth of the first child, whether the parent completed high school/GED, and whether English is spoken at home. The interview gathers additional information about homelessness, child welfare involvement, immigration and refugee status, as well as other more general information about the family's strengths and challenges. If a program is serving the child during his or her "three-year-old year," and/or if the program has previously collected the needed information for the family, the program does not have to conduct a new parent interview for purposes of completing the Weighted Priority Enrollment Form. However, as noted above, verification of income eligibility must be completed no less than six months before the child begins the Preschool Expansion program.

Programs will also receive additional information through the child's developmental screening, referral sources, and the income verification process that can be used to verify the presence of some of the selection factors without requesting additional documentation. Should programs verify presence of selection factors through these other methods, the corresponding questions that assess for these factors on the parent questionnaire/interview should be skipped. For instance, if a local family shelter refers a family they are serving to a Preschool Expansion program, that referral provides verification of the family's homelessness and therefore the program does not need to ask the family the questions to assess for homelessness in the parent interview. All programs must use a parent interview and questionnaire combination that includes at least all of the questions included on the sample form in this guidance document, and all programs must complete the standardized Eligibility and Weighted Priority Enrollment Form for every child enrolled. Programs may add additional questions to the parent interview as indicated by local or program needs.

Guidance on determining homeless status

Research has shown that parents are often not aware or do not readily share that they meet the definition of homeless according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (see definition below). Programs are advised to have a conversation with parents to assess their living situation. Here are some questions should be part of the interview to ensure that children who meet the definition of homeless are accurately identified:

- Tell me about your current living situation.
- How long have you been in your current place?
- Is it permanent or just temporary?
- How many times have you moved in the past year? What is the reason for the moves?
- Are you staying in your own place or with friends/relatives?
 - *If you are staying with friends/relatives:* Did you and your friends/relatives decide to move in together and share expenses for the long-term? Or is this a temporary situation?
 - How many people share the housing? How much space is there?
- Do you feel safe and comfortable in the place you're staying now?

In this conversation, staff should listen for evidence that the family's living situation is not **fixed, regular, and adequate**. All families residing in a transitional or emergency shelter are homeless, as are families living in a car, park, outdoors, rail/bus station, or storage unit; "couch surfing" and hotels/motels are almost always homeless situations as well. If the family reports frequent/multiple moves, family members living in different places, a temporary living situation, or describes unsafe, very crowded, or substandard housing, they are very likely homeless and should receive 50 points on the eligibility form. If the family has been referred by a homeless service provider (shelter worker, McKinney-Vento liaison), this verifies the family is homeless and the interviewer should skip the above questions.

Guidance on determining child welfare involvement

As with homelessness, families do not always offer information that would allow a program to determine that a child should be considered as having current or recent involvement with the child welfare system. Therefore, the following questions are suggested for inclusion in the parent interview:

- Is the child currently in foster care?
- Has the child been in foster care at any point during the past year?
- Do you have an open intact family services case with the Department of Children and Family Services? Have you had an open intact family services case at any point during the past year?
- Is either parent currently a ward of the state? Has either parent of the child been a ward of the state during the past year?

If a family answers yes to any of the above questions, they have confirmed current or recent child welfare involvement and should receive 50 points on the eligibility form. In addition, if the family

was referred by a child welfare agency, this verifies that the family has child welfare involvement and the interviewer should skip these questions.

Guidance on determining recent immigrant/refugee family status

The interview should include the following questions to determine whether the child or family is considered a recent immigrant or a refugee:

- Has the child and/or either of the child's primary caregiver(s) immigrated to the US within the past two years? If so, when? (Note: Legal immigration status is not a relevant factor.)
- Does anyone in the child's immediate family (including any guardians) have legal status as a refugee or asylee?

If a family answers yes to either of the above questions, they have confirmed their status as a recent immigrant or refugee family and should receive 25 points on the eligibility form. If the family was referred by a refugee services agency or other immigrant services agency, this verifies the family's status as well and the interviewer should skip the above questions.

Children with disabilities

Preschool Expansion classrooms must include children with IEPs who meet the income requirements for the Preschool Expansion program. Program monitoring will include an analysis of the percentage of children enrolled who have an IEP other than an IEP for speech only. The percentage of children with IEPs other than speech only should be no more than 30% in each classroom, and programs are strongly encouraged to include at least 9% children with IEPs in each classroom. Preschool Expansion program eligible children who are referred for a special education evaluation should continue enrollment in the Preschool Expansion classroom. For children who are found eligible for special education, the IEP Team must consider the Preschool Expansion classroom as the first option for educational placement. Children with IEPs will have their services provided in the Preschool Expansion classroom embedded in the activities and routines of the day as indicated in the IEP.

Note: Children with disabilities must meet the basic program eligibility requirements. They must be four years old on September 1 of the school year in which they are served, and their family income must be below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Technical Assistance Resource

The Administration for Children and Families [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!*](#) is a coordinated federal effort to encourage healthy child development, universal developmental and behavioral screening for children, and support for the families and providers who care for them. The website for this initiative includes tools and resources for both providers and parents, including information about best practices in developmental and behavioral screening and how to talk with parents about the screening results.

Reserving slots to accommodate children and families with especially high needs

Per Illinois' application, Preschool Expansion programs must develop a local plan for ensuring that preschool services will be available to age-eligible children with especially high needs (e.g., children who are homeless or in foster care) even if those children do not present for screening and eligibility determination until after the school year begins. Each Preschool Expansion program must work with its community partners to develop this plan based on past enrollment patterns, student mobility, prevalence of homelessness and foster care placement in the community, and other factors.

It is anticipated that most Preschool Expansion programs' plans will include reserving at least 5-10% of their program slots to be filled during the first two months of the school year. These slots would be filled immediately by any child who is homeless, in foster care, or otherwise demonstrates especially high needs. If the slots are still not filled by November 1, the program would enroll the highest need children from the waiting list.

In addition, programs are expected to maintain contact with agencies serving homeless families and children in foster care throughout the year, and if a homeless or foster child is identified as needing preschool services after all spots are filled, programs must make every effort to keep in contact with the family and place that child in a classroom as soon as an opening becomes available.

Establishing referral relationships

Programs are strongly encouraged to develop formal referral relationships with local providers that serve families that experience the priority selection factors, such as homeless service providers and McKinney-Vento liaisons, child welfare agencies, housing authorities, refugee resettlement agencies, and public aid offices. Not only will this ensure that programs are able to target the highest need children for enrollment, but a formal referral relationship can also support the process of verifying eligibility for the Preschool Expansion program. For example, the local TANF agency could refer families they serve directly to the Preschool Expansion program using a mutually agreed upon standardized process that incorporates verification of the family's receipt of TANF benefits. Programs are encouraged to develop referral forms collaboratively with partners that incorporate verification of age, income, and selection factors to the largest extent possible.

Technical Assistance Resources for Selection Factors

| Selection Factor | TA Resource |
|----------------------------|--|
| Homelessness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration for Children and Families Expanding Early Care and Education for Homeless Children page provides links to information on policies, guidance, and resources to increase access to early childhood programs for homeless children: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ecd/interagency-projects/ece-services-for-homeless-children. • The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: www.naehcy.org • The National Center on Homeless Education: www.nche.org |
| Child welfare involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Welfare Information Gateway: https://www.childwelfare.gov/ • National Child Traumatic Stress Network: http://learn.nctsn.org/course/index.php?categoryid=23 • DCFS Teen Parenting Service Network: http://www.youthincare.illinois.gov/TeenParent/TeenParent.shtml |
| IEP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illinois State Board of Education: www.isbe.net • Early Childhood Special Education: http://www.isbe.net/spec-ed/html/sped_early_child.htm |
| Military family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illinois Early Learning Project: http://illinoisearlylearning.org/faqs/military-families.htm • National Center for Children in Poverty: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_938.html |
| Teen parent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration for Children and Families: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/pregnant-parenting-teens-tips.pdf |
| Immigrant/refugee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home |
| English not spoken at home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BUILD Initiative: http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/59/Preschool-and-School-Readiness-Experiences-of-Children-with-Non-English-Speaking-Parents.aspx |

Definitions

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| Homeless | Pursuant to subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)), a family is considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including: children sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals or are awaiting foster care placement; who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private space not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and migratory children who meet this definition. |
| Current or recent child welfare involvement | A child is considered to be child welfare involved if the child is in foster care (including traditional, specialized, or home of relative placements), the child’s family has an open intact family services case, or if the child’s parent is a ward of the state. A child is considered to meet this risk criterion if the child has experienced any of these conditions within the past year. |
| Foster care | Foster care means 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. |
| Teen parent at birth of first child | A family meets this criterion if either parent of the child was under the age of 19 at the time of the birth of the first child. |
| Active Duty Military family | A family is considered to be a military family if one or more of the child’s primary caregivers is currently on active duty. |
| Recent immigrant | A child is considered to be a recent immigrant if the child’s family has moved to the United States from another country within the past two years. |
| Refugee | A refugee is a person with legal refugee status and as left his/her home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group or political opinion (section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is usually responsible for awarding legal refugee status. |