



# 2022 IMPACT REPORT





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Thank You

*Mission: To strengthen a coordinated and accountable early childhood system with policies, programs, and services that support and empower all families in Kent County, with a focus on eliminating disparate outcomes and closing inequitable gaps.*

*Vision: Every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life.*

2022 was an incredible year for First Steps Kent. We partnered with more than 20 organizations and provided funding support for 33 initiatives through the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. We strengthened the child care network by elevating the in-home business professional voice. We worked with local, state, and national experts to inform early childhood policy and best practice. This impact report highlights the many successes and stories of this past year.

One key story is the overall benefit of the Ready by Five millage dollars. Last year, more than 12,000 young children and expectant parents used this early childhood network of quality services and programs. Parents sought navigation and outreach for housing, home visiting, food access, dental care, and baby supplies. Infants and young children received developmental screenings and early intervention to improve health and school readiness. This dedicated and sustained funding is allowing Kent County to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic disparities in health and school readiness for young children.

Another important story is the success of Mainspring Early Care Alliance Initiative. Mainspring, which evolved from our Shared Services Pilot Project, aims to support and strengthen child care businesses so they can provide quality, efficient, sustainable care. As the experts, these business owners

now have the power to inform an equitable and provider-centered system. First Steps Kent is working to provide solutions to our child care crisis through innovative strategies like Mainspring.

As a supporter of First Steps Kent, you've witnessed how one vision can transform the early childhood continuum of Kent County. Our vision of equitable access for all families with young children means a healthier and more vibrant community for all. Our work, which continues to expand, is doing just that.

As the new leader of this organization, I'm grateful to those who helped lay the foundation for the future of First Steps Kent. It is their work and the commitment of our current First Steps' team that has provided a smooth leadership transition. As we move through 2023, you can expect my continued commitment toward ensuring all babies are born healthy, remain developmentally on track, and are ready for kindergarten.

Jennifer Headley-Nordman  
President, First Steps Kent



## First Steps Kent Team

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Project Manager

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Project Director

Megan Streng  
Communications Director

Christine Timbol Larson  
Senior Funding Administrator

Daniel VanderMolen  
Project Manager



Early Investment. Lifelong Success.





# 2022 IMPACT

The experiences and early learning opportunities of infants and toddlers greatly impact their later development and success. Brains are built from the bottom up, with basic circuits and skills providing the foundation for more advanced circuits and skills. Scientists know that a strong foundation increases the likelihood of positive outcomes, while a weak foundation does the opposite. Prolonged and persistent stress in early childhood weakens the developing brain, which can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.

The most significant benefits of early childhood investments are realized as children get older, first with improved school performance and reduced need for remediation, later as they are more likely to graduate from high school and contribute to the local economy.

First Steps Kent is working to strengthen a coordinated and accountable early childhood system for families, partners, and early educators in Kent County. By elevating

policies, programs, and resources that support and empower all families in Kent County, we are working with partners to close inequitable gaps in services and resources, so all children enter kindergarten healthy and ready for learning success.

For children to thrive, it is important that families are thriving. In 2022, First Steps Kent partnered with Stanford University's Center for Early Childhood to survey parents and caregivers across the country – including 1,500 people in Kent County who care for children ages 0-5. Through this project we have gained timely, actionable information about the needs of families, the challenges they face, and their successes.

What we learned is no surprise – the uncertainty of the last few years has added stress to families' daily lives. Many parents report having more anxiety than ever before. They are worried about having stable housing, employment, and income, and they are concerned about their children's

social emotional development and learning loss. These findings about Kent County highlight the importance of services funded by the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. Ready by Five-funded partners are working together to guide families to community resources that are available – everything from housing support to food access, to quality child care and early learning.

Like many communities, Kent County continues to experience challenges and unmet needs within child care – both for families and early childhood educators. There are not enough quality child care spaces to meet the community's demand – in part due to chronically

low wages and benefits for providers who work in the profession. First Steps Kent is working with partners to identify strategies that will stabilize the industry, because offering early learning opportunities, including quality child care, is vital to the success of our community. More information about those efforts can be found on page 8.

Starting earlier is better. Every dollar invested in high-quality birth-to-five early childhood education for children facing economic disadvantages delivers a 13 percent annual return on investment, significantly higher than the seven to 10 percent return that comes with preschool alone. ([www.heckmanequation.com](http://www.heckmanequation.com))



*"A mother was struggling with finding services for her child who has a delay in speech. We were able to connect her to Early On and she is now in the pipeline to be connected to an early education school program at three years old."*

Family Futures, Healthy Communities Coach



Parent Voice Matters

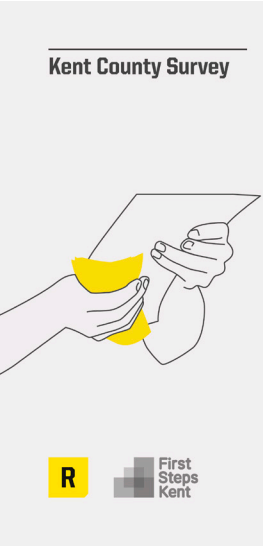
The early childhood system in Kent County is constantly evolving, influenced by new research, reporting, and funding sources. However, the most important influences guiding the system are the true experts in what works, what doesn't, and what's needed: parents. Parents come in all kinds - foster parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, stepparents, and other caregivers. Their voices guide the work we do.

First Steps Kent believes parents are the experts! Since the onset of the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage, parents have helped guide decisions. On the Resident Proposal Review Board, four parents work with local leaders and

experts to read and score proposals and ultimately decide which programs and services are funded.

In August 2022, we hosted the national Parent Leader Network, a group affiliated with the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, D.C. Parent leaders from across the country met to learn from one another. They shared best practices and ideas on how early childhood organizations can engage parents and keep them involved. Parents in the network receive training so they are equipped to serve. We also added two new parent leaders to the First Steps Kent Commission and are constantly working to ensure parents are part of all decision-making and advisory groups.

During 2022, First Steps Kent was one of the first communities to join the RAPID survey project offered through Stanford University's Center for Early Childhood. When the national RAPID project began in April 2020, parents were surveyed each month to learn how they were faring through the pandemic. As the project continues, the research has expanded to local communities to keep a pulse on parent needs and successes. The work provides meaningful insight into the experiences of families as we compare Kent County feedback to national feedback. Results are shared with early childhood system partners so they can ensure their work is aligned with what parents need.



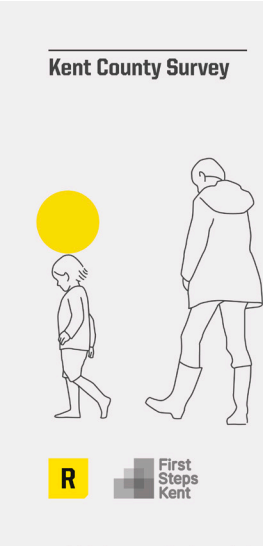
**Everything is getting more expensive, pay isn't increasing to keep up with the amount, there isn't enough hours in the day for a good family/work life balance, and the kids are growing up fast so my husband is missing out on milestones because he's working so much.**

Parent in Byron Center



**The monthly child stimulus needs to go back to monthly and no longer be on tax returns. My child's needs happen 12 months out of the year, not once a year.**

Parent in Kentwood



**[During this time, I need] easier access to special education, more inclusive programs and teachers equipped and willing to teach children with disabilities.**

Parent in Forest Hills



PARENT VOICE

2022  
COMMUNITY FINDINGS

- 92% of Black families and 88% of Latinx families reported material hardship, compared to 55% of White families, and 29% of other racial/ethnic groups.
- 76% of parents located in the southwest corner of Kent County reported experiencing material hardship, the highest rate of any area in Kent County.
- 55% of families reported receiving the MI Bridges Childcare subsidy.
- 65% of parents reported emotional distress in their child(ren).
- 77% of parents are covered by health insurance.
- 76% of children under six are covered by health insurance.

*(RAPID Survey Project, in partnership with First Steps Kent. Stanford Center on Early Childhood. Stanford Graduate School of Education. Nov. 2022)*





# CHILD CARE RESPONSE

## Advocating for Early Education

The importance of quality early education on a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development is well documented. However, accessing quality early care and education is often difficult for families. Child care is one of the largest expenses for families with young children, often costing more than a housing payment or college tuition. Further complicating access is the reality that space in high quality care is limited, as Kent County does not have enough slots to meet the demand. Families are often left with options that present inconsistencies with quality programming.

Access, affordability, and quality are longstanding issues that have only been made more challenging by the pandemic. Solutions require policy change and sustained investment from the federal and state governments and commitment from the private sector. First Steps Kent and partners continue to advocate for effective policy solutions. Federal COVID-relief funding is providing an important start, but it is short-term support and gaps remain.

First Steps Kent has been aligning and supporting advocacy efforts at the local, state, and national levels. We have been delivering messages about the importance of early childhood development and how our community's work is improving outcomes for young children and families in a number of ways. Advocacy work includes:

- The Case for Child Care campaign -- First Steps Kent capitalized on the national conversation about child care to create more local awareness using a series of guest blog posts and social media graphics.

- The Cost of Child Care video -- First Steps Kent created a video in which local child care providers shared their perspectives about the importance of early learning and the some of the misconceptions.
- Normal was Never Enough -- This joint campaign between First Steps Kent, KConnect, and other community partners featured blog posts about the inequities in child care, along with what local groups are doing to try to improve the system.
- Think Babies -- As one of 14 communities funded by the Pritzker Children's Initiative, First Steps Kent works with national partners to build a prenatal-to-three policy movement. This collaborative work has led to the creation of Think Babies Michigan, a coalition of more than 2,300 members mobilizing and advocating on policy priorities identified by families and early childhood experts around the state. First Steps Kent participates on the steering committee that is co-designing a vision and plan for a comprehensive prenatal-to-three system in Michigan.
- Vote Kids First -- First Steps Kent co-hosted a candidate forum before the November election that invited parents with young children to ask questions of their local candidates.
- Child Care Subsidies -- First Steps Kent promoted and was part of the Kent County Health Department's Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) convening, in which 15 organizations from across the state discussed challenges and how to bring awareness to subsidy programs and improve access to care.

## 2022 CHILD CARE NUMBERS

- 22% of local parents reported they were struggling to afford child care, compared to 10% nationwide. (*RAPID Survey Project*)
- The average annual cost for an infant and a four-year-old is \$18,802 in a child care center and \$13,621 for in-home care. (*Child Care Aware*)
- An estimated 44% of Michiganders live in child care deserts. A child care desert is when the ratio of children ages 0-5 to the number of licensed child care spots is greater than 3. Only one county in the state had enough spots for children in 2020. (*MLPP*)
- More than 65% of families with young children have all available parents in the workforce. (*Annie E. Casey Foundation*)
- It is estimated that 35% of Michigan children are in families with a single parent. (*Annie E. Casey Foundation*)



*"As the experts, child care business owners will have the power to inform the creation of an equitable system where their needs are centered."*

-Kristen Sobolewski, First Steps Kent



# MAINSRING

2022

MAINSRING NUMBERS

- Hosted four webinars, with 1,197 registered participants from more than 50 different cities in Michigan
- Recruited an 11-member in-home child care business owner advisory team, representative of all areas of Kent County
- Provided information and resources to 209 in-home child care providers
- Learned best practices at the 2022 National Shared Services Technical Conference in Austin, Texas, which featured 30 learning sessions with more than 500 participants from across the country



**main  
spring**

EARLY CARE ALLIANCE

*In 2022, Mainspring got a name and brand identity!*

## Developing Mainspring Early Care Alliance

In-home child care providers in Kent County are getting back-end support to maintain their businesses, helping to stabilize the industry. A three-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is providing funding for First Steps Kent to build on its Shared Services Pilot Project with an initiative now known as Mainspring Early Care Alliance. The expenses and time associated with running a child care business force many providers out of the industry. Research shows easing those burdens helps stabilize the pool of providers, giving families more options.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation's grant renewal will allow First Steps Kent to implement what was learned during the pilot. An early care alliance infrastructure will support and strengthen home-based child care businesses, so they can reinvest time and energy into quality care and education.

First Steps Kent has partnered with in-home child care providers throughout the pilot project and will continue to do so as Mainspring. During 2022, 11 child care business owners joined the Mainspring Advisory Team. Responsive to and reflective of the community, this team will ensure

that early care resources are invested wisely and fairly. As the experts, the advisory team is crucial at this stage of implementation to guide and strategically inform the alliance.

"Your team has made an amazing impact on the lives of all child care professionals in Kent County, and in turn throughout Michigan. I am excited to learn that important work will continue," said Laurie Fletcher, in-home child care business owner and member of the Mainspring Advisory Team.

"First Steps Kent's ability to guide and lift the voices of those of us working in this industry has helped create for us a more positive and respectable working environment. At the same time, your team has assisted us in making significant steps forward on some of the biggest issues we have always faced."

The framework for the Mainspring Early Care Alliance consists of five priority areas: 1. Provider Informed Voice, 2. Connector, 3. Business Acumen, 4. Translation/ Interpretation Support, and 5. Advocacy.



About the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage

The time between a mother becoming pregnant and the child entering kindergarten is critical for brain development and social and emotional learning. Making sure all parents in Kent County have access to developmental screenings, play opportunities, and brain-building resources for their child is essential and is the focus of the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage.

The Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage provides dedicated and sustainable funding for programs that improve the health, school readiness, and well-being of children under age five. It allows more children and families from across the community to participate in programs that are proven to increase their likelihood of success in school and beyond.

First Steps Kent administers and oversees the millage, which now generates about \$6.7 million a year to support critical early childhood services and programs.

To date, more than \$15 million has been distributed to programs and services that have been proven to make a difference in the trajectory of young children's lives.

In 2022, more than 12,400 young children and expectant parents in Kent Count benefitted from direct services funded by the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. Those served represented every zip code in Kent County, with the largest concentration in the most densely populated communities: the core cities of Grand Rapids, Grandville, Kentwood, Walker, and Wyoming.



# READY BY FIVE

2022  
READY BY FIVE NUMBERS

- More than 12,400 individuals enrolled in regular programming.
- 80% were children ages 0-5, 7% expectant parents, 12% other/unavailable.
- Through the Outreach and Navigation network, partners successfully navigated 3,900 children and families by connecting them to at least one resource.
- The eight Ready by Five Outreach and Navigation programs completed more than 49,000 contacts and 10,566 screenings.
- More than 10,000 home visits were completed in 2022 alone, with nearly 1,700 children and expectant parents participating.
- Play and Learn programs had 974 attendees.
- Reach out and Read distributed 24,000 books to 14,158 children.
- Home Health programs completed 375 risk screenings, comprehensive assessments, and follow-up screening. Of homes screened for environmental risks, lead was the most identified risk with 115 screenings.

Play and Learn

Play and Learn programs provide quality early learning experiences for young children while strengthening their adult caretakers' understanding of child development. Every play and learn group consists of age-appropriate activities that enrich holistic development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Caretakers learn what they can do at home to continue nurturing those skills.

Each session contains defined, essential learning objectives for the child and the caretaker. Each child who attends generally leaves with a small takeaway project or book to extend the age-appropriate learning that occurred. Programs also offer linkages to developmental screenings and early intervention services.

"Children have benefited from this program in many ways. They are more eager to read and want to learn more. Children have access to more books and want them read to them," said one Vibrant Futures Little Learners playgroup participant.



# READY BY FIVE

## OUTREACH AND NAVIGATION

Outreach and Navigation programming includes:

- Outreach to families
- Needs assessments and screening (read more on page 4)
- Navigation (read more on page 17)

**8,237**

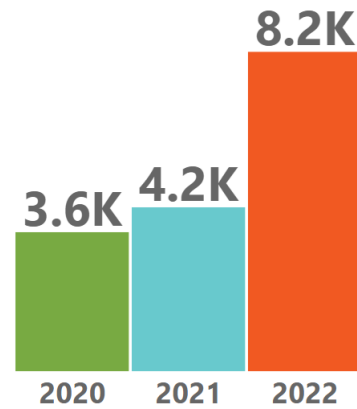
Total Participants

**\$3,105,078**

Total Invested

**8**

Number of Programs



## HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Healthy Development programs ensure families have access to coordinated care that maximizes the child's physical and emotional health. Programs in this service category include:

- Support for expectant and new parents
- Developmental screenings and information
- Healthy and safe home initiatives (read more on page 19)
- Fetal Infant Mortality Review Network (read more on page 17)

**1,293**

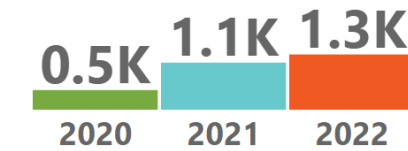
Total Participants

**\$1,762,838**

Total Invested

**7**

Number of Programs



## EARLY LEARNING

Early Learning programs nurture a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Early Learning programming includes:

- Play and learn groups (read more on page 13)
- Early literacy development

**1,274**

Total Participants

**\$1,442,330**

Total Invested

**6**

Number of Programs



The bar graphs show total participants per service category 2020 - 2022.



## PARENT SUPPORT

Parenting Education and Support programs ensure parents have the knowledge, skills, and resources to support their children's health, development, and learning. Programs include:

- Home visiting (read more on page 17)
- Translation and interpretation
- Child safety initiatives (read more on page 19)

**2,183**

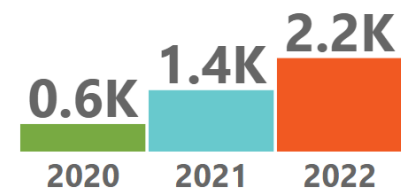
Total Participants

**\$2,406,149**

Total Invested

**12**

Number of Programs



The bar graphs show total participants per service category 2020 - 2022.



# READY BY FIVE

*"I have several families who have embraced the educational benefits of reading to babies. So much so, that they are sending me videos of their babies responding positively to being read to. These are families whose first language is not English. But they are learning about language development and value their infants' exploration of books."*

- Molly, Bright Beginnings  
Community Health Worker

## Reducing the Risk of Infant Mortality

The death of a baby is an excruciating loss for a family and community; it's particularly tragic when it could have been prevented. To have interventions that are targeted and effective, it is necessary to know the causes and contributors to infant mortality that are specific to Kent County. Understanding that is the work of the Fetal Infant Mortality Review Program, which is run by the Kent County Health Department and funded by the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage.

Since funding was re-introduced for this network, the Kent County Health Department has been leading a group of community partners in data collection, evaluation, and analysis of infant mortality.

The first report of the Kent County Fetal Infant Mortality Review Program was published in 2022. The data in the report shines a bright light on disparities, causes, and contributing factors and lifts up recommendations to reduce infant death as a whole and decrease persistent racial and ethnic disparities.

## Home Visiting

"Let them lead the way when we play," was a key takeaway from one parent who participated in Vibrant Futures' Little Scholars, a home visiting program.

Children learn when they have the support and encouragement of interactive parents and caregivers. Having a session with a home visiting coach adds a fun, meaningful activity that babies and parents can learn from.

Parents report that home visiting programs help them improve their parenting skills and gain confidence. More than 10,000 home visits were completed in 2022, reaching nearly 1,200 children and expecting parents. Rigorous evaluation of high-quality home visiting programs has shown positive impact on reducing incidences of child abuse and neglect, improving birth outcomes, improving school readiness for young children, and increasing high school graduation rates for mothers participating in the programs.

## Outreach and Navigation

In 2022, the eight Ready by Five Outreach and Navigation programs were successful in reaching families more than 49,000 times and completing 10,500 screenings. Programs provided 3,900 referrals in which a family had a confirmed outcome. In many cases, without Outreach and Navigation, the family likely would not have engaged with those community services. The most requested supports are below.



**READY BY FIVE**  
Early Childhood Millage  
Provider Network

**For a full list of Ready by Five programs and services visit [www.firststepskent.org/providers](http://www.firststepskent.org/providers)**

## 2022 MOST REQUESTED SUPPORTS

Families most often requested the following:

- Home visiting services: 1,013 referrals
- Housing support: 558 referrals
- Food access support: 483 referrals
- Dental services: 460 referrals
- Baby supplies: 416 referrals



# READY BY FIVE



## Supporting Behavioral Health of Young Children

In recent years, more children and parents have been looking for support related to behaviors and social emotional delays. This is commonly played out in child care and state-funded early learning programs. Recent data shows that, within early learning, there are significant disparities in children of color being suspended for behavioral concerns.

Ready by Five funding has expanded the evidenced-based program that utilizes the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) model, by teaming a mental health professional with early care and education staff and families to promote positive social and emotional development of children in care. These programs support children's social emotional health from infancy through age five.

## Child Safety Initiatives

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, sleep-related infant deaths are the leading cause of death among infants in Michigan. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for young children, and properly restrained children have a more than 50 percent greater chance of surviving a crash.

To ensure the safety of all babies and young children, car seats and safe sleep programs are now being offered to families with children through age five who live in Kent County. Three organizations are providing car seats and portable cribs, along with the training necessary for families who meet income qualifications. Bethany Christian Services, Cherry Health, and Family Futures serve households with income below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

*"Baby Scholars helped me realize the things I was good at. I'm so busy with balancing work and having time and energy for my son but my coach really helped me with finding space to teach and help my son grow smarter."*

- Baby Scholars Participant

## Lead Identification and Remediation

Lead in the home is a silent and prevalent danger in Kent County, as four out of five homes in the city of Grand Rapids and nearly three out of five countywide were built before 1978, the year lead was banned from paint. Exposure to even low amounts of lead can cause irreversible neurological, developmental, and health issues. Early identification of lead in the home followed by remediation are critical to eliminating exposure.

In 2022, Ready by Five-funded programs completed 378 risk screenings, comprehensive assessments, and follow-up screening. Of homes screened for environmental hazards, lead was the most identified risk (in 115 screenings). The screening also identified other hazards, including those that contribute to asthma, injuries, and pests. Many of these additional risks were mitigated through educating and problem solving with the family.

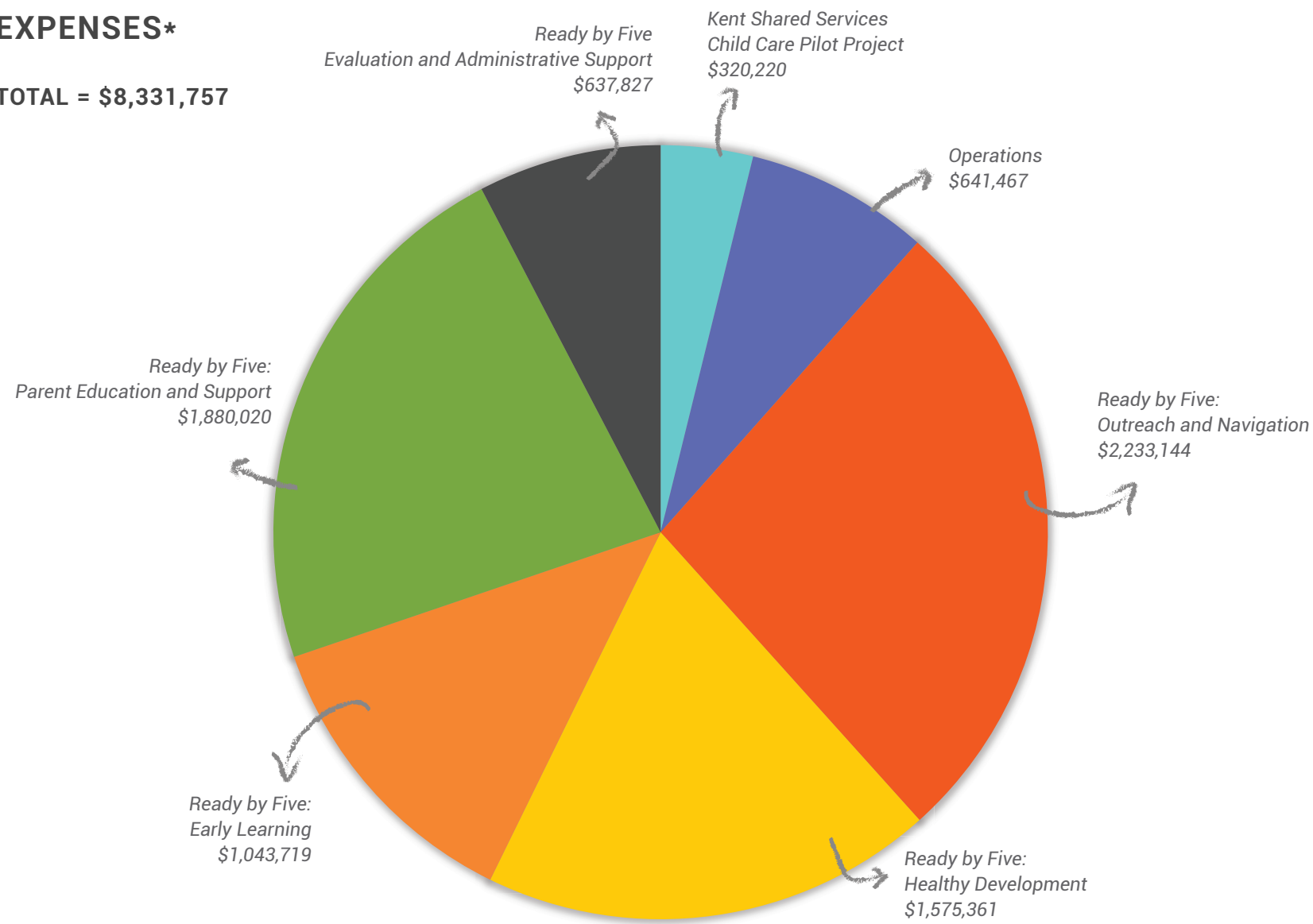


REVENUE AND SUPPORT\*

TOTAL REVENUE, SUPPORT, AND NET ASSETS = \$3,588,201

EXPENSES\*

TOTAL = \$8,331,757



\* FINANCIALS REPRESENT THE 2021/2022 FISCAL YEAR FOR FIRST STEPS KENT



FINANCIALS



FUNDERS

We want to thank our generous funders for their support of First Steps Kent and their commitment to young children in our community.

- Baker Family Foundation
- Frey Foundation
- J.B. & M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation
- Keller Foundation
- Kent County (Ready by Five)
- KRW Foundation
- Wege Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation

*"The work of First Steps is critical to ensuring that services to children and families continue in Kent County. The support that the community has given has made a significant difference in the lives of children and families."*

- Kate Pew Wolters, Board Co-Chair



THANK YOU



THE COMMISSION

The First Steps Kent Commission is committed to making Kent County a community in which all young children and their families can thrive. The Commission serves as our Board of Directors.

Kate Pew Wolters Co-Chair, KRW Foundation	Amanda Barbour Children's Healing Center	Melinda Johnson, MD Community Representative	Milt Rohwer Community Representative	Carl Ver Beek Community Representative
Lew Chamberlin Co-Chair, West Michigan Whitecaps	Rev. Howard C. Earle, Jr. Beacon Hill at Eastgate	Ron Koehler Kent ISD	Randy Thelen The Right Place	Joslyn O. Ward Parent Leader
Bob Herr Secretary-Treasurer, Community Representative	Lynne Ferrell Frey Foundation	Dr. Juan Olivarez Community Representative	Michelle Van Dyke Heart of West Michigan United Way	Sean Welsh PNC Bank
	Claire Guisfredi North Kent Connect	Kelsey Perdue Corewell Health	Beca Velázquez-Publes Urban Core Collective	Doug DeVos Emeritus
	Hanna C. Jaworski, MD Corewell Health	Anthony Queen Parent Leader		





**Early Investment. Lifelong Success.**

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