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Supported by the Kent County Ready by Five Millage

THOUSANDS OF KENT COUNTY FAMILIES WILL BENEFIT FROM INCREASED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMING

Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage awards \$7.6 million to 23 programs

(Grand Rapids, Mich., January 23, 2020)—More families in Kent County will be able to receive services that improve the health and school readiness of young children thanks to a new round of Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage funding that was approved today.

Funding totaling \$7.6 million will be distributed to 16 community-based organizations beginning in March of this year and running through December 2021. The organizations serve expectant parents and families with young children through 23 different programs that provide prenatal support, parenting education, comprehensive health services, and early learning opportunities, with a strategic focus on families with the greatest needs and ensuring young children in all areas of Kent County have access to quality services.

"The programs and proposals that were put forth by Kent County agencies showed innovation and excitement around early childhood work and the importance of improving outcomes for our youngest children and their families," said Annemarie Valdez, President & CEO of First Steps Kent. "We are grateful for the support of Kent County residents. This is a vital investment in young children across our community and we are now closer to making sure children are ready for the first day of kindergarten."

The programs all address gaps in the system of early childhood services in Kent County; this funding will allow additional families and children to participate in evidence-based programming. A Resident Proposal Review Board comprised of parents and other community members reviewed all proposals. That group's recommendations went to the First Steps Kent Board of Directors last week and was approved by the Kent County Board of Commissioners today.

The following programs and organizations were recommended and approved for funding that will begin in March 2020 and continue through December 2021:

HOME VISITING: Trained providers, such as nurses or parent educators, regularly visit families in their home to offer a variety of home-based education and support. Home Visiting service providers were awarded a total of \$2,880,558.

Home Visiting awarded recipients include Strong Beginnings operated by Spectrum Health System, Baby Scholars operated by Spectrum Health System, Bright Beginnings operated by Kent Intermediate School District, D.A. Blodgett – St. John's, MomsBloom,

Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Easterseals Michigan, Family Futures, and Camp Fire West Michigan 4C.

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT: Programming supports parents and caregivers in obtaining the knowledge and skills to support their child's health, development, and early learning. Healthy Development service providers were awarded a total of \$1,715,010.17.

Healthy Development awarded recipients include Family Futures, Family Promise, Cherry Health, Arbor Circle, and Ready for School.

PLAY AND LEARN COMMUNITIES: Facilitated play groups guide parents and/or caregivers with young children through group and individual play activities that model learning opportunities and build understanding of child development. Play and Learn Communities service providers were awarded a total of \$1,586,056.

Play and Learn Communities awarded recipients include Grand Rapids Community College, Camp Fire West Michigan 4C, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Comprehensive Therapy Center, and Cherry Health.

HEALTHY AND SAFE HOMES: Environmental health hazards in the home can contribute to lead poisoning, asthma, and unintentional injuries to young children. The Healthy and Safe Home agencies will address these issues and have been awarded a total of \$1,423,909.10.

Healthy and Safe Homes awarded recipients include Cherry Health, Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, and the Kent County Health Department.

"It is exciting to see more and more of the Ready by Five millage vision become reality," said Kent County Administrator Wayman Britt. "Kent County voters supported an early childhood millage with the idea of ensuring all of our community's children are ready for kindergarten. Rolling out these services makes that goal more real and tangible."

Kent County voters approved the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage on November 6, 2018. The six-year millage generates approximately \$5.7 million each year of dedicated funding for community-based early childhood programs, ensuring children and their families have access to vital services. All millage dollars go through an independent audit and are reported to the Kent County Board of Commissioners each year to ensure taxpayer funds are spent wisely and transparently.

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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 in Kent County. First Steps Kent is the administrator of the Ready by Five millage funds. First Steps Kent is an independent non-profit that works to strengthen and coordinate the system of early childhood services through research and innovation. First Steps is leading a community-wide effort to develop a system of support for children ages 0-5 (and their families) that ensures every young child in Kent County will enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life.