

Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage Evaluation Services Request for Information

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First Steps Kent

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Supported by the Kent County **Ready by Five** Millage

I. About Ready by Five

Passed by voters in 2018, the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage is the first of its kind passed in the State of Michigan. The funding will serve as a dedicated source to help ensure Kent County, Michigan children are healthy and ready to learn when they start kindergarten. It provides dedicated and sustainable funding of approximately \$5.7 million a year to serve an estimated 50,000 infants and children age five and under and offer approximately 25,000 slots of service through community-based programs and services that are proven to improve the health, school readiness, and well-being of children under age five. In 2019, [First Steps Kent](#) was selected by Kent County's Administration as the agency to administer and oversee the funding.

The original architects of Ready by Five envisioned dedicated funding that would sustain and fill “gaps” within programming. As priorities were set for Ready by Five, specific types of services were not included in the initial “portfolio” of services funded as it was determined federal, state (or potential state) funding is available. This includes three and four-year-old preschool, quality child care, or other identified services having possible state sources of funding—if advocacy efforts remain diligent.

Funding from the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage scales and expands programming that improves the healthy development and school readiness of all children ages zero through five. This includes services that:

- support new parents so they can ensure their children are healthy and ready for kindergarten;
- increase access to high-quality, early learning experiences that build a strong social, emotional, and intellectual foundation;
- ensure the early identification of speech and hearing impairments, autism, or delays and disabilities so kids get the treatment they need; and
- utilize an equity lens to understanding if interventions are having impact and consider disparities, specifically seeking to close gaps for children from low-income communities and communities of color.

The funding strategy acknowledges a continuum of services to support young children and their parents from conception to the day the child enters kindergarten. Initial Ready by Five agreements with service partners receiving funds, went into effect beginning October 1, 2019. Since this time, thirty-nine contracts, across four categories of services, have been funded. Millage funding is distributed to a [variety of community-based organizations across Kent County](#) that provide services such as in-home parenting support (including home visiting), developmental screenings, play and learn groups, and navigation to ensure families know what is available and have access to the services that best meet their needs.

Ready by Five has a comprehensive interest in improving equity for marginalized demographics, especially communities of color and families in households with incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. In addition to considering group-based factors, the system invests in programs that contribute to what has been identified as four “contributing indicators” of Kindergarten success defined in the grid below.

Community Identified Contributing Indicators to K-Readiness	What Will Change in Kent County?
Parents will have increased access to resources and information	All parents have access to resources and information that assist with a wide variety of family needs as well as support when they have a question or concern about their child’s development or health. Programs offer timely support with navigating resources to ensure basic needs such as shelter, clothing, food, and other necessities are accessed by families in need.
Mother’s Health & Well-Being	All mothers receive adequate prenatal care. Programs address prenatal smoking and non-prescription drug use during pregnancy with all expectant mothers. Programs funded contribute to improved mother/baby bonding. As new mothers are supported, there is an increase with breastfeeding and new mothers are reporting fewer concerns about their emotional wellbeing.
Children Developmentally on Track	All young children are universally screened for developmental concerns using the ASQ and ASQ-SE screenings. Children with identified concerns are connected to services and interventions that support receptive and expressive language, socioemotional development, and fine/gross motor development earlier.
Children are Healthy	There are no children with high blood lead levels and thus children are less at risk for learning, behavior and health complications caused by lead poisoning.

All funded agencies are required to submit data related to the contributing indicators that are relevant to their programming for all children and expectant mothers served. Agencies are required to follow [Ready by Five’s Standardized Data Definitions](#) when submitting child-specific data. These definitions specify the demographic and service-related fields required by each [type of program](#), as well as the format in which data fields are submitted.

In addition to the individual-level data collected from funded agencies, First Steps Kent has relationships with the Kent County Health Department and Kent Intermediate School District that will allow for data agreements to be put in place to authorize the limited ability to link Ready by Five child data to data collected by these entities. Potential additional sources of data for this evaluation include:

- Disparate kindergarten-readiness assessments performed by some school districts (however, the statewide Kindergarten Readiness Assessment [KRA] has been tabled indefinitely and was not administered in Fall 2020).
- Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ and ASQ-E) for many children at many stages; however, administration has not been systematically representative of all children in the population of interest.
- Vital records data from the Kent County Health Department.

Stakeholder interest—especially county commissioners and the voters and taxpayers they represent—is to ensure services are an effective investment for Kent County residents. The evaluation will analyze Ready by Five data and new data developed by the contracted evaluator to determine the impact of these funded services. Identifying economic benefits that can be persuasively and rigorously traced to Ready by Five will show stakeholders how investing early has significant impact on our youngest residents in Kent County and to ensure they have an opportunity for a bright future.

Please note that the intent is to evaluate the Ready by Five initiative as a whole, not to provide piecemeal program evaluations for individual programs awarded funding. However, a strong proposal might provide estimates of the value added by individual funded programs to the larger network effects of the millage-funded initiative.

II. Approach to the Evaluation of the Ready by Five Millage

Ideally this Econometric Evaluation will ultimately show the impact of Ready by Five funding in Kent County. The Evaluator will develop an approach to evaluation that is informed by sound analysis methods using data from Ready by Five funded programs that serve expectant mothers and children through the age of five. In partnership with the Evaluation Advisory Team, the Evaluator will design benchmarks and targets to show impact with the following:

- 1) How funded service partners are impacting the health and development of children enrolled in Ready by Five funded services (defined in the grid on page 3), and ultimately readiness for Kindergarten. This would include how services are addressing disparities among infants and children from lower income households and children of color. Parent feedback and satisfaction would also be a consideration.
- 2) An estimate of social and monetary return for services through a cost benefit analysis showing how Ready by Five funded programs contribute to future cost saving and/or social benefits for our youngest children in Kent County.
- 3) Additionally, the evaluation will include the effectiveness of the Funding Administrator, First Steps Kent. This would include examination of whether there was successful reach of Ready by Five funded services in reaching new participants, ensuring programs are operating at near or full capacity, and reaching county-wide geography and group-based factors such as by income and race/ethnicity.

Based on the information from the analysis, First Steps Kent and Kent County will have understanding to determine if the funding administration processes are adequate as well as the ability to identify what programs are effective in supporting both the contributing indicators and kindergarten readiness. From this information, there will be the ability to compare the costs and benefits of the different types of funded interventions that will ultimately inform policy and futures investments.

Potential methods available to evaluators might include some combination of the following:

1. Rigorous econometric models to estimate causal effects on children and communities.
2. Financial analysis to estimate return on investment (ROI).
3. Surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other quantitative and qualitative social-scientific data collection methods.
4. Direct observation of programs, families, and children, possibly using sampling methods to ensure representativeness.
5. Other methods identified by agencies responding to this RFI.

Accompanying the analysis, recommendations for areas to improve or activities should be included. Recommendations should include a literature review to identify and support the most effective services and strategies.

III. Request for Information

This Request for Information is being released to help First Steps Kent and the Evaluation Advisory Team gather information and compare the array of potential partners with evaluation expertise. All agencies who sufficiently describe how they meet qualifications will be invited to continue in the application process.

Additionally, information provided by agencies may be used to refine the upcoming future Request for Proposals (RFP) to clarify the evaluation's goals and scope to make better use of the capacity and expertise of a broad range of interested evaluation partners.

The RFI process seeks to:

- Identify agencies having an interest in the project.
- Inform the scope of acceptable methodologies to evaluate the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage funding model, especially econometric models and/or return-on-investment (ROI) estimation methods.
- Understand the scope of financial and logistical resources necessary to achieve the evaluation's goals.
- Gain perspective on how Ready by Five and the partner network (including funded agencies and families receiving services) might improve internal and external processes to support evaluation methodology that is reliable, accurate, equitable, and valid.
- Avoid any appearance of bias toward a particular evaluation vendor by indicating broad, nonspecific interest in evaluation methodologies that may be available to all.
- Identify mutual challenges and opportunities for evaluation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Learn from other communities with model initiatives for kindergarten readiness.

First Steps Kent anticipates the Request for Proposal will be released in early March of 2021. The selected agency would be notified in June 2021 and begin work in July 2021. Submission of a response to this RFI is not a prerequisite for agencies to participate in the upcoming RFP process.

IV. Responding to the RFI

The deadline for responses is February 19, 2021 at 5 p.m. This deadline is firm, no exceptions.

Responses will only be considered complete if they meet all requirements. If a proposal is missing elements, First Steps Kent may disqualify the response from further evaluation.

A. Directions for Submission

Submit the response by email to: readybyfivekent@firststepskent.org

February 19, 2021 at 5 p.m. is the firm deadline, no exceptions. First Steps Kent is not responsible for delays caused by any occurrence. The time/date stamp on the email received by First Steps Kent will serve as official authority to determine lateness of any proposal. Under no circumstances shall submissions received after the time be considered.

Responses will only be accepted electronically and as one single, BOUND PDF document.

Responses must follow the order and format as included immediately below in Part B. Do not deviate from the questions or format.

Limit narrative response to a maximum of five pages, exclusive of appendices.

B. Required Format for Response

In each section below, we are committed to prioritize strategies and frameworks that ensure the program and its evaluation are as equitable as possible.

1. Company Information

Company Name:

Principal Contact(s):

Contact(s) Email:

Contact(s) Phone:

Corporation Type:

Corporate Address:

Website Address:

2. Methodology

For this area, provide a narrative response to all questions below.

- a) Provide any reaction and feedback on the approach as described in Section II regarding the scope of acceptable methodologies to evaluate the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage funding model, especially econometric models and/or return-on-investment (ROI) estimation methods.
- b) Also consider the effectiveness of the four contributing indicators of k-readiness presented in the grid in Section I. Would additional indicators or modifications be recommended?
- c) How would you recommend Ready by Five and its evaluators collect and analyze data to measure and close racialized and socioeconomic gaps in the contributing indicators in Section I?

3. Team Expertise

- a) Are there considerations of expertise and experience that are specific to the scale and diversity of Kent County and the scope of this project? If so, please explain.

4. When time to respond to the RFP, each proposing agency will be required to submit a complete budget detailing project expenses. For the purposes of providing an initial estimate of annual costs, and based on the information we have provided to date, where would you estimate your agency's project costs would fall: *(Select only one)*

- \$100 up to \$100,000
- \$100,001 up to \$200,000
- \$200,001 up to \$300,000
- More than \$300,001

(Optional) Provide any comments below:

5. COVID-19 Considerations

- a) In a brief narrative, identify mutual challenges and opportunities for evaluation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Available Sources of Data

a) In Section I, potential sources of data are listed. Would your agency request the use of additional sources? *(Select only one)*

- NO
- YES

If you responded, "YES": Please include details of what additional sources data would be requested below.

7) (Optional) Additional Considerations

a) In a brief narrative, include information about any additional capacities to consider.

b) Agencies may include samples of work or other materials referenced in the narrative response.

C. Questions Related to the RFI

All questions or clarifications related to the RFI must be submitted electronically in writing to: readybyfivekent@firststepskent.org

Responses to all submitted questions will be available on the [First Steps Kent website](#).

The deadline to submit questions or clarifications is February 5, 2021 by 5 p.m.

All final questions and clarifications will be posted on the First Steps Kent website by close of business on February 12, 2021.

D. RFI Disclosures

Responding organizations will assume all costs incurred in providing responses to the RFI. The issuance of this RFI does not obligate First Steps Kent to accept any of the resulting responses.

First Steps Kent reserves the right to cancel, re-issue, or make corrections or amendments to the RFI due to errors or changes identified by First Steps Kent and to otherwise modify the terms of the RFI at any time.

First Steps Kent may or may not choose to meet with responding agencies. Such meetings and discussions would only be intended to get further clarification of information presented in an agency's response to this RFI.

All submissions become First Steps Kent property and will not be returned.

First Steps Kent makes no commitments, implied or otherwise, that this RFI process will result in a business transaction with any responding organization.

V. About First Steps Kent

First Steps Kent's vision is that every young child in Kent County, MI will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life.

Our agency is the convener of parents, service providers, funders, advocates, and other stakeholders to support alignment of collective work towards building a comprehensive early childhood system, which means having the programs, policies, and supports in place that help all young children and their families thrive.

First Steps Kent does that work by:

- Convening parents, service providers, funders, advocates, and other stakeholders to ensure high quality programs and services are accessible to families and they are well coordinated and effective.
- Building public support for early childhood by educating the community about the importance of early childhood development and advocating for policies that support young children and their families.
- Researching what is working effectively across the country and finding innovative approaches to address gaps and disparities in Kent County, improving equitable outcomes for young children.
- Using data to make decisions and measuring progress, so that services and programs are evidenced based and aimed at our community's most pressing needs.
- Securing resources that support the community's early childhood system.

To learn more about First Steps Kent's work, please visit: www.firststepskent.org