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Supported by the Kent County Ready by Five Millage

EXPANDED EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES WILL HELP MORE YOUNG KIDS IN KENT COUNTY BE HEALTHY AND READY FOR KINDERGARTEN

Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage awards \$2.6 million to 12 community programs

(Grand Rapids, Mich., December 3, 2020)—More families in Kent County will be able to receive services that improve the healthy development 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 \$2.6 million will be distributed to community-based organizations throughout 2021 and 2022. This most recent round of funding will meet a variety of community needs, including improving the health of babies at birth, providing tools for families to nurture early learning at home, and ensuring that services and information are available in multiple languages.

"The proposals and funding decisions shows that agencies have what it takes to meet parents and children where they are during this moment in our history," said Annemarie Valdez, President 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 families need these resources now more than ever."

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 were all approved by the Kent County Board of Commissioners today.

The following programs and organizations will receive funding starting January 2021 and continuing through December 2022:

NAVIGATION AND OUTREACH: These services connect parents to resources and programs that support healthy child development and early learning. Navigation and Outreach engages expectant parents and parents of young children, with a strategic focus on those with the highest needs.

Navigation and Outreach recipients include Family Futures, Health Net of West Michigan, Bethany Christian Services, Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, Family Promise of Grand Rapids, and West Michigan Partnership for Children. Navigation and Outreach service providers were awarded a total of \$1,738,422.

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: Three programs were awarded a total of \$635,075.

- Family Futures will provide learning toolkits to families to promote early education while they are home during the pandemic.
- Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative will provide support to meet the behavioral and emotional needs of young children in its early education programs.
- The Kent County Health Department will run the Fetal Infant Mortality Review Board, which will investigate infant and fetal deaths with the goal of improving healthy births across the community.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION SERVICES: These agencies will provide interpretation and translation services (in-person, telephone, and written) to families enrolled in programs funded by Ready by Five. Languages include, but are not limited to Spanish, Nepali, Kinyarwanda, Serbo-Croatian, Swahili, Burmese, American Sign Language, Vietnamese, and Karen.

Bethany Christian Services, Hispanic Center of West Michigan, and Liasison Linguistics were awarded a total of \$210,000.

"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.