

# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Supported by the Kent County Ready by Five Millage

## KENT COUNTY CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM EARLY LEARNING INVESTMENTS

*Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage awards \$9 million to 28 programs*

(Grand Rapids, Mich., January 4, 2022)—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 yesterday.

Funding totaling more than \$9 million will be distributed to 19 community-based organizations operating 28 programs during 2022. In its third year of funding, agencies that received the first round of funding in 2019 and 2020 were required to renew their contracts.

New this year were programs that will provide car seats and cribs to young children, along with early literacy initiatives. Also, funded agencies were required to show how they will provide services to families virtually and/or while following social distancing guidelines in response to the ongoing pandemic.

"We continue to see a great need from families in Kent County. The number of proposals we received exceeded the amount we had to allocate, which shows that this millage is necessary and continues to make an impact," said **Annemarie Valdez, president of First Steps Kent**. "We are grateful for the support of Kent County residents. This continues to be 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 requesting funding. In September, that group's recommendations went to the First Steps Kent Board of Commissioners, who administers the millage funding, and was approved by the Kent County Board of Commissioners today.

The following programs and organizations that were recommended and approved for funding for 2022 include:

**NAVIGATION AND OUTREACH:** Parents will know what resources and services are available to support the healthy development and early learning of their young children. These services reach out to, and engage expectant parents and parents of young children, with a strategic focus on those with the highest needs.

Navigation and Outreach award recipients include Family Futures, Health Net of West Michigan, Family Promise of Grand Rapids, and Kent ISD's Help Me Grow Kent. All four of these were previously funded by the millage and will continue their work navigating young families in Kent County to applicable resources and services. Navigation and Outreach service providers were awarded a total of \$2,930,087.

**HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS:** These services ensure expectant parents and those with young children have access to comprehensive, coordinated care that maximizes the child's physical and emotional health along with regular screenings to identify developmental delays, disabilities, and emotional concerns. Examples of services include developmental screening tools, healthcare-focused programming, behavioral health services, and programs addressing environmental hazards.

Healthy Development agencies that were funded this round include Arbor Circle, Easterseals Michigan, Family Futures, Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, and the Kent County Health Department. Healthy Development service providers were awarded a total of \$2,171,168.

**EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS:** Early learning programs include facilitated play groups and early literacy. Play groups guide parents and/or caregivers with young children through group and individual play activities that model learning opportunities and build an understanding of child development. A new area of service being introduced for 2022 is early literacy initiatives, which fund evidence-based programming supporting improved language ability and listening and communication skills in young children.

Early Learning award recipients include Comprehensive Therapy Center, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC), Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC), Kent ISD's Bright Beginnings, Ready for School and Vibrant Futures. They were awarded a total of \$1,515,613.

**PARENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS:** Parent support programs include home visiting and child safety initiatives. Home visiting is when trained providers, such as nurses or parent educators, regularly visit families in their home or comfortable meeting place to offer a variety of one-on-one education and support. Also new this year are initiatives that improve child safety by ensuring families who are unable to afford new, safe cribs, pack 'n plays, or car seats have a secure place for their young child to sleep and ride in.

Parent Support Programs that were funded this round include Bethany Christian Services, Cherry Street Services, Family Futures, D.A. Blodgett St. Johns, Easterseals Michigan, Kent ISD's Bright Beginnings, MomsBloom Inc., Spectrum Health's Baby Scholars and Strong Beginnings, and Vibrant Futures. Parent Support programs were awarded a total of \$2,481,960.

"We are so proud of the impact the Ready by Five millage is having on our community," said **Kent County Administrator Al Vanderberg**. "These funds are significantly advancing the work of First Steps Kent and local community organizations to ensure every Kent County child enters kindergarten thriving and ready to learn."

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 Kent 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.*