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YOUNG CHILDREN RECEIVE SERVICES TO HELP WITH EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT DUE TO RECENT MILLAGE INVESTMENTS

Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage awards \$11 million to 34 services

(Grand Rapids, Mich., September 15, 2023)—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 \$11 million will be distributed to 18 community-based organizations operating 34 programs from October 2023-September 2024. New this round includes a child care technology system that will allow parents to find real-time information about available child care spots that best fit their needs.

"We are grateful for the support of Kent County residents. The Ready by Five Millage continues to be such an important investment and is making a difference in the lives of young children and their families across our community," said **Jennifer Headley-Nordman, president of First Steps Kent**. "The requests for funding greatly exceeded the amount we had to allocate, which shows that this millage is necessary and continues to make an impact,"

A Resident Proposal Review Board comprised of parents, Kent County Commissioners and other community members reviewed all proposals. In July, 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 yesterday.

The Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage supports programs in the following categories. The organizations that were recommended and approved for funding for the next year are noted below:

PARENT EDUCATION AND SUPPORT: Parent Education and Support programming ensures parents have the knowledge and skills to support their children's health, development, and learning. Services provide in-home and/or community-based support and education. Programs offer parent education through home visiting as well as ancillary support that addresses the preventable causes of infant and child mortality. Organizations funded include Bethany Christian Services, Cherry Health, Family Futures, D.A. Blodgett – St. John's, Kent ISD, MomsBloom and Corewell Health.

EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS: High-quality early learning experiences nurture a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Examples of early learning services include play and learn groups, supports for caregivers, and connections to early intervention

services. Organizations funded include Family Futures, Ready for School, Comprehensive Therapy Center, Vibrant Futures, Kent ISD and GRCC.

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: Healthy Development programs focus on improving the lives of families in Kent County in regard to healthier births, overall child health and well-being, as well as ensuring children are developmentally on track. Organizations funded include Kent County Healthy Department, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Cherry Health, Arbor Circle, Bethany Christian Services, Family Promise, Hispanic Center of Western Michigan and Healthy Homes Coalition.

OUTREACH AND NAVIGATION: Outreach and Navigation services educate parents about resources to support their child's healthy development and early learning. The services make a personal connection with parents and check they are getting the support from the right programs that fit their needs. Organizations funded include Kent ISD, Health Net of West Michigan, and Family Futures.

"The Ready by Five millage has brought positive change and transformation in the lives of our youngest residents," said **Kent County Administrator Al Vanderberg**. "By providing invaluable resources to parents and families, we are not just preparing our little ones for kindergarten; we are nurturing a brighter future for our entire community."

Kent County voters approved the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage on November 6, 2018. The six-year millage generates approximately \$6.7 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.