



First 5 San Bernardino Community Listening and Learning Report

Deepening Understanding: Insights and Strategic
Recommendations for Early Childhood Policy and Investment



June 2026

Report by the Inland Empire Community Collaborative (IECC)
as part of our IE Children's Cabinet initiative on behalf of First 5
San Bernardino.



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This report provides an in-depth analysis of community perspectives and challenges related to early childhood policy and investment in San Bernardino County, drawing from comprehensive listening and learning sessions across the region. It offers strategic recommendations based on regional findings to inform future policy and resource allocation for improving outcomes for young children and families.

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This qualitative report presents findings from the Community Listening and Learning Sessions facilitated by the Inland Empire Community Collaborative (IECC), on behalf of First 5 San Bernardino, across four regions of San Bernardino County: the High Desert, Valley Region, West End, and Mountain Region. The sessions were designed to deepen understanding of the lived experiences, priorities, and needs of parents and caregivers raising young children ages 0-5, while identifying place-based opportunities for policy, investment, and systems change.

For the purposes of this report, the term **parents** refers to individuals who have legal or primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of children ages 0-5, including biological parents, adoptive parents, legal guardians, and others with recognized custodial authority. The term **caregivers** is used more broadly to include extended family members, family friends, and community members who provide regular and meaningful care for young children. This inclusive language recognizes the diverse family structures and caregiving arrangements present across San Bernardino County communities.

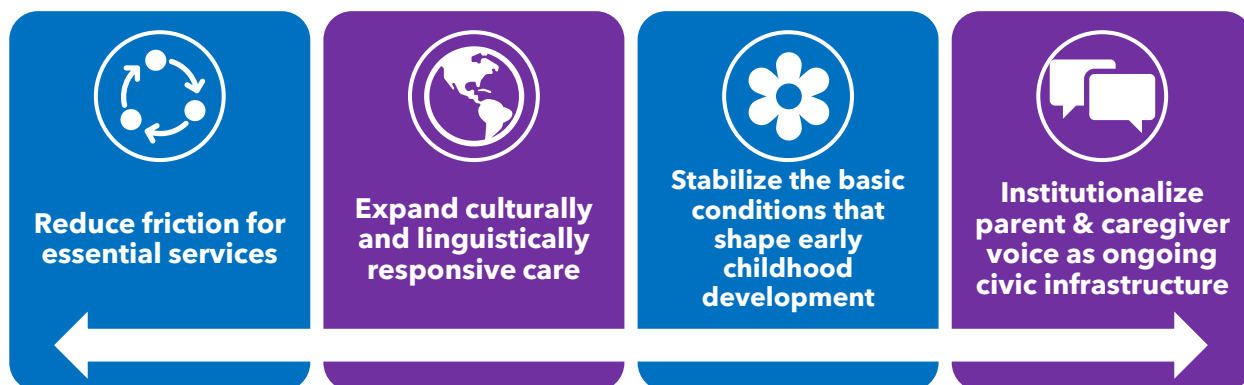
With participation from nearly 55 parents and caregivers across five sessions in Big Bear, Ontario, San Bernardino, and Victorville, the findings reveal a complex picture of family life in a geographically vast and economically diverse county. Families described deep commitment to their children, pride in their communities, and strong reliance on trusted local relationships. At the same time, they identified persistent barriers related to child care, healthcare, housing, food access, transportation, public benefits, language access, and the rising cost of living.

Across the county, families emphasized that the challenges they face are interconnected rather than isolated. A parent's ability to work is shaped by access to affordable child care. A child's health is shaped by whether care is nearby, affordable, culturally responsive, and timely. A family's stability is shaped by whether rent, food, utilities, transportation, and child-related costs can be managed at the same time. In each region, families described how systems that are fragmented, difficult to navigate, or misaligned with real family schedules can turn basic needs into major obstacles.

- **High Desert Region: Victorville** Families emphasized the impact of distance, limited local service availability, and rigid systems on daily life. Parents described major gaps in flexible child care, pediatric and developmental services, mental health support, clean water, and food access. Families often had to travel long distances for care, resources, and enrichment opportunities,

making trusted messengers, warm referrals, and local infrastructure especially important.

- **Valley Region: San Bernardino** Families described significant strain related to child care costs, employment instability, maternal health, postpartum recovery, mental health, food insecurity, and benefit cliffs. Parents shared that even when they were working, studying, or actively seeking stability, the costs of care, basic needs, and required employment-related expenses often kept them in survival mode. At the same time, families identified parks, schools, community centers, children and youth programs, and trusted community staff as important assets.
- **West End Region: Ontario** Families described a community with many amenities and opportunities, but also rising costs, gentrification pressures, fragmented referrals, and confusing eligibility rules. Parents emphasized the need for centralized information, affordable child care, developmental services, children and youth enrichment, and trusted case management. Families also lifted up extended family networks, schools, mentors, and local programs as critical support that help children feel connected and cared for.
- **Mountain Region: Big Bear** Families described a close-knit community with strong relationships and deep attachment to place, but also severe barriers created by geographic isolation, winter weather, high costs, tourism-related housing pressures, and limited local services. Parents emphasized the need for local health care, pregnancy and pediatric services, Head Start and preschool options, flexible child care, utility and housing support, bilingual services, and year-round children and youth activities.



While each community surfaced distinct priorities shaped by local context, the listening sessions also revealed a set of shared challenges that consistently affect families raising children ages 0–5 across San Bernardino County. The findings point to a set of cross-cutting priorities for early childhood policy and investment decisions: (1) reduce access friction for essential services, (2) expand culturally and linguistically responsive care, (3)

stabilize the basic conditions that shape early development, and (4) institutionalize parent and caregiver voice as ongoing civic infrastructure.

The policy and investment recommendations that follow are grounded in these lived experiences and are intended to support First 5 San Bernardino and its partners in strengthening early childhood systems across the county. The recommendations call for coordinated, place-based strategies that expand child care and early learning infrastructure, improve access to healthcare and developmental supports, address economic instability, support trusted community-based programs, and build stronger systems of navigation and accountability.

The voices and stories shared during these listening sessions make clear that families are resourceful, committed, and deeply invested in their children's futures. However, their resilience should not be mistaken for adequate support. By centering parent and caregiver expertise in policy and investment decisions, First 5 San Bernardino and its partners have an opportunity to reduce access barriers, strengthen local infrastructure, and ensure that every child in San Bernardino County has the foundation needed to thrive during the earliest years of life.

Regional Insights at a Glance

While many themes were consistent across communities, families also described distinct place-based realities shaped by geography, local infrastructure, cost pressures, service availability, and community assets. The snapshots below highlight key regional insights and priorities surfaced in each location.

Community	Primary Needs Surfaced	Key Barriers	Noted Assets
Victorville / High Desert	• Flexible and affordable child care aligned to work schedules • Local pediatric, mental health and developmental services • Clean water, food access, and basic needs support	• Long travel distances and limited local service infrastructure • Child care waitlists, limited hours, and no drop-in options • Limited culturally responsive care and delays in specialty services	• Diaper banks and resource fairs • Churches and trusted nonprofits • Strong reliance on trusted messengers and warm referrals

San Bernardino / Valley Region	• Affordable child care and support for employment stability • Maternal health, postpartum, mental health supports • Parenting education, food support, and trusted navigation	• High child care costs and benefit cliffs • Fragmented systems and limited case management support • Rising food, utility, and basic living costs	• Parks, schools, community centers, and children and youth programs • Strong family aspirations and desire to remain rooted locally
Ontario / West End	• Centralized information and service navigation • Affordable child care, preschool access, and children and youth enrichment • Developmental services, health care, and special needs supports	• Income eligibility cliffs, paperwork burdens, and confusing referrals • Rising housing costs, gentrification, and cost of living strain • Long wait times, limited provider availability, and transportation	• Extended family networks, grandparents, and siblings supporting care • Schools and local nonprofits • Community commitment to supporting children
Big Bear / Mountain Region	• Local health, pregnancy, pediatric, and specialty care • Flexible child care and early learning options • Affordable housing, utility support, activities, and language access	• Geographic isolation, winter weather, and unsafe travel conditions • High costs tied to tourism • Limited public benefits offices, bilingual services, and local providers	• Schools, libraries, parks and recreation • Strong informal parent networks and deep commitment to place

Together, these findings elevate both urgent barriers and community strengths that shape daily life for families with young children across San Bernardino County. The sections that follow provide additional context, regional detail, and actionable considerations aligned with these priorities.

Key Cross-cutting Themes

The themes below reflect what families consistently raised across sessions in the High Desert, Valley, West End, and Mountain regions. Together, they highlight the shared conditions shaping daily life for parents, caregivers, and young children across San Bernardino County, while recognizing that each region experiences these challenges differently based on geography, infrastructure, cost of living, language access, and service availability.

	Child care access remains misaligned with family work schedules, affordability, and early learning needs. Across regions, families described child care as limited, expensive, inflexible, and difficult to secure. Parents shared that available care often does not match work schedules, seasonal employment, nontraditional hours, or the needs of infants and young children.
	Healthcare access is constrained by distance, wait times, limited specialty care, and lack of culturally responsive support. Families described delays in pediatric care, pregnancy care, mental health support, developmental services, dental care, speech therapy, and specialty referrals. Rural families often travel long distances for care. In more urban areas, families still face long waits, high costs, insurance barriers, and confusing referrals.
	The rising cost of living is pushing families into constant tradeoffs between basic needs and child-related expenses. Parents described living paycheck to paycheck even when employed. Families raised concerns about the high cost of basic needs including rent, utilities, food, and out-of-pocket healthcare expenses. Many described benefit cliffs and affordability pressures leave families in survival mode and increase stress for both parents and children.
	Geography, transportation, and local infrastructure shape whether families can realistically access services. Families described transportation barriers, fragmented referrals, and difficulty reaching services that may exist but are not practically accessible. Across the county, families need services closer to home and flexible models that reduce travel, time, and cost burdens.

	Families need stronger navigation, trusted messengers, and warm handoffs to access existing resources. Participants repeatedly shared that resources exist but are difficult to find, understand, or complete. Families called for centralized information, culturally responsive navigators, and relationship-based support that helps them follow through when barriers arise.
	Children and youth need more safe and inclusive opportunities to learn, play, socialize, and belong. Parents across regions called for more free or low-cost activities and programs that support school readiness, social connection, emotional development, confidence and belonging, especially for those with specialized learning or developmental needs.
	Language access, cultural responsiveness, and trust are essential to equitable service delivery. Spanish-speaking families and families of color navigating specialized health or developmental needs described the importance of being heard, respected, and understood. Families emphasized that access is not only about whether a service exists, but whether families can use it with dignity and confidence.

These cross-cutting themes show that families across San Bernardino County are navigating interconnected barriers rather than isolated challenges. Child care, healthcare, transportation, housing, food access, language access, and economic stability all influence one another. Addressing these needs requires coordinated, place-based strategies that strengthen local infrastructure, reduce access friction, and center parent and caregiver voice in the design of policies, programs, and investments.

Economic History of San Bernardino County

Understanding the economic history of San Bernardino County provides critical context for interpreting the lived experiences shared by families across the High Desert, Valley Region, West End, and Mountain communities. As the largest county by land area in the United States, San Bernardino County has developed not as a single unified economy, but as a collection of distinct regional economies shaped by geography, infrastructure, land use patterns, and historical investment decisions.

Historically, the county's economic foundation was rooted in agriculture, transportation, and extraction industries. Early development centered on citrus production, ranching, and farming throughout the inland valleys, supported by rail infrastructure that connected the region to Los Angeles and national markets. The arrival of railroads and later interstate highways positioned San Bernardino as a logistics and transportation hub, facilitating goods movement across Southern California and the broader western United States. Over time, these early industries laid the groundwork for the county's continued role as a key node in regional supply chains, while also shaping patterns of land use and labor that continue to influence economic opportunity today.

Beginning in the mid to late 20th century, San Bernardino County experienced rapid suburbanization and population growth, particularly in areas closer to Los Angeles County. The development of residential communities in the Valley Region and West End was driven in part by the search for more affordable housing compared to coastal counties. At the same time, economic restructuring, including the decline of manufacturing jobs and the closure of major institutions such as Norton Air Force Base, contributed to long-term employment instability in parts of the Valley Region. While new industries emerged, including logistics, warehousing, and service sector jobs, many of these positions have been characterized by lower wages, limited benefits, and less long-term stability, contributing to persistent economic insecurity for working families.

As the county expanded, economic development patterns diverged significantly across regions. The valley region, including cities such as San Bernardino, Fontana, Colton, and Rialto, evolved into an area with a high concentration of working-class families, public sector employment, and logistics-related industries. Despite its central location and infrastructure access, this region continues to experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and housing instability compared to other parts of the county. Families in this region often navigate the cumulative effects of wage stagnation, rising costs of living, and fragmented access to services, which align with the economic pressures described in the listening sessions.

In contrast, the West End, including cities like Ontario, Rancho Cucamonga, and Upland, has experienced a different pattern of economic growth characterized by greater investment, commercial development, and proximity to major employment centers. The expansion of Ontario International Airport and the growth of large-scale warehousing and distribution facilities have reinforced the West End's role as a logistics powerhouse within Southern California. While this growth has generated jobs and increased economic activity, it has also contributed to rising housing costs, gentrification pressures, and growing disparities between higher-income and working-class households. As a result, families in the West End often experience the tension between economic opportunity and affordability, particularly related to housing, child care, and basic living expenses.

The High Desert region, including Victorville, Hesperia, Apple Valley, and Adelanto, reflects a third distinct economic trajectory shaped by geographic distance and more limited infrastructure development. Historically dependent on military activity, transportation corridors, and more recently warehousing and renewable energy projects, the High Desert has experienced periods of rapid growth followed by economic instability, particularly during broader economic downturns such as the Great Recession. Lower housing costs have attracted families relocating from more expensive regions, but this affordability has often been offset by fewer local employment opportunities, lower wages, and longer commuting distances. As a result, many High Desert residents rely on jobs outside the immediate region, reinforcing the transportation and access challenges raised by families in the listening sessions.

The Mountain Region, including cities like Big Bear, Crestline, Lake Arrowhead, and Running Springs, presents yet another distinct economic context. These communities have historically relied on tourism, recreation, and seasonal economies tied to natural resources and outdoor activities. While tourism generates important local revenue, it also contributes to economic volatility, seasonal employment patterns, and rising housing costs driven by short-term rentals and second-home ownership. Geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and weather conditions further constrain access to jobs, healthcare, and services, creating a set of structural challenges that differ significantly from those in more urban areas of the county.

Across all regions, broader economic trends have intensified existing disparities. Economic shocks such as the 2008 housing crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted inland communities, where families were already navigating lower wages, higher housing cost burdens, and less access to wealth-building opportunities. In San Bernardino County, these impacts have been compounded by environmental challenges, including extreme heat in the High Desert, wildfire risk in mountain communities, and air quality concerns linked to freight movement in valley and West End regions. These intersecting pressures affect not only

economic stability, but also health outcomes and quality of life for families with young children.

Today, San Bernardino County's economy is defined by both opportunity and inequity. While the county plays a critical role in regional and national logistics, and continues to grow in population and economic significance, the benefits of that growth are unevenly distributed. Families in different regions experience fundamentally different economic realities shaped by where they live, the types of jobs available to them, and the infrastructure that connects them to opportunity.

This economic backdrop is essential for understanding the findings of the Community Listening and Learning Sessions. Families' experiences with child care, healthcare, housing, food access, and transportation are deeply rooted in these regional economic patterns. By situating community voice within this broader economic history, it becomes clear that the challenges families face are not isolated but are shaped by longstanding structural dynamics that require coordinated, place-based solutions across the county.



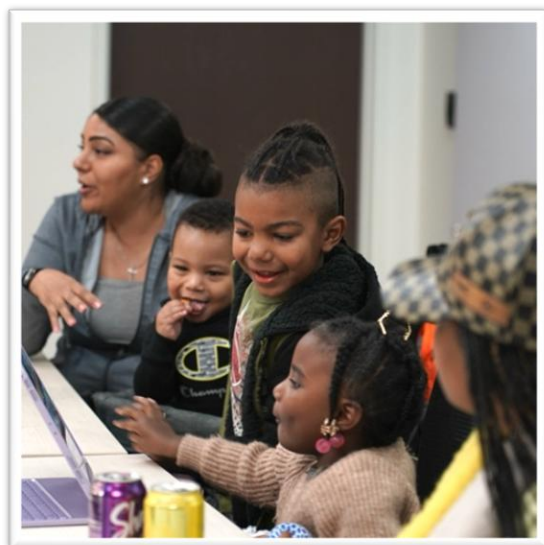
Findings by Region

High Desert Region: Victorville, CA

Families participating in the High Desert session described a region where distance, limited-service availability, and rigid systems make daily caregiving significantly harder. Although the session was held in Victorville, participants primarily represented nearby High Desert communities including Adelanto and Hesperia. Their experiences underscored how geography shapes access to child care, healthcare, food, clean water, and family support. Parents consistently described wanting to work, care for their children, and participate in community life, but feeling constrained by systems that were not designed around the realities of families raising young children in more isolated parts of the county.

Child Care Availability and Flexibility

Child care emerged as one of the most immediate and destabilizing barriers for High Desert families. Parents described long waitlists for subsidized child care and state preschool, limited availability of local providers, and hours of operation that did not align with work schedules. One mother shared that after months of waiting, she was offered a state preschool placement in Apple Valley, but the program closed at 4:00 p.m. while her job ended at 5:00 p.m. With no flexibility and no nearby alternative, she was forced to turn the placement down.



For many parents, the child care system created an impossible choice between employment and caregiving. Families described feeling trapped by a system that expects parents to work, but does not provide affordable, safe, and flexible care that makes work possible. Several participants noted the need for drop-in or short-term child care options for medical appointments, job training, school obligations, and other time-sensitive responsibilities. Without flexible care, parents reported missing work, delaying appointments, or leaving the workforce entirely.

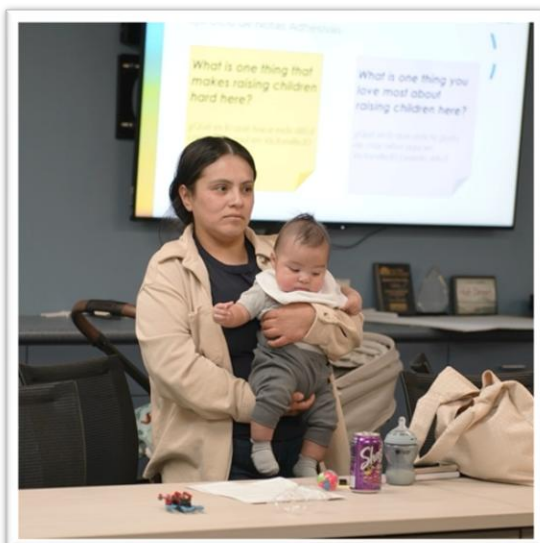
Healthcare Access and Culturally Responsive Care

Healthcare access was described as both a geographic and systemic challenge. Parents reported difficulty securing pediatric care, speech therapy, mental health support, and same-day medical appointments close to home. Families often had to travel “down the hill” to Fontana Kaiser or other communities for maternity care, pediatric services, or urgent needs. These trips required parents to take time off work, lose wages, arrange transportation, and manage child care, turning routine care into a major financial and logistical burden.

Due to the lack of available specialists to meet community needs, parents were put on waiting lists or offered alternatives to in-person care including telehealth. However, parents raised concerns about the limits of telehealth for young children. One parent described waiting more than six months for mental health support for her child, only to be offered virtual services. She explained, “You can’t put a three-year-old on Zoom and expect them to explain what they’re feeling.” Families emphasized that young children need relationship-based, in-person care, especially for developmental, behavioral, and mental health concerns.

Trust and cultural responsiveness were also central to the healthcare experiences shared. A Black family in the High Desert described repeatedly raising concerns about their infant’s sleep apnea, only to feel dismissed by medical providers. Despite repeatedly raising concerns, the doctor did not believe their baby had a serious medical condition. The family reported that it was only after the mother recorded and sent a video of her baby’s breathing that the provider acknowledged the severity of the issue and finally acted. “We had to prove something was wrong.” The family described the experience as frightening and exhausting, reinforcing how bias and

disbelief can delay critical care and erode trust. They felt dismissed and not trusted as parents until they were able to provide visual proof. Several parents also expressed a desire for greater access to Black doulas and culturally relevant pregnancy and childbirth support, noting that these resources could help families feel respected, advocated for, and less alone.



Clean Water, Food Access, and Basic Needs

Families in the High Desert also elevated basic needs that directly affect child health and family stability. Parents in Adelanto raised

serious concerns about clean water, including reports of brown or discolored tap water. One parent shared that her family relies on bottled water and filtration systems but still worries about safety. After contacting the city, she remained unclear about who was responsible for fixing the issue, leaving her household with added stress and additional expenses.

Food access was another recurring concern. Parents described WIC benefits as helpful but too restrictive to meet families' needs, especially for children with allergies or dietary restrictions. Healthy and organic food options were often limited, unaffordable, or located outside the immediate community. Families described cutting back on the quality or quantity of food they purchased as utility bills, housing costs, transportation, and other expenses continued to rise. The ongoing uncertainty has added stress to an already strained household budget.

Community Infrastructure and Local Assets

Parents repeatedly noted that High Desert communities, particularly Adelanto, have few local family-centered events, activities, and resource opportunities compared to Victorville. Families often had to commute long distances to attend resource fairs, parenting classes, enrichment activities, or community events. This lack of local infrastructure contributed to social isolation, especially for new parents, and reduced awareness of available services. Even when programming existed in Victorville, parents shared that class times were often not supportive of work schedules.

Despite these challenges, families identified important community strengths. Parents named diaper banks, resource fairs, churches, Sister Connections, and trusted community-based organizations as meaningful sources of support. Families emphasized that when they were successfully connected to services, it was often because a trusted individual helped them navigate the system. This reinforced the importance of relational support, warm handoffs, and trusted messengers in a region where services may exist but are difficult to find and access without guidance.

Valley Region: San Bernardino, CA

Families participating in the San Bernardino sessions described a community shaped by deep resilience, strong aspirations for children, and persistent economic and systems-level pressures. Across sessions hosted through Child Care Resource Center and El Sol, parents spoke candidly about the strain of balancing work, caregiving, health recovery, child care costs, food insecurity, and the need for trusted navigation

support. While families identified parks, community centers, schools, and local organizations as important assets, they also emphasized that available systems often remain fragmented, difficult to access, or misaligned with the realities of parents raising young children.



Employment Instability and Child Care Cost Burdens

Parents in San Bernardino described a persistent tension between work and caregiving. While jobs were available, families reported that many positions required extensive experience, credentialing, or training without providing the financial support needed to meet those requirements. One parent with a bachelor's degree in child development shared that she could not afford the fingerprinting and credentialing fees required for employment. After years of education and effort, she described feeling defeated because she had "put in so much work" and still did not have a clear path forward to support her family.

Child care costs also limited parents' ability to remain in the workforce. Families described paying so much of their income toward care that working became financially unsustainable. As one parent shared, "I was spending a whole paycheck on child care." Although she wanted to keep working, the cost made it impossible, forcing her to leave her job. Parents emphasized that these choices were not about a lack of motivation, but about systems that make employment and caregiving financially incompatible.

Maternal Health, Mental Health, and Recovery Supports

Parents spoke openly about postpartum depression, anxiety, medical trauma, and the difficulty of accessing in-person mental health support. Families described feeling dismissed or unsupported by healthcare providers at moments when they needed care, advocacy, and clarity. For parents recovering from serious health events, the lack of coordinated support compounded both caregiving responsibilities and financial strain.

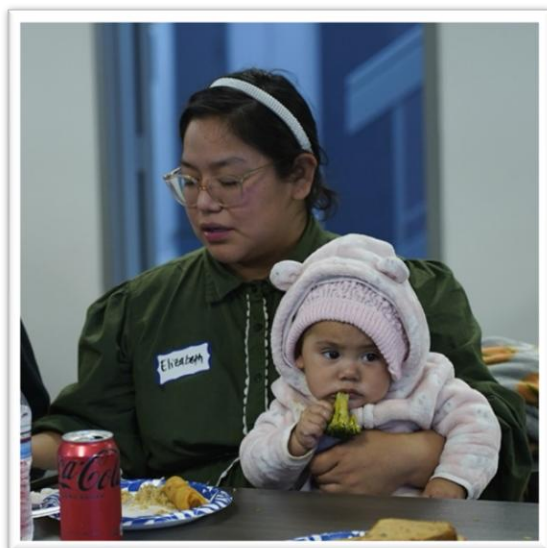
One parent described recovering from a stroke following a car accident while raising children. She shared that much of her body was temporarily nonfunctioning and that her children had to help her with daily activities. Despite her medical needs, she was unable to qualify for disability support, leaving her to navigate recovery, parenting, and

household responsibilities at the same time. Her story illustrated how quickly families can fall into crisis when health systems, disability support, and caregiving realities are not aligned.

Parents also emphasized the importance of culturally responsive maternal health support. Several participants spoke about the critical role doulas played during pregnancy and postpartum. One mother shared that when doctors pushed for a C-section, her doula helped explain alternatives, offered emotional support, and advocated for her wishes. She described feeling respected and supported in a way that was missing from other parts of the healthcare system. These experiences point to the need for expanded doula access, postpartum care, and mental health support that honor family voice and cultural context.

Food Insecurity and Cost of Living Pressures

Families described living under constant financial strain as the cost of basic needs continued to rise. Utility bills, especially during hot weather, were identified as especially burdensome. Parents reported cutting meals, changing what they fed their



children, or stretching limited resources in order to make food last. Although WIC and CalFresh were described as helpful, families consistently shared that benefits were not enough to meet household needs for the full month.

Parents spoke about feeling caught in an “in-between” space where they earned too much to qualify for some assistance, but not enough to meet the rising cost of living. One parent summarized the experience by saying, “It feels like we’re struggling all the time.”

Families emphasized that even parents with education, employment, or some incomes were still living in survival mode, making difficult tradeoffs between food, utilities, child care, transportation, and medical care.

Parenting Education, Navigation, and Community Strengths

Parents expressed a strong desire for parenting education and trusted navigation support. Families requested classes focused on developmental milestones, nutrition, positive discipline, and other practical tools for raising young children. Participants emphasized that classes should be culturally responsive, offered at accessible times, and designed so parents can attend with their children when needed. Several parents

noted that they did not know what to ask for or where to begin when seeking help, underscoring the importance of navigators, warm referrals, and relational support.

At the same time, families highlighted meaningful community assets, including parks, community centers, children and youth programs, schools, and community offices where staff took time to actively assist families. Parents also described a strong desire to give back and remain rooted in their communities. They shared hopes for their children to feel safe, loved, educated, and able to succeed. These aspirations reinforce that the challenges families named are not rooted in a lack of commitment, but in the need for better aligned systems, stronger navigation, and sustained investments that help families move from survival toward stability and opportunity.

West End Region: Ontario, CA

Families participating in the Ontario Listening and Learning Session described a West End region where opportunity and instability exist side by side. Parents recognized that Ontario has many amenities, schools, programs, and community resources, but they also emphasized that too many families do not know where to find information, cannot access services when they need them, or are excluded because of income thresholds, documentation requirements, transportation barriers, or limited program capacity. Across the discussion, families described feeling as though they are “just getting by,” often working long or irregular hours while still struggling to afford housing, child care, health care, food, and activities that support children’s development.

Financial Strain, Work-Life Imbalance, and Benefit Cliffs

Economic pressure was one of the most consistent themes raised by Ontario families. Parents described living paycheck to paycheck as housing, utilities, food, transportation, and child-related costs continued to rise. Even families with stable employment reported that wages were not enough to support the full cost of raising children. Several parents described being in the “in-between” space where they earned too much to qualify for assistance, but not enough to meet basic needs without stress.

Work schedules also affected family relationships and parental well-being. Parents shared that long hours, late shifts, and stagnant jobs limited the time they could spend with their children.



One parent described only seeing their children for a couple of hours each day because of work demands. Another shared a painful example from a child's school essay, where the child wrote, "I don't really know my dad, but I know he does a lot to provide for our family." These stories reflected the emotional cost of economic instability and the need for family-centered supports that allow parents to provide financially while remaining meaningfully connected to their children.

Families also emphasized that resources often exist but are difficult to locate or access. Parents described a lack of centralized information about services, afterschool programs, benefits, and other supports. This lack of coordination left many families unaware of what was available or unsure where to begin.

Child Care, Early Learning, and Family Support

Child care and early learning access were also major concerns identified. Families described difficulty qualifying for child care assistance, navigating paperwork, and finding available providers close to home. One parent described the difficult tradeoff she faced while trying to secure child care support during a period of deep financial hardship. Because the child care approval process required mandatory appointments during work hours, she was forced to choose between attending those appointments or keeping the job she depended on to provide for her family. After missing two appointments because she had to work, she was unable to move forward with child care approval. "I had to make two very difficult decisions of either putting food on the table just to survive or seeking help raising my children". Others described relying on grandparents, older siblings, and extended family members to fill child care gaps.



While these informal networks were an important strength, they also reflected the absence of reliable, accessible, and affordable child care options.

Parents also raised concerns about trust and quality. Some families were reluctant to use child care providers they did not know, while others described programs being full or unavailable. Single parents faced additional barriers, including paperwork requirements that assumed cooperation from the other parents, making preschool enrollment difficult when family relationships were strained. Parents worried that children who could not access preschool were missing important opportunities to socialize, build routines, and prepare for school.

Families emphasized the need for more flexible child care, state preschool access, and navigation support that reflects the realities of working parents, single parents, and families with complex caregiving responsibilities.

Health Care, Post Partum, Developmental Services, and Special Needs Supports

Ontario families raised serious concerns about access to affordable, reliable, and responsive health care. Parents described long emergency room wait times, high out-of-pocket costs, and difficulty finding clinics that accepted their insurance. Some families avoided seeking care unless absolutely necessary because they expected long waits, limited answers, or expensive bills. One parent shared that emergency room visits could take eight to ten hours, creating additional strain for parents who had to miss work or arrange care for other children at home.

Parents of children with developmental delays, autism, cerebral palsy, or other special needs described even deeper barriers. One parent spent years trying to get support for her child who was having difficulty walking but was routinely ignored or provided subpar services for her child by physicians due to medical insurance limitations. Her child was not formally diagnosed with cerebral palsy until he was six years old but was still never referred to specialized care or given details about financial support services or programs through Inland Regional Center. Families also identified a strong need for speech therapy, behavioral therapy, physical therapy, and specialized equipment. They reported long waitlists, limited provider availability, transportation barriers, and high costs for therapy tools and adaptive equipment. Several parents described having to provide therapy at home because services were delayed, unavailable, or too limited to meet their child's needs.

Postpartum depression emerged as a significant concern among parents, particularly when mental health needs were met with limited support, delayed care, or no clear pathway for help. One parent shared the experience of raising seven children while

struggling with postpartum depression and feeling unable to access adequate support. The lack of timely, responsive care contributed to a crisis point, including a suicide attempt, underscoring how maternal mental health challenges can become life-threatening when families are left to navigate them alone. Families emphasized the need for earlier screening, trusted referrals, in-person mental health care, and postpartum supports that recognize the full emotional, physical, and caregiving demands placed on parents.

Parents also described feeling dismissed or unheard by providers. Families often relied on pediatricians as their primary or only source of information, but many did not know where else to go for referrals, therapy, or caregiver support. These experiences point to the need for coordinated developmental services, trusted care navigation, and culturally responsive providers who listen to parents and respond early when concerns arise.

Child Development, Afterschool Programs, and Safe Third Spaces

Families consistently called for more free and affordable programs for children and youth. Parents wanted activities that help children stay active, build confidence, develop interests, and spend less time on screens. Families specifically mentioned sports, dodgeball, t-ball, books, toys, and other opportunities for children to play, learn, and socialize. Parents also described the need for affordable “third spaces,” including safe places beyond home and school where children can participate in structured activities.

After school and summer programming were especially important concerns. Parents described summertime as difficult because children were often stuck at home in front of screens while caregivers worked. Single parents and dual-income households both emphasized the need for low-cost extracurricular opportunities that support children’s development and allow parents to manage work responsibilities. Families also noted gaps for gifted students and children with specialized learning needs, including limited extracurricular options and insufficient school-based supports.



While some parents identified caring mentors and active school leaders as important assets, they also raised concerns about bullying, racism, stereotyping, and students with learning disabilities being separated rather than supported inclusively. Parents emphasized the need for culturally responsive school environments, specialized learning resources, and programs that recognize the full range of children's strengths and needs.

Housing, Community Conditions, and Neighborhood Change

Families described increasing concern about housing affordability and neighborhood gentrification. Parents noted that new luxury apartments near the Ontario International Airport were contributing to rising costs and a fear of being priced out of the communities where they had long lived. Families described the broader cost of living as increasingly difficult to manage, especially when combined with child care, transportation, food, health care, and extracurricular costs.

Community conditions also surfaced as a concern. Families described homelessness, trash, traffic, noise pollution, and drug activity as increasingly normalized parts of the local environment. One parent noted concern about substance use in Ontario and the lack of nearby substance abuse services. These concerns reflected a desire for safer, cleaner, and more supportive neighborhoods where children can grow up with stability, dignity, and access to positive opportunities.

Navigation, Trust, and Community Strengths

Families repeatedly emphasized that systems are difficult to navigate. Parents described outdated referrals, programs that were no longer funded, confusing eligibility rules, and service transitions that were hard to manage, especially when moving between counties or programs. Some families said the process was so difficult that they eventually stopped trying. Parents called for more case management, social workers, and trusted navigators who can help families understand what available, complete paperwork, and follow through when barriers arise.

Despite these challenges, families also described important strengths. Extended family members, older siblings, grandparents, and community networks play a major role in helping families manage child care, work schedules, transportation,



and summer routines. Parents described families taking care of one another and supporting children when formal systems fall short. These informal support networks are essential assets, but families made clear that they cannot replace the need for coordinated, accessible, and trustworthy systems.

Overall, the Ontario session highlighted a West End region where families are resourceful, committed, and deeply invested in their children's well-being, but are navigating fragmented systems, rising costs, and limited access to services that should be easier to find and use. Their experiences point to the need for stronger family navigation, affordable child care and youth programming, accessible developmental and health services, and community investments that help families remain rooted, connected, and able to thrive.

Mountain Region: Big Bear, CA

Families participating in the Mountain Region session described Big Bear as a close-knit community where families value the natural environment, strong relationships, and the sense of belonging that comes from living in a smaller mountain town. At the same time, participants were clear that geographic isolation, winter weather, high costs, limited local services, and a tourism-driven economy make raising young children especially difficult. Families repeatedly described having to travel "down the hill" for healthcare, groceries, public benefits, child care, and enrichment opportunities, often turning basic needs into full-day commitments that require time off work, transportation, and additional expense.

Child Care, Early Learning, and Family Routines

Child care was one of the most urgent and consistent concerns raised by Big Bear families. Parents described very few local options, limited infant care, high costs, and concerns about quality. Families shared that some available providers had poor reputations or did not meet children's basic needs, while other programs were full, unaffordable, or unavailable during the hours parents needed care. Several participants emphasized that child care must be flexible enough to support nontraditional, seasonal, and irregular work schedules, which are common in a tourism-centered economy.

Families also described a major gap in early learning for children ages 0-5. Parents reported that there is no local Head Start or state preschool option available to meet community need, and that preschool slots are limited or at capacity. Some families said they were told to look outside the mountain community for early education, including traveling to San Bernardino or other areas. For parents who already face long

commutes, winter weather, and limited transportation options, leaving the mountain for early childhood services is often unrealistic.

Parents described these gaps as directly affecting family stability. Some households rely on one income because child care costs more than a parent can reasonably earn. Others reduce work hours, leave employment, or depend on informal arrangements that may not be consistent. Families emphasized that affordable, reliable, and high-quality child care is not simply a convenience. It is a necessary foundation for employment, family economic stability, and healthy early childhood development.



Healthcare Access, Pregnancy Care, and Specialized Services

Healthcare access was described as one of the most severe challenges facing families in Big Bear. Participants reported limited access to pediatricians, OB/GYNs, dental specialists, neurologists, lactation consultants, behavioral health providers, and other specialty care. Families shared that appointments can take weeks or months to secure, and that available providers may not accept certain insurance plans. Parents also described high and inconsistent out-of-pocket costs, including copays that change from visit to visit and unexpected costs for basic services such as vaccines.

Because local care is so limited, families frequently travel to Loma Linda, Los Angeles, Apple Valley, Downey, or other communities for medical appointments. These trips require families to plan entire days around care, pay for gas, take time off work, and arrange care for other children. Participants described these barriers as especially frightening during pregnancy, postpartum recovery, and winter storms, when driving down the mountain can be unsafe or impossible. One parent summarized the lack of local pregnancy care by saying, "You can't have a baby here."

Families also raised concerns about delayed diagnosis and limited support for children with developmental, neurological, dental, physical, and mental health needs. Parents described being told to call daily for cancellations, waiting months for appointments, or being offered virtual care that did not meet their child's needs. Spanish-speaking families also emphasized the need for interpreters, bilingual providers, and services that can be accessed without language becoming another barrier. Overall, participants

described a healthcare system that places too much responsibility on families to travel, coordinate, advocate, translate, and absorb costs in order to secure basic and specialized care.

Cost of Living, Housing, and Infrastructure Pressures

Big Bear families described the cost of living as unusually high because of the area's geography, winter conditions, and tourism economy. Participants noted that food, gas, utilities, rent, recreation, and child care are expensive, and that winter months are especially difficult because heating and electricity bills rise sharply. Families also reported frequent power outages, including outages that affected infant feeding and



food storage. These infrastructure challenges add stress to households that are already balancing high expenses and limited local services.

Housing stability was another major concern. Families described rent as expensive and shared that the growth of short-term rentals has

reduced the availability of long-term housing for local residents. Some participants said homes that could house families are instead being used for Airbnb or other tourism-related rentals, contributing to displacement and making it harder for working families to remain in the community. Families expressed a need for rental assistance, utility support, and policies that protect year-round residents from being priced out of the mountain community they call home.

Participants also connected economic strain to the local labor market. Employment is often seasonal, tourism-dependent, and concentrated in lower-wage service, restaurant, hospitality, and trade jobs. Some parents described working extremely long hours to support their households, while others leave the workforce because child care is unavailable or unaffordable. Families shared that they want more stable employment, stronger economic mobility, and support that allow parents to work without sacrificing their children's care, health, or well-being.

Activities, Enrichment, and Safe Indoor Spaces for Children

Families consistently called for more free and low-cost activities for children and youth. Parents described limited recreational and enrichment opportunities, especially

during the winter when snow, road conditions, and cold weather reduce access to outdoor activities. Families noted that many programs are short-term, expensive, or offered too infrequently to meet children's needs. Parents wanted more indoor recreation, arts, music, swimming, sports, and safe social spaces where children can play, build skills, and connect with peers year-round.

Participants also emphasized that enrichment opportunities matter for children's emotional development and sense of belonging. Families described activities such as art, music, swimming lessons, and extracurricular programs as important outlets for creativity, confidence, self-expression, and stress relief. However, parents said these opportunities are often too costly, unavailable for children with disabilities, or located off the mountain. Some families travel to other communities for activities, but doing so adds transportation costs and time burdens that many households cannot sustain.

Parents also raised concerns about children's mental health, bullying, and limited alternative social spaces in a small community. While families valued Big Bear's closeness, they noted that children need more places to connect, decompress, and receive support outside of school and home. Families expressed concern that without expanded educational, enrichment, and employment pathways, young people may have to leave Big Bear in order to access opportunity.

Public Benefits, Language Access, and Family Support Systems

Families described public benefits and family support systems as limited, difficult to access, or inconsistent in Big Bear. Participants noted the absence of local offices for key services such as WIC and the DMV, explaining that online or telephone access does not replace having in-person help when families need immediate support. Families also described barriers related to transportation, limited connectivity, and the burden of explaining urgent needs remotely while managing children, work, and other responsibilities.

Language access was another recurring concern. Spanish-speaking families described the need for bilingual providers, translators, and more services offered in Spanish. Parents noted that English classes are available, but often only once a week or during times that do not work for everyone. Families also shared that some children's library programs and community activities are offered only in English, limiting access for Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers who want to participate fully in their children's learning and social development.

Immigrant families also described barriers tied to documentation status, employment opportunities, and system navigation. These challenges compound the existing

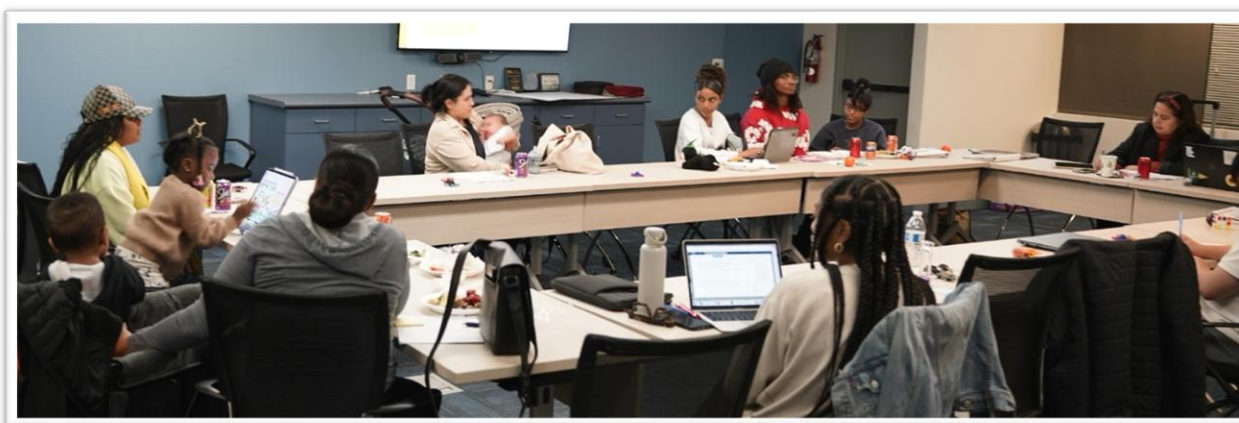
pressures of high costs, limited transportation, and scarce local services. Families emphasized the importance of trusted messengers, culturally responsive outreach, and support systems that reduce fear, confusion, and isolation.

Community Assets and Trusted Supports

Despite significant barriers, families identified meaningful local support and assets. Participants named The Mom and Dad Project, The Dad Project, WIC, CARE, food banks, schools, libraries, parks and recreation, REACH, faith communities, birthing classes, and informal parent networks as important sources of connection and support. Families especially valued programs that created space for parents to learn together, reduce stigma around asking for help, and build healthier relationships with their children and partners.

The Dad Project was described as welcoming, nonjudgmental, and valuable for fathers seeking to become more nurturing and engaged parents. Participants appreciated that the program was framed around growth rather than blame, helping fathers reflect on parenting practices, build communication skills, and learn alongside other dads. Families also valued birthing and parenting classes because they provided both practical information and a sense of shared community.

At the same time, families noted that many helpful programs are constrained by limited funding, infrequent schedules, eligibility restrictions, or lack of awareness. Some classes are offered only once a year, and some funding rules prevent both parents from accessing different courses even when the whole family could benefit. Overall, the Big Bear session highlighted a mountain community with strong relationships and deep commitment to place, but one where families need more consistent local infrastructure, flexible child care, accessible healthcare, affordable housing, language access, and sustained family-centered programming to raise children with stability and opportunity.



Policy and Investment Recommendations

Grounded in the lived experiences of families who participated in the San Bernardino County Community Listening and Learning Sessions, these recommendations are intended to guide First 5 San Bernardino, policymakers, public agencies, philanthropy, and community partners toward investments that are equitable, place-based, and responsive to the realities of families with young children ages 0–5. The recommendations align with the countywide priorities families raised across the High Desert, Valley, West End, and Mountain regions, while also reinforcing First 5 San Bernardino’s strategic focus on child health, family support, and quality early learning.

Families were clear that the challenges they face are interconnected. Child care affects employment. Transportation affects healthcare. Housing costs affect food security. Language access affects whether families can use services with dignity and confidence. For this reason, the path forward requires more than isolated programs. It requires coordinated systems investment, trusted community partnerships, and sustained opportunities for parents and caregivers to shape the policies and services that affect their children’s lives.

Expand Accessible, Flexible, and High-Quality Child Care and Early Learning Infrastructure

San Bernardino County needs a child care system that reflects how families live and work. Increased investment in a mixed delivery child care and early learning system would support both family economic mobility and healthy child development by ensuring that infants and toddlers have access to safe, reliable, and developmentally appropriate care.

Across all regions, families described child care as limited, expensive, and poorly aligned with work schedules, particularly for parents working evenings, seasonal jobs, irregular hours, or nontraditional shifts. Investments could expand access to home-based and center-based child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, state preschool, and other early learning options that are affordable and close to where families live.

Families also need flexible and drop-in care models, especially in communities where long travel distances make services harder to reach. These investments would help parents stay employed, reduce tradeoffs between work and caregiving, and ensure that families do not have to choose between affordability, safety, and quality.

Strengthen Local Pediatric, Maternal, Mental Health, and Developmental Care

San Bernardino County needs health and developmental services that families can reach before small concerns become crises. Investments could bring pediatric, prenatal, postpartum, mental health, lactation, development, and specialty care closer to where families live, especially in communities where distance, weather, or limited provider availability delay care.

Families in the High Desert and Big Bear described long travel distances and unsafe weather conditions, while families in Ontario and San Bernardino described long waits, high costs, fragmented referrals, and limited specialty availability.

First 5 San Bernardino and partners could expand mobile services, satellite clinics, family resource hubs, developmental screenings, early intervention pathways, and referral coordination. These investments could prioritize culturally responsive providers, bilingual services, doulas, community health workers acting as trusted advocates who help families feel heard, believed, and supported.

Build a Countywide Family Navigation and Warm Handoff System

San Bernardino County needs a family navigation system that helps parents move from confusion to connection. Families repeatedly shared that services may exist, but they are often hard to find, difficult to qualify for, or confusing to complete without support.

Parents described outdated referrals, paperwork burdens, eligibility cliffs, missed appointments, and limited case management. These barriers often leave families starting over each time they seek help, even when they are already connected to schools, clinics, community centers, or public programs.

A countywide navigation strategy could include centralized information, multilingual outreach, real-time referral updates, community navigators, and warm handoffs through trusted messengers. Navigation should be relationship-based so families are not only given information but supported through each next step.

Reduce Cost-of-Living Pressures Through Family Economic Stability Supports

Family economic stability should be treated as early childhood infrastructure. Families cannot focus on child development when they are constantly deciding between rent, food, utilities, gas, child care, and medical bills. Investments must help families meet basic needs while maintaining dignity and stability.

Across regions, parents described rising costs and benefit cliffs that leave families earning too much to qualify for help, but not enough to meet basic needs. These pressures affect employed families as well as families experiencing job instability, health challenges, or caregiving responsibilities.

Investments could expand flexible rental assistance, utility support, food access, transportation assistance, emergency cash supports, basic needs distribution, and benefits navigation. First 5 San Bernardino and its partners could also advocate on behalf of parents and caregivers for social welfare policies that reduce benefit cliffs and ensure existing programs are designed to meet the real needs of children and families.

Invest in Place-Based Access Strategies for Rural, Mountain, Desert, and Urban Communities

San Bernardino County's size and diversity require services designed around place. Families in rural, desert, mountain, and urban communities face different access barriers, and a one-size-fits-all service model will not meet their needs.

Big Bear families described challenges such as winter weather, long drives, and the lack of nearby in-person access points for essential services such as public benefits, healthcare, child care, and family support. Similarly, High Desert families described long traveling distances and lack of nearby providers as central challenges to accessing care. While Ontario and San Bernardino families may live closer to services, many still face fragmented systems, long waits, and cost pressures.

Investments could support mobile services, pop-up family resource events, transportation assistance, telehealth where appropriate, and permanent or satellite service hubs in under-resourced communities. Place-based planning should use local data and parent voice to decide where services belong and how families can realistically reach them.

Expand Safe and Inclusive Enrichment Opportunities for Children and Youth

Children need safe, affordable places to learn, play, socialize, and belong. Families across regions made clear that enrichment opportunities are not extras; they support school readiness, emotional well-being, confidence, creativity, and social connection.

Parents called for more free and low-cost afterschool programs, summer activities, sports, arts, music, indoor recreation, library programming, and safe "third spaces" where children can play and belong outside of school and home. Families also emphasized the need for inclusive programming for children with disabilities, developmental needs, and language access needs.

Investments could expand year-round activities that are affordable, culturally responsive, and available during times that work for families. Mountain and desert communities also need indoor and weather-resilient options so children are not cut off from recreation and social connection during extreme heat, cold, snow, or unsafe outdoor conditions.

Sustain and Scale Trusted Community-Based Family Support Programs

Sustained funding for trusted programs that families already rely on, while expanding their reach, frequency, and eligibility flexibility is critical. Across regions, parents identified trusted supports that included local nonprofits, schools and libraries, parks and recreation spaces, faith communities, food and diaper distribution programs, public benefits programs, crisis and safety-net resources, parenting programs, and informal parent networks.

These supports help families find information, meet urgent needs, build connection, and feel less alone. However, families also described many of these resources as limited by funding, scheduling, geography, awareness, or eligibility rules.

Sustained funding could help trusted community-based programs operate more consistently, reach more families, serve both parents and caregivers, offer child-friendly participation options, and connect families to additional supports through warm handoffs. The goal should be to strengthen what is already working while expanding access for families who remain disconnected.

Improve Housing Stability and Community Conditions for Families with Young Children

Housing stability and safe community conditions are essential to early childhood well-being. Families cannot thrive when they are facing rising rents, displacement, homelessness, unsafe neighborhoods, or constant uncertainty about whether they can remain in their community.

Ontario families raised concerns about gentrification and being priced out, while Big Bear families described short-term rentals reducing housing availability for year-round residents.

Investments could expand rental assistance, homelessness prevention, family-centered housing supports, supportive services, and local planning strategies that prioritize families with young children. Stable housing and safe neighborhoods should be treated as foundational conditions for healthy child development.

Strengthen Cultural Responsiveness and Trust Across Systems

Families need services they can use with dignity, trust, and confidence. Access is not only about whether a program exists; it is about whether families can understand it, feel safe using it, and be treated with respect when they ask for help.

Spanish-speaking families, immigrant families, Black families, and other families of color navigating disability or specialized health needs described the importance of being heard and believed. Families want providers and programs that communicate clearly, respond without judgment, and reflect the cultural and linguistic realities of the communities they serve.

Investments could support bilingual staff, interpretation, translated materials, culturally responsive outreach, Black maternal health supports, community health workers, parent ambassadors, and partnerships with trusted organizations. Trust should be treated as infrastructure and be built into program design from the beginning. Without trust, even well-funded programs may not reach the families they are intended to serve.

Center Parent and Caregiver Voice as Ongoing Civic Infrastructure

Parent and caregiver voice should be built into early childhood decision-making as ongoing civic infrastructure. Families who participated in the listening sessions offered clear insight into where systems work, where they fail, and what would make services more useful, accessible, and responsive.

Their participation should not end with this report. First 5 San Bernardino and partners could sustain regional Community Tables, parent advisory groups, compensated engagement opportunities, and feedback loops connected to the IE Children's Cabinet.

Families are not only recipients of services. They are experts in their lived experience and essential partners in shaping policies, programs, and investments. Centering their voice will strengthen accountability, improve program design, and help ensure that early childhood systems reflect what families actually need.

Taken together, these recommendations call for a more responsive early childhood system across San Bernardino County. The goal is not simply to add more programs, but to build a coordinated network of supports that families can actually reach, trust, and use. By investing in care, access, stability, and family voice, First 5 San Bernardino and its partners can help ensure that every child has a stronger foundation during the earliest years of life.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The experiences shared by families across San Bernardino County make clear that parents and caregivers are doing extraordinary work to raise young children in communities marked by both deep strengths and persistent barriers. Across the High Desert, Valley, West End, and Mountain regions, families described resilience, creativity, and strong commitment to their children's futures. They also described systems that too often require families to travel farther, wait longer, pay more, repeat their stories, and navigate confusing processes without enough support. These realities underscore the need for intentional, equity-driven policy and investment that meets families where they are and strengthens the local infrastructure children need during their earliest years of life.

While each region surfaced distinct place-based priorities, the listening sessions also revealed a shared call for systems that are easier to access, more responsive to family realities, and rooted in trust. Families need child care and early learning options that align with work schedules and developmental needs. They need healthcare, maternal health, behavioral health, and developmental supports that are timely, culturally responsive, and close to home. They need stronger navigation, warm handoffs, and trusted messengers who can help them move through services without being left to start over again and again. They need relief from the cost pressures that force impossible tradeoffs between rent, food, utilities, transportation, child care, and medical care. Most importantly, they need to be treated not only as recipients of services, but as experts whose lived experiences should guide decisions about programs, policies, and investments.

The recommendations in this report offer a practical path forward for First 5 San Bernardino, public agencies, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and regional partners. They call for expanded child care and early learning infrastructure, stronger pediatric and family health systems, a countywide navigation and warm handoff strategy, place-based access models, economic stability supports, safe enrichment opportunities, sustained funding for trusted community programs, housing stability strategies, and deeper investments in cultural responsiveness and family voice. Taken together, these recommendations are not simply a list of program improvements. They represent a broader invitation to build a more coordinated early childhood system that families can understand, trust, and use.

The IE Children's Cabinet will continue to build on the momentum created through these Community Listening and Learning Sessions by inviting parents and caregivers

to participate in regional Community Tables. This experience of listening directly to families has reaffirmed IECC's commitment to prioritizing community voice as a guiding force in early childhood policy, investment, and systems change. These tables will create ongoing opportunities for families to share priorities, review emerging recommendations, build advocacy skills, and work alongside community partners to advance health, racial, and economic equity for children and families. Participants will be compensated for their time and expertise, reinforcing the belief that family voice is not a symbolic gesture, but an essential part of civic infrastructure and systems change.

As next steps, IECC and the IE Children's Cabinet will work with First 5 San Bernardino and regional partners to share findings from this report, identify opportunities for alignment with existing initiatives, and support continued dialogue with families in each region. This includes using the findings to inform Community Table agendas, strengthen outreach and engagement strategies, support policy and funding conversations, and develop feedback loops that allow families to see how their input is being used. Continued engagement will also help broaden representation over time, especially among families who were unable to attend these initial sessions because of transportation, work schedules, language access, digital access, fear, or other barriers.

The stories in this report should be understood as both evidence and invitation. They show where systems are falling short, but they also point toward solutions that are already emerging through trusted relationships, community-based leadership, and family resilience. By acting on these insights with urgency, humility, and sustained commitment, First 5 San Bernardino and its partners can help create conditions where every young child, regardless of geography, income, race, language, ability, or family circumstance, has the support needed to grow, learn, and thrive. The work ahead requires collaboration, accountability, and continued listening, but the path is clear: when families are centered, systems become stronger, communities become more responsive, and children have a better chance to flourish.



Methodology

Session Design and Approach

To ensure authenticity and depth of engagement, the community listening sessions were carefully designed with a participatory, inclusive approach. Facilitators, trained in trauma-informed and culturally responsive facilitation, followed a structured guide that emphasized psychological safety, confidentiality, and respect for all voices. Instructions for facilitators, including sample probing and follow-up questions in both English and Spanish were provided in addition to a Facilitator Feedback Form to identify challenges and opportunities for better facilitation in the future.

The structure of the community listening sessions was intentionally crafted to foster active participation and authentic dialogue, ensuring that every voice was heard and respected. We determined that the session should follow a structured yet flexible format to foster engagement and meaningful dialogue.

- **Dinner:** As sessions were held in the evening, a hot meal and refreshments are provided to all families in attendance.
- **Welcome and Introductions:** Setting the tone, building rapport, and explaining session purposes and ground rules.
- **Issue Identification:** Using color-coded sticky notes, participants identified major needs, assets, barriers, and gaps. Patterns emerged visually as notes were clustered by theme.
- **Small Group Exploration:** Focused discussions explore specifics around service access, child and family needs, helpful programs, and lived experiences, while encouraging narrative testimony.
- **Large Group Reflection and Synthesis:** Reporting, synthesizing, and collectively prioritizing top issues for policy action.
- **Closing and Next Steps:** Summarizing main takeaways, identifying community champions, and outlining plans for ongoing engagement.
- **Documentation:** Facilitators submitted detailed notes including demographics, direct quotes, observed assets, barriers, and recommendations for process improvement.

Before the Community Listening and Learning Sessions formally began, hot meals and refreshments were provided to families and engaged by facilitators in a casual and welcoming environment. This allowed families to be more comfortable with facilitators

and other families in attendance while allowing a moment of community and socializing at the end of the day.

Facilitators played an essential part in making sure that all participants felt included, respected, and heard. Sessions began with introductions to the IECC staff, partners, and host organizations. Ground rules were collaboratively established, reinforcing the importance of active listening, non-judgment, and honoring diverse perspectives.

The methodology integrated both qualitative and consensus-building techniques. Issues were surfaced through a color-coded Sticky-Note activity, allowing participants to highlight their biggest needs, challenges, and community strengths.

- On a pink Sticky-Note, participants were asked to write or communicate with a facilitator about what they loved most about raising children in their respective community.
- On a yellow Sticky-Note, participants were asked to write or communicate to a facilitator about what challenges made raising children in their community difficult.

These Sticky-Notes were then read out loud and clustered into major themes. This visual clustering technique ensured that no voice was lost and helped identify collective themes and unique regional priorities. This process facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the concerns and needs expressed by families, while systematically analyzing broader themes specific to the community.

After larger community themes were identified, families were broken into small groups of no more than 7 people to discuss in more detail what families were experiencing to better identify tangible needs. In these small groups, facilitators were instructed to use open-ended prompts to draw out stories, encourage reflection on both positive and negative experiences, and probe into the root causes of challenges that were surfaced during the Sticky-Note activity. These areas of exploration included:

- **Biggest Needs:** What is your family's greatest need right now when it comes to raising your child(ren) in [San Bernardino, the High Desert, the West End, the Mountain region]?
- **Challenges and Barriers:** Can you share a time when it was hard to get something your family needed here in [San Bernardino, the High Desert, the West End, the Mountain region]? What did you need and what happened?"
- **Helpful Services:** What services or programs in [San Bernardino, the High Desert, the West End, the Mountain region] have been most helpful for you and your children?

- **Gaps and Unmet Needs:** you tell us about a service or program you wanted or tried to get in [San Bernardino, the High Desert, the West End, the Mountain region] but couldn't?
- **Lived Experiences:** Can you share a personal story about a time when a service or program either really helped your family, or when you needed help and couldn't get it?

Following this, attendees joined small group discussions, each facilitated to encourage deeper exploration of specific challenges, service experiences, and unmet needs. These small groups provided a safe space for sharing personal narratives and reflecting both positive and negative aspects of raising children locally.

After small-group discussions, participants reconvened for large-group reflections, where key insights were reported and prioritized. The sessions concluded with a summary of takeaways, next steps for community action and policy advocacy, and completion of facilitator assessments to improve future engagement.

Where needed, bilingual facilitators and materials ensured full participation for Spanish-speaking community members, and sessions were held in trusted, accessible community spaces.

This format, informed by earlier planning and feedback by First 5 San Bernardino staff and leadership, ensures that each participant can contribute, reflect, and collaborate. The session culminates in a group synthesis, where key insights are shared, priorities are set, and actionable next steps are outlined, paving the way for continued community involvement and policy development.

This multi-layered methodology ensured that data collection was both systematic and deeply human-centered, resulting in findings that reflect the complexity of San Bernardino County's communities.

Session Logistics and Participation Summary

IECC held five in-person listening sessions across San Bernardino County in the cities of Big Bear, Ontario, San Bernardino, and Victorville.

Big Bear Session Details

- Session conducted in both English and Spanish
- Date and Time: May 21, 2026
- Location: 41965 Big Bear Blvd. Big Bear Lake, CA 92315.
- Target Region: Big Bear City and surrounding mountain communities.
- Number of initial registrants: 20

- Number of parents/caregivers present at the session: 15
- Key demographics collected from session: Participants were primarily families coming from Big Bear, Big Bear City, Big Bear Lake and Sugarloaf. The majority identified as Hispanic or Latiné with 2 parents identified as White.

Ontario Session Details

- Session conducted in both English and Spanish
- Date and Time: May 14, 2026
- Location: First United Methodist Church. 918 North Euclid Avenue, Ontario, CA 91764
- Target Region: San Bernardino West-End
- Number of initial registrants: 8
- Number of parents/caregivers present at the session: 28
- Key demographics collected from session: Participants were primarily families coming from Ontario, San Bernardino, Rancho Cucamonga, Montclair, and Upland. The majority identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and Hispanic or Latiné, with some parents identifying as Black or African American and Asian.

San Bernardino: CCRC Session Details

- Session conducted primarily in English with Spanish translation available.
- Date and Time: February 12, 2026, from 5:00 to 7:00 PM.
- Location: Child Care Resource Center San Bernardino. Child Care Resource Center Victorville, 15456 W Sage St, Victorville, CA 92392
- Target Region: San Bernardino (Valley Region)
- Number of initial registrants: 20 people registered.
- Number of parents/caregivers present at the session: 3 attendees, with ~10 children.
- Key demographics collected from session: Participants were primarily parents and family members from San Bernardino County communities. The majority identified as Black/African American, with one parent identified as Asian.

San Bernardino: El Sol Session Details

- Session conducted primarily in English with Spanish translation available.
- Date and Time: February 19, 2026, from 5:00 - 7:00 PM.
- Location: El Sol NEC (Neighborhood Educational Center). 1535 S D St, San Bernardino, CA 92408.
- Target Region: San Bernardino West-End.
- Number of initial registrants: 12 people registered.
- Number of parents/caregivers present at the session: 6 attendees, and 3 children
- Key demographics collected from session: Participants were primarily parents and family members from San Bernardino County. With most identifying as Black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latiné and White families.

Victorville Session Details

- Session conducted primarily in English with Spanish translation available
- Date and Time: January 26, 2026, from 5:30 - 7:30 PM
- Location: Child Care Resource Center Victorville, 15456 W Sage St, Victorville, CA 92392

- Target Region: High Desert Region
- Number of initial registrants: 4 people registered.
- Number of parents/caregivers present at the session: 3 attendees and 7 children.
- Key demographics collected from session: Participants were primarily parents and family members from the city of Adelanto and Hesperia, with most identifying as Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latiné.

Marketing and Outreach Strategies

IECC implemented a marketing and outreach strategy that relied on close partners with existing community trust to engage with parents to notify them of the Community Listening and Learning Session opportunity. Social media posts were created and distributed across multiple platforms, reaching both broad audiences and targeted groups. These posts were further amplified by sharing them via email among nearly 3,000 contacts, including all Inland Empire (IE) Children's Cabinet members and their extensive networks to inform and invite families across San Bernardino County. Recruitment efforts relied heavily on the active engagement of Children's Cabinet members and First 5 San Bernardino grantees to conduct parent outreach and encourage families and caregivers to attend.

Barriers and Limitations

Marketing and Outreach

IECC continues to grow and maintain a large network of trusted partners across Riverside and San Bernardino counties, providing essential capacity building and advocacy support to ensure community needs are being met while ensuring nonprofit sustainability. Because of the nature of our core services and programs, IECC provides direct services to nonprofit leaders and staff rather than directly to the community-at-large. This means that IECC is highly dependent on the reputations and connections third party partners have with the community, especially as direct service providers, to ensure community is appropriately informed and engaged to participate in the Community Listening and Learning Sessions.

The outreach process for the Community Listening and Learning Sessions offered important lessons for future engagement efforts. While IECC appreciated the support and partnership of community organizations in sharing session information, IECC did not have direct oversight of when or how that information reached parents and caregivers. In some instances, information was shared close to the session dates, which may have limited families' ability to plan for participation. IECC also encouraged broader dissemination through First 5 San Bernardino County's grantee network. Reflecting on this experience underscores the value of earlier, more coordinated

communication strategies and multiple outreach pathways to ensure families have sufficient notice and equitable access to opportunities for engagement.

Outreach and attendance also required significant individualized follow-up. IECC staff conducted reminder calls to registered participants in the days leading up to sessions to support attendance. While this approach helped increase participation, it was time-intensive and underscored additional challenges related to trust and recognition. As IECC is not a direct service provider, some families were unfamiliar with the organization, making direct outreach by phone feel unexpected. This highlights the importance of continued partnership with trusted community-based organizations to support outreach, reduce barriers to participation, and ensure families are engaged through relationships they already know.

Looking ahead, IECC is committed to strengthening outreach efforts by working more directly and intentionally with trusted community partners to codesign outreach materials and public communications. This includes the purposeful incorporation of partner logos and organizational identities into flyer design and messaging that centers organizations that hold deep and longstanding relationships with families and are widely recognized as trusted messengers within their communities. By elevating these partners more visibly in outreach efforts, IECC aims to reinforce credibility, improve reach, and reduce barriers to participation. This approach reflects a commitment to equity driven engagement and honors the community rooted relationships that are essential to ensuring families receive information through sources they know and trust.

Digital Access and Communication Limitations

Reliance on digital outreach channels, including social media, did not consistently reach all families, particularly those with limited broadband access, device availability, or digital literacy. This digital divide constrained awareness of session opportunities and reinforced the need for diversified, community-based communication pathways. We learned that direct in-person parent engagement by trusted partners allowed for the greatest participatory engagement.

Geographic and Transportation Constraints

In rural and unincorporated areas, families face significant transportation barriers that limit their ability to participate in community engagement activities. Limited or nonexistent public transportation, long travel distances to meeting locations or services, and reliance on informal ride networks constrained both attendance and consistency of participation. These geographic realities disproportionately impacted families in areas such as Mecca and shaped who was able to engage and when.

IECC attempted to mediate these challenges by meeting in trusted centralized locations in various cities across San Bernardino County. This strategy aimed to make sessions more accessible for families by reducing travel times and leveraging venues familiar to community members, thereby fostering greater participation and comfort.

Language Access and Linguistic Diversity

While bilingual (English and Spanish) facilitation and materials were incorporated, language access remained a structural challenge. Many families speak Spanish or Indigenous languages as their primary language, and limited availability of interpretation across systems created barriers to full participation and understanding. This required additional facilitation support and underscored the need for expanded multilingual capacity in future engagement efforts. Additional linguistic capacity facilitated deeper engagement, resulting in more inclusive participation and feedback from Spanish-speaking families.

Fear and Distrust Related to Immigration Enforcement

In some communities, fear associated with Customs and Immigration Enforcement (ICE) created an additional barrier to participation. Ongoing concerns about safety, visibility, and surveillance influenced families' willingness to attend public gatherings or share lived experiences openly. This context required trauma-informed facilitation and limited the reach of traditional outreach methods.

As detailed in our findings, this represented a substantial barrier where the significant presence of ICE impeded access to essential services and generated notable safety concerns.

Timing and Competing Family Responsibilities

Sessions were intentionally held in the evening and included meals to reduce participation barriers; however, many families still faced competing responsibilities related to work schedules, caregiving, and household demands. For agricultural and working families with nontraditional hours, even well-designed accommodations could not fully offset these constraints, affecting attendance and duration of participation.

Providing on-site childcare was an important strategy to reduce barriers to participation, but it also presented operational challenges. Securing childcare providers required advance estimates of the number of children, their ages, and support needs; however, these factors were highly unpredictable. Registrations did not consistently reflect actual attendance, and the range of ages from infants to older youth required different levels of supervision and care.

This uncertainty made it difficult to reliably plan staffing with childcare providers, who often require clear ratios and age-specific information. In some cases, when external childcare support was unavailable or limited, IECC staff stepped in to supervise children during sessions. While necessary to ensure participation for families, this created additional strain on staff capacity and made it more difficult to simultaneously facilitate sessions and manage childcare needs. These experiences highlight the importance of flexible childcare models, contingency planning, and additional resources to ensure family participation can be supported without placing undue burden on staff.

Scope and Sample Size Limitations

Participation reflected the voices of nearly 55 parents and caregivers across four regions, providing rich qualitative insight but not a comprehensive representation of all San Bernardino County communities. Findings are illustrative rather than exhaustive and highlight the importance of continued, ongoing engagement to broaden representation over time.

Appendix

Appendix A. Session Facilitation Guide (English and Spanish)

Appendix B. Outreach Materials

Appendix C. IE Children’s Cabinet San Bernardino Listening & Learning Session Overview (June 2026)