



Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park

Creating Community Connections

A Neighborhood Approach

For Improving

Early Childhood Education Programs



Table of Contents

I	Executive Summary	1
II	Overview	2
III	Implementation	4
IV	Program and Projects	6
V	Research Results	10
VI	Conclusions and Recommendations	14
VII	Research and Publications	16

Research by Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning
Christine George, Ph.D., Lourdes Paredes, M.A., and Chiara Sabina, M.A.

Report prepared by Patrick Barry for the Early Childhood Network
of Edgewater & Rogers Park

©2002 Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park, Chicago, Illinois
Design and production by Meyerson Communications
Photos by Kate Thomas and Kate Sachnoff
Major funding provided by The McCormick Tribune Foundation

Executive Summary

In an era of tight budgets, how can limited resources best be used to improve the quality, supply and coordination of programs for children from birth to five years old and their families?

The Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park (ECN) was developed to test a model for improving services through a modest commitment of resources. The model proposes that one coordinator can network diverse providers throughout a neighborhood and maximize their ability to acquire the knowledge and resources necessary to improve and expand their programs.

ECN is unique in its local focus, its strong linkage to elected officials and the broad spectrum of types of providers that have continued to participate. Nearly 50% of all the licensed early childhood providers in the area have participated. They include Head Start, Even Start and Early Head Start; family day care homes; non-profit and proprietary child care centers; tuition and faith-based programs; parent co-ops; and State Pre-Kindergarten.

In addition, there was active involvement from support services including mental health, early intervention, parenting and home visiting programs, and local institutions such as Loyola University, the park district, library and chamber of commerce.

State Sen. Carol Ronen spurred the initiative. With financial support from the McCormick Tribune Foundation, a part-time director linked providers through monthly meetings that offer peer support, professional development, technical assistance, access to resources, grant opportunities, access to elected officials and a social outlet for sometimes isolated caregivers.

In three years of operation, ECN showed demonstrable results from a modest investment. Loyola

University's Center for Urban Research and Learning performed extensive research. Surveys, data analysis and evaluations of individual ECN projects found that ECN helped:

- Improve the quality of care, through professional development opportunities, access to existing resources and “mini-grants”;
- Expand availability of care: providers who participated in ECN added 177 slots, or 75% more than those who did not participate; and
- Strengthen coordination among programs through the formation of new relationships, publication of a community asset map and opportunities for interchange.

Loyola noted that ECN was less effective on a fourth goal of improving working conditions for child care professionals. The Loyola evaluation also identifies two organizational challenges: leadership development and funding stability.

Based on ECN's experience, they offer public policy recommendations relating to:

- Investment in neighborhood-based Early Childhood Networks in additional Chicago communities;
- Development of community asset map and resource appendix (CAMERA) publications of services for each Chicago community; and
- Increased compensation for early childhood teachers and caregivers.

The Early Childhood Network model shows considerable promise as a means for improving services with a relatively small commitment of new resources. Moreover, it can strengthen communities by building bridges between diverse players. It could prove to be a valuable addition to the existing structures of service coordination and improvement in early childhood and serve as a springboard for new initiatives to integrate services.

A new model for maximizing early childhood resources

How can a community improve and expand early childhood programs? A neighborhood project was designed to build bridges among those who care for babies and preschoolers and connect those providers to resources. Extensive data collection and evaluation show that the approach has been effective.

With more parents than ever in the workforce, communities across America are struggling to expand and improve their programs for the education and care of young children. The pressure of federal welfare-to-work requirements is exploding demand for child care, but in Illinois, as elsewhere, many communities face a shortage of affordable, quality programs. In many communities those programs are uncoordinated and vary in quality.

Early childhood providers work exhausting hours in draining jobs. Few have the time or expertise to educate themselves about eligibility for the confusing web of public programs, how to access early intervention, recalls of dangerous children's products, state regulations, legislation that impacts them and programs to benefit the parents they serve.

A unique community-based collaboration was established to address these issues in two adjacent neighborhoods on Chicago's North Side. In the spring of 1999, the Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park (ECN) was formed and an open invitation was made to all who were concerned with children from birth to age five including child care providers, pre-school teachers, professionals at support organizations and local institutions. The mission was ambitious:

- Improve the *quality* of early childhood programs;
- Strengthen *coordination* among local early childhood programs;
- Expand the *availability* of services for children from birth to five years old;
- Improve *working conditions* for early childhood teachers and caregivers.

The ECN model incorporated four elements that made it unique:

A spectrum of players. ECN bridged the bureaucratic, physical and philosophical barriers that separate early education programs in most neighborhoods. It actively sought to bring the providers from Head Start programs, home-based care (both licensed and license-exempt), center-based care, private pre-schools, the State Pre-Kindergarten program, faith-based programs, parent cooperatives and early childhood advocates into the same room.

“The network helped me do my job better. It made me happy to know I could call on ECN for resources.”

—Home child care provider

In addition it brought in partners from the local community such as mental health providers, transitional housing for women, the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Public Library, the community councils, the chamber of commerce, the local university, visiting nurses, home visiting programs, early intervention programs and programs for children with disabilities.

Linkage to elected officials. Creation of ECN was spurred by Illinois State Sen. Carol Ronen when she was a member of the House of Representative and Chair of the House Committee on Children and Youth. ECN was conceived as a two-way conduit for public policy information: to inform elected officials about local needs and to help local providers improve programs and gain access to new programs and funding. Access to public officials was intended as a way to empower providers to impact public policies that affect them and the families they serve.

Local focus. The adjacent communities of Rogers Park and Edgewater, with a combined population of 125,000 people, have long histories as active and cohesive communities. The

Early Childhood Network aimed to build on these traditions by creating stronger links among those involved with small children. It tapped “indigenous” local expertise for its various projects and had an ongoing partnership with Loyola University, whose main campus spans the border between Rogers Park and Edgewater. ECN

worked to bring resources and trainings to the neighborhood, held all its meetings and events locally and purchased all possible goods and services in the area. It maintained an intimate atmosphere that welcomed all players as important contributors to the health of the neighborhood. By working at the local level the model takes advantage of relationships of trust to ensure the effective dispersal of information and continuing relevance of its work.

Professional facilitation. The Early Childhood Network was staffed part-time by an Edgewater parent with substantial experience in government and the early education field; the fiscal

agent was a 47-year-old community organization. Both were independent of service-providing agencies and thus were not competing for contracts or imposing a particular service model. This helped bring providers together in a non-competitive environment.

These elements combined to create a solid record of accomplishment. Surveys, data collection, in-depth interviews and evaluation reports conducted by Loyola University’s Center for Urban Research and Learning over three years showed that the network brought real, quantifiable benefits to the two communities:

- *Better communication* across virtually all sectors of the field. ECN’s meetings and information fair attracted 73 organizations or independent providers and more than 120 individual participants.
- *An increase in supply* in the target area: There was an overall increase of more than 12% in the supply of slots for infants to five-year-olds in the two communities during the pilot period. Local providers who participated in ECN added 75% more slots than those who had not participated.
- Publication of a guide *mapping local resources* that has proven an important tool for providers and parents.
- *Effective use of mini-grants* to improve programs, expand supply and educate both providers and parents.
- A *neighborhood information fair* that included educational sessions by local providers and professionals.

This report is intended as a guide for any community that is considering methods of improving the quality, quantity or coordination of services for their youngest children. It details the workings of the pilot of the ECN, its successes and weaknesses and the barriers that remain.

It should also be of interest to public and private funders seeking to target dollars effectively toward these goals and to public officials seeking innovative community-based programs.

Community Profile

Target area: Boundaries are Foster Avenue on the south and the City Limits on the north, Lake Michigan on the east and Western Avenue on the west

Total population: 125,682
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2002)

0-5 year old population: 8,392
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

0-5 year olds identified in formal care: 2,232
(Loyola University study, 2001)

Preschoolers in care: 14% in Rogers Park,
18% in Edgewater
(Illinois Facilities Foundation, 1999)

Early childhood programs: 93
(Loyola University study, 2001)

The launch: A sponsor and a self-starter as director

ECN would never have gotten off the ground if not for two people. One was State Sen. Carol Ronen who was concerned about improving early education resources in her district. The other was a part-time director recruited by Sen. Ronen to create the network from the ground up.

The field of child care and early education was rapidly changing in 1998. A record number of women were in the workforce, and the work requirements of federal welfare reform had increased demand for full-day, full-year care for infants and young children. Carol Ronen, a state representative at that time, saw the massive changes as an opportunity for her constituents. But she suspected that the various child care organizations and home-based providers in her communities were not prepared for – or even aware of – new programs supporting the expansion of child care and early education services.

Her hunch was accurate. Sen. Ronen asked Margie Wallen, a child care expert at Chicago’s Ounce of Prevention Fund, to call six early childhood programs in her district and ask if they planned to use recently approved funding sources for expansion. Wallen found that not only were they unaware of the new resources available, few of the service providers even knew of each others’ work. There was little communication or coordination among the providers and very little thought given to improving the community’s collective ability to provide services.

Types of Child Care by Community

	Number of programs	Total children
Rogers Park		
Licensed-care homes	34	179
Child care centers	8	563
Head Start programs	4	191
State Pre-Kindergarten	4	188
Private pre-school	3	111
Total	53	1232
Edgewater		
Licensed-care homes	30	118
Child care centers	1	40
Head Start programs	4	212
State Pre-Kindergarten	3	168
Private pre-school	4	462
Total	42	1000

Note: Programs that include a combination of Head Start and child care are displayed here as two programs. Exempt homes were not surveyed.
Source: Loyola telephone survey of programs. (2001)

Sen. Ronen convened an informal committee to explore ways to reverse this situation, and with Wallen’s assistance, the network concept was born. With help from Mary Whalen, who volunteered to facilitate the very first meetings, a grant proposal was submitted to the Chicago Community Trust, which awarded a small start-up grant in 1999. The 47-year-old Rogers Park Community Council agreed to serve as fiscal agent and Loyola University donated meeting space (meetings were later moved to Sen. Ronen’s office). A former staffer of Sen. Ronen, Kate Sachnoff, was recruited as part-time network staff person. She was a self-starter with a master’s degree in social work, 12 years experience in city government and a new baby of her own at home. Her challenge was to organize diverse providers into a network that would empower them to improve services.

Monthly meetings were the first and major point of access. Using postcards, phone calls, e-mail and word-of-mouth, Sachnoff publicized the meetings and then tried to pack them with enough benefit at each session to bring out the always over-scheduled participants. Attendance was an ongoing challenge, with eight or ten people at some meetings, 20 to 30 at others. It was the wide variety of providers who attended – and continued to attend – that was most impressive. “I thought that over time the group would winnow down to one sector of early childhood, but the home providers and the centers, the Head Starts and even private school and PreK teachers had a great appreciation for each other’s expertise and kept coming back,” recalls the director.

“At the first meetings you could see that people were happy to meet each other,” says Wallen, now the coordinator for Illinois’ universal pre-school effort. “It was amazing how many people said, ‘Gee, we’ve been working down the street from each other for years, and we’ve never met before.’”

The first meetings focused on selecting possible projects, of which five were seen as having the highest priority:

- Help participants connect to existing funding and resources;
- Help providers find low-cost health insurance;
- Provide local training opportunities for early childhood professionals;
- Sponsor or promote health education programs; and
- Help home-based providers with licensing.

All of these priorities would be addressed over the network’s first three years as the meetings and other activities continued. The McCormick Tribune Foundation provided an operating budget of \$50,000 per year. ECN was successful in connecting participants to resources and each other. Other goals, like procurement of low-cost health insurance, proved to be daunting challenges. But as one meeting led to the next and relationships were formed, the network became a bona-fide organization. And one thing became clear: ECN was making it easier for providers to do their jobs better.

Momentum: Lively meetings and a stream of resources

With good speakers and open discussions, ECN's meetings became a reliable source of information and new contacts. To expand its impact, the network published a neighborhood resource guide, sponsored a local early childhood conference and distributed several rounds of mini-grants. Over time, the concept of a "networked neighborhood" became a reality.

Attracting teachers and child care providers to meetings is difficult for a simple reason: the target audience is usually busy taking care of children. The network had to make the meetings more than worthwhile for the participants, and simply offering door prizes wouldn't do it. "Even giving away umbrella-style strollers is passé," an experienced service provider advised Sachnoff. There had to be substance – both resources and relationships – to bring people back.

The first challenge was to make sure providers knew about the meetings, so a mailing list that included e-mail and phone numbers was developed and then updated regularly. It now has 150 names. A postcard notice was sent out for every meeting along with reminder faxes, e-mails and notices in the community newspaper and community council calendar. When participants arrived, there were cold drinks and bowls of fruit and other snacks on the table, pizza at evening meetings, thick packets of information and a small "quality-enhancement bonus" for each participant's program: a children's book, finger puppets or other learning tools. The themes of these tools were literacy and improving children's attitudes towards people of other races and persons with disabilities.

After introductions, a volunteer was recruited to take minutes, and then a speaker would present on a topic that participants had identified as one of their interests. Speakers were usually experts from the neighborhood and often participants from the group itself. The topics were timely and substantive, with direct impact on the participants, such as:

- Tax credits for providers and individuals;
- Recruiting and interviewing child care staff;
- Protecting children from dangerous toys and equipment;
- Computers and technology for children;
- Infant and toddler mental health;
- State legislative wrap-up;
- Programs offered by local social service agencies;
- Tips on grant writing; and
- Developmental and sensory delays in preschoolers.

"ECN brought together people with the same interests but different backgrounds. It worked to create a cohesive voice."

—Preschool principal

Meetings typically included a rundown by Sachnoff of child care-related legislation and policy debates at the federal, state or city levels; general sharing of neighborhood news; notice of upcoming training sessions and grant opportunities; and frequently, discussion of intractable issues like low pay, lack of benefits, housing problems and unresponsive bureaucracies. The director worked to bring accuracy to these discussions, get responses from policymakers and drive advocacy or mini-grant funding where needed to address the concerns.

Culture of sharing

There was an abundant sense of sharing and peer support, two elements that many felt were central to the network's success. Providers often had the answers to their colleagues' questions, and ECN had only to provide the forum where they could plumb each other's expertise.

An important part of the ECN culture was that the group worked as a "committee of the whole" with very little delegation to committees and few demands placed on participants. There was rarely "homework" for members to conduct once they left the room, short of using the tools provided to improve their programs. This allowed overworked providers to participate at whatever level they were comfortable. There were no membership fees or requirements; meetings were open to everyone in the identified geographical area who worked with children from birth to five years old.

ECN Attendance by Participant Type

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Support service	29	31	56	38
Center or school	39	45	45	34
Home provider	13	17	22	16
Public official	4	4	2	3
Student/intern	7	10	10	1
Speakers and other	9	12	7	10
Total	101	119	142	102

Source: Sign-in sheets. Number of meetings varies by year.

No one expected providers to attend every meeting. The goal was to give participants enough benefits that they would participate again at some point in the future and bring their friends from the field. That strategy worked. Each year more than 50 different people attended ECN meetings and about half attended more than one meeting. From year to year the percentage of those who attended five meetings or more has grown. "This isn't 'just another meeting' with a lot of people I'll never meet again," said one provider surveyed by Loyola University researchers. "These are people in my geographic area facing similar needs and issues as I am." Another provider said, "Every time I go to a meeting I get something good out of it."

She reported participating in music training and a "mini-MBA" certificate program as a direct result of her ECN participation.

The types of attendees have been consistently diverse in terms of their work roles with the strongest participation by people who work for agencies or schools. Attendance was predictably weaker among home child care providers who have less ability to break away to the afternoon meetings and traditionally have been less connected to institutions and sensitive to potential "policing." Evening meetings were added in 2001 on an alternating basis to help attract home-care providers. The modest increase in participation by home-based providers was matched by a drop in attendance by those who work at centers and social service providers, so both time slots were maintained.

While meetings constitute the central point of connection for ECN participants, three other significant activities were used to broaden the network's reach: 1) a resource guide, 2) a neighborhood information fair and 3) a mini-grant program.

The CAMERA resource guide

ECN's first major undertaking was to create and publish a guide to early childhood resources within the neighborhood. A committee was formed in late 1999 to define the project and to seek funding support. The director, the committee and a graphic designer then implemented the plan. By the following fall, 2,500 copies were being distributed in Edgewater and Rogers Park. The guide was also available in "PDF" format on ECN's web site at www.earlychildhoodnetwork.org and in local libraries' reference collections.

The Community Asset Map & Resource Appendix, known as the CAMERA Guide, is a unique 44-page two-color publication that includes detailed maps of the neighborhoods broken into quadrants pinpointing the following resources:

- Business & Professional Services (for early child care providers);
- Emergency Assistance;
- Government Services;
- Ethnic Organizations;
- Health and Medical Resources;
- Recreation;
- Social Services;
- Early Childhood Development Providers (in categories).

It was intended to help providers network with one another, access existing resources and refer parents to local support services. It has also served as a useful tool for parents, and on a policy level the maps clarify the distribution of – and the gaps in – local services for children. A survey of 47 ECN participants by Loyola University found that the CAMERA Guide was a useful reference. Nineteen of the respondents had used the guide at least six times, and some used it 15 times or more. Home child care providers were the most intensive users, and the majority of respondents said the guide was a useful tool when reaching out to parents in crisis and when seeking out services or opportunities for children and families. Abundant anecdotal evidence also suggests that this publication provided real benefits for parents as well as providers. It is widely known in the community. The publication was so well respected in the field that ECN was invited to present it at a regional conference on children.

A neighborhood conference

Another method ECN used to engage and connect providers was to organize a first-ever neighborhood mini-conference. Held in the fall of 2000, the “Growing Your Child Care Business” event combined trainings with an extensive resource fair for providers. Sponsored by ECN, Loyola University, Sen. Ronen, State Rep. Harry Osterman and the Chicago Foundation for Women, the event offered a day of credit-eligible training sessions on early childhood topics plus computer training, roundtable discussions and an exhibit area with vendors from the private sector plus government and social service agency representatives.

The fair provided leadership development and mentoring opportunities by using local talent both to organize the event and to serve as speakers. Thus the workshops afforded attendees business skills and relationship-building opportunities with neighborhood-based colleagues and potential mentors. Some of the speakers had great expertise but no public speaking experience and made their “debut” in the supportive environment of the neighborhood conference. Fifty-seven care providers, advocates and Early Head Start teachers attended the fair, and 23 information tables provided resources for the attendees. “If I was at a big conference downtown right now, I’d be nervous, not making eye contact,” said a home day care owner. “This feels so comfortable, like family.”

Training sessions included Record Keeping and Tax Preparation for Child Care Businesses; Family and Community Linkages; Legal Issues and Your Child Care Business; Setting Up Your Child Care Business; Milestones in Child Development; and Provider-Parent Communications. Attendees also received take-home resources such as discounts to a local children’s bookstore, an internet resource guide, information sheets on child health and a video, “10 Things Every Child Needs.” A computer trainer helped attendees create business cards for their child care businesses as an easy way to introduce them to computers.

Research showed attendance at this conference correlated with an increase in the number of infant and toddler slots.

Local grant pool: Easy access, high impact

ECN distributed several rounds of “community mini-grants” to early childhood providers and local support agencies. The grants were made from an initial pool of \$100,000 and then a second pool of \$70,000, using funds from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs that had been identified for ECN by Sen. Ronen and Rep. Osterman.

The overall goal was to increase either the quantity of care available or the quality of care being delivered by a provider. The ECN Community Mini-Grant program was open to all licensed early childhood providers and programs within ECN boundaries who served low-income families. Sachnoff performed substantial outreach and technical assistance to providers who needed help developing proposals and budgets. Minimal paperwork, one-on-one help and fast turn-around reduced the barriers to obtaining funding for providers who were new to the process.

How ECN Mini-Grants Were Used

Parenting Education and Mental Health – \$25,500

- Parent education including early intervention
- Parenting classes
- Field trips for special-needs home-care children
- Discipline seminars for providers and parents
- Brochure on parents' rights in early intervention system

Training and Development – \$25,600

- Stipends for 10 teachers' Continuing Education Units
- Educational forums for parents and providers
- Scholarship fund for conferences and classes
- Dangerous equipment/recalls trainings and materials
- Internet training for home providers

Capital and Equipment – \$83,500

- Fax, quadruple stroller, rug for child care home
- Equipment needed to create new infant slots in homes
- Lending library and storytelling kits for child care homes
- Triple stroller, toys, playpen for child care home
- Highchairs, cribs, playground for child care center
- Exhibits for 3- to 5-year-olds at local museum
- Literacy materials for Head Start program
- Help in purchase of building for new child care center

Special Projects and Administrative Costs – \$13,100

- Mini-grant administration
- Publication and distribution of Activities for Tots: Health and Safety
- Administrative fee to ECN fiscal agent
- Evaluation and outcomes research
- Data collection, strategic planning, report production

Note: Partial listing as of early 2002.

used for cribs, quadruple strollers and other equipment, brought 20 new slots to the neighborhood (10 for infants), at an average cost of

only \$366 per slot. Most slots were filled in a matter of weeks.

Park district advocacy

A group of providers and parents successfully advocated, through ECN, for the creation of a drop-in indoor play area at a park district facility. They worked with Sen. Ronen, Ald. Mary Ann Smith and the park district to procure \$3,500 in new age-appropriate equipment and two dedicated spaces and then developed rules for usage. This served as a model and started a wave of park district investment in similar "Tot Spots" around the city, which were publicized as a resource for home child care providers. Maintenance of these programs, unfortunately, has been challenging. ECN also assisted local parents in advocating for the complete rebuilding of Senn Park playground. The \$800,000 project broke ground on October 5, 2002, at a "community build day" with hundreds of local residents pitching in.

Health insurance public policy advocacy

Many providers voiced the need to identify affordable health insurance coverage for home child care providers and staff at child care centers. Several meetings and speakers were devoted to the topic and covered the possibility of buying group coverage or becoming part of the state's health care coverage. The Chicago Foundation for Women provided funding for extensive research on existing options and legal barriers. It became clear that the barriers to low-cost health insurance were too large for a small community organization to overcome alone. However, the ECN effort spurred the introduction of two pieces of state legislation to address the problem and the initiation of a health insurance project at Day Care Action Council of Illinois. In 2002, the state extended its KidCare insurance coverage to parents in very-low-income households (under \$8,869 for a family of four). This was expected to provide coverage to some providers and could serve more providers in the future if income-eligibility guidelines are expanded.

University tracks gains, maps future challenges

Researchers tracking the activities of the network found strong results in many areas. Both quality and quantity of services improved, and coordination among programs was enhanced.

Since its inception, ECN worked with Loyola University of Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) to monitor how the network evolved and to measure its results. The analyses by Loyola include an evaluation of the CAMERA Guide, in-depth interviews of 15 ECN participants, an analysis of supply of child care and education services, evaluations of the "Activities for Tots: Health" publication and the Neighborhood Information Fair, and a three-year report including observations about ECN's structure, methods and limitations. The research was funded largely through grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Education. Loyola's services to the ECN project are valued at over \$100,000.

Progress was made against all of the four goals outlined at ECN's early meetings:

Goal 1. Improve the quality of early childhood programs

Quality improvements could be measured in a number of categories including the professional capabilities of providers, their access to relevant resources, the quality of their facilities and their level of accreditation or licensing.

- *Professional capabilities* were improved by the large number of educational topics covered at meetings, the information fair, seminars funded by mini-grants and other educational programs co-sponsored by ECN.

- *Access to resources* was increased through publication of the CAMERA Guide and through mailings, announcements and legislative updates at ECN meetings. "The meetings provided access to information and a sense of what was happening in early childhood," said one participant. "It's very valuable and keeps people from being isolated."
- *Level of accreditation* showed improvement with at least four centers making progress toward or receiving accreditation and several home-based providers becoming licensed after receiving technical assistance through ECN.

"Some people are demeaning to child care workers while ECN treats us like professionals."

—Child care center director

- *Quality of facilities and equipment* improved through the mini-grant program; funds were invested in facilities and equipment such as strollers, cribs, books, computers and fax machines.
- *New curricula were created* on subjects such as using the internet for your child care business and dangerous children's products. The children's products training teaches providers how to track equipment in the home and check web sites for information on product recalls. Now established, it is being used in many other locations.

Goal 2. Expand *availability of services for children from birth to five years old*

There is concrete evidence in Edgewater and Rogers Park that ECN contributed to an increase in the supply of services for young children, most directly through mini-grants.

A \$25,000 mini-grant helped the Howard Area Community Center acquire a building in Rogers Park that will bring 48 new infant and toddler slots onto the market and house family support programs. Three other mini-grants totaling \$7,329 brought 20 new slots to the community by helping home providers purchase the necessary equipment. For only \$366 per slot, 10 more infants and 10 more toddlers and preschoolers were able to obtain care.

A Loyola survey of 93 providers or agencies in the two communities found an overall increase of more than 12 percent in the supply of slots for children from infants to five years old between 1999 and 2001. There was an overall capacity increase of 16.6% for providers (177 slots) who participated in ECN versus 9.5% growth among non-participating providers surveyed. In other words, ECN participants added 75% more slots than non-participating providers in the area. The study also showed a correlation between slot growth and attendance at the neighborhood conference and/or receipt of an ECN mini-grant.

Goal 3. Strengthen *coordination among local early childhood programs*

Evidence suggests that ECN stimulated coordination and individual collaborations among programs. The ECN model did not attempt overarching system coordination but aimed to spark collaborations between programs with a goal of maximizing the use of existing resources. At monthly meetings, providers advised one another about local services, classes and state programs to meet their needs—and those of the children they serve. They offered to share resources with colleagues such as training manuals, program assessment tools, equipment and meeting space. The research suggests that early childhood programs are more aware of each

other and are sharing tools but at this stage are not yet actively coordinating their efforts. Some examples of progress:

- *New relationships were formed* through ECN, according to 11 of the 13 participants interviewed by researchers.
- *Providers worked together* to present various educational programs for parents and teachers at a local nursery co-op.
- A new private school used ECN as its *primary vehicle to make community connections*. Through ECN, the British School invited local early childhood programs to a concert by the 80-piece Youth Orchestra of Wales. Children from the nearby Lake Shore Schools and others enjoyed this unusual opportunity.

Goal 4: Improve *working conditions for teachers and caregivers*

ECN made little impact on improving working conditions because of the economic structure of the industry and external barriers. Lack of benefits for many providers continued to be a major concern, and though ECN made a prolonged effort to find affordable group health insurance, it was unsuccessful because no such product exists. Gaining health insurance as a public benefit, through the State of Illinois, was attempted but acknowledged as infeasible at least in the short term because the state was having difficulty fully funding existing programs. An effort to assist home providers in purchasing housing was found to not be feasible due to high housing costs and condominium regulations.

- ECN research advocacy spurred the introduction of health insurance legislation in the state General Assembly and establishment of a health insurance policy initiative at the Day Care Action Council of Illinois.
- ECN mini-grants improved the physical environment for several home-based providers and a small preschool.

Organizational challenges

Despite clear successes, Loyola researchers have identified two main limitations related to the structure and resources of the organization.

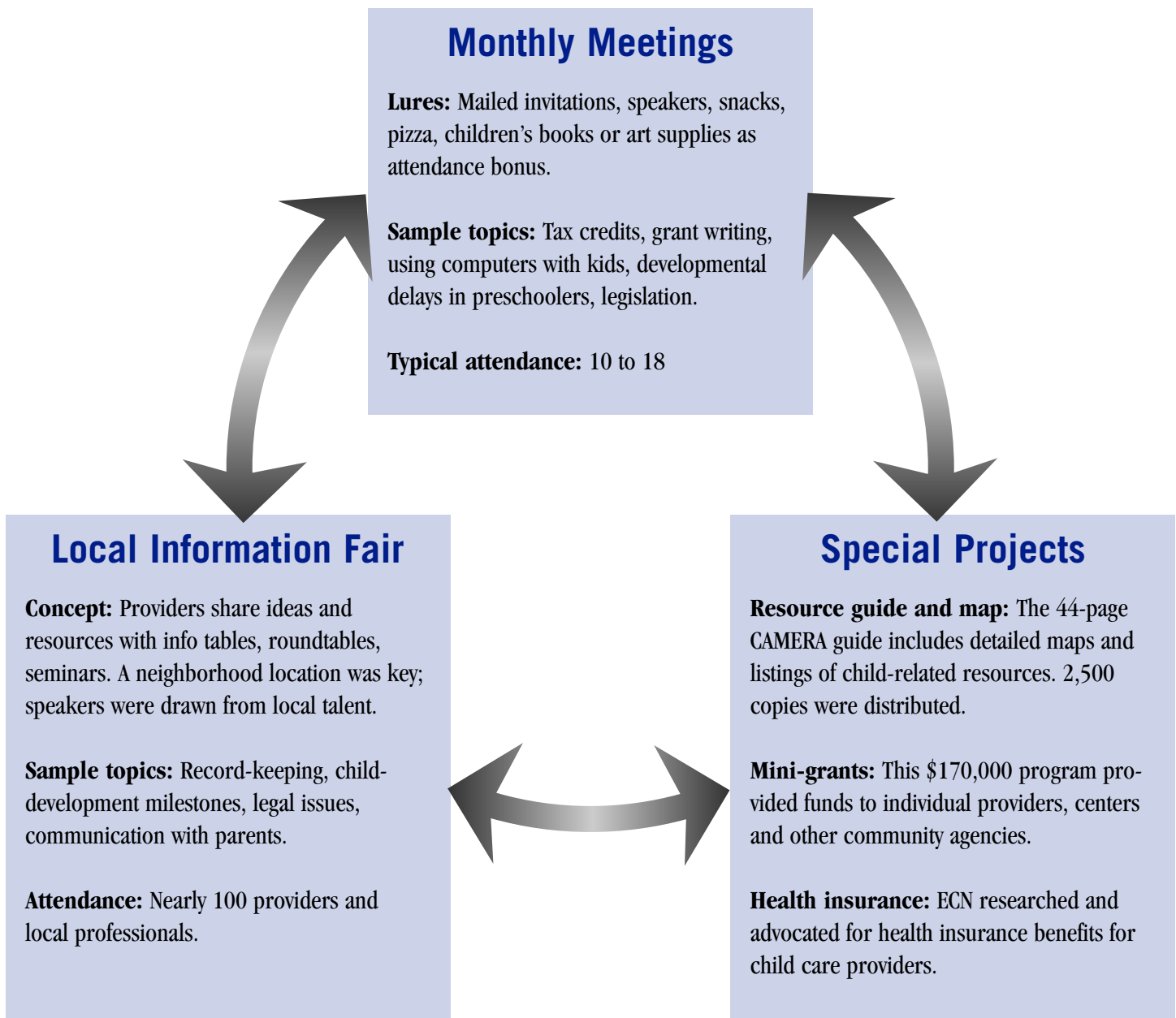
- **Balancing staff support and leadership development** – Loyola researchers note that ECN's success is connected very closely to the skills and background of its director and to a model which intentionally makes few demands on participants. Strong staff leadership and the absence of a board of directors or permanent committees allowed for involvement of busy providers. The tradeoff was that participants had fewer opportunities to test their leadership skills and build a structure that would succeed the founding director.
- **Securing stable funding** – The initial funding for ECN relied on private and state funds that are not available over the long term. The private grants were limited to a three-year pilot period and the recent economic downturn limits availability of discretionary state funds.

ECN staff and participants recognized three other challenges that exist.

- **Building inclusiveness** – ECN participants have been primarily white and African-American. The community has a substantial Hispanic population and large numbers of new immigrants. As it matures beyond the pilot phase, ECN will want to learn from other models how to effectively reach additional populations.

- **Reaching out to license-exempt providers** – ECN's ability to reach license-exempt providers in the neighborhood was limited. Gaining access to this group is difficult and requires specialized outreach. However, collaboration began with the Day Care Action Council on this important effort in 2002.
- **Expanding collaboration with State Pre-Kindergarten programs** – ECN had very modest participation among teachers and administrators who work in the State Pre-Kindergarten program in Chicago's public schools. A dialog was sparked regarding opportunities for collaboration with other programs that can provide child care before and/or after the 2-1/2 hour Pre-Kindergarten program. Focused outreach to increase participation would benefit the network and the community.

The tools that built community connections



W

Next steps: Building on strengths

Over three years, ECN has produced clear benefits as a stand-alone project for neighborhoods. Because it provides a vehicle for community collaboration and planning, the ECN model could also become an important building block for a system of integrated early childhood programs.

ECN is distinct from other models of collaboration in early childhood and provides a valuable addition to the overall structure of service coordination and improvement in Illinois. It supports and enhances the existing structures including the Resource and Referral system, child care subsidy systems, social service collaborations, and networks and associations of home child care providers.

The ECN model has succeeded in building bridges between private providers and preschools with publicly funded programs; between those that serve children with state subsidies and those that are strictly tuition-based; between day care homes and center-based programs; between providers and public officials; between child care programs and other community services such as early intervention programs, libraries, parks and mental health programs.

As this report shows, an Early Childhood Network can be an innovative and low-cost tool for enhancing quality of care and expanding supply of care. In fiscally constrained times, it is an efficient way to maximize existing resources.

The ECN structure can be a building block for the collaborations and coordinated service

delivery that will be necessary to develop the integrated early childhood care and education programs of the future. Because Edgewater/Rogers Park has a broad, inclusive, operational early childhood collaboration already in place, it is a prime location for launching new programs. With more than three years of on-the-ground experience, ECN is uniquely prepared to undertake local planning and coordination functions when new programs are initiated.

A springboard for new initiatives

As ECN faced the end of its pilot phase in 2002, participants engaged in a thorough strategic planning process to discuss the model's strengths and weaknesses and to identify future options. Among the goals discussed during this process were replicating ECN in other communities, further defining ECN's role in the existing early childhood structure, strengthening the model to prepare for future changes and pursuing stable funding.

Director Sachnoff and Loyola University researchers initiated a series of discussions and options papers to provoke discussion of ECN's future. Eight distinct approaches were identified. The group explored various structural and staffing options and assessed potential funding opportunities. They rejected a volunteer-run operation as not feasible but supported a variety of other scenarios ranging from part-time operation by a provider or staffer within a local agency to expanded full-time staffing, depending on available funding and growth potential.

There was strong endorsement of the basic functioning structure of ECN and optimism that with adequate resources ECN could be an effective springboard for further early childhood initiatives.

Conclusions

Based on the studies, analyses and outcomes described in this report, the Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park developed the following conclusions:

- Providers who receive peer support, education and training opportunities in their local community, along with technical assistance at the community level, are empowered to improve operations.
- Neighborhood networks can have a positive influence on the quality of early childhood programs.
- Targeted mini-grants to child care homes can expand supply by increasing use of existing licensed capacity. A relatively small investment can yield significant, immediate results.
- Tools are needed to improve awareness of existing resources for providers and parents of children from birth to five years of age.
- The ECN model has good potential for achieving further systems collaboration; this would require more than the part-time staffing that has been used to date.
- A realistic budget for full replication of the ECN model in a new community is \$60,000–\$100,000 per year. ECN's annual operating budget of \$50,000 per year did not include space, equipment or research (all of which were donated). Mini-grants were funded separately.

Public policy recommendations

ECN makes the following recommendations for improving public policy and structures related to early childhood care:

- Public and private funding should be invested in neighborhood-based early childhood networks to maximize use of existing resources, expand the supply of high-quality care and help communities prepare for larger-scale early childhood initiatives.
- Each Chicago neighborhood should be funded to develop a community asset map and appendix (CAMERA) for services for children from birth to five years old. This is a baseline for program coordination and creation of a functioning Early Childhood Network.
- Compensation to providers must be significantly improved (e.g. higher reimbursement rates and wage supplements) in order to improve quality and supply of care and allow providers to purchase private health insurance.

WVI

Data, research reports and ECN publications

This report is based in large part on the research and documentation conducted over the past three years by Loyola University of Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning. Other information was gathered through ECN files, attendance at meetings and interviews. More detailed information about ECN is available from the following sources (most are posted on ECN's website):

CAMERA: Community Asset Map & Resource Appendix

Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park, November 2000

A 44-page guide to resources for children from birth to five years old with detailed maps by quadrant of the target area.

Health Insurance for the Child Care Workforce: A Preliminary Review of Health Insurance Options for Child Care Workers in Two Chicago Communities

Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park, January 2001

A 23-page report defining the problem of access to health insurance for early childhood workers with a review of private market options and barriers and possible public policy solutions.

Evaluation of "Activities for Tots: Health"

Chiara Sabina, Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago, February 2002

A five-page evaluation of the ECN publication based on postcard surveys.

"Growing Your Child Care Business" Information Fair Summary

Chiara Sabina, Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago, December, 2001

A two-page summary of the ECN information fair.

Evaluation of "CAMERA: Community Asset Map & Resource Appendix"

Chiara Sabina, Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago, August 2002
A 26-page analysis of how the resource guide was used by ECN participants.

The Development and Operation of the Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park

Christine George, PhD. and Lourdes Paredes, Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago, November 2002

A 34-page research report and analysis of ECN history, structure, attendance, results and operating model including recommendations.

Early Childhood Care in Edgewater and Rogers Park: A Study of Capacity, Growth, and the Influence of the Early Childhood Network

Chiara Sabina, Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago, in collaboration with Kate Sachnoff, ECN, December 2002

A 23-page analysis of supply by age, year and neighborhood, and ECN's relationship to supply growth.

Options for Moving Forward

Patrick Barry, for the Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park, July 2002

A three-page working paper on ECN's future structure for group strategic planning purposes.

ECN website:

www.earlychildhoodnetwork.org

Contains all information relating to the organization including meeting minutes, attendees, grant dispersals, funders, CAMERA Guide and other publications.

Early Childhood Network of Edgewater & Rogers Park

5533 North Broadway • Chicago, Illinois 60640

773 769 1717 • fax 773 769 6901

www.earlychildhoodnetwork.org