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Introduction

Established in 1969, CLASP is a national, non-partisan, non-profit, anti-poverty organization based in Washington, D.C. that advances policy solutions for low-income people across the country. This proposal draws upon the work of CLASP experts in the areas of immigration and child care and early education policies. As a national anti-poverty organization, we understand the critical role of federal and state policies and practices in supporting the health and economic well-being of low-income families and their communities.

This proposal uplifts findings from two interviews with Chicagoland area early care providers, highlights best practices to mitigate the harm of immigration enforcement, and offers federal and state policy solutions.

Interviews in Illinois were a part of a larger project to understand how current immigration policies and practices are impacting immigrant families with young children ages five and under and the community providers who serve them. Between June and December 2025, CLASP conducted interviews with 67 early educators and child care providers, WIC staff, home visitors, health care workers, and community advocates in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, and Washington State. Interview findings confirmed that anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies are adding to the emotional and economic stress caused by new uncertainties regarding child care and health funding and programming. For early care educators and providers in particular, these policy inconsistencies and concern for the safety of their staff and communities exacerbated the stress of a primarily low-wage, highly volatile industry, leaving less time and emotional energy for the essential work of caring for young children and their families.

An upcoming report in April 2026 will detail the impacts and posit recommendations at the federal, state, and local levels to mitigate the harm of immigration practices on immigrant families with young children and the people dedicated to serving them. This project builds on CLASP's reports from 2017 and 2018 titled, [Our Children's Fear, Immigration Policy's Harmful Impacts on Early Care and Education](#), and [The Day That ICE Came](#). These reports continue to be relevant in documenting the impact of immigration practices and in our advocacy for humane immigration policy that uplifts children in immigrant families.

Immigration Enforcement Activity and Community Climate in Illinois

In December 2025, shortly after the launch of Operation Midway Blitz, CLASP conducted semi-structured interviews with two early childhood administrators serving the greater Chicagoland area, including Cook, DeKalb, Kane, Kendall, and Will counties. Together, these leaders bring over 45 years of experience working in the early childhood industry at various levels and run center-based facilities, home visiting programs, Head Start, and Early Head Start programs that together serve over 700 young children. One

of the leaders estimates that about 50 percent of the families they serve are immigrants, and approximately 75 percent of their staff are from immigrant families. The communities they serve are diverse, including Latin American, Middle Eastern, African, African-American, Pakistani, and Afghani.

Both leaders described a heightened and visible immigration enforcement presence following the launch of Operation Midway Blitz. Families and staff are witnessing or hearing about encounters with ICE agents through direct observation, social media, and community networks. Providers reported widespread concern about the safety of families and children due to what they described as violent and inhumane enforcement tactics.

One leader described an incident on October 31, 2025 in which ICE agents surrounded local schools. As she explained: “Children...come in scared. They have children that, you know, are wondering if their parents are going to get taken away or, you know...Their schools were surrounded literally by masked men with machine guns. So it was terrifying....October 31st was a really bad day in Evanston. We were basically attacked by ICE physically, emotionally. They were, peering, you know, leering into kindergarten classrooms. They were surrounding schools, helicopters everywhere, and they were pepper spraying people. Like, it was pretty bad. And like [in] neighborhoods and like on major streets, they caused an accident. They, I mean, a lot of things that were happening. Lots of our landscapers got taken that day.”

According to both interviewees, the visible presence of immigration agents and the broader enforcement climate have created an atmosphere of fear and instability across their communities. Staff report that fear is constant and pervasive. As one leader explained:

“[O]ur families are feeling attacked. And instead of my staff worrying about...not having a job, they're worried about families not...having us to support them. And what are they going to do?...You know, people are going to starve if SNAP benefits go away...So it was very fearful. It was traumatizing. It was very depressing.”

“We've had a family also observe a friend get taken, you know. So it might not have directly happened to them, but they're seeing it happen in front of them. So that's what's terrifying them a bit more, too.”

One interviewee told us about how one of the parents of a child that was abducted on their way to their center:

“...a family that I think that was about to start in the [Head Start or Early Head Start] program...were walking literally to the program, around the corner, [and] ICE grabbed, like in front of the child and the wife, grabbed dad and snatched him. And then [the child and wife] came running into the center very, very traumatized. The staff, the teachers there were super traumatized...that hit a lot closer to home..”

Interviewees described immigration raids as creating a sustained climate of fear that has reshaped daily decision-making, increased reluctance to engage with public programs, and altered how families interact with community institutions.

Direct Impacts on Illinois Children, Families, and Community Institutions

The enforcement raids and climate of fear described above has negatively affected children, families,

and the community institutions that serve them.

Fear and Withdrawal from Public Life

Parents are increasingly afraid to drop off their children at child care facilities for fear of detention. Families are also hesitant to provide personal information required for enrollment in public programs. As a result, providers report decreases in attendance. Because many child care programs rely on attendance-based reimbursement through state and federal subsidies, declining attendance directly affects program stability and sustainability.

Families are also deeply concerned about food security and access to benefits. Providers described fears that government shutdowns and broader federal instability could disrupt SNAP and other essential supports. The uncertainty surrounding benefit access compounds the fear generated by enforcement activity. The below quote from one of the interviewees demonstrate how trapped many immigrant families feel.

“Do you know the story of Starved Rock? [Interviewer shakes their head]. It was two tribes...fighting. And the one tribe pushed the other tribe, you know, like fought their way up to the top of Starved Rock. And it's called Starved Rock because they had nowhere to go. If they jumped off, they'd die. So they just stayed up there and starved them to death. That's what it feels like to me with Trump.”

Mental Health Impacts

Interviewees described profound emotional consequences for both children and staff. Children are arriving at programs visibly scared. Some are wondering whether their parents will be taken away. Providers expressed concern that prolonged fear and isolation may contribute to developmental challenges, particularly for young children who require social interaction and stable environments to thrive.

One leader described what she is observing: “[W]hat a lot of early childhood programs are dealing with are severe delays...imagine kids where they're locked up with the same people all the time and they're not getting...all that additional input that they normally get. It's really affected kids, their language, everything. I mean, it's severe. It's heartbreaking.”

Staff are also experiencing significant mental health strain. One leader described the workplace climate following the increase in enforcement: “Stress is an understatement...there were tears, there was anger there every single day...everybody was sad. It was depressing...we felt very attacked.”

Interviewees described a workplace climate marked by fear, funding uncertainty, and visible enforcement activity, which they said was traumatizing for staff, many of whom are members of immigrant families.

Institutional Destabilization

The immigration raids are also destabilizing early childhood programs and other community-serving institutions, that are already under multiple stressors.

Programs that depend on public funding, including Head Start and child care subsidy systems, are facing compounding pressures. In addition to attendance declines linked to enforcement fears, providers report increased administrative burdens and uncertainty related to federal policy changes. Funding instability affects the number of children served, staff retention, wages, and the range of services offered.

Interviewees expressed concern that fewer children are participating in evidence-based programs that support healthy development and long-term economic mobility. When families avoid child care due to fear of immigration enforcement, children miss opportunities for social interaction and access to wraparound services such as food pantries and family supports.

Interviewees emphasized that child care is essential for parents' ability to work and support their families. When child care programs become unstable, workforce participation and broader economic stability are also affected.

Recommendations

The experiences shared by Illinois providers demonstrate that immigration enforcement activity is producing tangible harms for children, families, and essential community institutions, warranting thoughtful action by policymakers to mitigate these impacts. While CLASP's full research report, to be released in April 2026, will offer a broader set of federal, state, and local recommendations, the actions outlined below are those most directly responsive to the experiences shared by the Illinois providers who participated in the interviews.

Recommendations for Illinois Local Agencies and Community Institutions

The people interviewed for this project are actively working to mitigate the harm to the children and families they serve. Based on their experiences, we identified several best practices that can support families in the current heightened enforcement climate. These strategies reflect steps Illinois local agencies and community institutions have already taken or can begin to implement to mitigate the immediate harms of immigration enforcement activity, even in the absence of broader federal reform.

1. *Have a safety protocol in place.* Many providers shared that their centers have processes in place if immigration authorities come to the facility. Providers also stressed the importance of proactively communicating with families about these protocols rather than assuming parents will ask. CLASP's Safe Spaces Guide contains a list of components providers should consider including in their safety protocol, as well as sample guidance.¹
2. *Provide ongoing mental health support and/or referrals.* Some providers are able to directly offer therapy and support groups for parents and staff. In addition, Head Start programs often have this kind of support built into their grants and programming for staff.
3. *Create partnerships with local legal aid, immigrant rights, and community rapid response groups.* Partnerships with local legal aid organizations and immigrant rights organizations can connect families with legal aid and Know Your Rights trainings. Moreover, being connected with hyperlocal (e.g., neighborhood blocks) community rapid response groups (e.g., groups of neighbors, small business owners, and other trusted, local actors connected on signal, an ICE watch hotline) could be a way for providers to know if immigration agents are nearby, and can deploy their protocols for notifying staff and families.

4. *Make it as easy as possible for families to receive services.* Providers should, as much as possible, reduce administrative burdens associated with enrollment and registration and provide remote services. Depending on the program, that responsibility could lie with state administrators (like with CCDF-funded programs) or with individual programs. For example, some WIC clinics, having taken lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, have waived requirements for in-person appointments and are able to conduct appointments over the phone. This would not, however, be as applicable or appropriate for all children’s programs.
5. *Share resources and referrals with staff and all parents.* Many providers shared how they proactively share resources with **all** parents, not just those they perceive to be immigrants. This could include ensuring resources are available in a waiting room (e.g. as brochures or posters) or including resources in all new enrollment packets. Immigrant rights groups have produced up-to-date resources for families with young children. Ones that are particularly helpful include contact information for local legal aid organizations; information about people’s constitutional rights; advice on how to talk to children at different developmental stages about immigration enforcement; children’s books on immigration enforcement and family separation; and family preparedness toolkits, which can help families plan what to do in the case of a parent’s detention and deportation (e.g., how to create temporary guardianships for their children).
6. *Stay updated on important developments regarding immigration policies.* This could include attending meetings on local ordinances, signing up for news alerts that are relevant to the population providers work with, or engaging with reputable national or state organizations that can offer information or support. “Immigration policy” can cover a broad range of issues, including public charge, court rulings about DACA work authorization, or protected areas legislation.

Recommendations for Illinois Child Care and WIC Program Administrators

Illinois child care and WIC program administrators play a critical role in stabilizing essential services for families with young children affected by immigration enforcement activity. The following recommendations are grounded in the experiences of Illinois providers and focus on administrative actions that can mitigate attendance disruptions, workforce strain, and service instability.

1. *Pay providers based on enrollment, instead of attendance to ensure provider pay does not suffer when immigration fears impact attendance.* Paying providers based on enrollment instead of attendance is a best practice and reflective of private payment practices. In states where enrollment-based payments are not in place or may be challenging to achieve, states should provide waivers for attendance drops due to immigration fears. Currently, many child care providers are subject to attendance requirements in order to receive reimbursement through CCDBG. However, Illinois allows child care providers to apply for waivers if attendance drops due to fear of immigration enforcement. This is a huge help to child care providers and essential for supporting those located in areas with a high presence of immigration agents.
2. *Provide mental health support to staff.* Continuing to incorporate mental health support for child care providers and early educators is essential. States should consider encouraging and directing more state CCDF funds for staff mental health support.² As the interviews show, child care and early education staff are directly affected by immigration enforcement; they are either directly impacted as members of mixed-status families, because their staff are members of mixed-status families, or because they serve mixed-status families. Head Start builds this support into their programming, and strengthening and continuing to provide mental health assistance is crucial for

preventing staff burnout and reducing turnover.

3. *Enact strategies that contribute to retaining a high quality workforce.* To mitigate workforce instability exacerbated by immigration enforcement and funding uncertainty, Illinois should prioritize strategies that support retention, including competitive wages, benefits, and professional development opportunities.³

Federal Recommendations

While many of the harms described in this submission are experienced at the local level, they stem from federal immigration enforcement policies and funding decisions. The recommendations below identify federal policy changes that would reduce enforcement-related trauma and strengthen stability for children, families, and community institutions.

1. *Support policies that protect the safety of children in immigrant families and safeguard them from the trauma of immigration enforcement actions.* For example, policymakers can support the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act (H.R.1061/S.455). Following the rescission of DHS guidance that limited immigration enforcement in sensitive locations, the number of arrests in and near child care centers, schools, health care clinics, and other locations important for families' basic needs has sharply increased. The Protecting Sensitive Locations Act would limit immigration enforcement activities in these and other locations that are essential to community well-being.⁴
2. *Advocate for policies that protect parental rights.* A whole-family approach that addresses all of the responsibilities of a potentially detained individual is essential to alleviate parents' stress and protect everyone in their care. Laws to protect individuals' rights to make decisions about the care and well-being of their dependent is essential to ensuring these family members are safe and with trusted caregivers. This protection would provide caregivers, parents, and legal guardians with the peace of mind that even if they are detained, their dependents will be unharmed.
3. *Restore and protect funding for programs that allow families with children to meet their basic needs and support their emotional, physical, and mental health.* Federal policymakers can do this by reversing cuts to Medicaid and SNAP from The Reconciliation Act of 2025 (H.R. 1) and protecting funding for WIC. Congress can also support the LIFT the Bar and HEAL Acts. These bills would extend eligibility for health care, food, and housing assistance to immigrants with legal status, many of whom were excluded from these programs through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA).⁵
4. Reverse harmful administrative changes to CCEE programs that would burden providers and result in fewer children being served:
 - a. Remove anti-DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) provisions from child care program requirements.
 - b. Rescind the proposal to roll back 2024 regulations that supported timely provider reimbursements, paying providers by enrollment, expanding access to care through grants and contracts, and capping co-payments for families.
 - c. Remove the 2025 CCDBG rule waivers that would undermine positive changes from 2024 regulations.
 - d. Reverse deregulation of CCDF policies at the state level that support affordability and access.
 - e. Fully staff the Administration for Children and Families and reinstate regional offices that were eliminated to offer technical assistance and support to states.

- f. Rescind the immigrant exclusion directive issued for Head Start programs through PRWORA; Interpretation of “Federal Public Benefit” Notice.
 - g. Protect the 2024 Head Start Final Rule which significantly improved workforce compensation and provided better support for children and families.
 - h. Ensure federal funding to CCEE programs is not frozen or delayed.
5. *Retain and increase funding for critical child care programs*, including in programs like Head Start, CCDBG, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) programs. In February 2026, Congress approved the Labor, Health and Human Services appropriations bill for fiscal year 2026, which included an increase of \$85 million to each of the CCDBG and Head Start programs. This increase was incredibly important, given the challenging fiscal environment states will face due to the cuts made to vital public benefit programs in H.R.1. However, the increase does not keep pace with inflation, meaning that it is not enough to serve all children currently accessing the programs. Stagnant funding in fiscal year 2025 and ongoing threats to funding only compound the problem. States will not be able to sustain their current costs, which may result in needing to serve fewer children. Additional investments are critical for CCDBG and other CCEE programs, which are incredibly important sources of support for children and families.
6. *Protect the status of people authorized to be in the United States*. People with decades-long connections in this country, including families and businesses, risk separation from their communities due to the end of programs like Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and the uncertain limbo of programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Refugees and asylum seekers are at risk as well. The Trump Administration has paused all new asylum applications and ordered re-reviews and re-interviews of applicants and refugees from specific countries.¹⁶ Policymakers must keep programs like TPS and DACA and asylum and refugee programs intact and offer reasonable solutions for long-term legalization for people with temporary legal status.

If you have questions, contact CLASP’s Suma Setty, senior policy analyst in CLASP’s immigration and immigrant families team, at ssetty@clasp.org.

¹ Priya Pandey, Rebecca Ullrich, and Alejandra Londono Gomez, “A Guide to Creating “Safe Space” Policies for Early Childhood Programs,” CLASP, April 2, 2025, <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/guide-creating-safe-space-policies-early-childhood-programs/>.

² Information Memorandum, Log No. ACF-OCC-CCDF-IM-24-01,” Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 9, 2024, <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/CCDF%20Mental%20Health%20IM.pdf>.

³ “Resources to Support Early Care and Education Workforce Strategies,” Office of Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://acf.gov/ecd/initiatives/strategy-resources-address-early-care-and-education-ecw-workforce-shortage>.

⁴ “Protecting Sensitive Locations Act,” Center for Law and Social Policy, 2026, <https://www.clasp.org/protecting-sensitive-locations-act/>.

⁵ S.2038 - LIFT the BAR Act of 2023, 118th Congress, (2023-2024) <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/2038?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22lift+the+bar%22%7D&s=3&r=2>; HEAL for Immigrant Families Act of 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1660?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22HEAL+immigrant+families%22%7D&s=2&r=1>.

⁶ “Refugee, Asylee, and Travel Ban Updates: What Practitioners Need to Know,” CLINIC, January 13, 2026,

<https://www.cliniclegal.org/resources/asylum-and-refugee-law/refugee-asylee-and-travel-ban-updates-what-practitioners-need-know>.