



South Carolina  
**Early Childhood  
Advisory Council**

## Family Voice Council



# A Year of Family Voice 2022 Report

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Family Voice Council Members

- 2021-2022 Inaugural Term

- 2022-2023 Term (as of August 31, 2022)



Pictured: Family Voice Council Member Nadya Brown (Richland County, S.C.)

Pictured on the cover: Family Voice Council Member Samirah Sawyer (Lexington County, S.C.) and family with Gov. Henry McMaster to launch the First Five SC parent web portal.

## Background

The South Carolina Family Voice Council (FVC) was born of a commitment from the public early childhood system to partner with families and listen, center, and co-create the future of programming and policies that impact families in our state. The SC Family Voice Council is supported through funding from the Preschool Development Grant, Birth-Five.

The SC Family Voice Council began meeting in August 2021 with eight founding members. The remaining parents were onboarded through June 2022, for a total of 20 members. Members of the SC Family Voice Council are featured on the Early Childhood Advisory Council webpage and listed in Appendix A. They represent all regions of the state and have a wide range of experiences, family composition, parent and child ages, incomes, professional backgrounds, and viewpoints. They are true representatives of the array of family experiences in South Carolina.

At the foundational meeting in August 2021, members identified key principles and values for the group: parents are a child's strongest champion; families supporting other families is fundamental in building flourishing communities. Members recognize the SC Family Voice Council as a way not only to amplify and center the lived experiences of parents, but also a way for each member to share personal interests, skills, and passions for the betterment of our state.

As parent leaders, FVC members wanted to learn about early childhood services so they could help promote parent awareness and use of available resources in their regions. At each monthly meeting a different state agency or publicly funded program or initiative presented to the members. The presentation was an opportunity for members to learn more about the programs that were of interest to them, and for members to offer feedback about possible areas of enhancement when applicable.

Many agencies, programs, and initiatives presented to the SC Family Voice Council on a range of topics:

- South Carolina First Steps
  - Ideas for Parent Incentives for Focus Group Participation
- Early Childhood Advisory Council:
  - Input into For Our Future: SC's Birth through Five Plan,
  - Development of First5SC.org,
  - Early Childhood Integrated Data System communications plan,
  - Data interpretation for the SC Parents' Needs Assessment and helping develop direction for the questions for parent interviews in the next phase of the needs assessment.
- SC Department of Health & Environmental Control
  - WIC
  - SNAP-Ed
- SC Department of Disabilities and Special Needs

- Early Intervention
- SC Department of Education
  - Family Supports from the Early Learning and Literacy, and Learning Engagement Coaches
- Additional organizations were invited by the SC Family Voice Council to make presentations
  - Help Me Grow
  - Kindred Hearts
  - SC Infant Mental Health Association
  - Unite Us

FVC also engaged in leadership and skill building professional development opportunities. Members attended leadership trainings with Family Connection of SC, Clemson Youth Institute, and the 2021 Summit on Early Childhood.

## Parent Feedback Themes

Throughout every aspect of parent feedback, a resounding theme emerged. Parents desire respect for their role as their child's first and earliest teacher and champion, and as experts on their own lives and experiences. One member stated, "parents are intelligent, even if they have different educational levels, skillsets and knowledge bases than child-serving professionals."

Throughout the year FVS feedback was solicited. Below, feedback has been summarized into three primary categories: barriers to finding resources and participating in programs, information sharing and outreach, and mental health and special needs supports.

### Barriers to Finding Resources and Participating in Programs

- Because transportation and knowing about available services are barriers, on-site screenings should be more available at child care centers and schools, and more partnerships with pediatric practices and child services are desired.
- Using common language between programs is preferred, as it is frustrating and confusing when different programs use different terminology and are not clear. Information from agencies should be clear in all communications, not just the eligibility forms and application. Parents should be aware of how their information is being used during the process, and it is helpful to show them what else they may be eligible for early in any enrollment process.
- There have been long wait times for visits in the past, as well as misinformation around program eligibility requirements, and parents thought they were ineligible for programs that they were in fact able to participate in.
- COVID-19 is still an ongoing hardship for many families due to risk, and members like when programs create contactless and virtual options for families.
- Parents feel they must advocate for their child, and another member indicated that sometimes public program staff are ill-equipped to assist families who are experiencing emergency situations and need assistance. For parents with older children, they experienced difficulties when their child

was aging out of early childhood system and found less supports available, or they were difficult to find and transition into. They found that frequently programs of interest have eligibility criteria for age that don't match child's/family's needs, whether their child was too young or older. There are also situations where the barriers in eligibility information and being eligible for needed programs are imposed by federal regulations that are not flexible for states to manage based on constituent needs.

- Parents are also concerned because program availability is inconsistent across the state, particularly in rural areas. Relationships between different entities that serve families are inconsistent, and this makes it difficult to find information through “no wrong door” approaches.
- Older parents recognize that education has changed tremendously, and they may need to know how to use and access technology. Some families do not have internet access or are not reliant on technology for primary communications with schools.
- A parent with multiple children feels that one application should be able to link to multiple children in a household. Many forms require parents fill one out for every child even though the household information is the same, and one household may have several children.

“It used to take forever to wait at offices in-person, I love the online meetings and services.” “As a parent you have to fill it [applications] out several times, and it takes a lot of time.”

## Information Sharing and Outreach

- Data use between early childhood agencies could be used to show student achievement as a way to show success of the early childhood system's efforts, as long as the information is not biased and only measuring data points that are in the favor of programs and schools. Data sharing with parents should also be personal and relevant to community needs to truly reflect the impact of programs on people in their community.
- The information should be well-represented. All information should also be available in Spanish.
- Parents desire data about how their children might compare to the larger group of children through percentiles that coincide with developmental expectations. For example, when they apply for kindergarten, parents are asked what early care and education was like for their child, and data about this would help parents answer that question. The preferred method of data sharing is for the information be sent between schools to assist in aligning the data easily to benefit families, save time, and ensure the information is correct between early education and the K-12 system.
- One parent also noted that standards change frequently, and it is often unclear what their child needs to be able to do to meet those learning standards and be prepared.
- Parents are concerned that systems can be so data focused that parents get disconnected and shuffled between entities—knowing information and data can help focus on what children need to learn, since parents have diverse backgrounds and may understand the information differently.

“Finding support can be difficult.”

## Mental Health and Special Needs Supports

- It can be difficult transitioning out of the birth-five system and into the special education system. Often parents felt as if they had to know someone to help navigate systems or learn about available resources.
- Mental health awareness is important for parents of the very young, and resources should be offered, especially due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- Parents Mental health awareness is important for parents of the very young, and resources should be offered, especially due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- Parents often have to wait a long time between being told their child has a special need and finding assistance, getting screenings, and receiving a diagnosis. Parents expressed interest in a universal developmental screening approach for children, and faced challenges in having their child's plans adhered to.

"If we truly believe that children and families are valuable, then there should be no price tag on ensuring investments for great outcomes." "Support can be difficult."

## How Programs Used Parent Feedback

An important part of partnership with families is responding to feedback and sharing how their input was used to make continuous improvements at the presenting agencies. To date, FVC feedback has been used to change how incentives are offered to parents for surveys and focus groups, and their recommendations and suggestions for outreach opportunities have been used by several of the presenting agencies to reach more families about their programs and services. Presenters have also followed up with SC Family Voice Members' individual requests for information and answers to specific questions about topics in their community. In areas where general issues were raised related to kindergarten transition or information needs of families, information was shared with other professionals throughout the early childhood system where relevant to their work. Input from the SC Family Voice Council was also instrumental to the development of First Five SC and outreach for First Five SC. For example, the eligibility screener now includes the "complete for another child" option, to minimize the number of times parents need to repeat entry of household circumstances.

Feedback from the members also included a desire for continued outreach to past presenters to see if their feedback resulted in not only immediate project changes, but any longer-term change in operations or procedures. They requested that in addition to following up with presenters immediately after monthly meetings, that there be a 3 or 6 month follow-up with presenters and a report back to members, which will be implemented in the 2022-2023 service term.



Pictured: Family Voice Council Member Khadija Kershaw (Florence, S.C.)

## Recommendations and Opportunities

Many parents expressed that using online services makes them feel empowered and provides them information when they need it. Prior to the pandemic, members indicated “it used to take forever to wait at offices in-person; I love the online meetings and services.” Another member said that they were a Medicaid participant, which automatically qualified for some other services. Implementing presumptive eligibility for other programs is convenient for families.

The categories below include what FVC feels are the best opportunities to reach families with information.

### Preferred Outreach Materials and Methods

- Parents like materials that include graphics, pictures, symbols, and illustrations that are clear, straight forward, and succinct.
- Parents relate well and appreciate testimonies from other parents.
- A small snapshot of the web address/QR codes could be provided that is small enough to stick in pockets—business card sized or smaller, as many parents don’t have time to read brochures.
- QR codes could be posted at bus stops and inside busses.
- Parents love to receive information through Tik Tok, short videos and reels on Instagram and YouTube.
- Parents spend a lot of time in cars taking children to appointments and activities, and radio continues to be a prime way they receive information.

## **Outreach Materials In Community Locations**

- Support literacy through libraries in low-income housing and apartment complexes as well as through mobile health services
- Provide information at grocery stores. Share brochures and information that excites children, provides parent education, and offers nutrition education. Families regularly go to grocery stores and pharmacies.
- Little libraries at parks and zoos
- Keep in mind the historical importance of black churches and ensure pastors are kept informed about service availability. Send press kits of program information to local and state level congregational associations.
- Continue to provide information at back to school bashes and family festivals and events.

## **Targeting Outreach to Professional Groups**

- Provide community supports information to police departments
- Large health systems communications departments
- Collaborate with community health workers and librarians for prenatal education as well as early childhood education
- Military family support organizations, Veterans Affairs, and military bases
- Information to fatherhood initiatives
- Ministerial Alliances
- Chambers of commerce
- Women's shelters and family shelters
- Technical colleges
- Information on all nutrition programs could be provided at schools, and possibly explore pilots for joint enrollment during eligibility screening for Free and Reduced Lunch, and through early care and learning centers and public school 4K. This could be included in enrollment and registration packets.
- Updated information should be provided to school social workers, social work academic programs, colleges of education for student teachers, resource teachers and guidance counselors.

## **Future Plans**

The SC Family Voice Council welcomes new members when seats become available at the end of service terms, and invites public system leaders to present and have meaningful discussions with members at our monthly meetings.

The ongoing goal of the members is for continued impact, and their hope is for the state's early childhood system to continually increase ways for families to be heard and their voices to help shape

the direction of improvements for all of South Carolina’s children. Over the 2022-2023 service term, FVC members are interested in supporting work around newborn screenings, maternal health, autism spectrum disorders and special needs services, and nutrition.

For more information about the SC Family Voice Council, please contact Rachal Hatton-Moore, Two-Generation Coordinator, rhatton@scfirststeps.org, who is support staff for the SC Family Voice Council members.

## Appendix

A special thanks to the SC Family Voice Council Members for their contributions of content and review of the document prior to publication, and to Iris Ballen-Morant for her service to the SC Family Voice Council as the Early Childhood Advisory Council AmeriCorps Outreach Member 2021-2022.

### Family Voice Council Members

#### 2021-2022 Inaugural Term

Ibukun Adedokun	Christina Hooker
Ashley Berendzen	Khadija Kershaw
Nadya Brown	Joseph T. McCullough
Tiara Coleman	Jessica O. Morton
Rosa Linda Contreras	Lindsey Phillips
Deneshia Craig	Samirah Sawyer
Ferlecia Cuthbertson	Markeisha Spencer
Corina Esaw	Angelique Stewart
Jennifer Grant	Tre’ Tailor
Niesha Hallums	Richard Williams, Jr.

#### 2022-2023 Term (Members as of August 31, 2022)

Ibukun Adedokun	Niesha Hallums
Ashley Berendzen	Christina Hooker
Nadya Brown	Khadija Kershaw
Samantha Carpenter	Jessica O. Morton
Rosa Linda Contreras	Lindsey Phillips
Deneshia Craig	Samirah Sawyer
Ferlecia Cuthbertson	Markeisha Spencer
Corina Esaw	Tre’ Tailor
Jennifer Grant	Richard Williams, Jr.

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[EarlyChildhoodSC.org](http://EarlyChildhoodSC.org)