IOWA | Health and Human Services

Early Childhood Iowa State Board: **Meeting Minutes**

June 5, 2026; 9:00am to 12:00pm

Attendance:

Mr. Dave Arens	x	~~Director Beth Townsend (IWD)~~ -	
~~Ms. Angela Anderson~~ –		Kathy Leggett (IWD) - designee	x
Ms. Jennifer Banta (joined at 9:15am)	x	Mr. Dave Muhlbauer	x
~~Director Debbie Durham (IEDA)~~ -		~~Ms. Melissa Miller (resigned on 11/7/25)~~	
~~Ms. Nicole Hansen (IEDA) (designee)~~ -		~~Ms. Mary Peterson (resigned on 5/20/26)~~	
~~Director Larry Johnson (HHS)~~ –		Mr. Brook Rosenberg	x
Janee Harvey (HHS designee)	x	~~Director Mckenzie Snow (DE) -~~ –	
Ms. Paige Berg	x	Dr. Kimberly Villotti, Designee (DE)	x
Ms. Unity Stevens	x	***Non-Voting***	
		Rep. Michael Bergan	x
Staff		Rep. Tracey Ehlert	x
Amanda Winslow	x	Sen. Cindy Winckler	x
Amanda McKee	x	~~Sen. Lynn Evans~~ -	
Liz Ernst	x		

Guests (names captured from the electronic listing per individual sign-in for Zoom meeting): Alyssa Barton, Amy Blanchard, Amy Grunewaldt, Amy McGinn, Amy McLaughlin, Angel Smith, Ashley Otte, Athena Porter, Barb Bremner, Ben Loeffelholz, Beth Ownby, Brenda Loop, Bridget Godes, Carrie Kube, Cass Des Moines, Cindy Winkler, Claire Carlson, Cyndi, Deb Schrader, Delma, Diane Martens, Elizabeth Stanek, Erin Barkema, Erin Harrison, Erin Monaghan, Gaylyn Mercer, Ginger Knisley, Gloria, IA-IECMH, Jacki McCracken, Jada Bahls-Kargalskiy, James Olson, Jared Lawrence, Jay – CUCCC, Jen, Jenna Hope, Jenny Robinson, Jessica Lange, Jordan Morse, Justin Cornish, Kassie Ruth, Kelly Schulte, Kelsey Thien, Kerri Hall, Laurie Nash, Linda, Linda Havelka, Lisa Hilsenbeck, Louie Hoehle, LW, M Faldet, Mallory Berkenpas, Matt Ohman, McKinley Bailey, Mindy Baylor, Nick Crawford, Pat McReynolds, Patricia Russman, PJ West, Salena Siefken, Sarah Hogan, Sarah Vanwyk, Sheila Hansen, Sherri Hunt, Tammy Wetjen-Kesterson, Taylor Nagle, Tonya Weber, Tracie Kirkpatrick

In-person attendance: Tasha Beghtol, Abigail Degenhardt, Mary Kay Wirth

Welcome/Introductions

Action Item – The board was informed that Mary Peterson submitted her resignation on May 20, 2026. The resignation has been shared with the Governor's Office through the Government Relations Office. Board members were also reminded that the Governor's Office is seeking additional letters of recommendation for appointment to the State Early Childhood Iowa Board. While previous recommendation letters have been submitted over the years, individuals interested in serving were encouraged to reapply and obtain updated letters of recommendation.

The Board then reviewed for approval the agenda for today's meeting, administrative update, and approval of minutes from May 1, 2026, and invoices for Dickinson, O'Brien, Clay, and Osceola counties.

Motion by Dave Arens to approve all consent agenda items except the administrative update which was requested to be discussed separately.

Seconded by Brook Rosenberg

Passed unanimously

During discussion of the administrative update, board members highlighted the work of the Iowa Integrated Data System (I2D2) team, for providing valuable insights into the needs of Iowa's children and families. It was also noted that an additional I2D2 administrative update would be distributed to board members following the meeting. Questions were raised regarding the DAISEY system update, particularly concerning the low level of participation in user acceptance testing (UAT). Only three (3) of twenty-four (24) participating directors provided feedback during the testing period. Staff explained that multiple voluntary training opportunities and ongoing access to the system were provided, but participation remained limited due in part to the busy time of year. While additional feedback is always welcomed, staff noted that implementation deadlines required moving forward with system updates to ensure readiness for year-end data collection. Board members expressed concern about the limited feedback and emphasized the importance of understanding barriers to participation so improvements can continue. Staff explained that feedback received during the testing period was incorporated into the system, including both technical and usability recommendations. Future substantive feedback can still be collected, but changes affecting report design or language may need to wait until a later system update cycle to maintain consistency and data integrity.

The discussion also addressed how DAISEY manages changes to data collection and reporting. Staff explained that corrections involving data accuracy can be implemented immediately, while changes to measures, questions, or reporting structures generally must occur during designated update periods. Any changes are documented to ensure transparency and maintain the integrity of longitudinal data comparisons. A suggestion was offered to consider establishing a standard feedback period, such as 30 days, for future review opportunities. The recommendation was based on state agency practices and intended to provide consistency and predictability for stakeholders while recognizing competing priorities and workload demands.

A separate motion was made by Dave Arens to formally acknowledge receipt of the administrative update and related comments.

Second by Paige Berg

Passed unanimously

Public Comment:

Carrie Kube, ECI Director – provided remarks regarding the services and performance of the Central Iowa Juvenile Detention Center (CIJDC) as a fiscal agent. Carrie stated that recent characterizations of the organization did not align with her experience and emphasized that Kassie Ruth and her team have consistently demonstrated transparency, responsiveness, and a willingness to answer questions from stakeholders. Carrie acknowledged that past audits had identified concerns related to previous management and departments but noted that, to her knowledge, ECI funds had never been at risk under the current leadership. She described CIJDC as a fiscal agent committed to accountability, accuracy, and continuous improvement, citing timely financial guidance, accurate reporting, rapid reconciliation of expenditures, prompt contractor payments, and audit outcomes demonstrating compliance and sound fiscal management. She further highlighted that CIJDC currently serves nearly fifteen ECI areas across Iowa, which she stated reflects a high level of trust and confidence from local boards. Notes that the organization provides dedicated specific staff assigned for ECI, with expertise in regulations and compliance requirements, a service she characterized as unique among fiscal agents.

Carrie also suggested that recent requirements requested by the CIJDC board and State Board regarding fiscal agent services should be applied consistently across all ECI areas rather than exclusively to those utilizing CIJDC as a fiscal agent. She stated that uniform expectations would promote fairness, consistency, accountability, and comparable information for stakeholders statewide.

Concluding her remarks, Carrie encouraged a return to the collaborative principles that have historically guided ECI emphasizing the importance of asking questions before making assumptions, listening before judging, and treating one another with respect. Expressed concern that collaboration and partnerships were being overshadowed by division and urged stakeholders to focus on the shared goal of serving children, families, and communities effectively.

Ashley Otte, Director of Workforce Initiatives at Iowa AEYC – provided an overview of how the ECI professional development (PD) funds are utilized specifically with the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) program. ECI PD funds have been used to support T.E.A.C.H. since 2006. T.E.A.C.H. supports early childhood workforce by providing funding for degree and credential attainment in early childhood education, individualized professional development counseling, financial support for tuition and books, and compensation incentives. The programs also work to reduce workforce turnover through participant commitments to their employers. Ashley explained that ECI PD funds complement Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) dollars by supporting individuals who are not eligible for CCDF funding, including teachers working in license-exempt programs. In addition, the funds assist home-based providers who are not yet participating in Iowa Quality for Kids (IQ4K) and can be leveraged by Head Start grantees across the state to help meet a portion of their required federal matching funds. Ashley emphasized that these dollars are critical to the success of the program and thanked the Board for its continued support.

Tonya Weber, Director of New Opportunities Head Start Program – Program is serving seven counties in west central Iowa. Tonya was in support of the ECI professional development (PD) funds and their impact on local programs. Tonya shared that ECI PD funds provided through the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Program have financially supported numerous staff members pursuing Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials and bachelor's degrees. Tonya explained that the organization operates both Head Start funded classrooms licensed through HHS and collaborative preschool classrooms operated in partnership with six (6) school districts across 11 classrooms. School district partnership classrooms are exempt from HHS licensing requirements, staff working in those settings would often be ineligible for T.E.A.C.H. support without the availability of ECI PD funds. It was noted that the program has been able to connect school district employees with T.E.A.C.H. resources, helping classroom associates obtain CDA credentials and improving the quality of preschool services beyond the Head Start program itself. Additionally, it was highlighted the importance of ECI PD funds in helping Head Start programs meet their required 20% federal grant match. Funds provided through T.E.A.C.H. can be counted toward this match requirement, which has become increasingly valuable as volunteer participation has declined.

McKinley Bailey, ECI Director – expressed appreciation to ECI State Board Chair, Unity Stevens for the significant time, effort, and dedication invested in the work noting that she has gone consistently above and beyond expectations in regard to the fiscal agent status. McKinley shared concerns regarding the timing of major policy and operational decisions affecting local ECI areas and partner organizations. He noted a recurring pattern of significant decisions being made shortly before the start of a new fiscal year, citing recent discussions regarding changes to the funding formula and the potential loss of fiscal agent responsibilities for certain ECI Boards.

Speaking from the perspective of Building Families Board, McKinley stated that losing the ability to serve as a fiscal agent would have a substantial negative impact on the organization. He emphasized that decisions of this magnitude require advance notice to allow organizations adequate time for planning and implementation. McKinley urged ECI State Board members to establish a process for making major decisions several months before the beginning of a fiscal year, rather than in the final weeks before implementation. He stated that providing four (4) to six (6) months of lead time would better support planning, stability, and effective organizational management for local boards and partner agencies.

Tasha Beghtol, ECI Director - Echoed Carrie Kube's previous public comment and shared feedback regarding services provided by Central Iowa Juvenile Detention Center (CIJDC). Tasha noted that their organization has utilized CIJDC's services as its employer of record and fiscal agent for approximately 11 years. Tasha stated that throughout the partnership, the organization has consistently received quality services at a reasonable cost. They also highlighted the willingness to adapt financial reporting processes to meet the organization's needs, helping ensure efficiency and accuracy in reporting requirements.

It was further noted that under the leadership of Kassie Ruth and Justin Cornish, the organization has implemented significant improvements in recent months. These changes include increased oversight and review of submitted documentation, the addition of staff dedicated to inspecting and verifying information, and the standardization of service rates. While the standardized rates are expected to increase costs, Tasha expressed support for the changes, recognizing them as efforts to strengthen the system, improve organizational performance, and enhance accountability for all parties involved.

Action Item: FY27 Professional Development Fund Requests – the board reviewed a proposal for the use of approximately $825,030 in state-level Early Childhood Iowa Professional Development funds, which have historically been reserved to support statewide workforce development initiatives. These funds have traditionally been administered through state-level contracts to ensure access and benefit across Iowa's early childhood system. Discussion focused on the proposed allocation of funds to support several statewide initiatives, including the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) endorsement system, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Program, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential pathway, and enhancement to the state's integrated data system infrastructure.

Staff noted that the IECMH endorsement framework, which Iowa adopted approximately ten years ago, provides competency-based training and endorsement opportunities for professionals serving children ages birth to five and their families. The framework supports workforce development across multiple sectors, including childcare, home visitation, family support, and mental health services. Board members engaged in discussion regarding the effectiveness and impact of workforce training investments. Questions were raised about available evaluation data, including workforce retention, skill development, and measurable outcomes for children and families. Staff indicated that evaluation efforts are ongoing and that additional information is available through annual reports. Several members expressed interest in receiving more detailed outcome data and exploring methods to better measure the return on investment of professional development initiatives.

Additional discussion centered on opportunities to strengthen collaboration across state systems, including partnerships with the Iowa Department of Education, Area Education Agencies, Child Health Specialty Clinics, and other early childhood service providers. Members emphasized the importance of avoiding duplication of services, aligning workforce credentialing efforts across systems, and ensuring that professional development investments complement existing state and local initiatives. The conversation also highlighted ongoing needs related to infant and early childhood mental health, inclusion of children with special needs, workforce supports, and family-centered services.

Board members discussed the value of future workgroups and planning efforts to address these areas through the emerging Early Childhood and Family Services System framework. It was noted that funding for the proposed initiatives would not fully expend the available PD allocation, allowing flexibility for future investments as additional needs and opportunities are identified. The Board also discussed increasing support for the State's integrated data system and community data dashboards to strengthen local planning, needs assessment, and decision-making efforts. Board members requested additional written follow-up regarding program outcomes, credential portability, communication of endorsement opportunities to the workforce, and coordination across state systems.

Motion by Dave Arens to approve the proposed FY27 use of the state professional development money as presented ($150,000 to be added for integrated data systems (I2D2, $115,000 for infant and early childhood mental health, $339,000 for T.E.A.C.H., $50,000 for DAISEY, and $175,000 for the Iowa Family Support Credential).

Second by Janee Harvey

Passed unanimously

Action Item: ECI State Board Policies and Procedures: Action Plans for Local Boards – The Board reviewed a proposed corrective action policy intended to clearly define expectations, roles, and procedures for both local Early Childhood Iowa board and the state team, with an emphasis on transparency and consistent communication. ECI TA Team outlined that the policy establishes a step-by-step process for addressing instances of noncompliance, including missed deadlines for required submissions such as budgets, performance reports, contract monitoring, and other state board approved requirements. If these expectations are not met, the process begins with a formal warning notice communicated via email to relevant parties, including the ECI Director, area board chair, state ECI team and state executive board.

This notice would include deadlines, required actions, and a clear indication that continued noncompliance could lead to a corrective action plan. If issues persist beyond the extended deadline, the policy allows for escalation into a formal corrective action plan, with further consequences for noncompliance potentially including restriction of funds, changes in designation status, or other sanctions. Discussion focused heavily on strengthening communication expectations with a policy. Board members requested clarification and consistency regarding timelines for both local boards and the state technical assistance team to respond to inquiries and notices. Several members expressed concern that the draft policy placed expectations primarily on local boards without equally clear timelines for state responses.

TA Team staff confirmed that in practice, reminders are typically sent within three business days and that responses often occur more quickly but acknowledged the need to formalize expectations in writing. Board members raised concerns about establishing rigid timelines without flexibility for extenuating circumstances such as illness, staffing limitations, or unexpected events. They emphasized the importance of allowing reasonable leeway while maintaining accountability and preventing prolonged communication gaps. Members also discussed the risk of relying on a single point of contact for communication and suggested adding additional roles, such as board chairs or secondary contacts, to ensure continuity if a primary contact is unavailable.

The conversation highlighted the importance of balancing accountability with practicality, ensuring that communication pathways remain open, responsive, and adaptable to real-world circumstances. Members stressed that escalation procedures should prioritize maintaining services and preventing disruptions, rather than creating punitive or overly rigid enforcement structures. Ultimately, given the substantive nature of the proposed revisions and the need for further refinement of language and timelines. TA Team staff will work with State board members and legal counsel to revise the policy for further consideration at the August State Board meeting.

Motion by Dave Arens to table this item for discussion at our next regularly scheduled board meeting.

Second by Janee Harvey

ECI State Board approved 8/7/26

Passed unanimously

Information Item: Adverse Event Policy update - Unity gave an update on the development of the adverse events policy. Following the May 1st Board meeting, a motion directed State Board members to collaborate with the ECI TA Team, selected ECI area directors, and the ECI Association to draft a policy addressing key components previously discussed, with an initial target of presenting the draft by June 5th. Unity reported that the work has been proceeding intentionally and collaboratively. Both the ECI TA Team and participating partners have developed draft versions of the policy. The next step will involve sharing each draft between parties to integrate the content into a unified document. Given the need for careful coordination and thorough development, the timeline has been adjusted, and the updated policy will be brought back to the State Board for consideration in August.

Information Item: Audit Results and Recommendations – The internal audit of the former Lakes ECI fiscal agent operations identified significant weaknesses in financial documentation practices, internal controls, and role clarity across the fiscal agent, local board, and state oversight structures. The audit reviewed three primary areas: personal records (including PTO accrual and payout), contractor and vendor payments, and governance/internal control structures. In the personnel review, auditors found that PTO balances were tracked using manual spreadsheets maintained by a single employee, with payroll records also managed by that same individual. No formal PTO policy or standardized accrual framework was in place, and there was no reliable independent documentation to verify final PTO balances or payout accuracy at separation.

In the review of contractor and vendor payments, auditors were unable to consistently trace expenditures back to supporting source documentation such as invoices or receipts. While no evidence of fraud, misuse of funds, or inappropriate vendors was identified, the absence of complete documentation limited the ability to fully validate that all payments were properly supported. The fiscal agent and local board processes did not consistently require or retain documentation sufficient to establish a complete audit trail. The governance and internal control review found unclear division of responsibilities among the fiscal agent, local board, and state technical assistance structures. Oversight functions, approval authority, and accountability expectations were not consistently defined or implemented. This resulted in a system where responsibilities were broadly understood as shared, but not clearly assigned, creating gaps in accountability and monitoring.

Overall, the audit did not identify intentional misuse of funds; however, it concluded that systemic weaknesses in documentation practices, policy infrastructure, and role clarity limited transparency and effective oversight. The findings indicate a need for strengthen internal controls, standardized policies for personnel and financial processes, and clearer assignment of responsibilities to ensure accountability across fiscal agent operations.

Action Item: Lakes FY26 funds to transfer to the new Northwest Early Childhood Iowa for the counties associated with the former Lakes Board - An update was presented regarding the transition of fiscal year 2026 funds previously allocated to the former Lakes Early Childhood Iowa Area. The item was brought forward to ensure clear state board direction on the transfer of remaining funds following the dissolution of the Lakes area and the establishment of the new Northwest ECI Board. To date, approximately $276,229 in contractual obligations has been expended through April to maintain services in the former Lakes Area. Based on projected expenditures for May and June, an additional estimated $55,245 is expected to be spent. The ECI TA Team confirmed ongoing coordination with the newly appointed Northwest ECI Directors to ensure continuity, including transfer to financial tracking information and access to IowaGrants to support alignment on balances and service obligations.

After accounting for projected expenditures and unspent but unobligated funds, ECI TA Team estimated approximately $261,000 in remaining carryforward funds would be available for transfer to the new Northwest ECI area to support services across Osceola, Dickinson, O’Brien, and Clay counties. Board discussion focused on confirming authorization for the transfer of remaining funds to the newly established Northwest ECI area. Members expressed general agreement that the proposed transfer aligned with prior discussions and reflected an appropriate continuation of funding responsibilities during the transition.

It was also noted the importance of personnel policies and employee handbooks for all local Early Childhood Iowa areas. It was noted to have area who do have a handbook share them as models for areas that may not. Central Iowa Juvenile Detention Center recently began collecting employee handbooks from local areas and identified organizations that did not have one, indicating that efforts were already underway to address this gap.

Motion by Janee Harvey to allow the final amount of carryforward funds in the former Lakes Area be allocated to the newly created Northwest Early Childhood Iowa area.

Second by Jenny Banta

Passed unanimously

Action Item: Fiscal Agent Duties – Exceptions for Consideration if Received via the Microsoft Form provided to ECI areas – The Board discussed recommendations regarding fiscal agent exception requests for four ECI areas. Significant review and due diligence had been conducted in collaboration with board members, local ECI leaders, fiscal agents, and financial professionals to better understand the unique circumstances of each area and assess associated risks. As part of this process, audit findings, internal controls, and financial practices were reviewed, including extensive discussions with representatives from SHIP and other affected areas. Additional information and documentation were gathered to provide a more complete understanding of how each organization operates and manages fiscal responsibilities.

While the situations varied among the areas, it was found that existing internal control structures and operational practices differed enough that a one-size-fits-all approach was not appropriate at this time. Based on the review, it was recommended to modify the original approach. Rather than requiring the affected areas to execute a separate fiscal agent area to execute a separate fiscal agent agreement, the Board was asked to approve a service contract appendix that incorporates the same fiscal agent expectations and requirements in a format more consistent with the existing contractual relationships.

It was emphasized that the expectations and accountability measures remain unchanged; the recommendation simply provides a more practical and logical mechanism for implementation. It was noted that this solution addresses immediate needs for FY27 but acknowledged that broader policy questions regarding fiscal agent arrangements will need further review. The Board was informed that these issues will return for discussion prior to the end of October to allow adequate time for legal review, stakeholders input, steering committee discussion, and planning for FY28. Board members expressed appreciation for the extensive work undertaken by staff, board leadership, and local partners to review the issue thoroughly. Discussion highlighted the importance of collaboration, trust-building, respectful communication, and balancing accountability with practical operational realities. Members noted that the process had involved significant dialogue, problem-solving, and relationship building among state and local partners.

Motion by Dave Arens to approve a grouped FY27 adaptation for Building Families, Thriving Families Alliance, SHIP, and Linking Families and Communities, allowing components from the fiscal agent agreement to be incorporated into each area's FY27 service contract as an appendix with the fiscal management expectations.

Second by Brook Rosenberg

Passed unanimously

Action Item: ECI Area Board Merger Requests – Tool U -

- ***Adams, Ringgold, Taylor, Union, Clarke, Decator, Wayne*** – Request to merge the Kids First Communities (KFC) and Quad Early Childhood Iowa areas into a single entity effective July 1, 2026. Background was given, explaining that the merger had previously been approved by the State Board at its November 2024 meeting. However, implementation was delayed due to uncertainty surrounding proposed legislative changes and districting discussions during the last two legislative sessions. At the time, there were concerns that potential district restructuring could affect the configuration of the merged area, leading local leaders to postpone moving forward. The proposed merger would unite seven counties – Adams, Union, Taylor, Ringgold, Clarke, Decatur, and Wayne under a single ECI area. The request was submitted with the required merger letter and board meeting minutes. It was noted that the local boards and leadership, including Director Jenny Robinson, had continued discussions over the past year and were now requesting formal recognition of the merger.

  Board members sought more clarification about whether any operational concerns, risks, compliance issues, or performance problems had prompted the renewed request. It was explained that no significant concerns had been identified. The area has remained responsive to state requirements and has remained responsive to state requirements and has not been flagged for missed deadlines or compliance issues. Instead, the primary motivation for the merger is administrative efficiency. Jenny Robinson currently oversees both boards, maintaining two separate governance structures has become increasingly burdensome and duplicative. Merging the areas would streamline operations, reduce administrative workload, and better align staffing capacity with organizational responsibilities.

Motion by Paige Berg to approve Tool U merger letter for Kids First Communities and Quad Early Childhood Iowa areas to merge effective no later than July 1, 2026.

Second by Dave Arens

Passed unanimously

- ***Dubuque, Clinton, Jackson –*** The board considered a merger request involving the Dubuque and Clinton/Jackson Early Childhood Iowa areas. The merger proposal had been the subject of ongoing discussions between local leadership, ECI TA Team, and the State Board. Representatives from both areas including Abbey Degenhardt and Mary Kay Worth were present to support the discussion. A key factor driving the merger was a leadership transition. This merger arose after the current director announced plans to leave the position. The board had attempted to recruit a replacement but received no applicants. As a result, the two areas began exploring a merger as a practical and sustainable solution.

  Board members learned that the current director, had committed to remaining involved during an extended transition period to help ensure continuity and support the successful integration of the two areas. Mary Kay Worth is expected to assume leadership responsibilities as the merger moves forward, while the areas continue evaluating future staffing needs and determining whether additional support positions may be necessary after the transition is complete. It was highlighted the collaborative approach being taken by merging ECI areas across the state. The ECI TA Team has maintained close communication throughout the process and has emphasized flexibility, problem-solving, and open communication rather than rigid adherence to timelines.

  Participants acknowledged that challenges are inevitable during a merger but agreed that timely communication and a shared commitment to serving children and families would be the keys to success. Board members asked whether there were any significant risks associated with the merger. It was indicated that no major concerns had been identified. Both areas have remained responsive to state requirements and have maintained consistent communication with the ECI TA Team. While the transition will require ongoing flexibility and support, leadership expressed confidence that the collaborative relationship and history of responsiveness demonstrated by the local areas position them well for a successful merger.

Motion by Brook Rosenberg to approve Tool U merger letter for Dubuque, Clinton, and Jackson, effective no later than July 1, 2026.

Second by Dave Arens

Passed unanimously

Action Item: HAWC Board – The discussion focused on a proposed merger between the HAWC Early Childhood Iowa area and the Building Direction for Families (BDF) ECI area due to significant governance and staffing challenges within the HAWC area. Board members and the ECI TA Team outlined that HAWC currently lacks sufficient citizen board membership to remain compliant with statutory requirements and is facing the imminent departure of its board chair, leaving the area without the leadership necessary to manage contracts, oversee services, or maintain designation as an ECI area.

A major concern driving the discussion was the continuity of services for families. Approximately 50 families currently receive home visitation and family support services in the HAWC area, and contractors providing those services still lacked FY27 contracts. Board members emphasized the importance of avoiding disruptions to those critical services. The proposed solution was for BDF to absorb the HAWC area. The ECI TA Team expressed caution that this situation differs significantly from other recent mergers. While BDF has an experienced director and existing infrastructure, the area has also required intensive technical assistance in recent years, including on-site support related to budgeting, contract management, and program fidelity. The ECI TA Team noted concerns about the sustainability of expanding responsibilities to a single staff member and warned that the level of support required could exceed what is typically provided through technical assistance.

Board members sought clarification about the risks and potential alternatives. The ECI TA Team explained that, without the merger, HAWC would likely be left without a functioning board and director, placing contracts and services at risk. While some members explored whether other ECI directors or state-level resources could provide temporary support, no immediate alternative emerged. Several participants discussed the possibility of supplementing BDF's capacity through additional staffing, mentorship from experienced directors, or enhanced state support. Representatives from both BDF and HAWC spoke to the board. BDF leadership acknowledged that assistance would be needed during the transition, particularly in understanding HAWC's contracts, grants, and local needs, but expressed confidence that the merger could be successfully managed. It was noted that

BDF's director would have increased capacity because other responsibilities previously carried alongside ECI work had ended. HAWC representatives reported that county supervisors and other existing board members were committed to remaining engaged after the merger, providing continuity and local knowledge. They also described efforts already underway to transfer information, contracts, and resources to support a smooth transition. Throughout the conversation, board members recognized that the merger would require significant effort and ongoing oversight. Several emphasized that approval of the merger would not solve all challenges immediately but would instead begin a substantial transition process. Participants discussed the need for guardrails, continued communication, and potentially additional staffing or peer support from other ECI directors to ensure long-term success. The discussion concluded with a shared understanding that maintaining services for children and families was the highest priority and that, while the proposed merger carried risks, the alternative of leaving HAWC without operational leadership posed even greater concerns.

Motion by Janee Harvey to approve the letter in response to Tool U to allow the counties of Buchanan, Fayette, Delaware, Howard, Winneshiek, Allamakee, and Clayton to merge to become one ECI area, no later than July 1, 2026. There will be the exploration of interim financial support to provide technical assistance during the initial transition period of the end of FY26 into the first quarter of FY27.

Second by Dave Arens

Passed unanimously

Action Item: Adjourn

Motion by Paige Berg

Unanimous adjournment

The board meeting ended at 12:01pm

Next meeting –August 7, 2026

Reminder of 2026 ECI State Board Meetings

Dates: August 7, 2026, September 11, 2026 **(9:00am – 12:00pm),** November 6, 2026 **(9:00am – 12:00pm)**

Respectfully Submitted, *Elizabeth Ernst*

ECI State Board approved 8/7/26