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New York City's Outreach and Enrollment Initiative (OEI) Helps Families Overcome Access Barriers to Early Care and Education

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Many New York City families struggle to access early care and education (ECE) that is affordable and meets their needs. In response, the Mayor's Office of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (MOCCECE) established the Outreach and Enrollment Initiative (OEI) to assist families facing a range of challenges that can limit their ability to secure ECE for their children, including a lack of information about low-cost or free child care and preschool programs, speaking a language other than English, and housing instability.

Using a portion of the $5 million secured from the City Council and prior administration in FY 2025, the MOCCECE awarded 19 community-based organizations (CBOs) grants to help low-income families learn about and enroll in ECE programs. The OEI addresses the challenges of unfilled child care seats in ECE programs while increasing parents' opportunities to work and improve family financial security. Children also gain important early learning experiences. Components of the OEI model are shown in the box.

This report presents results of a qualitative study of the OEI conducted from summer 2025 to summer 2026. Results are based on the analysis of 52 structured interviews with parents (19), CBO staff who provided OEI supports to families (23), and CBO supervisors of OEI staff (10). (See Appendix for additional information about CBOs, participants, and methods.) Throughout the report, "ECE" refers to all types of publicly supported early care and education programs, including subsidized child care, 3K, Pre-K, and Head Start.

The study addressed five questions:

1. What forms of outreach did OEI staff use to engage families facing significant barriers to accessing ECE?
2. What types of assistance did OEI staff provide to families?
3. What supports did OEI staff receive to help them work effectively with families?
4. What challenges did OEI staff and families experience in their efforts to find and enroll children in ECE programs?
5. What were the benefits for families that were able to enroll their child in an ECE program?



Key Activities of OEI Staff in CBOs*

- Roundtables or "meet and greets" with community Early Care and Education (ECE) Programs
- Family outreach events
- Ongoing canvassing in neighborhoods throughout year
- Screen families for child care options
- Help families create accounts in MySchools and MyCity
- Assist families with applications and enrollment in ECE programs and/or referral to NYCPS ECE programs with vacancies (local NYCPS-contracted ECE programs in CBOs; Head Start/Early Head Start Programs; Family Child Care Networks/Providers; District Schools)
- Establish partnerships with community ECE programs and other organizations to support families' access to ECE (e.g., local ECE programs, local pediatrician offices, faith-based organizations, and other community centers)
- Bimonthly meetings with the OEI managers in the Mayor's Office of Child Care and Early Childhood Education
- Track and report activities related to deliverables
- Financial reporting

**Several activities have target numbers (e.g., 6 family outreach events per year)*

Findings

Findings shown in the main headings of this section reflect content in half or more of the interviews. More specific findings under these headings were found in several interviews, but the number varied.

Most OEI staff visited multiple community settings in their efforts to connect with families facing barriers.

The places where OEI staff conducted outreach included shelters for unhoused families, WIC offices, food pantries, libraries, laundromats, pediatric clinics, community centers, and community events such as resource fairs or churches distributing food. While visiting these settings, staff offered on-the-spot information about ECE programs and explained the assistance OEI could offer. A few staff reported that during outreach sessions in community settings, they helped parents set up portal accounts to apply for ECE. Some OEI staff invited families to provide contact information on sign-up sheets so that OEI staff could follow up to offer tailored assistance. A few organizations conducted outreach for OEI by integrating it into their other outreach activities and community events. These organizations provided information at events hosted by the CBO's outreach or marketing teams about the many programs and services, including OEI, offered by their CBO. While engaging in some community outreach, OEI staff at three CBOs reported that they mainly serve "walk-in" parents because their organizations had a high volume of families that visited each day in search of assistance to meet a variety of needs, including child care.

Partnering with service providers in their own organizations and other organizations helped OEI staff reach families.

Families and OEI staff reported that families commonly learned about OEI from other service providers at their CBO. For example, one family learned about OEI assistance while attending an immigration information session. Another received information about OEI after participating in English classes.

About half of the OEI staff mentioned outreach tailored to immigrant, asylum, and non-English speaking families. In this outreach, OEI partnered with faith-based, legal, and cultural organizations, using visits, social media, and flyers to reach families whose home languages included Chinese, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian.

In a few cases, ECE programs also made referrals to OEI staff when families visited these programs seeking an ECE seat for their child. These programs directed the families to OEI specialists to obtain vouchers and other assistance.

Most families could not have enrolled their children in an ECE program without OEI assistance.

Parents reported needing ECE for children ranging in age from infants to preschoolers, with nearly 40 percent looking for infant-toddler care. More than half of the parents described efforts to access child care on their own before receiving OEI assistance. They cited many obstacles, including their lack of familiarity with ECE programs, limited digital literacy, English-only web pages and application portals, contradictory information, and guidance from city agency staff to visit multiple borough offices. About a quarter of the families had not tried on their own to find child care because they did not know about the availability of preschool for 3-year-olds, were unaware of financial assistance for child care, or lacked the computer skills needed to access online information and portals.

> *"I had applied about four or five times and they denied me…. She was the one who helped me apply for everything... and look, they accepted me." —Parent*

> *"I tried online but there were forms with many questions I didn't know how to answer. It was complicated for the first time. I tried for about three months." —Parent*

> *"I didn't know how to use the MySchools application or how to find the closest school." —Parent*

> *"It was such a hustle from here to there, and they never could do anything... I got tired, didn't want to try anymore." —Parent*

OEI staff provided intensive, individualized assistance to families.

Parents and staff described many forms of intensive support that OEI staff provided, including:

- Giving families detailed and repeated explanations about their ECE program options, with more than half of parents reporting that they received assistance in their home language
- Completing applications and uploading needed documents
- Following up with families by phone, text, and in-person appointments to make sure the family was progressing through the steps to complete an application and enroll in a program
- Updating or re-doing applications when families moved, changed jobs, or relocated after spending time in a shelter

OEI staff also continually stayed up to date on open seats for families they were assisting. This required:

- Frequently searching for programs by zip code and calling programs to ask about openings, hours, and suitability given families' home language and any special needs of the child
- Using provider networks and WhatsApp groups to find open seats

> *"The WhatsApp group with providers is a support…. They tell me when they have seats, and I can tell them when I have parents looking." —OEI Staff*

In addition to these routine activities, OEI staff spent significant time troubleshooting a variety of problems that arose, such as:

- Calling employers and landlords to obtain proof of address or pay stubs needed for applications when parents had difficulty obtaining documents
- Helping families that are paid informally to complete self-attestation forms
- Contacting agencies to request help in getting a stalled application processed
- Explaining denials of applications to families and helping resubmit applications or appeal denials
- Trying to find options for families facing frozen vouchers or a lack of seats which might include finding alternative care and getting on a waitlist



Parents reported that the OEI specialists talked with them about a range of ECE options, including voucher-covered care (both center- and home-based), 3-K and Pre-K programs, Head Start, and Early Head Start. OEI staff also addressed concerns of parents about the safety of child care and whether using child care would jeopardize cash assistance and other benefits they receive. Emphasizing parent choice, OEI staff encouraged families to visit programs and helped arrange visits so that families could feel comfortable about deciding whether to enroll the child.

Several OEI staff and supervisors reported helping families obtain other public benefits and resources to meet basic needs. They often leveraged the programs and supports within their CBOs to meet multiple, critical needs of families. Similarly, CBO staff who assisted families with housing, employment, and other needs called on OEI staff to help families with child care. A few parents also expressed appreciation for receiving diapers and other caregiving items from OEI staff.

OEI staff benefited from the highly effective support provided by OEI managers at the Mayor's Office and related resources.

OEI staff and supervisors reported that they received valuable, timely support from OEI managers at the Mayor's Office. This support included weekly recorded trainings (e.g., on eligibility and application processes, outreach strategies), regular office hours that included peer-to-peer exchanges, and rapid help from OEI managers to troubleshoot problems. The peer-to-peer and question-and-answer discussions during office hours were highlighted by many staff and supervisors as a chance to consider new outreach strategies such as events that provide children's activities. These discussions also helped them learn about how they could overcome difficulties with the application systems by using different documentation or procedures.

A few of the supervisors also cited the value of OEI reporting requirements, which included documenting outreach activities and the types of assistance OEI staff provided. They explained that reporting activities helped them validate their work, establish targets, and organize supervision sessions around topics such as time-management and triaging cases.

> *"[The OEI manager's] leadership on this project and her knowledge… Without that, I don't know how we would have done this, honestly." —OEI Staff*

> *"I think the office hours can be really beneficial because you see some of the other organizations and what their strategies look like." —OEI Staff*

> *"There is a special website with all the trainings and updates…. If I don't remember something, I can go back and watch the training again." —OEI Staff*

> *"The trainings gave us the tools… like the list of documents, the scenarios, the examples…. That's what I use when I sit with a family to explain the process." —OEI Staff*

Supports for communicating in families' home languages were also highly valued by OEI staff. They appreciated having access to Language Line Solutions for translation services, since families often

speak languages beyond those in which OEI staff are proficient. They also valued receiving forms related to ECE applications in multiple languages from the Mayor's Office. A few supervisors reported that OEI funding allowed them to hire and train multilingual members of the community who could work very effectively with families.

Families' enrollment in ECE programs was life-changing.

More than half of the parents reported that securing child care allowed them to search for employment, work more hours, or attend college—all steps toward reducing family financial stress. Similarly, most parents cited benefits to their children, which included early learning, language development, and experience getting along with peers in a group setting, as well as gaining access to developmental services such as speech therapy.

> *"Both my wife and me can have more free time to search for jobs and then try to get more income.... It's like a life changer." —Parent*

> *"It will help me work more. Currently, I can only work when someone cares for the baby.... Daycare is too expensive without help." —Parent*

> *"He learned English. He teaches me songs and dances now!" —Parent*

Even with strong supports, OEI staff and families still face significant challenges related to limited resources and systemic problems.

One OEI staff member reported struggling to manage a caseload of over 70 families, while another explained that she provided OEI services by herself due to budget cuts. Other OEI staff said that problems experienced by many of the families OEI serves, such as domestic violence, severe economic hardship, and anxiety about deportation, contribute to their stress. Staff and families described additional systemic and procedural challenges:

- Glitches when using MyCity and MySchools portals
- Long delays in agencies' processing of applications
- Frozen waitlists for seats requiring vouchers and a lack of openings for toddlers



Key Lessons

The results of the OEI study hold lessons that can inform the city's ongoing efforts to provide universal access to ECE, including equitable access for families facing barriers.

- Without access to enrollment supports like those provided by the OEI, many families will be unable to identify and enroll in ECE programs, including seats that become available in the coming year during 2-K and 3-K expansion. Because children in these families may experience adversities that interfere with healthy development (e.g., housing instability and limited access to developmental supports), they stand to gain the most from participation in high quality ECE.[1] **Achieving equitable access to ECE for the city's low-income families will depend on expanding the OEI or similar efforts.**
- Initiatives like the OEI should be embedded in CBOs. These organizations demonstrated unique strengths in delivering the OEI. Staff knowledge of communities served by the CBOs helped them conduct extensive outreach to connect with families who face challenges in accessing ECE. OEI staff were also able to help families obtain other types of assistance to address basic needs by connecting families to other services at their CBOs. OEI staff also showed sensitivity to families' needs in ways that suggest their understanding of the community; they respected and addressed families' concerns about using child care (e.g., by arranging visits to programs) and valued resources that let them communicate in families' home languages.
- Ongoing and future ECE access initiatives should incorporate other key features of the OEI:
  - Offering CBO staff the comprehensive training, support, and rapid troubleshooting provided by the OEI managers
  - Requiring CBOs to conduct outreach in community settings that reaches families experiencing significant barriers; examples mentioned by OEI staff include shelters, food pantries, and WIC offices
  - Ensuring families receive the types of intensive support in their home languages provided by the OEI
  - Continuing efforts to improve ECE enrollment systems and processes to further increase the efficiency of outreach and enrollment staff and reduce barriers for families
- The OEI and similar initiatives should be expanded to serve more communities with funding at levels that allow lower caseloads for staff.

In addition to these overall lessons that emerged from the study findings, parents and OEI staff offered specific recommendations for strengthening the initiative. A few parents suggested additional high-traffic sites for outreach, including grocery stores and consulates. Parents also called for establishing more in-person OEI locations in their neighborhoods.

OEI staff requested additional support through role-playing to help them talk to "hesitant" families during outreach; more guidance about interactions among public benefits and eligibility for immigrant families; and training on trauma-informed communication with families sharing experiences of domestic violence, homelessness, and immigration-related problems. They also hoped that the city would continue to strengthen its online ECE resources in ways that would help parents and OEI staff more easily access the information and application portals for all types of ECE programs.

1 Davis Schoch, A., Simons Gerson, C., Halle, T., & Bredeson, M. (2023). *Children's learning and development benefits from high-quality early care and education: A summary of the evidence.* OPRE Report #2023-226.



Conclusion

The study's findings point to the successful engagement of families facing significant barriers to accessing ECE by OEI staff at the CBOs; families' need for intensive, individualized assistance; the highly effective delivery of OEI services; and the strong support for the implementation of the OEI provided by the MOCCECE. The strength of the OEI implementation is also shown in the large number tasks, including completed applications and referrals, reported by the CBOs (see table). Together, these results suggest the value of scaling this model to help ensure that the city's efforts to expand ECE translate into access for the families who need it most.

CBO-Reported Child Care Screenings, Accounts Created, and Applications/Referrals Completed

FY26: July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026	Totals
Roundtables	117
Outreach Events	1,014
Child Care Screenings	5,710
MyCity + MySchools Accounts Created (Combined)	3,854
MyCity Applications/NYCPS Referrals (Combined)	2,696
3-K/Pre-K Applications (January 14, 2026-June 30, 2026)	1,610

Data and explanations below were shared with authors by OEI managers in the MOCCECE

Roundtables: OEI staff at the CBOs convene ECE providers to share information and build referral pathways between the OEI staff and NYCPS programs.

Child Care Screenings were conducted to determine the families' likely eligibility for free or low-cost child care.

Metrics for **MyCity** and **MySchools** (both "accounts created" and "applications/referrals") were combined because OEI staff completed a mix of these and combining them made it easier to document their efforts.

Appendix

CBOs funded to implement the OEI

The 19 CBOs funded to implement OEI in 2025-2026 were: Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, Shorefront YM-YWHA, Hebrew Educational Society, Mixteca, Edith & Carl Marks JCH, Riseboro, Parent-Child Relationship Association, Center for Family Life, Montefiore Medical Center, Mercy Center, Mexican Coalition, Mosholu-Montefiore Community Center, AID FOR LIFE, Muslim Community Network, Educational Alliance, Greenwich House, Sunnyside Community Services, Queens Community House, and Make the Road New York.

Methods

Recruitment of Participants for Interviews

Two groups of interview participants were recruited across the CBOs that were funded to implement the OEI: 1) OEI staff who worked directly with families, and 2) supervisors of OEI staff. Using a contact list obtained from an OEI manager at the Mayor's Office, project researchers emailed supervisors to invite them to participate in an interview, and interviews were scheduled with consenting supervisors. Researchers initially recruited OEI staff by asking OEI supervisors to forward information about the study via email to their staff. Staff who were interested in learning more responded by providing their contact information, which allowed researchers to formally invite them to participate and complete the informed consent process. Later, after obtaining a list of OEI staff email addresses from the Mayor's Office OEI manager, researchers contacted all OEI staff directly by email to invite them to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted with 10 supervisors and 23 OEI staff across 18 CBOs.

In addition, 19 parents who received help from eight CBOs were interviewed. These parents were recruited via a flyer developed by the researchers that was given to parents by OEI staff either in person when they were receiving assistance or by text or email. Parents could respond by providing researchers with contact information to learn more about the study, and, if interested in participating, could consent and schedule the interview. Seven parents were interviewed in English, nine in Spanish, and three in Mandarin.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with participants in each group lasted about one hour. The OEI supervisor and OEI staff interviews focused on aspects of OEI support that facilitated the ability of staff to work effectively with families, challenges they faced, and recommendations for strengthening OEI. Supervisor interviews also included questions about the benefits of OEI to the CBO and how OEI requirements affected their work. OEI staff interview questions focused on outreach methods and specific activities they engaged in to assist families. Interviews with parents asked about previous efforts to access ECE, how they connected with OEI staff, forms of assistance they received, benefits of enrolling their child in an ECE program, and challenges.

Analysis of Interviews

Researchers used a deductive approach to analyzing the content of the interviews. Using an AI platform, researchers elicited answers from the questions included in the interviews for each group of participants. One hundred percent of AI output was reviewed by at least one researcher to ensure that the content reflected plausible responses. In addition, for 10 percent of the interviews, researchers checked the AI-coded content against the actual audio recordings. Researchers also generated the frequencies of individual interviews related to AI-produced content to generate broad findings. As noted earlier in the report, high-level findings reflected content found in at least half of the interviews in each group of participants.

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