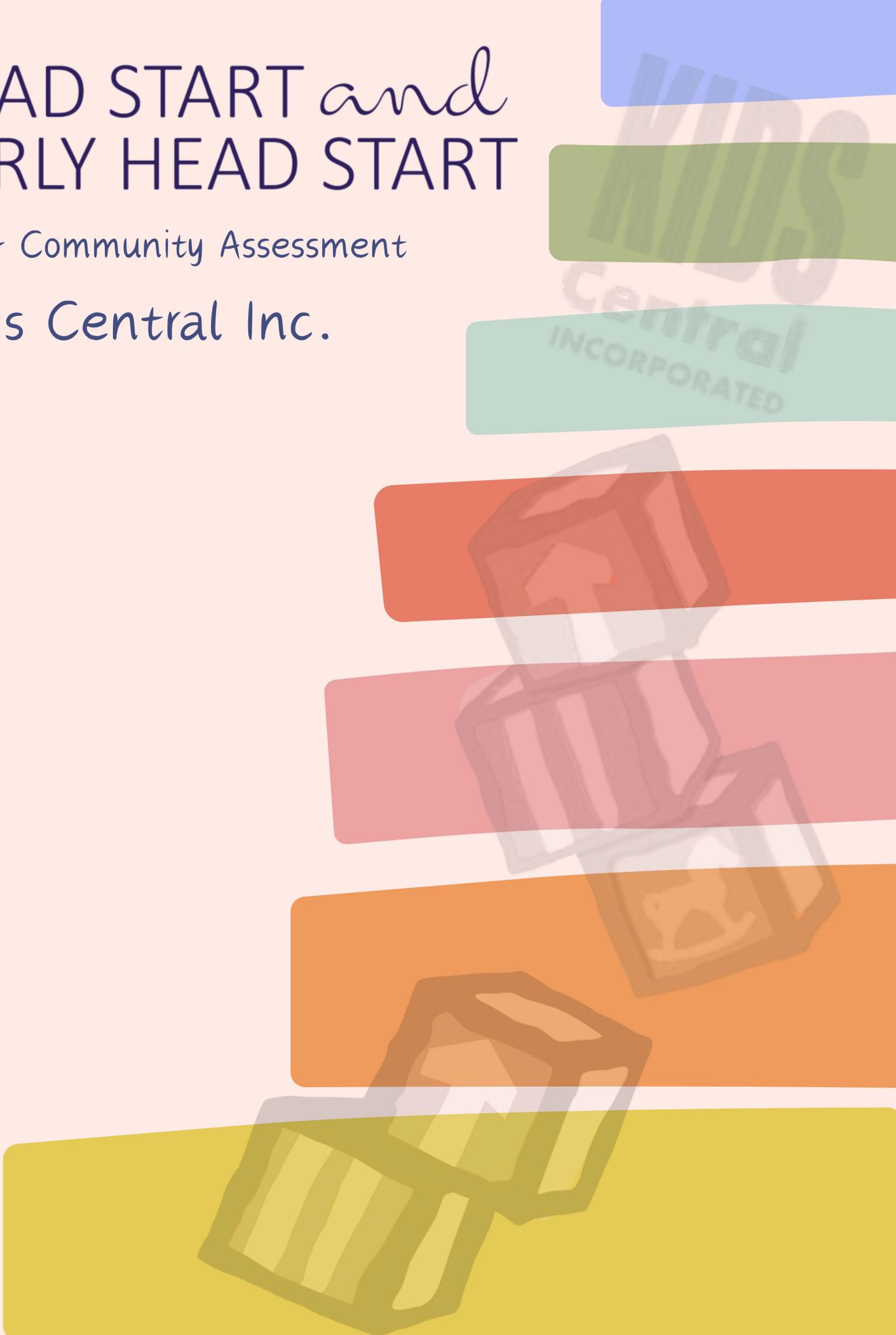


HEAD START *and* EARLY HEAD START

2024 Community Assessment

Kids Central Inc.

KIDS
Central
INCORPORATED



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Introduction and Overview

Purpose and Requirements of a Community Assessment

In accordance with federal guidelines, all Head Start and Early Head Start grantees are required to complete a comprehensive Community Assessment every five years. The purpose of this assessment is to provide a detailed understanding of the service areas for Head Start programs, enabling program staff, Policy Councils, and governing bodies to effectively plan and deliver services to eligible children and their families.

The Community Assessment must include:

- Demographic data on Head Start-eligible children and families
- Information on other child development and child care programs serving eligible children
- An estimate of children with disabilities (ages 0-4)
- Data on the education, health, nutrition, and social service needs of these families
- A review of community resources that can support addressing these needs

The insights gained from this assessment guide the development of Kids Central, Inc.'s (KCI) philosophy and long-term and short-term objectives. It also helps determine the necessary services, program options, recruitment areas, and criteria for enrollment priorities.

Agency Programming and Organization

Kids Central, Inc. (KCI) is a private, non-profit organization, classified as a 501(c)(3) corporation, and a grantee of the Head Start Bureau. Currently, KCI operates two Head Start programs:

1. A Head Start Preschool program serving 142 children and families in Wise County, Dickenson County, and the City of Norton, Virginia.

2. An Early Head Start program serving 153 pregnant women, infants, and toddlers in Wise County and the City of Norton.

KCI operates two program types:

- **Early Head Start (EHS):** Serves pregnant women and children from birth to 36 months.
- **Head Start Preschool (HS):** Serves children ages 3 to school age.

Each program type offers two service options:

1. **Home-Based Services:** Provide services to families in their homes, with 1.5-hour weekly visits for infants/toddlers and 30 minutes for pregnant women. Pregnant women are only served through the home-based model. The Early Head Start home-based option serves 77 families, and the Head Start home-based option serves 40 families.
2. **Center-Based Services:** Provide services in group settings for children from 6 weeks to school age. The Early Head Start center-based program serves 76 children, while the Head Start center-based program serves 102 children.

The Early Head Start program operates year-round, while the Head Start program offers both full-year and part-year (August through May) options. Waiting lists are maintained for all services, with eligibility determined by family income.

KCI is governed by a Board of Directors and a Parent Policy Council, which consists of both Early Head Start and Head Start parents as well as community representatives. As a federally-funded program, KCI is required to comply with the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) as well as relevant state and local mandates. All classrooms are licensed by the Virginia Department of Education's Office of Childcare Health and Safety.

Service Area Description

KCI’s service area includes Wise County, Dickenson County, and the City of Norton in Virginia, covering approximately 740 square miles in the southwestern part of the state, bordering Kentucky. This region is predominantly rural and mountainous, with small towns and communities dispersed throughout. While transportation has been improving, it remains a challenge for families navigating between localities.

Historically, the region's economy has been reliant on natural resources such as coal, natural gas, and timber. However, as global economic shifts and changes in resource availability continue to shape the area, the economy is gradually transitioning to new industries.

Despite these changes, the service area continues to face significant socioeconomic challenges typical of resource-dependent regions. These factors create barriers to self-sufficiency for many families and will be further explored in the subsequent sections of this report.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Population

According to 2022 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the total population of the Kids Central, Inc. service area is 52,755. Wise County is the most populous locality with 35,421 with Dickenson County and the City of Norton numbering 13,725 and 3,609, respectively. As shown in the table below, significant population losses were measured in all localities since the 2000 Census with a precipitous decline over the past decade. Since 2000, the overall service area has lost over thirteen percent of its population.

Table 1: KCI Service Area Population Comparison: 2022 to 2024

Year	Wise County Population	Dickenson County Population	City of Norton Population
2022	35,421	13,725	3,609
2023	35,174	13,640	3,492

Year	Wise County Population	Dickenson County Population	City of Norton Population
2024	35,021	13,527	3,429

Source: United States Census Bureau, USA Facts

Wise County:

Wise County, Virginia, has experienced a slight decline in population over the past few years. In 2022, the county's population was 35,421, which decreased to 35,174 in 2023 and further declined to 35,021 in 2024. This trend reflects a gradual reduction in population, which is common in rural areas where younger populations often move to urban centers for employment and educational opportunities. Despite this decline, Wise County remains the most populous among the three service areas of Kids Central, Inc., and continues to face challenges related to the socio-economic factors typical of rural regions.

Closer examination of small area population estimates (2024) within the county indicate which towns may be the catalysts for halting population loss in the service area – or conversely, continue to suffer continued population losses over time. As seen in the following table, a steady decrease has continued in the last four years.

St. Paul, with a downtown resurgence and a thriving tourism economy is also showing signs of small area growth. As retail centers, growth clusters for industry, and the site of significant economic impacts to the regional economy, localities such as Big Stone Gap, St. Paul, and Wise have some chance to experience modest growth while other locations will struggle to fight decline.

Table 2: Wise County Town Population Comparison: 2020 to 2024

Locality	2020	2024 (estimates)	% Increase/Decrease
Appalachia	1,430	1,352	- 5.4 %
Big Stone Gap	5,258	5,054	-3.9 %
Coeburn	1,591	1,527	- 4.1 %
Pound	866	830	- 4.2 %
St. Paul	860	816	-5.2 %

Wise	2,958	2,812	- 4.7%
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Source: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Dickenson County:

Dickenson County, with a population of 13,725 in 2022, experienced a slight increase in population in 2023, reaching 13,640, before experiencing a small decrease to 13,527 in 2024. This stable yet fluctuating trend suggests a relatively steady population, although the county still faces demographic pressures typical of rural Appalachia, including outmigration of younger populations and an aging population. Like Wise County, Dickenson County faces economic and social challenges but continues to serve as a vital part of the region, with many families depending on local resources and community services.

In examining small area population estimates, a tremendous decrease in population in Clinchco can likely be attributed to continued economic struggles in the coal industry. Despite its own loss of over 27% of its population over the last four years, any population maintenance within the county will likely occur in and around the county seat of Clintwood, where the county’s best infrastructure exists and economic opportunities are greatest. In summary, the overall population of Dickenson County is expected to continue its decline.

Table 3: Dickenson County Towns Population Comparison: 1990 to 2019

<u>Locality</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2024 (estimates)</u>	<u>% Increase/Decrease</u>
Clinchco	294	214	-27.3%
Clintwood	1,380	1,288	- 6.3 %
Haysi	484	520	+7.0%

Source: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey

City of Norton:

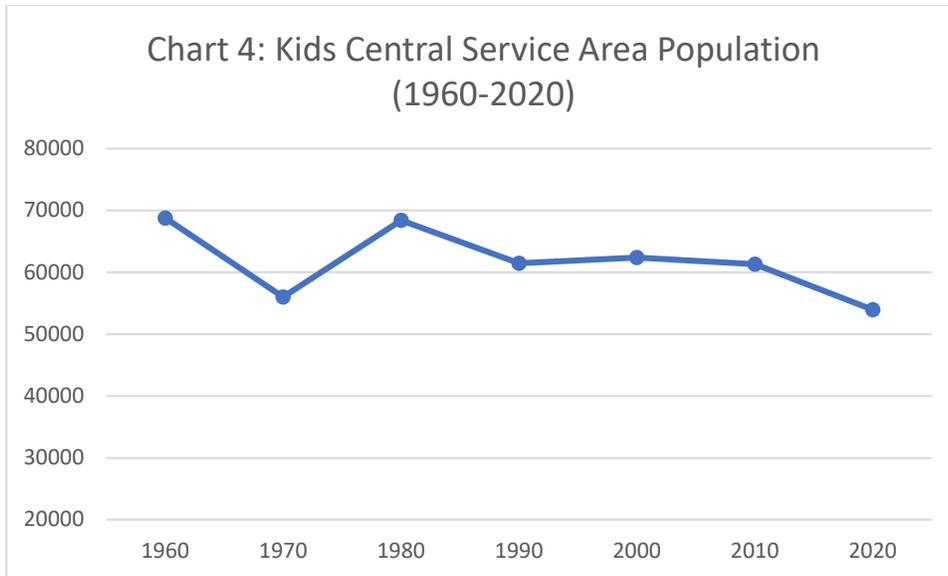
The City of Norton has seen more notable fluctuations in its population over the past few years. In 2022, the population was 3,609, which dropped to 3,492 in 2023 before

increasing significantly to 3,958 in 2024. This increase in 2024 may be attributed to new development or efforts to revitalize the city, though it still remains a small urban center compared to the surrounding counties. The population of Norton is notably smaller than that of the surrounding counties, and the city continues to be a central hub for commerce and services in the region. The fluctuations in Norton’s population highlight the potential for urban growth, especially as regional dynamics shift and local initiatives aim to attract and retain residents.

Year	Population	Change
2024	3,429	-1.8%
2023	3,492	-2.7%
2022	3,589	-1.18%
2021	3,632	-1.33%

Source: United States Census Bureau, USA Facts

Overall: As can be seen in the following chart, the population variations of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to have stabilized in recent years, but the precipitous decline of the past decade indicate that further population loss is very possible.



Source: United States Census Bureau, USA Facts

Age

An assessment of the age of the service area’s population is among the most important elements in a community assessment and is critical to planning the future operation of the program. According to the most recent estimates available from the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of children under the age of five in the region is declining overall, indicating that outward migration primarily attributed to economic stress is again becoming an issue within the region.

One item of note in the following chart that must be addressed is the enormous jump in the estimated population under the age of 5 in the City of Norton. Further investigation revealed that the estimating methodology is partly based upon birth records at medical facilities located within the host locality. In recent years, medical facilities in neighboring counties have been closed or downsized, shifting many medical services, including child births to the City of Norton, which is home to two hospitals. As such, one might expect that the numbers of children under the age of five actually residing in Norton remains near the recent trends while the overall uptick shown in the chart may negate some of the losses in Wise and Dickenson Counties. Regardless, the expectation is that the population under the age of 5 in the KCI service region will continue to decline.

Table 4: KCI Service Area Population Under Age 5: 2021 to 2022

Locality	2021	2022	% Change ('21-'22)
Wise County	1,706	1,717 (+11)	-8.02 %
Dickenson Co.	597	651 (+54)	-17.9 %
Norton City	222	217 (-5)	-37.6%
Total	2,941	2,525	-14.1 %

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Neilsburg.com

As further evidence that the outward migration of *young adults* is snowballing, a comparison of the service area's population, aged 15-44, over the same time is below. While the loss of population in this age group in Norton City is more measured as a percentage loss, the overall raw population loss of this important economic demographic is dramatic and should signal a warning to local leaders.

Table 5: KCI Service Area Population, age 15-44: 2000 to 2019

Locality	2000 (Census)	2010 (est.)	2019 (est.)	% Change ('00-'19)
Wise County	17,150	17,096	14,868	- 13.3 %
Dickenson Co	6,719	5,731	5,061	- 24.6 %
Norton City	1,615	1,562	1,483	- 8.1 %
Total	25,484	24,389	21,412	- 15.9 %

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Race

The overwhelming majority of the service area population is white with minor percentages for other races, as evidenced below. This disparity is not a new trend and while it shows signs of slowly easing, it is expected to be a slow move toward deeper diversity within the region.

Table 6: KCI Service Area Racial Breakdown, 2021

Category	Wise County	Dickenson County	Norton City
White (Not Hispanic)	90.8%	97.3 %	85.2%
Black/African-American	6.1%	0.6%	6.1 %
Hispanic or Latino	1.3 %	1.0%	3.9 %
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.2 %	0.2%	0.3 %
Asian	0.5 %	0.2 %	2.0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
Two or More Races	1.2%	0.7%	2.4 %

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Housing

The overall housing situation in the service area is decidedly improving over time, as the percentage of homes without complete plumbing service and phone service has dropped to a more comparable level to the statewide average. Both Wise and Dickenson County boast homeownership rates above the statewide average, indicating that affordable housing, often in the form of mobile or manufactured homes, is more readily available than in Norton City. The median value of homes and the median rent paid by renters is dwarfed in the service area as compared to the statewide average indicative of both the prevalence of older and/or mobile homes in the region as well as the overwhelmingly lower cost of living in the area, as opposed to more urban areas of the Commonwealth.

Table 7: KCI Service Area Housing Statistics, 2022

	Owner Occupied Housing Rate	Med Value of Homes	HHs w/o Comp Plumbing	HHs w/o Phone Service	Median Rent
Wise Co.	70.3 %	\$108,000	0.6 %	1.4 %	\$715
Dickenson Co	77.2 %	\$89,200	0.7 %	4.8 %	\$680
Norton City	53.0 %	\$104,200	1.1 %	0.4 %	\$613
Virginia	66.9 %	\$273,100	0.3 %	1.6 %	\$1,440

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Transportation

For many, many years concerns over the transportation infrastructure in the service area have been paramount and only in recent years have considerable strides been made, particularly in the Wise County and Norton City areas. Still, the limited availability of public transportation and poor overall infrastructure, especially in Dickenson County, pose significant challenges to the region as a whole.

U.S. Highways 23 and 58A which bisect Wise County and the City of Norton are the two primary arteries for the region and lead to other major highways such as Highways 19, 460, 58, and even Interstate 81 at Abingdon in Washington County. These highways are accessible from Dickenson County but require considerable travel time, often over narrow and twisting roadways.

In the past, the dearth of major highways proved a major hindrance to the importing of manufacturing-based industries in the region. However, as the nation's economy has drifted further and further away from such traditional jobs toward more information and service-based economies, coupled with the region's wise use of lands near its major highways as industrial and technology parks, this has become less of a factor in the region's economic well-being.

Improvements to existing highways along with planned development of other arteries – in particular the Coalfields Expressway – hint that the transportation infrastructure of the region may continue to progress. The Coalfields Expressway, a planned four-lane highway, in close approximation to an interstate-level roadway, would connect in Wise County at Route 23 and traverse through Dickenson County to connect to West Virginia's own Expressway, eventually leading to Interstate 64. This connection, if and when completed, will open Dickenson County (and the entire service area) to tourism and economic development opportunities unforeseen in the past. Still, this is a long-term project, yet to establish firm funding options, and simply cannot be counted on as an impact in the near-term.

The lack of a true public transportation system in the service area is often a hardship to low-income and low-mobility citizens of the region. The development of such a system lacks viability in the marketplace and the scattered clusters of population over often small mountain roads leads one to conclude that such a system will not be

developed in the near future. Some area organizations, particularly the Mountain Empire Older Citizens, along with private taxi services, offer some transportation for those in need of conveyance, but are unable to meet the needs of the region as a whole.

Economic Indicators

ARC Designation: The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is an economic development partnership entity of the federal government and 13 state governments focusing on 423 counties across the Appalachian Region. ARC’s mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia.

For fiscal year 2024, the ARC has classified both Dickenson County and the combined Wise County and the City of Norton locality as “distressed”. By definition, “distressed” counties are those considered to be the most economically depressed, ranking in the worst 10% of all ARC counties collectively. While both ARC-defined localities have been classified as distressed in recent years, the designations are a step back from what had been an “at-risk” or “transitional” rating in some years ago. In fact, prior to FY 2017, Wise County and the City of Norton had not been ranked as “distressed” since 2004.

Poverty: The most recent poverty estimates indicate that the service area suffers from an overall poverty rate of 20.4% in Norton City to a high of 22% in Dickenson County, as compared to the nationwide rate of 11.1% and only 10.2% in the Commonwealth of Virginia. As might be expected, for individuals under the age of 18, the numbers are even higher, ranging from 27.6% in Dickenson County to 30.7% in Norton City.¹ All of these poverty rates are at least twice the statewide averages.

Table 8: KCI Service Area Poverty Rate Percentages, 2022

Locality	Overall Poverty Rate
United States	11.6%

Virginia	10.2%
Dickenson Co.	22%
Wise County	19.2%
City of Norton	20.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Income: The service area lags far behind the statewide average in income statistics, which is not surprising given the longstanding economic conditions of the region when compared to more affluent regions of the state, such as Northern Virginia. The most recent household income statistics show that the service area localities have household incomes roughly 44%-56% of the statewide average.

Table 9: Median Household Income, 2022

Location	Median Household Income
United States	\$75,580
Virginia	\$85,170
Dickenson County	\$40,143
Wise County	\$47,541
City of Norton	\$36,974

Bureau

Source: US Census

Unemployment: The most common measure of economic vitality in a region is the unemployment rate and in recent years, the service area's rates have been falling to a much more equitable margin to both the state and country. In addition, pandemic effects on unemployment rates make data analysis a very challenging topic. The most recent figures available show unemployment rates for the service area of 4.3% in Dickenson County, the 4th highest rate in the state of Virginia as well as 3.9% in Wise County and 4.1% Norton City, all of which are higher than the statewide average of 2.9% and nationwide average of 3.7%.

Table 10: Unemployment Rate, November/December 2023

Location	Unemployment Rate
United States	3.7 %

Virginia	2.9%
Dickenson County*	4.3%
Wise County	3.9 %
City of Norton	4.1 %

*4th largest rate in state of Virginia

Source: Virginia Employment Commission

Service Area Economy: As described earlier, the service area has historically been dominated by a natural resource-based economy, namely coal. This lack of diversification has resulted in huge economic swings within the region over the years, as the regional economy rode the waves of the coal industry’s trends, enjoying successful years when energy prices and the demand for coal were high ... and bearing difficult times in opposite conditions. In examining overall employment data (below), the current struggles within the coal industry are evident, mirroring the overall employment climate in the region with a loss of over 33% of the total employment in the region since 1990.

Table 11: Total Employment, 1990 vs 2022

	Dickenson County	Wise Co/Norton City	Kids Central Service Area
1990	5,209	20,662	25,871
2022	5,435	18,268	23,703
Difference ('94-'22)	+226	- 2,394	- 2,168

Source: Virginia Employment Commission

Realizing the perils of relying upon the coal industry, regional leaders have been pursuing other specific types of projects to improve the regional economy. The aforementioned prisons have undoubtedly been a major boom to the service area’s employment prospects. Area technology parks, such as the one adjacent to the Lonesome Pine Airport in Wise, are growing and attractive to tech-based businesses looking to expand or relocate – particularly when paired with widespread efforts to build broadband networks in the area. Small business incubators and entrepreneurial programs are

available at several locations throughout the service area, offering small business owners every opportunity to succeed.

Another growth industry in the service area is tourism, with emphasis on both ecotourism (such as biking, hiking, birding, camping, rafting) and heritage tourism. The heritage tourism facet is highlighted by the Crooked Road Trail, a revered bluegrass music “trail” which goes traverses through both Wise County and Dickenson County on its way across Southwest Virginia. In addition, a newly formed Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Commission is busy “branding” Southwest Virginia as a complete cultural tourism gateway. The Spearhead Trails, a recent ATV trail development looking to expand across the service area is showing signs of gaining traction with much of the very recent successes in the Town of St. Paul being attributed to this.

All of these efforts are evidence that regional economic leaders have long since recognized that a singular, natural resource-based economy is not the foundation of a healthy economy, opting instead for diversification, both embracing what the region has to offer and pursuing necessary infrastructure improvements to recruit new industries.

Educational Attainment: There can be no doubt that educational attainment is closely linked to the economic health of a region or locality. As such it is easy to see that the Kids Central service area is significantly below the average educational attainment in the commonwealth. While the service area lags measurably in high school educational attainment, the difference in higher educational attainment is striking.

Table 12: KCI Service Area Educational Attainment Rates, 2022

	% of Pop. w/ HS Diploma or Higher	% of Pop. w/ Bach. Deg. Or Higher
Dickenson County	81.4%	11.4%
Wise County	80.4%	16.3%
City of Norton	90.2%	19.4%
Virginia	91.1%	41.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau *(+/-) from 2019

However, there are reasons to believe that this statistical category, like some others examined within this document, are slowly improving and moving toward a more equitable relationship with the rest of the state. Many factors, such as income, poverty rate, parental education levels, and overall availability of higher education make college degrees a bit harder to obtain in the service area than, say, in Northern Virginia or the Richmond area. As such, quick improvements in higher educational attainment rates are unlikely and must expect a more measured approach.

Overall Demographic Analysis

Dickenson County: It seems certain that the population of Dickenson County will continue to decline for the foreseeable future, as it deals with the greatest economic challenges in the service area. It is expected that the median age of the county's population will continue to rise and outward-migration of the younger generation will continue to factor into the county's outlook. In the long term, if issues such as planned transportation improvements take place, Dickenson County may be able to begin a slow rebound, assuming that continued efforts to diversify and improve job prospects for county residents are successful.

In small area analysis, it seems clear that any resurgence within the county, both short and near term, will occur in and around the county seat of Clintwood, which benefits from the best infrastructure and economic opportunities in the county while smaller communities such as Clinchco and Haysi will struggle to remain constant.

Wise County: With greater job opportunities, retail offerings, and educational clusters, Wise County may offer the healthiest outlook for the service area localities. Efforts to diversify the county will be a slow process, much like the region, but improved job opportunities and educational offerings will serve as an asset to that endeavor. Again, lowering the poverty rate and improving educational attainment, while certainly important goals, will be ones with long-term outlooks.

Much like Dickenson County, there are certainly small areas of the county that will grow at a healthier pace than others, courtesy of greater economic opportunities and

as the home of large impacts such as UVa-Wise, local prisons, retail clusters, and Lonesome Pine Technology Park. As a result, the towns of Wise and Big Stone Gap seem to offer the greatest hope for long term growth. Smaller, more remote towns such as Appalachia, Pound, and Coeburn will face greater challenges in maintaining population and economic base.

Norton City: While the city of Norton has seen significant population decreases in the past several years, there are signs of a potential reversal of that trend. A growing retail center, steady leadership, and the efforts to improve the housing shortage within the city limits indicate that the city is reversing its loss trends and may become one of the beacons of the region.

POPULATION SERVED

Eligible Children

Estimating the number of children living in the service area that are eligible to participate in the Head Start program is critical to planning effective program operations, and should factor greatly into decisions regarding program options and center locations.

Federal standards do not mandate a method for estimating the number of eligible children in the grantee’s service area. As a result, agencies have the flexibility to choose the method that is best suited to their programs.

Many programs use alternative methods of estimation, such as the “Free Lunch” method which has been used in the past by Kids Central. However, Kids Central recently chose to utilize a commonly recognized and very intuitive method based upon small area poverty rates (and advocated by Western Kentucky University’s Training and Technical Assistance Services). Using the latest poverty and population estimates of children under the age of 5, it is projected that **there are approximately 2,585 Head Start and Early Head Start age eligible children in the Kids Central service area.**

Table 13: Estimate of Eligible Children in KCI Service Area

Locality	Population Under Age of 5 (2022 est)	Poverty Rate, Under Age of 5 (2022 est)	Number of Eligible Children (rounded)
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Wise County	1,717	19.2%	330
Dickenson County	651	22 %	143
Norton City	217	20.4%	44
TOTAL	2,585		517

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Children Available

With the Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) program that is available within Wise County, Dickenson County and the City of Norton school systems being the primary alternative to Head Start-eligible children in the Kids Central service area, it is relatively easy to determine the rate of service for the program.

Based upon data in the 2023-2024 Fall Membership Report (Source: Virginia Department of Education), there were 392 children enrolled in the Wise County Pre-K program, 80 in Dickenson County and 33 in the City of Norton. Table 14 demonstrates the critical need of collaboration between Head Start and local education agencies to ensure children of all eligibility are given the opportunity of an early childhood education. The total preschool enrollment for Kids Central, Inc. is 176 slots, it can be ascertained that Kids Central is tasked with delegating slots appropriately between program options to meet the needs of the families of these 324 available eligible children in the service area.

Table 14: Eligible and Available Children

	Elig. Children (2022 est.) See Table 14	Pre-K Enroll.	Total Enrollment at KCI
Wise Co.	330	363	
Dickenson Co.	143	63	
Norton City	44	42	
KCI Svc. Area	517	505	142- HS 153- EHS

Source: KCI Enrollment 2024-2025, VDOE Fall Membership 24-25

Demographics of Population Served

Disabilities: One of the most difficult sets of data to gather and analyze is the number of children with disabilities and, most often, an extrapolation of larger-scale numbers is the only method for determining the number of disabled children in a service area. Using 2019 Wise County Census estimates for the number of civilian, non-institutionalized population with a disability, under age 5, it was determined that approximately 2.2 percent of the population has some form of documented disability. Assuming that the percentage is similar to the entire KCI service region, it could be expected that there are approximately 27 disabled (and eligible) children in the Kids Central service area. The 2022-2023 Kids Central Program Information Report indicates that 32 enrolled children meet the federal eligibility for IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) meaning that the agency is doing a good job of identifying those children with special needs within this category.

Race & Language Spoken: Mirroring the overall makeup of the service area, the population served by Kids Central HS & EHS is overwhelmingly White/Caucasian and English-speaking. The most recent Census data estimates that well over 90 percent of the service area population classified themselves as white while the percentage of enrollees in the Kids Central program for 2022-2023 measured similar characteristics. While over 90% of the Head Start children were classified as White/Caucasian and 91.5% of the Early Head Start enrollees were identified as White/Caucasian.

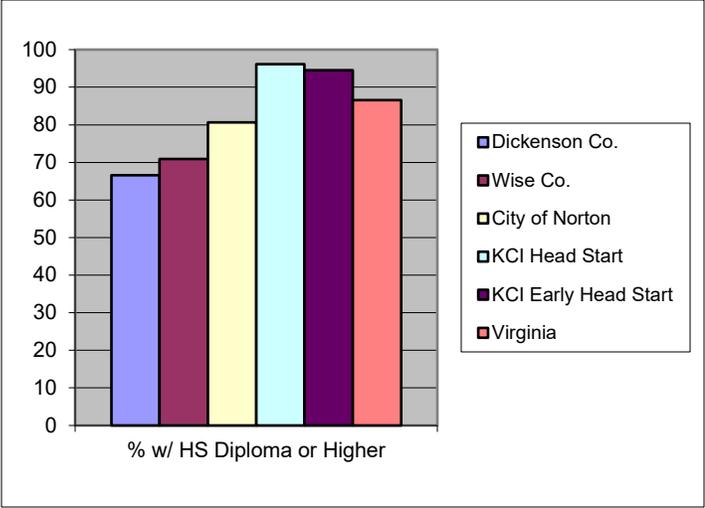
Similarly, the Census data measured the service area population who spoke a language other than English at home with generally only one to two percent falling into the category. KCI's data for its enrollees during 2022-2023 indicate that 100% of the families in both Head Start and Early Head Start utilize English as the language spoken at home. While these data points are a long-established trend in the entire region, Kids Central must resolve to keep an eye on service area tendencies so that if the number of minority or foreign-language speaking children or families becomes more prevalent, the agency will be well equipped to meet their needs.

Table 15: Racial and Language-Spoken Comparison, Service Area & Served Population

	Total Pop. Measured	% of Pop.: White	Language Other Than English Spoken at Home
Dickenson Co.	14,124	96.9%	0.4%
Wise Co.	36,130	90.1%	1.7%
Norton City	3,687	87.4%	4.0%
KCI HS	203	87.6%	0%
KCI EHS	130	91.5%	0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019 & Kids Central, Inc. Program Information Reports, '20-'21

Educational Attainment: As compared to the educational attainment rates of the service area at large, it is encouraging to note that according to the Kids Central, Inc., 2012-2013 Program Information Report, 96.1% of the Head Start and 94.5% of Early Head Start families have a parent or guardian(s) with at least a GED or High School diploma or higher. As noted earlier, the attainment rate for this level in the service area as a whole ranges from 73 to 82 percent. Therefore, the education level of both Head Start and Early Head Start families is not only higher than the service area population but also surpasses the statewide average, indicating that the agency's families are at least as well prepared to be competitive in the job market as the general population.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau & Kids Central Inc. PIR

Methodology

In accordance with the federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (45CFR1302.11) and Head Start Act conducted a Community Assessment in 2023. The

following information was gathered, reviewed, and used to effectively plan five-year goals to support the growth of families and children within Kids Central:

- Demographic information about eligible infants, toddlers, preschool age children, and expectant mothers.
- Information about the education, health, nutrition, and social service needs of eligible children and their families.
- Employment and school schedules of parents with eligible children
- Child Development information detailing services, childcare availability, and options available to eligible families.
- Resources available within the community
- Strengths of the community and any identified gaps in available services for Head Start eligible families.

Surveys, community partner reports and other information were reviewed and analyzed for trends within the community, assisting the agency with its goal and program planning.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

After examining the preceding sections of this assessment of the socioeconomic characteristics of the Kids Central, Inc. service area and the families it serves, there is little question that the service area is adversely affected by significant economic and social barriers. The struggles in the local economy are a root cause of many of the socioeconomic difficulties experienced by local children and their families. However, it is important to recognize that the statistical information used to describe the area is representative of actual individuals and families – families that are subjected to these conditions on a daily basis and must deal with them accordingly. In addition to the tangible data cited earlier, there are also supplementary strengths and assets in the service area community, both ethereal qualities and available infrastructure elements that bear mention.

Family Strengths: An enduring trait of Appalachian culture is the concept that a person's family is the foundation and primary source of personal strength and support. Kinship and familial bonds are important influences within the community, and Head Start and Early Head Start families often benefit from the support that their extended family members are able to provide them.

Service area families are often able to depend upon the financial and moral support of their family members in ways that are not as possible within other parts of the country. Many people in the area are "natives", having been born and raised here, with strong ties to family and home that are not as evident in urban or highly diverse populations. These are perceptible reasons that many people of the area have consciously chosen to remain here over the years – despite the promise of more economic opportunity in more distant, urban areas.

The presence of such highly developed family structure is a discernible strength for Kids Central children and their families. Such relationships provide individualized support, enabling many to rely on their families as a primary source of sustenance when auxiliary forms of assistance are unattainable.

Work Ethic: The work ethic of the community is without a doubt a strength and a convincing element in enticing businesses to locate in the area. Whereas to those unfamiliar with the region and its people, stereotypical assumptions about the lax work ethics of people in the area is common, real world experience proves otherwise. Numerous companies which have located in the area have touted the work ethic, loyalty, low turnover and absenteeism of the region's workforce as a true asset. Such ethics in the workforce increase the employability of local families, enhancing the ability to provide for themselves and their families.

Higher Education: The community is served by a higher education system of two fine institutions, each with a tangible and growing influence and reputation, both in the region and across the state: The University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVa-Wise) and Mountain Empire Community College (MECC).

UVa-Wise is the only branch of The University of Virginia in Charlottesville. With a total enrollment of approximately 2,000 students, the college is the only four-year college in the service area and has been estimated to have a direct annual economic

impact of millions of dollars to Wise County and the City of Norton. The college is consistently ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the top ten public liberal arts colleges in the nation and recent campus improvements and expansions only signal continued success and recognition.

MECC, located in Big Stone Gap, is a member of the Virginia Community College System. Currently, MECC enrolls over 5,000 full and part-time students from across Southwest Virginia. MECC is predominantly a two-year college, but also offers bachelor's degrees through a distance learning program affiliated with Old Dominion University.

Both colleges seek to maintain a high level of community involvement, and actively participate in economic development activities conducted throughout the region. The colleges offer various educational and jobs training courses designed to prepare students for successful entry into the workforce. Each are distinctive community strengths as they provide young and working adults access to a quality education. The availability of these two institutions within the community lessens the requirement that recent high school graduates and working adults must leave the area to further their education. This does a great service in minimizing outward-migration, increasing the overall educational attainment levels of the community, and assisting job creation and economic development efforts through the creation of a well-qualified workforce.

Community Resources: Resource and referral organizations are typically active within a community and, as required by the Head Start performance standards, Kids Central, Inc. annually provides Head Start and Early Head Start families with contact information for available resources within the service area.

For example, families living in Wise County and the City of Norton are provided a copy of a comprehensive *Resource and Referral Directory for Youth and Families* upon enrollment into the Head Start or Early Head Start program. This document, which is compiled and updated by the Lonesome Pine Office on Youth, details the range of services available for children and families in Wise County, Lee County, Scott County, and the City of Norton. Kids Central has compiled a similar directory for distribution to enrolled families living in Dickenson County.

Some of the types of services available within the service area follow:

Department of Social Services: Wise County, Dickenson County and the City of Norton are each served by a local division of the Virginia Department of Social Services. The department of social services is typically the primary source of social assistance in the service area. Qualified families are able to receive or apply for some or all of the following services:

- Auxiliary Grants to Rest Home Residents
- Food Stamps
- Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)
- Child Care
- Emergency Assistance
- Foster Care
- General Relief
- Fuel Assistance
- State/Local Hospitalization
- Adoption Services
- Companion Services
- Counseling Services
- Surplus Commodities
- Medicaid
- Children's Medical Security Insurance Program (CMSIP)
- Job Placement through the Virginia Initiative for Employment not Welfare (VIEW) program

Health Departments: Wise and Dickenson County are each served by a local branch of the Virginia Department of Health. The county health departments strive to protect and promote community health through the provision of free and low-cost health services. These departments are often a primary source of health care for much of the Head Start and Early Head Start population. Among the services offered:

- Well Baby Care
- Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program
- Children's Specialty Services
- Dental Clinic
- Diabetes Control Project
- Family Planning Clinic
- General Medical Clinic (for adults)
- HIV/AIDS Education
- Health Education Activities
- Immunizations for Children Aged 0-5
- Injury Prevention
- Pap Clinic
- Prenatal Clinic
- Sanitation Services
- Well Child Clinic

- Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC)
- Resource Mothers

Mental Health Services Providers: Head Start and Early Head Start families are generally eligible to obtain needed medical health services through one of two providers: Frontier Health or the Dickenson County Community Services Board.

Frontier Health employs the use of a sliding fee cost scale to provide services for individuals with emotional, family, or daily living problems and alcohol or drug abuse.

The Dickenson County Community Services Board provides comprehensive mental health, mental retardation, substance abuse and treatment, consultation, and counseling services for families living in Dickenson County. Both mental health providers accept Medicaid and private insurance as payment for services.

Mental health services are also available through faith-based organizations and a variety of local psychiatrists and psychologists.

Community Action Agencies: Citizens in each county and the City of Norton are served by one of two designated community action agencies: People Incorporated of Southwest Virginia and the Rural Areas Development Association (RADA). Both community action agencies concentrate on securing funds for programs designed to assist the local community. These agencies offer vital assistance to the community by providing services that are likely unavailable through any other means.

Residents of Dickenson County are eligible for services through the following programs offered by People Incorporated of Southwest Virginia:

- Child Care Resource and Referral
- Early Head Start
- Parents in Education
- Resource Mothers
- Appalmade
- BusinesStart
- Individual Development Accounts
- Cars for Work
- Ninth District Development Financing
- Domestic Violence Program
- Senior Services
- Virginia Cares
- Home Ownership
- Indoor Plumbing Rehabilitation
- Minor Home Repair
- Rehabilitation Specialist Services
- Section 8 Rental Assistance

- Transitional Housing
- Weatherization
- Project Discovery
- Youth and Adult Workforce Development
- Reading for Jobs
- Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program

The Rural Areas Development Association is the designated community action agency for Wise County and the City of Norton. Services offered by RADA include:

- Housing Repair
- Weatherization
- Indoor Plumbing Rehabilitation
- Water/Wastewater Services
- Youth and Adult Workforce Development
- SHARE (Self-help and Resource Exchange)
- General Outreach, Advocacy, and Referral
- Child Care Connect (Child Care Resource and Referral)

Disabilities Services: Services for children and families with disabilities are available through Disabilities Services, Inc (DSI), a private, not-for-profit corporation chartered in the Commonwealth of Virginia to encourage and provide for the development, training, and education of handicapped citizens in Wise County and the City of Norton. DSI has an Adult Activity Center which provides developmental day training for adults with mental retardation. DSI also employs a Behavior Specialist that provides assistance and training for consumers, families, and other community agencies to manage difficult behaviors. DSI works closely with Kids Central Inc., Early Head Start program to provide disabilities services for families with children aged 0-2.

Disabilities services are also available through the Junction Center for Independent Living. The Junction Center assists and provides transportation for persons with severe disabilities so that they may live as independently as possible. The Junction Center also encourages necessary change within communities so that independent living for disabled persons is a possibility.

In Virginia, Lead Education Agencies are responsible for providing special education services for children and their families through the age of 21. Wise County, Dickenson County, and the City of Norton coordinate the provision of special education services within their respective areas. Typically, children and their families receive assistance, education, and training on coping with their individual problems. Kids Central

works closely with each school district to coordinate services for Head Start children with diagnosed disabilities.

Employment and Training Services: Jobs placement and training services are also available to area residents. Most providers concentrate on ensuring that persons are able to acquire the skills and resources necessary for them to enter the workforce.

Each school system in the service area offers vocational training classes for high school students and other eligible individuals interested in receiving training in a range of topics, such as automotive repair, cosmetology, nursing, and corrections, among others.

Jobs placement services are offered by the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC). The local VEC field office, which is located in the City of Norton, meets customer's needs by providing employment placement services, labor market information, and unemployment insurance to promote job opportunities and economic growth within the area.

A local Workforce Investment Board also serves each county in the service area. The creation of the Workforce Investment Act replaced the federal Jobs Training Partnership Act. As a result, a local Workforce Investment Board was created to provide jobs training funds to certified providers within the area.

Employment services for the elderly are available through Experience Works. This program fosters and promotes part-time community service opportunities for economically disadvantaged persons aged 55 years of age or older who have poor employment prospects. Participants in the program are provided jobs training opportunities within a variety of agencies and businesses throughout the community.

Housing: Organizations throughout the service area provide rental assistance and public housing for income eligible citizens and the Wise County, Big Stone Gap, and City of Norton Redevelopment and Housing Authorities operate numerous lower-income housing complexes in the area. These organizations also provide Section 8 rental assistance to assure that the low-income community has access to adequate housing.

Other Resources: Kids Central has worked diligently over the years to build strong collaborative relationships with most of the following groups to ensure that Head Start and Early Head Start families receive needed services in a timely and efficient manner. Since many families enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs often

receive services from these and other community agencies, these collaborative relationships often ease the process of attaining necessary public assistance and services. The scope and variety of resources available to the community through these and other groups is an identifiable strength of the service area.

Mountain Empire Older Citizens (MEOC): This is the local Area Agency on Aging for Wise County. MEOC provides services such as:

- Adult Day Care
- Advocacy
- Case Management
- Congregate Nutrition Program
- Elder Abuse Prevention
- Emergency Services
- Foster Grandparents
- Group Respite Services
- Home Delivered Meals
- Homemaker Services
- In-Home Respite Services
- Information and Referral
- Lifeline
- Long Term Care-Ombudsman Program
- Mountain Empire Transit
- Older Worker Programs
- Pension/Insurance Counseling Services
- Personal Care Services
- Pharmacy Access
- Retired Senior and Volunteer Program
- Senior Wellness Initiative
- Support for Family Caregivers

Regional Adult Education: Adult education and literacy services are available within the service area. Adult education classes are held at various locations in each county. Participants are assisted in obtaining a General Equivalency Diploma and improving their literacy skills. A home-based adult education program is also available for qualified applicants.

Virginia Cooperative Extension Service: The Virginia Cooperative Extension Service provides families with educational programs and research information on topics related to agriculture, natural resources, home economics, and community resource development.

Family Crisis Support Services, Inc. (Hope House): Hope House educates the community about domestic and dating violence and their effects on family members.

Hope House also offers emergency shelter, food and support for residents, information and referrals for housing, counseling, legal aid, parenting skills, health care, jobs, a support group for abused women, and other community outreach efforts.

Civic Organizations: Civic groups, such as local chapters of the Kiwanis and Lions Clubs, are also active within the community. These and other similar organizations periodically have fundraisers to support local community initiatives and activities designed to assist specific age groups within the service area.

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Despite all of the aforementioned strengths of the community, the service area is not without significant challenges to the well-being of local children and their families.

Employment and Education: Lessening employment opportunities, an uncertain economic outlook, and lagging educational attainment in the service area have been well documented in this assessment, and continued focus and success in these areas are imperative if the region is to maintain any advancements. The key to success hinges on cooperative regionalism among area leaders, with emphasis on such key infrastructures as transportation, education, water and sewer services, and broadband capabilities, all critical to successful and diversified economic development.

Improvement to the higher educational attainment rate of the service area population is another important facet to maintaining and improving the economic outlook for individuals and households. As noted earlier, the region has made considerable strides in the high school and GED attainment rates, but rates of college graduates does not maintain the pace of the state. It is through gaining such education that individuals enjoy improved job opportunities and, on a larger scale, the region itself becomes a more attractive site for prospective employers.

Child Care: The most commonly noted reason for a parent not working or going to school is the “lack of child care.” This is a common reference in the service area as the availability of high quality and affordable child care is very low. Many working families are unable to secure high quality child care for their children due to high fees or a lack of available openings. Unfortunately, this problem is only exacerbated for low-income working families in the service area.

In Virginia, the state department of social services is the licensing agent for day care centers, each of which must meet the standards promulgated by the Child Day Care Council. These standards are designed to assure that licensed child care providers provide safe, nurturing and healthy environments for the children in their care. The department of Social Services conducts inspections at licensed centers twice per year and investigates formal complaints. Upon gaining licensure, centers are also subject to local and state building and fire codes, and must meet minimum health and safety requirements.

Kids Central is the largest and most developed child care provider in the region. A recent search of the licensed child care center database maintained by the department of social services indicates that there are only four licensed child care centers in the service area (not including the Head Start and Early Head Start centers operated by Kids Central, Inc.) All told, licensed child care centers in the service area have the capacity to serve 309 children at full enrollment, with 175 of that total at three licensed centers in Wise County with 64 available at one center in Dickenson County.

When one considers the estimate that over 3,300 children under the age of 5 live in the service area, let alone children over that age that may require after school or summertime care, it seems clear that the child care market would struggle to meet the demand for its services.

A secondary source of child care available in the area is “unlicensed” day care centers, which can be religiously-exempt centers or voluntarily registered family day homes (which typically provide care for a small number of children). According to the department of social services database, there are seven such centers in the service area.

The only other structured source of child care within the service area is the Pre-Kindergarten programs offered by Wise County, Dickenson County and the City of Norton school systems. According to the latest data available, these programs serve 363 children in Wise County, 63 in Dickenson County and 42 in Norton City. While there are no income guidelines governing enrollment in Title I Pre-K programs, children must possess a need for service and be at least four years of age, with the exception of Wise County which serves both three and four year olds. These programs offer high quality early childhood programming, but are only available during the normal 180-day school

year. Thus, while they provide a quality alternative for four year old children, the Pre-K program cannot address a family's true need for child care.

Consequently, it seems clear that the service area is in dire need of additional child care options. Not all families – especially working families – are income eligible to participate in the area's largest child care provider, Kids Central, and their needs for quality child care often go unaddressed.

Most working parents are forced to rely upon family members to care for their children, meaning that such children do not receive the comprehensive enrichment and development services available within Head Start or Pre-K programs. While the care received from family members is likely adequate, it is simply not able to realize the benefits provided by structured childhood education programs.

Child care options in the service area need to be expanded, particularly in light of continued economic diversification and expansion. In order for parents to access the available employment, educational, and training opportunities in the area, the lack of dependable child care must be eliminated.

Health and Wellness: As has been documented in many studies, the overall health of Southwest Virginia citizens lags considerably behind statewide and nationwide averages. Many factors contribute to this from diet and exercise habits, to health care availability, to the personal health education quotient of the general public. As local media frequently indicate, prescription drug abuse is a common problem for area individuals and families. Therefore, Kids Central administration would be well advised to remain aware of health and wellness trends and needs of the service area and the challenges that they may present to families.

Other Challenges: Continued improvements to the transportation infrastructure are critical to economic development, as evidenced in Wise County and the City of Norton, which find their localities opened up to the larger population to a degree unforeseen decades ago. Still, transportation issues in Dickenson County continue to pose hardships and the beginning of construction on and eventual completion of the Coalfields Expressway would go a long way towards alleviating those problems.

Population loss in the service area is projected to continue, at a more measured pace in Wise County and Norton City, with more substantial declines in Dickenson

County. As delineated earlier, this is a result of limited job opportunities in most cases. An aging population coupled with outward migration of younger, child-bearing citizens continues to bode a lessening population base in the region. Increased emphasis on strategies to lessen or eliminate this “brain drain” is at the forefront of many leaders and organizations’ master plans.

Kids Central, Inc. is facing the same challenges as other Head Start programs throughout the nation in finding and retaining qualified staff to work in classrooms. Early childhood, with traditionally low pay, is a field that is struggling to attract candidates to the field and even when we hire staff, the burnout rate is incredibly high. Our profession is seeing record numbers of staff across the nation voluntarily leaving their jobs, we are no different. In addition to the difficulty in finding qualified staff, we saw challenges in keeping staff as well. With the stringent staffing 15 standards required by Head Start, entry level staff are difficult to find and can be even harder to keep. Working in early care and education is difficult with notoriously low wages. During the pandemic, the Head Start Bureau gave special allocations to allow for staffing increases, but they were temporary measures. *To compensate for the challenges in finding and retaining staff, many programs are “right-sizing” by decreasing numbers of classrooms/centers and staff and using the savings to make significant market adjustments to existing staff.* As an organization, we will explore all the possibilities to find new ways to recruit, train and retain highly qualified staff.

As of recent data, the starting salaries for public school teachers in Wise County, Dickenson County, and the City of Norton, Virginia, vary slightly by locality, though all are influenced by state funding and local budget constraints. Here's a summary:

1. **Wise County:** Starting salaries for teachers in Wise County typically range from **\$45,700** annually, depending on the teacher's qualifications and experience. The county may offer additional stipends or benefits based on specific needs or teaching positions.
2. **Dickenson County:** The starting salary for teachers in Dickenson County is generally **around \$41,729**, again depending on individual qualifications and experience. Similar to Wise County, the district may offer additional benefits or bonuses for high-need areas.

3. **City of Norton:** Teachers in the City of Norton start at approximately **\$40,890** annually. Like the other districts, salary increases are possible with experience and additional qualifications.

These salaries reflect the challenges faced by Head Start programs in attracting and retaining teachers.

Moving Forward:

To meet the new Head Start Performance Standards, Kids Central, Inc. needs to focus on several key areas:

1. **Family Engagement:** Strengthen partnerships with families, emphasizing shared decision-making and more comprehensive support to families' goals, needs, and well-being.
2. **Curriculum and Instruction:** Ensure a high-quality, individualized curriculum that aligns with the developmental needs of children and supports school readiness goals. Prioritizing professional development for CLASS and
3. **Teacher Qualifications:** Hire and retain highly qualified teachers and staff, with an emphasis on providing professional development/coaching opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge. Develop an agency pay scale to offer competitive wages and benefits.
4. **Health and Safety:** Improve health and safety standards, including comprehensive physical and mental health services for children and families.
5. **Data Use and Accountability:** Enhance the use of data to inform practices and decisions, ensuring programs are meeting the needs of children and families, and achieving desired outcomes.
6. **Inclusion and Equity:** Ensure that all children, including those with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds, receive equitable opportunities and services tailored to their needs.
7. **Continuous Improvement:** Establish strong mechanisms for continuous self-assessment and program improvement to ensure ongoing quality and adherence to the updated standards. Cultivating a culture of wellness for staff to empower them to effectively complete their jobs and provide regular breaks for all staff as needed.

Kids Central will also be tasked with developing new policies and regulations to meet the new Head Start Program Performance Standards mandates. Among these mandates are increased mental health services for children and families, pay parity for Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start staff, staff health and wellness, and staff benefits. Costs to cover unfunded mandates will require Kids Central to look at changes to program options, enrollment and possible reorganization.