

## Ready Regions

### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Updated September 2, 2021

## BACKGROUND

### 1. What is “Ready Regions”?

A sturdy regional network capable of supporting equitable access to quality early childhood opportunities across the Commonwealth. For more information, go to: [www.vecf.org](http://www.vecf.org).

### 2. Why is VECF shifting to Ready Regions?

Ready Regions is needed to ensure consistency and capacity in a statewide network to equitably champion the needs of all children and families in every region, in every locality. Shifting to a regional approach allows every locality in Virginia to be engaged and supported in creating optimal environments for *all* young children and their families.

As noted in SRI’s June 2020 evaluation report [Advancing local early childhood systems in Virginia: Next steps for local, regional, and state stakeholders](#), “Although each Virginia community has unique needs, some common approaches can strengthen early childhood systems statewide. These include maintaining a resolute focus on the central role of systems in improving outcomes for children by ending the perpetuation of disparities, gaining the sustained commitment of influential advocates across sectors, and addressing all aspects of the early childhood system.”

### 3. Why is VECF doing this now?

The events of 2020 underscored the charge. VECF has accelerated our commitment due to:

- Long-standing and unacceptable racial inequities create disparate opportunities for children and families in Virginia, especially those in low-income households and those who are Black and Hispanic. Regional, on-the-ground relationship building, convening, and community-owned strategic decision-making that has been the foundation of Smart Beginnings’ approach is needed in all areas of Virginia now more than ever.
- The 2020 School Readiness Act established a long-needed single point of accountability for school readiness at the state level and a mandate for a unified system of quality improvement for Virginia’s early care and education system. To avoid a top-down, “one size fits all” approach and to support the evolving landscape and improvements, Ready Regions will serve a critical role facilitating collaborative, cross-sector public-private partnerships needed in every region to ensure families’ access to quality opportunities.
- The health, economic, and educational crises resulting from the pandemic clarified both the essential function of child care and the critical need for stable and consistent regional leadership in Virginia.

**4. How is Ready Regions different from Smart Beginnings?**

Ready Regions is an organic evolution of Smart Beginnings. Local Smart Beginnings have brought public and private leaders together to collaborate on priorities for their youngest citizens since 2005. Ready Regions will be built from lessons learned from the existing Smart Beginnings network in order to ensure equitable coverage for all of Virginia’s children and families. This latest evolution will allow Virginia’s public-private network to continue to be responsive to early childhood needs for decades to come.

**5. What is the difference between Ready Regions and the Emergency School-Age Care initiative?**

As Virginia navigated the changing landscape shaped by COVID-19, including reduced child care capacity and shifts to virtual learning for many school divisions, VECF facilitated regional collaboration through the short-term Emergency School-Age Care initiative to address the immediate need for safe, quality child care for working families with school age children. Ready Regions is a systemic approach to supporting equitable access to quality early childhood opportunities whereas Emergency School-Age Care served as a short-term demonstration of the value of a regional approach.

**6. What is the difference between Ready Regions and the Virginia Department of Education’s Unified Early Childhood System, and will they have different requirements for child care providers? (added 7/14/21)**

Ready Regions and VDOE’s Unified Early Childhood System are complementary. An initial and primary function of Ready Regions will be to support the ongoing activities and strategies to guide quality improvement in early childhood care and education programs (including child care programs) as part of VQB5 (Virginia’s new uniform measurement and improvement system), including coordinating observations. Ready Regions will not have different requirements for childcare providers, but rather support the requirements and activities determined by VDOE for them.

**7. What is the difference between Ready Regions and PDG B-5? (added 7/14/21)**

The [Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five \(PDG B-5\)](#) opportunity is a multi-year federal grant scheduled to end on June 30, 2023. [Click here](#) to learn more about PDG B-5. One of the accomplishments from the PDG B-5 initiative has been to lay the foundation for Virginia’s new uniform measurement and improvement system (VQB5). A primary function of Ready Regions will be to provide the ongoing on-the-ground support system for VQB5.

## **8. What will Ready Regions be doing?**

Ready Regions will be Virginia's on-the-ground early childhood systems builders. They will be responsible for coordination and integration of essential services and resources starting with a focus on early childhood care and education (ECCE). An initial priority of Ready Regions will be to implement the Preschool Development Grant-funded foundation of Virginia's new measurement and improvement system, called VQB5, which will focus on the quality of all publicly funded birth to five-year-old classrooms and support families to choose quality programming across different program types. The outcome of a *ready* early childhood system is a unified approach that works for all families of children ages birth to five who choose to participate.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR EXISTING SMART BEGINNINGS**

### **9. What does the shift to Ready Regions mean for existing Smart Beginnings?**

VECF plans to implement a competitive process for identifying Ready Regions in Fall 2021 starting with a Letter of Intent released on August 18, 2021. Smart Beginnings partners may choose to apply to serve as a Ready Regions lead, collaborate on a regional application led by another organization, or not to apply. All Smart Beginnings partners may continue typical operations, including use of the Smart Beginnings brand, during the competitive process.

### **10. When will the change from Smart Beginnings to Ready Regions take place?**

Change has begun and will evolve over the next few years. For more information, go to: [www.vecf.org](http://www.vecf.org).

### **11. What does the transition to Ready Regions mean for the Smart Beginnings brand?**

A strong launch of the Ready Regions brand will communicate to stakeholders across the Commonwealth that early childhood systems building in Virginia is advancing to the next level - a comprehensive, regional model that serves children and families in every community. Smart Beginnings has been a recognized and trusted brand in many communities since 2005 and has demonstrated the critical importance of systems building.

On March 11, 2021, Smart Beginnings partners were asked to develop a plan to phase out the use of the Smart Beginnings name and logo by July 1, 2023, to reduce confusion and to affirm alignment with Virginia's evolution in systems building, and commitment to an updated network, and a new brand.

## APPLICATION PROCESS

### **12. How will Ready Regions be determined?**

The organizations leading the Ready Regions work will be determined through a competitive grant process open to all interested organizations. To be successful, Ready Regions will need to consider the influence of a number of different relevant constituencies: 1) state entities that are responsible for setting policy and investing public funds, and state-level entities serving as intermediaries and advocates; 2) local partners providing direct services to children and families, including but not limited to child care centers, family day homes, Head Start, and schools; and 3) families engaged in informing the design of a system that meets their needs and preferences.

### **13. Are there expectations for how Ready Regions will be structured?**

Ready Regions must be committed to a public private approach and include diverse and equitable representation reflective of the region. The proposed structure for Ready Regions includes three components:

- A stable governance with a board that includes regional partners and families, as well as an experienced fiscal agent with a solid financial position, strong administrative and fiscal capacity, and a sound reputation in the region.
- Executive leadership with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to run a self-sustaining and fiscally nimble organization, and capable of building a diverse team to facilitate the region's success in achieving its goals.
- A team focused on the implementation and coordination needed to successfully achieve state expectations and meet regional needs. Implementation teams should be built in a way that works best for the region. Regions may choose to hire staff to complete the work, subcontract with other organizations, and/or partner with organizations with similar goals to guide the work.

### **14. What are the possible roles for my organization in Ready Regions?**

An organization may choose to apply to serve as a Ready Regions lead or collaborate on a regional application led by another organization as a Ready Regions partner.

### **15. What is the difference between a Ready Regions lead and Ready Regions partner?**

A Ready Regions lead would be awarded a contract to oversee and implement the work across a regional footprint via a competitive process starting with a Letter of Intent. A Ready Regions partner may either serve as a subcontractor to the regional lead *or* serve as an unfunded partner with aligned goals helping to guide or implement the work. VECF envisions that it would be the regional lead's responsibility to make decisions to subcontract with other agencies to implement some part of the work in a specific locality or localities within the larger footprint, with VECF providing technical assistance to facilitate successful partnerships.

**16. Where can I find the Letter of Intent (LOI)? (updated 8/17/21)**

The Ready Regions LOI will be released on August 18, 2021. VECF will announce the Ready Regions LOI to all entities subscribed to receive email updates. [Click here](#) to sign up to receive email updates. VECF will also post updates on our social media ([Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)) and [website](#). LOI must be submitted through VECF's online grants management system available [here](#).

**17. Is the LOI required?**

Yes, the LOI is required for all communities interested in submitting a full Ready Regions application.

**18. Who should complete and submit the LOI on behalf of the region?**

Organizations interested in participating in Ready Regions are strongly encouraged to begin conversations with regional partners across the full coverage area now to determine the most capable collaborative structure and determine the organization that will serve as the applicant and lead agency in the LOI submission. VECF encourages interested applicants to work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders throughout the process to ensure equitable representation reflective of the full region. While all LOI will be reviewed, the most competitive applicants will be organizations or entities that facilitated partnerships resulting in a single Ready Regions application for their region.

**19. Is it allowable for an individual child care program to submit an LOI and potentially serve as lead fiscal agency in an application?**

All LOI, including those submitted by individual child care programs, will be reviewed. The most competitive applicants will be organizations or entities that clearly represent whole-community collaboration across the region and have experience in early childhood systems building, such as Smart Beginnings, United Ways, community action agencies, school divisions, higher education institutions, private foundations, and other multi-service nonprofits. Independent early childhood care and education programs or individual early childhood leaders within regions are encouraged to connect with other interested stakeholders to support a regional application.

**20. What assistance is available to my community during the LOI and full application process?**

**(updated 8/30/21)** Technical assistance (TA) in the form of FAQ, webinars, and phone calls will be provided throughout the application period. [Click here](#) to sign up to receive VECF updates, and check VECF's website or social media for updates. TA opportunities currently available:

- a. Interested communities can watch the Ready Regions Letter of Intent Webinar recorded on August 25, 2021 at noon. [Click here](#) to watch the recording.
- b. Questions can be submitted via email to [info@vecf.org](mailto:info@vecf.org) to be included in future FAQ updates.
- c. Organizations planning to apply to serve as a Ready Regions lead can request a 1:1 TA call with VECF staff. [Click here](#) to request a call.

**21. What are the Ready Regions coverage areas? (updated 8/17/21)**

VECF is suggesting nine regional footprints. This determination was made after careful consideration from several perspectives including review of existing regional maps, relevant data indicators, and conversations with local partners. These reviews and considerations have helped inform the potential for equitable distribution of resources. Applicants may suggest adjustments to these regional footprints in the LOI, but ultimately final decisions will be based on our commitment that every community in Virginia is covered by Ready Regions. [Click here](#) to view Ready Regions grant resources including the nine suggested regions.

**22. Can you name some of the other existing early childhood regions that VECF took into consideration when creating the 9 suggested regions to help us understand the overlap in service areas and connect with others who may be interested in the work? (added 8/30/21)**

VECF took many existing regions into account including the [Virginia Department of Education Superintendent's Regions](#), [Regional Offices of Social Services](#), [Regions of the Infant Toddler Specialist Network](#), [Child Care Aware of Virginia Resource Centers](#), [Virginia Quality Regions](#), [Virginia Cross Sector Professional Development Regions](#), and [Early Impact Virginia's Home Visiting Directory organized by region](#).

**23. Will VECF release the names of organizations that submit an LOI since an adjustment to the coverage of one region would likely affect the coverage of at least one other region?**

**(added 8/30/21)** For any regions or overlapping areas where VECF receives more than one LOI to serve as the lead agency, VECF will facilitate connections between applicants.

**24. Will this be the only competitive opportunity to apply to serve as a Ready Regions lead?**

**(added 8/30/21)** VECF does not plan to offer another competitive opportunity as expansive as this one. Future competitive opportunities may be implemented as necessary, e.g., to fill any gaps in coverage areas to serve all of Virginia equitably and ensure every region has a high capacity lead in place.

**25. Will an organization that is selected to be a Ready Regions lead be required to change their name?**

No, we do not expect a Ready Regions lead to change its organizational name. We do expect an organization that is selected to be a Ready Regions lead to use the Ready Regions brand and logo to publicly identify itself as the designated lead alongside its current organizational name. Similar to Virginia's network of small business development centers, which are embedded in a variety of organizations such as chambers of commerce and institutes of higher education, Ready Regions will be a network of organizations focused on early childhood systems building that are implementing aligned work identified by a shared designation of Ready Regions.

**26. Do all regional partners have to be in place by the time the LOI is submitted? (added 8/30/21)**

VECF does not expect all regional partners will be in place by the time the LOI is submitted. Strong applications will include a list of partners representing most localities in their coverage area with many moderate to high levels of engagement.

**27. How can local government and child care providers in the region be involved? (added 8/30/21)**

Local government and child care providers, including child care centers, family day homes, Head Start, Mixed Delivery Programs, and schools, can become involved by participating in PDG B-5. [Learn more about PDG B-5 here.](#)

## FUNDING

**28. How will Ready Regions be funded?**

VECF has secured short-term funding that will serve as a starting point for standing up Ready Regions. VECF anticipates serving as a broker to facilitate access to longer-term funding for some core functions of Ready Regions. However, it will be necessary for a strong Ready Regions lead to facilitate the public private partnerships and commitments necessary to ensure sustainability and diversification beyond the initial or any one single source of funding. Additional details on funding will be addressed through the competitive process.

**29. Will VECF still provide grants to partners outside of Ready Regions, or will Ready Regions leads serve as conduits/gatekeepers for any funds available in their regional footprint?**

VECF will continue to pursue opportunities to leverage increased funding to support early childhood success for young children and their families across Virginia. VECF anticipates that ultimately, the majority of funds will be efficiently and equitably administered through Ready Regions. In turn, the Ready Regions leads will manage subcontracts with other partners as needed to allocate resources and deliver on core functions within each region. VECF will clearly indicate who is eligible to apply in any request for proposals that we release.

**30. Will matching funds be needed to apply? (added 7/14/21)**

Matching funds will not be required to apply to the Ready Regions grant opportunity; however, Ready Regions will be expected to create public-private buy-in and maximize the funding granted by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation by identifying other funding sources to implement the work.

**31. How much funding is available to Ready Regions and what is the source? (updated 9/2/21)**

From 1/1/22 through 6/30/22, up to \$2.55 million in total funding is available to support the initial start-up of Ready Regions. This includes up to \$2.3 million in funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth to 5 (PDG B-5). Funding is largely based on the anticipated costs for staffing and/or infrastructure needed to ensure a full transition from PDG B-5 to Ready Regions by 7/1/22. Funding available per region will be based on the region's coverage area with an anticipated range of \$250,000 to \$300,000 in grant awards to regions.

From 7/1/22 through 6/30/23, it is currently expected that up to \$13 million in total baseline funding will be available to Ready Regions to coordinate quality measurement and guide improvement in early childhood care and education (ECCE) classrooms and family day homes as part of the VQB5 system. Funding allocation will be based on several key factors:

- Total number of publicly-funded classrooms within a region;
- Total number of publicly-funded family day homes within a region;
- Baseline staffing needed to build relationships, coordinate enrollment and engage families;
- Costs of completing CLASS observations and providing feedback for all classrooms within a region.

Specific funding amounts and sources will depend on the region's coverage area. Funding may be reduced based on participation and final amount and source(s) of funding are subject to General Assembly approval.

Funding beyond 6/30/23 will be subject to appropriations and the region's performance, but the goal is to maintain the fiscal year 2023 baseline and increase by a small percentage each year to account for inflation and other factors.

**32. What will be the grant award timeframe for Ready Regions? (added 8/30/21)**

VECF anticipates offering initial 6-month grants from 1/1/22 through 6/30/22. Grant renewals will be based on funds available (see response to the question above) and performance.

**33. Will the Ready Regions funding cover services to children up to 12 years old like the Emergency School-Age Care initiative has? (added 8/30/21)**

Ready Regions funding is intended to facilitate early childhood systems building activities across all direct service providers who support families with young children and coordinate quality measurement and guide improvement in ECCE classrooms and family day homes as part of the VQB5 system. The Emergency School-Age Care Initiative is a short-term grant from 11/20/20 through 9/30/21. The Emergency School-Age Care Initiative is intended to address the immediate need for safe, quality child care for working families with school-age children as Virginia navigated the changing landscape shaped by COVID-19 including reduced child care capacity and shifts to virtual learning for many school divisions.

**34. Will there be funding available for impartial, expert facilitation if needed to provide technical assistance to bring partners together in this regional approach? (added 8/30/21)**

Since 'Building Partnerships' is one of the five required Ready Regions strategies, we anticipate this type of convening to be part of the funded work accomplished during the first 6-month grant term (January – June, 2022). VECF anticipates that needs for assistance will vary by region, and will make technical assistance focused on Regional Planning & Collaborative Decision Making available to Ready Regions that request expert facilitation.



**35. VECF has prioritized equity and family engagement. Will funding be available to build capacity within the region to achieve equity and family engagement? (added 8/30/21)**

Since ‘Confronting Racial Inequities’ and ‘Engaging Families’ are two of the five required Ready Regions strategies, we anticipate these activities to be part of the funded work begun during the first 6-month grant term (January – June, 2022). We expect each region’s needs for support implementing these strategies will vary, and in addition to funding, VECF anticipates providing technical assistance to Ready Regions that will include a focus on these two critical strategies.

**36. Will Ready Regions be the structure for distributing early childhood funds in Virginia; for example, will Ready Regions become the leads for VQB5, VA Infant Toddler Specialist Network, or other publicly funded early childhood initiatives? (added 8/30/21)**

Ready Regions will be built on the strong foundation of Virginia’s federal Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five ([PDG B-5](#)) and will support the ongoing activities and strategies of [VQB5](#) in line with new state law. Ready Regions will also play a key role in helping to coordinate enrollment and expand regional capacity in order to increase access via multiple state and federal funding sources (e.g., child care subsidy, mixed delivery). To continue to unify the early childhood system and improve school readiness outcomes, Virginia will look to integrate other key public investments while complying with all state rules for procurement. Ready Regions will be encouraged to compete for public and private funds that can help further their efforts to build partnerships, increase access, improve quality, engage families, and confront disparities. Lastly Ready Regions will be expected to engage school divisions, social and human services, health districts, quality improvement networks (such as the [VA Infant Toddler Specialist Network](#)), ECCE programs, and other related organizations in their work.