

California's Early Identification and Intervention System and the Role of Help Me Grow

FIRST 5 CENTER FOR
CHILDREN'S POLICY

Executive Summary

California's early identification and intervention (EII) system, which seeks to identify young children with developmental delays or behavioral concerns and route them to appropriate services, has longstanding, systemic flaws. These are critical services that have the ability to dramatically affect the trajectory of a child's life. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the need for innovative, coordinated health systems that are able to reach families in need, and the inequities in access to services for children and families. This paper proposes a number of possible improvements to the EII system by leveraging Help Me Grow (HMG), which has been a vital component of county EII systems for 15 years.

California has one of the lowest developmental screening and early intervention rates in the country. While 18% of the state's children have a developmental delay or disability, only 3% of children receive early intervention by age three. Screening rates are a key sticking point: just 26% of children are screened three times before age three, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Children of color and those living in low-income households are less likely to be screened than white children and those living in higher-income households.

Multiple factors prohibit children from being screened or connected to services in a timely way: providers have resource and time constraints; families are hesitant about screening and referral; and coordination among services providers is limited. HMG has led the charge to close the resulting developmental screening and service gaps, and to improve the functioning of the EII system in the 30 counties where it operates.

Help Me Grows operate call centers; provide screening, referral, and care coordination; educate and provide outreach to parents and providers; train pediatricians and other providers; collect data and build data systems; and convene partners so they can collaborate effectively. Although they provide great value to their local communities, HMGs in California lack a designated funding source and have largely been supported by county First 5s, whose Proposition 10 revenues continue to decline.



Drawing on comprehensive interviews, this paper compiles lessons from HMG leaders from eight counties across California on how to ensure a robust statewide EII system. These leaders advise that screening for developmental delays and behavioral concerns be encouraged both inside and outside the health care sector, and that care coordination be prioritized so children receive preventive services. In addition, the state's system capacity should be enhanced to ensure universal screening and links to services when needed, as well as a universally linked data system for EII. Outreach and education should be conducted at both state and county levels, and every county should have a locally informed point of access for parents and families.

Now is a critical time to evaluate and improve EII in California. With state leadership that recognizes the importance of early childhood, California has an opportunity to leverage existing HMG infrastructure so the state can reach its early childhood systems improvement goals. *California's Early Identification and Intervention System and the Role of Help Me Grow* provides examples of innovative local implementation efforts, as well as ideas for how to build equitable and sustainable developmental supports for all California children.