



Raising Illinois

2024 Priorities on Behalf of Expecting Families, Infants & Toddlers

Upon us is an ambitious, yet possible, year of work on behalf of Illinois' infants, toddlers, families and, especially, those who care for them. Advocates across the state are committed to inform and support historic investments, noteworthy legislation and system improvements that support the most critical years of a child's life – the first three.

Raising Illinois, powered by Start Early, is a collective effort to close the opportunity gap for our earliest learners. We are a partnership of diverse individuals and organizations across Illinois committed to supporting our youngest generation by ensuring families can access high-quality health care, engage in quality learning experiences and establish economic security.

This document outlines Raising Illinois' top policy priorities for 2024, across the coalition's four priority areas and eight interconnected strategies within the [Illinois Prenatal-to-Age 3 Agenda](#). As organized in this document, efforts will be advanced through federal, state and local budget advocacy, legislative advocacy, administrative and implementation advocacy and public awareness and engagement.

We encourage you to join us in advancing these new and refreshed priorities, amplifying efforts and sharing information about our collective work. Visit www.raisingillinois.org/get-involved to join the Raising Illinois coalition and be a part of our robust and diverse advocacy commitment to Illinois' families and young children.

Our Mission

Together, we must address the root causes of disparities and create an equitable and cohesive early childhood development support system for expecting families, infants and toddlers and the communities in which they live. We believe race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or ability should not determine the opportunities and, ultimately, the success a child experiences in life.

Our Vision

Every expecting family, infant and toddler in Illinois should have equitable access to affordable high-quality learning experiences, health services and economic supports that they need during their most formative years—creating the strongest foundation for their success in school and life.



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POLICY PRIORITY: HEALTHY PARENTS & BABIES

Comprehensive Perinatal Supports



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Advocate for targeted state funding in FY 2025 to improve **equitable access to comprehensive maternal health services, including peripartum mental health care**



Legislation

- Advocate for the passage of state legislation addressing **maternal substance use and child welfare**, prioritizing parent-child attachment and dyadic interventions over an automatic child neglect indication for prenatal drug exposure
- Advocate for the creation of a **state-level diaper allowance** for families struggling to afford diapers as a way to improve child health and reduce parental stress



Administration & Implementation

- Support efforts to **sustainably fund Universal Newborn Support Services (UNSS) through the Family Connects model** in Peoria County and Stephenson County, as well as expansion of Family Connects in the City of Chicago
- Inform implementation of **Medicaid coverage for postpartum care services** performed by doulas, nurse midwives, lactation counselors and consultants, community health workers, public health nurses and medical caseworkers, as mandated under the Improving Health Care for Pregnant and Postpartum Individuals Act (SB 967; Pub. Act 102-665)
- Inform implementation of **cultural competency training for health care provider licensure and renewal**, as mandated by HB 2450 (Pub. Act 103-531)
- Establish **cross-system standards and coordination for doula services** as an enhancement to existing home visiting services
- Explore administrative opportunities to improve **equitable access to community-based treatment for peripartum mental health disorders**
- Advance key strategies within the **Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant Action Plan**, administered by the Illinois Department of Public Health
- Uplift the recommendations made by the Illinois Maternal Health Task Force to **improve the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services' Perinatal Report to the General Assembly**



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Continue raising awareness about **maternal morbidity and mortality disparities** by socializing key findings from the expected release of the third Illinois Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Report



POLICY PRIORITY: HEALTHY PARENTS & BABIES

Strengthened Home Visiting System



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Increase the state line items in FY 2025 for home visiting programs funded through the Illinois State Board of Education (**Prevention Initiative**) by **\$75M** and the Illinois Department of Human Services (**Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting**) by **\$5M**, to continue meeting community needs and improving provider compensation



Administration & Implementation

- Ensure **equitable saturation of home visiting capacity across programs** by monitoring allocations and participation rates
- Inform the development of the **Early Childhood Block Grant Request for Proposals** for FY 2025 by uplifting the recommendations of home visiting program staff
- Contribute to the **workforce scan activity** of the **Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5)**
- Assist with and inform the work of the **Early Learning Council's Health and Home Visiting Committee**, including:
 - Develop recommendations for ISBE and IDHS to align requirements, administration, and supports for doula services as a funded component alongside home visiting
 - Develop recommendations to align home visiting program requirements and program standards
 - Support alignment between physical and mental health initiatives and the early learning system



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Increase **public understanding** of home visiting and its benefits
- Leverage results of the Gateways Staffing and Salary Survey, Start Early's Illinois Home Visiting Caregiver and Provider Feedback project, and MIECHV Annual Survey reports to **inform workforce strategies**
- Promote strategies to address **staff wellbeing**





POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Accessible Family- and Center-based Early Learning & Care



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Advocate for a **\$75M increase in FY 2025 to the Illinois State Board of Education's Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG)**, with at least 25% of new funding allocated to Prevention Initiative
- Advocate for additional line item increases in FY 2025 to **sustain the Smart Start program and ongoing modernization needs of the Child Care Management System**
- Advocate for **Early Childhood Construction Grant eligibility to include community-based organizations** and provide flexibility for programs to use these funds to make quality improvements, not just expand capacity



Legislation

- Explore **mechanisms to expand the Child Care Assistance Program**, such as increased income thresholds or categorical eligibility



Administration & Implementation

- Ensure **Smart Start Child Care Workforce Compensation Contracts include an infant-toddler cost differential and accessible program structure**, so infant-toddler providers, as well as programs with limited support from other funding sources, are able to benefit
- Advocate for the **equitable distribution of Off-Hours Child Care Program resources** to serve infants and toddlers from families with non-traditional work hours
- Inform the development of the **ECBG Request for Proposals for FY 2025** by uplifting provider-led recommendations to **prioritize Prevention Initiative awards for the center-based model, implement planning grant opportunities, and improve pathways for family child care home providers to access awards**
- **Increase infant-toddler child care capacity at Early Head Start and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership programs** by connecting current and prospective grantees to technical assistance opportunities
- Submit **public comment in favor of the proposed revisions to the federal Child Care and Development Fund**, which would improve the predictability of program payments and enhance families' ability to enroll in subsidies funded by the Child Care and Development Block Grant



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Educate state lawmakers and the public on the **critical role that Early Head Start programs play in providing comprehensive services to infants and toddlers**





POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING
Optimized Early Intervention



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Advocate for a **significant (at least \$20M) increase in FY 2025 to the Early Intervention (EI) program** to continue increasing reimbursement rates for providers and service coordinators, accommodate growing caseloads, and address additional cost drivers for providers including transportation, missed visits, and insurance



Administration & Implementation

- Increase **number of children and families accessing EI services**, with a focus on children under age 1 and children who meet automatic eligibility criteria, by
 - Advancing statewide policy recommendations for systems change to improve the **timely connection of neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) families** to EI services
 - Implementing **automatic EI eligibility for children with substantiated cases of abuse and neglect**, as mandated by HB 4242 (Pub. Act 102-926)
 - Strengthening the **knowledge and understanding of automatic eligibility criteria among primary referral sources** by supporting professionals and systems that refer children who automatically qualify for services, including universal newborn nurse home visitors
- Reduce service delays by identifying tangible **strategies to recruit providers** and **modifying and expanding models of service delivery**, with a focus on addressing disparities in race and geography as well as for families with complex needs, by:
 - Implementing **modified approaches to EI service delivery** to better address the needs of families and support the workforce
 - Applying existing and new **cross-state research findings and recommendations** to cost modeling efforts and modified service delivery pilot to help inform workforce payment structure changes and service delivery best practices



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Increase engagement of **providers, families, IDHS Bureau of EI, and state legislators as advocates and partners** for system improvements to the EI program
- Improve **public awareness of established EI timelines** through the IDHS-led dissemination of educational materials to families, letting them know of their rights, and advocating for more peer-to-peer support opportunities for parents





POLICY PRIORITY: FINANCIALLY SECURE FAMILIES
Family-friendly Work Policies & Income Supports for Families



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Identify and advance opportunities to advocate for **increased appropriations in the federal FY 2024 budget for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** to ensure all eligible participants receive the full cash-value voucher/benefit, including the fruit and vegetable adjustment



Legislation

- Advocate for the **state passage of a child tax credit** that is refundable, provides a per-child credit, phases out with income, and is accessible for families who file with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN)
- Advocate for **state passage of a paid family and medical leave insurance program** with substantial protections for low-wage workers and sufficient time off for new parents and infants to bond



Administration & Implementation

- Support **implementation of the Illinois Earned Income Tax Credit's increase to 20% of the federal credit, as well as expanded eligibility**, for tax year 2023, as amended by SB 157 (Pub. Act 102-700)
- Increase opportunities for **outreach and referrals to WIC for families enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs**, through a collaboration between the Illinois Head Start Association and the Illinois Department of Human Services
- Ensure full and equitable implementation of the **Paid Leave for All Workers Act** (Public Act 102-1143), entitling nearly all employees in Illinois to a minimum of 40 hours of paid leave, or an accrual of one hour for every 40 hours worked, in a 12-month period
- Advocate for the **approval of the final rule on Initial Activity Search for Child Care Assistance Program eligibility**, allowing up to three months of child care subsidy during a parent's employment or education search (making permanent the temporary rule first approved in 2021)



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Support the **launch of a statewide marketing campaign and mobile enrollment pilot to increase enrollment in WIC**, particularly for children ages 1-3
- Amplification of **public awareness and storytelling campaigns to galvanize support for paid family and medical leave** in Illinois





POLICY PRIORITY: STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE

Cross-system Preparation, Professional Development & Support and Strong State & Community Structures



Local, State & Federal Budgets

- Advocate for **state investment in FY 2025 to sustain the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program** once federal American Rescue Plan Act funds are exhausted
- Advocate to ensure that any **changes to governance and funding for early childhood regional infrastructure** do not draw resources away from programs that serve expecting families, infants, or toddlers



Legislation

- Support the passage of legislation establishing a **new state early childhood agency** and partner with the transition team on effective design and implementation



Administration & Implementation

- Advance opportunities to **leverage the ECACE program to expand degree pathways for students interested in working with infants and toddlers**, so as to strengthen the infant-toddler educator pipeline
- Sustain, strengthen, and expand workforce **utilization of Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (I/ECMHC) services** and identify additional opportunities to improve accessibility
- Advance identified recommendations from the **Illinois I/ECMHC equity analysis**
- Collaborate with the Governor's staff, state agency leaders, and the Early Learning Council to continue developing and advancing recommendations to improve delivery of prenatal-to-three services and supports through **integration and alignment of functions of regional intermediaries**



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Complete an **Illinois I/ECMHC equity analysis**
- Elevate and disseminate the **I/ECMHC public awareness campaign materials** to diverse audiences statewide
- Uplift the **Birth to Five Illinois Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments**, identifying key trends related to the needs of expecting families, infants, and toddlers
- Increase awareness of the **Illinois Cares for Kids web portal** as a tool for collaborative referrals across family-serving systems

