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Emerging State and Community Strategies to Improve Infant and Toddler Services

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Introduction and summary

Decades of research on brain development and outcomes from early learning interventions have clearly demonstrated that children thrive when they have consistent access to high-quality early childhood programs starting at birth or even before and continuing until they enter kindergarten. Yet too often, programs that target young children provide services in isolation, are underfunded, and fail to meet the needs of all eligible families. Creating a continuum of services that are intentionally aligned to reach children for as long as possible can help ensure that early childhood services and programs effectively support all aspects of young children’s healthy development.

States and communities are increasingly recognizing the importance of creating a coordinated system of services that supports all aspects of infant and toddler development from birth to age 5. Since young children’s developmental needs are uniquely intertwined, it is critical that infants and toddlers have access to quality health care, nutritious food, and stimulating and safe environments in order to achieve positive outcomes later in life. Therefore, programs across the spectrum of public services for young children and their families must be readily accessible for all who need them. While many states and communities offer a variety of services to support young children and their families, significant barriers keep many families from accessing the resources they need.

The current mix of programs and services that provide early care and educational opportunities for infants and toddlers are underfunded across the country, and many families who qualify are unable to access the services that they need. When programs are underfunded, getting the right services to the right families can become a significant challenge. Similarly, where services are provided, they are often offered in isolation. For example, families who receive benefits through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC—the federally funded health and nutrition program for women and their children—may not know that they also qualify for home visiting services, meaning that these families miss out on an important opportunity.

Fortunately, states and communities across the country are implementing efforts to better coordinate their infant and toddler services to support healthy development and successful transitions from one program or education setting to another during early childhood. These efforts can be supported further by federal policy actions to incent and ensure that low-income children and families receive the support that they need to thrive.

Communities across the country are working to align infant and toddler services by increasing access to available programs and resources, creating centralized intake systems, and targeting interventions to specific populations. Similarly, states are developing statewide plans to deliver a continuum of support for children from birth to age 3 and identifying standards and developmental guidelines for programs that serve young children.

As states and communities continue to make progress to reach more infants and toddlers throughout the first three years of life, federal policy should support them by increasing investments and providing long-term and continuous funding; making funding sources more flexible to support service alignment efforts; continuing to build momentum for private-sector investments; providing guidance for weaving together disparate funding; streamlining grant applications and reporting; and initiating a permanent cross-agency office at the federal level that would focus specifically on infants and toddlers.

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