

For strong and effective advocacy efforts, the voices of both families and front-line staff are essential in moving infant and toddler policy in communities, states and at the federal level. No one can speak to the lives of young children with more knowledge and understanding than those who spend every day with them. Advocates and policymakers across the country are finding thoughtful and innovative ways to support families and early childhood professionals to tell their stories and participate in decision-making.

Throughout several years of [Strolling Thunder™](#), ZERO TO THREE's Policy Center has brought a family with an infant or toddler from every state and the District of Columbia to meet with their Members of Congress. During these meetings, families share their stories and tell their elected officials and staff what they can do to better support young children. *Strolling Thunder* is a core component of ZERO TO THREE's *Think Babies* advocacy strategy because we know that when policymakers hear directly from families, it creates a lasting impression and helps to inform their decision-making. We also know that when parents see themselves as advocates, they take charge and create change for their families – and others like them.

ZERO TO THREE [Think Babies state partners](#) exemplify the practice of including and elevating these voices. In addition to the many *Strolling Thunder* events states organized in [2018](#), [2019](#) and [2020](#), they have also implemented multiple innovative opportunities for families and providers to share their stories, advocate, and shape policy. A few examples are shared below.

Colorado

[Colorado Children's Campaign](#) and [Clayton Early Learning](#) created an infant-toddler coalition structure ([Raise Colorado](#)) that is inclusive and welcoming. Their work with family child care providers and in the parent ambassador program have allowed for real time collection of stories and impactful policymaking. Additionally, strategic partnerships have ensured a deep equity focus in their doula and Medicaid work.

- Parent Ambassador Program:** Colorado's chapter of this program is housed at Clayton Early Learning and supported by Educare Learning Network. The program includes a versatile cohort of Early Head Start and Head Start parent advocates. The Parent Ambassador Program provides strategies to involve parents in program development, parent advocacy opportunities at the capitol, and highlights the importance of parent leaders in classrooms, communities and at state level policy. Participating parents have shared stories, met with legislators, attended education policy trainings, participated in lobby days and press conferences, and testified in support of the state earned income tax credit.
- Family Child Care:** Robust family child care engagement informed the creation and ongoing implementation of the [Senate Bill 63 Infant and Family Child Care Shortage Action Plan](#). Raise Colorado supported the Office of Early Childhood's (OEC) outreach and stakeholder engagement efforts for the bill's implementation. In order to ensure adequate feedback from different parts of



the state, co-conveners worked with OEC to host listening sessions in the Denver-metro area, which were used to inform the creation of the [Senate Bill 63 toolkit](#). Advocacy with the Governor's Office made funding from the National Governors Association Prenatal-to-Age-Three grant available to support local communities in hosting their own listening sessions. The funding was used by community representatives to rent venues, provide food and child care to attendees, pay facilitators, and cover additional expenses. The toolkit and scholarships assisted OEC with a comprehensive response from communities across Colorado and serves as a model for future community engagement efforts. Additionally, Raise Colorado's strong relationship with the Colorado Association of Family Child Care (CAFCC) and Small Business Majority - Colorado has ensured that family child care providers are actively involved in the advocacy needed to implement many of the pieces of the strategic action plan.

- **Ensuring Equity:** Advocates are working with leaders in the birthing community to hold robust listening sessions around the state about equity in birthing and reducing infant and maternal mortality. Sessions explore what participants think is working well, what challenges exist, and what policies they would support at the state level. Listening sessions are being heavily promoted on social media. Strategic partnerships are strengthening outreach, with partners helping to co-host listening sessions with the aim of informing the policy work they will engage in for legislation in 2021 and 2022. All participants in listening sessions receive \$50 compensation to help cover costs associated with attending events.

Georgia

The [Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students \(GEEARS\)](#) is working with their infant-toddler coalition to advance the health, social, intellectual, and emotional well-being of infants and toddlers across Georgia. Travelling across the state, the group is intentional about collecting voices from every region and representing the diversity of residents.

- **Families:** Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive (PAACT), a community-based initiative led by GEEARS, hosted a number of community conversations independently and in partnership with Civic Dinners to provide a safe space for parents to discuss the joys and challenges of raising children in 2020. PAACT is using the information gathered to provide insight on the needs and experiences of parents in Atlanta, which will guide the work of the initiative going forward. Additionally, to raise public awareness of Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System (Quality Rated), GEEARS convened parents and social media influencers at several dinners to gather stories about how high-quality early learning benefitted their families, such as providing young children with positive early learning experiences and giving parents the ability to participate in the workforce. These stories were shared through multiple platforms. Finally, to support federal advocacy in light of COVID-19, GEEARS

STRATEGIES FOR INVITING ALL VOICES

- Surveys in multiple languages and formats
- Stipends to recognize time, energy, and ideas contributed by parents and providers
- Meetings held in the evenings or at times that allow access to the population you are targeting
- Online meetings to eliminate commute time and child care issues
- Interpretation services
- Print and digital resources in multiple languages
- Support from an organizer to help facilitate participation among people from marginalized communities

hosted several Zoom calls with Congressional offices featuring parents and providers from their respective districts. This let the staff hear firsthand how COVID-19 is impacting families with young children, their families, and the professionals who serve them. After participating in one of these calls, Congresswoman Lucy McBath's spoke in support of child care during the *Child Care is Essential Act* hearing and a briefing on child care in the House Committee on Education & Labor. She also began a virtual story hour for young kids in her district.



- **Surveys:** In May-June 2020, GEEARS surveyed Georgia parents and caregivers of young children about their experiences with parenting and child care in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, GEEARS collected stories about the impact of the pandemic on families through three focus groups later in the summer to better understand the nature of the challenges parents described in the survey. In partnership with the Metro Atlanta Chamber, GEEARS is compiling the findings from the surveys and focus groups, and spotlighting ways employers are supporting their employees with young children in a report that will be released this fall.

New Jersey

[Advocates for Children of New Jersey \(ACNJ\)](#) is leading a statewide effort to ensure state leaders make New Jersey infants and toddlers a priority.

- **Congressional Meetings:** During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, ACNJ, in collaboration with the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children, sponsored Zoom meetings with all but one of the New Jersey Congressional delegation. At least three child care providers from each legislative district (for a total of 65 providers) were recruited and prepped for the calls. The meetings were an opportunity to advocate for additional funding for child care and also educate Members of Congress on the complex child care system. Since then, both New Jersey Senators and 9 out of 12 Representatives have signed on to co-sponsor the *Child Care is Essential Act*. The meetings also provided ACNJ with further insight into the experiences and challenges that providers were facing. Finally, these meetings helped to build relationships between providers and their Members of Congress, with aides reaching out to providers after meetings for additional information and providers contacting the aides directly during advocacy asks.
- **Family Child Care:** ACNJ collaborated with several partners to hold a virtual Home-Based Child Care meeting that brought together family child care providers, community-based organizations, state department representatives and stakeholders in the summer of 2020. The discussion was intended to gain a better understanding of the response and resources needed to support home-based child care in New Jersey, not only during the pandemic and recovery periods, but also for long-term sustainability. The meeting featured a panel of family child care providers who shared their experiences as providers both before and during the pandemic, as well as challenges and ideas to support and strengthen home-based care.
- **Surveys:** Recently, ACNJ sent out a series of surveys to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and child care providers. These surveys captured

the voices of hundreds of parents and child care providers throughout the state. Responses from these surveys have been used to identify critical issues to address and to advocate for those issues on the state and federal levels. Additionally, the surveys have been used to identify providers for advocacy activities, like the congressional meetings described above. Survey results were shared with legislators to give them an understanding of what was happening in their individual districts. Finally, the surveys were used to understand the concerns and needs of parents during the pandemic to guide planning for several webinars, including:

- [Parent Town Hall: Child Care and the Pandemic](#)
- [Parent Town Hall: Addressing Maternal Health Inequities During Civil Unrest and the Pandemic](#), and
- [Teachable Moments at Home: Educating our Littlest Learners](#).

North Carolina

In North Carolina, the *Think Babies* North Carolina Alliance is engaging local communities in raising public awareness and building political will to improve policies and programs for North Carolina infants and toddlers and their families.

- **Communities:** In the spring of 2019 and 2020, the *Think Babies* NC Alliance awarded [mini-grants](#) of \$2,000 to sixteen organizations to support county-level activities that raised public awareness; engaged infant, toddler, and family advocates; and informed policymakers about the importance of focusing on infants, toddlers, and their families. Grantees hosted multiple activities to promote public awareness and advocacy skill-building. Activities included forums on issues impacting young children; breakfasts and roundtable discussions for policymakers, business leaders, and community members to discuss the needs of infants and toddlers; tours of child care centers; and advocacy training for parents and child care providers. Engaging community partners to host local activities not only proved to be an effective use of funding, but also allowed the organization to effectively reach diverse stakeholders across the state's large geographic region.

Rhode Island

[Rhode Island KIDS COUNT](#) advocates for the advancement of policies to improve the health, safety, education, economic well-being, and development of Rhode Island's youngest children.

- **Family Child Care:** Rhode Island KIDS COUNT worked with All Our Kin, a national organization that helps to develop and sustain high-quality family child care systems, to hold four evening Zoom meetings with family child care providers to review Rhode Island data and discuss national strategies that have helped build strong family child care systems. KIDS COUNT hired an organizer to help facilitate the meetings, provided \$75 stipends for the family child care providers and offered simultaneous interpretation through a Partnership for America's Children grant. The meetings led to the development of a set of priorities to build and sustain a high-quality family child care system in Rhode Island that will be disseminated in both English and Spanish to



policymakers and child care providers across the state. Family child care providers in Rhode Island have been isolated from quality improvement resources and approximately 60-70% speak Spanish as their first or primary language. As a result of these meetings, the state decided to launch monthly family child care advisory committees (one in English and one in Spanish). Meetings are held in the evenings to accommodate family child care schedules. In addition, the state has relaunched efforts to design a staffed family child care network in partnership with Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the family child care union.

As advocacy groups and policymakers use intentional practices like these to bring families and providers to the table in meaningful ways, it is essential to consider potential barriers to participation and establish responsive and relationship-based strategies for these groups to participate in the policymaking process. Too often, families, providers and others in the community have a lifetime of experiences where they were told in big and small ways that their voices did not matter. ZERO TO THREE is proud to partner with these states through *Think Babies* as they give new advocates a different experience.