



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

The Growth of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Supports in Georgia

Introduction

The science is clear: our brains develop more rapidly in the first three years than at any later point in life. Recognizing the critical opportunity of this period and supported by ZERO TO THREE [Think Babies](#), Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) formed the Georgia Infant-Toddler Coalition in 2018, bringing together cross-sector private and public partners to advance policies and programs benefiting infants, toddlers and their families. The Coalition formed two committees: Child Care Affordability and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. This brief will focus on the results and next steps for GEEARS and IECMH in Georgia.



Georgia Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Systems Progress

Spring 2018

Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) partners with ZERO TO THREE's Think Babies Campaign

Fall 2018

Formation of Georgia Infant-Toddler Coalition and IECMH Sub-Committee supported by GEEARS and ZERO TO THREE Think Babies

September 2019

Infant-Toddler Social-Emotional Health Study Committee

December 2019

Recommendations established:

- Establish IECMH state-level leadership
- Determine Medicaid reimbursement
- Create a workforce development plan

2020 Legislative Session

IECMH Director position created

November 2020

Director hired at Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)

Spring 2021

Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH) exploratory board established

Fall 2021 Progress

- Child-Parent Psychotherapy Training Expansion with braided funding from Department of Early Care and Learning and Department of Public Health
- Medicaid Care Management Organizations affirm coverage of IECMH treatment services
- GA-AIMH moves to Georgia State University and Endorsement Licensed

Future Plans

- Grow Georgia's network of IECMH providers through training coordinated by GA-AIMH
- Expand the state's awareness of the mental health needs of young children
- Focus on promotion and prevention efforts within pediatrics, early care and learning, home visiting, and early intervention

The Infant and Toddler Social Emotional Health Study Committee

For years, GEEARS heard from child care providers and pediatricians that behavioral challenges, especially related to children who experienced trauma, were a major concern. Recognizing the need for a specific focus on the mental health needs of young children, the newly formed IECMH sub-committee worked with legislative champions, especially Committee Chair Katie Dempsey, to create the Georgia House [Infant and Toddler Social Emotional Health Study Committee](#) in 2019.

The Study Committee created a platform for launching the conversation on early childhood brain development and the need for state supports to help children and families during the first three years. GEEARS staff helped to ensure the success of the committee by working collaboratively with legislators and committee staff to design impactful meeting agendas and identify relevant content experts. A range of professionals provided testimony, including a national leader in infant mental health, private mental health providers, state agency staff, academics from Georgia universities, and advocates. GEEARS leveraged the expertise of the IECMH sub-committee to identify speakers who ultimately informed the final report and recommendations written by the Committee Chair and her staff.

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 5 years old to:

- form close and secure adult and peer relationships
- experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions
- explore the environment and learn

all in the context of family, community, and culture.

Study Committee Recommendations

Recommendations were grouped into three main categories with a variety of concrete deliverables in each:

- ✓ **Establish IECMH State Level Leadership:** Include funding in the FY 2021 budget for an infant and childhood mental health coordinator at the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL).
- ✓ **Determine Medicaid Reimbursement:** Direct leadership at both the Department of Community Health (DCH) and Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) to submit a report to the Speaker of the House of Representatives by June 30, 2020 with information on gaps in coverage for children under the age of 4, a plan to add language to existing billing codes to clarify appropriate services for children under 4, and a plan for Medicaid to cover mothers for 12 months postpartum.
- ✓ **Workforce Development:** Create a statewide IECMH workforce development plan to grow the labor pool of mental health professionals serving children birth to 4; direct the Georgia Board of Healthcare Workforce to collect a minimum data set survey on mental health professionals; Direct DECAL to embed IECMH as primary support in the Quality Rated program; and direct the Technical College System of Georgia and University System of Georgia to begin the process of embedding early childhood social and emotional development curriculum in to all early childhood education programs.

Despite the many challenges facing the state in the 2020 legislative session, including a shut down from March to June of that year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recommended IECMH position was included in the DECAL budget, funding an IECMH Director who was hired in late 2020.

The Study Committee recommendations have also led to:

- A cross-state Child-Parent Psychotherapy training collaboration hosted by the state of Alabama, including practitioners from Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. This pilot was expanded with funding from DECAL and the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) to provide training to an additional 60 clinicians in 2022.

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- Coverage for IECMH treatment services by Medicaid Care Management Organizations in the state
- The launch of the Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health with funding from private and public sources including Preschool Development Grant (PDG) funding from DECAL

The Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health

GEEARS worked with the IECMH committee of the Infant-Toddler Coalition to form the Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH). GA-AIMH will improve the state's IECMH service delivery system and increase the number of child-serving professionals with knowledge of the mental health needs of young children and their families.

The Exploratory Board and Early Efforts

In 2021, an exploratory board was formed with nine members all with a vested interest and expertise in infant mental health. The board included a cross section of practitioners including faculty at universities across Georgia along with private mental health providers. ZERO TO THREE staff met regularly with GEEARS staff and helped craft agendas, provided input on mission and vision, strategized on system building, and guided planning for the future of the mental health association.

In May 2021, the exploratory board unanimously passed and approved a [shared vision, mission, values and goals statement](#).

Launching the Association

Having established the name and purpose of the GA-AIMH, the team turned their attention toward operationalizing. Two essential components of this were identifying an appropriate organization to house the association and securing the necessary funding to launch and operate.

Ongoing partnership, support, and initial funding to start the organization came from DECAL. With a clear need for workforce development, an allocation from the Federal Preschool Development Grant was attained to purchase the license of a competency and endorsement system used by 34 other states as well as other countries. The endorsement ensures all professionals have the education, skills, and experience to support the social and emotional well-being of infants, young children, and their families.

Philanthropic organizations including The Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta have also contributed funding to support this work.

Conclusion

The advances made in GA's IECMH system are a success story of commitment and collaboration across advocates, legislative champions, and state agency staff. Because of these partnerships, Georgia's young children and their families will have better access to necessary mental health services. The emphasis on educating the entire child-serving workforce will ensure an easy to navigate system of care for families across the state.

Georgia is investing in babies today for a healthier tomorrow.