



Strengthening Connections: State Approaches to Connecting Families to Services

Vermont's Help Me Grow Resource Hub



ZERO to THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

SUMMARY

Help Me Grow Vermont aligns the efforts of early childhood partners to strengthen families and ensure that all children reach their greatest potential. Its services are available to all families statewide who are pregnant or have children from birth through 8 years old. Help Me Grow Vermont's centralized access point, called the Resource Hub, is operated in partnership with Vermont 2-1-1, a program of the United Ways of Vermont. This partnership ensures that Help Me Grow can plug families and communities into a comprehensive resource grid with accurate information about community services.

Families can reach out directly to the Resource Hub—through calling Vermont 2-1-1, texting HMGVT to 898211, or e-mailing info@helpme-growvt.org—or may be referred through a provider. Help Me Grow Vermont child development specialists assess families' needs, make referrals to appropriate services and supports, and follow up with both families and referral sources. All families are screened for food insecurity and are offered the opportunity to complete a developmental and/or behavioral screening questionnaire. Help Me Grow stays in touch with families so they receive support before, during, and after they are connected to services.

Help Me Grow Vermont hosts a statewide developmental screening platform, the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) Enterprise

Online System. Screening data from the ASQ online platform will soon be captured in the Department of Health's Universal Developmental Screening Registry—the data coordination system that facilitates earlier identification and referral when follow-up is needed. The Registry promotes reduction of duplication across screening settings.

Help Me Grow has gained traction in Vermont through outreach and training activities to ensure a coordinated approach among health care providers, early childhood educators, home visitors, and community-based organizations. A key Help Me Grow strategy is to build and maintain a network of community resources across sectors and coordinate services to better connect families to what they need.



Vermont's Approach to Strengthening Connections

- Help Me Grow affiliate
- statewide centralized access point
- partnership with Vermont 2-1-1
- developmental and social-emotional screening focus

GETTING STARTED

In 2015, partners in Vermont were looking for a way to align early identification efforts across health, education, and human services providers to detect developmental concerns as early as possible. Children with delays or at risk were being identified, but families did not always get connected to services when they were referred. Vermont had no coordinated, centralized access point for families and providers to receive support in navigating the system and consistent follow-up to ensure connection to services.

Like many states, Vermont sought to bridge the gap between screening and service delivery with an equitable, sustainable infrastructure that supports families in navigating service provision across sectors. Vermont partners were attracted to the national [Help Me Grow](#) model as an evidence-based, coordinated information and referral system to promote children's development and connect families to services. Vermont 2-1-1 had been in existence since 2005 and offered a statewide, cross-sector platform on which Help Me Grow Vermont could be built. Key leaders from the Department of Health and the Department of Children and Families were aligned in their support, and Vermont became a statewide affiliate of Help Me Grow in 2015.

ADMINISTRATION

The Department of Health serves as the organizing entity to support scale-up and spread of [Help Me Grow Vermont](#), which is available to all families statewide who are pregnant or have children from birth through 8 years old. Help Me Grow Vermont's centralized access point, called the Resource Hub, is operated in partnership with Vermont 2-1-1, a program of the United Ways of Vermont. The Resource Hub is staffed by two child development specialists who have Information and Referral national certification (as do all 2-1-1 Information and Referral Specialists). Help Me Grow Specialists receive additional training in trauma-informed care, child development, and the foundations of early learning. Help Me Grow

Vermont was initially funded by the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge and the Preschool Development Grant and is now funded by the Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant, and philanthropic dollars. Help Me Grow Vermont's annual operating budget is about \$600,000, which includes Resource Hub operating costs, community and family outreach, training, quality improvement, and evaluation. Vermont's vision is to ultimately secure cross-agency funding.

Help Me Grow Vermont developed a database that expands the 2-1-1 platform with resources for families in the prenatal period through 8 years old. Vermont 2-1-1 is accredited by the national Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. One of the requirements is that all resources in the database must be nonprofit or government agencies providing health and human services. Help Me Grow has added other resources that do not meet the 2-1-1 criteria, such as individual therapists who can treat trauma, substance use, and mental health issues. Advantages of the partnership with 2-1-1 are:

- use of their technology—telephone line, computer programs, texting platform, and technology support
- a dedicated resource team to collect and update resources
- regional 2-1-1 outreach staff who promote Help Me Grow Vermont as well as 2-1-1
- the ability to pull data and reports from the 2-1-1 database

However, Help Me Grow does more than 2-1-1 can—offering developmental and social determinants of health screenings, care coordination, and follow-up both with families and referral sources. Help Me Grow added demographic data and contact markers to the database to track information more precisely. Data are used to complete quarterly and annual grant reports and to respond to specific requests.

APPROACH

Community outreach is critical to make families aware of Help Me Grow Vermont. Strategies include:

- Let's Grow Kids, a nonprofit focused on ensuring access to high-quality child care, develops materials to promote Help Me Grow and developmental screening to families and providers.
- 2-1-1 regional outreach staff present at meetings and community events and distribute Help Me Grow materials, which are state-customized versions of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* resources.
- Building Bright Futures Regional Councils, which gather information from communities to inform policy and practice, offer activities for families and host Help Me Grow events such as developmental screening training for child care providers.
- The Vermont Child Health Improvement Program raises awareness of developmental screening and Help Me Grow among medical practices and early childhood providers and is working to connect pediatric practices implementing DULCE (Developmental Understanding and Legal Collaboration for Everyone) with Help Me Grow when babies phase out at 6 months.
- Word of mouth is a common way that information about Help Me Grow Vermont is spread.

Families can reach out directly to the Resource Hub—through calling 2-1-1, texting HMGVT to 898211, or e-mailing info@helpmegrowvt.org—or may be referred through a provider. Those who call can choose Help Me Grow from the phone menu, and 2-1-1 staff screen callers again to funnel to Help Me Grow when appropriate.



Help Me Grow Vermont child development specialists assess families' needs and make referrals to appropriate services and supports. Basic needs are the most common reason families contact Help Me Grow Vermont. All families are screened for food insecurity using the Hunger Vital Signs tool and are informally screened for other social determinants of health through conversation.

Help Me Grow Vermont hosts a statewide developmental screening platform, the [ASQ Enterprise Online System](#), where families can use the online screening tools. Parents who contact the Resource Hub are offered the opportunity to complete developmental screening questionnaires (Ages and Stages Questionnaire and/or Ages and Stages Questionnaire Social-Emotional) online or on paper. Help Me Grow child development specialists follow up with parents about the results and connect them to any needed services, such as early intervention or early education programs.

Every family is offered a follow-up contact to ensure that connections have been made and services initiated and to determine if other resources are needed. Families with more intensive needs receive longer-term care coordination. Help Me Grow child development specialists also follow up with the referral source by phone or e-mail to let them know the status of the referral and close the loop.

Help Me Grow Vermont staff train partners—medical practices, early care and education programs, and home visiting providers—to conduct developmental and social-emotional screening and use the ASQ Online System. Vermont will soon complete a bridge between the online ASQ and the Department of Health’s Universal Developmental Screening Registry—the data coordination system that facilitates earlier identification and referral when follow-up is needed. This integration, unfortunately delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, will allow screening results and referral information to be securely shared between medical homes, early care and education, and other community service providers to improve communication and networking across providers and thus avoid duplicate screenings.

Under Vermont’s health care reform and One-Care Accountable Care Organization, developmental screening is a core measure for quality and reimbursement that child health care providers can fulfill by using the Registry. Participating practices and providers are encouraged to access and review screening results in the Registry that are completed by community providers. Medicaid or private insurance will reimburse the child health provider for these activities.

[Vermont’s Developmental and Behavioral Screening Guidelines](#) describe this provision.

Help Me Grow has gained traction in Vermont through outreach and training activities to ensure a coordinated approach among health care providers, early childhood educators, home visitors, and community-based organizations. To improve access to services and make connections, Help Me Grow staff and partners:

- offer activities and trainings to increase families’ and providers’ knowledge of early child development
- train providers to conduct developmental monitoring and screening and to use Vermont’s statewide ASQ Online System

- ensure communities are fully plugged into a reliable grid of resources
- connect families and children to the community resources they need when they need them
- deliver care coordination and follow-up for families accessing the Resource Hub

A key Help Me Grow strategy is to build and maintain a network of community resources across sectors and coordinate services to better connect families to what they need. By ensuring families and communities are fully plugged into a reliable grid of resources, Help Me Grow Vermont expands earlier and equitable access to resources that support families in nurturing their children’s development and connecting them to developmental services, mental health supports, and needed resources for family well-being.

Vermont’s approach has evolved over time in several ways:

- Help Me Grow initially focused on early care and education providers, using a continuous quality improvement process to implement developmental monitoring and screening. Early educators now see themselves as experts in developmental screening and understand their part in the shared role. The focus is now shifting to medical providers.
- When the pandemic started, Vermont had just begun piloting the online ASQ. With the move to virtual services, the online tool became even more appealing to a variety of providers—medical, early care and education, and home visiting.
- Help Me Grow Vermont has learned to tailor its messaging to different audiences. For the health care sector, a focus on social-emotional development has been key. With early care and education providers, building children’s resiliency has been a motivation for involvement with Help Me Grow.

CHALLENGES AND IMPACT

Help Me Grow Vermont faced and addressed several challenges in the implementation process:

- Those completing developmental screenings on families did not have time to do manual data entry into the Developmental Screening Registry. This problem was resolved by making the ASQ available online. Once the bridge between the online ASQ and the Registry is fully built, providers will be able to complete screenings electronically and the data will automatically be shared with the Registry.
- There was some confusion, perceived conflict, and competition for limited resources between Help Me Grow Vermont and previously existing initiatives in the state. Help Me Grow messaging emphasized the complementary but different nature of its services. Over time, many providers have seen the value of Help Me Grow to their work. This was the result of targeted outreach to health care providers, families, and communities.
- There have been major changes in high-level state agency leaders. Help Me Grow is working to get new leaders informed and aligned with the vision.



During the first 3 years of implementation, Help Me Grow Vermont had an extensive formal evaluation process. Lately the initiative, in partnership with the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program, produces a more forward-facing annual report to partners as a snapshot of key data points. Highlights of the 2020 annual report include:

- In 2019, there was a 55% increase in incoming calls and referrals, a 67% increase in referrals made to services and supports, and a 68% increase in follow-up calls.
- Use of the Developmental Screening Registry more than doubled in 2019.
- Between 2014 and 2019, as a result of training early educators, there was a 30% increase in children receiving developmental screening in child care programs statewide and a 20% increase in referrals to early intervention in Vermont's most populous and diverse county. The trend line moved toward a significantly younger age of referral to early intervention—the average age decreased from 26 months to 14 months over the 4-year period.

During the pandemic, Help Me Grow Vermont worked to mitigate its impact on child care. Help Me Grow connected families to child care, emergency food resources, mental health services, and other supports. Staff supported the reopening of child care programs through family engagement trainings addressing the social conditions of health made worse by the pandemic. Outreach activities had to be done virtually or creatively by supporting families with Welcome Baby bags, delivering packets of developmental resources and activities, including materials at food drop sites, and promoting child development through social media. Help Me Grow trained early childhood and other community programs to use the online ASQ, and use of this online system increased during the pandemic by 7,964% during 2020, from 28 screens to 2,258 screens entered.

Lessons Learned from Vermont

- **Leverage partners who want to improve families' access to supports.** Partnerships with early care and education, medical, and other community providers help identify and address gaps and support one another.
- **Identify champions.** Those who are passionate about supporting young children's development help spread best practices to other providers.
- **Be nimble and responsive.** The flexibility of the Help Me Grow model is essential to creating an integrated system that can be adapted to meet the state's needs.
- **Offer a central access point.** Both families and providers appreciate having a simple way to connect families with resources and services.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Next steps for Help Me Grow Vermont include:

- supporting children's resiliency by continuing to offer community activities and events that help families learn about and nurture their child's development
- strengthening the database of resources around mental health supports and services
- engaging health care professionals (especially in pediatrics, family medicine, and obstetrics) to use Help Me Grow's Resource Hub
- increasing use of the Developmental Screening Registry among health, education, and human service providers to ensure earlier identification of developmental concerns and increase kindergarten readiness

As Help Me Grow Vermont looks to the future, staff hope to continue to expand their capacity to coordinate with other referral efforts. They plan to leverage the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems: Health Integration Prenatal to Three grant opportunity to become even more integrated with partners, such as the Child Outcomes Accountability Team at Building Bright Futures. Their goal is to offer services that are integral to the early childhood system in Vermont.

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For other case studies in this series, see [here](#).