



Strengthening Connections: State Approaches to Connecting Families to Services

Washington's Help Me Grow Coordinated Access Point



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

SUMMARY

In 2010, Help Me Grow Washington <www.helpmegrowwa.org> was launched as a mechanism to focus on both developmental screening and coordination of services and supports for families who are pregnant or have children from birth through 5 years old. [WithinReach](#) is Washington’s state affiliate of the national [Help Me Grow](#) model. The organization leads expansion of the model, working with local communities to plan and implement Help Me Grow in a way that honors the unique needs and resources of their regions. It also serves as the statewide coordinated access point for families seeking support and maintains an online database of more than 6,000 resources.

Families can access resources by contacting the statewide hotline by phone. Family resource navigators assess families’ needs, refer them to appropriate services, and help them understand eligibility guidelines and complete applications. For families who don’t need one-on-one assistance, WithinReach provides an online database, [Parent Help 123](#).

WithinReach has agreements with four sub-affiliates through local lead organizations. Communities that become sub-affiliates can choose one of three models: outreach for the

statewide coordinated access point, a local coordinated access point, or a hybrid approach.

Help Me Grow Washington is connected to the Department of Health’s Universal Developmental Screening data system, the state’s new paid family and medical leave program, and the Plan of Safe Care for families of infants born exposed to substances who do not have safety concerns. Through the coordinated access point, Washington is building a system that connects services and organizations to one another and families to the resources they need.



Washington's Approach to Strengthening Connections

- Help Me Grow affiliate
- statewide coordinated access point
- sub-affiliates with different approaches
- partnership with the state’s paid family and medical leave program

GETTING STARTED

In 2009, the Washington Department of Health was interested in creating a universal developmental screening system that could share screening results between health care and child care providers. The agency convened partners from the Department of Early Learning, the University of Washington, and WithinReach (a nonprofit that operated the maternal and child health hotline) to address the problem.

Concurrently, families with young children had expressed frustration with the difficulty of accessing specialized services, especially when developmental delays were identified. Partners wanted to ensure stronger connections between families and service providers so that resources were available when they were needed.

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ADMINISTRATION

WithinReach is the organizing entity that administers Help Me Grow Washington. The statewide nonprofit's mission is to build pathways to make it easier for Washington families to navigate complex health and social service systems and

connect with the resources they need to be healthy and safe. In addition to operating the Help Me Grow Washington hotline, WithinReach's programs include comprehensive food and nutrition outreach, a bilingual call center with three statewide health and food hotlines, and interactive web and texting tools, all of which support families in finding resources and navigating public benefits. The organization maintains an online database of more than 6,000 resources. WithinReach also serves as an intermediary organization with the administrative infrastructure to distribute funds and support communities in outreach activities.

WithinReach has agreements with four sub-affiliates through local lead organizations:

- Central Washington (Yakima and Kittitas Counties): Yakima Valley Community Foundation
- Pierce County: First Five Fundamentals
- King County: Public Health—Seattle and King County
- Skagit County: United General District

The sub-affiliates provide local coordination and planning and will conduct family and provider outreach when in-person activities can safely resume.

Funding for Help Me Grow Washington comes from a variety of sources, both public and private. The state affiliate is funded by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems, and the Pritzker Children's Initiative. The coordinated access point is supported through funding from the Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment, and state funds. At the sub-affiliate level, county funding and local philanthropic dollars support the work.

APPROACH

Because the Help Me Grow hotline was established 30 years ago as the state's maternal and child health hotline, the phone number is included on numerous outreach materials developed by WithinReach and state agencies. As a result of the hotline's long-standing reputation, most referrals come through word of mouth. WithinReach also makes families and providers aware of the hotline by:

- holding events to promote awareness of Help Me Grow and healthy child development
- training medical providers on developmental screening, linkage, and referral through Help Me Grow
- marketing online such as through Google AdWords

Families can access resources by contacting the statewide hotline by phone, and a texting option is being piloted. When families contact the call center, family resource navigators assess their needs using a customized screening tool that has been developed over time. The screening tool includes information needed to assess eligibility for federal and state benefit programs and identifies whether the family is in need of additional food- and health-related resources, including developmental screening. Family resource navigators refer families to appropriate services and help them understand eligibility guidelines and complete applications. More than half of calls in 2020 were for support with meeting basic needs. During scheduled follow-up calls, navigators inquire about previous referrals and any additional concerns of the family.

For families who don't need one-on-one assistance, WithinReach provides an online database, [Parent Help 123](#). Families can learn about a variety of services and supports and search for resources in their community.

Help Me Grow hosts a statewide developmental screening platform, the Ages and Stages Questionnaires Enterprise Online System. Families with young children are made aware of developmental screening through family resource navigators and the Parent Help 123 website. If a family is interested in having a developmental screen on their child, they can either complete it online through Parent Help 123 or they can call the hotline and receive a link by e-mail. A specialized team follows up by phone to discuss the results with the family and make any needed referrals. Screening information is entered into the Department of Health's Universal Developmental Screening database, which reduces duplication across screening settings.

There is no one-size-fits-all in implementation of Help Me Grow in Washington. Communities that become sub-affiliates can choose one of three models:

- conduct outreach for the statewide coordinated access point
- develop a local coordinated access point
- use a hybrid approach—the community-based satellite coordinated access point



The current four sub-affiliates are piloting different approaches to the coordinated access point. Pierce County uses 2-1-1 as the local coordinated access point. Central Washington and Skagit County utilize the hybrid approach. The local lead organization collaborates with WithinReach to hire a family resource navigator who lives in the community but is part of the statewide team. WithinReach provides onboarding, technical assistance, and access to the resource directory, phone line, and technology infrastructure. King County's model is still in development. [VisionLink](#) is used by both the state system and the sub-affiliates to track and gather data.

At the state level, linkages between systems are strong. In addition to the close tie with the Department of Health's Universal Developmental Screening data system, Help Me Grow Washington is connecting with the state's new paid family and medical leave program. Families entering the service system through Help Me Grow are referred to the paid leave benefit when relevant and, if applying for paid family leave, are referred

to Help Me Grow. Another linkage is with the Plan of Safe Care supported by Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act funds. If an infant is born exposed to substances and there are no safety concerns determined by the hospital staff, the family is referred to Help Me Grow Washington for a Plan of Safe Care, which diverts families from entering the Child Protective Services system. Family resource navigators help families learn about and apply for community supports. An online portal, which launched in December 2021, serves as a direct referral pathway.

Help Me Grow Washington's approach has evolved since its inception in 2010. Originally, the primary goal was to create a universal developmental screening system. However, over time, the main purpose has become the development of an easy-to-navigate, interconnected system so families can access needed services. The initiative started with state-level infrastructure but later began focusing on strong partnerships at the local level in recognition that families are more likely to seek to access services locally.



CHALLENGES AND IMPACT

WithinReach encountered and addressed several challenges in implementing Help Me Grow Washington:

- Some terms related to the national model were not well received at the local level. For example, some communities objected to “centralized access point.” Recognizing that the function is coordination of available services across multiple access points to connect families to resources, Washington changed the terminology to “coordinated access point.”
- Initially geography was seen as a barrier. Help Me Grow Washington staff realized that a statewide entity could not provide all needed connections and began developing models of how they could work with communities.



- Outreach to health care providers was difficult at the outset, but engagement with the Department of Health was helpful.
- State agencies were initially reluctant to invest in funding Help Me Grow. Through the PDG B-5 grant, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families funded Help Me Grow directly as well as a state employee specifically responsible for the program. This resulted in additional relationships and buy-in at the state agency level. The position will be rolled into state agency funding when PDG B-5 funding ends in late 2022.

WithinReach staff described the benefits of Help Me Grow Washington on several levels:

- On the family level, families with young children are being connected to a multitude of services and supports.
- On a local level, communities are increasing families’ access to resources and giving families a voice.
- On a state level, policy solutions and linkages between systems are being forged.

Help Me Grow Washington develops periodic briefs that summarize the data and accomplishments of the statewide call center and the sub-affiliates. Help Me Grow’s successes highlighted in the mid-year report for January through July 2021 include:

- fulfilled 7,625 requests for support and provided 16,236 referrals
- managed a 12-person COVID quarantine/isolation support team to ensure exposed families had supplies and resources during their isolation or quarantine
- released the [Help Me Grow 101 video](#)
- launched bimonthly shared learning events for sub-affiliates

Lessons Learned from Washington

- **Develop strong relationships with state agencies and local partners.** Having a statewide nonprofit with a solid reputation has been helpful in Washington. The work was also strengthened through the creation of a state agency position. Building credibility at the local level was another key factor in Washington's success.
- **Educate legislators on the importance of the early years.** Many years of advocacy efforts in Washington resulted in legislators who are champions for early childhood.
- **Don't force communities into a single model.** WithinReach developed three options for how sub-affiliates could approach Help Me Grow implementation.
- **Think continually about sustainability.** Help Me Grow Washington staff think strategically about how to work within limited resources to support both the statewide and local levels, so every family has access to the services they need.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As Help Me Grow Washington looks to the future, staff hope to:

- grow the diversity of partnerships at the local level
- maintain and strengthen the commitment to racial equity and co-design with families
- figure out how technology can be harnessed to work well for families
- help staff become more comfortable dealing with families facing trauma and mental health issues
- use data to understand who is being served by systems, who is not well connected, and how all families can be served better
- continue to cultivate political will to support the work
- expand services to the prenatal population

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