

# Built for Babies: A Family-Centered Approach to State Policies



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

## Project Description and Request for Applications

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center (ZTT) is initiating a technical assistance (TA) project to assist selected states/territories to build and strengthen comprehensive policies, programs, and systems that ensure families with children prenatal to three (P-3) have the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. We are specifically interested in partnering with state/territory teams that have not had a long-standing deep focus on P-3 but are interested in building their capacity to do so (see list of eligible states/territories on page 4). TA staff will support teams to develop and make progress on P-3 policy and systems goals specific to their context using a family-centered approach.

### Background

Children's brains grow faster between birth and age 3 than at any later point in life, forming more than one million new neural connections every second. When babies have nurturing relationships with family members and other caregivers, high-quality early learning experiences, and good health and nutrition, these neural connections are stimulated and strengthened, laying a strong foundation for school readiness and success in school and beyond.

Public policy can help ensure babies get the best possible start, but federal and state/territory policies have not kept up to meet the needs of today's parents and caregivers. And opportunities for young children to grow and flourish are not shared equally by all infants, toddlers, and families, reflecting past and present barriers to critical resources. Roughly 40% of infants and toddlers live in families without enough income to make ends meet (at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, \$52,400 for a family of 4). Children of color are two to three times more likely to be affected by poverty than white children. These disparities are rooted in discriminatory policies throughout U.S. history that have blocked opportunity for people of color. The chronic, unrelenting stress and instability associated with poverty is compounded by difficulty accessing services such as preventative health care, quality housing, treatment for physical and mental health challenges, and quality child care. This can have immediate and lasting consequences on babies' health and development. The science is clear – the early years offer great opportunity and risk.

If children are to reach their full potential, it is essential that state policies and systems provide equitable access to a comprehensive range of services and supports that honor the needs and choices of families for their children. Services are most effective when they are coordinated and accessible through systems that center equity and are built through collaboration, both across service areas and between government, families, and communities. While most states have established structures for coordinated planning, infants' and toddlers' unique needs are often not fully understood or prioritized. **This project aims to help state/territory teams take an intentional focus on children P-3, building on existing efforts to improve outcomes for families with young children.**

### Description of the Opportunity

**Project Period:** July 2023 – November 2025.

**Overall Project Goal:** To build states'/territories' capacity to advance family-centered P-3 policies and systems.

**Project Activities:** This project will assist 3-6 state/territory teams to develop/refine and make progress on P-3 policy and system priorities specific to their context (potential areas could include, but are not limited to: health, mental health, early care and education, paid leave, family support, home visiting, Part C early intervention, screening and referral, nutrition, child welfare, family economic security, workforce, early childhood governance, and partnering with families). Project offerings include:

- **In-person cross-team meeting in October 2023**, where state/territory teams will meet peers, create plans and learn from experts in the field. **Travel and accommodation for five team members per state/territory will be funded by ZTT.**
- **Individualized, intensive support** from the TA Team who can help identify strengths to build on and opportunities for growth, provide information on best practices and other states'/territories' strategies, co-facilitate group meetings, and connect states/territories to outside experts. **Individualized TA will primarily be provided virtually through monthly meetings and email, with opportunities for 1-2 onsite TA visits from the TA team or outside experts in 2024-2025.**
- **Virtual peer-to-peer experiential learning activities** based on emerging needs as the project progresses.
- **Access to an opportunity fund** to receive financial support to further project goals if needed. The amount available per team will depend on the number of participating states/territories, but we **anticipate it ranging from \$2,000 - \$5,000 in 2023 and \$10,000 - \$15,000 in 2024/2025.** Potential uses could include but are not limited to compensation for core team members to participate in project activities (particularly families, providers and/or grassroots organizations); staff/consultant time to focus on P-3 priorities; development of resources; or meeting expenses.

TA will be tailored to fit the needs of each team. Project activities will generally proceed in the following phases, though time spent on each will vary based on teams' current efforts and context.

1. **Team building** – TA Team will support states/territories to finalize formation of a core team that commits to working together throughout the project and assist the team to build/strengthen relationships, develop shared language, and determine group norms and processes for working together.
2. **Needs assessment, identification or refinement of priorities, and planning** – TA Team will support state/territory teams to:
  - assess P-3 needs and how well existing services and supports are meeting them (ZTT will be rolling out a draft version of a revised Infant-Toddler State Policy Self-Assessment Tool that participating teams can pilot if interested),
  - identify specific P-3 policy/system priorities to focus on through this project, and
  - create contextual and relevant action plans for advancing selected priorities.
3. **Implementation of priorities** – TA Team will support state/territory teams to implement their action plans, measure progress, and adapt strategies as needed to respond to new opportunities and challenges.

**Anticipated Outcomes:** While each state/territory will determine specific outcomes they want to work toward through this project, we will support all teams to achieve progress on the following short-term outcomes that are critical to laying the groundwork for policy change:

- **Increased understanding** of the strengths and needs of families with children P-3 in the state/territory, and how they differ by factors such as race/ethnicity, income, rural/urban, language, etc.
- **New and strengthened partnerships** to advance shared policy and system priorities that will improve outcomes for children P-3, particularly those who face structural barriers accessing services and supports.
- **Increased visibility** of issues that impact families with children P-3, particularly those who face structural barriers accessing services and supports.
- **Increased will to act** on issues that impact children P-3, particularly those who face structural barriers accessing services and supports.

We know that policy change takes time, so while it is possible that participating states/territories may achieve policy and system wins during the project period – that is not a requirement. Interim measures of progress toward longer-term goals will be identified.

## Expectations

### Selected State/Territory Teams Will:

- Finalize formation of a core team of individuals who commit to maintaining a consistent level of participation throughout the project.
- Select 1-2 team members as the Team Lead(s) to serve as point(s) of contact for the TA Team and co-facilitate monthly TA calls.
- Select 1 team member (does not need to be Team Lead) to serve as the team's representative on a planning group to inform the structure and content for the October in-person convening (will likely include 2-3 planning calls and review of draft agendas).
- Engage other stakeholders in the state/territory, especially those with lived experience, to inform development and implementation of P-3 priorities.
- Participate in project elements outlined in Description of Opportunity, including regular team TA calls, October 2023 in-person cross-state convening, and virtual peer-learning sessions.
- Provide feedback on project structure and activities to inform continuous quality improvement.

### TA Team Will:

- Support state/territory teams to meet benchmarks of the project, utilizing resources such as the ZTT revised Infant-Toddler State Self-Assessment Toolkit, [State of Babies Yearbook data](#), [Think Babies resources](#) and other tools as needed.
- Co-host monthly calls with the core team.

- Conduct up to 2 in-person TA visits per state/territory in 2024/2025 to support teams with facilitation, needs assessment, priority selection and action-planning activities. TA Team can also engage outside experts to participate in onsite TA.
- Lead planning efforts for October 2023 cross-state in-person convening, including hosting planning committee calls with representatives from each state/territory team, and virtual cross-team events.
- Organize resource materials and expert contributions to support team activities.
- Produce resources for the field to share project highlights, relevant project experiences, successes and lessons learned.

### Application Process

**Eligibility:** We are specifically interested in working with states or territories that have not had a deep focus on children P-3 but are interested in building their capacity to do so. For that reason, states currently working intensively with the Pritzker Children’s Initiative or that formerly held multi-year *Think Babies* grants are not eligible to participate. Eligible states/territories include Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Wyoming, and U.S. Territories.

**Core Team Composition:** States/territories must identify a core team with a minimum of 4-5 people who commit to working together throughout this project. When forming the core team, applicants are encouraged to consider different kinds of power, authority, and spheres of influence to create policy/system change that team members will contribute, such as:

- lived experience navigating and engaging in public services for families with children P-3,
- authority to make policy and system decisions or access to decision-makers in state/territory government,
- trusting relationships in communities that have been made marginalized (with families, grassroots groups, providers, faith-based organizations, non-profits, etc.),
- administration of services or programs for children P-3,
- understanding of family experiences, particularly families who face structural barriers accessing services and supports,
- involvement in related early childhood system-building efforts,
- advocacy capacity, and
- experience providing direct services to families with children P-3.

**Ideally, core teams would include individuals with lived experience, have representation from the public and private sectors, and be cross-disciplinary** – though if these relationships do not yet exist, establishing or strengthening them could be initial goals of the project. An existing group interested in building their capacity in P-3 policy can serve as the core team.

Although the core team will be the primary contact for TA, states/territories may involve additional individuals or groups in activities throughout the project as they see fit. Recognizing that policies are most effective when families and the professionals serving them are involved in policy development and implementation – a key component of TA will be supporting state/territory teams to engage additional voices to inform their work, particularly those who are typically not engaged because of structural barriers.

### Submitting an Application

If interested in participating in this project, eligible states/territories are invited to provide brief, specific answers to the questions below. **Applicants have the option of submitting responses via a written application OR a 50-minute interview conducted via Zoom. Please click [HERE](#) to answer the questions in writing.** Responses should not exceed 1-3 pages and are due no later than 8pm Eastern/5pm Pacific on June 1<sup>st</sup>. **For the interview option, please click [HERE](#) to sign up for a slot by 8pm Eastern/5pm Pacific on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Interviews will take place June 1-5.**

1. What does your state/territory team hope to accomplish through participation in this opportunity?
2. What does it mean to you to center families in this work?
3. Who might serve as your core state team? For each member, please describe what their unique contributions would be. If there are new partnerships that you want to establish or strengthen during the beginning of the project that could lead to additional core team members, describe those. Please also identify 1-2 individuals who will serve as the team lead(s).
4. As you consider the opportunity, what are your thoughts on immediate TA needs?
5. Is there anything essential for us to know about your application that we did not ask?

### Selection Criteria:

If we receive more interest than we have capacity to support, we will base selection of states/territories on the following criteria:

- State/territory has assembled, or has clear plans to assemble, a core team made up of individuals bringing diverse kinds of power, authority, and spheres of influence to create policy and system change that will improve outcomes for children P-3.
- The application clearly describes how participation in this project will increase the state's/territory's capacity to advance family-centered policies and systems that support children P-3.
- We will also consider diversity in terms of geography, current infrastructure, and goals.

Questions may be addressed to Jamie Colvard ([jcolvard@zerotothree.org](mailto:jcolvard@zerotothree.org)), Katrina Coburn ([kcoburn@zerotothree.org](mailto:kcoburn@zerotothree.org)), or Christy Stanton ([cstanton@zerotothree.org](mailto:cstanton@zerotothree.org)).

### Important Dates:

- May 11, 2023 2:00 – 3:00 pm ET – optional Q&A Call to provide overview of RFA and answer questions from prospective applicants. Register [HERE](#) to attend or obtain the recording.
- May 26, 2023 – deadline to sign up for a time slot if selecting to apply by video interview
- June 1, 2023 – deadline for submitting responses if applying in writing

- June 14, 2023 – ZTT will inform applicants of submission decisions
- Three days during the week of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 – in-person convening (at a TBD location)

### About ZERO TO THREE

ZTT is a national nonprofit organization that informs, trains, and supports professionals, policymakers, and parents in their efforts to improve the lives of infants and toddlers. The Policy Center is a nonpartisan, research-based resource for federal and state policymakers and advocates on the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers. The Policy Center brings to bear ZTT's 40+ years of research-based expertise on infant and toddler development to ensure that public policies reflect best practices and current research in support of our nation's very young children.

Through TA to states, ZTT staff support establishing coordinated, comprehensive services and ensuring their inclusion in broader system-building efforts and advancing policies that benefit/prioritize babies and toddlers. Current and recent state-level projects include: [Think Babies](#), [IECMH-Financing Policy Project](#), [Building Strong Foundations for Families](#), and Supporting the Expertise of Those with Lived Experience to Disrupt System Racism in Policies and Advocacy Aimed at Serving Children and Families.