

# Request for Applications

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health  
Financing Policy Project  
Cohort 5



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

## Building a Robust Continuum of Mental Health Supports and Services for Infants, Young Children, and Families

The ZERO TO THREE (ZTT) Policy Center is pleased to announce that we will be expanding our Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Financing Policy Project (FPP) to welcome a fifth cohort of states to this national learning community. In May 2026, we will kick off the fifth cycle of our FPP, which will include comprehensive technical assistance (TA) for up to ten new state teams. We will support teams to develop financing strategies to advance state policy and build systems that better meet the mental and relational health needs of infants, young children, and their caregivers. The work to build and sustain a robust continuum of high-quality, developmentally-appropriate mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment supports and services is complex and spans systems, workforces, and funding streams. For nearly ten years, the FPP has been enabling states to pursue this vision in community with one another, and we are eager to welcome additional states into this collaborative.

### Why the Financing Policy Project?

In the first five years of life, children develop more rapidly than at any other period of the lifespan. During this time, safe environments and nurturing relationships provide a solid foundation for child health and wellbeing, while trauma and adversity can threaten healthy development. The science is clear: the earliest years provide both opportunity and risk, and when we support infants, young children, and the caregivers and families that raise them, children are significantly more likely to grow up happy and healthy.

As policy makers look for ways to ensure that all young children have what they need to thrive, our job at ZTT is to highlight IECMH as an essential component of early childhood development and, thus, the early childhood system. The FPP seeks to bring together multi-disciplinary teams within and across states to problem-solve, share successes and challenges, and test innovative financing policy strategies. Each team will receive support from ZTT staff, national IECMH experts, and their FPP peers in developing and financing a robust array of IECMH supports and services.

### Description of the Opportunity

This opportunity includes a minimum of one year of individualized TA from the ZTT IECMH Policy Team and partners and continued access to the learning community, which has served 36 states to date.

Project offerings will include:

- Informational Q & A session on **March 23, 2026, from 3-4pm ET** (Register [here](#) and you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting);
- Virtual kick-off meeting on **May 12, 2026, 1-2:30pm ET** (*If you are submitting an application, please ask each member of your full team to hold this date and time on their calendars. We will*

*notify states of selections by **May 1, 2026**, and want to ensure all team members are available to attend the onboarding session the following week);*

- Monthly team calls with TA provider;
- Access to additional TA support from subject matter experts;
- In-person convening **September 22-24, 2026** in Minneapolis, MN with state representatives from Cohorts 1-5, national partners, subject matter experts, and ZTT staff; and
- A series of virtual peer learning opportunities.

**Project Period:** Individualized TA will run from May 2026 through May 2027. Your initial commitment is 12 months. After this period, the ZTT team will work with your state to identify ongoing needs. Currently, states across all previous cohorts continue to participate actively in the project, and our team will help you determine the types of engagement that best support your goals moving forward.

**Goals:** To identify and implement state strategies for aligning financing policy with IECMH best practice across the promotion-to-treatment continuum. States will share their expertise and explore possible solutions to current policy and program challenges. The ZTT team, partners, and state teams will work together to:

1. Develop and share strategies and innovations for financing a robust continuum of IECMH supports and services by identifying key policy levers and funding opportunities;
2. Develop and share strategies and innovations for communicating about IECMH and engaging systems leaders and policymakers; and
3. Promote peer-to-peer learning by building relationships and creating opportunities for cross-state connections.

### **Expectations:**

#### **ZTT will:**

- Plan and host a virtual kick-off meeting, a series of virtual learning and sharing sessions, and an in-person national convening;
- Deliver individualized TA to support teams in developing and implementing a financing and policy action plan;
- Facilitate additional peer meetings and be available for one-on-one meetings with team leads upon request;
- Support teams' capacities to engage families and providers with lived experience in IECMH systems, and to create opportunities for those with lived experience to shape the FPP work; and
- Gather and disseminate resources to support state progress and stories of state successes and lessons learned.

#### **Selected state teams will:**

- Select one member to serve as **Team Lead** and main point of contact to communicate with the ZTT team;
- Participate in project elements outlined in Opportunity Description, including monthly state team meetings, and the virtual peer learning series;
- Select **five** team members to attend the in-person convening **September 22-24, 2026**, in Minneapolis, MN;
- Gather state-specific information about availability of and gaps in IECMH services along the promotion-to-treatment continuum, and related systems, financing structures, strengths, and challenges (guidance to be provided by ZTT);

- Create and implement an **action plan** based on assessment of current challenges, gaps, and opportunities to advance quality and access; and
- Participate in the online platform Basecamp, posting questions and answers and sharing resources among the learning community.

#### Team Leads will:

- Be responsible for scheduling and coordinating team meetings, including recurring monthly TA meetings;
- Guide the team in initial discussions about processes for decision-making, identifying additional team members and connecting to other state early childhood teams/coalitions, and establishing norms and structures that accommodate all team members;
- Attend the in-person convening September 22-24, 2026, in Minneapolis, MN;
- Participate in our cross-state monthly **Team Lead meetings**;
- Track progress on the creation and implementation of the action plan; and
- Provide progress updates every other month to assigned ZTT contact.

### Application Process

#### Eligibility:

All states that have **not previously** been a part of the project are eligible to apply\*. While not included in this list of participating states, it is important to note that Minnesota is a mentor state and has played an instrumental role in the project since its initial conceptualization.

*Cohort 1:* AK, CO, IL, IN, LA, MA, NC, OK, OR, VA

*Cohort 2:* AL, DC, MD, NV, NH, NM, NY, SC, TN, WA

*Cohort 3:* CT, GA, HI, IA, KS, MS, MO, NJ, UT

*Cohort 4:* DE, FL, MI, NE, OH, PA

*Mentor/Host State:* MN

States should assemble a core public-private sector team of a **minimum of five** people (see membership guidelines below). States must submit a single application on behalf of the team for consideration. Applications must identify a lead contact person who represents a public or private sector state-level entity, such as a state agency or advocacy organization, who works on the state's IECMH policy and service delivery system.

\*If your state is already a member of the FPP but you are not connected to your state team and are interested in this work, please reach out to the ZTT team and we will connect you with your state's active FPP participants.

#### Core Team Composition:

States must identify a minimum of five individuals (a Core Team) who will commit to maintaining a consistent level of participation through the first 12 months of TA, at a minimum.

#### Core Teams must include representation from:

1. The state's Medicaid Director (or high-level designee of the state Medicaid office, such as the EPSDT lead, Medical Director, or behavioral health director within Medicaid); and
2. A licensed IECMH clinician directly involved in the provision of mental health services to infants, young children, and families (via direct services or clinical/program supervision and management).

Based on state priorities, structure, and current capacity to advance policy, states may fill remaining positions with other decision makers such as representatives from:

- Mental health authority (e.g. children’s mental health director, behavioral health director);
- Other state agencies (e.g. Part C, public health, child welfare, early childhood education etc.);
- State leadership for Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics;
- Family leadership organizations or advisory bodies;
- Perinatal mental health system and/or clinical leaders;
- State Infant Mental Health Association;
- Tribal Nations;
- The Governor’s Office;
- Legislative champion;
- Advocacy organization focusing on children and/or mental health;
- Institutes of Higher Education;
- State chapters of provider organizations (e.g. American Academy of Pediatrics);
- Health insurance provider (Managed care organizations, private insurers); and
- Philanthropic foundations.

Chosen members must be able to commit to attendance at monthly TA meetings and prioritize attendance at other FPP offerings. In some states, this work may be completed most effectively through existing councils/advisory groups or through the convening of a larger team. In these cases, FPP teams may involve a broader team beyond the individuals identified as the Core Team.

If your state is interested in the project but concerned about specific project requirements or goodness of fit, please reach out to Alex Busuito at [abusuito@zerotothree.org](mailto:abusuito@zerotothree.org). Our team is happy to discuss any questions or concerns.

### **Key Considerations for Teams:**

We strongly encourage applicants to consider family leadership when determining team composition. Teams that intentionally integrate family voice and clearly articulate how family perspectives will be centered in IECMH policy work in their state will be particularly competitive. We view the absence of meaningful family engagement in IECMH policymaking as a missed opportunity for both states and the communities they serve. We know that families must play an integral role in shaping policy direction, systems change, and progress.

We recognize that states may draw on existing or newly formed teams, groups, or relationships for this project, and that the avenues for family voice and leadership may vary across states. Through this application process and the subsequent work with ZTT, we would like states to assess the current extent to which families inform priorities and decisions in mental health and early childhood policy and, where needed, identify ways to increase this capacity. We also recognize that states may be coming to this project with varying levels of existing capacity and infrastructure, so we will ask for initial exploration through the application questions (see below) and further exploration and progress through TA.

Additionally, we are excited by the growing integration of perinatal and early childhood mental health, and the increasing collaboration across these spaces in workforce development, service delivery, and policymaking. For states pursuing policy and systems change with opportunity for this integration, we encourage consideration of partners working at this intersection and in the perinatal mental health space.

**Submitting an Application:**

States should identify the lead contact person for this application and, together, provide brief, specific answers to the following questions:

1. Who will serve as your core state team (minimum 5 members)? Why is this particular combination of partners (your proposed Core Team) capable of meaningfully advancing IECMH financing policy in your state? For each member, please describe:
  - a. their sphere of influence; and
  - b. what your team would be missing (include personal and/or professional perspectives) if this person were not a part of the project.
2. Who will serve as your team lead? Please describe:
  - a. how this person is suited for this role, include project management skills, IECMH policy experience, and experience leading teams; and
  - b. how they will prioritize time to attend all FPP activities.
3. What does your state team hope to accomplish through participation in this opportunity? Are there financing and/or systems-building issues or challenges you would be particularly eager to work on in this setting? Please be as specific as possible (e.g. not just “learn best practices from other states”, but what specifically would you like to learn from other states?).
4. To what extent has your state included a focus on IECMH within mental health, early childhood, or other system-building efforts to date? How will this opportunity be used to build on historical and current efforts and contribute to long-term sustainability?
5. Please discuss your team’s readiness and capacity to engage in self-assessment and action planning focused on how well current IECMH services and related policies support families.
6. In what way(s) is your state uniquely well-positioned to take advantage of this opportunity?
7. Please share the extent to which families are involved in IECMH policy work in your state, if at all. If you have family leadership in place, please tell us about it. If this is an area for growth, please describe the extent to which you have existing capacity (infrastructure, financial resources, staff capacity) or goals related to family engagement and describe how you envision making progress in this area through the TA experience. What would you need from ZTT or other partners?
8. If you anticipate engaging additional partners, groups, or coalitions beyond your core team, who are they and why?

Responses should *not exceed 6 pages* and are due no later than  
**5:00pmPT/6:00pmMT/7:00pmCT/8:00 pm ET on Friday April 17, 2026**

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**Important Dates:**

- Monday March 23, 2026, 3-4:00 pm ET - virtual informational Q & A session. [Register here.](#)
- Friday April 17, 2026 - application due
- Friday May 1, 2026 - respond to applicants with decision
- Tuesday May 12, 2026, 1-2:30 pm ET – virtual Kick Off event
- September 22-24, 2026 - in-person convening in Minneapolis, MN