

Illinois partners with ZERO TO THREE to tackle infant, early childhood mental health challenges

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SPRINGFIELD – State of Illinois health officials today announced that Illinois was one of 10 states selected to participate in a ZERO TO THREE Policy Center meeting to advance state policy related to improving infant and early childhood mental health.

“Our children are the foundation for our future generations’ health. Participating in the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center meeting will help inform our efforts already underway to take a collaborative approach to health care as part of Illinois’ health and human services transformation,” said Governor Bruce Rauner. “Communities, health care organizations, advocacy groups, and government agencies must work together to change and improve mental and behavioral health services for infants and young children.”

Government agencies, advocacy organizations and child- and family-serving programs in states across the country competed to become one of 10 states that gathered October 13-14 in Minneapolis to address mental health prevention, intervention, and treatment programs for very young children. The goal of the ZERO TO THREE meeting was to identify state strategies to align health care finance policy, specifically Medicaid, with infant and early childhood mental health practice.

“We know that children’s earliest experiences – both positive and negative – affect their brain formation,” said ZERO TO THREE Executive Director Matthew Melmed. “The period from birth to age five is critical to future success, and we are pleased that policymakers, in Congress and in states, are increasingly aware of, and investing in, infant and early childhood mental health.”

According to ZERO TO THREE, it is estimated that between [nine to 14 percent of children age birth to five years experience at least one emotional or behavioral disturbance](#), which left untreated, can have long-term negative impacts on child development, future health, and success. It is critical to create a seamless system of high quality mental health supports and services designed to ensure healthy mental development in children. States continue to face many challenges in the infant/early childhood mental health field, including developing, providing, and financing assessments; developmentally appropriate diagnosis; and evidence-informed treatment.

To assist with some of those challenges, Illinois recently applied for an 1115 Waiver to evaluate policy approaches, such as providing services not typically covered by Medicaid or creating innovative service delivery systems that improve care, increase efficiency, and reduce costs. One initiative requested under the waiver involves infant /early childhood mental health consultations. The consultations team infant/early childhood mental health consultants with professionals who have frequent contact with young children (e.g., teachers, care providers) to help them build skills to support and promote the socio-emotional, behavioral health, and development of young children. Illinois has been at the forefront of supporting mental health consultation in multiple child and family service systems, but there is still a need to expand access to consultation and other mental health services. The 1115 Waiver is critical to successful implementation of its behavioral health strategy.

Illinois’ team is composed of the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the Illinois Department of Human Services – Division of Mental Health, the Illinois Department of Public Health, Chestnut Health Systems, and the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership. Illinois will join this special ZERO TO THREE meeting with other professionals from Alaska, Colorado, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Virginia.

ZERO TO THREE in a non-profit organization working to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development.

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