

How the Proposed Budget Impacts Early Childhood Programs

Conference Call Summary

Voices for Illinois Children

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ECBG, Early Childhood Capital and Child Care

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Diverse groups of advocates, policymakers, providers, families and other stakeholders have come together to form powerful partnerships around early childhood in Illinois. The Early Learning Council, among other examples, has become a network that fosters integration across issues and sectors to break down barriers and achieve real results for kids and families. Many of you on the call today are dedicated partners in these efforts. Because of these, although we face a challenging climate in Illinois, we are in a stronger position to work together and better meet the needs of children and families.

In spite of the significant gains we've made over the years, we have our work cut out for us during this budget cycle. This call will focus on a few early childhood issues and how the FY10 proposed budget would impact them.

Early Childhood Block Grant

The Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) supports preschool for 3- to 5-year-olds and developmental services for at-risk infants and toddlers. Under the proposed budget, the block grant would grow by \$12.5 million. Given the state's limited resources, this increase is a welcome first step. Yet, the original Preschool for All plans called for \$45 million in new funding for FY 2010. \$12.5 million would essentially support cost-of-living adjustments, and would not help to expand program access. The gap between capacity and demand for 0-3 and PreK services is still unacceptable.

Only 11 percent of birth-to-3 program requests are being fulfilled at this funding level. One ongoing effort to better address this shortfall is legislation that would increase the size of the birth to three set aside from 11 percent ECBG to 20 percent between now and 2015. The bill includes a provision that if ECBG funding is insufficient to increase the set aside without reducing the amount of the grant for existing preschool providers, the set aside will remain level. SB 1412 has passed the Illinois Senate and will soon become the full House for a vote. Today would be a great time to reach out to your respective state representatives to share your support for this bill.

Early Childhood Capital

Also critical to early learning are investments in facilities. Again, there is a gap between capacity and need. Some communities require new or expanded facilities, while others are in desperate need of repair or modernization. In all cases, it is imperative that young children have access to safe learning environments that meet their distinct needs. By including community-based providers—such as child care centers, Head Start sites and

nursery schools—in a capital plan, we can address their infrastructure needs while ensuring that working parents have a variety of options that meet their diverse needs.

Across the state, school districts have identified a shortage of at least 593 additional preschool classrooms, according to a 2008 assessment conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education and Capital Development Board. That figure only reflects the shortcomings of school-based programs whose district officials responded to this survey; actual shortfalls are larger.

This is why a comprehensive capital program is so essential. The good news is that the FY10 budget proposal includes \$25 million in matching grants for early childhood capital funding. Statewide hearings on capital wrapped up last week. Voices and other advocates spoke up in favor of investments in early learning infrastructure. Also drawing attention to capital needs was the Chicago Tribune's front page story last week highlighting disparity in access to PreK programs—particularly in Latino communities. Inclusion in the proposed budget is certainly a positive development; it's still critical to speak up in support of this funding and highlight growing demand throughout the state.

Child Care

Quality, affordable, accessible child care is crucial to children's development. It's also an important work support for parents. The proposed budget includes a \$50.6 million cut in the IDHS budget for child care.

The bottom line is that underfunding child care is bad for kids and families—it's a cut Illinois can't afford to make.

Home Visiting and Mental Health

Dawn Melchiorre, senior policy associate

Home Visiting

Because we recognize the importance of the parenting role and that learning begins at birth, home visiting programs offer in-home services designed to strengthen parenting skills, assist in the development of a safe and nurturing home environment, and promote early learning for children beginning at birth.

Participation in home visiting programs is entirely voluntary and the programs are designed to include weekly or bi-weekly home visits by either a nurse or paraprofessional targeting families with significant risk factors such as teen parents. Home visiting programs in Illinois include Health Families, Parents as Teachers, Parents too Soon, and Nurse Family Partnership.

Research has shown families and children that participate in home visiting programs have:

- Improved prenatal care and birth outcomes

- Higher academic achievement and graduation rates for the children in the programs
- Increased economic self-sufficiency and reduced welfare usage
- Fewer criminal arrests and convictions for both parent and child
- Children in home visiting programs were less likely to be confirmed victims of abuse or neglect

During these difficult financial times, we have the sobering news that reported cases of abuse and neglect have risen 5.8 percent in Illinois in 2008 and 9 percent in the Chicago area. The research is clear, home visiting programs are effective in preventing abuse and neglect.

The Governor's proposed budget would cut about \$1.8 million (10 percent) from home visiting programs. Currently, these programs are able to provide assistance to as little as 7 percent of all families who could need the services these programs provide.

Children's Mental Health Partnership

Children's academic success and overall wellness cannot be ensured without addressing their mental health needs. Research indicates that children's social and emotional well-being is as important as their physical and cognitive health. This work has its roots in the 2003 passage of the Children's Mental Health Act, which led to the creation of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (ICMHP). The Partnership is a statewide group of agencies, organizations and individuals committed to improving the scope and quality of mental health programs, services and supports for Illinois children and their families. Working together, Partnership members developed a strategic plan for building a comprehensive mental health system, and identified several key priorities most in need of investment.

The investment of \$3 million in the ICMHP priorities within the Department of Human Services (DHS) Division of Mental Health budget in FY2009 is improving the social and emotional wellbeing of children birth to age five. The investments include:

- Enhancing the capacity of community mental health agencies and Healthy Families/Parents too Soon programs to respond to the mental health needs of young children through consultation projects.
- Providing services to children under the age of five and their families who are at risk for or experiencing mental health issues.
- Expanding children's mental health services including services for children from birth to age five.

Through these and many other efforts, Illinois has been able to serve more children at younger ages and earlier stages of need with more effective mental health supports. Our state has reduced fragmentation of services and enhanced interagency collaborations. And the Partnership's work has helped the state avoid approximately \$19 million a year in costs of unnecessary psychiatric hospitalizations and related expenses.

The Governor's proposed budget includes an almost \$350,000 cut or 12 percent of the \$3 million DHS funding for the IMCHP priorities that are improving children's social and emotional well-being .