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# Alabama

Harnessing Every Opportunity to Expand Critical Components of the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health System of Care

**T**his policy vignette highlights efforts in Alabama to grow multiple aspects of the infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) system. From forming an IECMH association and creating a full-time IECMH state coordinator position, to expanding mental health consultation in early childhood education settings, piloting perinatal mental health consultation services and allowing mental health clinicians to bill Medicaid using their own license, the state is intentionally expanding critical components of the IECMH system of care. The vignette also shares key lessons learned.

## the Innovation

Without delay, state and local leaders in Alabama are working both inside and outside government to develop the state’s IECMH system of care. Leaders across multiple state agencies and nongovernmental organizations are raising awareness, building capacity, capitalizing on like efforts, and bringing forth policy changes to support reimbursement of evidence-based assessment and treatment. No stone is left unturned; no challenge is viewed as insurmountable.

## the Impetus

Inspiration for addressing IECMH came from many years of state leaders working collaboratively to improve access to infant and early childhood services. The leadership of Gail Piggott, Executive Director of the Alabama Partnership for Children, brought Help Me Grow to Alabama, shedding light on the lack of IECMH resources in the state. “Gail was one of the first people I met when I came to state work, and she immediately recruited me to help her in the work she and my predecessor had started with regard to funding IECMH,” said Jane Duer, Director of the Alabama Department of Mental Health Infant and Early Childhood Special Programs. “Gail was the catalyst and provided the glue. She recognized this as a priority and was always on the lookout for opportunities and pockets of funding.”

It helped too that Dallas Rabig, now the State Coordinator for IECMH, previously served as an IECMH consultant in Colorado, where she witnessed that state’s work to transform and advance early childhood mental health policy.

In Alabama, Rabig was dedicated to raising awareness of IECMH by submitting proposals for presentations at every state conference that targeted providers in early intervention, early childhood education, home visiting, and related public and mental health fields.

Engaged leaders across multiple agencies at the state level—led by the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH), the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), and, in time, Alabama Medicaid—also contributed to these state-level changes. “This was an area that was never brought to our attention as a need. But that changed,” said Kathy Hall, Deputy Commissioner of Program and Administration at Alabama Medicaid. “The door of communication has been opened and we are working together.” Alabama’s participation in [ZERO TO THREE’s IECMH Financing Policy Project](#) provided the opportunity to further formalize collaboration with Medicaid and deepen IECMH knowledge and commitment among Medicaid leadership.

## the Process

Transformation started to occur in Alabama beginning in 2014. For example:

- Alabama received a Project LAUNCH Grant.** The ADMH was awarded a 5-year cooperative agreement grant by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The collaborative efforts to focus on [Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health \(LAUNCH\)](#) led the state’s leaders to quickly identify the lack of resources for IECMH.

Funds from this grant helped to begin to build the foundation for what was to come.

- **IECMH Consultation was piloted.** Project LAUNCH local services were established in Tuscaloosa County in partnership with the University of Alabama Child Development Resource Center, and involved five core strategies, including addressing IECMH in early care settings and the integration of behavioral health into primary care. To this end, two full-time IECMH consultants were hired by UA to work with early childhood providers and a pediatric practice. This is now being replicated across the state through funding from the Alabama Department of Human Resources (ADHR) (the Alabama agency that provides childcare licensing and oversight) and in partnership with [First 5 Alabama](#), with six additional IECMH consultants working with licensed child care providers. By early 2020, eight more consultants will be added through state funds acquired by the ADMH. These consultants will work with Early Intervention personnel, Alabama First Class Pre-K teachers, and women affected by substance use disorder during pregnancy. In addition, workforce development and IECMH consultation is also included in the state's federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five.
- **A full-time IECMH Coordinator position was created and funded.** This position is supported by the ADECE and the ADMH, representing an ongoing interagency commitment.
- **First 5 Alabama was launched.** The state's IECMH association, an affiliate of The Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, was launched in 2017 in order to help build workforce capacity. Within a year, First 5 Alabama had more than 200 members. The association supports professionals in earning the [Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health](#)<sup>®</sup>. In addition to supporting the Endorsement<sup>®</sup> process, First 5 Alabama helps to ensure everyone working with infants, young children and their families know how to support social and emotional development through regular and intensive training, professional development, and other learning opportunities (virtual, in-person, with national experts, etc.).
- **Support was provided to Alabama First Class Pre-K and Infant/Toddler Coaches.** Over 65 coaches support 1,200 Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms across the state through ADECE. Over 25 Infant/Toddler specialists support licensed child care centers and Early Head Start classrooms as part of a collaboration between ADECE and ADHR. IECMH State Coordinator Rabig supports the ADECE Professional Development Director and the Director of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support to establish best practices in reflective supervision. She has also worked to support state agency and nonprofit professionals in IECMH-informed practice and in application for endorsement through First 5 Alabama.

- **Changes to Medicaid billing were approved.**

Licensed mental health clinicians can now enroll directly with Medicaid and do not have to work under a Medicaid-enrolled psychiatrist when treating Medicaid recipients under 21 years of age. Medicaid is also working toward developing reimbursement codes that will only be available to those that have the IECMH Endorsement®.

- **Implementation is under way for the next iteration of Medicaid care coordination that will look at the whole family unit.**

The primary goal of the new Alabama Coordinated Health Networks, managed by Alabama Medicaid, is to move away from silos and toward comprehensive care coordination that will follow women through pregnancy and children's early years.

## Financing

Alabama was able to tap into many sources of funding to support this critical work. SAMHSA grant funds, through Project LAUNCH laid the groundwork in 2014. An existing grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation was amended and supplemented to provide \$40,000 to start First 5 Alabama. Additional funds included the federal Child Care Development Block Grant through ADHR funds a full-time First 5 Alabama Coordinator and the six consultants serving licensed childcare providers and the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five is supporting infrastructure and implementation activities.

// It was the first time we got funding from the state legislature for mental health services for this population as a prevention service that is not home visiting or early intervention."

— Dallas Rabig, State Coordinator for IECMH,  
Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education.



The agency leaders at ADMH and the ADECE have continuously gone to bat, sharing the cost of the State Coordinator for IECMH position and, as mentioned above, ADMH recently secured an additional \$500,000 in the state budget for additional support of IECMH in Alabama. The ADHR pitched in too, funding consultants to provide services in licensed child care settings.

### next Steps

Workforce development continues to be a top priority, Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five funds opened the door for collaboration between ADECE and Troy University to develop undergraduate and graduate courses in infant and early childhood mental health. The courses will be designed for students in mental health, social work, early childhood development, among others. Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN), reflective supervision, and Diversity Informed Tenets of Infant Mental Health will be offered to the state's early childhood, pediatric, and mental health workforce. There will also be an 18-month learning collaborative on Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) with the goal of increasing the number of clinical providers who can provide CPP by 35, allowing there to be more than one CPP-trained provider in each mental health region. The ADMH will hire eight additional IECMH consultants with the funds included in the state budget for FY2020, supplemented by funds from ADECE. These consultants will work with Early Intervention, Alabama First Class Pre-K, and pilot a Perinatal Mental Health Consultation model.

There are also plans to support workforce development among pediatric mental health clinicians and pediatricians so that they can begin to use the *DC:0-5: Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and*

*Early Childhood (DC:0-5™)* and other evidence-based practices with the birth–5 population and their families. Hall points out, “We have worked really hard. Now is the time to implement our plans and analyze what is needed next. Medicaid has a team of folks who are ready to look at the data and help us determine where we are having success and where more work is needed.”

### important Lessons

- Every barrier is an opportunity for change and growth. Don't let yourself be overwhelmed by what people think you can't do; instead, direct your energy toward advancing reform.
- You can't do it alone. Partnership across agencies is essential. There is strength in collaboration.
- Have patience and persevere. Sometimes a back door or different messenger is needed to bring about the changes you seek.

### for more Information

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