

IMPROVING INFANT–TODDLER EARLY INTERVENTION ACCESS IN CHILD WELFARE

September 2025

Why It Matters

Children involved in Pennsylvania’s child welfare system are at significantly higher risk for developmental delays due to abuse, neglect, poverty, and family instability. Early Intervention (EI) services under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) offer critical support to children under age three by promoting their development across key domains—physical, cognitive, communication, social-emotional, and adaptive.

Despite clear federal and state mandates, many eligible children in Pennsylvania are not connected to these life-changing services.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services should:

- Build EI tracking into the new Enterprise Case Management platform.
- Establish guidance for information sharing between Infant-Toddler EI agencies, providers, and County Children and Youth Agencies (CCYAs), including parental consent protocols.
- Convene annual regional or statewide meetings to foster collaboration between child welfare and EI and surface frontline insights.

2) Pennsylvania Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) should:

- Mandate Infant-Toddler EI referrals for all children under age three with substantiated Child Protective Services (CPS) or valid General Protective Services (GPS) reports, allowing counties meeting performance benchmarks to apply for targeted exemptions.
- Require written referral and electronic tracking procedures, in alignment with state policy, and make procedures accessible by staff and state reviewers.
- Build EI tracking into the Child Welfare Information System.
- Mandate annual statewide data reviews to inform funding, monitor compliance, and identify outcome trends.

3) Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) and OCYF should collaborate to:

- Create asynchronous, standardized training modules on Infant-Toddler EI referrals and service value for all CCYA staff.
- Create a “warm handoff” system to ensure transfer of EI services within 60 days when families move across counties.

Findings From Statewide Review

Quantitative data analysis and interviews across counties reveal:

- **Eligible Children Left Out Under Current Policy:** Current policy only mandates developmental screening and referral for children under age three with substantiated abuse or neglect reports. This excludes children identified through GPS, who make up the majority of the children in the PA child welfare system. Updating the policy to include GPS-involved children in mandatory screenings could make up to 13,000 more children eligible for services annually.
- **Inconsistent County Practices:** Screening and referral procedures vary widely by county, with most CCYAs meeting only minimum requirements. Referral tracking is largely informal or nonexistent.
- **Limited Training:** Child welfare staff receive little to no standardized training on EI referrals. High caseload sizes make further education difficult to access.
- **Inadequate Data Infrastructure:** There is no unified system to accurately track or evaluate aggregate child welfare referrals to Infant-Toddler EI statewide. OCDEL data may undercount referrals from child welfare, and the OCYF system lacks the capacity for real-time oversight.
- **Family Barriers to Access:** Fear of government involvement, stigma, and transportation challenges deter family participation in EI services.
- **Service Delays Across Counties:** When families move, lack of inter-county coordination leads to gaps or delays in services.

Data Analysis

These recommendations were informed by analysis of data related to the child welfare populations required by policy to receive developmental screening, as well as Infant-Toddler EI referral and enrollment data. Recommendations were also informed by focus groups and key informant interviews of county child welfare staff and Infant-Toddler EI stakeholders conducted from October 2023 through June 2024.

County Children and Youth Agency Participants

Adams County	Delaware County	Northampton County
Allegheny County	Fayette County	Philadelphia County
Armstrong County	Franklin County	Sullivan County
Bucks County	Lancaster County	Warren County
Chester County	Lehigh County	Washington County
Dauphin County	Montgomery County	York County

The Path Forward

These recommendations present a clear path to increase Infant-Toddler EI access and developmental support for thousands of vulnerable children. With relatively modest system changes, Pennsylvania can better fulfill its federal and state obligations and, more importantly, give at-risk children a stronger start in life. For more detail, see the full report from Children First at www.childrenfirstpa.org.