

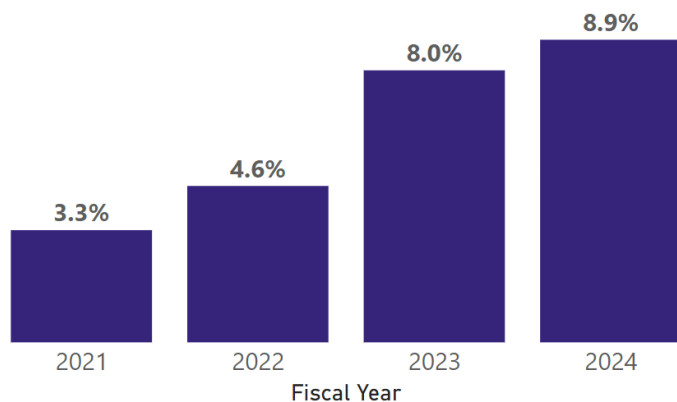
INCREASE EARLY INTERVENTION (EI) FUNDING BY \$60M IN FY26 TO GET BABIES OFF OF WAITING LISTS FOR SERVICES

Illinois' Early Intervention (EI) program ensures that infants and toddlers with or at substantial risk for developmental delays or disabilities have the best chance for healthy development. EI provides a range of family-centered developmental and therapeutic services, including speech and language, developmental, occupational, and physical therapies and social work to **more than 28,000 infants and toddlers across Illinois**. These critical services improve developmental outcomes for young children, support families to better meet their child's needs, and reduce future educational and health costs to our communities and the state by minimizing the need for special education services. Importantly, EI experiences are most effective when provided during the first three years of a child's life – a unique window of time in which the developing brain is most capable of change. **EI is an entitlement for families** under state and federal law and serves children in every county across the state, regardless of income level.

Families are struggling to access EI services in a timely manner and experiencing historically high service delays.

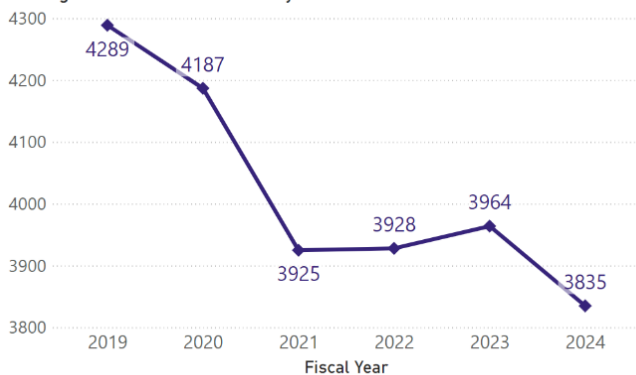
Thousands of [families across the state](#) are currently waiting for the EI services they need and are entitled to receive. **Service delays have nearly doubled to historic levels in the past two years**, with over 9% of children waiting to receive services in FY24. In addition, hundreds of families are waiting each month to complete the intake, evaluation and the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). This does not account for the unknown number of families who are referred to the program but do not receive a timely response or are unable to connect to the EI system at all to begin the intake process. Illinois law mandates that families referred to EI receive a response within two business days and have an evaluation completed, eligibility determined and IFSP created within 45 days. The state is required to initiate services within 30 days of parental consent to the IFSP. Despite these mandates, families are experiencing delays at every step of the process—primarily due to a workforce shortage. The harm caused to children and families is irreparable.

Average Service Delays by Fiscal Year



Hundreds of EI providers have left the field since 2020 to work in other settings that offer higher pay.

Average Number of Providers by Fiscal Year



Service delays are tied directly to the program's ongoing workforce crisis. Illinois' EI workforce faces several challenges including **high caseloads, low compensation, and high turnover**. Most providers work as fee-for-service independent contractors and are **not paid for travel time or missed/canceled appointments, often do not receive health benefits**, and receive limited, if any, compensation for reflective supervision or professional development. While active cases continue to increase, the system has **lost nearly 500 providers each year** over the past 5 years, as providers leave the program to work in hospitals, schools, private practices, or other settings.

Illinois provider reimbursement rates are significantly lower than other states, and far below the true cost of delivering services.

In a [statewide survey](#), financial and compensation issues were reported as the biggest challenges to recruiting and retaining the EI workforce. This past year, Illinois has invested in [cross-state research](#), cost modeling, and time-use studies that demonstrate these challenges and provide evidence-based recommendations for system improvements. Findings show that **only approximately 36% of providers' time spent is billable, and to adequately compensate EI providers, rates need to reflect and account for the full amount of time it takes to provide a service.** Overall, providers in Illinois are not adequately compensated compared to their counterparts in other states as **many states offer providers significantly higher rates than Illinois**, along with additional benefits.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW – BABIES CAN'T WAIT.

The Illinois General Assembly has an opportunity to address the Early Intervention program's stubbornly high service delays and workforce crisis. **We urge the legislature to increase funding for the Early Intervention program by \$60 million in the FY26 budget, allowing IDHS to authorize a substantial rate increase for providers, and ensuring a commitment to Smart Start Illinois by including significant multi-year investments for Early Intervention.** More therapists will leave the program entirely without immediate action, causing further harm to infants, toddlers, and their families. **The time to act is now.**

Sign this petition started by Illinois Early Intervention parents & caregivers to support increased funding for EI in the FY26 state budget!



*For more information, please contact:
Zareen Kamal, Start Early, zkamal@startearly.org*