



Raising Illinois

2025 Priorities

on Behalf of Expecting Families, Infants & Toddlers

As we look to the year ahead, we are emboldened to secure and build on the advancements we've made for Illinois' youngest children, families and those who care for them. Raising Illinois' policy priorities for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY 2025) present a bold but achievable vision that will strengthen services for children during their most formative years—the first three. Our priorities can only be made possible with advocates statewide united in a commitment to advancing transformative change, driving forward key legislative priorities and supporting system improvements.

Raising Illinois, powered by Start Early, is a collective effort to close the opportunity gap for our earliest learners. We are a partnership of diverse individuals and organizations across Illinois committed to supporting our youngest generation by ensuring families can access high-quality health care, engage in quality learning experiences and establish economic security.

This document outlines Raising Illinois' goals for FY 2025, across the coalition's four priority areas and eight interconnected strategies within the **Illinois Prenatal-to-Three Agenda**. As organized in this document, efforts will be advanced through budget advocacy, legislative advocacy, administrative and implementation advocacy and public awareness, engagement and mobilization. We encourage you to join us as we strive together to accomplish these priorities, amplify efforts and share information about our collective work. Visit www.raisingillinois.org/get-involved to join the Raising Illinois coalition and be a part of our robust and diverse advocacy commitment to Illinois' families and young children.



Our Mission

Together, we must address the root causes of disparities and create an equitable and cohesive early childhood development support system for expecting families, infants and toddlers and the communities in which they live. We believe race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or ability should not determine the opportunities and, ultimately, the success a child experiences in life.

Our Vision

Every expecting family, infant and toddler in Illinois should have equitable access to affordable high-quality learning experiences, health services and economic supports that they need during their most formative years—creating the strongest foundation for their success in school and life.



POLICY PRIORITY: HEALTHY PARENTS & BABIES

Comprehensive Perinatal Supports



Budget

- Secure **targeted state funding in FY 2026** for the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (IHFS) to continue improving **equitable access to comprehensive maternal health services**, including prenatal and postpartum mental health care



Legislation

- Extend **coverage for reproductive health and related services** under the IHFS Family Planning Program to otherwise eligible Illinoisans **regardless of immigration status**
- Pass the **Strengthening Mental Health and Substance Use Parity Act**, which would improve access to behavioral health treatment by reducing commercial insurance coverage restrictions and building network adequacy



Administration and Implementation

- Identify and establish a **statewide administrative home for Universal Newborn Support Services (UNSS)** to coordinate community expansion and reach more families
- Continue advancing key strategies within the **Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant Action Plan**, administered by IDPH
- Fully implement **Medicaid coverage for services provided by doulas, nurse midwives, lactation specialists and home visitors** as directed under the Improving Health Care for Pregnant and Postpartum Individuals Act (SB 967; Pub. Act 102-665)
- Implement state legislation passed in FY 2024:
 - SB 3130 (Pub. Act 103-777), **establishing pregnancy as a qualifying life event** for special enrollment in a health insurance plan once the state-based exchange is operational
 - Family Recovery Plans Implementation Task Force Act** (SB 3136; Pub. Act 103-941), creating an inter-agency task force to develop recommendations for Illinois to implement a model for serving infants with prenatal substance exposure that is less punitive for families
 - Liam’s Law** (SB 3182; Pub. Act 103-948), requiring hospitals to notify the gestational parent of a stillborn fetus of the **parent’s right to receive a certificate of birth resulting in stillbirth**
 - HB 5142 (Pub. Act 103-720), **requiring commercial health insurance to cover services** for pregnancy, postpartum and newborn care **provided by doulas, midwives and lactation consultants**, as well as related medical supplies, starting in 2026
 - HB 5493 (Pub. Act 103-718), **prohibiting prior authorization** by health insurers for **obstetric or gynecologic care**



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Engage expecting parents, new families and health professionals in partnership with the Illinois Maternal Health Task Force and Illinois Public Health Institute **to better understand the new Medicaid provider types and benefits** to support maternal and infant health
- Uplift efforts by the **Illinois Workgroup to Improve Obstetric Care and Availability in Rural Areas** to address geographic disparities in access to obstetric care and eliminate maternity care deserts
- Continue socializing key findings from the third release of the **Illinois Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Report**, published by IDPH

POLICY PRIORITY: HEALTHY PARENTS & BABIES

Strengthened Home Visiting System



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$75M in FY 2026 for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to expand the Early Childhood Block Grant**, with at least 25% of new funding set aside for Prevention Initiative, including home visiting programs
- **Increase state funding by \$5M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to expand the Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting programs** to continue improving provider compensation and expanding access



Administration and Implementation

- As part of the transition to the **new Illinois Department of Early Childhood**, include a **statewide data system, saturation goals, new workforce pipeline opportunities** and other stakeholder recommendations for home visiting services
- Submit the state plan amendment for federal approval of **Medicaid coverage of evidence-based home visiting services**
- Include guidance and flexibility on program expansion, incentives and purchasing in the **IDHS Home Visiting Expansion Notice of Funding Opportunity for FY 2026**
- Provide the budget sample tool to all grantees receiving **ISBE Prevention Initiative Home Visiting awards** to better support program operation
- Develop a **new home visiting credential** through the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and leverage the credential to build workforce compensation and diversity



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Continue increasing **public understanding of home visiting and its benefits** through messaging materials, with particular focus on fatherhood engagement and home visitor descriptions
- Launch a statewide **home visitor appreciation campaign**



POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Accessible Family- and Center-based Care & Learning



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$115M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to expand Smart Start Child Care**, including the Smart Start Workforce Compensation Grants (\$110M) and the Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program (\$5M)
- **Increase state funding by \$75M in FY 2026 for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to expand the Early Childhood Block Grant**, with at least 25% of new funding set aside for Prevention Initiative, including center-based early care and learning programs
- **Increase state funding by \$55M in FY 2026 for IDHS to accommodate the growing subsidy caseloads of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)**, as well as raise rates by 6% for home-based providers and 3% for center-based programs



Legislation

- Collect data on **early childhood workforce benefits use** with the long-term goal of expanding CCAP eligibility to improve educator recruitment and retention
- Improve state agency efficiencies, communication, enrollment procedures and **other child care licensing functions**



Administration and Implementation

- Ensure the **Smart Start Workforce Grants, Smart Start Quality Support Program and other resources are responsive to provider concerns from both home- and center-based programs** and prioritize expanding the supply and quality of infant-toddler care and learning
- Continue incorporating provider recommendations into the **FY 2026 Early Childhood Block Grant Request for Proposals**, such as a process for converting lost preschool slots into infant-toddler slots, planning grants and ramp-up supports for new grantees and subgrantees, including Family Child Care providers
- Award more **Early Childhood Construction Grants** to community-based organizations and provide flexibility for programs to use funds to make quality improvements, not just expand capacity



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Educate state lawmakers and the public on the **need for more qualified infant-toddler educators in communities statewide** to increase the supply and quality of infant-toddler care and learning

POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Optimized Early Intervention Services



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$60M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services' Early Intervention (EI) program** to substantially raise rates for providers and more effectively serve families



Administration and Implementation

- Identify and establish **funding and payment structures that better support the full cost of providing EI services** by leveraging findings from the recently completed cost model
- Increase the **number of children and families accessing EI services**, with a focus on children under age one and children who meet automatic eligibility criteria, by:
 - Implementing statewide improvements for the **timely connection of neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) families** to EI services
 - Continuing implementation of **automatic EI eligibility for children with substantiated cases of abuse and neglect**, as authorized by HB 4242 (Pub. Act 102-926)
 - Strengthening the **knowledge and understanding of automatic eligibility criteria among primary referral sources** by supporting professionals and systems that refer children who automatically qualify for services, including in-home nurses
- Reduce service delays by **modifying and expanding models of service delivery**, with a focus on addressing disparities in race and geography, as well as for families with complex needs



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Mobilize families, providers and other stakeholders to advocate for **increased state investment in EI** through lawmaker outreach, petitions, media coverage and other activities
- Improve **public awareness of families' procedural rights** regarding EI services and support parents in **filing state complaints** after a violation of EI timelines



POLICY PRIORITY: FINANCIALLY SECURE FAMILIES
Family-friendly Work Policies



Legislation

- Establish a **statewide paid family and medical leave insurance program**, with substantial protections for low-wage workers and sufficient time off for new parents and infants to bond
- Require employers statewide to provide **time off for working parents with an infant in the neonatal intensive care unit**



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Mobilize families, employers and other stakeholders to advocate for **paid family and medical leave** through lawmaker outreach, storytelling and other activities
- Inform working parents of the **paid time off protections available** across the City of Chicago, Cook County and the rest of the state



POLICY PRIORITY: FINANCIALLY SECURE FAMILIES

Income Supports for Families



Budget

- Increase state funding by \$50M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Revenue to double the value of the state-level Child Tax Credit for eligible families beginning in tax year 2025
- Increase state funding beyond \$1M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to expand the Diaper Distribution Pilot Program or another diaper benefit to serve more communities



Legislation

- Establish a **state-level guaranteed income or similar unconditional cash assistance program**, or a task force to inform the development of such a model for ensuring families with young children can meet their material needs



Administration and Implementation

- Adopt the **Internal Revenue Service's Direct File tool with state filing integration** so working families can file both their federal and state taxes more easily and at no cost
- Establish **coordination and alignment provisions in the next Medicaid Managed Care contracts to improve food assistance referrals, certification and participation** for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)
- Increase **WIC outreach and referrals for families enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs**, through the multi-year collaboration between IDHS and the Illinois Head Start Association
- Implement the **IDHS Diaper Distribution Pilot Program** in two communities to mitigate diaper need for participating families and demonstrate potential for expansion



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Amplify **public awareness of the state-level Child Tax Credit** to promote family access and uptake
- Increase the **WIC coverage rate**, particularly for children ages 1-3, through **outreach and mobile enrollment campaigns** both statewide and in the City of Chicago

POLICY PRIORITY: STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE

Cross-system Preparation, Professional Development & Support



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$12M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) to expand the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE),** restoring a portion of the scholarships available to incumbent educators after significant reductions in FY 2025
- **Sustain or increase state funding in FY 2026 for ISAC to continue operating the Human Services Professional Loan Repayment Program,** incentivizing recruitment and retention of qualified staff at community-based human services agencies, including those that serve expecting families, infants and toddlers



Administration and Implementation

- Identify and establish a statewide administrative home for **Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health (I/ECMH) Consultation** to implement equity analysis recommendations, improve accessibility and increase workforce utilization
- Advance opportunities to leverage the ECACE program to expand **degree pathways for infant-toddler educators from underrepresented backgrounds**
- Continue convening communities of practice to train more practitioners to use **DC:0-5, an age-appropriate mental health diagnostic tool**, in their clinical work with infants and toddlers
- Develop **cross-training offerings** that meet professional development requirements across early childhood provider types



Public Awareness & Engagement

- Continue elevating and disseminating **I/ECMH Consultation public awareness campaign materials** to early childhood educators, families and other stakeholders statewide



POLICY PRIORITY: STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE

Strong State & Community Structure



Budget

- **Sustain or increase state funding in FY 2026 to continue transitioning to the Illinois Department of Early Childhood and building the capacity of regional intermediaries**, without reappropriating existing dollars from programs that serve expecting families, infants and toddlers



Legislation

- Amend the **Department of Early Childhood Act** (SB 1; Pub. Act 103-594) to improve how the new agency transition process prioritizes the needs of expecting families, infants and toddlers



Administration and Implementation

- Improve prenatal-to-age-three service delivery through **ongoing state and regional alignment** between the Office of the Governor, state agency leaders, the Early Learning Council, Birth to Five Illinois and the Early Childhood Education and Care Transition Advisory Committee
- Build capacity for the **new Illinois Department of Early Childhood** to:
 - **Effectively integrate data** to simplify family applications, intake and referrals
 - **Support cross-system governance** for Universal Newborn Support Services, Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and inclusion
 - **Collaborate across agencies** to facilitate Medicaid financing and enable greater family participation in maternal and child health initiatives and nutrition and cash assistance programs



Public Awareness and Engagement

- Continue increasing awareness of the **Illinois Cares for Kids web portal** as a tool for collaborative referrals across family-serving systems