



Hub State Spotlight: Early Childhood Investment Corporation, Michigan

Alicia Guevara Warren, Director of Statewide Policy Initiatives

The NCIT Newsletter offers *Spotlights*, a regular monthly feature that provides an ongoing opportunity to share the work happening at the state or community level, and foster connections among grantees. This document highlights the work of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, the state grantee for Michigan.

Early Childhood Investment Corporation's Prenatal-to-Three Goals

Our big buckets of work include the following:

1. As Think Babies Michigan policy collaborative, we are working towards making Michigan a top state in which to have a baby.
2. We are exploring how to expand access and enrollment in several key programs that we know are important for essential health, development, and social-emotional support for infants and toddlers, such as home visiting and early intervention.
3. We are also looking at how to increase the number of infants and toddlers who have access to and can be enrolled in high-quality, affordable child care.

Our specific strategies for how to get there include focusing on equity and the cross-sector infant/toddler workforce, maximizing federal funding, strengthening how families learn about and access programs, and continuing to be an active partner in the many different initiatives that are underway in Michigan right now.

Challenges to Achieving Our Goals

Some of the work we are doing in Michigan is challenging, regardless of the pandemic -- trying to reach all lawmakers, ensuring we have data and information at the local level to help educate policy makers, and the political environment in general. As we work within a politically divided environment, we are trying hard to ensure bipartisan support for all of the different policy strategies that we are taking on; we know it is the only way we are going to be able to get things passed in the state.

COVID has made it a little bit more difficult to access policymakers. They are still taking meetings, but they are a little less available. There have been many Zoom meetings with them, and committee hearings are still broadcast live on the web but it is harder than before. In this virtual environment, people have to be mobilized in a very different way. We have to ensure our partners that are part of the collaborative, such as our parent leaders, can still have meetings with lawmakers and that they are able to share their stories and have their voices heard. In addition, a lot of the work that we are doing with Think Babies Michigan is about mobilizing people to engage in the policy change process. Again, this is more challenging in a virtual environment.

Our Stakeholders

Through a planning grant, we were able to engage over 950 people from across the state to help determine what our policy priorities and focus areas should be if we want to create a strong infant/toddler system for the state of Michigan. A lot of those folks have continued to be engaged now that we have shifted to putting all of this into action. We have grown into an over 1,400-member diverse collaborative that engages folks from across the state, including parents, researchers, advocacy organizations, and government staff.

We engage the membership through a monthly newsletter shared via email. Members take part in work groups that are created and a lot of information sharing takes place, as do efforts to mobilize them around any kind of action alerts that come up.

We have an approximately 30-member diverse steering committee that acts as an advisory body, with members focusing on various early childhood issues areas. The committee includes non-profits and government agencies; its members, who come from both local communities and statewide organizations, work to mobilize their own networks into action. Thirty percent of the steering committee are parent leaders who are from different parts of the state and have experience with different services and programs. They meet on a quarterly basis, helping to give direction to how we move the work forward, engage the larger collaborative, and gain membership. We also discuss legislative strategy and other opportunities for partnerships and collaboration. They help us stay grounded, understand what this work should look like, and know what the impact really is. Their guidance is key.

Then we have our leadership group, which is our executive committee, with ECIC acting as the coordinator of the work. This group is made up of four different organizations: the Michigan League for Public Policy, Michigan's Children, Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, and Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership. There are also two parent leaders on the executive committee, one of whom is a tribal leader from the northern part of the state, which is more rural. The other parent leader is a father from Southeast Michigan who does a lot of work in the fatherhood space.

We do a lot of work with parents, in particular. They not only serve on the two committees, but they also co-chair and help lead work groups. Some parents do not serve in these roles but are engaged in the broader work of the coalition. All the parent leaders are engaged in the advocacy work and we try to make sure that they have the tools and the resources they need to be able to engage in the policy work.

We are working on building additional partnerships with the business community, hoping to do a lot more in that space as we move into year two. We have started to build some of the foundational work that needs to be done, but we are still working on that.

We anticipate that opportunities will soon arise to engage faith-based leaders as well, particularly regarding childcare. We are looking forward to growing our coalition and continuing to focus on diversifying it. We are surveying the membership right now so that we can focus our outreach efforts to make sure we have all the right people engaged in these conversations.

How This Work Gets Accomplished

We really lean on our partners to do the outreach to make those connections. We think of our executive committee and steering committee members in particular as being ambassadors of the Think Babies Michigan work, so that they are talking to the folks in their networks about the work. The coalition has developed resources they can share with people to introduce them to Think Babies Michigan. When new partners are introduced, the committees think through what their role might be and how we can connect them to some of the specific things that we are working on at the time. It is a team effort.

Our parents are not just invited to sit at the table; they are invited to be decision-makers at the table with us. We do a lot of work to engage our parents and to prepare them to be able to feel empowered to help drive decision-making. We work to engage parent leaders at every point of our process, including deciding what our deliverables, strategies, and priorities are going to be. They are truly valued partners in all of this work.

Our collaborative is very committed to equity. Our number one policy priority is to ensure that neither race nor income nor zip code determines a child's destiny in Michigan. A lot of our work is about pulling that equity thread throughout our strategies and policy priorities and trying to approach things with that equity lens. For example, even within our work groups, we wanted to ensure that the work was grounded in equity from the very beginning. In fact, as we launched different work groups this past fall, we invited Child Trends to do a training with the members on how to use the data and ground the work of the group in equity.

Collaboration with the Community Grantee

First Steps Kent has a seat on our steering committee, so it is part of the work that we are doing. We make sure that they are engaged in, for example, our messaging development to ensure that we are aligned and singing the same song. As things start to develop a little further, there will probably be more opportunity for partnership on policy work in year two.

We Cannot Do This Without Parents

The most important thing about the Michigan work is the parent engagement piece. Our parent leaders have been critical to helping to drive our work. Having them engaged to help us see things from their experiences and perspectives and having them as part of the process has been key to making the work even more meaningful.