

**House Bill 513 Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program - Established**

House Way and Means Committee

February 17, 2022

Position: Support

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. MHAMD and our Children's Behavioral Health Coalition appreciate this opportunity to support House Bill 513 for its positive impacts on infant and early childhood mental wellbeing.

HB 513 would establish an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program within the State Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Development, responsible for referring children and families in need of intensive mental or behavioral health services to appropriate clinics or programs; training, coaching, and mentoring teachers and caregivers to address challenging behaviors; building partnerships with community resources; and working to ensure children have stable, quality child care programs. HB 513 also includes an annual appropriation for the fund.

The Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Consultation Program is a crucial program for early identification of behavioral and emotional problems in children aged 0-5. Mental Health consultants currently provide consultation at no charge for childcare or educational setting personnel who have a child of concern in their setting. The consultants may make recommendations for interventions in the center or may refer a child or family out for further assessment or treatment.

This program is currently administered on a county or regional basis and has struggled to remain steadily funded. These ECMH consultation programs have been an important referral source to the preschool teams at many area hospitals and play a critical role in identifying children very early, which saves money down the road. Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Project services include:<sup>1</sup>

- Observation and assessment of children and the childcare environment using research-based tools;
- Partnering with childcare providers to deliver training, mentoring, and coaching to help create environments that better support the social and emotional needs of young children;

---

<sup>1</sup> MSDE, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Consultation Project.  
<https://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health-iecmh-consultation-project>

*For more information contact:*

*Margo Quinlan, Director of Youth & Older Adult Policy: 410-236-5488 / [mquinlan@mhamd.org](mailto:mquinlan@mhamd.org)*

- Increasing childcare staff skills in addressing the social and emotional needs of children to improve readiness for school;
- Working with childcare providers to help retain and serve children with behavioral and mental health needs; and
- Forging positive relationships with providers and families.

Investment in infant and early childhood brain development has impacts on preventing the achievement gap, improving health outcomes, and boosting lifetime earnings. There is an overall return on investment through better outcomes in education, health, sociability, economic productivity and reduced crime.<sup>2</sup>

Expansion of the ECMH Program would tie directly to Maryland's increased awareness of and response to Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs. About 50% of children are exposed to a traumatic event, and as many as 67% of trauma survivors experience lasting psychosocial impairment. Trauma can affect a child's brain and delay certain development which can make it harder for the child to concentrate and study. These ACEs have been found to have a direct impact on the normative development and lifelong health of individuals. ACE's include extreme poverty, family problems, experiencing or witnessing violence, abuse and discrimination. All of these can be extremely traumatic for children. ACEs are a significant risk factor for mental health and substance use disorders and can impact prevention efforts.

The most profound impact we can make on substance use disorders (SUD) is prevention - supporting parents of young children, as a community, can help to alleviate stressors that ultimately contribute to infants and toddlers not receiving the consistent nurturance they need to develop coping skills and neuropathways for soothing. The development of the dopaminergic pathways in the first two years has the most profound impact on whether or not an individual can learn to self soothe (through a consistent, attuned, attentive adult presence) or if they begin to habitually seek external resources to soothe their stress – a precursor for SUD. This might include prenatal support groups, SUD treatment for pregnant parents, parenting groups, subsidized daycare or other daycare support, case management for young families, support navigators for young families, and support for parents in the hospital after delivery.

This investment in infant and childhood mental health would support Maryland's youngest during a time of critical need for their development and can help further build the resiliency of our communities as a whole. For these reasons, Mental Health Association of Maryland, and our Children's Behavioral Health Coalition, request a favorable report on HB513.

---

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, J. (2017). "4 Big Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Development." <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/4-big-benefits-of-investing-in-early-childhood-development/>