



Kennedy Krieger Institute

DATE: January 29, 2025

BILL NO: Senate Bill 359

COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation

TITLE: Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program – Funding -
Alterations

POSITION: Support (with modifications)

**Kennedy Krieger Institute supports Senate Bill 359 - Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program – Funding -
Alterations.**

Bill Summary: Senate Bill 359 provides a continuation of the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program – Funding - Alterations. The purpose of the Program is to provide grants to providers that specialize in providing child care and early childhood education to children under the age of 6 years who have developmental delays, physical disabilities, or delays in social, emotional, or behavioral functioning.

The Program officially took effect in Maryland on April 12, 2022. The Program’s grants sought to incorporate the services formally provided under the Medically Fragile grant. The broad range of medical conditions, developmental and physical disabilities, and behavioral issues present with resource needs that require a full array of skilled professionals. Since 2022, the identified programs have provided reports on the cost per child of providing services and the funding sources.

Background:

Kennedy Krieger Institute is dedicated to improving the lives of children and young adults with developmental, behavioral, cognitive, and physical challenges. Kennedy Krieger’s services include inpatient, outpatient, school-based, and community-based programs. Over 27,000 individuals receive services annually at Kennedy Krieger. We employ close to 3,000 persons who play a vital role in our mission to transform the lives of children with disorders of the brain.

Families and caregivers for children with complex medical needs have very few resources for inclusive, medically, and developmentally supported early childhood education. We believe our mission is to serve children and their families through a stimulating MSDE (Maryland State Department of Education) accredited (five-star Maryland EXCELS rating) integrated early childhood education center. As you are aware, Kennedy Krieger is home to the Early Childhood Development and Education Center (EDEC, formerly known as PACT, Helping Children with Special Needs, Inc.) providing a continuum of programs offering early child care and education to children and families:

- EDEC World of Care: 6 weeks- age 5 educational child care with embedded nursing and therapies
- EDEC Early Learning Classrooms: inclusive 3-and 4- year-old preschool classrooms with diverse needs
- EDEC Southeast Early Head Start: 6 week- age 3 attachment-based and trauma-informed model of care
- CASSI Inclusive Pre-K: inclusive 3-and 4- year-old preschool classrooms with diverse needs

These programs are built on an inclusion model – bringing together typically developing children with those who are neurodiverse or have medical needs to learn and play together in a safe and supportive environment.

Rationale:

The ability of our early childhood programs to provide exemplary service for children with significant medical and/or developmental needs is in large part because of our highly skilled and educated workforce of teachers, support staff, and related service providers who dedicate themselves to the children and families we serve. Kennedy Krieger and our partners participating in the Therapeutic Child Care Program must rely heavily on government and philanthropic (both foundation and corporate) grants, as well as donations from private philanthropy, to continue programming to cover costs. We expect the same transition to kindergarten for children with such significant needs as we do for those who may be typically developing, without providing sufficient resources to support the needed differential learning environment and specialized learning approaches.

This legislation can create a permanent funding source that has not previously been present for early childhood providers serving children with medical fragility and developmental concerns. Kennedy Krieger strongly recommends a tiered cost model rather than a standardized cost per child. In 2021, the legislation established \$3,700,000 per year; there has been no adjustment for inflation, annual cost-of-living, nor the increasingly complex array of services our children and their families require each year, especially post-COVID-19.

To support the amendment to SB 359 related to a tiered model with a new 2025 based, Kennedy Krieger encourages the committee to review the three years of cost-per-child reports submitted by each program, showing the complexity of children served and the array of services provided—not all which were covered by the Therapeutic Child Care legislation. While we have four programs that are designated as Therapeutic Child Care Programs, each program’s funding is not determined by the developmental (to include behavioral), the medical acuity, nor the complexity of the child/family dynamic. The average cost may be higher, should a child need a dedicated aid, nurse, or other services not readily provided by the program. Each child and family requires individualized responses and planning to address their unique needs. We account for this range by supporting all children with and without disabilities through a customized child family learning plan as well as supporting children with disabilities through an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

Going forward, our early childhood programs can develop enhanced partnerships to support training, competency, and capacity building to provide exemplary service for enrolled children with significant needs. Kennedy Krieger’s EDEC has committed significant resources in supporting and retaining a highly skilled and educated workforce of teachers, support staff, and related service providers who dedicate themselves to the children and families we serve. Unfortunately, because of being a historically underpaid field, Kennedy Krieger, like fellow childcare programs, has struggled to retain and hire highly qualified staff.

We are confident that creating permanent and increased funding will enable us to continue to innovate in supporting the early childhood workforce, enhance service delivery models for our children, and result in a significant return on investment. Research has shown that effective early care and education make a difference and yield a significant return on investment, with the Bipartisan Policy Center citing that it is as much as \$13 for every dollar invested.¹

Renewing and expanding the Therapeutic Child Care fund to allow the full implementation of staffing and practices proven to benefit children is not simply good for children, but society at large. The availability of research-based therapeutic early learning enables parents to work, helping to address Maryland’s higher-than-the-national-average reduction in prime-aged women in the workforce. But more than that, it gives these families peace of mind as their children thrive. Early learning and preschool have a considerable impact on the health and well-being of families. High-quality programs generate long-term impacts to prevent or reverse the damaging effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), improve access to nutrition, and enhance a child’s cognitive and physical development; a particularly critical need given the exponential increase in mental health challenges being demonstrated by Maryland’s youngest learners and their families post Pandemic.

While we applaud the allocation of funding under the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program, it is critical that these funds adjust to inflation and the increased cost of providing efficacious care that meets demand in subsequent years.

Summary:

Enacting the Therapeutic Child Care Grant Program – Funding - Alterations will allow Maryland families to have access to the highest quality of early childhood education programming, while decreasing the burdens placed on the child, family, and the system. We thank Delegates Mireku–North, Atterbeary, Foley, Kaufman, Miller, Solomon, Terrasa, and Vogel and the Ways and Means and Appropriations Committee for their leadership on this issue. It is time for Maryland to join other States to avoid being the last to readjust post pandemic in early childhood education.

Kennedy Krieger Institute requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 359 with consideration of annual funding adjustment to cover costs.

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¹ Bipartisan Policy Center (2023). *Investments in the Future Workforce*. Washington: DC.
<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BPC-ECI-Bipartisan-Toolkit-2023-Investments-in-the-Future-Workforce.pdf>