



Together for
Young Children
with Disabilities

March 18, 2026

State Advocacy for Early Intervention

Challenges and Opportunities



Why Focus on Young Children with Disabilities and Delays?

- Civil rights is critical context.
- Significant and growing population of children.
- Early Intervention and inclusion work.
- Population vs. program approach.



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Aims:

- Strengthen early childhood systems so children with disabilities can access timely, high-quality, inclusive supports from birth through age five
- Build state advocacy capacity through shared learning, connection, and technical assistance.
- Elevate federal and state policy priorities that promote inclusion and family well-being
- Connect advocates across sectors and states to align strategies and accelerate change.



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Activities in Support of Early Intervention System Advocacy

- Our focus today: Landscape analysis of the state of state early intervention system policy and advocacy
- Advocates' Collective – listserv for state advocates, providers and family leaders, virtual meetings about key policy issues, webinars with national experts, [collecting and collating resources](#), and an in-person convening in Fall 2026
- Strategic Advocacy Roadmap (state focused) – informed by virtual meetings and finalized at in-person convening with policy solutions and advocacy resources



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Landscape Analysis of State Early Intervention System Advocacy

- Review of federal and state policies related to early intervention
- Interviews with advocates, providers and family leaders in 14 states (GA, IL, IN, KY, MD, MI, NC, NJ, NY, OH, OR, PA, RI, & TX)
- Identified systemic challenges, promising policy actions and effective advocacy strategies to improve the access to and quality of services for children and families in early intervention



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System Wide Challenges

- **Delays and waitlists** at every stage (referral, intake, evaluation, services), even though EI is a legal entitlement.
- **Workforce shortages** (SLPs, OTs, PTs) driven by stagnant reimbursement rates, high administrative burden, and competition from higher-paying sectors.
- **Chronic underfunding**, forcing many providers to operate at a loss or rely on private fundraising.
- **Inequitable access**: families of color, rural families, and families facing language or trust barriers wait longer and receive fewer services.
- **Babies under age 1 are underserved**—only ~1% receive EI nationally, despite the highest developmental risk.



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Policy Levers for Improvement

- Increase provider reimbursement rates using cost modeling to reflect real service delivery costs.
- Optimize Medicaid billing and reimbursement to draw down available federal funds and reduce administrative burden.
- Invest in workforce recruitment and retention, including better pay, mentoring, and streamlined onboarding.
- Improve eligibility policies, Child Find, and outreach, particularly for infants and underserved communities.
- Strengthen coordination across health, early childhood, and education systems, including transitions out of early intervention.



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Advocacy Strategies that Drive Change

- Build EI-specific policy expertise and capacity at the state level.
- Develop cross-sector coalitions of families, providers, advocates, and administrators.
- Elevate family and provider voices, paired with strong data and cost analyses.
- Leverage administrative and legislative relationships, not just legislation.
- Use data, research, and media strategically to build public and policymaker urgency.



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Key Takeaways from the Landscape

- ❖ State advocates are eager to learn, share and work more strategically together.
- ❖ There are a lot of opportunities for state advocates and national partners to work more effectively across our states for systems change.
- ❖ EI systems advocacy requires dedicated staff time, access to research and data, and strong coalition capacity, including provider and family advocacy leadership.
- ❖ Philanthropy plays a critical role in building an effective eco-system for EI advocacy.



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Every child has equitable
opportunity to reach their full
potential to thrive in school
and in life.

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