

Insights

How States Can Better Support Community Efforts



Health and human services, mental health services,

education, employment, the justice department, and housing—these are just a few of the many different state agencies that must work together to improve early childhood health outcomes. Together, they represent a more comprehensive early childhood system, one that accounts for the different needs families have depending on where they live, how much money they make, their education level, and the many other social determinants that affect their health and well-being.

Synergizing their work and making sure resources go to the right place at the right time gets complicated, though, explains Colleen Murphy, MAIECD, MSMOB, [NICHQ Project Director](#) for the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([ECCS CoIIN](#)).

“There’s no one-size-fits-all solution that state agencies can apply to communities across their state,” says Murphy. “Providing families with comprehensive services that actually fit their needs starts by elevating the work at the community level to inform policy and program improvements.”

This is what's happening in New York State, one of 12 ECCS CoIIN states working to improve developmental outcomes for children. For over four decades, New York State's Council on Children and Families—a neutral body within the state government—has helped health, education, and social services agencies collaborate to help keep families from falling through the cracks. After being awarded the ECCS Impact Grant in 2016, the Council's work has further focused on early childhood systems-building, as well as the imperative to support community efforts and use their successes and challenges to guide state policy and programs.

“The voices and accomplishments of the community should inform how our early childhood system needs to change,” explains Kristin Weller, M.S., who coordinates the Council on Children and Families' ECCS CoIIN work. “As state entities, we have to move away from any assumption of knowledge about what families need, instead acknowledging that those needs differ by community, from urban to suburban to rural, and look toward community voices to build change.”

How can state agencies and policy makers do this, though? How do we elevate community voices so that systems change reflects community needs? Below, Weller and her colleague, Ciarra Norwood, expand on New York's approach to synergizing state and community work, offering a valuable framework for other states to take up in their own systems-change efforts.

A Framework for Supporting Community Early Childhood Improvement Efforts

Convene a neutral body to bring different state agencies together

For different agencies to support communities, they need to work together instead of in silos. New York's Council on Children and Families, while operating within the state government, is a neutral body, with the goal of fostering collaboration and coordination among the 12 separate state agencies that serve children and families.

“Since we're a neutral body focused on collaboration, early childhood stakeholders from different sectors know they can trust us to remain unbiased,” explains Weller. “This makes it easier for us to bring everyone together regularly for Council meetings, where we discover shared goals and align our tactics and programs.”

During these meetings, Weller highlights the early childhood work happening at the community level, identifies how that work intersects with current state programs, and offers recommendations on how state-level initiatives can enhance and elevate community efforts.

Connect the community work with state-level policy influencers

“For policy change to be effective, it needs to be informed by communities,” says Weller, “but too often community voices are overlooked. And as a result, policy makers are insulated from the people that policy changes will most affect, and families and community members end up feeling invisible.”

To ensure that state-level influencers hear local voices, Weller hosts quarterly webinars where communities share their work with the state partners who can directly influence policy change. She also makes a point to connect every community initiative with an existing policy issue, so policy makers can clearly see how state-level policy changes will impact community efforts.

Focus on relationship building

“Developing authentic relationships with community organizations is at the core of how we do our work successfully,” says Norwood. “These relationships inspire true mutual collaboration between the state and the communities we’re trying to support.”

These relationships aren’t possible, though, unless communities know what the state is trying to accomplish. Since early childhood systems-change efforts can be confusing, Norwood recommends spending time up front developing a clear message about your state’s early childhood goals and why you’re invested in working with communities to pursue change.

For a successful relationship, communities also need to trust that state officials respect their work and value their needs, Weller adds.

“Attending local early childhood meetings helped us build rapport with community members, and establish a sense of transparency between state and community efforts; this tells them we are here to support, not micromanage, their work. We also highlight community initiatives in our monthly newsletter, which goes out to all partners. By sharing the limelight with our communities, we validate what they’ve accomplished and signify our willingness to support them.”

Know how to assess and respond to funding readiness

State agencies can play an important role in helping communities find funding for their early childhood initiatives. However, not all communities are positioned to capitalize on a funding stream for systems-building work.

“Funding is most effective when it goes to community initiatives that already have a rich network of local partners who are poised to work together collectively,” explains Weller. “But we have communities from all over the state, and their partnerships are all in different stages. We needed a way to determine who was at a stage to benefit from funding, and how we could support those who weren’t there yet.”

In response, New York is piloting a tool that assesses a community’s readiness for leveraging a collective action approach. The assessment tool evaluates the key components for collective action—such as community engagement and whether the community partnerships have a mechanism for shared measures—and provides a quantitative score that communities can share with the state. Along with demonstrating where funding might be of immediate benefit, the assessment results can help communities that have not yet achieved funding readiness: by revealing gaps in partnership, assessment helps communities envision their next steps and helps state agencies determine how to best support those efforts.

New York is one of 12 ECCS CoIIN Impact Grantee states. Over the next three years, they’ll work with their communities to enhance early childhood systems with the ultimate goal of increasing developmental skills among their communities’ 3-year-old children by 25 percent. Stay informed about their work by [signing up for NICHQ News](#).