

## Finding a Common Route: A Roadmap for Early Childhood Systems Collaboration

From 2020-2021, AMCHP staff provided intensive technical assistance to four states and jurisdictions (Indiana, Louisiana, Guam, and Mississippi) to pilot a framework for increasing state-level coordination among Title V, MIECHV, and ECCS programs. Representatives from each of the three programs and a family leader drafted an action plan to improve collaboration to achieve a mutual priority. Based on the pilot, AMCHP staff developed this roadmap that state-level early childhood program leaders and staff can use and tailor to increase collaboration on shared goals. Case studies from these four technical assistance opportunities are presented in a separate section of this Roadmap.

There are many initiatives or activities that Title V, MIECHV and ECCS programs can work on together to accomplish shared goals. Examples include:			
✓	Cross systems training and initiatives on breastfeeding, developmental screening, maternal depression screening, and equity	✓	Use integrated early childhood data to drive policy and decision making
✓	Improve identification of pregnancy-related depression and early identification systems for developmental screening and referral	✓	Partner on needs assessment activities for early childhood populations
✓	Partner on community coordination resources, like Help Me Grow, to support systems building, coordination, and alignment	✓	Develop early childhood “hubs” to support local programs and communities
✓	Build or enhance centralized intake and referral systems	✓	Embed a culture of meaningful family and community engagement and co-creation in all early childhood systems building efforts
✓	Develop or enhance integrated early childhood data systems	✓	Develop a strategic plan to guide racial equity in early childhood systems and programs, such as promoting equitable access to, and experience with, developmental health services for young children and families of color



For additional exemplar strategies of shared interest:

[HRSA and the U.S. Department of Education's Policy Statement to Support the Alignment of Health and Early Learning Systems](#)

[The Association for State and Territorial Health Official's Resources for Early Brain Development](#)



## Preparing for the Journey Getting on board



★ While preparing for the journey, consider your opportunities to carry out the recommendations for enhanced collaboration:

Develop relationships and partnerships across programs and agencies

Contribute to or embrace a clear, articulated vision for early childhood systems building

Develop leadership capacity to drive systems building and integration

1

### Agree on a journey of collaboration

The first step to improve collaboration is to ensure that the state early childhood programs' leadership or staff have reached a consensus that collaboration is an important strategy for accelerating overall improvements in early childhood outcomes. If early childhood program leaders have not yet established this mutual desire, they may need to take time to build relationships with key partners, have initial discussions on shared goals or priorities, and articulate the benefit of collaboration for early childhood systems building.

#### Form the team

Prior to convening state teams for implementation of this Roadmap framework, each interested state point of contact was tasked with identifying and recruiting representatives from each of the early childhood-related programs (focusing on Title V, MIECHV, and ECCS programs for the purposes of this effort). In addition, states were strongly encouraged to include a family and/or local community representative on their team to ensure that this voice would be equally valued and incorporated within decision-making from the start of this journey. AMCHP staff emphasized that selected representatives from each of the early childhood programs should have the experience and authority to decide on and time to commit to priorities and an eventual action plan. If members of the team have never worked together prior to this effort, it is critical to build in time to get to know one another's program goals, values, and audience. Ensuring that each team member has a baseline understanding of all represented programs is essential before moving to the next phase of the Roadmap.

2

### Pack your bags—gather individual program priorities and perceived barriers to collaboration.

Before convening the kickoff meeting, AMCHP staff asked each team member to articulate their represented program's priorities and to complete an online, anonymous assessment of the internal (organizational) and external barriers to collaboration with other early childhood programs in their state. Finally, if possible, invest in an outside facilitator for the duration of the Roadmap process. Regardless of who will be facilitating the process, ensure that the agenda and facilitation process are co-created with input from the full team.

3

## 1 First stop

### Plot the course:

#### Selecting a Shared Destination, Mapping Resources, and Assessing Systems Conditions



The first stop on the journey to meaningful collaboration is to bring the team together to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify and/or recommit to a shared early childhood priority
- Understand the key actors, connections, and patterns within their early childhood system
- Assess and map the resources that each team member brings to the effort to achieve the shared priority
- Diagnose the internal and external conditions keeping the current early childhood system in place
- Create a list of concrete next steps for collaboratively enhancing the early childhood system

When conducted in-person, AMCHP's technical assistance pilot devoted an entire day for this first stop meeting. Virtually, the first stop was conducted over three, 2.5-hour sessions. To achieve these objectives, AMCHP staff guided teams through the following itinerary for the first stop:

#### **Celebrate past successes and highlight current efforts.**

To kick off the first stop, state teams were prompted to share their past collaborative successes and their ongoing collaborative efforts. This collective effort is a strength-based approach to frame shared goals, commitments, and approaches for collaboration. A "brag wall" is an effective technique to facilitate this activity and was used for the meeting. (See **appendix B** for a template.) As outlined in adrienne maree brown's "Emergent Strategy," brag walls provide a space to regularly recognize and celebrate progress towards a goal.

The brag wall has three sections: (1) past successes, (2) current efforts, and (3) vision for the future. The vision for the future was not filled out during the first meeting. The state teams dedicated the rest of the day working through several processes to develop a shared vision.

#### **Select a shared destination (priority).**

Individual team members shared their prepared list of priorities of the program or group they represent. From these lists, the teams worked together to identify a list of common or overlapping priorities. Using this list of shared priorities, the teams used an [Impact Matrix Worksheet](#) (see **appendix C**) to collectively select the priority for the team to focus on as a catalyst for collaboration. The Impact Matrix Worksheet was selected because it has been demonstrated as a quality improvement methodology that can enable users to focus on selecting priorities that will have the most impact and be the most feasible given the team's available collective resources.

Once the team identifies a shared priority (or vision), the group can identify each program’s roles to advance the stated vision.

**Identify and map the relevant early childhood system actors and the team’s resources.**

AMCHP staff used [Foundation Strategy Group's \(FSG\) Guide to Actor Mapping](#) to facilitate an early childhood system actor mapping exercise. As it related to their selected shared priority, state teams mapped the key players, programs, and initiatives in their state’s early childhood system and the strength of relationships among them. The team members that were mapping the system defined the scope of the early childhood system. Simply deciding on the scale of the system to hone in on yielded important insights among state teams. Note that many techniques are available for systems analysis; however, AMCHP staff selected the actor mapping method as this method focuses on the stakeholders, or key players, within a system. The state teams valued the method they used to shed light on the “facilitators” for and the “blockages” that were influencing the level of connectedness of their state’s early childhood system stakeholders. Understanding these levers gave the teams insight into opportunities to enhance systems building efforts and invest in partnership-building. Once key system actors have been identified, consider using a tool like the [National MCH Workforce Development Center’s Asset Mapping process](#) (see instructions under “Using the Tool”) to facilitate an understanding of the resources that each team member can contribute toward achieving the shared priority. This knowledge will be useful during the action planning stop of the Roadmap.

**Assess systems conditions using FSG’s Water of Systems Change Framework.**

During the meeting, state teams used the [Water of Systems Change \(WoSC\) Action Learning Exercise resource](#) to complete internal (to their own organizations) and external assessments of the conditions perceived to be maintaining the status quo of the current early childhood system in their state. The WoSC framework articulates six conditions for systems

★ During the first stop, consider your opportunities to carry out the recommendations for enhanced collaboration:

Align with or articulate a state or jurisdiction-wide early childhood vision
Understand agency structures and governance that can promote collaboration and/or remove silos
Understand current and potential early childhood investments and how they align to the vision
Understand current investment in family engagement and leadership and where further investment is needed
Commit to engaging partners with purpose, particularly Medicaid, family leaders, and local partners
Commit to advancing equity as part of your collaborative work

change that range from structural (explicit), such as policies and practices, to transformative (implicit), which include mental models. Completion of this assessment results in a concrete list of opportunities to improve the early childhood system and can serve as a valuable tool for staying focused on systems-level change during the action planning process.

**Commit to engaging a variety of stakeholder perspectives.**

State teams committed to inviting additional key stakeholder perspectives to inform their efforts. Early and continuous engagement of stakeholder perspectives, particularly those of families and people with lived experience, is important to create buy-in for implementation of a collaborative action plan.

**Journey to the Next Stop:****Fueling Up for Collaborative Action Planning**

The next stop on the early childhood collaboration journey is to prepare for action planning. The time frame for completing this step should be limited to keep the project focus and momentum. In the technical assistance pilot, state teams had three months to prepare for collaborative action planning. Accordingly, state teams were encouraged to share outcomes from the “First Stop—Plot the Course” meeting with stakeholders that were identified as important for achieving the shared priority and to gather any additional information needed for the action planning process. State team members then gathered additional input from stakeholders to inform the creation of a collaborative action plan. For example, Louisiana surveyed all MCH staff in the Bureau of Family Health to understand current policies, practices, attitudes, and beliefs related to their shared priority. The team then used the “Water of Systems Change” framework to organize the survey results and present the results to the full MCH staff. Similarly, the Indiana team shared the meeting outcomes with their agency leadership to obtain the buy-in required to focus on collaboration among the programs as a shared priority.



While fueling up for collaborative action planning, consider your opportunities to carry out the recommendations for enhanced collaboration

Gather feedback on family and community-driven outcomes and how families and people with lived experience are engaged in current efforts

Examine how current policies, structures, and initiatives related to your goal can change to be more equitable

Engage partners and stakeholders in conversations on advancing your shared goal to garner buy-in

Identify systems-level initiatives to enhance alignment and collaboration related to your shared goal



**2** *Second stop*  
**Where the rubber meets the road:**

**Collaborative Action Planning**



The second stop is to reconvene the team to focus on the following objectives:

- Draft an action plan for working together on the shared priority, which includes clear mechanisms for continued collaboration and coordination
- Create an environment conducive for each state team member to take ownership and responsibility for implementing the drafted plan

The teams devoted another meeting to complete the collaborative action planning. The AMCHP technical assistance has only conducted the action planning virtually; AMCHP staff recommend splitting up the meeting into two, 2.5-hour sessions versus a one-day, 5- or 6-hour session. To continue the practice of celebrating successes and expressing enthusiasm about each team’s shared priority and progress, state teams began the meeting by revisiting their brag walls (see **appendix B**) to add their achievements over the previous three months. They reaffirmed their shared, early childhood systems-related priority by including that in the “future” panel of the brag wall. This second meeting used a facilitation methodology<sup>9</sup> that was effective for guiding state teams to draft a collaborative action plan for the next six months. The discussion topics included:

1. Key actions/tasks necessary to progress together toward the shared priority. These actions should address the systems conditions that were identified during the “first stop” as hindering progress toward the shared priority.
2. Clear timeframes for completing tasks
3. Based on the resources that each team member brings to the effort as defined during the asset mapping activity at the “first stop”, designation of person(s) responsible for ensuring tasks are completed
4. Mechanisms for ongoing collaboration and coordination among the team, including shared benchmarks (or measures) to promote accountability towards achieving their shared priority



During the second stop, consider your opportunities to carry out the recommendations for enhanced collaboration:

Apply an equity lens to critically analyze each step of the action plan

Articulate how families and communities are engaged in co-creating the action plan

Identify programmatic and/or structural mechanisms to embed collaboration

Prioritize systems-level drivers for action

Clearly outline each partners’ role and alignment with the shared goal

Identify and align shared measures for accountability

Identify opportunities for state-local coordination



**Sustaining Collaboration:**

**Plan a regular maintenance schedule**

Successful collaboration is a practice that continuously evolves based on changing factors, such as staff transitions, emerging priorities, and changing funding situations. The group of collaborators must be nimble and flexible to adjust to unpredictability. Teams must agree upon mechanisms for ensuring continued accountability for implementing the collaborative action plan in changing circumstances. To mitigate possible challenges, teams might consider scheduling recurring meetings with an agenda dedicated to the following:

- (1) Reviewing progress toward implementing the action plan and critically analyzing progress for equity—who is benefiting from progress and who is being harmed by the progress?
- (2) Assigning responsibility for implementing the next steps of the collaborative action plan based on progress since the prior meeting.
- (3) Refining the collaborative action plan if this becomes necessary.



★ While planning a maintenance schedule, consider your opportunities to carry out the recommendations for enhanced collaboration:

Identify new partnerships and funding to achieve the shared goal and vision
Invest further in family leadership and engagement
Enhance structures for state-local coordination
Use shared measures to assess progress and drive implementation and refinement of the plan
Continue to critically analyze progress using an equity lens
Listen to, engage, and partner with parents and caregivers from the communities that are most impacted by health inequity

# Conclusion

State Title V, MIECHV, and ECCS programs have many opportunities for alignment based on the overlapping priorities required of each program. Recommendations for maximizing synergy among the three programs are as follows:

- (1) Articulate a statewide or jurisdiction-wide early childhood vision
- (2) Promote agency structures that reduce silos among early childhood investments, including Title V, MIECHV, and ECCS programs. Consider, for example, forming interagency work groups, using an umbrella agency that houses all early childhood programs within it, or instituting advisory councils
- (3) Align all early childhood investments and new funding opportunities with the statewide early childhood vision
- (4) Ensure all early childhood investments are optimizing or partnering with Medicaid, as appropriate
- (5) Prioritize systems-level drivers as targeted areas for improvement
- (6) Align measures and coordinate measurement systems for increased accountability of shared results
- (7) Partner with purpose and regularly assess the role of partnerships
- (8) Invest in family engagement and leadership within early childhood system efforts
- (9) Build out structures for state-to-local coordination
- (10) Create a strong commitment to advancing equity within early childhood systems and outcomes

This resource also presents a roadmap framework that can be used to strengthen the collaboration among Title V, MIECHV, and ECCS within states and jurisdictions. The recommendations and roadmap framework should help state-level early childhood program leaders accelerate improved outcomes among children.

