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Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health in Alaska

A STATEWIDE NEEDS
ASSESSMENT



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Partnerships



**Pediatric Health
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Training**

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Report Sections



Introduction to IECMH

IECMH Services and Supports in Alaska

Workforce & Professional Development

Funding for IECMH Services & Supports

System Coordination

Recommendations

Project Overview

Purpose

Identify needs and opportunities to improve supports and services for infant & early childhood mental health (IECMH) in Alaska, including the goals and priorities in the Early Childhood Alaska Strategic Direction for 2020-2025.

Methods (Nov 2023-Apr 2024)

Secondary indicator data (public & requested from programs)

Survey of recently active early childhood coaches and IECMH consultants (n=27)

16 interviews with state-level leadership

16 interviews with program-level leaders

5 focus groups with families of young children across Alaska (n=34)

Awareness of IECMH in Alaska

Both providers and families have varied levels of familiarity and understanding of IECMH.

Limited familiarity reduces family access to services.

Families are frustrated with the lack of resources throughout Alaska.

Stigma plays a key role in familiarity and comfort discussing this topic.

"I think sometimes people just take a wait-and-see attitude... 'Let's just see [if] they grow out of this; this'll be fine.' Or people don't recognize the impact of trauma - the kids are too young to understand it, that they'll never remember... And I think that's a challenge - for families to actually access services. And then it's just finding a resource in your area that has good training and information."

- Key Informant

Defining Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)

IECMH is the ability of young children to “form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community, and culture.”*

**The Basics of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: A Briefing Paper.*
ZERO TO THREE, 2017



IECMH Services & Supports In Alaska



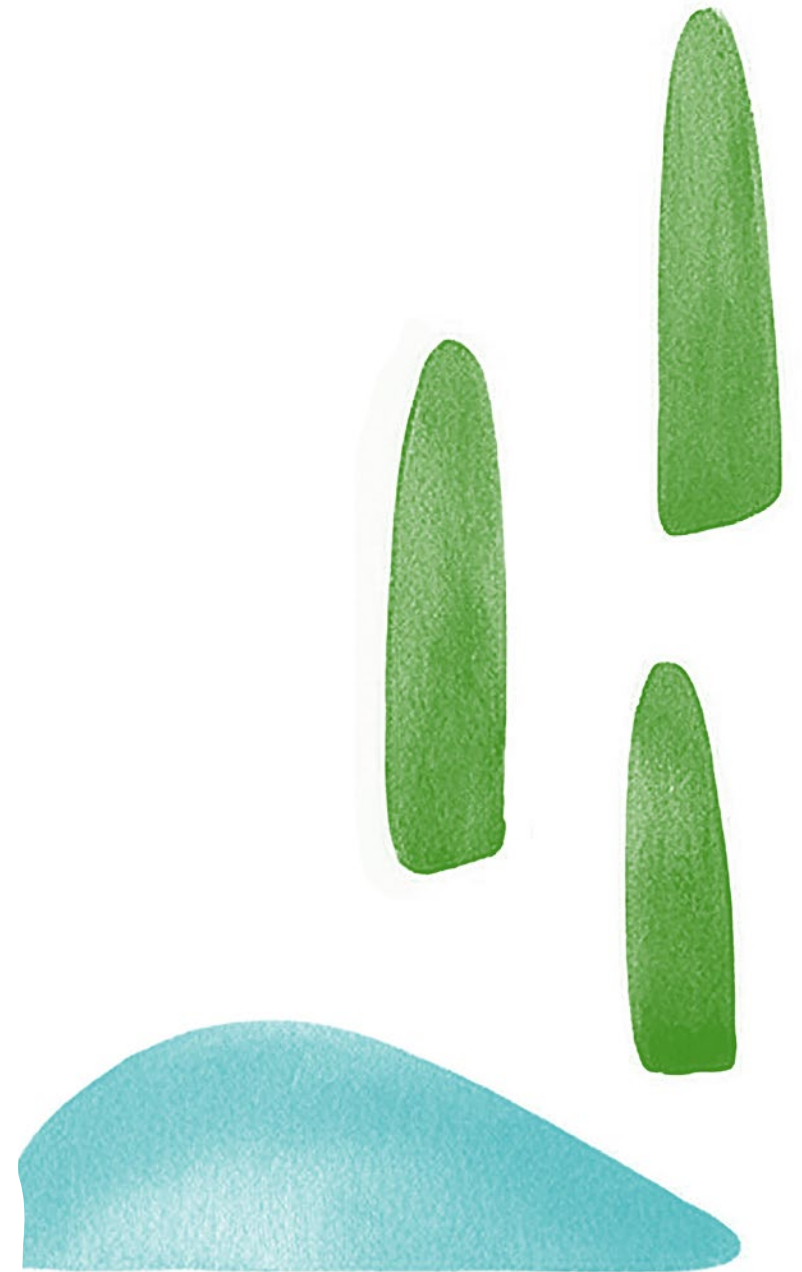
Workforce – IECMH Consultants

IECMH Consultation is a prevention-based approach that pairs a mental health consultant with adults who work with infants and young children in different settings where they learn and grow, such as child care, preschool, home visiting, early intervention, and their home.

- There is no state registry of IECMH consultants, or specific credential or endorsement in Alaska, making it difficult to determine the number working in the state and their qualifications
- IECMH consultants often do not have access to reflective supervision/consultation

Workforce Challenges

- IECMH-focused professions such as IECMH consultants, counselors, and therapists are particularly understaffed
 - Working with young children requires specialized training, incurring additional costs without increased earning potential
- Few mental health professionals will serve young children, and many have extensive waitlists
 - Families reported waiting several months to a couple of years



Funding

There is no evidence of widespread state or local investment in IECMH services and supports, or the infrastructure to plan, coordinate, and monitor how well existing services and supports meet needs

Woven into
program
funding

- Most common
- Some IECMH requirements do not include additional funding
- Often for training & workforce development

Grant
funding

- For specific services and system-level initiatives
- Instrumental in the state, though less stable and sustainable

Health
insurance

- Intervention-focused services
- Medicaid 1115 expanded to some prevention services
- Most providers only accept private insurance

Recommendations

1. Create a state-level position to coordinate IECMH services
2. Launch a social marketing campaign about IECMH
3. Increase early childhood workforce training & professional development on IECMH
4. Build statewide IECMH consultation capacity
5. Grow Alaska's behavioral health workforce
6. Increase access to basic early childhood services & supports

Cross-Cutting Themes

- Rural/urban considerations
- Cultural appropriateness
- Emphasis on promotion/prevention
- Family and provider voice in decision-making

System Coordination



The IECMH landscape is disjointed, piecemeal, and emergent. Leadership, coordination, and funding to strengthen it remain elusive.

- There is a noted lack of understanding of IECMH among state leaders.
 - As a result, system coordination falls on a few key individuals who champion efforts
- Lack of leadership around IECMH is closely tied to other perceived deficits in the state's early childhood system including lack of investment and overall reliance on individual champions

System Coordination

There has been recent, significant growth in IECMH in Alaska, though without statewide coordination programs develop their own understanding, requirements, and approach to IECMH.

Opportunities exist for growth & formalization to:

- Integrate IEMCH into the broader system
- Grow the workforce
- Increase access to services

Thank you!

Questions?

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