

'Think Babies Michigan' campaign begins

The "Think Babies Michigan" campaign has launched with a \$1.5 million multiyear grant from the Pritzker Children's Initiative to improve prenatal-to-age 3 outcomes for kids in the state.

This can help vulnerable families whose situations have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, said Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, in a Wednesday media briefing.

"The entirety of this effort is really focused on making Michigan a better place for low-income families, or lower-income families, to have and raise families, and we know through a variety of measures and ways that the pandemic has impacted working-class families and low-income families much more significantly than it has others," Gillard said.

He said the federal government is starting to address the situation, noting the need is greater than ever.

"The pandemic has really challenged all of us in society, but it really has challenged the children in lower- and middle-income working families the most," Gillard said.

High-quality child care will help parents stay at work, which is "critically" needed amid COVID-19, he said.

"What the pandemic has done is really just exacerbated the need that was already there, but made it even more urgent," Gillard said.

For instance, Denise Smith, implementation director of Hope Starts Here, pointed out that in the Detroit area, essential workers wanting to return to their jobs — who had infants and toddlers — weren't able to find the necessary child-care slots for their children.

Smith said a preferred option for most families with babies were home-based programs.

"Michigan has seen a decline in this population of our early childhood segment for decades, and COVID just exacerbated all of that," Smith said.

The "hyper focus" on infants and toddlers will bring attention to what she called the "critical stage" in a child's development.

"As we think about this collective work, we know that this focus is not only important for those babies and their future, it's important for their families to be able to take care of their children," Smith said.

It's also important, she stressed, for communities and Michigan.

Campaign leaders on Wednesday said their goal was to help increase enrollment and access to high-quality child care, home visiting, early intervention and postpartum care for families with low incomes by 50%, reaching an additional 83,000 children up to age 3 who live in low-income households by 2025.

Think Babies Michigan is led by a collaborative that includes The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership, Michigan's Children, Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, the Michigan League for Public Policy, and parent leaders Meredith Kennedy of the Traverse City area, and Quinn Wright of metro Detroit.

The campaign is part of a partnership with the national campaign created by Zero to Three.

For more information on the plan, visit www.ecic4kids.org/policy-thinkbabiesmi/.