

**Ohio House of Representatives
Families & Aging Committee
Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 7 - The Strong Foundations Act
Erin Lucas, Director of Early Childhood Programs
Hopewell Health Centers
May 9, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Families & Aging Committee for this opportunity to share my experience with you today, specifically as it relates to the importance of the investments made in House Bill 7 towards Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.

My name is Erin Lucas and I serve as the Director of Early Childhood Programs at Hopewell Health, a Federally Qualified Health Center, providing integrated primary care and behavioral health services with locations in 9 southeast Ohio counties. To illustrate the impact of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, let me share a scenario; A preschool teacher uses her puppet frog to ask children to put their hand to their heart to hold their sad indicating they are thinking of a loved one they have lost. Together with the frog, the class sings about what it feels like to be sad and how to be ok until the sad gets smaller again. One child who had challenged the teacher in previous lessons, used Silly Stretches to move the sad out and then joined with classmates marching around stomping their sad into the ground. *Experiences like these are made possible with early childhood mental health consultants*, whose **unique** role is to support early learning professionals in using mental health tools to promote the mental health and wellness of young children, demonstrating the importance of our state's investment in Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.

Recovery in a post-pandemic Ohio involves frequent pivoting, creative collaboration, and cross-system support, all of which are happening across Ohio through our investment in early childhood and the **specialized service of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation**. When Ohio invested in the Whole Child Matters: Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Initiative in 2016, it created a statewide system of support for early childhood promoting mental health and wellness through Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Training for early learning professionals. This funding and statewide leadership provided by Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services under Dr. Valerie Alloy, Lead Administrator of ECMH Initiatives at the time, transformed access to care statewide and brought Ohio's program to the forefront as a national model with empirically proven success.¹

At Hopewell Health Centers, this funding expanded our staff and therefore our impact. Growing from a team of 10 to a team of 23, with 16 specialized Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants allowed us to grow from serving 36 classrooms a year to 90 classrooms a year.

Each year:

- Over 150 early learning professionals receive support in meeting the mental health needs of children and families they serve, impacting more than 1,000 children.
- Over 3,300 early learning professionals are trained.

Through your investment in Hopewell Health Centers alone, you have supported the mental health and wellness of **over 7,000 children since FY17** and **over 22,000 training participants**. This has had a transformational impact in our region.

Across the state, ECMH Consultants support **over 10,000 children each year**. ECMH Master Trainers train over **8,000 participants annually**. With a satisfaction rate of 92-95%, early learning professionals participating in ECMH Consultation and/or training report increased capacity to promote mental health and wellness and respond to the mental health needs of young children.²

Given that mental health and wellness is the biggest concern facing children birth to graduation post-pandemic, this service is more vital now than ever. Without increased funding, capacity to meet the needs of those caring for young children diminishes each year, resulting in increased burden on other systems. While a specially trained **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant can impact 200-500 children a**

year, a Mental Health Therapist can only serve 50-90 children a year. Relying on mental health treatment rather than fully funding Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation decreases our effectiveness and efficiency within the early childhood system. ECMH Consultation is the proven best practice to serve the greatest number of children, for the greatest cost savings and investment any state can make.¹

With the mental health workforce shortage that we face in Ohio, it is more important now than ever to invest in efficient, effective services. Moving just one early childhood mental health professional from the specialty of providing consultation to treatment reduces the efficiency nearly 10-fold from impacting **200-500 children a year to only 50-90 children a year.**

When funding is adequate and secure, ECMH professionals get to focus on our specialized expertise: collaboration and coordination across systems to meet the needs of **classrooms & programs full** of young children, not just one, young child. Cuts or reductions in funding force a reduction in efficiency & effectiveness in Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation & treatment, limiting access to care within our communities. I strongly support the funding investments made to Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation in House Bill 7 and hope you will, too, ensuring we are positioned to respond to the mental health needs of our community, promoting the whole health and wellness of families and growing healthy, thriving communities. Thank you for your time.

References

¹Reyes CR, Gilliam WS. Addressing challenging behaviors in challenging environments: Findings from Ohio's early childhood mental health consultation system. *Dev Psychopathology*. 2021 May;33(2):634-646. doi: 10.1017/S0954579420001790. PMID: 33762032.

²Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services, Whole Child Matters Evaluation Report.

Additional Information

Whole Child Matters: Statewide ECMH Initiative

The Whole Child Matters: ECMH Initiative was born in an effort to promote healthy social and emotional development and school readiness among children age six and younger. The funding built a statewide ECMH system of care, (1) adding 64 mental health consultants to work with teachers, staff and families of at-risk children in preschools and other early learning settings, (2) creating a system of ECMH trainers who oversee professional development services statewide and (3) creating a statewide hotline, OPEPP: Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Program, to access ECMH Consultation when caregivers or early learning professionals are challenged and don't know how to respond to the mental health needs of young children.

Hopewell Health Centers Early Childhood Programs:

Hopewell Health Centers has been in the Ohio early childhood mental health community since its inception. Our founding Early Childhood Programs Director, Dr. Sherry Shamblin, served as a founding partner of ODMH Early Childhood Initiative in 2002 and provided leadership through service on the State Leadership Council on the Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative as early as 2003. Her service, not just to our community, but also investing countless hours on state workgroups and committees demonstrated our local commitment to a sustainable statewide system of support. Eventually, she helped develop Ohio's Early Childhood Mental Health Core Competencies published in 2009 and two years later, served on the Comprehensive Health Committee for Ohio's Early Childhood Advisory Council, a sub-committee of the Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet. When Ohio was finally able to invest annually in the Whole Child Matters Initiative, ECP Director, Erin Lucas had big shoes to fill, taking full advantage of the opportunity to continue our support of statewide sustainability, while ensuring local access to high quality care. Appalachian traditions of good stewardship with entrusted resources, value of trusting relationships built on accountability and the tenacity and grit displayed when approaching whatever circumstance we face have served us well at Hopewell. As we connected to best practices, enjoyed statewide trainings in evidence-based services and built relationships with partners across the region and state, this tiered system of support came to life.

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

- Since inception (FY17), ECMH Consultation and training services have impacted over **7,000 children and 22,000 training participants** and supported **1,200 caregivers & families** in responding to mental health challenges they face with young children.

Early Childhood Mental Health Treatment

- HHC provides ECMH treatment services & parenting programs, utilizing several evidenced-based models, averaging **300 early childhood families** served in treatment and an additional **275 families** through parenting programs.
- HHC provides Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, & Speech Therapy, through Ohio Early Intervention, serving **over 300 children birth to age 3** in 2022, steadily increasing access each year to specialized treatment in southeast Ohio.

Investing in ECMH Initiatives creates cross-system communication and collaboration, increasing our efficiency and effectiveness within local communities as well as statewide systems of support. With secure funding, we have been successful in focusing on the needs of children and families and create effective and innovative strategies to enhance our collective impact, resulting in the development of this full system of support for Appalachian children in southeast Ohio. Additionally, we have grown some amazing leaders in the field, with our own ECMH Master Trainer, Misty Cole, recently hired as the ECMH Administrative Lead, bringing Appalachian Excellence to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

ECMH Consultation is the proven best practice to serve the greatest number of children and for the greatest cost savings and investment any state can make. Clearly, it has transformed access to care in southeast Ohio through Hopewell Health Centers and across Ohio. **Please support the policy and funding provisions in House Bill 7 towards Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation**, ensuring we are positioned to respond to the mental health needs of our community, promoting whole health and wellness of families and growing healthy, thriving communities.