

Support Texas Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities

Continue Restoring Funding for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) & Oppose the Proposed Cut

Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee on February 26, 2021

Texas ECI Is Highly Effective for Kids With Disabilities

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a federal-state program that contracts with community organizations to provide life-changing therapies and services to babies and toddlers with autism, Down syndrome, and other disabilities and developmental delays. Working with caregivers, ECI helps children learn to walk, communicate with their families, and meet other developmental goals -- reducing the need for costly special education services. Moreover, during the COVID-19 health crisis, ECI has successfully pivoted to providing effective telehealth services, extending a lifeline to Texas' most vulnerable, isolated young kids.

<p>ECI Long-Term Impact</p>	<p>Reduces need for special education</p>	<p>Promotes brain development in the critical early years</p>	<p>More effective and less costly than interventions later in life</p>
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But Funding Cuts Led To Program Closures and Under-Enrollment

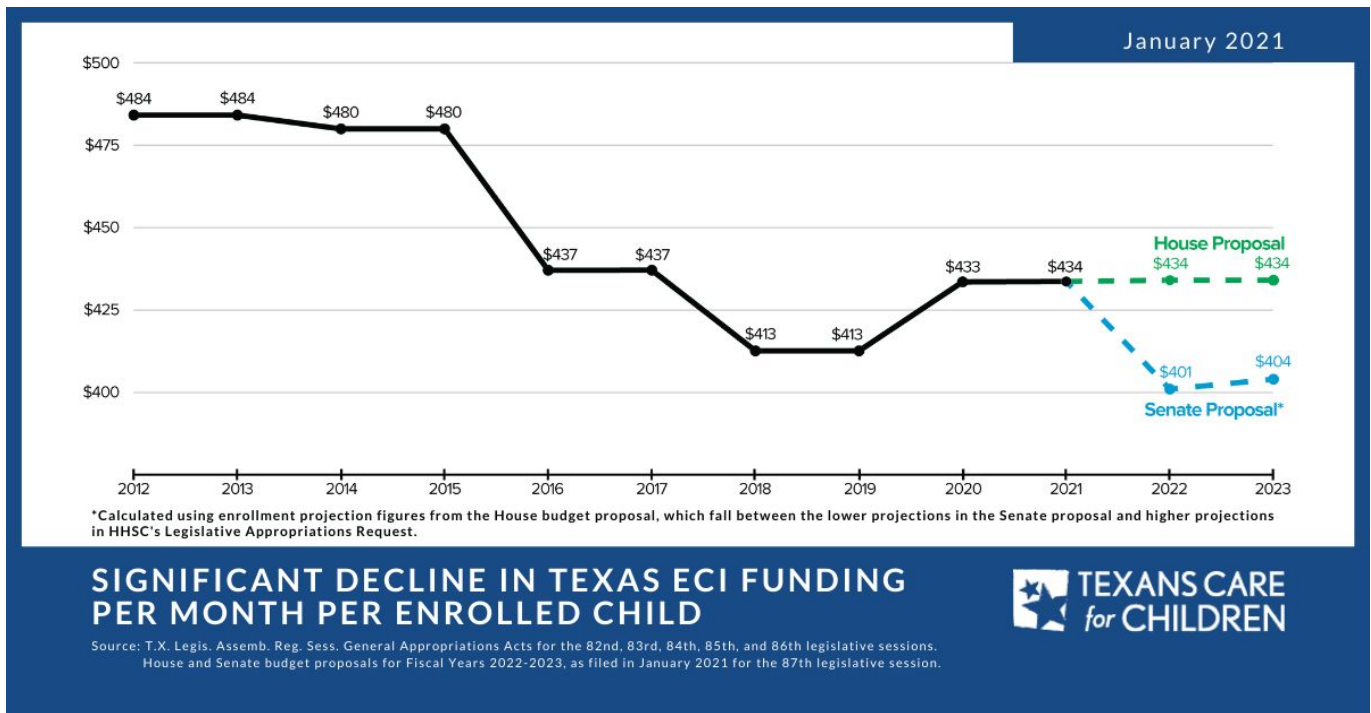
Over the last decade, state leaders cut ECI funding and Medicaid reimbursement rates for therapy providers. Programs have shuttered. Eligible babies and toddlers have gone without support. In response to public outcry, the 2019 Texas Legislature restored some ECI funding, but per child funding levels are still below previous levels.

A Federal Review of Texas ECI Recently Found that Eligible Babies and Toddlers Continue To Go Without Services

In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Education sent a letter to HHSC stating that Texas falls short of its federal obligation to ensure access to ECI services for eligible children. According to federal investigators, Texas fails to adequately fund ECI and must take corrective action to ensure access for all eligible children.^{1,2}

The Legislature Took a Good Step Last Session to Begin Restoring Funding, But SB 1 Proposes a Significant Cut

SB 1 proposes cutting nearly \$27 million from the ECI program over the next biennium, providing \$315 million compared to the \$342 million provided in the current FY 2020 - 2021 budget. Calculated on a per-child basis, the proposal in SB 1 is particularly concerning. As shown on the graph below, the Legislature took a good step last session to begin getting funding out of the ditch, but SB 1 would only dig the program into a deeper ditch, lowering the per-child monthly funding level from \$434 to barely over \$400 per child, calculated using the more realistic enrollment projection in the House budget bill. We consider the House projection for ECI enrollment to be more realistic because it falls between the higher estimate from HHSC and the lower estimate from SB 1 and because, since 2018, Texas has served more than the number of children projected in the Senate base budget. Even throughout 2020, while dealing with COVID-19, ECI providers served more than 31,000 children, while SB 1 projects only 30,042 children will enroll in FY 2022 and 30,459 children in FY 2023.



Recommendation

Restore ECI Funding to At Least \$176 million Per Fiscal Year. This recommended level is based on average per-child funding over the last decade (\$450 per child) and the House projected caseload. House projected caseload falls between the lower Senate projections and higher HHSC Legislative Appropriations Request estimates. ECI contractors need additional funding to remain sustainable and have the capacity to serve all eligible children in their communities. Sustainable, adequate funding is a priority for the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities and would help address the federal government's concerns about Texas ECI.³

Endnotes

1. <https://txchildren.org/posts/2020/11/10/report-tx-eci-funding-amp-enrollment-lagging-for-toddlers-with-disabilities>
2. <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/partcdmsrpts/dms-tx-c-2020-dmsletter.pdf>
3. <https://gov.texas.gov/organization/disabilities/gcpd-reports>