

The Texas Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Program Supports Infants & Toddlers with Disabilities

The Legislature Should Continue to Support ECI

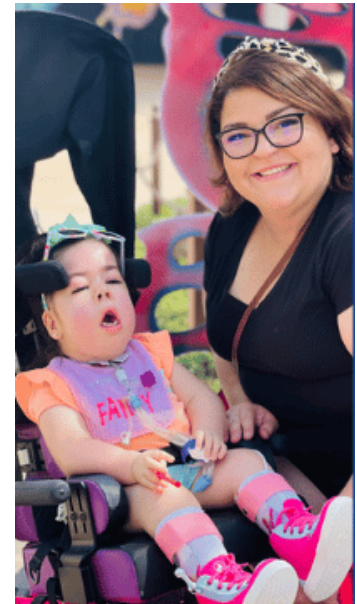
ECI is highly effective for infants and toddlers with disabilities — when they have access to it.

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a federal-state program that contracts with community organizations, such as Any Baby Can and Easter Seals, to provide life-changing therapies and services to babies and toddlers with autism, Down syndrome, speech delays, and other disabilities and developmental delays. By serving children during the critical first three years of life, a time of rapid brain development, ECI is highly effective in helping children learn to walk, communicate with their families, get ready to start school, and meet other developmental goals. Moreover, research indicates that the positive effects of ECI persist after children begin school.¹

During her pregnancy, Natalia learned her daughter would be born with abnormalities. Thanks to ECI, Natalia and Mariana recently danced together for the first time.

During a routine check-up early in her pregnancy, Natalia Castillo found out that her daughter was going to be born with abnormalities, but it wasn't until Mariana was born that they knew the extent of the care she would need. Mariana was born prematurely at 34 weeks. There were complications immediately. After tracheotomy surgery and 135 days in the NICU, Mariana was finally diagnosed with Central Core disease, a rare neuromuscular genetic disorder, and was sent home with a slew of home-care equipment and instructions.

Natalia was overwhelmed — but the local ECI provider, Any Baby Can, stepped in. A case worker helped Natalia enroll Mariana in Occupational Therapy (OT), Physical Therapy (PT), and Speech Therapy (ST). With the caseworker coordinating everything, Natalia could focus on helping Mariana through her appointments, finding ways to support her daughter, and enjoying moments with her daughter that she never thought she would have. With the help of PT, Mariana was able to use her medical standing device and dance with her mom for the first time. Mariana graduated from the ECI program in September of 2022, and because of the critical services she received, she is in a better position to reach her full potential and enjoy just being a kid.



¹ McCormick, M., Brooks-Gunn, J., Buka, S., Goldman, J., Yu, J., Salganik, M., Scott, D., Bennett, F., Kay, L., Bernbaum, J., Bauer, C., Martin, C., Woods, E., Martin, A., & Casey, P. (2006). Early Intervention in low birth weight premature infants: Results at 18 years of age for the Infant Health and Development Program. *Pediatrics*, 117(3), 771–780

Unfortunately, heading into the 2023 legislative session, ECI faced two funding challenges.

Additional funding was needed to cover the expected enrollment increase in the 2024-2025 biennium. For the 2023 session, the Health and Human Services Commission requested an Exceptional Item (EI) in their Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR). This EI request indicated that the ECI program would need to serve 11% more children in FY 24 than in FY 23 due to kids returning back to services after the pandemic, and that \$56.6 million in additional general revenue funding was necessary to prevent a reduction in per-child funding for this biennium.

ECI also faced the challenge of chronic underfunding after years of per-child funding consistently falling short. State ECI funding per child is currently around \$444, significantly lower than the \$504/child target set by the Legislature for 2010 – even before accounting for inflation. The true gap between current funding and funding a decade ago is actually much larger if inflation over the last decade is taken into account. Providers currently face significantly higher costs for staff, office space, transportation, and other core expenses than they did a decade ago, when per-child funding was higher than it currently is.

Additionally, the state of Texas has regularly underestimated future enrollment of children in ECI programs, resulting in less per-child funding for providers than what the Legislature allocates each year. For example, while the ECI program was funded at \$434 per child in 2021, the **actual** funding per child as of December 2022 had dropped to \$395 per child due to increasing enrollment.² This reflects a continuing trend where the **actual** per-child funding received by providers is consistently lower than the amount of funding the Legislature allocated for that biennium.

In 2023, the Legislature provided funding to cover higher anticipated enrollment for the biennium but failed to significantly increase per-child funding.

The Legislature provided a funding increase aimed solely at addressing the projected rise in enrollment.³ We appreciate that the Legislature provided the \$56.6 million requested by HHSC.

However, the Legislature did not provide funding to significantly increase per-child funding. In addition to the \$56.6 million for enrollment growth, the Legislature also provided a small but welcome \$6 million boost, slightly increasing per-child funding. The \$6 million represented a good first step towards improving per-child funding, but the fundamental issue of inadequate per-child funding remains unresolved.

Due to this chronic underfunding, Texas kids like Mariana have missed out on services.

When the state underfunds ECI, there are multiple ways it can hurt infants and toddlers with disabilities. Amid this financial pressure, ECI providers have had to:

- Reduce outreach efforts, leading to kids starting ECI services late or missing out on them altogether.
- Reduce the amount of support for children enrolled in ECI due to staffing shortages and budget pressures.

We urge the Legislature to adequately fund ECI during the 2025 legislative session.

We appreciate the additional funding the Legislature provided for ECI during the 2023 session. During the 2025 session, we urge the Legislature to build on that important first step and ensure that Texas infants and toddlers with disabilities have the support they need.

² Texas Health and Human Services Commission (December 2022). ECI Funding Per Child. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5728d34462cd94b84dc567ed/t/63d296c3330a931ec4678f61/1674745577294/HHSC-ECI-Funding-PerChild-December-12-2022>

³ Texas Health and Human Services Commission (August 2023) Legislative Appropriation Request for Fiscal Year 2024 and 2025. <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/hhsc-legislative-appropriations-request-2024-2025.pdf>