



# Mississippi IDEA Part C - Early Intervention Task Force

## Summary of 2024 Report Recommendations

October 29, 2024

During its 2024 Regular Session, the Mississippi Legislature reconstituted the Early Intervention Task Force (EITF) to continue its work of assisting and collaborating with the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) to make changes to Mississippi's EI program, First Steps. The following is a summary of the 2024 EITF report recommendations to the Mississippi Legislature and MSDH. The 23-member EITF divided its recommendations into three main categories: General Operations and Management, New Implementation and Service Delivery Model, and Improved Billing and Reimbursement Model.

### General Operations and Management (page 10)

The EITF acknowledges that there are several critical areas that require improvement to enhance the quality and effectiveness of EI services provided to children and families. To address these gaps, the EITF outlined a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening the workforce, improving training, ensuring quality control of the program, and ensuring more efficient service delivery.

#### **The Legislature should consider adopting legislation to:**

- establish a subcommittee within the State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) (i.e., an advisory council required by federal statute and appointed by the Governor to advise and assist MSDH in implementing the requirements of IDEA Part C) to collaborate and work with MSDH to ensure the EI program continues to move forward with implementing recommendations and improving program outcomes.

#### **MSDH should implement the following program improvements:**

- determine the type, number, and cost of positions needed within First Steps to implement the proposed delivery model and overall system improvements;
- streamline the hiring process for EI staff by reducing the lengthy onboarding timeline and modifying position criteria;
- enhance competency-based training and expand required training (e.g., billing process) to ensure that all service providers have access to the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver high-quality services;
- facilitate better recruitment and improve communication with providers and allied health professionals by creating a live, up-to-date service provider directory;
- strengthen collaboration and partnership between First Steps and oversight committees and early childhood organizations in Mississippi to ensure comprehensive service delivery;
- enhance telehealth and remote training opportunities; and,

- establish resource directories of spaces that meet the criteria for natural environments in each region to ensure services are provided in the appropriate settings.

## New Implementation and Service Delivery Model (page 13)

The EITF proposes that MSDH implement a new hybrid implementation model wherein MSDH would contract with local provider groups called Early Intervention Collectives (EICs) to provide EI services in their geographic region and allow the First Steps regional offices to focus on the remaining areas of the state not covered by an EIC.

### The Legislature should consider taking the following action:

- utilize the financial information and data that should be provided by MSDH to provide adequate funding for First Steps.

### MSDH should take the following actions:

- provide a plan to the Legislature by the 2025 Regular Session, if possible, or by December 2025 at the latest detailing the amount of additional funding and support needed to implement the new model;
- use data-driven decision-making that considers target enrollment numbers to inform changes in resource allocation, processes, and policies;
- develop a robust, centralized, electronic referral process and database system, including a live directory of local service providers;
- vet EICs for subcontracts via a rigorous request for proposal (RFP) process;
- document and share all aspects of the program with stakeholders; and,
- communicate with families and referring providers regarding all aspects of the program to ensure awareness of and understanding of how the program operates.

## Improved Billing and Reimbursement Model (page 16)

### The Legislature should consider adopting legislation to:

- amend the Medicaid Technical Bill (i.e., a proposed bill during the Legislative session that includes any changes to the state's Medicaid program) to allow for universal contracting for EI providers who are credentialed with Medicaid.

### MSDH should take the following actions:

- offer a centralized billing, credentialing, and contracting option through MSDH or a third-party contractor;
- standardize the list of billable codes for EI services, including the consideration of bundled codes and unique modifiers; and,
- collaborate with insurance providers to revise the prior authorization process to allow for less frequent reapproval requirements.