



Arizona Building for Babies

A Policy Plan for Arizona's Youngest Children

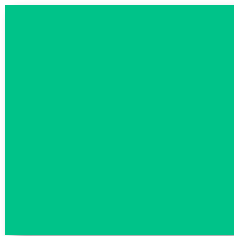
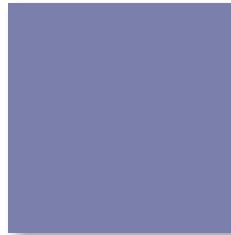


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The first three years of a child's life are crucial for growth and development. They set the stage for good health, effective learning and general well being. Their brains grow faster at this stage than at any other point in life. A consensus of data and research shows that directing resources into children's development during this time leads to a significant return on that investment. Despite this evidence, in Arizona we still have a system of programs and services for our youngest children that is underfunded. Parents report that finding help is difficult and often disjointed and in some cases, it doesn't exist at all. Administrative requirements are not aligned across agencies or organizations and unnecessary barriers exist making it difficult to access those services that do exist. These problems are often policy and priority choices made by those in decision making positions.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

What is AZECA?

The Arizona Early Childhood Alliance (AZECA) is a statewide multiagency collective of 50 plus [partners](#) committed to ensuring that every young child in Arizona has access to the high-quality programs and services they need to thrive. Since its inception, AZECA has played a pivotal role in shaping early childhood policy and advocacy, uniting stakeholders from across the state with the shared vision to build a cohesive, responsive, and equitable early childhood system.

Our experts and influencers work together to develop and communicate impactful messages and recommendations to support change in early childhood programs and policies.

AZECA Experts

collectively work on critical early childhood issues and develop impactful messages and recommendations to support program and policy change.

Types of Experts Engaged:

Nonprofits, practitioners, foundations, and supporting collaboratives.

Grassroots Constituents:

Engaged independently by AZECA partners around programs and policies



AZECA Influencers

work with experts to translate policy messages and recommendations to use in advocacy efforts with elected officials and state agency leads.

Types of Influencers Engaged:

Advocacy organizations, foundations, and business leaders



Government officials

get informed messages that help them improve program and policies.

Types of Leaders Engaged:

Elected officials and State agency leads

Why Did We Take On This Project?

In 2023, Zero To Three, a national organization whose mission is to “ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life”, offered Arizona early childhood stakeholders the opportunity to participate in a Built for Babies (BFB) cohort. BFB is a technical assistance (TA) project to assist selected states/territories to build and strengthen comprehensive policies, programs, and systems that ensure families with children prenatal to three (P-3) have the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

The partners agreed that Arizona had a lot of programs and services for young children and their families but many were siloed, underfunded or generally difficult to access. Many people understood that gaps existed, but not everyone knew where and what was lacking was a comprehensive, cohesive infant/toddler state policy plan that represented a shared policy agenda. Participants felt that creating that plan could best be accomplished utilizing the existing structure of AZECA, with the participation of additional subject matter experts.

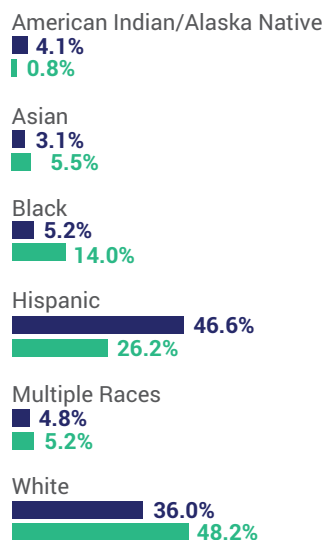
Demographics of Infants and Toddlers in Arizona

Arizona is home to approximately 235,000 infants and toddlers. As a subset of the population, they are incredibly diverse in race/ethnicity but also in geography, family make-up and income level.

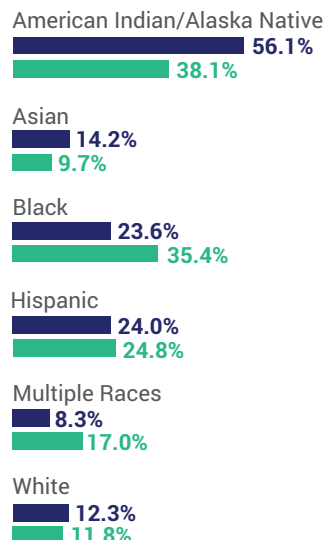
Arizona is a large state that covers more than 113,000 mostly rural square miles. It has 15 large counties, but ninety percent of its 7.5 million residents are located in the two largest population centers in the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas. There are 22 federally recognized Indian tribes and 20 Indian reservations spread across the state. Many rural communities are very isolated and residents often have to travel a great distance to access programs and services.

The Grand Canyon state has a very ethnically diverse population and its youngest residents are no exception. Just over 46% of infants and toddlers in Arizona are Hispanic, 36% are white with Black, Native American and mixed or multiple race children at approximately 5% each. Overall, the poverty rate for these young children in Arizona is 20% but, Black, Native American and Rural children are disproportionately represented.

Race/ethnicity of infants and toddlers in AZ



Infants and toddlers in poverty, by race in AZ



Source: ZERO TO THREE State of Babies Report <https://stateofbabies.org/state/arizona/>

Parents of young children in Arizona are also struggling with the high cost of living and the impacts of inflation. Nearly thirty percent of families with children have a high housing cost burden, defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as “households that spend more than 30% of their income on rent, mortgage payments, and other housing costs.” Nearly seventy five percent of children have at least one parent in the workforce but the cost of child care is out of reach for many and the state has implemented a wait list for child care assistance for low income working families. Arizona also has the second highest rate in the US of uninsured children at nine percent. All of these challenges make it difficult for parents trying to get ahead.

Arizona's System and Partners

Arizona has many supports and services in place to serve infants and toddlers and their caregivers, but for families of young children, finding and accessing programs and services is often a challenge. Sometimes due to geography or income level. But policy choices and the make up of the system itself also contributes. At the state level, there are multiple state agencies charged with providing programs and services but they are often underfunded, siloed and difficult for families to access. Most of the services are located in the population centers making it challenging for rural families to get the help they need. But even in urban centers, the administration of programs and lack of investment creates barriers. Workforce shortages exist across the state that contribute to a lack of access.

Multiple State Agencies Manage Services and Supports



Department of Economic Security (DES)

Child Care Assistance, Early Intervention, Developmental Disabilities, Cash Assistance (TANF), Child Support, Food Assistance (SNAP), Shelter/Housing/Homeless Services



Department of Child Safety (DCS)

Child welfare, Home Visitation (Healthy Families)



Department of Education (ADE)

Developmental Preschool, Head Start Collaboration Office, Arizona Early Learning Standard, Program Guidelines for High-quality Early Education Birth through Kindergarten, Child Find



Department of Health Services (DHS)

MIECHV home visitation, child care licensing and regulation, vital records, disease prevention and control, Title V MCH Block Grant



First Things First (FTF)

Quality Improvement and Rating System (QIRS), Access to Quality Care, Home Visitation, Parenting Education and Navigation, System Building



Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS)

Medicaid, Behavioral Health Services, KidsCare (SCHIP)

Our Political Landscape

Arizona has long been home to a large percent of independent political thinkers. One third of registered voters are not aligned to a particular political party. Despite that, for the last three decades, the state has been led by Republicans. More recently, the state has trended toward the purple. While the state legislature remains slimly controlled by Republicans, the Governor, Attorney General and Secretary of State are Democrats. The political landscape is shifting and the ramifications of that are not fully known. Regardless of the political winds, support for investments in young children is bipartisan. In 2006, Arizona voters created First Things First, the state's Early Childhood Development and Health Board, and the only state agency solely directed to work on early childhood issues. That initiative created a dedicated funding stream via a tobacco tax specifically on cigarettes to be spent to address the needs of children birth to five. Unfortunately, that funding stream was never enough to fully fund the needs of the system and the tobacco tax revenue has decreased by 40% since its inception. This revenue loss has occurred for a variety of reasons including the increase in vaping and other alternative tobacco products that are not subjected to the same taxes as cigarettes. In addition, bipartisan support for early childhood has not always translated into additional action or funding nor has it protected early childhood funding sources from large scale cuts over time. Cuts have dismantled important infrastructure that is difficult to rebuild once new funding sources are found. The result is a system for young children and their families that is disjointed, difficult to navigate and often frustrating particularly for babies and toddlers, who don't naturally fit into other existing systems like the K-12 education system.



DESCRIPTION OF TOOL AND PROCESS

In October 2023, members of a core team representing 13 child-focused organizations (see list) in Arizona and facilitated by ZERO TO THREE staff began the process of self-assessment using the [ZERO TO THREE Building for Babies State Policy Self-Assessment](#) tool to have critical discussions about how babies and families in Arizona are able to access essential resources. Core team members expanded their reach to form four sub-committees that reached an additional 12 organizations (see section VII for core team and subcommittee partners.) These sub-committees met monthly in 2024 to create a list of recommendations for improving services statewide. Subcommittees were focused on:

- **Good Health**
- **Strong Families**
- **Positive Early Learning**
- **Collaboration and System Building**



The goal of this group was to have a shared agenda that would allow representatives from all sectors and organizations to be a unified voice for decision makers in the state in the coming years. We know that babies and their families have many varying needs and it's important that they are able to access resources they need for children to thrive.

During the summer of 2024 the sub-committees wrapped up with a total of [100 recommendations](#) across the four groups. The policy recommendations outlined in this document came from consensus of each of the subcommittees and working with AZECA leadership to create forward-thinking aligned priorities.

Underlying Principles and Key Questions

AZECA and its partners had some underlying principles that were embedded in the process of identifying and prioritizing the strategies in the state plan. First, there is recognition that the original set of 100 recommendations is too much to manage at one time so that list needed to be pared down. The longer list was not discarded and the partners felt it was important to include them as part of the document. This document should be considered a living document and as windows of opportunity open, the state could change its focus when appropriate to address any of the nonprioritized recommendations.

A high priority was placed on the parent input we received in selecting the final list. Parents and caregivers are the ones who need and should use services for young children and we wanted the final list to reflect their expressed concerns.

The AZECA Leadership Team, as well as the subcommittee members felt it was important to consider the whole child in this work. The tool can be split up to work on any one domain but we made the intentional choice to consider all of them. And because of this, we deliberately and intentionally sought out practitioners who worked in the field and subject matter experts who had expertise that our partners lacked.

Lastly, each subcommittee used a standard set of questions when reviewing and analyzing the state's current policy status.

1. Is the policy/program/practice being implemented statewide? Why or why not? If yes, how well? If not, how can it be expanded to positively impact more families?
2. Do families have equitable access?*
3. Are there barriers to effective equitable implementation that your state could address, such as lack of workforce capacity, limited geographic access or limited funding?

*When considering equitable access, the following guidance was considered:

A family's ability to find and obtain high-quality, affordable services that meet their needs in a timely way within their local community, without encountering structural barriers based on race, language, ability, etc. Examples of things to consider:

- Services are culturally responsive, are offered in languages that families speak and are held at times and in locations that are convenient to families
- Eligibility requirements, ease of enrollment, redetermination timelines (if relevant) and system navigation supports
- Recruitment efforts, referral pathways and supportive services to make participation possible (e.g., transportation, child care, colocation of services)
- Whether qualitative and quantitative data show differences in rates of enrollment, retention



Parent Participation

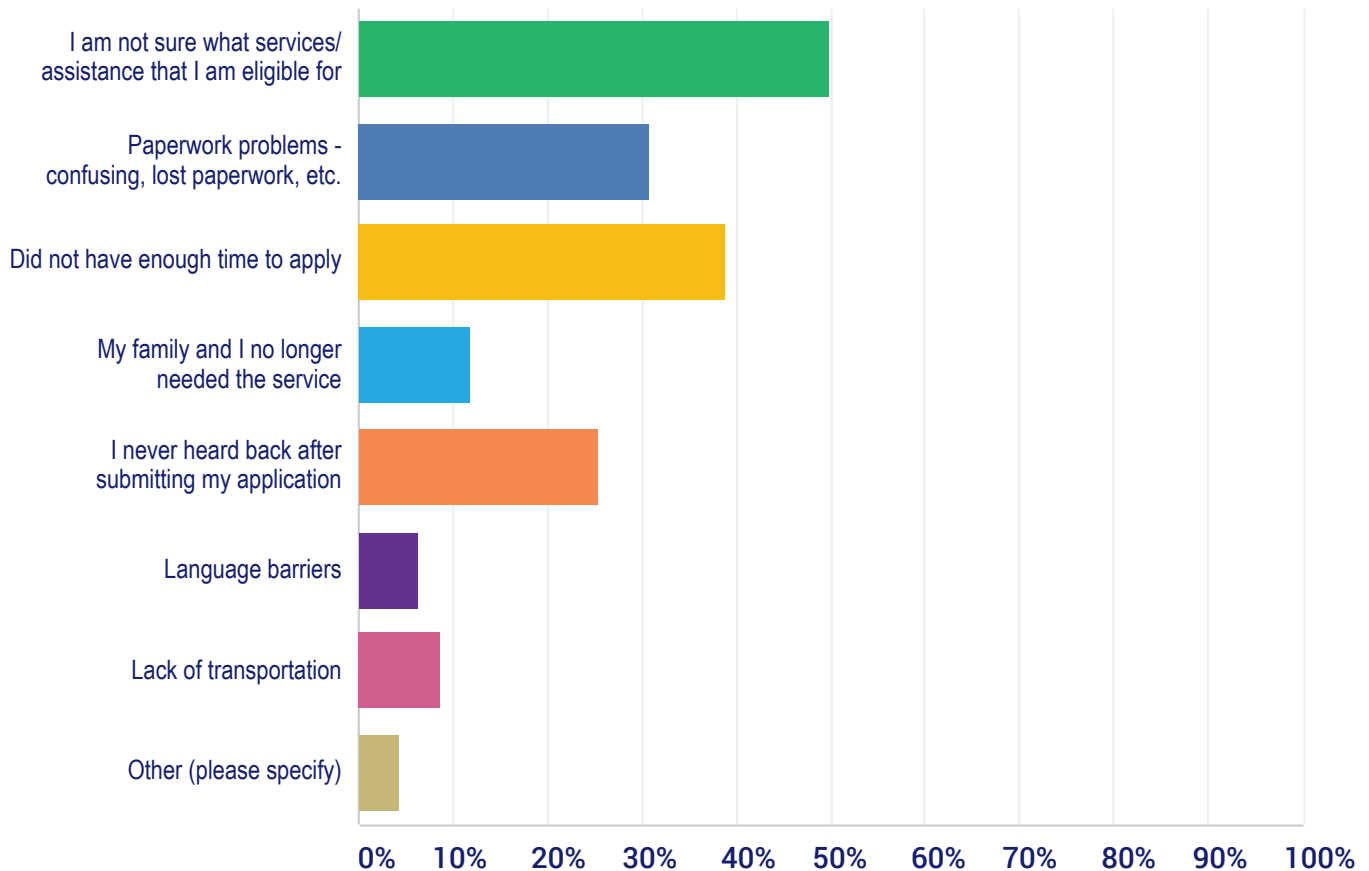
Babies do not live alone. They are dependent upon their parents or caregivers to grow, develop and thrive. It is the parents who interact with and provide access to programs and services for young children. Their impressions and experiences in interacting with that system are key to understanding where the gaps and barriers lie. Advocates and policy makers often choose to prioritize and address needs based on their understanding of the system, but fail to ask those who are living the experience what their needs and priorities are. For this project, AZECA wanted to engage parents in the process and use their insight and recommendations to help create and prioritize its policy agenda.

While there were certainly parents who served on the core team and subcommittees, AZECA wanted to reach a more diverse sample that more closely represented caregivers of infants and toddlers across the state. We did that in two ways. First, we created a parent survey, in both English and Spanish, and asked our partners and participants in this project, many of whom are direct service providers across the state, to help us get the word out about it. The survey was online and could be accessed via a link and a QR code that we widely distributed in places parents might normally be. We also held three targeted focus groups, including one exclusively for Native American parents, to gain deeper insight into parent experiences accessing programs and services. Parents who filled out the survey were entered into a drawing for \$100 gift cards and those that participated in the focus groups were paid for their time.

Survey and Focus Group Results

We received 758 responses to the parent survey, 698 in English and 60 in Spanish. The survey questions were designed to elicit information about parent needs and their ability to access and utilize programs and services across the state. We also gathered demographic data such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, marital status and family income. After a first round of respondents replied, we used the demographic data to target outreach to communities or groups that were under-represented in the first round.

Much like the demographics of the infant and toddler population in Arizona, 45% of the children of respondents were on Medicaid and 23% utilized Kidscare (Arizona's SCHIP program). Twenty seven percent utilized the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. **One quarter of respondents reported that they had remained unemployed when they wanted to work** and the same number stated that they had delayed or were unable to get medical or dental care in the recent past. Nearly 10% reported that they had experienced homelessness. Yet despite that, a large percent (42) believed that they were eligible for services that they were not receiving. When asked why, parents reported a variety of reasons including confusion over what they were eligible for, complicated paperwork or application processes and a lack of follow up from agencies or organizational staff.



What came through in both the survey and the focus groups was a desire to know more about what was available to families raising young children, and easier ways to access things that would help them face their challenges. They cared less about who is funding, or providing it, they just want to know about it and they don't. So many were struggling with basic needs and survival and that made it difficult to focus on anything else.

“FEAR is very real right now. For the undocumented, or those embarrassed to ask for help. They won't say something unless you ask. There is a stigma of admitting you need help. Afraid that people will judge you or try to take away your kids.”

— A Focus Group Parent

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations were prioritized from the original list of 100 for this policy plan. The subcommittees, core group and AZECA Leadership team considered several factors in making these selections. They took into account the parent input, considered where there might be windows of opportunity to address policy issues, and weighed the current federal and state political landscape. All of the participating organizations felt that it was important to maintain the full list of 100 recommendations – linked in the document – as new windows of opportunity might open or conditions could change leading to the possibility of making progress on any of the non-prioritized items.

We have also included icons that indicate whether the policy recommendations require legislative, regulatory or other administrative support and noted where additional funding would be required:



General Policy Recommendations

It is important to note that this policy agenda was not created in a vacuum. The political and policy landscape is rapidly shifting at the state and federal level. This work occurred with these massive changes occurring as a backdrop in real time.

Arizona has made a number of policy decisions that have a significant impact on our ability to make important changes to our early childhood system. In 2022, Arizona established a flat income tax rate, significantly limiting the revenue available for state programs and services. In addition, in order to raise new revenue a two thirds majority of the legislature or a 60% majority of the voters is required. A threshold that is becoming increasingly impossible to achieve.

At the same time, massive change is occurring at the federal level with cuts to vital health and human service programs. Changes are coming to how states implement Medicaid and SNAP, with the expectation that many Arizonans will lose access to these often life saving programs. Attempts to defund long standing early childhood programs like Head Start and Preschool Development Grants have been made and continue to occur. Executive Orders that are at times conflicting or lacking in detail have been handed down to states in an unprecedented manner.

These fast moving changes have created confusion at the service delivery level and guidance on how to move forward has been slow to arrive. Arizona is home to a large immigrant population and changes to the immigration process, mass deportations and restrictions on what supports and services are available to immigrants — both documented and undocumented — are occurring regularly. All of which has had a chilling effect, and created significant fear for immigrant families. AZECA and its partners want to make clear that we stand firmly against cuts to these programs and therefore added an additional policy goal explicitly stating where we stand.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Work to protect federal and state funded programs like Medicaid, Head Start (HS), Early Head Start (EHS), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), etc.



Good Health Priorities

State Medicaid enrollment and eligibility: In Arizona, one of every two births is covered by Medicaid, here called AHCCCS. Evidence shows that Medicaid recipients reap several health benefits. They are more likely to get prenatal care, less likely to have cesarean births and their infants have better health outcomes. As the United States continues to struggle with the highest rates of maternal mortality of all high income nations, it makes sense to offer Medicaid services to more pregnant women who might not be able to otherwise afford care.

RECOMMENDATION 2: State should set income eligibility for Medicaid/CHIP at or above 200% of the federal poverty level for pregnant women.



RECOMMENDATION 3: State should provide temporary coverage for children and pregnant women until Medicaid eligibility can be fully determined. (presumptive eligibility)



General state health policies: Qualified non citizens (for example, those who are lawful permanent residents and green card holders) are eligible for AHCCCS and Kidscare as long as they meet the other eligibility criteria. Arizona has a five year waiting period from the time an immigrant has obtained “qualified” immigration status. States may waive this requirement for pregnant women and children and according to the Center for Children and Families at Georgetown University, thirty eight states representing the full political spectrum have done so for children and thirty one have done so for pregnant women.

RECOMMENDATION 4: State should waive 5 year residency requirement for Medicaid.



Early Intervention: The Arizona Early Intervention Program known as AZEIP, is a statewide interagency system of services and supports for families of infants and toddlers, birth through two years of age, with disabilities or delays. Early intervention is vital to gaining significant improvements in cognitive, social emotional and language development and can reduce the need for special education services and remediation later. Arizona has very restrictive eligibility requirements for the program requiring a 50% developmental delay in one or more developmental areas. This leaves many children and families across the state with no access to vital therapies and services until school entry.

In addition, Arizona has a significant shortage of professionals who provide these important services, particularly in rural areas. This is partially due to geography, with some rural parts of the state with few qualified professionals, but also due to a complicated and inadequate rate system for the providers that do exist. This means that even families who qualify for AZEIP often face waitlists or delayed services. Fixing this system is a big undertaking but there are many incremental steps that can be taken to address access.

RECOMMENDATION 5: State should review current eligibility standards and provider rates and make recommendations to address the eligibility gap. Factors that place children at risk for developmental delays or disabilities should be included. This should be considered an incremental step toward an overhaul of eligibility.



“ *I was struggling with feelings of isolation, my wife had support from friends/family. I wasn't getting support. It was frustrating and sad. There wasn't anything for fathers or even neutral resources. I'd like something local and community based but they don't exist.”*

Strong Families

Many families in Arizona are struggling with their economic security. The median family income is \$77,315 yet one in five young children are living in poverty. The state is facing an increasing crisis in affordable housing. In one survey, nearly 28% of parents said they quit a job due to child care issues, including affordability. Much like the rest of the country Arizonans have seen increased inflation and spikes in the cost of groceries and other basic household needs. With so many living paycheck to paycheck, working Arizonans who do not earn paid leave, cannot afford to miss work. Paid family medical leave allows employees to take paid time off work to care for themselves, or to care for family members without jeopardizing their own financial security. For new parents, the benefits are well documented. It improves bonding, is good for the baby's healthy development, and improves maternal health.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Strengthen/broaden the coalition to promote equitable access to paid family and medical leave and paid sick days.



Positive Early Learning

Early learning experiences, such as those that you might find in high quality child care programs, are the foundation to future success. Children gain the cognitive and social skills necessary to enter kindergarten prepared and ready to learn. Child care is also an economic development issue. Parents need a safe, reliable place for their children to go while they are working. Unfortunately in Arizona these programs are limited in supply and high in cost. Infant care in Arizona can cost as much as a year's college tuition or a good used car. Arizona's tuition support programs — including Head Start/Early Head Start, Child Care and Development Fund assistance, First Things First Quality First scholarships and community-funded programs — only serve a fraction of the eligible children. The high costs lead many parents to forego or miss work. One study by the US Chamber Foundation found that businesses in Arizona lost \$1.77 billion due to child care issues. Child care is an essential service and Arizona must find a way to make access to it a priority.

Like most of the rest of the country, Arizona also faces a workforce shortage of child care professionals. Despite the high cost of care, child care workers are often some of the lowest paid in the workforce. It is a profession with a high percentage of women, and specifically women of color, many of whom are the parents of young children themselves. It is essential to find ways to recruit and retain qualified early childhood professionals into the system.

Funding:

RECOMMENDATION 7: Work with a wide coalition of partners, including the business community to raise state revenue for early childhood programs and services in Arizona. The stakeholders will examine potential revenue sources for early childhood and determine which are viable to pursue.



Workforce:

RECOMMENDATION 8: The state should designate child care staff as a protected class for child care subsidies and health care benefits.



“Caregiving work impacts my ability to work. We need affordable child care and preschool.”

“We need more counseling for children. Mental health services and supports for children.”

“Applications for everything are rejected, then there is no follow up. It's hard to go through. People need help to apply for benefits. Help us know what is available... where to find it and use it.”

Collaboration and System Building

Systems change can mean many things but one easy way to view it is that it is about the core components of a system such as the people, the rules and regulations governing the system and how they are implemented, the physical location or ability to access services, and who has control over decision making and how resources are directed. It considers how those components interact and impact each other and how to change them in order to create a new, better functioning system.

Systems change requires collaboration among the system partners and stakeholders. Together they need to use data and information to identify the root causes of gaps or barriers in the system that maintain the status quo and develop strategies to address them.

Comprehensive and Coordinated System: Family resource networks, whether delivered via family resource centers or as a component of other programs like home visitation, are one strategy to help link parents and families to community resources they might need. These types of strategies meet parents where they are and are embedded and trusted in communities.

RECOMMENDATION 9: Expand on existing networks for families to access services. Bring family resource center system, Arizona's 211 program and comprehensive home visitation programs to scale.



Data: In order to make evidence based decisions, system partners need data. Arizona is not necessarily lacking in data but what exists is often siloed and difficult to obtain. Partners regularly create their own databases that are not connected to each other making information fractured. There are a number of ways Arizona can improve upon its data driven decision making.

RECOMMENDATION 10: Assign a state level ID number at birth or before.



RECOMMENDATION 11: State agencies should have a shared agreement to use existing databases to make equitable decisions for allocating resources for infant and toddler slots. • State agencies should collect and use data for race and ethnicity.



Visit [Built for Babies: Policy and Practice Recommendations for Arizona](#) to see the full set of Arizona's Hot 100 recommendations.

APPENDIX

Core Team Organizations

Arizona Association for the Education of Young Children

* Arizona Early Childhood Education Association

* Arizona PBS

* Children's Action Alliance

* Child & Family Resources, Inc.

* First Things First

* Pendergast Family Resource Center

* Southwest Human Development

Southern Arizona Association for the
Education of Young Children

* Stand for Children Arizona

* United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

Valley of the Sun YMCA

ZERO TO THREE

Subcommittee Organizations

Arizona Head Start Association

Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System

ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy

Candelen

Coconino Coalition for Children & Youth

DCS Office of Prevention

Family Involvement Center

Maricopa Superior Court

Open Hearts Family Wellness

Prevent Child Abuse Arizona

Valleywise Health Family Resource Centers

Valley Learning Centers

* Also participated in sub-committees

AZECA Partners

Arizona Association for the Education
of Young Children

Arizona Center For Afterschool Excellence

Arizona Early Childhood Education Association

Arizona Family Resource Network

Arizona Head Start Association

Arizona State University

AZ Dept. of Economic Security

AZ Dept. of Education

AZ Dept. of Health

Blue Cross/Blue Shield

Candelen

Child and Family Resources

Child and Parent Centers

Children's Action Alliance

DMB Associates

Education Forward

Family Resource Center Coalition

First Things First

Harvard and Smithsonian Whipple Observatory

Helios Education Foundation

Indigo Cultural Center

Inter Tribal Council of Arizona

Local Initiative Support Corporation

Maricopa Department of Public Health

Northern Arizona United Way

Northland Pioneer College

Preschool Promise of Pima County

Prevent Child Abuse Arizona

Raising Special Kids

Read Better, Be Better

Read On Arizona

Arizona Rural Engagement (RAZE)

SAZAEYC

Southwest Human Development

Stand for Children Arizona

Steele Foundation

United Methodist Outreach Ministries

United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

United Way of Yuma County

University of Arizona

Valley of the Sun United Way

Valley of the Sun YMCA

Virginia Piper Foundation

Womens Foundation for the State of Arizona



The Arizona Early Childhood Alliance (AZECA) is a partnership of 50 public, nonprofit, and private organizations statewide dedicated to collaborating on public policy solutions to help young children be prepared for kindergarten and educational success.