



**Developing a Statewide Help  
Me Grow System: Perspectives  
from Families, Service  
Providers and Administrators  
in the State of Washington**

# Authors

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# Introduction

The first five years of a child's life can set the foundation for their later success. Connecting families with the services and resources they need to support their young children's development is essential for ensuring that children thrive to their fullest potential. For many families, finding help can be hard. Without a well-built resource and referral system, expectant families and families with young children will need to navigate an overwhelming system of services on their own. Families of young children may experience challenges in accessing the care that they need to support their children's development.

A team of Child Trends researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with people who use, or whose work is connected to, Washington's resource and referral systems, including Help Me Grow Washington. The purpose of these interviews and focus groups was to identify challenges with existing systems for connecting families with services. In particular, these individuals include parents, caregivers, service providers, and administrators who operate programs that serve expectant families and families with young children. The perspectives and recommendations shared in this report can inform the continued development of Help Me Grow Washington.

## Child Trends sought input from:

**Parents/caregivers and providers:** Child Trends held focus groups with families and providers. English- and Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers were asked about their experiences trying to find help for their young child's development in Washington. Providers' focus groups presented programs that work with expectant families and families with young children in the community (for example, health care providers, child care providers, home visitors). The purpose of these focus groups was to gather information on how families and providers navigate finding resources in existing resource and referral systems in the state.

**Program administrators:** Child Trends interviewed key Help Me Grow staff members, as well as administrators at resource and referral systems across the state of Washington. The purpose of these interviews was to gather input on Help Me Grow's conditions for success, current challenges, needs, and opportunities for improvement. Additionally, insights were gathered on opportunities and challenges related to the resource and referral system.



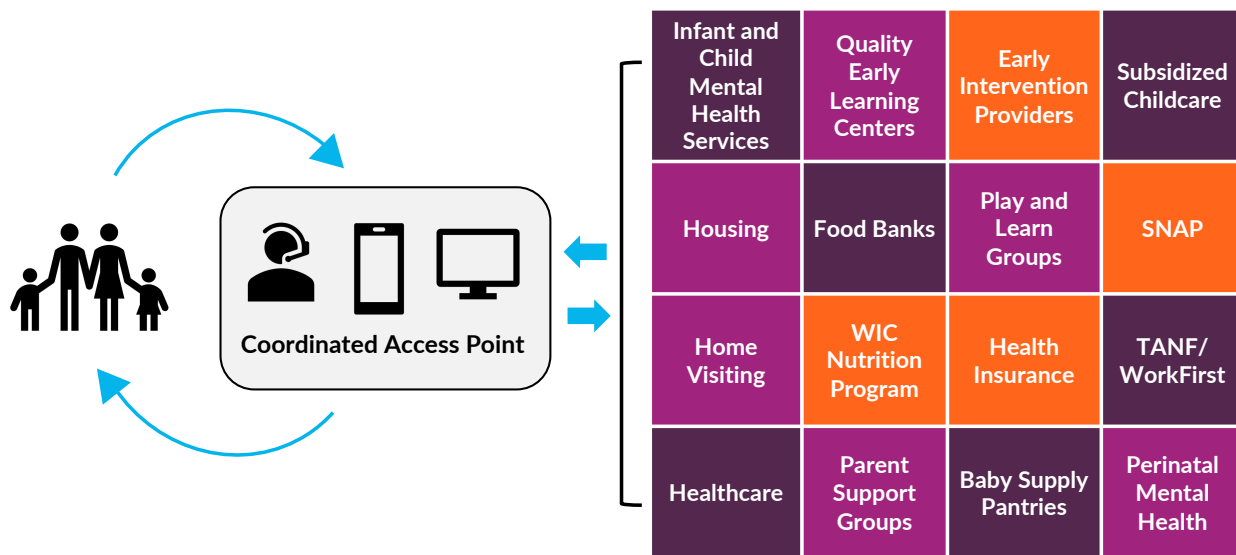
# An Overview of Help Me Grow

Help Me Grow connects families with support services in their communities through a robust resource and referral linkage system. Services may include early supports for infants and toddlers, infant and child mental health services, developmental screenings, home visiting services, housing services, play and learn groups and more.

A resource and referral system that connects children and families to the local and statewide services they need.

Families with young children connect to Help Me Grow through phone or web-based portals to receive information about services for themselves and their children. Trained staff support families in finding services, providing information about developmental and behavioral concerns, and following up on family referrals. Help Me Grow connects to other service delivery systems to provide a larger referral and linkage system for families, service providers, and program administrators. Figure 1 depicts the Help Me Grow service model and a fuller list of services available for families with young children.

Figure 1: Help Me Grow Model of Service Delivery<sup>1,2,3</sup>



The Washington Help Me Grow resource directory includes 6,000 programs, services, and resources. As new information becomes available about a program, service, or resource, a database specialist updates the directory. The entire directory is reviewed and updated at least once a year.

<sup>1</sup> SNAP is the abbreviation for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

<sup>2</sup> TANF is the abbreviation for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program

<sup>3</sup> WIC is the abbreviation for the Women, Infants, and Children assistance program

## Help Me Grow Washington's expansion and potential integration with other systems

Help Me Grow functions as an affiliate system. In the State of Washington, WithinReach<sup>4</sup> is the state affiliate, and other local agencies are sub-affiliates that implement Help Me Grow in their local areas. As of October 2020, there are four sub-affiliates in the state of Washington who have agreed to implement Help Me Grow in their regions: Skagit County, King County, Pierce County, and Central Washington (Kittitas and Yakima counties).



Help Me Grow Washington is developing and expanding its sub-affiliate network to provide more local-based support to families with young children seeking services. Help Me Grow Washington is also examining options for integrating with other state-wide health and well-being initiatives that support children and families.

The following sections outline identified challenges to existing resource and referral systems and provide recommendations to guide the next steps in the development of a statewide Help Me Grow system.

## Challenges with Existing Systems that Connect Families with Services

### Challenges experienced by families

**Duplicative intake processes.** Families described needing to complete complicated forms that request the same information multiple times and needing to navigate multiple referral channels to get the support they needed. Families described being in vulnerable and, at times, traumatic situations; agencies providing supportive services often re-traumatized families by requiring repeated re-telling of traumatic events.

**Administrative and logistical barriers to receiving referred to services.** Families experienced long wait times for receiving services, often with no update about their application status. For those who matched with services, hours of service delivery sometimes conflicted with work and other schedule obligations and call-in hours to obtain information were similarly limited. Strict policies about receiving services did not accommodate families' needs, such as needing to show up at the same time for the appointment each week or having to start over in a long application process if items on the application were left blank. Additionally, many families lacked transportation to access services.

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<sup>4</sup> WithinReach is a Washington state entity committed to creating equitable and healthy communities. WithinReach strives to build pathways for families to navigate health and social service systems. Retrieved from <https://withinreachwa.org/who-we-are>

**Poor match between available services and needs.** Families described needing to settle for services that did not match their needs. Families were often eligible for or in need of multiple services, however, the resource and referral system agents connecting them to resources had limited knowledge of the services that were available that could have been beneficial for the families' needs.

**Inequitable access.** Limitations in access to phones, the internet, or reliable transportation prevented families from accessing services. In addition, families described feeling deterred from seeking help when services were not offered in their preferred language. Poor translations of outreach materials combined with ineffective outreach strategies further limited families' ability to access and use the services they needed.

**Concerns about trust and confidentiality.** Families expressed concerns about how their information was shared between organizations. Mistrust of service providers, especially by communities or families with negative previous experiences, or by in households with members who have vulnerable immigration statuses, deters families from seeking services.

**Staff turnover.** Families expressed challenges with making trusted, personal connections with service agencies and with receiving follow up on service use due to staff turn-over.

## Challenges experienced by service providers and program administrators

**Disconnected systems.** Local agencies reported sometimes having multiple, duplicative data directories that contained information on programs and services. These various disconnected directories required manual updates and were therefore often out of date, which limited agencies' ability to efficiently connect families with the services they needed. Programs also had limited resources to track and follow up on families' enrollment (e.g., case management system), so there was little information on families' use and satisfaction with the services to which they were referred.

# What Families and Service Providers Want in a System

## Families' recommendations

**Multiple methods for connecting to the system.** Families explained that the system must be intuitive, user-friendly, and support families' preferences for engagement. For example, families should be able to visit a community provider, text, call, or search online for information on services. Ideally the system should have a 24-hour hotline, provide up-to-date information on providers' services and availability, allow families to tailor their search for service providers (e.g.

by hours of availability, location, language, etc.) and allow real-time tracking of the status of family applications to services. The system should provide the option for a knowledgeable advocate or case worker to help navigate initial connections and continued use of different services.

**Improved outreach.** Families were concerned that they may be unaware of the types of supports available to them, so information about the system and the supports it offers should be shared through traditional and non-traditional methods to reach families (e.g. posted information in local communities, churches, health clinics, stores, etc.) and in the languages that families speak.

**Improved match between families and services.** Families expressed challenges around obtaining the service that was most appropriate to their needs within the existing resource and referral systems. The system should allow tiered service based on need and risk to avoid long wait times and service delays for those who are in crisis or with urgent need. Consideration of “fit” between service providers and clients (e.g., scheduling, convenience, relationship) would also improve the opportunities for matching families to services. Finally, the system should address challenges related to insurance or eligibility requirements, by at least eliminating services for which a family is ineligible from the client referral list.

**Options for developing a user profile and opt-in to sharing information.** Families described wanting the ability to create a user profile that matches them to the services they need and notifies them when new openings and services that meet their criteria are available. Parents noted that these services should be updated regularly for correct information. With this user profile, families would be able to “opt in” to release personal information to multiple agencies, avoiding duplicate forms and paperwork.

## Service providers’ and administrators’ recommendations

**A clear vision for the system.** There needs to be a common, unifying vision for the system that is developed by and shared with families, service providers, and state- and county-level administrators so that they understand and can make informed decisions about using the system.

**Family and community inclusion in system development.** Families, service providers and other system users must be part the development of the system. Leaders should consider integrating values of shared power and decision-making.

**Data-driven decision making.** A system should collect data about the demand for, use of, and satisfaction with services. This will allow leaders to better understand how to make system-level decisions for allocating resources to meet families’ needs.

**Prioritization of data privacy and security.** Clear communication about data security with families, service providers, and administrative users is essential. Families should have the ability to permit and restrict personal information to services of their choice. Staff should be trained on secure data collection and management.

**Plans for long-term sustainability.** Policy or legislative intervention to fund the system on a long-term basis (e.g. providing line items in the state budget) is necessary for sustained service provision. Long-term funding would support the development and maintenance of data infrastructure and support sufficient program staffing.

## Things to Consider

Families and service providers have a clear need for an improved resource and referral system to connect with appropriate services. In expressing these recommendations, families of young children value systems that build on and center around their own ability to choose and access the types of services that they need, as well as decide the level of information that will get shared with other agencies. Through collaboration and partnership with families and service providers, Help Me Grow -Washington offers an opportunity to strengthen the connections between families and service providers through a coordinated approach.

As leaders plan for the continued development of a statewide Help Me Grow system, they will need to conduct a series of activities that include:

- Identifying **shared goals** with partners across the state
- Engaging a variety of **stakeholders**
- Identifying **funding and capacity** for sustaining this work overtime
- Developing an **inventory of current and new state systems and data sources** that may be relevant for this type of work
- **Aligning specific data elements** across data systems and sources to ensure data interoperability
- Developing a trusted way to **govern shared data** across systems and sources
- Ensuring that data shared between systems and sources are kept **private and secure**





# Recommendations for the Statewide Expansion of Help Me Grow

## The Problem

**Connecting families** of young children with the services and resources they need to support their children's development is essential for ensuring that children thrive to their fullest potential. However, for many families, finding help can be hard.

## The Strategy

**Help Me Grow (HMG)** is a robust resource and referral linkage system that connects families of young children with support services in their communities. HMG is developing its network throughout the state to provide more locally-based support to families seeking services.

**Families, service providers, and program administrators** identified challenges with the existing systems for connecting families with services and provided their recommendations for how Help Me Grow could better meet the needs of children and families across the state.

## Challenges with Existing Systems

- Multiple, disconnected resources and referral systems
- Duplicative intake processes
- Administrative and logistical barriers to receiving services
- Poor matches between families' needs and available services
- Inequitable access to supports and services
- Concerns about trust and confidentiality
- Program staff turnover

## Recommendations for a HMG System

- Offer multiple methods for connecting to one system (e.g., in-person, phone, text, online).
- Increase outreach to make families more aware of supports available.
- Improve match between families' needs and services.
- Implement a user profile and option for families to share their data.
- Include families and community members in the development process.
- Use data to drive decision making.
- Align data privacy and security policies across system.
- Develop a plan for long-term sustainability.

## Process for Implementing Help Me Grow Statewide



**Families benefit as Help Me Grow listens to them, links them to services, and provides ongoing support.**

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