A **BGA** and **Illinois Answers Project** publication

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT Early Intervention

Navigating the state's program for toddlers with developmental delays

ILLINOIS ANSWERS PROJECT

BGA

Did you know your toddler could get free therapy if they are experiencing developmental delays?

The program is called Early Intervention:

- **Eligibility**: Children under the age of 3 who are experiencing developmental delays or disabilities
- **Proven results:** It can help toddlers meet important milestones and even potentially keep them out of special ed when they're older

But there's a problem.

Therapists are quitting by the hundreds across Illinois and it's causing kids to miss out on care they're legally entitled to.
I wanted to understand why.

My name is **Meredith Newman**. I'm an investigative reporter for the Illinois Answers Project, a nonprofit newsroom that examines solutions being implemented to some of our state's biggest problems to see what is working, what isn't and why.



Early Intervention has been around for a long time. Recently, I started hearing about toddlers waiting months to receive therapies.

This zine is a compilation of my reporting: what I found, what families are going through, important information about your rights and what to do if your family is having issues with Early Intervention.

Here's what I found:

- Illinois pays providers way less than other states.
- In some states, they can get mileage reimbursement or travel incentives – but not here.
- As more parents learn about the program, caseloads are going up. But therapists are quitting by the hundreds.
- Wait times have only gotten worse. Months, sometimes a year.
- Therapists have told us, and the state, that they will consider leaving if things don't change.
- While telehealth could be a solution, many families prefer in-person time for their toddlers.
- Virtual therapy is more likely to be provided in Chicago's poorest ZIP codes than other areas of the state.

Therapists leaving Early Intervention

Providers are leaving Early Intervention, with an estimated 500 providers leaving each year from 2018 to 2022. The number of therapists entering Early Intervention isn't catching up.

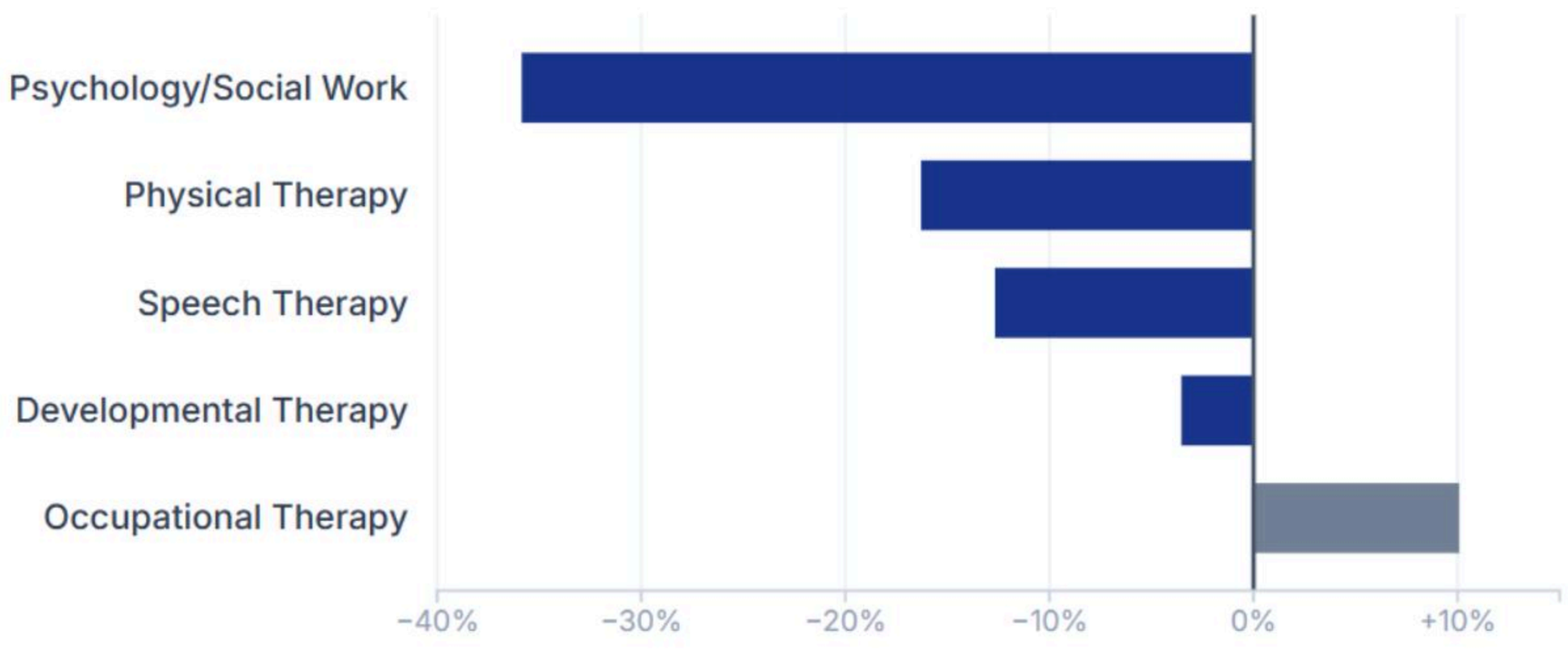


Chart: Meredith Newman & Andrew Adams, Illinois Answers Project • Source: Afton Partners for the Illinois Department of Human Services – Division of Early Childhood

The timeline the state is required to follow:

- **First contact:** Within 2 business days of your child's referral, Child and Family Connections (CFC) has to call you and schedule a conversation.
- **Evaluation:** CFC has to test your child and create a treatment plan within 45 days of your conversation and submission of signed forms.
- **Services:** Once you've received the plan and signed off on it, therapy has to start within 30 days.
- **Records:** You have a right to your child's CFC records and they have to give them to you within 10 days of your request or before any meeting related to your child's care.

Illinois' Early Intervention didn't always have intake delays

Early Intervention requires children to be evaluated within 45 days of being referred to the program. In 2018, almost no Illinois families were waiting to receive their initial evaluation, assessment or the creation of their service plan. Yet it's become a problem in recent years.

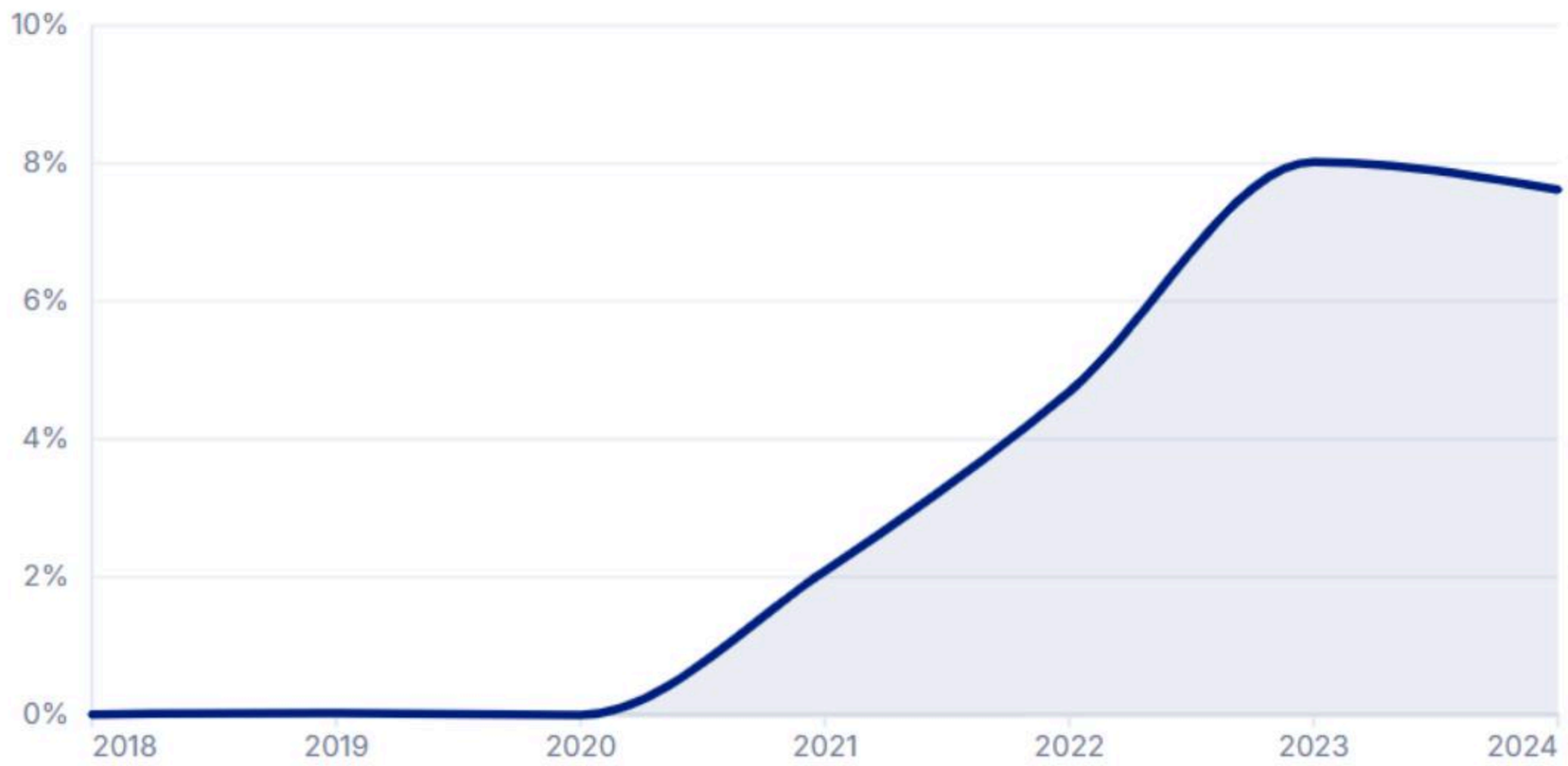


Chart: Meredith Newman, Illinois Answers Project • Source: Afton Partners for the Illinois Department of Human Services – Division of Early Childhood

How to file a complaint:

- **Complaint:** If you believe your child's rights were violated, including if the state didn't follow the timeline, you can file a complaint. The state is required to investigate and make a decision within 60 days, which will be final.
- **Mediation:** Another option is mediation, which is free and can only occur if both parties agree to it. The mediation needs to take place within 10 days of your request. If both sides reach an agreement with a mediator, it will be put in writing.
- **Due process hearing:** Requests for this need to be made within three months of the incident. Both sides can attempt to reach an agreement during an initial month-long resolution period. If that goes nowhere, the parties (and any experts they bring) meet with a hearing officer, who will issue a decision within 45 days.

Scan the QR code for links and more details on how to pursue any of these options.

Or go to bit.ly/4vJciPz

What families are saying:

Waited months, offered telehealth: Erika Reffett's son Noah was offered virtual therapy after he had to wait months to get all the care he qualified for. Erika was willing to take whatever she could get — and to her surprise, "it ended up working beautifully."

> **"it ended up working beautifully.**
>
> — Erika Reffett

Disparities persist: One Chicago mother said she waited about eight months for her son to be evaluated and was never given the option of in-person therapies, only virtual. She said she felt "beggars can't be choosers."

"Your average speech therapist looks like (YouTube star) Ms. Rachel with blonde hair," said the mother, who lives in the historically Black neighborhood of Bronzeville. "They're going to feel more comfortable going to Lakeview. They're going to feel more comfortable going to Rogers Park. They're going to feel more comfortable going to wherever that is, not a predominantly Black and brown neighborhood."

> **"beggars can't be choosers.**
>
> — Chicago mother

What therapists are saying:

Low pay, highly dissatisfied: Lisa Wister, an Oak Park occupational therapist, said it's "frustrating to not feel valued" with the low reimbursement rates. "For the level of importance of our job and our education and all of the verbalization of how important we are, it doesn't feel like it."

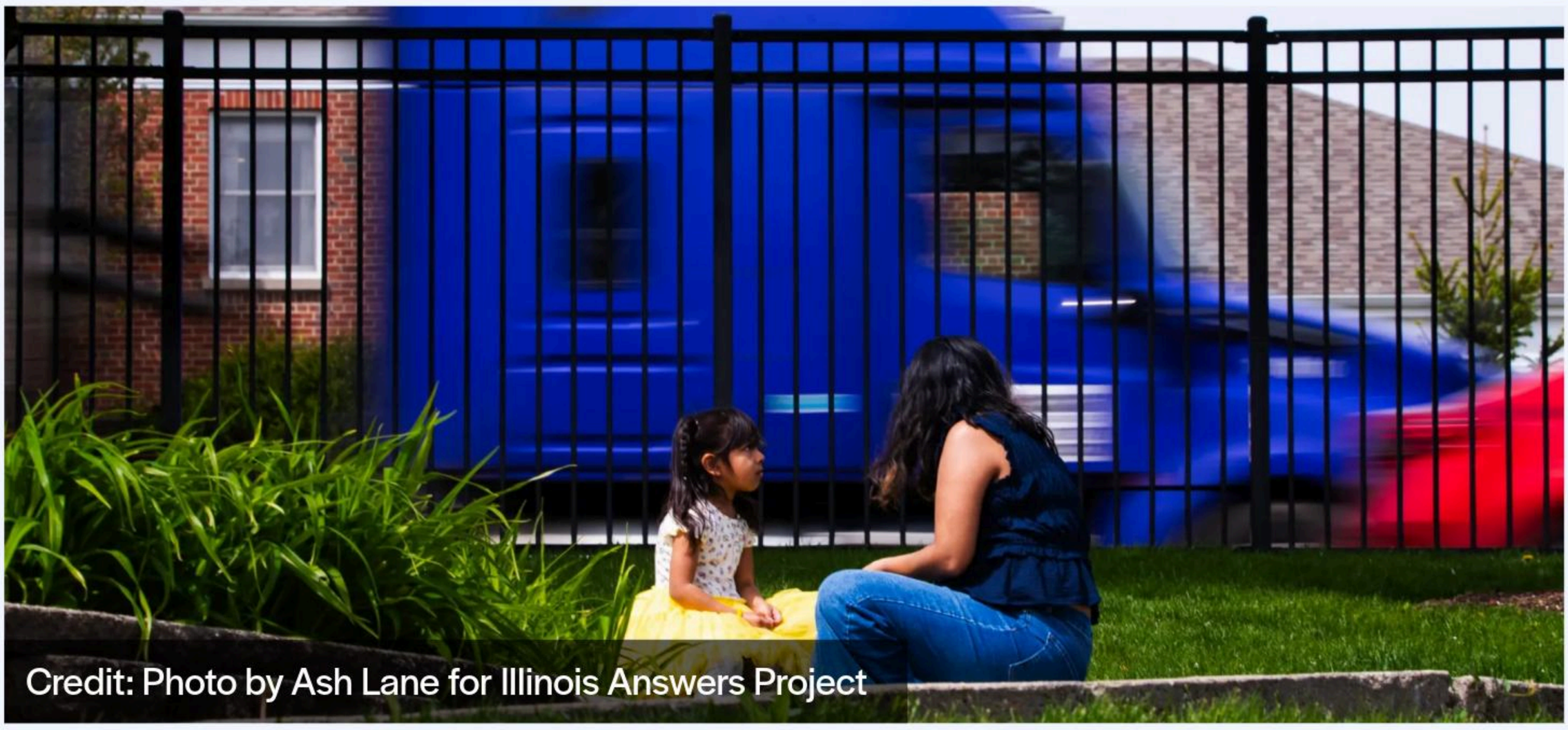
Telehealth offers reprieve: Rhonda Levie, an Early Intervention social worker, said driving "all over the place" in DuPage County was contributing to her burnout. The state allowing telehealth therapies, she said, "changed my life."

Read an excerpt of our story

Early Intervention therapies help kids — but Illinois pays providers less than other states, stalling access

Hundreds of therapists are leaving the program each year, causing some families to miss out on services they're legally entitled to.

By Meredith Newman and Madison Hopkins | June 4, 2026



Credit: Photo by Ash Lane for Illinois Answers Project

The bus stop had become one of the scariest places for Stephanie Jimenez. So had her apartment complex's parking lot, driveways and any busy street.

Her then-2-year-old daughter Lia wasn't talking and struggled with sensory processing. She had meltdowns when Jimenez tried to hold her hand, and she would often sprint away without regard to her own safety the moment she stepped outside. At its worst, the family put Lia in a harness with a leash.

Though there was never an accident, the threat of one was everywhere. Then, Jimenez started working part-time as a parent liaison for Early Intervention. The little-known, publicly funded program provides therapies to infants and toddlers up to age 3 who are experiencing developmental delays or disabilities.


Photo provided by Erika Reffett

Then, Jimenez started working part-time as a parent liaison for Early Intervention. The little-known, publicly funded program provides therapies to infants and toddlers up to age 3 who are experiencing developmental delays or disabilities.

The temporary support can help these children reach important milestones and initiate therapies that they might continue receiving throughout their childhood.

Not long after starting her job, Jimenez asked a colleague, “Can I talk to you about my daughter?” Lia was soon evaluated through Early Intervention, and qualified for speech and occupational therapies.

Jimenez immediately requested telehealth, rather than in-person sessions, for Lia. The girl’s third birthday was approaching, and Jimenez had heard accounts of children waiting months to receive in-person services. Early Intervention therapies stop once a child turns 3.

Research shows the first three years of a child’s life are a narrow and critical period for brain development. Studies analyzing the outcomes of Early Intervention found it can change a child’s developmental trajectory, and may even reduce the need for special education later.

The telehealth sessions proved challenging — Jimenez often found herself chasing after Lia with her phone’s camera during therapy — but they worked with the family’s schedule, and got results for Lia. Following the therapist’s guidance, Lia now holds onto one part of her “stuffie” when walking outside, while Jimenez or her husband holds onto the other.

Still, Jimenez said she has a “mixed” relationship with virtual therapy. She accepted it because it was what was available.

“We don’t have the luxury anymore of waiting,” she said.



Photo provided by Eleanor Grano

In recent years, the percentage of Illinois families waiting for Early Intervention has doubled. The Illinois Answers Project identified dozens of families who have waited long periods for services — some as many as six to 17 months. The U.S. Department of Education has found the state has failed to meet its targets for providing timely therapies.

The delays are largely due to more children entering the program even as therapists continue to leave, citing low pay and poor benefits. Black children are more likely to face these delays, as are children who live in rural areas.

The state has started to embrace telehealth for Early Intervention, and it has become widespread among providers. Yet it has done little to improve wait times or fix the shortage of therapists. A disparity has also emerged: Virtual therapy is more likely to be provided in Chicago’s poorest ZIP codes than other areas of the state.

There’s also a growing gulf between how providers and families view virtual visits. Many providers are enthusiastic about them because they feel they improve the quality of the therapies, while also reducing professional burnout and unpaid costs. Yet parents frequently state their strong preference for in-person care.

These challenges come at a time when Early Intervention is set to be housed under the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood starting July 1. Spokespersons for both the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) and Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) declined to make leadership of either agency available for interviews for this story.



Credit: Photo by Ash Lane for Illinois Answers Project

An IDHS spokesperson said in a statement that Early Intervention is "designed to strengthen families' ability to support their child's development, and that work can be effectively delivered through multiple approaches, including in-person and Live Video Visits (LVV)." "While there is still significant work to do," an IDEC spokesperson said in a statement, "there has been recent progress and investments to build on." This includes adding 21 new Early Intervention related jobs to the department by 2027 as well as some previous rate and cost of living increases for certain providers.

Jimenez, who helped co-found the group Illinois Families for Early Intervention, is among the advocates who say Early Intervention needs significantly more state funding. The key to improving Early Intervention, according to experts, advocates and consultants, is to pay therapists a higher wage. Illinois has significantly lower provider rates than other states.

In the state budget legislators passed on June 1, Gov. JB Pritzker allocated an additional $15 million in state funding for Early Intervention for fiscal year 2027. But this is a fraction of the $40 million advocates wanted. And it still likely won't be enough to bring Illinois' reimbursement to that of other comparable states.

That would require about $150 million annually, according to consultants hired by the state.

State officials declined to say if any of the new 2027 funding will go toward providers' salaries.

Advocates, parents and providers fear the Early Intervention delays will continue to get worse if providers aren't incentivized to stay. "Time's against us," Jimenez said. "Waitlists steal the time."

Read the full story at bit.ly/4vPgnle

Get in touch!

- Is your child having problems getting care?
- Have thoughts on childcare and its challenges?
- Want to tell me about what it's been like to raise a child in Illinois?
- Have a story suggestion you want me to look into?

I'd love to hear from you. Email me at **mnewman@illinoisanswers.org** or follow me on TikTok at **@MereNewman.**

And if you have the time, I recommend checking out more of our work at **illinoisanswers.org**.

Read more from Meredith

Meredith's TikTok

Written by Meredith Newman
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