

State Stories for Children's Vision and Eye Health

MASSACHUSETTS: Policies in Early Intervention

Background

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) has the largest Early Intervention (EI) program in the nation, enrolling 20% of all children aged birth to 3 (about 50,000 children) in the state. Eighty percent of the children have a developmental delay. By state law (An Act Relative to Eye Examinations for Children, 2004) MA requires all children with diagnosed neurodevelopmental delay to have proof of a comprehensive eye examination upon entering public kindergarten. The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) Handbook also outlines the services to be provided to enrolled children. Undetected visual disorders can often be overlooked as a contributing factor to a child's developmental delay.

Companion to *Children's Vision and Eye Health: A Snapshot of Current National Issues, 2nd edition*, which can be accessed at <https://preventblindness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Snapshot-Report-2020condensedF.pdf>. For more information contact info@preventblindness.org

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Aim: To support system improvements and raise awareness among Early Intervention Department policy makers and specialists in the field of the incidence and impact of undetected and untreated vision disorders in children enrolled in early intervention programs.

Leadership and Expertise: Leadership was provided by the Director and Assistant Director, the Early Intervention Division; Children's Vision Massachusetts staff, ophthalmologists, optometrists; and Regional EI Program Leaders.

Strategies:

- **Coalition.** As the Children's Vision Massachusetts (CVMA) coalition was established, key DPH/EI Directors were invited to be coalition members.

- **Multi-year Approach.** CVMA members initiated multiple and widespread outreach efforts that included:

- » Meeting with the Department Director to highlight the vision connection, discover and troubleshoot potential barriers, and discuss avenues for information dispersal around childhood vision care.
- » Presentation to Perkins School for the Blind Early Intervention Specialists.
- » Presentations at Early Intervention Program Directors meetings.
- » Presentations by CVMA vision experts (ophthalmology and optometry), and exhibiting at the MA Early Intervention annual conferences.

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- **Funding.** Funding was sought for initiation of a Parent Guide and distribution of resources.
- **Partnership.** The Department of Early Intervention agreed to support distribution of CVMA information through a variety of mediums.

Successes:

- **Policy Change.** In 2017, the MA Department of Public Health Early Intervention Division agreed to enhance communication and highlight potential vision disorders in EI assessments. In collaboration with CVMA vision experts, the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) Handbook was revised: Vision health concerns and information on comprehensive exams was added to the Health and Eligibility Summary which evaluates and assesses a child's function prior to EI entry; and a list of common signs and symptoms of vision disorders was added to the IFSP Health Resources Appendix.
- **CVMA provided communication to Early Intervention Specialists:**
 - » an e-newsletter article on the new directive
 - » a webinar with mandatory attendance by all 60 Early Intervention Directors in which changes to the handbook, as well as reasons for making comprehensive eye examination high priority for all children entering Early Intervention were discussed
 - » a resource guide of eye care providers statewide who accept Medicaid coverage and will treat children under 6 years old

- » a guide for parents of children in Early Intervention: "Is My Child Seeing Clearly?" was written and translated into six languages. The resource is downloadable and printable from the CVMA website (<https://childrensvision.preventblindness.org/massachusetts-childrens-vision-resources>). Grant funding from the BCBS Foundation was obtained for the production of 10,000 "Is my Child Seeing Clearly?" brochures. The Department of Early Intervention distributed these brochures to parents in 60 sites across Massachusetts.
- » Ongoing Childhood Vision Information Sessions to Regional Early Intervention Programs that allow updated children's vision information for Early Intervention Specialists and the opportunity to reinforce the vision message.

Challenges:

Sustainability of the initiative was the biggest challenge. While CVMA regularly attends the Early Intervention annual conference as an exhibitor and provides workshop speakers, additional tasks have yet to be completed and include:

- E-newsletter, which includes the development of additional childhood vision articles for the Early Intervention e-newsletter for specialists in the field
- Tracking children that receive comprehensive eye examinations and a vision diagnosis
- Resource refinement, which includes highlighting providers in the CVMA eye care provider resource guide across the state who treat children under age 3 and those with special needs