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Supporting the Whole Child:

# Counties Strengthening Prenatal-to-Three Wellbeing

The first three years of life set the foundation for lifelong health and success. Counties play a vital role in supporting healthy prenatal-to-three (PN-3) development through the delivery of federal safety net programs, administration of local services and the creation of community partnerships.

A “whole child” approach is an interdisciplinary system that emphasizes investment in and integration of education, public health and social service sectors to provide individualized care to children and their families. Research shows that early life interventions grounded in whole child principles improve maternal health, child development and family stability.<sup>1</sup> While whole child programs are customized to support positive outcomes across diverse settings, key components of this approach often include:

|   |   |   |   |   |
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|  |  |  |  |  |
| Safe, stable and supportive home environments                                     | Affordable and high-quality childcare   | Accessible parental and child health education                                    | Family-focused supports and services  | Community partnerships and engagement   |

## County Examples

County officials use a combination of whole child strategies that promote education, integrated service delivery and economic stability to provide the most effective and comprehensive care. Counties may implement “single door” social service referral policies, identify diverse funding sources and build public-private partnerships to provide effective solutions to PN-3 challenges.

### EDUCATION: BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS

Education is a crucial factor in implementing any whole child program. Educational strategies that engage parents and caregivers as well as infants and toddlers focus on providing enrichment and mitigating stress. Programs that utilize nurse-led education for people who are pregnant increase confidence in parenting and mental health. Nurse-led education also fosters long-term educational success of children as they transition into elementary school.<sup>2</sup>

**Los Angeles County, Calif.** supports maternal education through their MAMA's Neighborhood program. In this program, a team of care providers coordinates with parents throughout their pregnancy and up to one year postpartum. MAMA's multidisciplinary team includes a health educator that provides perinatal resiliency classes in both clinic and home settings. The educational services are incentivized through the provision of free goods for infants and toddlers including diapers, car seats and strollers. The health educators communicate with the family's assigned care coordinator who develops a care plan for sustained success. The MAMA's Neighborhood program is funded through California's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal.



**MAMA's Neighborhood  
Women's Health**

## INTEGRATED SERVICE DELIVERY: CONNECTING FAMILIES TO CARE

Counties implement universal referral policies where partners come together to offer mental health, infant nutrition and parenting services at a single location. Service navigators connect families with social programs that address their unique needs. Programs focused on service integration have promoted healthy behavior change for parents and caregivers as well as increased the use of social service referrals.<sup>3</sup>

### Guilford County, N.C.

created the Ready for School, Ready for Life (Ready



Ready) program with the goal of building a connected and innovative system of care. As part of Ready, the Guilford County Division of Public Health partnered with the Children's Home Society to launch the Community Navigation program, which pairs families with one navigator who identifies the family's nutritional, social and economic needs. The navigator program links traditionally siloed services for simple accessibility for families through one point of contact. Ready is funded by the Duke Endowment and Blue Meridian Partners using a place-based grantmaking strategy.



**The Duke Endowment**  
Ready for School, Ready for Life

## Key Takeaways for County Leaders

To maximize the whole child approach, counties can:



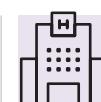
Integrate health, education and family support through coordinated referral pathways



Invest in maternal education and caregiver support to build family resilience



Target funding to promote financial stability and economic mobility for families with infants and toddlers



Leverage partnerships with hospitals, nonprofits and foundations to sustain whole child efforts



Use local data to monitor outcomes and inform policy decisions

## ECONOMIC STABILITY: REDUCING FAMILY STRESS

Nearly one in five infants and toddlers in the U.S. live in a family experiencing poverty.<sup>4</sup> Whole child programs can alleviate this stressor by promoting economic stability and upward social mobility for young families through facilitating connection to services. For example, ensuring less than 30 percent of income is spent on housing allows more flexibility to pay for quality childcare.<sup>5</sup> Economic stability fosters a stress-free environment during a critical time of development for infants and toddlers.

**Allegheny County, Pa.** began the Hello Baby program in 2020 to act as a network of support for families and children aged zero to three. Families are assigned a service tier based on their current health, social and economic factors. The service tiers create a universal priority tier in which families can receive cash assistance, emergency rent assistance and childcare assistance. Hello Baby is funded by the Allegheny County Department of Health and Human Services through the Administration for Children and Families.



**Hello Baby**  
Allegheny County, Pa.



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<sup>1</sup> Berger, L. M., & Font, S. A. (2015). The Role of the Family and Family-Centered Programs and Policies. *Future Child*, 25(1), 155-176.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed, H.H., Hamed, A.A.A.E., Afefy, N.A.E.F. et al. The effectiveness of nurse-led antenatal education on maternal self-efficacy: an evidence-based approach. *BMC Nurs* 24, 895 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-025-03471-5>

<sup>3</sup> Berger, L. M., & Font, S. A. (2015). The Role of the Family and Family-Centered Programs and Policies. *Future Child*, 25(1), 155-176.

<sup>4</sup> NCIT. (2025). Economic security - NCIT - the National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers. Economic Security: Making the Case for Prenatal to Three Policies. <https://ncit.org/economic-security/>

<sup>5</sup> Stark, Deborah R. Pathways to Prosperity: Report From a Convening on Economic Security for Families With Infants and Toddlers. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/pathways-to-prosperity-report-from-a-convening-on-economic-security-for-families-with-infants-and-toddlers/>