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### **New eligibility requirements stunt Help Me Grow program**

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LISBON - Eligibility changes may stunt the growth of the Help Me Grow program, but one official said she's more concerned about what that means to at-risk children who don't fit the new guidelines.

"Without services, they'll continue to be behind," said Tammy Blankenship, director of the Infants and Toddlers Program at the Columbiana County Health Department, which provides Help Me Grow through a partnership with the county Family and Children First Council.

On a fact sheet about the program, she described Help Me Grow as "a free and voluntary home visiting program for Ohio's expectant parents, newborns, infants and toddlers (less than 3 years old) that provides health and developmental services so children start school healthy and ready to learn."

Children are supposed to meet certain milestones in their development at certain points in their life. When they don't meet a milestone, it could be evidence of a delay. Delays can involve cognitive development, physical development, communication or language development, social or emotional development or adaptive development.

Diagnosed medical conditions can also make children eligible for the program, besides having a delay.

When state legislators approved their new budget, they not only cut funding to Help Me Grow, they also redefined the eligibility guidelines. Those changes mean some children who could have been considered at-risk for development delays before will no longer qualify for the program.

Blankenship explained the biggest change is the requirement which states a child must be under six months old, fall under the 200 percent of federal poverty level for family income and must display two additional risk factors out of a list of seven possible risk factors to be eligible for the program.

"That's where we're going to lose the most kids," she said.

"People aren't referring them until after they're six months old and we can't make them eligible," she said, noting if they're referred at age 1, they won't be eligible.

She also noted that if a child was already in the program before July 1, they'll still be in the program if they no longer meet the eligibility requirements. She warned, however, that if the at-risk child leaves the program, they won't be able to return if they can't meet the new requirements.

Prior to July 1, a child could be deemed at-risk for development delays and qualify for the program if they met four out of 28 risk factors and their family income fell under 300 percent of the federal poverty level. They could also enter the program at any time as long as they were under the age of 3 years old. They could also enter the program, leave and come back.

After July 1, the amount of money a family of four could make and still qualify dropped to \$3,675 or less of gross income per month. The number of eligible risk factors also dropped, as did the age of the child.

Julie Shea, the county Project Director for Help Me Grow services at the FCFC, said previously they could fit just about anybody into the program via the at-risk factors, which included reasons such as low birth weight, inadequate health care or no health insurance, a parent with four or more preschool age children, a lack of social supports or demographic characteristics, such as living in Appalachia.

The risk factors now are limited to the following: adolescent mother (under the age of 20 when child is born); single parent in the home; lack of stable residence, homelessness or dangerous living conditions; maternal prenatal substance abuse; parent or primary caregiver with drug or alcohol dependence; parent or primary caregiver with chronic or acute mental illness or developmental disability; or history of abuse or neglect.

The requirements are the same for an expectant mother: an income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines and two risk factors.

Children age birth to 3 years old with a delay or disability still qualify for the program, so there was no change to that guideline. Another guideline that didn't change was the one governing children identified through child protective services from a substantiated case of abuse or neglect. Children identified with special needs also experienced no change in services.

One of the other changes to the program was the elimination of the one-time newborn visit by a registered nurse.

The Help Me Grow program through the health department serves about 300 children, but the state has only provided funding for services for 190 children. Funding to the health department was dropped to \$290,000, but FCFC transferred an additional \$10,000 to the department to help with the transition.

One employee was let go earlier this year due to the budget strain and Blankenship said they could lose two more by December. She said they're looking at every avenue to continue services, noting that the caseloads remain full.

"Because of the state's change, we don't have as many kids coming through the door. As kids transition out, we don't have as many to fill slots," she said.

Shea said they still want people to call with referrals because they can still do a one-time screening and they can still make referrals to other agencies. She said the agencies collaborate well in these type of situations. Many agencies are dealing with state funding losses.

Anyone with a concern about their child's development if they're under the age of 3 can call Help Me Grow at 330-424-0288.

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