

A photograph of two young children, likely twins, playing on a white play table. The child on the right is leaning over the table, looking towards the camera with an open-mouthed smile. The child on the left is also leaning over the table, looking down at a toy. The table is filled with various colorful toys, including a teddy bear, a ball, and other small objects. The background is a plain wall with a light-colored baseboard. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

Strengthening Ohio's Systems & Prioritizing Family Well-Being

***A Look Back at Ohio's Safe Babies
Approach 2021-2022***

June 2023

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Published: June 2023
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Groundwork Ohio.

About Groundwork Ohio:

Groundwork Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization committed to championing high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families, and communities.

LEARN MORE:
www.GroundworkOhio.org
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INTRODUCTION

Babies are born with unlimited potential, but sometimes events occurring very early in their lives challenge their ability to reach this potential.

Environmental conditions can too often put undue stress on families raising young children—and for some, this challenges their ability to provide their children with safety and stability.

The child welfare system serves children of all ages. These locally driven systems aren't always designed to meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers.

The approach is not a one-size-fits-all program, but instead, an approach focused on the health and well-being of the individual children and their caregivers through connecting children and families with community supports and services. This court-based approach provides a plethora of lessons and insights that can be scaled and sustained throughout child-serving systems to better meet the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families.

The Safe Babies approach was designed using the research on early childhood development to better meet the needs of infants and toddlers.

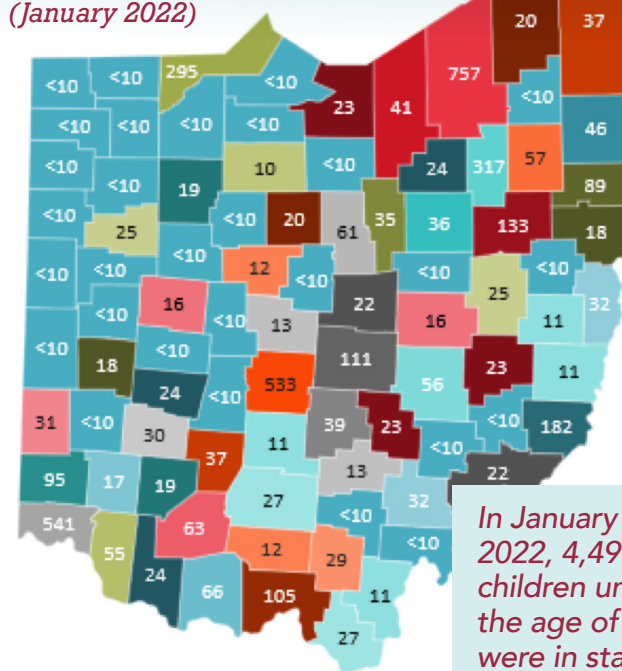
Nearly 1 in 5 Ohio children, ages 0-5, have been exposed to two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

Young children of color have increased risk.

ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood. These events can be grouped into three categories:

- Abuse, including emotional, physical, and sexual.
- Household challenges, such as substance use, mental illness, or incarceration of a household member.
- Neglect, including emotional and physical.

Number of children under age 5 in state custody by county (January 2022)



The Safe Babies Approach



Safe Babies, a program of ZERO TO THREE, meets the needs of babies and toddlers under court jurisdiction by implementing a team-based approach, rooted in the science of early childhood development, to ignite collective action across states and communities.

IMPACT: *Safe Babies focuses on the urgent developmental needs of young children during all planning and decision-making to strengthen early relationships with parents and caregivers and to create safe, stable, and nurturing environments for babies and toddlers.*

The Safe Babies approach is guided by five areas of focus, with the needs of babies and their parents at the center. The approach works concurrently, at both the **Child and Family Level** and the **State and Site Level**, to ensure healthy childhood development while impacting long-term capacity building.

Continuous Quality Improvement
Driving and sustaining best practices to foster reflection instead of reactivity, allowing the space for families and professionals to grow, adapt, and change based on effective data and evaluation

Interdisciplinary Collaborative and Proactive Teamwork
Ensuring families' individualized needs are addressed by promoting coordination across communities to find creative solutions and remove structural barriers that perpetuate discriminatory processes and inequities



Enhanced Oversight and Collaborative Problem-Solving
Enhancing judicial oversight with more frequent court hearings and engaging families as partners guided by respect, kindness, and compassion

Expedited, Appropriate, and Effective Services
Ensuring services for babies and their families are timely and comprehensive while respecting their lived experiences and the intergenerational effects of social, racial, and health inequities

Trauma-Responsive Support
Responding to trauma with a healing approach while recognizing the resilience of parents and understanding the lifelong, systemic social and health inequities facing some families with young children



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Safe Babies Approach In Ohio



Developed by ZERO TO THREE, leading experts in early childhood development and mental health.

The Safe Babies approach provides a developmentally appropriate intervention for families with children ages 0-3 and their families who are involved, or at risk for involvement, in the child welfare system. The approach is highly collaborative and seeks to prevent child maltreatment more broadly during the prenatal-to-3 period. The Safe Babies approach works to meet the unique needs of, and improve outcomes for, infants, toddlers, and families engaged in local court systems by providing an evidence-based, data-driven, and trauma-informed approach that supports cross-sector collaboration and coordination.

The child welfare agency and assigned caseworkers are invaluable partners and work hand in hand with a local infant-toddler court team to ensure safety and compliance while driving the case forward.

The Safe Babies approach additionally includes the following core components:

Assigned Infant-Toddler Court Team Community Coordinator:

The Community Coordinator is the primary point of contact with families in the court program and serves as a neutral entity and coordinator. The Community Coordinator works alongside the caseworker to ensure families understand the case plan services being asked of them and that all parties are heard during the process.

Regular Family Team Meetings:

Family Team Meetings invite all parties working with a family to have open and honest conversations about case plan progress, needs and barriers, and/or reunification expectations and timelines. Participants

➔ **Each court program engages with the Safe Babies approach from the lens of their unique community.**

Each community refers to their infant-toddler court program based on the title selected by their leadership team.

For example, in Lucas County, the court's program is referred to as *Healthy Baby Court*.

vary depending on the family's situation but can include any legal counsel (including that of the child welfare agency), assigned guardian(s) ad litem, pertinent family members, foster or kinship placement providers, service or treatment providers, family support people, or parent peer members, as well as the child welfare caseworker and Safe Babies Community Coordinator. Pre- and Post-removal Family Team Meetings work to prevent or minimize out-of-home placements.

Frequent court hearings:

Court hearings take place at least once per month and enable the Judge or Magistrate overseeing the infant-toddler court program cases to build relationships with

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families, make changes in visitation or other case plan objectives, and work towards reunification quicker than the traditional timelines.

Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP):

Where available, sites refer families for CPP services or a comparable infant mental health intervention. This helps to build skills in parents and ensures a strong, nurturing parent-child relationship. There have been many challenges in accessing and utilizing the CPP approach, specifically regarding the lack of certified CPP providers in Ohio. As of this report's publication, there are no available CPP providers in Scioto or Lucas County.

Frequent Visitation:

Visitation schedules vary by site and family but can be as often as 4-5 times per week. Frequent visitation works to maintain the parent-child bond when a child is placed out of the home.

Active Community Team (ACT):

The ACT mobilizes stakeholders to address the complex needs of children and families involved in dependency court and the child welfare system. This interdisciplinary team focuses on reducing disparities, addressing gaps in systems coordination, and driving improvement through new practices and policies. This group meets bi-monthly and commonly includes Early Intervention, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services, Early Head Start, Adult Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment, and multiple other child and family prevention and intervention services and supports.

The Safe Babies approach works to prevent and mitigate the impact of trauma experienced by infants and toddlers engaged in the court system and supports their families so these children are less likely to reengage with the court system later during their childhood or youth. The approach delivers these incredible results by integrating cross-sector prevention strategies and services including physical, behavioral, and mental health care, substance

abuse treatment, Part C early intervention, evidence-based home visiting, quality child care, parent support programs, family economic support, and public benefits among others.

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INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

The Safe Babies approach has been utilized in Lucas County under the leadership of Judge Denise Navarre Cuban, operating as the Lucas County Healthy Baby Court program since 2016.

In the fall of 2020, Groundwork Ohio and the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio received a 12-month grant from ZERO TO THREE to provide leadership in scaling the Safe Babies approach across Ohio.

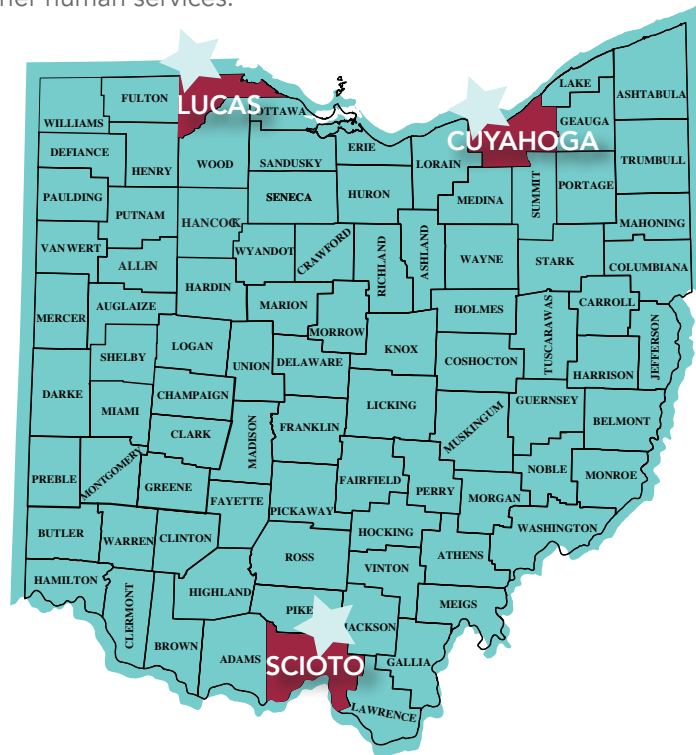
The Ohio expansion grant provided financial support and technical assistance to local judicial and child welfare leaders and community stakeholders to stand up infant-toddler court teams in Cuyahoga and Scioto counties under the leadership of Judge Kristin Sweeney and Judge Alan Lemons respectively, over the course of a year. The Lucas County Healthy Baby Court also received funds to expand its capacity to serve more families and children.

With this funding, each site was able to leverage existing and new partnerships to build upon existing services and supports for children and families to address gaps identified through national, state, and local data. It is helpful to note that Ohio has a "state-supervised, county-administered" system. State agencies develop policies to guide programs, but all 88 counties create independent structures and budgets for child welfare, public and mental health, and other human services.

These sites, described in more detail below, include Cuyahoga County (urban), Lucas County (suburban), and Scioto County (rural, Appalachian).

The three initial Ohio sites were selected based on:

- 1) Interest of judicial host
- 2) Need
- 3) History of successful cross-sector collaboration
- 4) Representation of the diversity of Ohio's rural, urban, and suburban counties



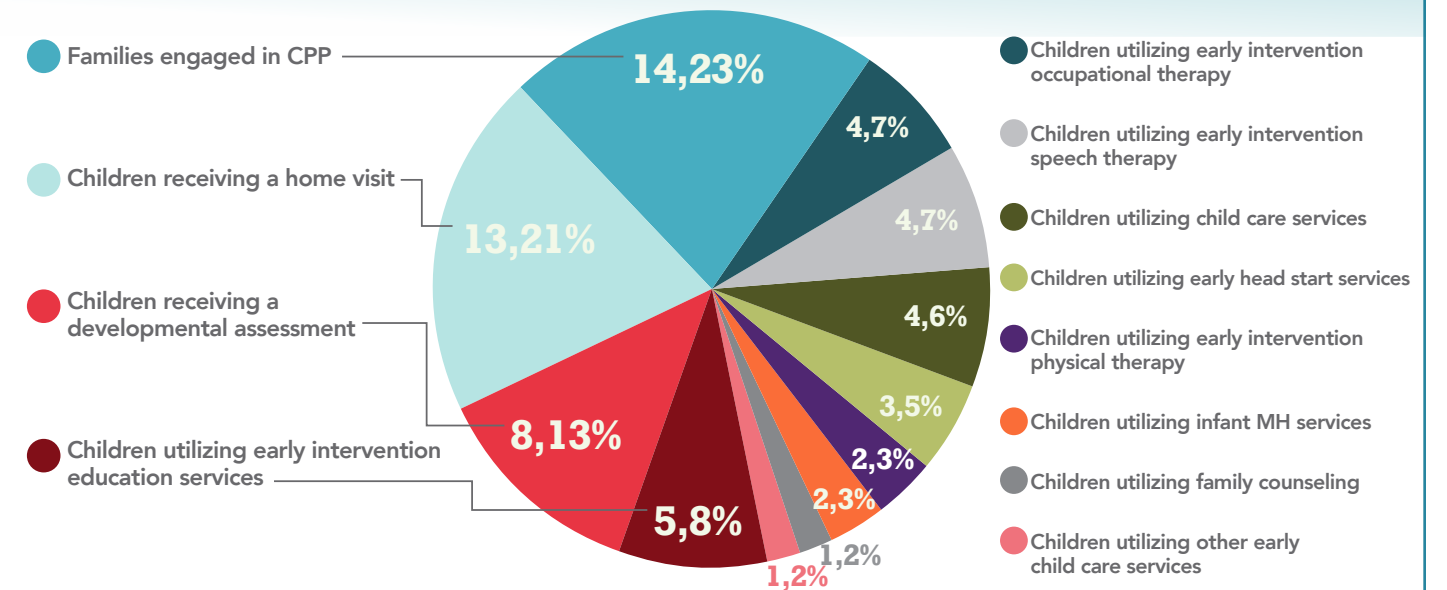
Groundwork Ohio serves as the Statewide Coordinator of Ohio's Safe Baby program. In this role, Groundwork staff directly supports community coordinators in standing up and sustaining their sites, connecting with interested partners in counties looking to implement the Safe Babies approach, and advocating for policy change aligned to the tenants of the Safe Babies approach.

Community Coordinators in each of these three sites have supported the local work since the inception of the statewide project in 2020; the teams started serving families in the late summer of 2021.

Each coordinator has developed strong working relationships with local leaders to facilitate Family Team Meetings, a Leadership Team of judicial and child welfare leaders, and an Active Community Team comprised of a broad range of health, mental health, drug treatment, education, social services, family advocates, and philanthropic representation.

From August 2021 through December 2022, the three sites collectively served 36 families. These cases included 61 children: 46% African American, 42% White, 2% Pacific Islander, 6% multi-racial, and 4% Hispanic. Twenty-two of the children reached permanency either through reunification with their mother or with a willing relative. For the cases that were closed during this time, they were open on average 153 days.

Services Accessed by Families



INFANT-TODDLER COURT TEAM SITE LOCATIONS



SCIOTO COUNTY

“Safe Baby Court Team is very different from any other program we have in Scioto County. Our main focus is to help families break down barriers that have held them back from succeeding by working collaboratively with other community agencies to best serve the family as a whole.”

– Jordan Davis, Scioto County Community Coordinator

In Scioto County, Judge Alan Lemons was familiar with the Safe Babies approach and eagerly joined as one of the 2020 sites. On the initial planning call with county representatives, Judge Lemons referenced the “Healthy Beginnings, Healthy Futures” judge’s guide and offered to talk with any other



Honorable Alan Lemons

Ohio judge to encourage their participation. Scioto County has been very successful in rallying community resources through its Family Reunification Court.

Program Data: August 2021 – December 2022

Families Served	14
Children Served	23
Number of Children in Child-Parent Psychotherapy	No service providers
Number of Children Who Have Reached Permanency	6
Average Number of Days Closed Cases Were Open	313

LUCAS COUNTY

“This comprehensive approach, owned by our community, meets our shared goal that all Lucas County children will be raised and grow in safe, healthy, and loving families.”

– Judge Cubbon



Lucas County Juvenile Court (LCJC) has developed a strong collaborative relationship with its child welfare system, job and family services, mental health board, and family council, resulting in collaborative programs and grants to address some of the systemic issues related to caring for their most vulnerable infants, children, and families.



Honorable Denise Nevarre Cubbon

In 2016, Judge Cubbon began to develop their Infant Toddler Court Program, which their community has named “Healthy Baby Court.” In 2021, LCJC received a Court Improvement Program grant from the Supreme Court of Ohio to develop a System of

Care for opioid-exposed babies and plays an integral role in the Community of Support grant received by Lucas County Children Services (LCCS) to develop and implement a community-wide, prevention approach for implementing Plans of Safe Care for substance-exposed infants. In September 2021, LCJC also joined the last year of the initial statewide ITCT Implementation grant and developed an additional position (Co-Parenting Mentor) to enhance their Healthy Baby Court with TANF funding from Lucas County Job and Family Services. Judge Cubbon has also developed a Special Projects Manager position within LCJC to provide direct oversight of both therapeutic dockets: Healthy Baby Court and Family STAR (Support, Treatment, Advocacy, Recovery) Court. With this funding, LCJC will be able to sustain the momentum of this innovative, complex, system-changing, and community-impactful work to identify and address barriers for infants and families in Lucas County.

Program Data: August 2021 – December 2022

Families Served	13
Children Served	24
Number of Children in Child-Parent Psychotherapy	2
Number of Children Who Have Reached Permanency	13
Average Number of Days Closed Cases Were Open	Data Not Available

SITE LOCATIONS



CUYAHOGA COUNTY

“Safe Babies Court is unlike other newer programs in our community because it’s completely driven and led by already existing staff in our community—our local children’s and family services staff, local attorneys, local child-parent psychotherapy providers, and Guardian ad Litem. I’m here to just pull it all together, bringing everyone together to problem solve around the issues and barriers that we know exist.” – Delaney Jones, Cuyahoga County Community Coordinator

Cuyahoga County has been actively planning an infant-toddler court team since 2017. The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Ohio Association for Infant Mental Health (NEOAIMH) identified having a Court Team as a priority and sponsored a “lunch and learn” in 2017 to engage community leaders. In 2018, with the help of Lucas County’s Judge Cubbon, a judicial lead was



Honorable Kristin W. Sweeney

identified, a working group established, and a training set up at the Juvenile Court. ZERO TO THREE came to Cleveland and participated in the training and the working group has continued to meet, building awareness and a broad network of support from

community partners, public agencies, and funders. Cuyahoga County has a strong network of infant/early childhood mental health providers, including two providers located at the County Department of Child and Family Services. The Court Team working group includes foster parents, CASA, early education, domestic violence and child advocacy, hospitals, and neighborhood collaboratives.

Important work is also underway in Cleveland through hospitals and neighborhood collaboratives to address disparities and promote resilience in families and young children. The Cuyahoga County Community Coordinator has already secured new funding from local foundations to 1) increase the availability of Child Parent Psychotherapy and racially and linguistically diverse mental health providers, 2) create strategies to address racial equity in the ITC work, and 3) increase and support providers who participate in Family Team Meetings by offering monthly reflective practice sessions.

Program Data: August 2021 – December 2022

Families Served	9
Children Served	14
Number of Children in Child-Parent Psychotherapy	12
Number of Children Who Have Reached Permanency	5
Average Number of Days Closed Cases Were Open	147

STATEWIDE COLLABORATION

Community Coordinators in each Ohio site are responsible for expanding and strengthening the relationships between child welfare and juvenile court to include other community partners who help to identify resources for families and gain access to traditional and non-traditional services and systems.

Community Coordinators help increase the capacity of agencies and communities to serve children and families by identifying gaps, barriers, and training needs and working with their local Active Community Team to develop solutions.

The State Advisory Council is made up of leaders and thought partners from across the state that lend their voices and time in support of the Safe Babies work. This work began as a collaborative effort with partners such as:

- Ohio Supreme Court
- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities
- Ohio CASA/GAL Association
- Ohio Children's Trust Fund
- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services
- Ohio Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
- Ohio Department of Health, Bureau of Maternal, Child, and Family Health
- Help Me Grow Home Visiting
- Ohio Children's Alliance
- Ohio Domestic Violence Network
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio
- Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
- Ohio Department of Education, Office of Early Learning and School Readiness

This dynamic team continues to support systems integration and alignment by increasing access to various services and supports that benefit families inside and outside of Infant-Toddler Court Team sites. The State Advisory Council uses their unique perspectives to investigate the various support available to families and began identifying areas where improvement is needed. The Advisory Council continues to work toward an equitable and effective system of services for families with young children in Ohio.

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FAMILY VOICE

Aligning with Groundwork Ohio's steadfast approach to including family voices and perspectives in all facets of programming and decision-making, the Safe Babies approach has a heavy emphasis on including families in planning and implementation.

Families with lived child welfare experiences have a place in the teams where decisions are being made and have meaningful contributions alongside quality improvement and data reporting efforts. Each of the current sites has placed a high value on elevating the voices of families with lived experience in the child welfare system into direct work on case plans (through Family Team Meetings), into strengthening families through work with parent-peer mentors in Cuyahoga and Lucas counties, as well as in ongoing quality improvement using strategies such as family focus groups and surveys. The Ohio infant-toddler court

teams have been diligently working to identify families with lived experience to serve in leadership capacities and help inform the work. As services are provided for a longer tenure in these communities, the pool of potentially interested families will grow.

Aside from families with lived experience, partners engaged in the collaborative process, such as the Leadership Team and Active Community Team, have either direct experiences with the relevant systems or work first-hand with families engaged in these systems to ensure all perspectives are represented.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Special ingredients” that make the Safe Babies approach impactful:

- ➔ **A Dedicated Judge:** The Judicial support is a key factor in establishing the Safe Babies approach in communities. Judges and magistrates must understand infant/child development, the effects of trauma, and how appropriate interventions within the first few years of life have profound effect on the intergenerational cycles of involvement in the child welfare system.
- ➔ **Willingness to Change:** Safe Babies is a unique approach! It is supportive, family-centered, and adaptable to meet the needs of the community. If the child welfare system is resistant to change, this can create a barrier to achieving broader buy-in from decision-makers.
- ➔ **Robust Child Welfare Agency:** The involved child welfare agency must recognize the need for Safe Babies programming and support its approach and implementation. This often requires additional effort- especially in the implementation phase- so a desire to try something different is one of the most important factors in ensuring success.
- ➔ **A Strong Coordinator:** The Community Coordinator is the voice, presence, and face of the program. It is necessary to have a strong Coordinator who can address hard questions from those not familiar with the approach, while simultaneously meeting the needs of families in crisis.
- ➔ **Community Support of the Project:** Community buy-in is a must in implementing and sustaining the incredibly collaborative approach of infant-toddler court teams. All systems involved, providers, grassroots organizations, and families must believe in and respect the developmentally focused approach.
- ➔ **Upfront Expectations:** Honest, neutral direction for families is critical. Frequent family team meetings ensure that service providers, the children's services organization, and the family all hear the same review at the same time. Case plan objectives can be discussed, and the family can ask questions if they are unclear about expectations.
- ➔ **Support of Workforce:** Infant-Toddler Court Team Community Coordinators can assist with portions of case management for families, such as identifying resources and making referrals for services, scheduling and ensuring completion of parent-child visitation, and following up on compliance with medical care or case plan objectives. Providing this extra support when the child welfare workforce is struggling can be critical.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

Current Safe Babies programming across Ohio builds upon funding from the national organization ZERO TO THREE. With five-year structured funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Ohio's grant has the ability to forecast future growth and expansion. Current sites represent the diversity of Ohio's rural, urban, and suburban counties, but unfortunately, the sites share a growing population of babies in child welfare custody, and parents with significant unmet needs.

Resources have been allocated to enhance and expand the work of existing sites through the first two years of the funding cycle to create high-quality and replicable infant-toddler court teams. In the coming years, existing sites will prioritize sustainability while additional communities will initiate new local infant-toddler court team sites. These expansion sites will also be determined based on need, collaboration, and leadership.

Peer Mentors: Building upon statewide momentum to include family voice, infant-toddler court team sites are beginning to lay the foundation for parent-peer mentor support on their teams. Parent-peer mentors are parents with lived child welfare experience—not necessarily infant-toddler court team experience—that help walk families through the processes of the child welfare and juvenile court systems. With appropriate funding, these positions would help create intergenerational impact by empowering a new sector of the workforce that values and compensates parents for their vital experiences.

Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP): Teams in Ohio continue to be focused on increasing access to quality infant mental health services, paying particular attention to Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP). Ohio Teams have been working closely with infant mental health and other, young child-focused providers to identify barriers to certification and implementation of CPP in all communities in the state, with an emphasis on the three infant-toddler court team communities. There is much that can be done to include CPP in the roster of support provided to families with young children. We will continue to call on partners to bolster the workforce by offering CPP certificates in higher education program offerings, encouraging and assisting with funds for additional training cohorts of CPP in the state, supporting the development of an Ohio Community of Practice, and advocating for reimbursement of CPP and services of its kind.



ALIGNING KEY INITIATIVES & VITAL SYSTEMS

In addition to the continuation and expansion of initial sites, Ohio is positioned to capitalize on the readiness and partnerships at the state level. In the current 135th General Assembly, a priority bill, The Strong Foundations Act (HB 7), is being considered. This bill proposes comprehensive system investments to combat Ohio's worsening infant mortality rate (6.9 infant deaths under age 1, per 1,000 live births)¹. Policymakers are becoming increasingly aware and motivated to invest in systems that support infants, toddlers, and their families.

The work of Ohio's Safe Babies programming will directly inform the work Groundwork Ohio and partners engage in to make Ohio a place where all children can thrive.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER) (2019)

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