



**Testimony for the FY2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services
Submitted by: Elizabeth Isakson, MD, Executive Director, Docs for Tots
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding New York State’s Help Me Grow (HMG) program and the critical importance of primary prevention services for New York State’s children and families.

Docs for Tots works to ensure children’s healthy development and future success. We bring together children’s doctors and communities to transform practices, optimize childcare, empower families and strengthen systems. Docs for Tots has a two-pronged role in regard to HMG, as the organizing entity for HMG Long Island and at the state level, serving as the convener for the four existing HMG sites across the state while supporting communities interested in starting new HMG communities in New York. **HMG currently operates in 17 counties throughout the state and is based in Long Island, Monroe County/Finger Lakes, Onondaga County, and throughout Western New York.**

We are disappointed that the Executive Budget merely reappropriates last year’s investment of \$200,000 and does not allocate continued funding for Help Me Grow. (We would point out that the reappropriation is necessary only because NYS has not yet allocated the initial investment– not because HMG doesn’t need it.)

- **Budget Request: Maintenance of last year’s \$200,000 and an increase of \$300,000 for a total of \$500,00**

HMG is a nationally recognized, evidenced-based model that improves outcomes and reduces disparities in early developmental health and family well-being. The model works across sectors (human services, health care, child care,) to promote child development, make developmental and social emotional screening universally available, and provide ongoing support for families to effectively navigate systems to access services.

The HMG model provides a road map of what community wide primary prevention could look like in New York State if supported. **In 2022 alone the four HMG systems reached 10,000 children.** This represents exponential growth since HMG first started in New York.

HMG is primary prevention at its finest. There are three types of prevention in public health – primary, secondary, and tertiary.

- Primary Prevention – intervening prior to issue arising

- Secondary Prevention – intervening early, often before symptoms are present, thereby minimizing serious consequences
- Tertiary Prevention - intervention to ameliorate or reverse complications after occurrence

A prevention agenda that supports healthy families and developing children is needed in New York State. While effective secondary prevention services for children identified as at risk or tertiary treatment for children that have experienced family dysfunction or are developing atypically, there is currently an imbalance in support where secondary and tertiary prevention is common – primary prevention rare. To invest in New York State's future, the opportunity is now to make significant investments in primary prevention.

The foundation of thriving families and the opportunity for primary prevention is during pregnancy and early childhood. The science is clear. Ninety percent of brain development occurs in the first five years of life. This means that a strong first five years can determine a strong forever. New York’s investment in the early years can be enhanced through evidence-based programs that are effective and efficient, making a huge difference for today’s littlest New Yorkers, tomorrow’s productive citizens. HMG does just this.

HMG utilizes and builds on existing resources to develop and enhance a comprehensive approach to early childhood system-building in any given community. HMG builds upon current state efforts such as NYS Council on Children and Families’ ‘Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Project’ and the recommendations of the Child Care Availability Task Force. HMG has robust partnerships with pediatricians, child care and Head Start providers, school districts, and county governments. Successful implementation of the HMG model requires communities to identify existing resources, think creatively about how to make the most of existing opportunities, and build a coalition to work collaboratively toward a shared agenda.

An investment in HMG will greatly assist children from birth to age five across New York State. HMG is a proven prevention model that brings communities together to foster strong families and ensure that all children get the start they deserve.

Thank you for considering our testimony.

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