



Expand eligibility for EARLY intervention and maximize the impact of early intervention.

Research shows that achieving developmental milestones is essential to developing a child's ability to learn, speak, and move at optimal levels later in life. Early intervention programs are designed to support families and caregivers in developing the competence and confidence to help their child learn and develop.

Early Steps is the name of Florida's most comprehensive early intervention program. This program utilizes state dollars and federal funding through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C. The Early Steps Program provides Florida's infants and toddlers, from birth to 36 months, who have a developmental delay, or a condition that places them at risk for developmental delay, with early intervention services and supports that improve a child's chances to develop to their full potential by achieving their developmental milestones.

During the 2015 Special Session A, Early Steps received \$13 million in additional funding that provided the largest increase to the states Early Steps in years. This increase in funding provides an opportunity to ensure that eligible children are receiving all the services they need and that there is funding available for a projected 5% increase in enrollment.

However, while the program received more funding, advocacy groups are monitoring the effects of changes in the Early Steps State Office due to a large staff reduction. Stakeholders will determine if the reduced staff and new administrative requirements for local Early Steps providers is adequate to implement the program. State and local administrators and staff have to oversee the provision of a large increase in revenue and a change in data collection providers without affecting service provision. All this will need to be accomplished while adhering to federal requirements for the program.

Advocates are also looking into using the increase in funding for the provision of more services in the natural environment and ways to expand eligibility back to where it was in 2010.

Expanding eligibility for Early Steps helps infants and toddlers receive intervention at earlier signs of developmental delay rather than waiting until the delay is more serious. Early intervention is truly effective at the first indication of developmental delay and can prevent more serious and costly problems for children that can result from waiting until delays become severe.

SB 7034 and HB 943 include language on the Early Steps Program. Advocates are working with the legislature to include language that would expand eligibility and define the roles of the state and local Early Steps offices. **Advocates want Early Steps to provide EARLY intervention rather than use the program to work with a system of later intervention!**