

Universal Newborn Screening & Support Systems



Building a coordinated system and new standard of care for how families with newborns are welcomed and supported in Illinois

Regardless of ZIP code or family income, when welcoming a new baby, all parents and families could benefit from additional encouragement and support.

As health and early learning professionals know well, the first three years of a child's life are the most rapid, critical and vulnerable period of development in the entire human lifespan, making the early weeks among the most important for building secure relationships with parents and caregivers and ensuring that families have what they need to support healthy development. At the same time, the early postpartum period represents a vitally sensitive window for supporting the physical and mental health of birthing parents.



Yet, despite the importance of supporting families with a new baby, unlike many high-income nations, the United States lacks a comprehensive, universal approach to screen all families for health risks of both the newborn and their parents and to provide connections to vital community resources.

This gap harms families, who may struggle to navigate or fall through the cracks of complex networks of early care and learning, health and mental health and other supportive services. It also jeopardizes new parents who face gaps or delays in postpartum health care in the first few weeks after birth, contributing to the nation's maternal mortality and morbidity crisis, which disproportionately harms Black and Indigenous birthing people.

Universal Newborn Screening & Support Systems (UNSS): offer and provide voluntary, short-term screening and referral services to every family with a newborn to help connect them to the supportive services and resources they may need and want, at no cost to the family

UNSS approaches might look different on the ground in different communities, depending on local context and which model of UNSS is being implemented. Broadly, UNSS systems consist of a nurse home visitor, community health worker or other trained professional meeting with a family in their home to assess health and overall well-being in the immediate postpartum period. Referrals may be made to services to address health and mental health needs, intimate partner violence, substance use, infant and maternal health, child development, socio-economic needs, safe sleep, managing crying, help with infant care and a myriad of other needs.

Common Connections Made By UNSS Referrals:



UNSS approaches are not duplicative of or a replacement for any of the existing services that families benefit from and choose to participate in, including home visiting, doula, community health worker, primary health care and Early Intervention services. Instead, these systems operate as an entry point and referral system to increase alignment of and connections of families to local family-support services. By collecting data on family needs and outcomes, as well as the availability of other local services (infant and maternal health, mental health, early learning, economic supports, etc.), UNSS approaches help streamline coordination across family-facing services and supports and ensure these are accessible within the local community.

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1. Nurse, community health worker or other trained professional connects with family shortly after birth



2. Provider will visit families in their homes around three weeks following childbirth and once the family is settled



3. Families are connected to community resources and additional supports

A number of communities in Illinois already have UNSS. Family Connects is one such model that has been implemented in Peoria and Stephenson Counties, and in many neighborhoods across the City Chicago. Evidence from these and other UNSS models demonstrate robust benefits for families, including improvements in maternal mental health and infant health, reductions in emergency medical care for infants in the first years of life and increased positive parenting behaviors.

Community-level impacts of UNSS include strengthened networks of community resources and referrals supporting families, improved data collection on the needs of families, which supports a public health response to these data and the identification of gaps in services or barriers to accessing available services, and a potential reduction in stigma associated with family-support services that have historically targeted toward “at risk” populations.

There are opportunities for early learning, health and other family-facing providers to shape the statewide expansion of UNSS. Through the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant (ECCS), a five-year federal planning grant housed at the Illinois Department of Human Services, the state is actively working to integrate and align prenatal-to-age 3 early childhood and maternal and child health systems and expand a statewide UNSS system to drive positive outcomes for families with children. The input and support of health, early care and learning, economic supports and other family-facing service providers will be essential to ensuring the successful scale of a statewide UNSS system in Illinois.

"It's just getting that medical support and knowledge and information, but in a comfortable environment. It sounds weird to invite a stranger into your home, but it's just so helpful and encouraging to be able to do it in a comfortable environment where it can be slow paced, where you don't have to worry about leaving your home [...] It's good to know that [universal newborn supports] are there for any mom, no matter where you're at or what your needs are or what your family, financial or family support situation is. But for me, it was just the encouragement of having a nurse come in and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?'"

**SAMANTHA PRICE,
MOM OF FOUR IN PEORIA COUNTY, ILLINOIS WHO
PARTICIPATED IN FAMILY CONNECTS UNIVERSAL
NEWBORN HOME VISITING AFTER ALL FOUR OF HER
BIRTHS**

